

GREECE: ON COMING HOME

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The hallway was short and bare, save the one desk-chair combination so prevalent in the 1950's. The walls were white, the windows were gray with the winter rain and snow of western Virginia, and the floor was covered with institutional gray asbestos tiling. I remember sitting and meditating on the imperfections of the lines between the tiles and staring out the windows at the empty asphalt courtyard sandwiched between the wings of the small U shaped school. I sat alone in the hall, beside the door to the classroom, while my seventh grade classmates on the other side listened to a Protestant minister's wife lecture on the prophets of the Old Testament. There was a harshness in her voice as she spoke of how wicked the Hebrews were when they periodically succumbed to the worship of the gods and goddesses of the Mediterranean.

At twelve years of age, I had chosen to be excused from the class. My parents had taught me that the public school was no place for teaching religion to an imprisoned, diverse, populace of children. In 1958, fundamentalist Christian teachings were part of the weekly curriculum in my seventh grade classroom. True, you could sit out the religious instruction, if for some reason your religious sensibilities did not include an appreciation of a hardy dose of fundamentalist Christianity. But you did it alone, sitting in the hallway the same way a student was punished for unruly behavior. I deeply resented the coercion, and the message in the teachings that something was forbidden. As a precocious young adolescent, I took up the challenge. I sat in the hallway, proud, determined, and alone.

It has never been clear to me how it was that though I managed to have the freedom to sit the class out, I still had to take the final exam at the end of the course. I do remember watching the instructor's chagrined face when I aced the exam with a grade of 100.

What I remember about the Old Testament prophets was that they seemed enraged at the wayward Jews who, at moments of tribulation, chose to abandon Yahweh and worship, instead, other gods and goddesses. They had done something that was forbidden. Any parent knows that you do not lightly tell a teenager that something is forbidden. I was curious. I wanted to know more about the religions that seemed to stimulate so much fear. The religious institution that encouraged my curiosity was Unitarian Universalism.

My fate was sealed several summers later when I took a required college course in New Testament at a small Protestant liberal arts college in the mountains of Kentucky. The kind Protestant minister who taught the course allowed me to take as my term paper topic 'The Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Greece.' In the library I stared in appreciation and wonder at photographs of beautiful nude bodies of Athena and Zeus and Poseidon and Aphrodite and

Apollo. I could not believe that the idealized beauty of the human body depicted in those magnificent sculptures could come from an evil or debased religious perspective. Instead of rejecting them, I wanted to walk among the statuary, see them with my own eyes, and have the experience of feeling dwarfed by their presence.

In the recent popular non fiction, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*, the author Thomas Cahill rhetorically asks what the Greeks of the classic period believed.

What did they believe, these Greeks? Were the gods real to them or just metaphors?...If we look seriously at the (myths) we may find ourselves captivated by their poetry and depth of emotion—which may lead us to exclaim something like ‘Well, this doesn’t explain anything scientifically, but there is something very satisfying about it. It has the truth of a dream...The myths (are) metaphors—not metaphors as naive explanations of natural phenomena but as attempts by society’s dreamers to find a language that can penetrate to the heart of reality...Though the myths were naive in the sense that they were anthropomorphic, presenting the gods as if they were men (and women), the myths were also attempting—at a deeper level—to feel the intangible and say the unsayable.’” (Cahill, pp. 235-36)

It is with this understanding that I have found myself returning throughout my life to the study and enjoyment of Greek mythology, literature, drama and religion. And it was with this understanding that I took a trip to Greece with my husband, Roger Fritts, last summer. We visited some of the ancient religious sites of Greece--Athens, Epidaurus, Olympia, Delphi, and Delos. We walked among the temple ruins, gazed at the sacred statues, and wondered at the magnificent landscapes with mountaintops, valleys, seas and islands.

