

Sparta and Athens

What do we remember best from our history lessons at school? Some maintain they have forgotten everything. Others have diligently learned by heart; dates, names and events. Some can name the kings or presidents in the right order. Yet in the middle of that dry, gray substance most of us have a few shining, dramatic pictures that are chiseled indelibly in our memory for the rest of our lives. Even today we 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 Viking's 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 remembered the next day?

Is it because we remember the important world historical events while randomly forgetting the meaningless events?

So easy it is not. 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. 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 show reckless, unbreakable courage where personal death plays no role whatsoever.

Marie Antoinette is the powerless and helpless human placed in a central position without the ability to create any resolution that will prevent the catastrophe.

All of world history takes place in human beings, in mankind's fight against his environment, and with himself, including victories and defeat.

The conventional, dry history is not true history. When a teacher represents world history for children he stands before the task of penetrating to the core of the issues so they are expressed as concrete events among certain people. Very often that is difficult, almost impossible because it requires many years of intense studies and reflection. In other cases the core appears almost by itself. The following is a superb example: Sparta and Athens in the Fifth Century B.C.

I.

We are fortunate to have an epoch with such fundamental meaning for future cultural development concentrated in a small area where men lived that could give us accurate descriptions of what took place. Teachers can work with the vast sources and grasp the core historical developments that lie just below the surface.

Our modern culture is not possible without its Greek foundation. That includes the arts and the 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 grew up 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?

It describes itself as a rebirth "renaissance" of the classical culture.

Christianity does not come from Greek culture. But how is it 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 tiny Greek people would be smashed by the Oriental giant (the Persian Empire in coalition with the Phoenicians, Carthagens and Etruscans), we see how the future two thousands years were at risk in those days! How little could have changed the results of those events. The prerequisite for the victory at Salamis was a collective effort by the Athenians and the Spartans, which was forced by Themistokle's famous cunning. If his brilliant intelligence had not mastered the situation the Persians would have won. If we pretend that one person's efforts were not there at that crucial moment, we would also have to pretend that the following flourishing of the Greek, especially the Athenian culture would not have taken place. This is a bold but necessary thought. Here we find an example of one individual's efforts that are irreversibly connected with the following two thousand years of cultural development.

What a huge difference this event entails compared with the Joms Viking's 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 is a turning point in world history. For that moment the scale of history hung in the balance. Themistokles is not just a simple person. At Salamis he became the organ for the entire Greek people and also for future cultural development. In the middle of the battle the Greeks said- with a clairvoyance they normally did not have, - that angels from heaven partook in the battle and helped them. Because of that vision they were unstoppable. They no longer fought for their own existence, now they fought for something greater.

And Xerxes, the emperor of the great 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; he was again the subject of Themistokles' slyness for all he could do was to flee as fast as possible. The victory was complete.

Yet shortly thereafter Themistokles leaves the Athenian stage. It was a personal tragedy for him but an absolute necessity for the Athenians. With the secure instincts of a sleepwalker the Athenians elect the calm, reflective and just Aristides, a man who was the diametrical opposite of Themistokles and exactly the man they needed. Themistokles might have become too high-handed due to his brilliant but personally ambitious intelligence. The Athenians put him aside. The best man wins.

In history lessons, as in all subjects, we face a problem we can call, "working economically": What shall we teach and what shall we leave out? If the teacher has even a slight "cover everything-mania" where he feels committed to include a little bit of everything it will effect the quality of instruction and the whole pedagogical benefit of the lessons. To concentrate on the essential core points is decisive. If these core historical points come alive, they may create organs of knowledge providing the children with new prospects in many directions.

Once the teacher carefully selects a core point a very special preparation is made. He needs to understand the point from the inside by meditating upon it. 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. Normal history books are not suited for this. They provide only a little bit about many things.

When you arrive at these events at the end of the fifth grade and the children know Themistokles in all of his sly and aggressive behavior, you 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, etc. Comparing him with his opponent the upright, easy Aristides who has been equally well described previously can sharpen the characterization.

But you should not stop at characterization. Such an observable archetype can be used to help children develop their conceptual relationship between individuals and peoples. Without the Greek people, especially the Athenians Themistokles is nothing. Without his efforts the people would be as helpless as a body without eyes or arms.

Here some may object that another Athenian could have helped the people if Themistokles had not made his contribution. The Athenians had plenty of agile,

quick-thinking, aggressive people. That is an important possibility, but not certain. It was Themistokles who carried out the deeds.

