

INFORMATION IS A VALUABLE ASSET

Odysseus was a legendary hero in the ancient Greece. The poet Homer tells about his adventures in two great epics, in the Iliad and in the Odyssey. Iliad is the story about Trojan war which lasted ten years. Odysseus, the king of Ithaca and one of the Greek leaders, invented the "Trojan horse". It was a huge wooden horse which was left alone outside the city of Troy. Trojans believed that the Greeks had stopped besieging their city and left leaving the horse behind. They took the horse inside the city walls and made a party. A bunch of Greek soldiers were hiding inside the horse, jumped out and ambushed the Trojans. Thus the war was won but Odysseus' adventures were not over. He had to sail from one danger to another ten more years before he could return home. He could overcome all obstacles because of his cunning, and bravery, and with the help of the goddess Athena.

There were many Greek heroes who were strong and brave. Of them, Odysseus was the most cunning. He used to keep any information he happened to have secret, and he did not reveal any facts or family secrets until he was absolutely sure about the other party. The story of Odysseus meeting his wife Penelope is a kind of duel two equally cunning persons. When Odysseus finally arrived to his kingdom Ithaca he behaved very carefully. He disguised himself as a beggar, and approached his palace with the help of an old swineherd. This was indeed the right step as his palace was overtaken by young men who wanted to marry his wife and become the king. They did not know that Odysseus was still alive, even though his wife believed so. She had developed tricks to keep the suitors at distance but she was not able to chase them away. They would have probably killed Odysseus had he entered the house openly.

Odysseus did not reveal his identity even to his wife who nevertheless helped him to conspire against the suitors. All of the suitors were caught in a trap and killed by Odysseus and his son. Penelope was even more cunning than her husband. She did not trust him immediately when he had revealed his identity. After all, he could have been a god in disguise. To secretly test him, she tricked him to believe that his bed had been moved away from their bedroom. Odysseus got mad inquiring who had been strong enough to remove the bed which he himself had built around a tree-trunk. This was a secret known only by the couple. Finally, Penelope trusted her husband, and disclosed that she just tested him. Proud of his clever wife, Odysseus forgave her.

The Trojan war took place around 1,200 BCE. Yet it must have been much earlier that being cunning, or clever, smart, or wise, was already highly appreciated among human beings. We call our species 'homo sapiens sapiens', that means a wise human, and it is definitely sure that humans would not have survived without their intelligence. Animals can be stronger and braver than men but they hardly can be as shrewd. The traditional societies knew this and thus, when they chose leaders or chiefs, they tended to select a person who showed wisdom in speech and behavior.

Outwitting competitions and song contests of sages have been a popular pastime all over the world in places which are as far apart as North America, Scandinavia, India, and South Pacific. People learn magical spells and songs from their parents or maybe from famous old shamans. Magical spells are believed to have much power: they can make crops grow, bring a rain, a cure a person. The more spells one knows the more power one possesses. Young people are not supposed to boast with their knowledge. A Finnish tale tells about a young man Joukahainen who urged an old sage to a song contest. After he had sung all his spells the old man laughed at him and began to sing himself. With the power of his words he threw the youngster into a swamp where he was stuck. The unfortunate youngster was not able to get out before he had promised his sister Aino as a wife to the old man. Another misfortune followed from this promise as the girl did not want to marry that old shaman. To escape from that fate she drowned herself and turned into a fish.

This kind of song contest is taking turns in singing until others have to give up to the one who knows more spells. The other kind is singing at the same time. Among Native Americans, it usually takes place in a sweatlodge. The lodge is heated until steaming hot and the men strip and enter it. They pour water onto hot stones and start singing. Those who cannot bear the heat and escape have lost.

It is not only in the modern society where information and knowledge is highly valued. All traditional societies respected wise old women and men not because of their age but their long experience. They knew many stories, riddles, songs and proverbs. When a grandmother told stories for small children, there was always a hidden lesson in them.

Philosophers and prophets also used stories in their teaching. They knew that simply giving orders or advice was not a good way to make people understand. They had to make their listeners to

think and to realize the truth themselves.

