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The Accidental Rhodes Scholar

Henriette Lazaridis Power

I was an accidental Rhodes Scholar. Even though I had spent my Junior year of college reading English at St. Hugh's, I had never heard of the Rhodes. When a Middlebury professor told me I should apply, I was delighted to discover this cool, free way to get back to my St. Hugh's friends for two more years. But being the only child of Greek immigrants, that's all I thought the Scholarship was. I had no idea the Rhodes would be the kind of thing that could change your life and would alter people's impression of you forever, and not always for the better.

When it was time to actually leave for England, I almost didn't make it. With the QE2 in dry-dock that year, we were to be sent off with a luncheon in New York preceding our flight to London. Sometime between lunch and departure for the airport, I discovered I had left my passport in Massachusetts. While the rest of my cohort was preparing for their grand adventure, I spent a few harried hours rushing through the Manhattan passport office with a State Department Rhodes who could cut the line, weeping over the imminent separation from my then boyfriend (now husband). I still have that passport, with its photo of my red-rimmed eyes, disheveled hair, and

mournful expression. That was the face I wore onto the plane, taking my seat just before the wheels began to roll.

I often wish I had missed that plane. The tiny accidents that led me to get a Rhodes could have so easily swung the other way. And it's possible my life would have been better for it. Had I not gone to Oxford, I would have headed for New York and a job at a publishing company, writing fiction on the side and living with my boyfriend. Instead, my planned two-year spree with friends turned into a very serious M.Phil., which turned into an academic career that lasted more than ten years. My Rhodes years in Oxford, following those first quite happy and carefree undergraduate days, did afford me many good experiences, both academic and personal. But they were very difficult years, keeping me from the man I loved, and leading me into a commitment to academia and research which I ultimately found wasn't right for me.

In the end, what I learned during that accidental Rhodes turned out to be both a burden and a blessing. What seems to have happened to me during those two years at Oxford was not just an education in modern British literature, but an initiation into an Anglo-Saxon way of life. Let me explain.

Cecil Rhodes serves in my life as a kind of embarrassing uncle—the one who gives you hefty gifts but who takes you by the elbow and reminds you to give to charity, or to save, just when you're planning to spend the cash on a new pair of heels. I don't mean the real Cecil Rhodes—whose charitable urges are of course qualified by everything else we know about him—but the symbolic Cecil. The Cecil Rhodes who reminds you to

fight the world's fight.

Growing up Greek, I had a few mottos to follow: moderation in all things; a sound mind in a sound body. The last thing my parents were was moderate, but they did do all things. They drew and painted; they designed furniture; my father built it. In their youth, they both competed in swimming—my mother at the national level—and were among the first to take up skiing, hiking up Greece's surprisingly snow-capped mountains for long runs down. With their example, I embraced the Olympic ideal of sports combined with intellect.

But that was ancient Greece. The modern Greece that I knew was a place where people played all the time and rules always applied to someone else. If there was a debt today, it could always be paid tomorrow. Volunteerism was non-existent. (Some of these things have changed. Volunteerism saw an upswing after the 2004 Olympics. The rest, as the current economic crisis demonstrates, remain painfully unaltered.) This is not to say that my parents allowed me to be lazy. They believed quite strenuously in the importance of education, and their expectations for me were always high. But those expectations had very little to do with the world or its collective fight. Excellence was important. Community was not.

In came Cecil. This whole idea of fighting the world's fight led me to change my degree from the B.A. to the M.Phil. To do the B.A., I reasoned, would be fun, but not useful. Spending the Rhodes Trust's money to earn an advanced degree would be practical, I imagined. More than that, it would send me on a path trodden by my other

imagined and adopted ancestors: my professors at Middlebury who had taught me so much and whom I admired tremendously. Truly *in loco parentis*, my professors had led me into my first real American experience, where I was free from my parents and tied by choice rather than necessity to my Greek self. I could do a lot worse, I thought, than follow in their footsteps. Since they were academics, not writers, I would be too.

