

Assembly (6th Nov., 2013): Odysseus, the Sirens and Self-Discipline

Today I would like to say something about one of the four major concerns of the school for this year – but which concern? Let me reveal it after I have finished the story, so you can do some guessing while listening to it.

The story comes from Greek mythology and it is about Odysseus and the Sirens. Who is Odysseus and what are the Sirens?

Odysseus was a Greek hero who led his men on a long sea journey home after winning the Trojan War. A lot of strange things happened and Odysseus got lost on the way. In the end it took him 10 years to reach home.

As for the Sirens, they were mythical creatures with the head of a woman and the body of a bird. But this is just their appearance. The key thing about the Sirens is that they can sing very sweetly but sadly. And when people hear their songs they will be totally attracted by them, then they will go crazy and finally they will try to kill themselves. Pretty scary!

Now for Odysseus to go home, he needs to pass a strait guarded by the Sirens. No ships had ever passed this strait successful before because their sailors had all heard the singing of the Sirens, gone mad, driven their ships into the rocks and were all drown. Luckily, someone warned Odysseus about this but he still wanted to hear the singing of the Sirens, firstly to enjoy the sweet songs, and secondly, because it had been said that he could hear his future from the songs. So what did he do? He ordered that he himself be tied to the mast of the ship and that the sailors should ignore his orders while going through the strait. Then he asked all the sailors to seal their ears with wax so they could not hear the Sirens' singing. Then they set sail. When they passed the strait, Odysseus heard the singing and, as expected, he tried to order the sailors to change course that would wreck the ship. When the sailors ignored Odysseus, he yelled and cursed and kicked, but to no avail. In this way, the ship passed the strait safely and Odysseus was later untied and given back the command of the ship again.

OK, this is the story. Can you guess which one of the four major concerns this story illustrates? See if you got it right - it is about "self-discipline".

What is self-discipline? Self-discipline is to restrain one's own behavior, that is, to tie oneself up like Odysseus, through one's own free will. It is

not a constraint imposed by others against one's will. Why would a person be so stupid as to tie oneself up? Like Odysseus, we usually know deep down what the right thing to do is but we know we would be distracted by something else which appears to be very attractive but which is actually harmful to our goal. By limiting our own freedom to choose that which is tempting, we ultimately achieve what we really treasure deep down. In this way, we actually achieve true freedom in the end.

For example, I want to keep fit but I also like to have ice cream. Now keeping fit benefits me in the long run while having ice cream gives me enjoyment only in the short run. Keeping fit is my goal and ice cream is the distraction to this goal, which is my weak spot. If I know my weak spot like Odysseus and think ahead, I could plan for what I would do when faced with the temptation, e.g., by avoiding routes that pass convenience stores where ice creams are sold, or I could simply make a mental rehearsal on what I would say to myself when I pass a place where ice creams are sold so as to remind myself of the greater goal of keeping fit. By making a conscious and intentional effort to prevent ourselves from succumbing to the temptation, we use self-discipline to achieve our greater goal.

I think you must have experienced similar situations. So, in the next 30 seconds, do the following on your own:

- 1) Take an important goal which you really want to achieve. (It could be related to your studies, your performance in music or sports, or it could simply be staying quiet in the classroom.)
- 2) Then think about the distractions/temptations that have prevented you from achieving your goal.

Alright, does everyone have your goal and your distractions? OK, later today, please try to come up with some methods to discipline yourself to deal with the distractions, and then test them out in the next few days to see if they work.

This is the end of my sharing about self-discipline. The next time you are faced with temptations that could distract you from your goals, remember **Odysseus** and **the Sirens** and see if you could draw some inspirations from this story.

YL So, 6th November, 2013