

The Search for Greek American Identity

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Growing up in a small town in the heart of Ohio, I did not have the luxury of experiencing Hellenism as many of my peers from bigger metropolitan areas in the state such as Cleveland, Columbus, or Cincinnati did. We did not have large AHEPA meetings, GOYA basketball tournaments, or a formal Greek language school. We were fortunate to have a small but mighty dance group that I participated in. Every year, we would dance our *kalamatiano* and *tsamiko* with plenty of *kefi* at our parish festival. I was happy to see many people from our surrounding community showing interest in Greek food, music, and the Orthodox faith. Greek would be extensively spoken at home until grade school, and then slowly my speaking ability would lose its progress as I continued through my education. Thankfully, I kept speaking Greek at home and when I would spend cherished moments with my grandparents. This helped me retain a basic understanding of the language that has allowed me to understand my culture even further today.

I learned from my family and grandparents great and simple truths about life, influenced from their perspective of growing up in the difficult times of the post-World War II and Civil War era in Greece. Sayings such as “Όπου ακούς πολλά κεράσια κράτα μικρό καλάθι” (“Wherever you hear of many cherries bring a small basket”) and “Κάνε το καλό και ρίχτο στο γιαλό!” (“Do the right thing and throw it in the sea!”) These resonated with me throughout my entire life. In an academic setting, these sayings might be regarded as simple folk wisdom, but I experienced them to be something even more important, as pragmatic forms of philosophy. Being Greek American has shaped a large part of my life experience, as I understand other people’s culture has shaped their own lives. This identity to me is not defined by where or when you are born, but how you live and think.

As I became a more critical thinker in my college years, I realized the things that I valued most about being Greek were the intangible and timeless concepts that can be passed down from generation to generation. They are values that have distinct words: *philotimo*, *arete*, and *eudaimonia*. They encapsulate an overall sense of honor, excellence, and pursuing true happiness no matter what life brings. These values were taught to me first at home and through the Church, and later investigated on my own through

philosophy books and my academic courses. In this way, I began to expand my perceptions on the idea of what makes someone more "Greek," not limited by birth, but as someone who is able to strive for these ideals through education and a way of thinking critically about the modern world we live in. Cultures around the world seem to be assimilating to new standardized ways of life under globalization and commercialization. Our world today might look very different from the worlds known by the ancient philosophers and my grandparents, but I believe that the value of the ideas they shared still remains.

The most exposure of Greek ideas in my early school years came in the form of Greek mythology, the Pythagorean theorem, a short history excerpt about democracy in Athens, and reading about the architectural value of the Parthenon. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* was a promising book series that I related to in middle school as well, as it blended the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology with settings in modern day America. But the opportunity to truly dive deeper into my Greek heritage began when I was in high school. I was fascinated by philosophy and its unconventional ways of looking at things. My interest in this subject quickly led me to uncover how vast the contribution of Ancient Greece has been to this topic of study. I started checking out books by Aristotle and Plato from the public library, and soon became happily distracted from my typical studies. This was when I started to realize that Greece can offer the world much more than natural beauty and good food.

At the same time, I began adding many modern Greek songs to my music library. I learned about the classic folk songs from my festival dancing days, but now I began to explore the rich tradition of rebetika and the more recent genre of *laika*. My friends would be driving to school listening to the latest radio hits, and I would be deciding between Theodorakis or Vamvakaris. Part of my interest stemmed from a record player that my father kept in good condition accompanied with dozens of Greek records from the 1960s and 1970s. Another reason for my interest was a desire to better understand the modern culture and history of Greece in the twentieth century. I was looking for signs of continuation between the ancient thinkers and the modern-day culture. I was surprised to find songs that incorporated ancient themes into their lyrics. Titles such as "Where are you Pericles?" ("ΠΟΥ ΕΙΣΑΙ ΚΑΪΜΕΝΕ ΠΕΡΙΚΛΗ") sung by Jim Apostolou, and "The Tsifteteli of Diogenes" (Το τσιφτετέλι του Διογένη) sung by Nikos Papazoglou. The advent of unlimited music streaming services and the ability to hold thousands of songs on one device have only helped my search for new music, and I have not stopped searching since. I think this has been the greatest lesson of my readings in philosophy as well. To stop searching is to stop living a fulfilling, examined life. When we just accept what is given to us or live simply at the surface we can miss out on many things, such as knowing our identity more deeply or the opportunity to begin to trace our roots. It is common within the Greek American community, even still with many young Greek Americans, that the

way to greet someone is not complete without asking where they are from. Some might know their ancestral ties very well, down to the region and the village. Others might just say they are only part Greek but that they grew up with a full appreciation for the folk dancing and the food they had at home. As second, third, and fourth generations of Hellenes in America embark on their own odysseys of self-discovery and understanding, I suggest that the importance of this interaction still holds. My own experience has been that having a strong cultural identity and foundation has given me great friends, virtues, and memories.

The meaning of being a Hellene has been debated for thousands of years. Nonetheless, the identity has persisted through several tumultuous and triumphant periods of history. As many questions arise about the future of Hellenism in America, we must ask ourselves and especially younger people: what makes them Greek? And why is this valuable? Carrying this tradition and heritage can still be a great source of intellectual and personal strength. Everyone can learn from the wisdom and experience of the past, whether it is the story of the Greeks or another previous advanced civilization. The most important thing is that we do, in fact, search, and in this way, it will be difficult to lose the curiosity for learning about ourselves and the world around us.

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