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Recapturing the Spirit of Hellenism¹

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Being able to address Greek American audiences is particularly touching for me, because, in all honesty my journey is pretty unlikely. My father was born in a small farming village in mountainous region of Epirus, in a hamlet that lacked electricity and the most basic amenities. Despite these circumstances, my father had aspirations for further study and was able to obtain a scholarship to a land of hope and opportunity that has opened its arms to so many: America. My mother, on the other hand, was born in a large city in China. Despite their seemingly different circumstances, they shared the values of two ancient cultures and believed that America could be a place where their children could carry out those principles and achieve what they put their minds to.

I believe the promotion of a variety of civic and religious initiatives, including the creation of charter schools and church-sponsored programs, are quite noble endeavors. After some reflection, I think that there is much about Greek culture that I wish I could have obtained. For example, I know very little of the Greek language. Growing up, I frankly had trouble understanding the sermons in St. George Church in Piscataway, NJ. Granted, attempting to be tri-lingual with is not an easy task, but it would have been great if I knew the Greek language. Nonetheless, I truly enjoyed the environment, the warmth, and congeniality of the people and community. I reveled about the stories my father and uncle told me about the history of both modern and ancient Greece, and became a prime beneficiary of this incredible knowledge and perspective which I believe has tremendously enriched both my life and my character. What I most enjoyed were the narratives, their own personal stories, profound stories, about triumph and tribulation, of victory and loss, and how those played into their own destinies and the destinies of a people. Though we are all part of one American family, passing on these traditions and values can have great impact in the lives of future generations of Greek-Americans, and I commend everyone who has played a part and made a contribution in this area.

Lastly, I want to touch upon one important point, and that is the definition of Hellenism. I know it is bold, especially from a young person with an eclectic background to attempt re-capturing something so profound. But I think that it is important and worth discussing, and so I will try my best. I often thought about what drove the ancient Greeks, the original founders of this idea of Hellenism. During the seventh annual foreign policy trip to Greece sponsored by the American Hellenic Institute, we took a visit to a museum that houses many of Greece's ancient ruins. Looking at those artifacts from antiquity, I tried to get a better insight into the ancients. They had an insatiable drive for perfection, whether it was physically through the Olympics, a deeper level of consciousness through philosophy, or a world more connected through the creation of new technologies and projects to push the boundaries of what was thought possible. Instead of pursuing goals that would have given them short-term pleasure, they pursued long-term projects that sought the betterment and elevation of the human condition. Although we do know that there is no such thing as perfect person or perfect society, as the renowned football coach Vince Lombardi once said, in the pursuit of perfection, we can obtain excellence. And that is what I believe is the core of Hellenism, the idea of human excellence, that we can rise above our most base emotion and embrace positive behaviors, excellent behaviors. And I am happy that this is something that has been touched upon by prominent persons such as Ambassador Tsilas. And this is something that I have thought about quite a bit myself, why is excellence important? We know that it is the right thing to embody, but what is the fundamental reason for embodying it? Currently, to fulfill a science requirement, I am taking a geology class. I have not learned anything about rocks since grade school, but it did remind me of an analogy that has profoundly influenced my outlook and shaped my life. I was always curious about what differentiates a rock from a diamond, as a rock was once a diamond. A rock becomes a diamond through enormous heat and pressure, and in the process is sculpted into a diamond, a gem of incredible value.

Similarly, leaders in any industry or field sculpt their character through an enormous demand and commitment, and in the process, they grow as people and are able to give back to society in a greater capacity as a result because of who they have become. The life of a leader is not always easy, and not every moment is a happy moment, but I do believe that one gets an even greater benefit, that of profound fulfillment in knowing that we have lived our lives in a way that not only served ourselves but served others, and that we have become the people that the universe, or if I may God, intended us to be. And to clarify, anyone can be a leader, and does not need fancy titles, degrees, or public office to exercise leadership or be a leader of our own lives. Rather, a leader is someone who is committed to ideals, values, and causes larger than themselves, and who is constantly working toward their full potential, whether it is as an outstanding parent, business person, educator, or organizational head. The ancient Greeks exercised this type of leadership, constantly exceeding their own

expectations and in the process gave so much to the world that we are still reaping the benefits of their work 2,000 years later. We can all learn for their example, and attempt to incorporate their core philosophies into our own lives.

Therefore, Hellenism is much more of an ideal than simply a race, just like being an American is much more than a compilation of cultural stereotypes. Being Greek does not mean one automatically embody Hellenism. Hellenism is not a birthright, but a universal ideal that we all must strive towards and work for. And this is something the Greek-American community has done to great effect. Despite originally entering into America as immigrants with little background or education for the most part, the Greek-American community is now one of the most prosperous groups in the United States. And though I am hopeful that our great work will continue, we must make sure that increasing prosperity does not lead to increased complacency, and that the fourth generation of Greek-Americans is just as driven as the first.

On reflecting on my identity, my story is in many ways part of the larger Greek-American story as well as the larger American story. As Nick Larigakis has noted, more than 80% of Greek-Americans are marrying outside their racial group, more than ever before, and the ability to preserve things such as language will be more difficult. That being said, to only preserve the words, but not the language of the values and ideals, would be a hollow victory indeed. If we can incorporate narrative, history, values, and that fundamental idea of human excellence as well as customary traditions, then I have no doubts that the legacy of this community will still be burning brightly in decades and centuries hence the same way that the legacy of the ancients still influences us today. Let us work together to secure this future.

¹ This essay is based on my presentation at the fourteenth annual conference on the Future of Hellenism in America sponsored by the American Hellenic Institute. I thought it a great honor to be invited to speak. I also had the extraordinarily good fortune to have my parents attend the conference. I know they are proud of all that I have done, but I would like to acknowledge how proud of them I am for all they have overcome and how much they have achieved despite the obstacles they have faced

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