As an undergraduate at Oxford, I had acted in several plays, written for the *Cherwell* and another magazine I can't remember now, and attended a few parties that I couldn't remember then. At Oxford the second time around, I worked. I saw other Scholars playing Frisbee in New College quad or getting to know one another around town, and I felt a perverse obligation to stay away, as if keeping my nose in my books could somehow make the best use of the Rhodes money. When I made friends, they were almost exclusively British. When I wasn't working—well, I was hardly ever not working. Having come from a culture of grasshoppers, I was determined to become an ant.

Becoming an ant might not seem a particularly radical endeavor, but to me, back then, it was my best route to independence—not only from my family but also from my culture. If being an ant was the difficult thing, it was also, in an old-fashioned way, the male thing. My Epirot extended family was full of women who had done man's work while their husbands were traveling as merchants or, more recently, fighting or captive during the many wars to hit the Balkans in the first half of the twentieth century. These women had chopped wood, fired weapons, dug trenches—and made phyllo dough so

thin they could see their wedding rings through it. They had lived, in a way, gender-neutral lives. But if I tried to pick up my suitcase or go for a run, it became an international incident. Modern life had restored the divisions of gender, their logic seemed to go, so I should appreciate the fact that I was free to behave like a woman.

Of course, I needed to show my family I wasn't bound by convention. So I created my own privileged version of their hardship-induced versatility. I did go for those runs, did heft the suitcases, did insist on helping when someone needed to hammer a nail. And, because being a scholar and having a serious career wasn't what I thought they expected of me, that's exactly what I planned to do.

The thing is that my parents and my extended family were much more accepting of all of this than I thought at the time. They had never expected me to be a grasshopper, after all. They were proud of me—and my American life gave me a pass to be different and to excel at a life of my own choosing. In fact, it must be said that my father had started the whole gender-neutral thing in the first place. Having no sons, he never hesitated to teach his only daughter anything he would have taught a son. That was why I even knew how to swing a hammer.

All the same, burdened by cultural imperatives and my own misguided sense of obligation, I spent my Rhodes days at the Bodleian, with only occasional forays into the Worcester College squash courts, and trips to the phone booth in the bus station so that I could pump my 50p pieces into weekly long-distance calls to my boyfriend.

Clearly, I didn't do it right while I was at Oxford. I was fighting, all right. But it

was my personal fight, not the world's. My efforts to make the most of the Rhodes money and of my time away from my boyfriend turned out to be quite the opposite of what I intended: I didn't economize, I squandered the opportunity to make something happen, to create something with a larger community and for a larger community.

Though I was a poor Rhodes Scholar, I did hold onto the essential notion of Rhodes' will as a guideline later on in my career. Beginning as a Lecturer on English at Harvard after earning my Ph.D. from Penn, I soon learned about the Allston Burr Senior Tutors, thirteen academic deans who served in each of the Houses, dividing their time between teaching and advising. This was exactly what I wanted—to be able to teach both inside and outside the classroom, to help shape students as scholars and as people who would do Good Things when they went out into the world. I would fight the world's fight by molding the next generation of world-fighters.

When I helped prepare Dunster House students for their Rhodes interviews, I looked for those who had the drive to excel in a way that served a larger community. One of those was Faith Salie ('93), who has since become a close friend. Serving on several selection committees for the scholarship, I joined my colleagues in measuring a gifted applicant's candidacy against Cecil's motto. I remember one young woman, a classicist, who had excelled in every possible scholarly way. She was lovely and personable. But we all asked ourselves "Will she fight the world's fight?" She got a Marshall.

But Cecil can be a truly Burdensome Uncle—in a way that I suspect many Scholars

will find familiar. We know he's right to ask more of us. We want to make him happy. We feel guilty when what makes us happy might not, we suspect, make him proud. He's there behind every life decision we make, prodding us to do the Rhodes thing: to lead, to organize, to innovate, to challenge.

