

## What Might the Oracle Say? Higher Education and the Delphic Ideal in a Profoundly Connected World

I am so honored to have been asked by the Hellenic American National Council to participate in this symposium. I want to acknowledge the vision and foresight of Mr. Theodore Spyropoulos, the president of HANC and Mayor Kaltsis of Delphi for bringing us together today.

This is my first trip to Greece, and I have already found that Greece has three main problems. The food is too good, the country is too beautiful, and the Greek people are too interesting. Because of these problems, I have eaten too much, walked too much and stayed up too late in Tavernas having fascinating conversations. I will never be the same!

I have also found one thing that I have done already for the Greek people. I have given my blood. The black flies who bite love me more than anyone else, so I get bit instead of letting those bugs bite my hosts!

I want to talk today about higher education and the role it plays in modern society. I believe that, if Mr. Spryopoulos and Mayor Kaltsis are to be successful in helping revitalize the Delphic Ideal, they will need the support and participation of colleges and universities across the globe. Critical times require great leaders, who can see beyond the cacophony of the present to the vision of a more harmonized future. These leaders must possess the foresight, intelligence and determination necessary to catalyze many people to come together to help frame and achieve their vision.

I believe that Mr. Spryopoulos is one of those leaders. It is my deepest hope that we will all remember this gathering of like-minded people for many years because of the action that it helps to start.

I will assert in my talk with you today that there are deep changes in societies around the world, as we become both closer together and farther apart in our world views and our perceptions of how to create a better place for ourselves, our children, and our countries. I will present the argument that colleges and universities face a conundrum as they try to be responsive to these new challenges, and yet hold on to the

riches of our cultural heritage. And I will also assert that the Delphic Ideal provides a deep and important spring of knowledge that can assist higher education to achieve its purpose.

If you allow me, I will imagine the Oracle coming back to us here and now -- in the year 2006. Using her imagined spirit as a frame or a lens through which to view our world, I want to explore the ways in which globalization, mobility and technology challenge educational leaders to find new methods to teach. And I want to focus on how educators must be challenged to help an increasingly international student population achieve *sophrosyne* - the ideal of multiple kinds of wisdom held in human balance.

I first want to thank Dr. Diana Woolis, the CEO and founder of Knowledge in the Public Interest, whose engagement with me on these issues in a Socratic dialogue helped to shape my thinking. I also believe that she has some of the new-age tools, especially her Polilogue process, that can assist our communities to achieve what I am talking about today.

I will also begin with an apology. I am sure that there are individuals in the audience today who know much more than

I do about many of the issues I want to discuss today. I hope you will be patient with this presentation, and then assist me at the end with questions and points of view that expand and clarify or challenge and contradict what I will be trying to advance.

## **Introduction**

The world that we all face today is in a state of amazing flux. While cell phones and the internet connect us in ways unthought-of of even fifteen years ago, we also see a world that uses that connectedness to foment terrorism and destruction. We live today in a profoundly connected world, and this technological connectedness alters the way in which we much conceive of society and the role of education in that society.

We are here today in Delphi, the “navel of the earth”, surrounded by the wisdom of ancient peoples, and yet joined by a desire to establish a better future, with the ability to move ahead the cultures and economies of our countries. And yet we stand, those of us who live in the United States and I believe here in Greece also, when the government’s commitment to public higher education is waning. We face the danger of making totally private and focused on profit an

educational system that should be committed to the higher moral purposes to which this symposium is dedicated.

Let me go through these issues – The Delphic Idea, The Profoundly Connected World, The impact of the connected world on our conceptions of ourselves and our ability to reflect on that conception, the new global importance of higher education ---one at a time.

### **The Delphic Ideal**

In my limited and partial understanding of this very complex concept with a long, long history, I would define its fundamental meaning as being concerned with the development of wisdom based upon the balance and integration of a humble human spirit. There are so many interpretations to the ideal, and in a way the Delphic Ideal might be one of those Greek concepts that requires books to interpret what the Greeks contain in a single word. However, the exhortation “knows thyself” implies so much about the creation of knowledge, the explication of wisdom, and the development of ideals that advance humanity, that I believe this symposium is correct to focus on its centrality.

One of the honors of being here in Delphi is that this place provides an explicit focus on the birth of human consciousness. For me, Delphi marks a point in time when philosophers codified what was happening in the human consciousness – namely the comprehension that human thought was not only possible but perfect-able. It was a moment to articulate the growing ability to be reflective of one's own place in the world, and to do so within social, cultural and historical perspectives. It was the beginning of a belief in the power of thinking, and the impact of deep thought.

