

Sparta and Athens

by

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What do we remember best from our early history lessons in school? Some say they have forgotten everything. Others have diligently memorized dates, names and events. Some can name kings and presidents in the right order. Yet in the midst of that dry, gray intellectual material, most of us have a few shining, dramatic pictures that were painted indelibly in our memories for the rest of our lives. Even today we can see them so clearly that they could have happened before our eyes!

They may be Martin Luther before the church doors in Wittenberg or Marie Antoinette's unsuccessful escape during the French Revolution. They may be Julius Caesar walking to the Senate on March 15 or the Joms Vikings battle with Haakon Jarl at Hjorungavag in 986.

Why do some pictures last a lifetime while, for example, the status of farmers in England in the seventeenth century can hardly be recalled the next day? Is it because we remember the important world historical events while randomly forgetting the less meaningful events?

It is not that easy. Neither Catholics nor atheists deny the fact that Martin Luther's brave protest against the papal state played an important role in world history. Yet we remember the Joms Vikings equally well. And Marie Antoinette just as well. But have they had any influence on cultural development? Undoubtedly not. Yet they are archetypes for the human events that are the core of historical development.

The Joms Vikings showed reckless, unbreakable courage where personal death played no role whatsoever. Marie Antoinette was the powerless and frail human placed in a central position without the ability to create any resolution that could avert the catastrophe. All of world history takes place in human beings, in mankind's battle with his environment and with himself, including victories and defeat.

The traditional, objective recorded history is not true history. When a teacher presents world history to the children, he stands to the task of penetrating to the

core of the issues so they are expressed as concrete events involving particular people. Very often that is difficult, almost impossible, and it often requires many years of serious study and reflection. In other cases the core appears almost by itself, as in the following picture of Sparta and Athens in the fifth century B.C.

I.

We are fortunate to be able to look at an epoch with such fundamental meaning for future cultural development concentrated in a small area and when men lived who could record accurate descriptions of what took place. Teachers can work with the plethora of sources and grasp the core historical developments that lie just below the surface.

Our modern culture would not have been possible without its Greek foundation, including the arts and sciences. In the Roman Empire, throughout the Middle Ages, and during the past five centuries, we have lived off the fruits of the Greek civilization. We have developed and found ourselves by experiencing the Greek spirituality, beauty, clear thinking and a wealth of knowledge. Practically every concept we find in modern philosophy and science was already available in clear Greek thinking. What would the art of the Renaissance be without Greek art? Indeed, it was a rebirth, a “renaissance” of the classical culture.

Christianity does not come from Greek culture. But how might it be understood in light of Greek spirituality? If we look at the fateful days in the years 490, 480 and 479 B.C. at Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataiai, where all reason predicted that the small Greek society would be smashed by the Oriental giant (the Persian Empire in coalition with the Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Etruscans), we see how our future of two thousands years was at risk in those days! How little could have altered the outcome of those events. The prerequisite for the victory at Salamis was a collective effort by the Athenians and the Spartans, which was spearheaded by Themistokle’s famed cunning. If his brilliant intelligence had not mastered the situation, the Persians would have won. If we can imagine that one person’s efforts were not present at that crucial moment, we could realize that the subsequent flourishing of the Greek, especially the Athenian, culture would not have taken place. This is a bold but critical thought. This is an example of one individual’s efforts that are irreversibly connected with the cultural development that followed.

What a huge impact this event had compared to the Joms Vikings battle at Hjorungavag. In their efforts, in their unconquerable and conscious courage the individual’s eternal being appears. Otherwise their efforts remain on the periphery of historical development.

In contrast, the battle at Salamis was a turning point in world history. At that moment the scale of history hung in the balance. Themistokles was not just

a simple person, but rather the organ for the entire Greek people and also for cultural development into the future. In the midst of the battle the Greeks said—with a clairvoyance they did not have under normal circumstances—that angels from heaven partook in the battle and helped them. With the strength of that vision, they became unstoppable. They fought for their own existence, and they fought for something greater.

Xerxes, the emperor of the great Persian empire, ripped his clothes apart as he stood on the banks of the Bay of Eleusis watching the battle unfold. He panicked when he saw the unbelievable surprise; all he could do was flee as fast as possible. The victory was complete.

