

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PRESERVE OUR GREEK CULTURE? | A CALL TO ACTION

Demetra Xenos for St. Demetrios Greek Independence Day Celebration 2014 (March 23rd, 2014)

“A SOCIETY GROWS GREAT WHEN OLD MEN PLANT TREES WHOSE SHADE THEY KNOW THEY SHALL NEVER SIT IN.” – GREEK PROVERB

Thank you so very much for inviting me back. It is an honor and a pleasure to be asked to speak tonight. Zhto Ellas.

Φοβάρμια. I'm scared. I really, truly am. But it's not glossophobia; I'm not scared to stand up here today and speak. No, I'm scared because people think being Greek means *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *300*. I'm scared because people think being Greek means belonging to a country in the midst of an economic disaster. I'm scared because there's more involvement in the Greek system of colleges by our youth than in their own parishes and cultural activities. I'm scared because we *know* that we identify as Greeks, but we're losing sight as to *why*.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “culture” is defined, on a basic level, as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” Got it. Greek Orthodoxy, Elliniki Glossa, food, tavli, dancing, family – Greek culture. Right? But this is nothing more than a topical, stereotypical definition. Webster's further expands its description of “culture” as “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” I repeat – “depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” It's this notion of passing on the culture that we're losing sight of. Where would society be if the philosophers and scientists of Ancient Greece hadn't shared their knowledge to the world? It's not enough just to be Greek; we have to share our culture, with the world and with our children, to preserve our heritage. It's our duty. It's our right. And it's our privilege.

In the infamous words of Maria Portokalos, “We are lucky to be Greek.” And truly, she's right. We belong to one of the world's oldest and powerful cultures, with a history so rich and fascinating, the world continues to be enamored with it some 4000 years later. ZHTO ELLAS. We speak a gorgeous language whose roots are evident even in our adopted American society.

ZHTO ELLAS. We laugh, we dance, and we love knowing that this is a part of our blood, a part of who we are, to live life to the fullest and embodying the definition of kefi. ZHTO ELLAS. Our culture teaches us. Our culture unites us. Our culture defines us.

But is that enough? Is our pride, our love, our fervor for the culture of the past enough? For now, maybe. For the future? No, it's not enough. We cannot let our Greek identity fade into the history textbooks or be lost as a single thread within the fabric of our globalized world. Our society is becoming more and more interconnected, which is fantastic, unless you lose sight of your culture and allow it to be diluted and ultimately lost. It is our responsibility to preserve this culture, not with a mentality of racial supremacy, but with the knowledge of our ancestors and their accomplishments, with the morals and values of our culture, with the faith and fervor that has allowed our culture to flourish. But why? Why is it *so* important?

Do you believe that our history is important? Greece is the birthplace of civilization, *h patriida* not just for us as Hellenes, but for the world in its entirety. From its mountain villages to coastal cities, the leaders, thinkers, and activists were born. Democracy, philosophy, mathematics, theater, strategy, medicine – it all came from the Greeks. In a country no larger than the state of Alabama, the Greek people – our people – have survived cultural genocides, religious persecutions, the Turkish occupation, invasions by the Persians, the Italians, the Germans and more. Alexander the Great spread Greek culture to his conquered lands. Socrates taught the world how to think. Homer wrote one of the most epic tales of all time. General Metaxas said Oxi to Mussolini. The Cretan villagers protected their land from the experienced German paratroopers with only their bare hands and household items. Lord Byron of England fell so in love with this country and its history that he laid his life down for the Greeks. Our grandparents left their homeland with nothing but courage to come to an unknown country to provide a life for us. For these testaments, I believe that our culture is important.

Do you believe that our language is important? Τοσο ομορφι ειναι η ελληνικι γλωσσα. Remember Gus Portokalos? “Give me a word, any word, and I will show you that the root of that word is Greek.” The Greek language is one of the oldest still in use, and the foundation for a vast amount of our modern English language, permeating our society from medical terms to our daily colloquial speech. Too often our children are learning Greek from the American classrooms – beh-tah, gah-mah – that the language is dissipating. But it shouldn't. This

language is gorgeous. It conveys so much more emotion than anything can in English. Words like *filotimo*, *kefi*, *parea*, *agape* are simply untranslatable. For these lexi, I believe our culture is important.

Do you believe that our traditions are important? Church isn't an isolated part of our lives, something that happens once a week. It is home to a faith that is woven into the fabric of our daily lives, from prayer to morals. Family is held close to our hearts, because *to aima nero then yinetai*, blood is thicker than water. We dance the same steps as our great-grandparents, because music transcends generations. Yiayia's cooking is something that makes our mouths water, and whose secrets we aspire to be worthy enough to learn. Mom and dad's cautions of "Ta matia sou thekatessara" slip out when we talk to our friends. We roast lamb and crack eggs at Easter, celebrate name days more than birthdays, and eat Olive Oil like its water. For these principles, I believe our culture is important.

Do you believe that our values are important? The word *kefi* is the epitome of our culture. We love life and we share our hearts. We are hospitable, opening our arms to our fellow men with *filoxenia*. We are wise, negotiating business deals and musing over the idiosyncrasies of life. We are human, making mistakes but knowing that we must learn from them. We value our family, our faith, and our heritage above all. We know that time for a *kafethaki* and *tavli* is just as important as our hard-work ethic and drive. We boast the best food, gorgeous sights, and infectious music around. We applaud a strong mind and a good heart even more than an articulate mouth and fit body. We learn not just from the classroom, but from proverbs, stories, and Papou's wisdom. We smile with our whole being, because we believe happiness is paramount. For these attitudes, I believe our culture is important.

Do you believe that our Greek *psuxi* is important? The Greek spirit is one of a kind. It is why Winston Churchill powerfully proclaimed "Hence we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks!" It is a spirit of tenacity in the face of adversity. It is a spirit of fraternity and love, of *kefi* and passion, of pride and inspiration. It is the source of our love to argue, the meaning behind our desire to live life to its fullest. It is the unifying bond between all Greeks, the reason we have organizations like AHEPA. It's the spark that lights our Greek fire, fueled by the stories of our ancestors and our land. For this identity, I believe that our culture is important.

You see, it is not a choice to be born Greek. But it is a choice to *continue* to live by and to spread your Greek culture. It's more than an ethnicity, it's a mentality. It's about keeping this culture alive through its history and language, its traditions and values, its love and its *psuxi*.

We cannot, as Hellenes and as Philhellenes, allow the culture to fade into memories and meager artifacts. As the Greek proverb says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." So continue to plant the trees of this great culture and to cultivate them. Water them with your *kefi*. Nourish them with your stories. Protect them with your traditions, all so that the future generations may experience them and enjoy their fruits the same way we do.

Let us do this with the spirit of the Greek word, *meraki*, which loosely translates as "the soul, creativity, or love put into something; the essence of yourself that is put into your work." Make this culture your work. Preserve this culture through yourself, be the living example. Share it with your voice, through stories and proverbs. Describe it with an educated mind, through writings and song. Reflect it through your attitudes and actions, living the Greek way. And most importantly, keep your culture always in your heart.