In Athens, we walked down narrow streets, past the site of an old Greek Orthodox monastery, through Roman and Greek ruins, and began our ascent to the top of the Acropolis and the spectacular Parthenon. As I walked up steep stairs and winding pathways, I fought back tears. I fought the desire to bend and kiss the ground. Not a speck of Greek blood courses through my veins. I had never before been to the Mediterranean. Yet I felt I had returned home to the site of my dreams and religious expression. I felt confused and embarrassed by the intensity of my emotion. In retrospect, I imagine my feelings were much like those of pilgrims who visit religious sites in Catholicism or Judaism, or of individuals who have labored over genealogies and felt a strong identification with a certain country or landscape.

From atop the Acropolis I could view the lower hill where politicians talked to the citizens and votes were taken. Yet even in Athens, democracy was limited. Citizens were males who were born in Athens. Immigrants, women and slaves were excluded from citizenship. I knew that if I had lived during that time, I would not be able to vote.

I do not believe in a literal Earth-Goddess as described in Charlene Spretnak’s *Myths of Ancient Greece*, nor do I believe in the Hellenic gods and goddesses whose lives are, as Thomas Cahill so

aptly points out, “taken up with predictable domestic crises—who’s sleeping with whom, who’s getting back at whom, who’s belittling whom.” (Cahill, p. 235) Instead, Greece gives me a greater understanding of how religious myths are poetic and imaginative expressions of our deepest questions and yearnings, and Greece reminds me that myths reflect and sustain the political arrangements of the culture in which they are created.

In Delphi, where there are ruins of the Temples of Athena and Apollo, I stood in awe under great rocky crags untouched by the ancients because they were sacred to Gaia, the sovereign deity before Apollo and Athena. The ancients believed that Gaia created the world and the human race out of chaos. Several undisturbed promontories or rocks were especially holy. The first rock, Sibyl’s Rock, was where Gaia’s prophetess stood when she first came to Delphi.

From the hills of Delphi, we could look down on a mighty valley now filled with olive groves which stretched to the Mediterranean in the distance. In the museum I stood beside the bronze statue of the Charioteer, so finely sculpted that his eyelashes were perfect and undisturbed, and the beautiful statue of a young man, the lover of an Emperor, who died in the Nile, perhaps a suicide.

I listened to a guide describe how slaves successfully bought their freedom only if they could also find a free man who would stand up for them and plead their case at Delphi. If they were lucky, and freedom was their lot, it was inscribed in the pillars and marble pedestals, and the God Apollo was seen as their witness and benefactor.

On the island of Mykonos, a blaze of sunlight blinded Roger and me as we stepped off the gangplank of a large Greek ferry. The light was so bright we felt assaulted by its power as we stumbled toward a taxi in the hopes of finding shelter. We had come to Mykonos, not to sunbathe, but to visit the small island off its shore, Delos. Stories that I read as a young girl and found quaint, took on powerful meaning to me, now a woman with the births of my own children behind me.

It was believed the small island of Delos, the very center of the Cyclades, a vast swirl of rocky islands in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, was the birthplace of the Greek god of light, Apollo. Though all the goddesses of Olympus gathered on Delos, Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth, did not know of the impending birth. Only after nine days of painful and unsuccessful childbirth did Leto finally give birth to a beautiful son. At that moment Delos was said to ‘glow like burnished gold, the ground was covered with blossoming flowers....and singing swans glided on the circular lake.’ (Tsakos, p. 5)

What woman who has given birth cannot identify and empathize with Leto, who suffered in childbirth, only to be convinced upon her child’s birth that her newborn was the most beautiful in the world?

Delos was dotted with the ruins of temples, buildings, and homes. The geography is simple: a

granite crag, a stream that flows from the crag to the sea, a sacred lake in the shape of a wheel, and a slender palm tree that marks the memory of the birth. Within the walls of the museum at Delos I found countless renditions of the great gods and goddesses of Greek antiquity. The Greek imagination visualized the healthy human form to be the best representation of the gods and goddesses...naked, full, ripe and luscious men and women in various poses of athletics and rest. While now we see them in bright white, at the time of the flourishing of Delos, those statues were painted in vivid life-like color. Can you imagine being surrounded by painted sculptures with red lips, and blue or brown eyes, and blonde or dark hair? The power of their presentation would be something another religious perspective, especially a fledgling cult such as Christianity, would quake to consider.

