The ironies of memory

Be careful what you ask for in life. You just might get it. This lesson is hammered home in Greek myths, especially when the average person is dealing with those who have more power. For the Greeks, this is usually their self-centered gods, but the gods are simply stand-ins for the socially and politically privileged, the wealthy and other human wielders of power with the clout to act counter to communal law or common decency. In the early periods when many Greek myths were first shaped, such folks defined the rules of law and made it serve their own purposes.

The great Greek myth-makers viewed life with the clear-sighted pragmatism of sharecroppers and war veterans. It pays to listen to them. Take this example. T.S. Eliot certainly did. He uses it as the epigraph to his famous poem "The Waste Land."

Apollo loved a young woman named Deiphobe. Wanting to seduce her, he promised her as many years of life as the grains of sand she could gather in her two hands. She accepted the offer, scooped up lots of sand, and then refused to close the deal by sleeping with Apollo. Our own litigious culture knows a different version of this lesson: "always read the fine print."

Apollo gave Deiphobe a long, long life, but not lasting youth. The beautiful object of divine lust aged, withered and shrank until she became a cicada, chirping her field, "a prominent banker and UT regent, graphs to his famous poem "The Waste Land." These are hard-bitten advice to human beings who in order to counteract "northern influence." The irony now is that these statues serve to heighten awareness of the still-existent legacy of a period that we may otherwise delude ourselves into thinking has vanished forever. Without the ironic power of these historical statues, we would not have had the student activism of the early '90s that led to the commissioning of the statue of Martin Luther King Jr. Nor would we have learned the cultural lessons in Ferguson's op-ed piece. It reminded me of a conversation I had with a restaurant owner in a Hill Country community eight years ago. Learning we were from UT-Austin, he asked whether we knew anyone in the "science department." I asked him how he knew of this department. He said he had catered one of its outings. And then he remembered: "Yes. It was the science department. They were mainly orients and Jew-boys." Sometimes when you ask for something, you get a living legacy instead.

Many creative artists claim they "just tell stories" that they themselves are incapable of fully explaining. The ramifications and textures are too manifold.

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