Therefore the Delphic Ideal also seems to connote the deployment of knowledge as the form for connection among peoples and therefore the beginning of an ideal of international peace. The intellectual perspective necessary for an ancient people to come to this understanding cannot be underestimated. It was a pivotal moment in the development of society, and we know that its roots in the Western world are buried in the ground upon which we stand today in Delphi. As you all know, the great poet Angelos Sikelianos and his wife Eva Palma organized the first Delphic Festival for cooperation among intellectuals from many cultures in 1927. This tradition must be carried through

not only this conference, but in colleges and universities around the globe.

But if I were to invite the Oracle into dialogue with us today, I would want to ask her about the challenge for Greece, and for the rest of the world, in this new millennium. I would want to ask her advice for adapting the intellectual treasures of the past to advance the causes of connection and international peace in the present. Let me return to this question in a moment.

### **The Profoundly Connected World**

There is no individual at this symposium today who needs any explanation of what I mean by a profoundly connected world, but let me give you a little example. I was in a very small village in Crete – Kournas – five nights ago on my very first night in Crete when I met a woman who was able to speak to me in English. She told me about her daughter, who had just finished law school in Greece and was at that moment in the United States with her fiancée looking at graduate schools. I was about to hand the mother my business card and tell her daughter to contact me if she needed help when she dialed her daughter in Boston on her cell phone. I began to talk to the daughter about my opinion

of the best universities to study criminal law in Boston, and telling her that a friend of mine was the president of one of the colleges she was considering. I was connected within seconds to a person in Boston from her mother in a town of 800 people in Western Crete. Incredible!

### *A Changing Definition of Self*

The nature of this technological connection has many implications. Let's look at what the Oracle might think of this profound connectedness made possible through technology as it relates to the concept "*Know Thyself*." Historically, the Oracle would know that individuals would "*know themselves*" within a single, highly specific place and culture. The mother I met the other night had family as far back as she could remember in that tiny village of Kournas. But this is no longer true. Her daughter had studied in Athens and was about to do so in the United States.

The Oracle might advise us that, in a connected world, the very definition of "self" is changing. We know clearly who we are when we are surrounded by our family, when the ground we walk on has been in our family for centuries. It is easier to have a distinctive sense of yourself when the people you

pass in the street are the children of the same people who your parents knew, and worked with, and went to school with, and went to church with, and engaged in political discussions with, etc., etc.

I think the Oracle might caution us to consider whether the concept of “*Know Thyself*” is more difficult, complex or fluid as we pass through multiple places and engage with individuals from worlds very different from our own. The contemporary African philosopher and diplomat Kwame Appiah writes in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* that we see more people in a day on the streets of Athens than our forebears saw in their whole life. The Oracle might tell us that this new world will require a different set of skills and competencies to develop the capacity of self-knowledge that is one of the foundations of the Delphic Ideal.

As the president of a college, I know that educators need to provide the educational experiences that help our students to achieve the harmonic ideal exalted in Delphi. But if the process of *Knowing Thyself* has become ***situational learning*** as a result of a profoundly connected world, we perhaps need to re-examine our process of education. The difference is that, whereas learning and knowing were often

done in one place for an entire life, it is now situationally based. The daughter of the Kournas mother will go to Boston, understand the United States, and then perhaps go to Canada to practice law. What she knows, and how she knows it, and the challenge she will face of knowing herself in these multiple places and multiply perspectives is a new problem. It is also a new opportunity for developing another level of human consciousness that might lead to a more advanced world, a world where international understanding and peace are possible.

As educators and leaders, we have to think deeply about how to make the courses and curriculum in our colleges able to nurture students who will inevitably negotiate our profoundly connected world.

So part of the challenge is to teach ourselves and our students about how to go across cultures, without losing our own. Culture is the source of our artistic and humanistic sentiments – it must be protected but simultaneously challenged. That is one of the issues I have heard spoken of by individuals in this conference – how to keep alive a Greek-centric cultural identity within a diasporadic community. Given the amazing mobility of our contemporary society, this is not only a Greek problem. As you discover

the answers, you will provide critical models for the rest of the world. But I caution you that only trying to advance the historical knowledge and values without taking into consideration how to adapt and use the principles to make a better world today will only lead to a continued weakening of the Greek cultural presence in other lands.

### *A Changing Opportunity for Reflection*

The Oracle, if I could bring her here within our midst, might encourage us to consider another aspect of the connected world if we wish to revive a process of following the Delphic Ideal of Knowing Thyself. This aspect is **speed** -- the speed of life in a connected world. When the Cretan mother called her daughter, I think it was about 1 o'clock in the morning in Boston. The daughter's life, and increasingly all of our lives, have been accelerated by the pace of technological connection. This is experienced in our work as well as our home lives. Cell phones and emails that keep us constantly connected to each other, and at least for Americans, to our work – changes our ability to *Know Ourselves*. Because to *Know Thyself* you must have a very precious thing – time. Within that time, you must cultivate the

intellectual and emotional capacity for **reflection**. Cultivating the capacity for reflection is not done quickly or easily. Reflection means that we have experienced life, that we think about those experiences, and that we then analyze ourselves in relationship to the issues we confronted. It is best done in a continuous, iterative process where we compare our personal experience with the wisdom gleaned from scholarship (reading and learning from other teachers) and the analytic process of developing our own frame of reference and understanding.