Jesus was a good example of this kind of teacher: he selected stories from everyday life to illustrate his teachings. He even refused to explain his stories thus forcing his listeners to reach conclusions themselves. Those who did not even try to understand were not worth of the message. One of his stories tells about a farmer, the parable of the sower:

On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Matthew 13 New King James Version (NKJV)

The people in Antiquity were familiar with farming and growing grains. The great Greek philosopher Socrates also took an example from farming five hundred years earlier than Jesus:

"Tell me this: will the sensible farmer, who cares about his seed and wants it to reach fruition, sow it in summertime in gardens of Adonis and gladly watch it growing for eight days, or would he only do such a thing for a joke and for the sake of a festival, when and if he were to do it? But the seed he takes seriously he will sow in a proper location, using his agricultural knowledge, and he would rejoice to see his seeds reaching their fruitful goal in the eighth month."

The Omaha, a Native American group, live in the state of Nebraska. When they gather to have fun together, they dance and sing. Roger Welsch, a white American, tells how he attended a party with his Omaha friends. He was invited to join the dance but he felt too shy because he did not know how to dance. Others teased him by collecting money for his "dance lessons". The very idea of dance lessons is a big joke for the Omaha. Lessons are the white man's idiotic way. To learn to dance Omaha dance, you dance Omaha dance. Among the Omaha you learn by observing and doing.

The story of counting and writing: knowledge

Another Native American tribe, the Dene, shares this view. They believe that true knowledge is acquired only at firsthand. They learn by careful observation, not by asking questions.

Knowledge in their culture is acquired during dreams and other personal encounters, often from animal helpers. Only one's own personal experience is valuable knowledge, "medicine". The more knowledge and power a person integrates, the better able she is to control the world. When a man has exceptional success hunting moose, the Dene attribute his achievements to the knowledge and power that he has assimilated through dreams and other experiences. Authority in any area of life is connected to the "knowledge" about the subject and is not transferrable to other areas. They are reluctant in citing others, even storytellers are concerned about telling lies, or giving unreliable information. When they draw maps, they include only places which they've seen themselves, other areas are left blank.

Practice:

Try that yourself! Drawing a map of the surroundings of your school, including only places you have seen yourself. Compare it to a street map.

In a way, the Omaha are right to the point. Do you remember the time when you were very young? Who taught you how to crawl? Who taught you how to walk? And how to talk? Nobody. Nobody but you. You learned those important skills all by yourself if you were a healthy child. You learned by observing others, by imitating them and trying and trying.

Why do we actually need any lessons? Would it not be possible to follow the Omaha way, and to learn everything by doing oneself and acquiring experience?

The modern society is often called information society. By this one wants to emphasize that people need to know huge amounts of information in their daily lives. Much of that information comes and goes very quickly like the news of the day, telephone number of a restaurant and so on. People are not able to remember most of the information they encounter. They forget it but it is again available in books, papers, or internet.

Information is seen as a valuable asset in the society. It is stored and maintain for continuous access. Scientists, journalists, and numerous others work to increase the knowledge of our society. No single person is able to master all that knowledge.

Just as it is offensive in Omaha culture to give directions, lessons, or orders, it is a discourtesy to ask a question. People respect each other's knowledge by not demanding it.

Information is given voluntarily, not upon request.

The aboriginal people of Australia share this attitude. This reflects the ethic of personal autonomy, for to insist on an obligation to reply is to impose oneself upon the other. In Aboriginal society a question may be answered, but the answer is given the questioner not as a right, but as a privilege. People seldom ask straight questions. A request for firewood is often in form of a statement that it is needed in the presence of potential provider. "Too direct a request and too direct a response to the request is demeaning."

Among the aboriginal Australians, knowledge may be owned by individuals or groups and, as such, may be made available to others on a highly selective basis. This applies, in particular, to knowledge having to do with their religious beliefs, the Dreaming. Details of designs, songs and other matters connected with religious ceremonies are the property of a family group which others are not allowed to copy. This is extremely important as the Dreaming is not only of spiritual relevance but it also connects people to the land, to particular places and to their ancestors. Men and women have different designs and different knowledge.

The museums in Europe and North America have collected religious objects from so called primitive tribes, and keep them at display. Many tribes find this upsetting because it may even threaten the continuity of their ceremonial life. Their sacred knowledge gets part of its power from being secret, known only to initiated persons who have gone through a long training. The Zunis of Arizona had many anthropologists visiting them and studying their life style. They were later shocked by the discovery that the scientists were publishing descriptions of their ceremonies, including photographs of sacred paraphernalia and transcripts of prayers and other liturgy. In Zuni belief, dissemination is contrary to sacred knowledge. It not only dilutes its power, it hands over this knowledge to individuals outside Zuni religious institutions, whose motives may not include the good at all. Hostile people could even use that knowledge to destroy them or to cause them harm.