

“Stories of War” on the $\Phi\beta\kappa$ Lecture Circuit

BY TOM PALAIMA, $\Phi\beta\kappa$ FELLOWS LECTURER

When I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa at Boston College in 1973, I was a mathematics and classics major heading to graduate school in classics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. There I continued exploring interests in Homer, Hesiod, Roman satire, ancient Greek history and what became the career-long research specialty for which I was awarded a MacArthur fellowship, Mycenaean Greek script, language and culture.

At Boston College, I was drawn to classics by an inspiring professor, David Gill, S.J., and by the vivid realism of Homer’s *Iliad*. I took Father Gill for four semesters of Greek and Roman history, and for two senior seminars, one on George Grote’s seminal *History of Greece* (1846-1856), the other on Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788). These works, written by non-academics for strong personal reasons, planted deep in my heart that the ultimate aim of

history is to explore why human beings, individually and collectively, live their lives as they do.

This is what the motto *Philosophia Biou Kubernetes* is telling us members of Phi Beta Kappa. By passionately cultivating true wisdom about life, we can guide our own lives and the lives of others. The founders of the Society took for granted that we, as humanists, would aim for what was good.

I was overwhelmed when I first read Homer’s *Iliad* and Euripides’ *Medea* and *The Trojan Women* in Greek. I had never read anything so true in my life. But in my first 12 years of teaching after finishing my Ph.D. (1980), I was frustrated that I could not

communicate to university undergraduates the visceral power of the *Iliad* or make them feel what it meant for 17,000 Athenian citizen soldiers and veterans to watch Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* in the Theater of Dionysus, months after many of those same soldiers had slaughtered the adult male population of the island of Melos. Those who argue that *The Trojan Women* or the *Iliad* are anti-war stories, in the modern sense, have lots of ques-

nage of wars, the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust, the brutalities of dictatorships, the irrational violence of serial killers or the plain human misery caused by social and economic inequality in any period. Second, I had just tried de-compartmentalizing my interests by having mythology students watch the documentary *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* before we began studying the *Iliad*; and it worked. Watching and hearing soldiers

their age come to terms with war made my students see in Homer part of what I had always seen because of my life-long fascination with human inhumanity.

In my Phi Beta Kappa lectures “Stories of War,” I try to get people to think about what soldiers, writers, reporters and singers from Homer to the present have been trying to make us see: war as it is and what war does to us.

All great stories of war are trying to get at truth. This may include factual realities that non-combatant civilians do not

understand or have any chance to see. But the truth of war stories is always more than that.

Tim O’Brien claims true war stories have an uncompromising allegiance to evil and do not convey moral lessons. Filmmaker Werner Herzog extracts ecstatic truth from Operation Desert Storm and the life of U.S. pilot Dieter Dengler, a prisoner of war in Laos during the Vietnam War. Marine veteran poet Charles E. Patterson wants us to know how morally decent American soldiers and young Viet Cong family men behave in war.

Mostly I talk about stories of war to Phi Beta Kappa initiates for the reason William Styron gives in *Sophie’s*



Tom Palaima in his office at the University of Texas at Austin. The blue poster in the background is from a conference he helped to organize, “How War Changes Lives.”

tions to answer.

About 15 years ago, I was asked whether I would like to teach a junior seminar in the Plan II Honors Program at the University of Texas at Austin, where I have taught since 1986. To my surprise, I spontaneously answered, “Sure. How about a course on war and violence?”

I had never taught any such course, nor had I been thinking about doing so. Looking back now, I think two things made me say this.

First, I unconsciously realized that I had always kept in a separate personal compartment my lifelong intellectual and emotional interest in the human experience of evil, manifest in the car-

Choice. “[P]rofessors of philosophy, ministers of the Gospel, rabbis, shamans, all historians, writers, politicians and diplomats . . . , stand-up comedians, film directors, journalists, in short anyone concerned remotely with affecting the consciousness of his fellow man — and this would include our own beloved children” should get to know the mind of Rudolf Höss, Kommandant of Auschwitz. Otherwise we will only know the “mediocre evil” in “most novels and plays and movies.” We will have “no acquaintance with true evil,” with how “crushingly banal” it is. We will forget or be ignorant of the lessons of the past.

For the ancient Greeks something that was true (*a-lethes*) was something that we must not forget. Phi Beta Kappa initiates need to take the great stories of war into their hearts and minds and remember them throughout their lives. This is not a pacifist message. The ancient Greeks, as George Santayana and Douglas MacArthur recognized, fought wars almost constantly. But they also made sure, by telling honest public stories, that their men, women and children, soldier and civilian, knew what war is. ■

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Palaima has been a member of the ΦBK Fellows Lectureship since the 2004-2005 academic year and has given lectures for the Society at Roanoke College, St. Olaf College and Hendrix College, as well as for the East Central Illinois Association and the Northeast Alabama Association. His lectures have included “Truth in War Stories, Old and New” and “Home Front and War Front in Ancient and Modern Times.” He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at Boston College in 1973.

Palaima writes regular commentaries for the Austin American-Statesman and regular book reviews for The Times Higher Education Supplement. To see his short on-line lecture on war stories go to http://www.utexas.edu/inside_ut/take5/palaima/



Above is an image of what the opening and closing lines of Homer's *Iliad* would look like written on papyrus in Greek of the sixth century B.C., which Palaima prepared for a Discovery Channel documentary on the realities of war in the *Iliad*. The program was titled *Unsolved History: The Trojan Horse* (2004). The opening lines describe the destruction caused by Achilles' rage, and the close describes the burial of the Trojan hero, horse-taming Hector.



Palaima spoke at the ΦBK induction ceremony at Hendrix College in April. He is pictured here instructing some of ΦBK's newest members in the art of the Society's “secret” handshake, following his lecture “Truth in War Stories, Old and New.”