Shortly thereafter Themistokles left the Athenian stage, a personal tragedy for him but an absolute necessity for the Athenians. With the secure instincts of a sleepwalker the Athenians elected the calm, reflective and just Aristeides, a man the diametrical opposite of Themistokles and exactly the man they needed. Themistokles might have become too high-handed through his brilliant but personally ambitious intelligence. The Athenians put him aside. The best man won.

In history lessons, as in all subjects, we face the challenge of “working economically.” What shall we teach and what shall we leave out? If the teacher has even a slight “cover everything mania” by which he feels committed to include a little bit of everything, the quality of instruction and the whole pedagogical benefit of the lessons will be affected adversely. To concentrate on the essential core points is critical. If these core historical points come alive, they will create paths of knowledge which will provide the children with new prospects they can pursue in many directions.

Once the teacher has carefully selected a core point, a very special preparation is made. He needs to understand the point from the inside by meditating upon it. For example, Themistokles must be so well described that he is, in a sense, personally present in the classroom. Herodot and Plutarch give accurate descriptions of this figure that provide an excellent starting point. Traditional history books are not well-suited to this task. They usually provide only a little bit about many things.

When the class has arrived at these events at the end of the fifth grade and the children know Themistokles in all of his sly and aggressive behavior, the teacher can create reflective dialogues with the children by characterizing him. It is enough to set the tone, then the children stream in with adjectives of their own; smart, sly, courageous, aggressive, ambitious, and so forth. Comparing him with his opponent, the upright, easy-going Aristeides who has also been equally well-described, can sharpen the characterization.

But the teacher should not stop at characterization. Such an observable archetype can be used to help children develop a conceptual relationship between the individual and society. For, without the Greek society, especially the Athenians, Themistokles would have been nothing, and without his efforts the people would have been as helpless as a body without eyes or arms.

Here some may question if another Athenian could have helped the people had Themistokles not made his contribution. The Athenians had plenty of agile, quick-thinking, aggressive people. That is an important possibility, but we will never know, for it was Themistokles who carried out the deeds.

By working through such sequences of thought, the children sharpen their ability to observe large parts of life—necessary tasks demanded by peoples or historical epochs can only be carried out by individuals who become organs for their people in the decisive epoch. From the fifth and sixth grade on, the children need to awaken and practice an especially strong consciousness of the individual and the larger social reality. This is in contrast to the earlier school years' experience when the children are part of a larger group soul.

II.

Themistokles walked an influential individual path in his life. At the same time he was a typical Athenian. "Did something new happen?" ask the Athenians when they met each other. Curious and inquisitive they were always receptive to new impressions. Venturesome, they took on great plans. Even though they were exaggeratingly boisterous and funny, they also had large portions of ambition "always to be the first and conquer the others." Everything was a competition between individuals to serve the gods and their own honor and to never forget their honor for their dear "violet-surrounded" Athens.

But even as they loved their city above all others, they loved to travel and throw themselves into adventures on the wavy sea. They soon became the best seamen of their times. With the spirited commerce in the seaport at Athens, Piraeus, the center soon spread across the entire Mediterranean Sea.

Along with commerce the Attic production of art and handicrafts spread across the world, and what a luxurious production unfolded, especially within the ceramics industry. What quality! The remaining pieces are only a tiny fraction of the actual output.

Of the thousands of vases with different forms and drawings, only a few remnants survive, now in large collections in Athens, Tarent, Naples, Rome, Paris, and London, where every single vase is a wonderful piece of art to admire again and again. This unbelievable production in fantasy and handwork expertise is perhaps the best testimony to Athens's activities. And what did that small group of people in the fifth century B.C. leave to humanity from its horn of plenty in sculpture, architecture, painting, lyricism, drama, science and philosophy?

Compare that with the Spartan's contributions. What cultural goods streamed from the other main Greek tribe? Compared to the Athenians, we are tempted to say: Nothing! But the Spartans were just as important for the Greek people as the Athenians.

