

Pythagoras

c. 428 BC - 348 BC

from Little Journeys To The Homes Of Great Teachers

by Elbert Hubbard

Consult and deliberate before you act, that thou mayest not commit foolish actions. For 't is the part of a miserable man to speak and to act without reflection. But do that which will not afflict thee afterwards, nor oblige thee to repentance.

—*Pythagoras*

When Pythagoras was only four or five years old, his mother taught him to take his morning bath in the cold stream and dry his baby skin by running in the wind. As he ran she ran with him and together they sang a hymn to the rising sun that for them represented the god Apollo.

This mother taught him to be indifferent to cold, heat, hunger, to exult in endurance, and to take a joy in the glow of the body.

So the boy grew strong and handsome and proud; and perhaps it was in those early years, from the mother herself, that he gathered the idea, afterward developed, that Apollo had appeared to his mother, and so great was the beauty of the god that the woman was actually overcome, it being the first god at which she had ever had a good look.

The ambition of a great mother centers on her son. Pythagoras was filled with the thought that he was different, peculiar, set apart to teach the human race.

Having compassed all there was to learn in his native place, and, as he thought, being ill appreciated, he started for Egypt, the land of learning. The fallacy that knowledge was a secret to be gained by word of mouth and to be gotten from books existed then as now. The mother of Pythagoras wanted her son to comprehend the innermost secrets of the Egyptian mysteries. He would then know all. To this end she sold her jewels, in order that her son might have the advantages of an Egyptian education.

Women were not allowed to know the divine secrets—only just a few little ones. This woman wanted to know, and she said her son would learn and tell her.

The family had become fairly rich by this time, and influential. Letters were gotten from the great ones of Samos to the Secretary of State in Egypt. And so Pythagoras, aged twenty, “the youth with the beautiful hair,” went on his journey to Egypt and knocked boldly at the doors of the temples at Memphis, where knowledge was supposed to be in stock. Religion then monopolized all schools and continued to do so for quite some time after Pythagoras was dead.

He was turned away with the explanation that no foreigner could enter the sacred portals—that the initiates must be those born in the shadows of the temples and nurtured in the faith from infancy by holy virgins.

Pythagoras still insisted, and it was probably then that he found a sponsor who made for him the claim that he was a son of Apollo. And the holy men peeped out of their peepholes in holy admiration for any one who could concoct as big a lie as they themselves had ever invented.

The boy surely looked the part. Perhaps, at last, here was one who was what they pretended to be! Frauds believe in frauds, and rogues are more easily captured by roguery than are honest men.

His admittance to the university became a matter of international diplomacy. At last, being too hard-pressed, the wise ones who ran the mystery monopoly gave in, and Pythagoras was informed that at midnight of a certain night, he should present himself, naked, at the door of a certain temple and he would be admitted.

On the stroke of the hour, at the appointed time, Pythagoras, the youth with the beautiful hair, was there, clothed only in his beautiful hair. He knocked on the great, bronze doors, but the only answer was a faint, hollow echo.

Then he got a stone and pounded, but still no answer.

The wind sprang up fresh and cold. The young man was chilled to the bone, but still he pounded and then called aloud, demanding admittance. His answer now was the growling and barking of dogs within. Still he pounded! After an interval a hoarse voice called out through a little slide, ordering him to be gone or the dogs would be turned loose upon him.

He demanded admittance.

“Fool, do you not know that the law says these doors shall admit no one except at sunrise?”

“I only know that I was told to be here at midnight and I would be admitted.”

“All that may be true, but you were not told when you would be admitted—wait, it is the will of the gods.” So Pythagoras waited, numbed and nearly dead.

The dogs, which he had heard, had, in some way, gotten out and came tearing around the corner of the great stone building. He fought them with desperate strength. The effort seemed to warm his blood, and whereas before he was about to retreat to his lodgings he now remained.

The day broke in the east, and gangs of slaves went by to work. They jeered at him and pelted him with pebbles.

Suddenly across the desert sands he saw the faint pink rim of the rising sun. On the instant the big bronze doors against which he was leaning swung suddenly in. He fell with them, and coarse, rough hands seized his hair and pulled him into the hall.

The doors swung to and closed with a clang. Pythagoras was in dense darkness, lying on the stone floor.

A voice, seemingly coming from afar, demanded, “Do you still wish to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

A black-robed figure, wearing a mask, then appeared with a flickering light, and Pythagoras was led into a stone cell.

