

Garden of Thoughts

Pericles (495?B.C.-429 B.C.)

The Age of Pericles is famous for the splendid development of the fine arts. Pericles, the brilliant Athenian statesman, gave mankind one of the greatest funeral orations ever made. This address was delivered in 431 B.C, as a memorial to the first Athenian soldiers who fell in the Peloponnesian War.

FUNERAL ORATION

Many of those who have spoken before me on these occasions have commended the author of that law which we now are obeying for having instituted an oration to the honor of those who sacrifice their lives in fighting for their country. For my part, I think it sufficient for men who have proved their virtue in action, by action to be honored for it-by such as you see the public gratitude now performing about this funeral and that the virtues of many ought not to be endangered by the management of any one person when their credit must precariously depend on his oration, which may be good and may be bad. Difficult, indeed, it is, judiciously to handle a subject where even probable truth will hardly gain assent. The hearer, enlightened by a long acquaintance, and warm in his affection, may quickly pronounce everything unfavorably expressed in respect to what he wishes and what he knows-while the stranger pronounces all exaggerated through envy of those deeds which he is conscious are above his own achievement. For the praises bestowed upon others are then only to be endured, when men imagine they can do those feats they hear to have been done; they envy what they cannot equal, and immediately pronounce it false. Yet, as this solemnity hath received its sanction from the authority of our ancestors, it is my duty also to obey the law and to endeavor to procure, as far as I am able, the good-will and approbation of all my audience.

I shall therefore begin first with our forefathers, since both justice and decency require we should on this occasion bestow on them an honorable remembrance. In this our country they kept themselves always firmly settled, and through their valor handed it down free to ever since succeeding generation. Worthy, indeed, of praise are they, and yet more worthy are our immediate fathers, since, enlarging their own inheritance into the extensive empire which we now possess they bequeathed that, their work of toil, to us their sons. Yet even these successes we ourselves here present, we who are yet in the strength and vigor of our days, have nobly improved, and have made such provisions for this our Athens that now it is all-sufficient in itself to answer every exigence of war and of peace. I mean not here to recite those martial exploits by which these ends were accomplished, or the resolute defenses we ourselves and our fathers have made against the formidable invasions of Barbarians and Greeks-your own knowledge of these will excuse the long detail. But by what methods we have risen to this height of glory and power, by what polity and by what conduct we are thus aggrandized, I shall first endeavor to show, and then proceed to the praise of the deceased. These, in my opinion, can be no impertinent topics on this occasion; the discussion of them must be beneficial to this numerous company of Athenians and of strangers.

We are happy in a form of government which cannot envy the laws of our neighbors-for it hath served as a model to others, but is original at Athens. And this our form, as committed not to the few, but to the whole body of the people, is called a democracy. How different soever in a private capacity, we all enjoy the same general equality our laws are fitted to preserve; and superior honors just as we excel. The public administration is not confined to a particular family, but is attainable

only by merit. Poverty is not a hindrance, since whoever is able to serve his country meets with no obstacle to preferment from his first obscurity. The offices of the state we go through without obstructions from one another; and live together in the mutual endearments of private life without suspicions; not angry with a neighbor for following the bent of his own humor, nor putting on that countenance of discontent, which pains though it cannot punish-so that in private life we converse without diffidence or damage, while we dare not on any account offend against the public, through the reverence we bear to the magistrates and the laws, chiefly to those enacted for redress of the injured, and to those unwritten, a breach of which is thought a disgrace. Our laws have further provided for the mind most frequent intermissions of care by the appointment of public recreations and sacrifices throughout the year, elegantly performed with a peculiar pomp, the daily delight of which is a charm that puts melancholy to flight. The grandeur of this our Athens caused the produce of the whole earth to be imported here, by which we reap a familiar enjoyment, not more of the delicacies of our own growth than of those of other nations.

