

Personal Reminiscences about the Benefits of Latin

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There are moments in life when you encounter something which you know is going to change your life forever. This was exactly the feeling which I experienced when I encountered a foreign language for the first time. In my case, the language was Latin, and it was to have such a profound influence on me that it altered any career plans I might have previously had. Several years later, when I first began to take Greek, Greek had a similar effect, though not nearly so powerful, because it came later and because it tended to reinforce the feelings I had already developed about Latin and about language in general. Even though these are classical languages which are no longer spoken, this did not matter to me. It was the very obvious influence that they have had on the English language that impacted me so strongly and brought me to an understanding of my own language which I had never really known, an understanding which it has been my pleasure to pass along to students.

When I entered high school, I did not have a clear idea of what I wanted to study or of what courses I wanted to take, or really even what I wanted to do with my life in terms of a career. I knew where some of my interests lay, but I was totally unprepared for the reaction I would have to a foreign language. The impact on me can only be described as amazing. It was as if it were a discovery waiting to

be made, and the unexpectedness of it made it that much more exciting. When I was in elementary school, I had discovered an old French textbook that had been used by one of my aunts in high school. I did not ever remember ever having seen anything written in a foreign language before, and it was amazing to open this book and to see words, sentences and whole paragraphs written in a language I could not even begin to grasp. I was immensely curious about the book and the language it taught, but there were at the time a number of tools that I lacked : primarily, an understanding of the grammar of my own language, but more specifically of the grammatical terms used to describe it. Nor could I understand the universal phonetic symbols used to describe the pronunciation of French, nor did I even know what these strange symbols were. In addition, I felt, probably correctly, that there was no one I could really ask to explain what I was seeing. Therefore the book remained only a curiosity, and I occasionally glanced at it, feeling a combination of frustration at my inability to understand what it was all about, and a feeling of wonder that there were people who spoke such a language. However, what it did manage to instill in me, and which lay dormant for several more years, was a curiosity about other languages.

In that first year of high school, all of my friends except me registered for a foreign language. At that time, my high school offered only three foreign languages : French, Spanish and Latin. This was typical of high schools back in the 1950s and 60s. Of these three languages, most of my friends registered for Latin, which was considered to be the more 'academic' of the three. My own plan had been to wait for one more year and then to take French. In retrospect, I do not understand the basis for my original decision to postpone tak-

ing a foreign language. Instead of a language, I registered for a journalism class. I was a little overwhelmed to find that most of the other students in the journalism class were high school seniors, fully three years older than I. I felt so totally out of place that I decided to follow my friends and register for Latin instead. I am embarrassed to say now that I had only the vaguest idea at the time as to what Latin was. I was not even aware that it was no longer spoken. Classes had started a week before, and since high school classes in the United States are held five days a week, I was already far behind the other students. I attended three more classes without understanding anything until finally the Latin teacher, a woman who ultimately became a good personal friend, kept me after school one day to teach me in one or two hours what the other students had spent the first week and a half learning. And this was where my first surprising discovery came. As things became clear to me, I realized I liked it. 'Liked' does not do my experience justice. It would be more accurate to say that I loved it. Furthermore I realized that I was good at it, better at anything I had studied up until that point. This was totally unlike my experience with the French textbook of my elementary school days. Not only was I able to develop a full grasp of the grammatical structure of English as well, but I had a competent teacher to guide me. I felt that I had finally found something that had been beckoning to me.

I have perhaps belabored the point in the previous paragraphs, but I only do it to emphasize the change wrought in my life by Latin. I have heard similar accounts from other people about their first experience with something which was so life-changing.

For me at this time, learning Latin was an experience totally unlike any other that I had ever encountered. It would not be an exaggera-

tion to say that it was a life-altering experience. By taking Latin, it was as if I had entered a door that previously I had not even known existed. Suddenly the latent curiosity that had been instilled in me when I was in elementary school came alive in a way that it never had before. I also became aware of another thing. Although many of my fellow classmates also liked Latin, I was surprised to find that they did not share my full enthusiasm. I was also perhaps a bit disappointed. Over the years I have realized that each of us reaches these moments of discovery in different ways and this was mine, not necessarily shared by those around me. Because language had always fascinated me, I was happy that the explanations about English grammar began to finally make sense to me. For example, we had always been given the following definition of a preposition: a preposition is a word that shows the relationship between its object and another word in the sentence. We had memorized this definition in the fourth grade, but it never made any sense to me, nor, so far as I could tell, to any of my classmates, nor do I remember hearing any clear explanation of it, although I cannot imagine that we did not receive such an explanation. The point is that it was not presented to us in a way that we could grasp it. However, to give my junior high school teachers credit, this grammatical concept did become a bit clearer when we learned to diagram sentences, something which I consider a lost art, since it is no longer taught. If it were, it would save students from making a lot of grammatical errors, I am sure. Because of the elaborate case system for nouns in Latin grammar, I was forced to observe exactly what a preposition is and how it functions in a sentence. Suddenly the old definition made sense and I even wondered why I had never understood it before.