The challenge for great educators is how to help students develop insight. If insight is derived from reflection – how do we teach students to do this, especially when they can be overwhelmed with just learning the copious amounts of information that are required for their technical expertise in their field. Have you looked at a law book or a chemistry book lately?

The Oracle might remind us that, in the ancient time of the Olympics, we actually stopped the world to allow time for reflection, in a way, by ceasing all warfare. This allowed the continuation and flourishing of art and culture. It was an especially brilliant strategy, no matter how fully or partially enacted, because to the ancient Greeks the different city-

states were the world. Now, nothing stops us. The globally connected world never stops – email from Greece arrives in the United States while we are asleep, for example, and this continues in every family who has someone they love in another part of the globe, and especially for the movement of people, ideas and things. For those of you who lead or work for international companies, you know what is occurring in Moscow in the middle of the night for Mr. Velavaskis' company is of critical importance, and might engender a 5 am phone call.

The onslaught of information is relentless. Since the realm of the Oracle was always one of questions, she might ask us “How do we teach students to reflect, when they are awash in information? Is there a way to use our role as teachers to require the quietness and intensity of focus that reflection requires, or must we admit that the speed related to our profoundly connected world changes the very nature of contemporary society and makes achievement of the Delphic Ideal more difficult than ever before?”

### **The New Centrality of Higher Education**

One of the things that might most surprise the Oracle if we were to bring her here is the way in which education has

become central to a country's power and might. While she might be delighted that a Greek tradition -- Socrates' method of questioning -- stood as a robust method of deep engagement of students over the centuries, she might be surprised that more important than armies or gold to the future of a country is what I will call its intellectual capital. By this I mean that economic progress and international standing is created by the "knowledge work" of college educated students. This is true whether that work is a new accounting process for international trade, the development of a new material for building, or the application of a new computer system to a multi-national business. Joseph Burke, an American Educational policy analyst, has suggested that the business and government sectors are acting as if "education is too important to leave to the educators." In this statement, I think we can anticipate the current waves lapping at college's doors -- especially for-profit colleges whose focus is on the creation of wealth for its investors instead the development of a country's intellectual capital for the good of humanity. In the United States, we see the simultaneous decrease in public funding of colleges and universities and increase in the number of for-profit colleges.

These trends are potentially antithetical to the values espoused by the Delphic Ideal. In this case, the Oracle might suggest that business, and the making of profit, have a very high likelihood of turning colleges to their own purposes and not forging ahead with the kind of multi-contextual, multi-perspective and reflective critical analysis that we need to advance the world today. But I would also challenge the participants in this conference today. When you encouraged your sons and daughters, did you tell them to be teachers, or to get their MBA's and law degrees?

In the process that others have termed the globalization of work, the economies of the developed world will rest on the knowledge economy. The knowledge economy's engine must run on millions of brain waves. As educators, we must be part of our country's participation in the modern world, but also stand as the holders of the mysteries of a life well-lived. The history of war and unending cycles of technological development are clear, yet the knowledge that still eludes us is how to teach about an international development that moves ahead a constant peace and livable future.

The demands of contemporary society for an expansion of the role of colleges and universities to create and promote the knowledge society has never been stronger, nor more

important to the continued development of the world. Small changes in education world-wide, such as the education of women in undeveloped countries, would unleash enormous economic potential. To really respond to a Delphic Ideal of advancing wisdom, I argue that we must change our understanding of the scope of individuals who need a college education and the likelihood that these people will come to our national colleges from other countries.

There are a beginning set of cross-national projects such as the European Bologna Project, which is attempting to promote student and faculty cross-country mobility through a harmonized system that attempts to assure the quality and consistency of a college education around the world – no small task.

What might the Oracle say to the idea that we need to college-educate a much greater proportion of each of our country's population if we are to be successful in this new age? One thing she might caution us is to be very careful about defining what it is we should be teaching in our colleges. And that it part of the conundrum of invoking the past wisdom to guide us into the future. It is very difficult, and yet I will argue essential, that we assure both the continual progression of the development of knowledge and

at the same time never ignore the wisdom that forms the Delphic ideal and can lead to true world harmony as well as personal development.

