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The ironies of memory

Be careful what you ask for in life. You just might get it. This lesson is hammered home in Greek myths, especially when the average person is dealing with those who have more power. For the Greeks, this is usually their self-centered gods, but the gods are simply stand-ins for the socially and politically privileged, the wealthy and other human wielders of power with the clout to act counter to communal law or common decency.



In the early periods when many Greek myths were first shaped, such folks defined the rules of law and made it serve their own purposes.

The great Greek myth-makers viewed life with the clear-sighted pragmatism of sharecroppers and war veterans. It pays to listen to them. Take this example. T.S. Eliot certainly did. He uses it as the epigraph to his famous poem "The Waste Land."

Apollo loved a young woman named Deiphobe. Wanting to seduce her, he promised her as many years of life as the grains of sand she could gather in her two hands. She accepted the offer, scooped up lots of sand, and then refused to close the deal by sleeping with Apollo. Our own litigious culture knows a different version of this lesson: "always read the fine print."

Apollo gave Deiphobe a long, long life, but not lasting youth. The beautiful object of divine lust aged, withered and shrank until she became a cicada, chirping her hard-bitten advice to human beings who came to consult her about their futures. She was the first oracular Sibyl of Cumae and her one great wish, immortalized by Petronius and Eliot, was to die.

We remember such myths and teach them for the same reason some of us read and learn the stories and parables of the Old and New Testament. They resonate with us. They give us ways of understanding our own lives.

Storytelling lies at the center of healing therapies: Freudian psychiatry, the treatment of combat veterans affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, the sermons of preachers and even the digressions of old college profs. Many creative artists, like novelist Tim O'Brien, claim they "just tell stories" that they themselves are incapable of fully explaining. The ramifications and textures are too manifold.

Stories like the Deiphobe myth give us a proper sense of irony about life and its many hidden meanings. They serve as monuments to life's ever-present dangers. One of the greatest dangers, ironically enough, is forgetfulness. But forgetting

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seems to be what modern American culture does best. This might explain why "memory studies" recently have become an important academic sub-discipline. It certainly explains why we have become so keen lately — and rightly so — to remember the personal stories of our own "greatest generation" who have bequeathed to us our place in the modern world.

How do we remember? What memories do we culturally privilege and retain? What do monuments signify and how do they convey their meaning? These are some of the questions asked by scholars of social memory. They are questions we can ask about the controversial statues that call for us to revisit the legacy of the Confederacy at the University of Texas at Austin. They are questions about what we choose to remember and to forget — mostly at our own peril.

Miguel Ferguson reminds us in Monday's op-ed in the *American-Statesman* that the four University of Texas monuments were erected by the "power and privilege of George Washington Littlefield," a prominent banker and UT regent, in order to counteract "northern influence." The irony now is that these statues serve to heighten awareness of the still-existent legacy of a period that we may otherwise delude ourselves into thinking has vanished forever. Without the ironic power of these historical statues, we would not have had the student activism of the early '90s that led to the commissioning of the statue of Martin Luther King Jr. Nor would we have learned the cultural lessons in Ferguson's op-ed piece.

It reminded me of a conversation I had with a restaurant owner in a Hill Country community eight years ago. Learning we were from UT-Austin, he asked whether we knew anyone in the "science department." I asked him how he knew of this department. He said he had catered one of its outings. And then he remembered: "Yes. It was the science department. They were mainly orientals and Jew-boys." Sometimes when you ask for something, you get a living legacy instead.

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