Without them there is no doubt that the Greeks would have been crushed and the Athenian culture would not have developed. The individual Spartans meant nothing to their people, only as servants of their people. This considerable, unlimited gesture of service and sacrifice is the archetype of the Spartans. What counted was winning or dying. The Spartan mother said: "Come back from the battle, my son, with your shield or upon your shield." A representative picture is the Spartan King Leonidas with 300 chosen men at Thermopylene, surrounded in a celebration of certain death before him. When one visits the site today, one can notice that nature speaks without words. From time immemorial until today sulphuric, Thermopylene warm (38 degrees Celsius) water streams right out of the mountains. One can feel a stream of youthful health and power when you bathe in these springs.

The Spartan power of sacrifice is not productive culturally. It is an inner concentrated, unbreakable, consolidated power. It is not interested in the outside world. Shipping and commerce were repressed, actually forbidden. Few, but accurate words were spoken, few movements taken. Their brown skin was so hardy that wind, burning sun, hail or lashings had little effect. The Spartan's attitude was equally unmovable.

To the contrary, the Athenians kept their skin soft, open and pliable. Their attitude to weather changed dramatically from exaltation to desperate helplessness. A gray, permanent cloudy sky was foreign to them. Storms with lightning, thunder and heavy downpours were known, yet the sun shone for the most part.

Let us further consider their landscapes. Arriving in Sparta from Arcadia's changing, dramatic and romantic valleys, one gets the impression of a peaceful landscape. The flat plateau, Lakedaimon, was once the bottom of an inland sea six miles wide and twelve miles long. But the river Eurotas dug itself through the valley southwards to the ocean and the earth rich. "Wide plateaus you own, where clover grows and spicy herbs, wheat, spelt and broad-leaved barley in golden fields," says Telemachos to King Menelaos (in the *Odyssey*, IV, 602–604).

Even today that plateau is very fruitful with luxurious oranges, lemon trees, fig and olive orchards, cotton plantations, and vineyards. This broad, flat plateau is limited and closed on all sides. The south wall is very low. The western wall is more than 2000 meters high and includes Taygetos with eternal snow on the highest peaks (2400 meters above sea level). On a ledge on Taygetos are some beautiful Byzantine cloisters and churches, Mistras. They flee from the sinful world to the soul's inner god-like source. The Spartans did not flee; they did

not care about the world outside Lakedaimon's walls. They had enough within themselves, in their own space.

On the highest ledge lies a thirteenth century castle. Here people from the Middle Ages hid themselves in armor from the attacks of the world. The Spartans needed no walls. The men themselves with hard skin were Sparta's walls. Sparta's temples were not placed on heights, even though they had hills everywhere. The holy temple for their goddess of fertility was built on the plateau on the banks of the flowing Eurotas. (The humble ruins still lie there.)

The Athenians on the other hand lived on the peninsula Attica that stretches out into the Aegean Sea with a number of fantastic harbors on all sides that provide the starting point for worldly travels. If one sails into the bay of Piraeus, one can immediately see the main holy site of the Athenians, the Parthenon Temple on top of the Acropolis lit against the sky.

Attica's changing hills, and hillcrests are simple, worn down, naked and open. Here there are no walls. Everything is open against the sea and the world's vast space. With a slight exaggeration one may say there are no trees. The landscape's formations are unveiled in sparkling "classic" clarity. And the naked formation's lightly waving surfaces live in endlessly shifting colors, especially at sunrise and sunset on the Acropolis and over the violet, heather blankets where energetic bees collect nectar for the incomparable Attic honey. There is no "romantic" forest breeze that speaks to the ear as for example in Arcadia. Here everything speaks to the eye. Slightly fertile, almost barren with poor soil Attica could never support many people. Yet it is rich due to handy, imaginative and worldly-oriented people. Here we find silver and lead in the mines at Laurion, the finest marble in Pentelikon and Hymettos and, last but not least, the finest clay for the ceramic industry.

