

Excellence for Its Own Sake

• • •

*Matthew Bogdanos*¹

Assistant District Attorney in Manhattan; Marine officer; author Thieves of Baghdad²

There has been much fanfare in the media about my seemingly inconsistent pursuits: a New York City homicide prosecutor who is also a published author, a combat Marine who can read classical Greek and Latin, and a middleweight boxer who once danced ballet. The attention is misplaced, however, because I have no special talents. But I am driven. And the basis of that drive is my firm belief that all of these pursuits come from the same place. It all started with a book.

When I was 12 years old, my mother—a waitress in my family’s Greek restaurant in lower Manhattan—gave me a copy of the *Iliad*. For me, reading the *Iliad* and inhabiting Homer’s world of heroes, duty, and honor transported me to another place. Reading about that world pretty much set the course for everything else I’ve done since. Indeed, it was identification with the Bronze Age Greeks and their values that led me to take up boxing, to join the Marines, and to become a prosecutor. And it was my fascination with history—reinforced by a rigorous liberal arts education—and my appreciation of the Greek concepts of *themis* (what’s right) and *arête* (excellence for its own sake) that made me want to track down some of the world’s oldest and most precious antiquities that had been stolen from the Iraq Museum in April 2003.

Historically, the life of action and the life of the mind (or artistic sensibility) have always been two halves of a single whole. Today, when we conjure up the classical Greek ideals, we think of philosophy and art, but even in their greatest contributions to aesthetics, Greek society was all about *agon*—competition. Each year in Athens, the presentation of new plays was such a competition, with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others vying for the prize in playwriting. But *agon* does not mean hostility. In almost every boxing match since the ancient Olympics, you’ll see the fighters hug each other after the last round.

In my view, then, being efficient and ruthless on the battlefield is entirely consistent with being a loving, fully sensate human being. It is not so much a question of bouncing back and forth but of integrating. At times, being a good military officer means having compassion and sensitivity: witness Siegfried Sassoon, winner of the Military Cross for his bravery during the Battle of the Somme, who wrote poems from

the trenches in World War I, expressing the same tender “watch while they sleep” concern for his men on the battlefield that I have experienced with my children. At times, being a good parent means being tough and demanding. Witness those parents sturdy enough to be the solid brick wall a teenager can rail against, even beat his fist against, without the inhibiting fear of doing damage. We should take down the wall we’ve set up between being fiercely loving and being occasionally fierce.

Arête is a Greek word, but we don’t have to say it in Greek for the concept to sound out of place. Even in English it’s something of an anachronism. But honor is not some antique refinement, like knowing classical languages. Honor and education are force multipliers. If you decide in advance to act honorably, then, when the moment arises, you know exactly what to do. It doesn’t mean you do it, but at least it points you in the right direction straight as the needle to the pole.

The concept of honor, like the concept of bravery, is a form of mental conditioning for the individual. Culture and custom, codes and systems of honor, are society’s version of the same kind of conditioning—only in this case, it’s a form of *societal* muscle memory. Liberal arts education helps guide us in this collective training. In a very real sense, then, it offers a possible answer to Juvenal’s question of the first century, “Who will guard the guardians?” We all will as a society based on the code we have established. “What is honored in a country,” Plato observed, “will be cultivated there.” But in order to cultivate it, first you must learn about it.

Endnotes

- ¹ Matthew Bogdanos has been an assistant district attorney in Manhattan since 1988. A colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves, middleweight boxer, and native New Yorker, he holds advanced degrees in law, classics, and military strategy. Recalled to active duty after September 11, 2001, he received a Bronze Star for counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan, served two tours in Iraq, and received a 2005 National Humanities Medal for his work recovering Iraq’s treasures. Royalties from *Thieves of Baghdad* are donated to the Iraq Museum.
- ² Adapted from *Thieves of Baghdad: One Marine’s Passion to Recover the World’s Greatest Stolen Treasures* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005). Copyright 2005 by Matthew Bogdanos.