Similarly, I had heard of and had been taught such grammatical terms as ‘clause’, ‘noun clause’, ‘subordinate clause’, ‘relative pronoun’, ‘relative clause’, and others, and I knew what they were, and from my experience with learning to diagram sentences (a form of instruction which I still advocate), I understood how they functioned in sentences and in overall grammatical structure. However, it was not until I studied Latin and Greek (particularly Latin in my case), that they really began to take on any concrete meaning. It is difficult to describe the situation any better than this. It is as if something which had previously been only a game or academic exercise had suddenly taken on a new and practical, and yet beautiful reality. To be more specific, in studying Latin, I learned things about noun clauses and other grammatical devices which I had not previously realized and which I felt had never been sufficiently taught to me. Because Latin makes a distinction as to what type of noun clause follows which class of verb (a characteristic of Indo-European languages), I then began to focus more on the nature of English grammar, and to draw conclusions about English in particular and about the nature of Indo-European languages in general. This learning process did not take place only during my student days. It continued even more when I became a teacher myself. I have heard it said that it is through teaching a subject that one gains a full understanding of it, and this was true in my case. There is also that vague category of verbs, which are inadequately described by English teachers and by grammar books as helping verbs, verbs such as ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘would’ and ‘might’. Anyone who studies Latin and Greek comes to realize that historically these so called helping verbs were once main verbs themselves, and not just auxiliary verbs at all. Once again, these are con-

clusions that come from a study of Latin and are points which may never actually be taught in an English class. The only thing which I had learned previously which even came close to helping me to understand grammatical structure in English was sentence diagramming.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits to be gained from a study of Latin and Greek is the way that one's vocabulary grows by leaps and bounds, and continues to grow throughout one's life. I have experimented with teaching a class in which I did not actually teach Latin or Greek, but only the roots, stems and suffixes which form the basis of much of English vocabulary, but I found that this method fell far short of what could be achieved from actually studying the languages themselves. There is some indefinable aspect to actually learning the target language that aids in vocabulary acquisition. Latin and Greek had a profound effect on my own vocabulary as well as that of my classmates who took Latin. Even the ones who did not like Latin, even the ones who hated it, and there were some, had to admit that their vocabulary improved as a result. If one asks people who took Latin many years ago what they remember about it, the thing most often heard is the effect it had on their English vocabulary. Beginning with Latin and continuing with Greek, we all found ourselves able to analyze words of Greek and Latin origin and to surmise their meanings without consulting the dictionary. Furthermore, it instilled in all of us, I believe, a greater respect for words, and for the fact that they have an actual history and tradition. This knowledge has proved to be of immeasurable value to me over the years.

My own high school only offered two years of Latin. Beyond that was unheard of, a far cry from my own teaching experience where it

was possible for students to take as much as five years of Latin. After graduating from high school, I did not take Latin again for several years, six in fact, but its influence was lasting, and although during this hiatus my grasp of the structure of the language became a bit rusty, what I had learned continued to remain part of me. This reminds me of a definition I once heard of education: "Education is what remains after everything you have ever learned has been forgotten."

I did not study Latin again until I was halfway through my undergraduate years. In the meantime I had started several modern languages, and I knew that it was Latin that had enabled me to grasp these modern languages as well as I did. When I finally did pick Latin up again, it was like meeting a familiar friend after a long absence. In fact, even though it was late in my undergraduate career, I decided to take enough courses to turn Latin into a major. This led me to also take Greek for the first time. I had an intensive Greek course that required an enormous amount of effort. Two years of study were compressed into only one semester. Greek influenced me as much as Latin did, but since I was introduced to Latin at such a much younger age, the effect was more profound.

After graduating, I got my first job teaching Latin, and I learned more that year about how NOT to be a teacher than I was ever to learn again. I made every mistake a new teacher could make; however, in time I learned not to assume that students loved the language as much as I did, and this taught me patience and helped me develop ways to generate interest in others for things they had never really thought about before.

I was uncertain whether to continue studying the Classics, but I ul-

timately decided to get my M.A. in Greek and Latin. It was in graduate school that I once again started teaching Latin as a teaching assistant. I had become a better teacher by this time than I had been in my previous teaching position, but nonetheless, I was so caught up in what I felt was the beauty and symmetry of the Latin language that I failed to adequately convey to students the civilization that had spoken it. I never made that mistake again. As a teaching assistant, I also taught two other courses, Greek civilization and subsequently Roman civilization. Teaching these two classes was precisely what I needed to ground me more thoroughly so that I could properly convey to students the importance of the languages that form the central core of Western civilization.

Finally, after another brief hiatus, I began teaching Latin in the public schools in Florida. I was impressed with Latin as it was taught in the Florida schools. Every major high school offered it, and there were even annual events sponsored by the Latin clubs of each high school. These events included recreations of historical events of Roman civilization and, on the academic side, there were various tests in the various levels of Latin. There were also tests on history and literature. Students were quite competitive about making good scores on these tests. All these activities were sponsored by two important national organizations, the American Classical League and the Junior Classical League, both of which seek to promote the teaching of Latin in the American school system. These events served as an added stimulus to students, so that Latin was not taught in a vacuum. In my own classroom, still, I individually felt a responsibility for justifying to students the importance of studying a so-called dead language. It has taken me several years to reach the point that I can

convince students of the need for studying these languages. It is interesting to note that nearly all students, whether the need for Latin was justified for them or not, felt that they had benefited from it and all said that they hoped their children would be able to study Latin also. Ultimately, this is sufficient justification in my opinion.