By working through such rows of thoughts the children's ability to observe large parts of life is sharpened: necessary tasks demanded by peoples or historical epochs can only be carried out by individuals who become an organ 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 first grade-school years where the child is part of a larger group soul.

II.

Themistokles walked a large individual path in his life. At the same time he was a typical Athenian.

"Did something new happen?" ask the Athenians when they meet each other. Curious and inquisitive they are always receptive for new impressions. Venturesome, they take on great plans. Even though they are exuberantly boisterous and funny they also have large portions of ambition: "Always to be the first and conquer the others." Everything is a competition between individuals to serve the Gods and their own honor and never to forget their honor for their dear "violet-surrounded" Athens.

But even if they love their city above all others, they love to travel and throw themselves into adventures on the wavy sea. They soon became the best seamen of their times. With the spirited commerce that unfolded 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.

We retain the few remnants of thousands of vases with different forms and drawings that are now in large collections in Athens, Tarent, Naples, Rome, Paris, and London, where every single vase is a wonderful piece of art you can 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. offer 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? From an Athenian perspective we are tempted to say: Nothing!

And 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 smashed and the Athenians would not have developed their cultural life. The individual Spartans meant nothing to their people, only as servants of their people. This inconsiderate, unlimited sacrificial power is the archetype of the Spartans and it influences their lives and childbearing. What counts is winning or dying. The Spartan mother therefore says: "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 you visit the site today you notice that nature speaks without words. From time immemorial until today sulphuric, Thermopylene warm (38 degrees Celsius) water streams right out of the mountains. You notice 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. The brown skin was so hard that wind, burning sun, hail or lashings played no role. The Spartan's attitude was equally unmovable.

The Athenians, to the contrary, 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 consider their landscapes. Arriving in Sparta from Arcadia's changing, dramatic and romantic valleys you get the impression that the landscape becomes peaceful. The flat plateau, Lakadimon, 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 productive earth is viewed; "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. It is Taygetos with his eternal snow on the highest peaks (2400 meters above sea level). On a ledge on Taygetos lie some beautiful Byzantine cloisters and churches, Mistras. They flee from the sinful world to the soul's inner god-like source. The Spartans do not flee. They did not care about the world outside Lakadimon's walls. They had enough within themselves, in their own space.

On the highest ledge lies a castle from the Thirteenth Century. 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 you sail into the bay of Piraeus you 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 you may say there are no trees. The landscape's formations 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 would have never 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 landscape contributed to developing these forces. Therefore the Athenians and the Spartans are archetypes of conformity in complete accord between cultural, historical possibilities and their geographic landscapes. The Greek people needed these main contrasts in addition to the many small tribes and their characteristic landscapes.

III.

Once you have 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. 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 they belong to.

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 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 their environment (the soil, etc.)

gives the children's thinking flexibility and a sense for reality. Had you given the fifth graders abstract theories about the cause and effect, either of the meadow-marigolds or the Athenian cultural life and their landscape, you would give the children stones for bread, something they would in the best case refuse.

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

How appropriate to practice this in History lessons about Hellas! This is where thinking first appeared in its pure form, especially in Athens that opens to the rest of the world but does 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. First in Hellas does thinking seriously release from the cosmic, mystical pictures and appear as thoughts. Thinking is thus born as something independent.

We may soon hear objections: fifth and sixth graders cannot understand any philosophy in general or in the form of Greek philosophy in its simplest form.

That is true in a certain sense: 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. In his attitude to situations in real life the fundamental power of thinking appeared.

Especially clearly it appears as his life is woven together with Alkibiades' dramatic life. 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. He 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.

He becomes the "eye".

As twelve year olds approach the "birth" of their thinking, we have them meet the man who called himself thinking's or the soul's midwife. This fact can also be illustrated in a fruitful way by melting the most different subjects in the curriculum to strengthen each other.

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 appears Socrates' words concerning his task as mere-

ly being the “midwife”. Here the teacher can add a detailed description of a human birth, maybe even an especially painful, difficult birth. Afterwards you may return to Socrates and his friends who strive for the “birth” of thinking. You will notice that 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 to 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.

And the conventional leaders of culture do not tolerate the emerging human being who becomes a servant of the truth.

As the Greeks reach their purist and highest development in Socrates they have already surpassed themselves and sentence themselves to death as they hand 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, emerging human being.

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