LEARNING FROM PAIN



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Around 1817, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) created a painting called "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog." What does this painting mean? One interpretation could be this: "The hiker stands as a back figure in the center of the composition. He looks down on an almost impenetrable sea of fog in the midst of a rocky landscape—a metaphor for life as an ominous journey into the unknown." Bob Kennedy faced such a look into the unknown when he lost his brother Jack to an assassin's bullet. That catastrophic event changed RFK's approach to life. Original painting maintained at Kunsthalle Hamburg.

After Jack's death, Bobby was completely devastated. Trying to help him deal with the grief, Jackie Kennedy told her brother-in-law that he might find comfort in the books of <u>Edith Hamilton</u>. Taking her advice, he read <u>The Greek Way</u>. Soon thereafter he purchased, read and annotated the rest of Hamilton's works. He also started to read Greek poets.

The fruits of his study became apparent as he quoted ancient writers in his speeches—like the famous <u>"Stars" speech</u> he delivered (to a <u>thundering</u>, <u>lengthy ovation</u>) at the 1964 Democratic convention. He continued to memorize passages which gave him comfort.

Not long before he died, he said his favorite poet was <u>Aeschylus</u>, a survivor of the <u>battle</u> of <u>Marathon</u> and <u>author</u> of numerous Greek tragedies. It was Aeschylus, in <u>The Oresteia</u>, who said man must live by a "law" which includes pain and suffering:

The truth
Has to be melted out of our stubborn lives
By suffering.
Nothing speaks the truth,
Nothing tells us how things really are,
Nothing forces us to know
What we do not want to know
Except pain.
And this is how the gods declare their love.
Truth comes with pain.

(The Oresteia, Ted Hughes translation, page 9)

Before his brother's death, Bobby had always been known as a focused, hard-driving, energetic taskmaster who accomplished <u>his objectives</u>. Through <u>his suffering</u>, however, he noticed the plight of others who endured life's daily hardships.

Having stepped away from <u>his job</u> at the Department of Justice, RFK was elected U.S. Senator from New York. Traveling throughout America, and abroad, he found plenty of people in desperate circumstances. He began to think he could expose their plight and provide them with a voice which could be heard around the world.

In a moving talk he gave to white students, in <u>apartheid South Africa</u>, Bob Kennedy delivered what many scholars consider his finest speech. He challenged the students, and the world, to affirm their humanity and to help others.

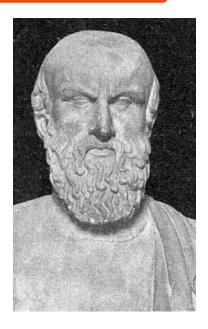
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Media Stream



<u>Aeschylus</u>

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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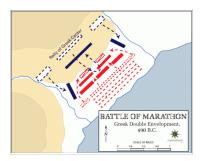


Map: Battle of Marathon

Image online, USMA Atlas Collection.

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Marathon - Battle Lines

Image online, courtesy Atlas Collection at the USMA.

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RFK - Bobby Delivers His "Stars Speech"

"Stars Speech" and Richard Norton Smith introduction, courtesy C-Span. PD

Quotation from Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene II - PD

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RFK - Bobby at the 1964 Democratic Convention

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Narrated by Blair Brown

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RFK - Suffering After JFK's Death

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