

THE SAVING OF A WOULD-BE PRESIDENT OF THE USA

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"In our sleep, **pain** that we cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the **heart** and in our own despair, against our will, comes **wisdom** through the awful grace of God."

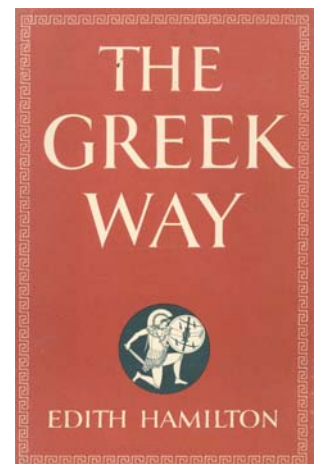
Aeschylus, Greek Tragedian, 5th Century BC

This eloquent, off the cuff, quote from the Greek classics was what the-would-be-president of the United States **Robert Kennedy**, had he not been cruelly assassinated 2 months later, used to eulogize **Martin Luther King**, upon hearing of the murder in **April 1968** of the **"Man for All Nations"** Civil Rights champion. I wondered how was it that Bobby [*as he was affectionately known*] was knowledgeable enough of the Greek tragedies to quote them verbatim? This was **Jeffersonian**!

The mystery was solved for me last November when I read in the NY Times an article by **David Brooks**. Brooks is an exponent of the Republican side of politics, who quotes, however, from Greek classics and gives examples from Greek history in his writings and even on TV in the Lehrer news hour on PBS on Fridays. Brooks writes that the martyrdom of Bobby began on 23 November 1963 when FBI chief Hoover **called him on the phone and coldly** announced that his brother the President was shot **dead** in Dallas Texas. Devoured with grief and with **excruciating pain in his heart**, Bobby went into seclusion and was on a road to self destruction. His miraculous recovery was a book, a gift from his sister-in-law, **Jackie Kennedy** [*later to become Mrs. Aristotle Socrates Onassis, the Greek shipping magnate*]. The book was **"The GREEK WAY"** by **Edith Hamilton**. The cure was Aeschylus, who knew something about death having fought both at the Marathon in 490 and in Salamis in 480 BC battles against the Persians and lived to write about it!

Edith Hamilton published **"The Greek Way"** in 1930 when she was 60 and had retired from teaching. It became a best seller; it has been re-published several times since then, and it is still available. It is a classic that I had read in college, but I am now beginning to discover its profoundness by examining how the book transformed Bobby Kennedy from doom to the most articulate spokesman against the savage futile war in **Vietnam**.

Edith Hamilton found in the classical Greeks the **wisdom that causes and sustains greatness**. Her book contains essays on great minds of the **Golden Age of Greece** when the Greeks broke away from the theocratic philosophies of Egypt and India, where religious priests formulated government responses to crises, to throw light on an **anthropocentric universe** where the supreme commandment is *γνωθι σε αυτον* [*know thyself*], as true today as it was 2500 years ago when Socrates first invented it. Her analyses of the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides; of the significance for modern man of the philosophies of Plato and of Aristotle; of the deep meaning of Aristophanes comedies; of the global understanding of history by Herodotus; of the idea of Thucydides that war history repeats itself; of the impartiality of reporting by Xenophon embedded with the Greek mercenary forces in



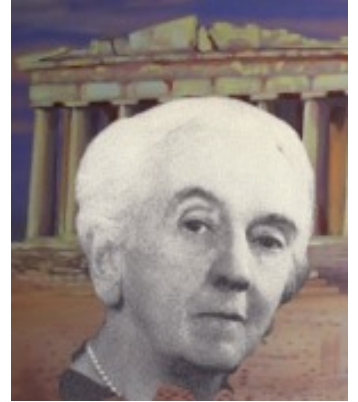
the war in **Mesopotamia [Iraq]**; of the astounding Pindar whose lyrics so inspired Alexander the Great that he preserved his home when he burned uncompromising Thebes; all are simplified in her book, and she relates them to our modern life.



But let us go back to the Bobby Kennedy story. Brooks write that Bobby found in Greek tragedies the tragic sensibility of his own; the strange mixture of doom and exaltation, that good grows out of bad, virtue out of hardship, and that wisdom is born in suffering. After memorizing segments of the book and understanding their meaning, Kennedy was able to recover from the death of his brother and found in the ancient Greeks a civilization that could look death in the face and learn from the experience. He carried around in his pocket his gift copy of “*The Greek Way*”, beaten from frequent readings, underlined, and annotated, and did not hesitate to read excerpts to everyone that would listen. It was Bobby, who in his presidential campaign, was often quoted as saying, what is classical Greek:

***“There are those who look at things as they are, and ask why?
I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?”***

Before we leave the Kennedy story, let us go back to Jackie Kennedy-Onassis, who upon living on the Onassis island of Scorpis next to Ithaca, became enamored with the poetry of Greek poet K Cavafy. Cavafy became an overnight success in America after Jackie chose his 1911 poem “**Ithaca**” as her epitaph. It was read at her funeral. The Cavafy poem is a classic, it is an admonition to be “**Odysean**” in our life, welcoming adventure, facing and overcoming threats and dangers on our **VOΣTOC**, as we long and struggle to return home, like Odysseus in his **nostos** to Ithaca after 20 years in diaspora. So it was not only money she inherited from Onassis but also the love and zest of flamboyant Onassis for our common ancestry in classical Greece. [Prof. Jusdanis wrote about Cavafy in the 4th issue of **Greek Ethos**].



Edith Hamilton learned Greek by herself starting at age 7 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After graduating from the University of Munich in Germany [*the first woman to be admitted*], she taught in a girls school. In 1957, **at the ripe age of 90**, she traveled to Greece for **the first time**. In a public ceremony at the theater of Herodes Attikus, under the Acropolis, Ms Hamilton was deservedly proclaimed **honorary citizen of Athens**.

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