Faith and I have talked about this—especially in terms of the fact that we are both involved in arts careers where our success often depends on someone's aesthetic taste. At times we measure our careers by how much world-fighting they involve. Faith tends to be more confident of the social value of art than I am. In my darkest moments, I take the view that the world would go on as planned if deprived of my prose. What about building a family, we wonder? Is that world-fighting? Is there such a thing as second-degree world-fighting—wherein we raise children who will grow up to be Rhodes-type people? And how many Rhodes Scholars can dance on the head of a pin?

I've done all these mental gymnastics. Never more so than twelve years ago when I left academia so that I could return to the pre-Rhodes writing career I had never properly begun. I made my peace eventually with the notion that creating art could be as important to the world as teaching young people how to think. (But even now, it's hard to read that sentence without finding the equation preposterous.) I still haven't come to terms with the expectations for success. Am I living up to the legacy of my oddball adopted ancestor by being a writer and a mother? What if I haven't found a publisher for my novel yet? Is that failure? Do Rhodes Scholars fail?

I should point out that these very questions are not part of the Mediterranean

culture I was raised in. My parents could never understand how the Rhodes could be anything but an unalloyed good. To my extended family, it wasn't a *Rhodes* at all. It was *Oxforthi*—along with *Charvard* and the *Sorvoni*, the only non-Greek institution of higher learning they had heard of. And therefore famous, and therefore good. Generalizing here, Greeks are not particularly self-reflective. They don't stop to consider how their actions will affect the world around them. There is plenty of melodrama in Greek music, literature, and theater. But the questions of melodrama are rhetorical rather than analytical. "Why, oh, why did he leave me?" not "How can I help?" An Athenian driver will park his car smack in the middle of a crosswalk—even in a crosswalk specially designed to aid the blind in negotiating traffic. When you happen to point this out to the driver, as I've done on a few occasions, you get a litany of personal woes and excuses.

It's this inward turning of Greek culture that has left the country so lacking in community service, patronage, and volunteerism, and has made disclaimers of personal and political responsibility a national habit, evident now in the popular response to the current economic crisis. (Greece does have prominent benefactors, but interestingly most of them came from Epirus in the north—my father's family's region—where Ottoman rule lasted longest, into 1912. The Epirots' contributions can almost be seen as a kind of nostalgia for a lost national identity.)

I've answered my world-fighting questions for now, with a recent career tweak that seems motivated in part by Uncle Cecil. Frustrated by the passivity inherent to the writing career, I felt an urge to make something, to influence my community of readers

and writers. I took an old form—the literary magazine—and brought it into a relatively new medium—online audio. I might have left it there, as a pipedream, but Faith insisted we make it happen. As the founding editor of The Drum (www.drumlitmag.com), with Faith as one of two Contributing Editors, I feel I've returned to the Rhodes idea after several years away. I'm still not fighting any truly important fight, but I'm part of the world in an exciting new way.

I do often think about what would have happened if the State Department's Frank Sieverts had not attended the pre-flight luncheon in 1982, and if he hadn't helped me get my replacement passport. Even a one-day delay in my departure might have stalled my momentum just enough for me to say nope, I'm not leaving. Would it have mattered? In some ways, no. For much as I would have hated to admit it that tearful day in New York, the Rhodes idea was always bound up in who I am. I would be like this—valuing a life balanced between action and contemplation, hoping to engage in the world in some way or other, falling into small leadership roles here and there—with or without the fraught legacy of a long-ago academic award.

The Rhodes has driven me to expect more from myself, to live up to the ideals of the Scholarship—in a way that's very different from the attitude of my M.Phil. years. Thanks to years of fighting the wrong fights, I have finally learned what the right ones are: to work hard at what I love, and to be good to the people around me. Even my imaginary Uncle Cecil.