The unimaginative Spartans would have been helpless here and probably have hungered despite the Spartan way of life just as the Athenians would have stagnated by the Eurotas River. (To be more accurate they never would have settled there.) Both tribes migrated from the north and found the landscape that best suited their inherent tendencies as well as the latent forces not yet developed by them. The landscapes in turn contributed to developing these forces. Therefore the Athenians and the Spartans are archetypes conforming to the cultural, historical possibilities and their geographic landscapes. The Greek people and culture were strengthened by these main contrasts in addition to the many small tribes and their characteristic landscapes.

III.

Once the teacher has told the children in the fifth grade history lessons about the Spartans and the Athenians and their landscapes, it falls naturally to lead

them in practicing comparisons. In that way the qualities come forth better and the children's abilities to see them are developed. This is in no way an exercise in cause and effect, rather we practice observing qualities that belong together in pairs.

In the botany block in the same grade we can practice the very same thing but using plant forms and the earth in which they belong. The marigold family's many related forms provide an easily observable transition: from marsh-marigold's water-filled, swollen, round shapes on the edge of a stream or in the swampy soil to meadow-marigolds tall, thin freely-unfolding shapes down in the valley and to the icy crowfoots' compact, little rugged shape on the barren mountain soil.

To practice observing such changes in qualities as well as metamorphoses in relation to environments (the soil, etc.) gives flexibility and a sense for reality to the the children's thinking. Had the teacher presented the fifth graders abstract theories about the cause and effect, either of the meadow-marigolds or the Athenian cultural life and landscape, he would have given the children stones for bread, something they would in the best case ignore.

At this age thinking is in its first phase of vulnerable independence. It needs juicy nutrition and down to earth practice. The only fruitful way to exercise is with qualities that have already been directly and strongly experienced. With this nourishment, the children's first "thinking sprouts" shall grow and thrive. Everything else is only empty scheme.

How appropriate to practice this in history lessons about Hellas! For this is where thinking first appeared in its pure form, especially in Athens that opened to the rest of the world but did not lose itself. During the previous cultural epochs—Egypt, Babylon, Persia, India—we find an abundance of wisdom. But at that time thinking was woven in the form of mystical pictures. It is in Hellas that thinking is first seriously released from the cosmic, mystical pictures and appears as thoughts. Thinking is thus born as something independent.

This raises many questions: fifth and sixth graders cannot yet understand any philosophy in general or in the form of Greek philosophy in its simplest form. That is true in a certain sense, for philosophy requires a very different ability in thinking than eleven to twelve year olds can perform. Yet there are some exceptions. Greek philosophy did not merely unfold in various thought forms. It also appeared in an individual's way of life: Socrates. The fundamental power of thinking appeared in his attitude to real-life situations.

Especially clearly it appears as the life of Socrates is woven together with the dramatic life of Alkibiades. These simple life pictures are understandable for children at the beginning of the sixth grade. In Socrates we find united the

best qualities of the Spartans and the Athenians. Mankind no longer has merely instinctive, naturally given soul forces. He is filled with consciousness. He no longer has merely warlike, sacrificial willpower; he sacrifices random, personal desires for the truth. And his love for learning opens new worlds while it is free of personal ambition.

Socrates becomes the “eye”

As twelve-year-olds approach the “birth” of their thinking, we have them meet the man who called himself the “midwife” to thinking. At this point in fifth or sixth grade, the teacher can also begin melting together the most diverse subjects in the curriculum to strengthen each other and become more interdisciplinary.

In the midst of the stories of Socrates and his friends (among them the uncontrollable, careless and ambitious Alkibiades) who all strove for the “birth” of thinking are Socrates’ own words concerning his task as midwife. Here the teacher can add a detailed description of a human birth, maybe even an especially painful, difficult birth. The thoughts for the children quickly condense when the teacher moves from the concrete physical birth to the soul-spiritual birth of thinking. Thoughts are not “nothing.” They are truly alive so they may be given birth and they may grow. They need nutrition, care and love.

Precisely in this “oscillating” form of observation we practice down to earth thinking, a thinking that may be constantly grounded in the living, emerging human being. As the Greeks reached their purist and highest development in Socrates, they surpassed themselves and sentenced themselves to death as they handed Socrates the chalice of poison. This conventional, withering, dying quality is something we all have inside. And it can only be overcome by continually awakening and caring for the sense of the living, toughest emerging human being.