### *Linking International Issues in Higher Education to the Delphic Ideal*

I believe that higher education must undertake a structural transformation to resolve the conundrum of moving ahead while we stay connected to ancient wisdoms. We must move from knowledge acquisition and accumulation to critical analysis of information, creating hierarchies and typologies of information, and finding ways to synthesize and link information. This means that colleges and universities must move from knowledge dissemination, where a teacher is presumed to know everything and all he or she has to do is tell students, to knowledge adaptation and application, where we engage with our students in an active dialogue that leads us to understand problems at a deep level. When we do this kind of teaching, I think we will embody the Delphic Ideal as well as develop highly evolved thinkers who will know how to face the next problem – whether in the workplace, politics or our societies – with energy and initiative and new thinking.

The globalization of knowledge requires a re-thinking of what is the “Content” of the Delphic Ideal’s teachings. Knowledge cannot be static yet must struggle to identify the fundamental core of knowledge that cannot be minimized or atomized. Knowledge content must be simultaneously global in its framing and context and yet adaptable or applicable at the local levels. We need to preserve the intangible cultural heritage and strengthen cultural identity (we don’t want everyone to look European or American) but we also need to cultivate a way to elaborate on a world culture. In part, I am arguing that preserving a Greek cultural heritage is not enough if it is the only one we save.

We must teach our students to find ways to revitalize endangered traditions at the same time as we create new traditions of cross-nationality.

### *Implications for Higher Education Internationally*

I am therefore presenting today for your consideration the idea that there are changing definitions of what we should be teaching our students. This is both a direct challenge to taking the Delphic ideal as a sacrosanct set of concepts, and yet a profound new need to find that which is most fundamental, most basic, in the creation of a wise and

educated populace. I believe a challenge that Greeks and those of Greek descent must accept is to take the profoundly important treasures of this place where we are gathered and think about how to help other countries adapt these values in positive ways within the context of those other cultures. If Delphi is a crevice at the beginning of human consciousness, it is also a birthplace of the desire for the elevation of a human consciousness. We must continue this process. We must help ourselves and our students enact the intellectual process embodied in “know thyself” in a manner that acknowledges our more primitive impulses and channels them into actions that pushes all aspects of our selves – our physical, social, intellectual and spiritual selves to the highest possible levels of development. This means that, as a people, we need to push human consciousness into something beyond primitive impulses that lead only to war or avarice. We must assert the possibility of a global blossoming of an advanced human intelligence that is critically self-conscious and able to use that intelligence to move forward the human ability to flourish in peace.

There are so many ways to do this. Art and culture allow different generations communicate and continue the creation of wisdom and beauty. I wonder what this

conference would be like if we were to use the art and culture of our youth to engage their ideas and allow those ideas to challenge us. And I think about the struggle in the United States and elsewhere to ensure that a college education doesn't only train someone for success in the business world.

As I watch the United States, a country whose avowed values are ones I greatly endorse but whose lived values do not always reach our exalted values, precipitate wars in other countries, I am saddened. It is so tragic that we have not found ways of resolving our differences beyond killing each other. I have the same sadness as I see human violence in Africa, Malaysia, India, and the Middle East. I fear that too many of these conflicts stem not from religious beliefs, as we so often hear, but from individuals who are not intellectually evolved enough to frame a way of living in the world that allows them to pursue a life based upon self-reflection and personal values. Imagine the impact of the Delphic Ideal in this context. We often shake our head about what humans are capable of – usually in the most horrific and negative ways. Imagine if the principles of the Delphic ideas could advance the human race in a balanced manner.

If we educators are to take seriously our calling to a higher purpose, I believe this is one of the destinations where the Oracle would push us. If the search for human perfection or at least human advancement is possible, I believe educators must work with all their might to bring to light the advancement of humanity. Often the pride of a people is in their region's rich culture – but how do educators both celebrate and protect a region's heritage while they encourage respect and tolerance for other traditions?

I think it is sad that, despite the burst of intellectual advancement that occurred in the ancient Greek philosophers and people thousands of year ago, we have not moved nearly far enough along a trajectory of intellectual advancement. We have not put into individuals' hands the ability to think and reflect – to know themselves as human. But as the economic progress of the world increasingly relies upon the intellectual capital of its people, the possibility is that more and more emphasis will be placed on higher education. It will relate directly to the bottom line of companies and governments. It will be enormously tempting for governments or religions to narrowly determine what should be taught, and I think that this must be resisted. But it

is also possible to imagine a renaissance if we embrace the potential of the human mind.

If Greeks and people of Greek descent could re-claim this critical heritage, and become leaders in the formulation of a movement to again explicitly advance the human race by reminding us what is most important about humanity, it is possible to unleash a potent force for good. If this were to occur, those of us who were not blessed by being born a Greek must sit at their feet, learn from them, and help them move ahead in a renewed yet ancient struggle between knowledge and darkness, between education and chaos.

So in my little fantasy about what the Oracle would say to us is to take up again the challenge that was embraced and advanced in the ancient grounds of Delphi. We know that it is the human search for perfection, always elusive but perennially an excellent goal, that is the root of culture as well as the root of the development of human consciousness.

Thank you.