At Epidaurus, I sat in one of the uppermost seats of the famous amphitheater where 14,000 people were able to watch the dramatic tragedies and comedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. A person at the base of the theater, speaking in a stage whisper, was clearly audible where I sat. I could see how people approached the site from the plains, stopping on the way to worship at the temple of Asklepios, the son of Apollo and the god of healing.

I remembered my study of the Greek tragedies and comedies years before, and how they formed the basis for the liturgies of the Christian church. Here at Cedar Lane, we participate in responsive readings, have dramatic performances, tell stories that describe and explain our world, and much of the form of our religious worship comes straight from Greek drama.

I sat on a weathered stone seat at Epidaurus and thought about our invasion of Iraq in March. I remembered the tragedy *Agamemnon* and how it is likely that it was performed in theaters such as Epidaurus. It is a story of lust, bloodshed and brutality. Agamemnon, of the House of Atreus, went to war to retrieve the abducted princess, Helen. After the Trojan War, he returned home to find his wife, Clytemnestra, had taken a lover. Eventually Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and their children were all dead and the house of Atreus had fallen. I felt awe that a drama I read, thinking of it as far away, was actually performed in an amphitheater within a stone's throw of the Mycenaen hilltop where it all really occurred.

And I remembered the courage and creativity of the Greek playwright, Aristophanes, who dared to suggest in *Lysistrata*, that women would only be able to keep men from going to war if they threatened to withhold their sexual favors. Such an indictment dared only be conveyed in comedy, and even then it did not win the hearts of those who attended the performance.

The play opens with the young woman Lysistrata pacing at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens. She is waiting impatiently for the women she has invited to an important meeting. They are late. Her friend, Calcione, gives us a view of the life of the women, and it is little different from women today. They are held up, she explains to Lysistrata, because they have to tend to husbands, rouse servants, put children to sleep or bath them, or feed them. But Athens is at war, and Lysistrata will not be contained. When the women do arrive, she appeals to their frustrations. She asks, Don't you miss your husbands? Since they have gone, there is no joy or solace. And then

Lysistrata makes a proposal.

We must abstain—each—from the joys of Love...If we women will but sit at home,
Powdered and trimmed, clad in our daintiest lawn (clothes), Employing all our charms,
and all our arts To win men's love, and when we've won it, then Repel them, firmly, till
they end the war, We'll soon get Peace again, be sure of that. (Aristophanes, Pp. 291-292)

Greece was home to many of the ideas I hold to be sacred.

--Democracy, in all its imperfections, is a gift we received from Greece. Here at Cedar Lane we struggle to make the power of democracy real.

-- Art, too, reached a pinnacle in Greece. The human body was idealized and rendered perfect in statue and temple, on hillsides and mountaintops.

--The literary splendor of the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes spoke of human emotions and struggles that are still the lot of human beings: love, jealousy, narcissistic pride, possessiveness, competition, curiosity, shame, vindication, guilt, gratitude, pity.

-- And the religious myths of the gods and goddesses of that time are still enacted in human behavior. Our President has waged a war to kill the man who plotted to kill his father. Slavery and women's oppression still exists in nearly every corner of the world. It still often takes the power of a free man to release a slave from shackles. In every country, there are citizens, and there are those who have no political voice or economic power.

I do believe that there can be a better world, if we will work to create it. The dream began in Greece imperfectly, and it is up to us to keep alive what was dreamed and imagine an even better way to be with one another as a human family.

Forty-five years ago I sat in the hallway of a small country school because I wanted to protect my right to pursue my own religious quest. I was thought to be a heathen, but all I wanted was to decide for myself what religions to study. Though I thought of my action as a statement of my independence, it was over-determined. My parents believed strongly in the separation of church and state. My act of rebellion was firmly entrenched in their value system. They were, you see, Unitarian Universalists. The day I sat outside a religion classroom, I began a life long love of Greek history, mythology, literature and drama. I began a life long interest in religion. I began a journey that led me eventually to the Unitarian Universalist ministry...all when I refused to sit through a religion class.

Sources:

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