His head was shaved, and he was given a coarse robe and then left alone. Toward the end of the day he was given a piece of black bread and a bowl of water. This he was told was to fortify him for the ordeal to come.

What that ordeal was we can only guess, save that it consisted partially in running over hot sands where he sank to his waist. At a point where he seemed about to perish a voice called loudly, “Do you yet desire to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

Returning to the inmost temple he was told to enter a certain door and wait therein. He was then blindfolded and when he opened the door to enter, he walked off into space and fell into a pool of ice-cold water.

While floundering there the voice again called, “Do you yet desire to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

At another time he was tied upon the back of a donkey and the donkey was led along a rocky precipice, where lights danced and flickered a thousand feet below.

“Do you yet want to go on?” called the voice.

And Pythagoras answered, “I desire to go on.”

The priests here pushed the donkey off the precipice, which proved to be only about two feet high, the gulf below being an illusion arranged with the aid of lights that shone through apertures in the wall.

These pleasing little diversions Pythagoras afterward introduced into the college which he founded, so to teach the merry freshmen that nothing, at the last, was as bad as it seemed, and that most dangers are simply illusions.

The Egyptians grew to have such regard for Pythagoras that he was given every opportunity to know the inmost secrets of the mysteries. He said he encompassed them all, save those alone which were incomprehensible.

This was probably true.

The years spent in Egypt were not wasted—he learned astronomy, mathematics, and psychology, a thing then not named, but pretty well understood—the management of men.

It was twenty years before Pythagoras returned to Samos. His mother was dead, so she passed away in ignorance of the secrets of the gods—which perhaps was just as well.

Samos now treated Pythagoras with great honor.

Crowds flocked to his lectures, presents were given him, royalty paid him profound obeisance.

But Samos soon tired of Pythagoras. He was too austere, too severe. And when he began to rebuke the officials for their sloth and indifference, he was invited to go elsewhere and teach his science of life. And so he journeyed into Southern Italy, and at Crotona built his Temple to the Muses and founded the Pythagorean School. He was the wisest as well as the most learned man of his time.

Horatius (excerpt)

c. 6th Century BC

from Lays of Ancient Rome

by Thomas Babington Macaulay

A Lay Made About the Year Of The City CCCLX

XXIX

“Haul down the bridge, Sir Consul,
With all the speed ye may;
I, with two more to help me,
Will hold the foe in play.
In yon strait path a thousand
May well be stopped by three.
Now who will stand on either hand,
And keep the bridge with me?”

XXX

Then out spake Spurius Lartius;
A Ramnian proud was he:
“Lo, I will stand at thy right hand,
And keep the bridge with thee.”
And out spake strong Herminius;
Of Titian blood was he:
“I will abide on thy left side,
And keep the bridge with thee.”

XXXI

“Horatius,” quoth the Consul,
“As thou sayest, so let it be.”
And straight against that great array
Forth went the dauntless Three.
For Romans in Rome’s quarrel
Spared neither land nor gold,
Nor son nor wife, nor limb nor life,
In the brave days of old.

LV

But with a crash like thunder
Fell every loosened beam,
And, like a dam, the mighty wreck
Lay right athwart the stream:
And a long shout of triumph
Rose from the walls of Rome,
As to the highest turret-tops
Was splashed the yellow foam.

LVI

And, like a horse unbroken
When first he feels the rein,
The furious river struggled hard,
And tossed his tawny mane,
And burst the curb and bounded,
Rejoicing to be free,
And whirling down, in fierce career,
Battlement, and plank, and pier,
Rushed headlong to the sea.

LVII

Alone stood brave Horatius,
But constant still in mind;
Thrice thirty thousand foes before,
And the broad flood behind.
“Down with him!” cried false Sextus,
With a smile on his pale face.
“Now yield thee,” cried Lars Porsena,
“Now yield thee to our grace.”

LVIX

“Oh, Tiber! Father Tiber!
To whom the Romans pray,
A Roman’s life, a Roman’s arms,
Take thou in charge this day!”
So he spake, and speaking sheathed
The good sword by his side,
And with his harness on his back,
Plunged headlong in the tide.

LX

No sound of joy or sorrow
Was heard from either bank;
But friends and foes in dumb surprise,
With parted lips and straining eyes,
Stood gazing where he sank;
And when above the surges,
They saw his crest appear,
All Rome sent forth a rapturous cry,
And even the ranks of Tuscany
Could scarce forbear to cheer.