It was early in my high school teaching career that one of the most practical reasons for studying Latin became apparent. By this time, the teaching of English had become radically different from what it had been when I was going through the public school system. At the time that I was a student, English grammar was taught regularly, so that students managed to have some grasp of it. By the time I was teaching in high school, however, this had changed. Teaching the structure of English had become so watered down by this time that it virtually did not exist. The powers that be had decided somewhere that English grammar need no longer be emphasized with the result that a generation of students is sadly lacking in an understanding of the structure of their own language. Nor has this situation improved much. One thing in particular that has gone by the wayside is diagramming sentences. I have always felt that diagramming helps students to grasp structure better and also directly improves their writing ability. Students who can diagram sentences seldom write sentences that are not grammatically correct. English teaching in the United States seems to give little or no attention these days to the teaching of English grammar, and this fact is manifest in the poorer writing ability of students today.

Although I felt that I had thoroughly mastered Latin, and to some extent Greek, in graduate school, I found out what many teachers had found out before me. It was when I actually began teaching Latin

that I really began to develop a deep grasp of it. It was first as a teaching assistant in graduate school and then as a high school teacher that I found out how little I really did know. I am sure that this is an experience which all thoughtful teachers have had. My students asked me questions to which I was not immediately able to give the answers and here I discovered that honesty was the best policy. If I did not know the answer to some question about Latin, I simply said that I did not know, but that I would find out by the next class. I had to hurry because most of the time the next class was the very next day. I spent a lot of time researching Latin that year. It was a humbling experience.

It was also while I was teaching that I once again recalled my own confusion about grammar in elementary school and I realized it was dangerous to assume that my students understood even such basics as the parts of speech. This was an important discovery and it has saved me a lot of wasted time in not having to backtrack and re-explain.

Unbelievable to me as it may seem, Latin also has its opponents. There are those people who believe that it should be banished from the schools and that it has no place in a modern-day curriculum. I do not believe this is so, and, fortunately, there are enough people who share my opinion so that Latin continues to be taught. Occasionally it will decline in popularity for a time, and then it will regain in popularity. At the time of this writing, Latin has made quite a comeback once again in the public schools after suffering declines for several years. In fact, the number of Latin teaching positions now is such that there are not enough teachers to fill these positions, and I hope that this does not mean that some schools will lose their Latin

programs.

One question that students have asked me over the years is whether they should take Latin or whether they should choose a modern spoken language. My answer is to take both, but to study Latin first, so that they can be grounded in the structure. By opting to take Latin first, students would be able to reap all the benefits of studying a language so central to Western civilization. They would gain a better understanding of and appreciation for English and its structure and they would be better prepared to cope with any foreign language they choose to take afterwards, whether it is an Indo-European language or not.

There was another issue which occasionally disturbed me during the early years that I was teaching Latin. I myself had loved the language only for itself, totally aside from any cultural considerations about the civilization which it represented, though later, as my teaching matured, the civilizations which had spoken and written those languages became the prime focal point of my teaching, with Latin and Greek as the tools for understanding them, so that in my teaching, the civilizations and the languages had equal value.

The lingering question, one which still comes up, and one which will never be fully resolved is: "why should I study Latin or Greek and what value do they have, and what benefit could I get from any so-called 'dead language?'" Many teachers have described to me how they have dealt with this question, but oddly, in my own high school, this question came up only one time. I think the reason for this is that the high school where I was teaching was very academically motivated. Latin was an elective and students were there because either they themselves wanted to be there, or both they and

their parents wanted them to be there. There were occasionally students who, quite differently from the type of student I was, entered high school with a very clear idea of what the world was about and about what they wanted from it, and about what they needed to equip themselves with in order to be successful. Such students never questioned why they were in a Latin class. I mentioned above that the necessity of Latin was questioned only once, and oddly enough, this did not come from the student, who by the way wanted to study Latin, but from her father who was a teacher himself. He and I had several discussions about this, and I am sorry to say I never was able to convince him of the importance of Latin. These days I am no longer bothered by this question, for I have a ready answer. I would explain first of all that Latin and Greek stand at the very heart of Western civilization and that studying their languages and culture is essential to understanding our own. I would tell students that studying either or both of these languages will bless them with benefits which they cannot yet imagine, and that they will be rewarded with an increased vocabulary and with a greater understanding of their own language than they would have had otherwise.

It has been many years now since I taught Latin in high school, although I expect to teach it again in the future. I still remain in contact with many of the students I taught in those days and even the ones who complained about the difficulty of the language and about how they could not see its importance now admit that they were wrong and insist that their children should study Latin for at least two years. I could have no better proof of the importance of classical languages than this.