In the affairs of war we excel those of our enemies, who adhere to methods opposite to our own. For we lay open Athens to general resort, nor ever drive any stranger from us whom either improvement or curiosity hath brought amongst us, lest any enemy should hurt us by seeing what is never concealed. We place not so great a confidence in the preparatives and artifices of war as in the native warmth of our souls impelling us to action. In point of education the youth of some peoples are inured, by course of laborious exercise, to support toil and exercise like men, but we, notwithstanding our easy and elegant way of life, face all the dangers of war as intrepidly as they. This may be proved by facts, since the Lacedaemonians never invade our territories barely with their own, but with the united strength of all their confederates. But when we invade the dominions of our neighbors, for the most part we conquer without difficulty in an enemy's country those who fight in defense of their own habitations. The strength of our whole force no enemy yet hath ever experienced, because it is divided by our naval expeditions or engaged in the different quarters of our service by land. But if anywhere they engage and defeat a small party of our forces, they boastingly give it out a total defeat; and if they are beat, they were certainly overpowered by our united strength. What though from a state of inactivity rather than laborious exercise, or with a natural rather than an acquired valor, we learn to encounter danger?-this good, at least, we receive from it, that we never droop under the apprehension of possible misfortunes and when we hazard the danger, are found no less courageous than those who are continually inured to it. In these respects our whole community deserves justly to be admired, and in many we have yet to mention.

In our manner of living we show an elegance tempered with frugality, and we cultivate philosophy without enervating the mind. We display our wealth in the season of beneficence, and not in the vanity of discourse. A confession of poverty is disgrace to no man, no effort to avoid it is disgrace indeed. There is visible in the same persons an attention to their own private concerns and those of the public; and in others engaged in the labors of life there is a competent skill in the affairs of government. For we are the only people who think him that does not meddle in state affairs-not indolent but good for nothing. And yet we pass the soundest judgments, and are quick at catching the right apprehensions of things, not thinking that words are prejudicial to actions, but rather the not being duly prepared by previous debate before we are obliged to proceed to execution. Herein consists our distinguishing excellence, that in the hour of action we show the greatest courage, and yet debate beforehand the expediency of our measures. The courage of others is the result of ignorance; deliberation makes them cowards. And those undoubtedly must be owned to have the

greatest souls, who, most acutely sensible of the miseries of war and the sweets of peace, are not hence in the least deterred from facing danger.

In acts of beneficence, further, we differ from the many. We preserve friends not by receiving, but by conferring, obligations. For he who does a kindness hath the advantage over him who, by the law of gratitude, becomes a debtor to his benefactor. The person obliged is compelled to act the more insipid part, conscious that a return of kindness is merely a payment and not an obligation. And we alone are splendidly beneficent to others, not so much from interested motives as for the credit of pure liberality. I shall sum up what yet remains by only adding that our Athens in general is the school of Greece; and that every single Athenian amongst us is excellently formed, by his personal qualification, for all the various scenes of active life, acting with a most graceful demeanor and a most ready habit of dispatch.

That I have not on this occasion made use of a pomp of words, but the truth of facts, that height to which by such a conduct this state hath risen, is an undeniable proof. For we are now the only people of the world who are found by experience to be greater than in report—the only people who, repelling the attacks of an invading enemy, exempt their defeat from the blush of indignation, and to their tributaries yield no discontent, as if subject to men unworthy to command. That we deserve our power, we need no evidence to manifest. We have great and signal proofs of this, which entitle us to the admiration of the present and future ages. We want no Homer to be the herald of our praise; no poet to deck off a history with the charms of verse, where the opinion of exploits must suffer by a strict relation. Every sea hath been opened by our fleets, and every land hath been penetrated by our armies, which have everywhere left behind them eternal monuments of our enmity and our friendship.

In the just defense of such a state, these victims of their own valor, scorning the ruin threatened to it, have valiantly fought and bravely died. And every one of those who survive is ready, I am persuaded, to sacrifice life in such a cause. And for this reason have I enlarged so much on national points, to give the clearest proof that in the present war we have more at stake than men whose public advantages are not so valuable, and to illustrate, by actual evidence, how great a commendation is due to them who are now my subject, and the greatest part of which they have already received. For the encomiums with which I have celebrated the state have been earned for it by the bravery of these and of men like these. And such compliments might be thought too high and exaggerated if passed on any Greeks but them alone. The fatal period to which these gallant souls are now reduced is the surest evidence of their merit—an evidence begun in their lives and completed in their deaths. For it is a debt of justice to pay superior honors to men who have devoted their lives in fighting for their country, though inferior to others in every virtue but that of valor. Their last service effaceth all former demerits—it extends to the public; their private demeanors reached only to a few. Yet not one of these was at all induced to shrink from danger, through fondness of those delights which the peaceful affluent life bestows—not one was the less lavish of his life, through that flattering hope attendant upon want, that poverty at length might be exchanged for affluence. One passion there was in their minds much stronger than these—the desire of vengeance on their enemies. Regarding this as the most honorable prize of dangers, they boldly rushed towards the mark to glut revenge and then to satisfy those secondary passions. The uncertain event they had already secured in hope; what their eyes showed plainly must be done they trusted their own valor to accomplish, thinking it more glorious to defend themselves and die in the attempt than to yield and live. From the reproach of cowardice, indeed, they fled, but presented their bodies to the shock of battle; when,

insensible of fear, but triumphing in hope, in the doubtful charge they instantly dropped-and thus discharged the duty which brave men owed to their country.

