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Linda L. Lyman

Illinois State University, llyman@ilstu.edu

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Lessons From Greece: A Body, Mind, Spirit Odyssey*

Linda L. Lyman

Spring Semester 2005 I was a visiting Fulbright professor at Aristotle University in Greece. The purpose of the Fulbright Program is to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of the 150 or so countries that currently participate in the Fulbright Program. Details of the opportunities offered and directions about how to apply can be found at www.cies.org. Aristotle University is located in Thessaloniki, a city of a million people in northern Greece. This 2,300 year-old city is a major seaport at the north end of the Aegean Sea. In retrospect, living and teaching in Greece from January through July was definitely *an odyssey* – bringing adventures of the body, mind, and spirit. It was a life-altering journey with multiple layers of learnings to bring home.

After surveying the possibilities for my sabbatical, I applied for a Lecturer/Researcher Women's Studies award in Greece. Once selected for the award, I created the two classes I taught at Aristotle University in the Department of American Literature and Culture in the School of English. One was a lecture style class for 86 undergraduates on *Women and Leadership in American Culture*, and the other was *Gender and Leadership in American Fiction and Film*, a class for five graduate students who became special friends. Teaching in a foreign university with 75,000 students required a steep learning curve. Strange customs included students not being required to come to class, being able to decide whether they wanted to take the spring semester exams in June or September, and getting to take final exams again if they did not pass the first time. I did things I had not done before, like teaching undergraduates and giving lectures incorporating technology in a building not designed for it. The students valued my American approach to teaching and loved giving me their opinions about books and ideas. They said I gave them a vision of a new way to teach.

In addition to the teaching, I completed a qualitative study about the leadership beliefs and practices of Greek women principals. My collaborators were two Greek women professors of educational administration from

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About the Author

Linda L. Lyman is a Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations, Campus Box 5900, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-5900, email: llyman@ilstu.edu

Athens, Dr. Anastasia Athanassoula-Reppa and Dr. Angeliki Lazaridou, who have become friends for a lifetime. We presented our preliminary research findings together at a conference in Patra before I left Greece. I have since presented our findings at the 19th Annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the UCEA 2005 Convention in Nashville. Through working with these extraordinary women and others, I learned that the issues for women who would lead are the same in Greece as they are in the United States. Similar social-cultural, institutional, and psychological barriers to women's leadership restrict opportunities in both countries.

Adventures of the body began when my husband and I got off the plane in Thessaloniki and had to find our way around a city with few right-angled streets. We thrived on the food and learned that a well-stocked Greek kitchen depends on lemons and olive oil. We learned to value sitting in coffee shops, particularly when finding ourselves lost during long walks in the city. We discovered that if we walked downhill we would always end up at the sea and could find our way home. We grew to like knowing that nothing would ever start on time, counted on it in fact. We learned that plans and schedules can always be changed, and it won't matter because time is not linear. Life in Greece had a satisfying human pace even as the mythical gods and goddesses hovered historically. The beauty of this mystical land invited wanderings. One place we wandered was Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece, which in fact is not a single mountain but a massive ridge with several summits. We learned that "olympos" means "all-shining, sparkling," probably because the peaks are covered with snow except for a short time in the summer months and they literally shine during moonlit nights.

Adventures of the mind were many. The differences between Greece and the United States challenged us daily; they stretched our minds and enriched our journey. Just getting around and doing the little things, like shopping for groceries and paying the bills, required mental concentration. Studying the Greek language offered a lesson in humility, although I did manage to learn enough to communicate about basics when we visited villages where not much English was spoken. We learned through our travels in the countryside that communication does not require a common language. We saw the Greek

light in as many places as we could. We saw major monuments of antiquity in Athens and Ancient Olympia, explored the ruins of Agamemnon's palace in Mycenae, were awed by the Royal Tombs in Vergina, and questioned the oracles at Delphi and Dodoni. We visited larger towns and small villages, crisscrossed the mainland and visited the islands of Corfu, Crete, and Rhodes. Yet as we think back to all the beautiful and historic places we visited, clearly it was the people we met who brought light to our lives and gave meaning to our experience of Greece.

Adventures that deepened the spirit were offered to us by the many Greek people who took us into their homes, hearts, and culture. We participated in a meaningful Greek Orthodox Easter celebration in a village by the Ionian Sea, and were awed by the monasteries on the rocks of Meteora. We visited countless Byzantine churches and lit candles in street-side shrines. The Greeks we came to know are above all people of spirit, comfortable with the intermixing of mythology and contemporary reality. Having lived in the magical glow of the light of Greece for six months, we have been living since in its afterglow and we see the world differently.

The light of Greece is unique, according to Nicholas Gage. "In the stark light of the Greek sun, colors become so pure and clear that they are almost audible, but never brash and glaring. Every patch of color glows with a great subtlety of shades," he writes. His words echo those of Henry Miller, who wrote this about Greece, "Everything here speaks now, as it did centuries ago, of illumination . . . Here the light penetrates directly to the soul, opens the door and the windows of the heart, makes one naked, exposed, isolated in a metaphysical bliss which makes everything clear without being known."

So it was for us. Veils quickly fell away as we immersed ourselves in the Greek *now*, lived more fully in *kairos*, the eternal present. Life was newly clear even as we lived in the midst of much that was unknown. Gage wrote, "Seeing the intensity of the Greek light, which tolerates no half-tones, no secrets, setting every object ablaze with significance, is the cornerstone to understanding Greece." Another cornerstone is experiencing the warm Greek *hospitality to the stranger*. Remembering them, the names of our Greek friends call up images of hospitality, friendship, and love. To celebrate every special holiday Greeks always return to their family villages. We have decided that "Greece" will be our village, and we plan many returns.