As for you, who now survive them, it is your business to pray for a better fate, but to think it your duty also to preserve the same spirit and warmth of courage against your enemies; not judging of the expediency of this from a mere harangue-where any man indulging a flow of words may tell you what you yourselves know as well as he, how many advantages there are in fighting valiantly against your enemies-but, rather, making the daily-increasing grandeur of this community the object of your thoughts and growing quite enamored of it. And when it really appears great to your apprehensions, think again that this grandeur was acquired by brave and valiant men, by men who knew their duty, and in the moments of action were sensible of shame; who, whenever their attempts were unsuccessful, thought it no dishonor for their country to stand in need of anything their valor could do for it, and so made it the most glorious present. Bestowing thus their lives on the public, they have every one received a praise that will never decay, a sepulchre that will always be most illustrious- not that in which their bones lie moldering, but that in which their fame is preserved, to be on every occasion, when honor is the employ of either word or act, eternally remembered. For the whole earth is the sepulchre of illustrious men; nor is it the inscription on the columns in their native land alone that shows their merit, but the memorial of them, better than all inscriptions, in every foreign nation, repositied more durably in universal remembrance than on their own tombs. From this very moment, emulating these noble patterns, placing your happiness in liberty, and liberty in valor, be prepared to encounter all the dangers of war. For to be lavish of life is not so noble in those whom misfortunes have reduced to misery and despair, as in men who hazard the loss of a comfortable subsistence and the enjoyment of all the blessings this world affords by an unsuccessful enterprise. Adversity, after a series of ease and affluence, sinks deeper into the heart of a man of spirit than the stroke of death insensibly received in the vigor of life and public hope.

For this reason, the parents of those who are now gone, whoever of them may be attending here, I do not bewail-I shall rather comfort. It is well known to what unhappy accidents they were liable from the moment of their birth, and that happiness belongs to men who have reached the most glorious period of life, as these now have who are to you the source of sorrow-these whose life hath received its ample measure, happy in its continuance and equally happy in its conclusion. I know it in truth a difficult task to fix comfort in those breasts which will have frequent remembrances, in seeing the happiness of others, of what they once themselves enjoyed. And sorrow flows not from the absence of those good things we have never yet experienced, but from the loss of those io which we have been accustomed. They who are not yet by age past child-bearing should be comforted in the hope of having more. The children yet to be born will be a private benefit to some in causing them to forger such as no longer are, and will be a double benefit to their country in preventing its desolation and providing for its security. For those persons cannot in common justice be regarded as members of equal value io the public who have no children to expose to danger for its safety. But you, whose age is already far advanced, compute the greater share of happiness your longer time hath afforded for so much gain, persuaded in yourselves the remainder will be but short, and enlighten that space by the glory gained by these. It is greatness of soul alone that never grows old, nor is it wealth that delights in the latter stage of life, as some give out, so much as honor.

To you, the sons and brothers of the deceased, whatever number of you are here, a field of hardy contention is opened. For him who no longer is, everyone is ready to commend, so that to whatever height you push your deserts, you will scarce ever be thought to equal, but to be somewhat

inferior to these. Envy will exert itself against a competitor while life remains; but when death stops the competition, affection will applaud without restraint.

If after this it be expected from me to say anything to you who are now reduced to a state of widowhood, about female virtue, I shall express it all in one short admonition: It is your greatest glory not to be deficient in the virtue peculiar to your sex, and to give men as little handle as possible to talk of your behavior, whether well or ill.

I have now discharged the province allotted me by the laws, and said what I thought most pertinent to this assembly. Our departed friends have by facts been already honored. Their children from this day till they arrive at manhood shall be educated at the public expense of the state which hath appointed so beneficial a meed for these and all future relics of the public contests. For wherever the greatest rewards are proposed for virtue, there the best of patriots are ever to be found. Now let everyone respectively indulge in becoming grief for his departed friends, and then retire.

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