

American Journalism Historians Association
Sidney Kobre Award for Lifetime Achievement in Journalism History

David Abrahamson
Acceptance Speech
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Thank you,_____.

I promise to be somewhat brief in my remarks today. [It says here, "Pause for applause."]

I wanted to begin by recognizing everyone by name who clearly had a role in this wonderful honor. But once the number of names passed 30, I realized that I would resemble an awe-struck Hollywood starlet on the Academy Award stage.

So, with your permission, I will defer. You all know who you are, and I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would like, however, to publicly thank AJHA—not only for this wonderful honor, but also for all the warm friendships and collegial kindnesses this association has afforded me over the years. I promise you I am genuinely humbled. But I must also confess that the words of E.B. White, from the closing pages of *Charlotte's Web*, do come to mind:

“It is deeply satisfying to win a prize in front of a lot of people.”

More than 20 years ago, I had a good fortune to have the late Neil Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, on my dissertation committee.

What follows is an adaptation of some of his thoughts on subject of some importance.

The topic at hand is our ancestors. Not, of course, our biological ancestors, about whom I know nothing, but our spiritual ancestors. To be specific, I want to tell you about two groups of people who lived many years ago but whose influence is still with us. They were very different from each other, representing opposite values and traditions.

The first group lived about 2,500 years ago in a city they called Athens. We do not know as much about their origins, but we do know a great deal about their accomplishments. They

were, for example, the first people to develop a complete alphabet, and therefore they became the first truly literate population on earth.

They invented the idea of political democracy, which they practiced with a vigor that puts us to shame. They invented what we call philosophy. They believed in reason. They believed in beauty. They believed in moderation.

About 2,000 years ago, the vitality of their culture declined and these people began to disappear. But not what they had created. Their imagination, art, politics, literature, and language spread all over the world so that, today, it is hardly possible to speak on any subject without repeating what some Athenian said on the matter 2,500 years ago.

The second group of people lived in northern Europe and flourished about 1,700 years ago. We call them the Visigoths, and they were spectacularly good horsemen, which is about the only pleasant thing history can say of them. They were marauders—ruthless and brutal. Their language lacked subtlety and depth. Their art was crude and even grotesque. They swept down through Europe destroying everything in their path. There was nothing a Visigoth liked better than to burn a book, desecrate a building, or smash a work of art. From the Visigoths, we have no poetry, no theater, no logic, no science.

Like the Athenians, the Visigoths also disappeared, but not before they had ushered in the period known as the Dark Ages. It took Europe almost a thousand years to recover from the Visigoths.

Now, the point I want to make is that the Athenians and the Visigoths still survive. They do so through us—and the ways in which we conduct our lives. All around us, there are people whose way of looking at the world reflects the way of the Athenians, and there are people whose way is the way of the Visigoths. To be an Athenian or a Visigoth is to organize your life around a set of values.

To be an Athenian is to hold knowledge and, especially the quest for knowledge, in high esteem. To contemplate, to reason, to experiment, to question. These are, to an Athenian, the most exalted activities a person can perform. To a Visigoth, the quest for knowledge is useless unless it can help you to earn money or to gain power over other people.

To be an Athenian is to cherish language because you believe it to be humankind's most precious gift. In their use of language, Athenians strive for grace, precision and variety. And they admire those who can achieve such skill. To a Visigoth, one word is as good as another. A Visigoth's language aspires to nothing higher than the cliché.

Now, it must be obvious what all of this has to do with us. Eventually, we must decide. We must be on one side or the other. You can be an Athenian or a Visigoth. Of course, it is much harder to be an Athenian—for you must learn how to be one, you must work at being one. Whereas we are all, in a way, natural-born Visigoths.

That may be why there are so many more Visigoths than Athenians.

And I must tell you that you do not become an Athenian merely by accumulating academic degrees. Yet, we must not doubt for a moment that the academy is, after all, essentially an Athenian idea. There is a direct link between the cultural achievements of Athens and what we in this room are about. I have no difficulty imagining that Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus or Thucydides would be quite at home in AJHA.

And so, whether we were aware of it or not, one of the purposes of our association is to give us a glimpse of the Athenian way, to interest us in the Athenian way. I am happy to report that I think AJHA does a splendid job therein.

I thought I might conclude my remarks with a observation or two about that Athenian vocation, the craft of research—something everyone in this room so admirably pursues.

Henry Rosovsky, the distinguished economic historian at Harvard, once said that research is an expression of faith in the possibility of progress. I think what he meant was that the drive that leads scholars to study a topic has to include the belief that new things can be discovered, that newer can be better, and that greater depth of understanding is achievable. As a result, I suspect it can be argued that research, especially academic research, is nothing less than a form of optimism about the human condition.

Furthermore, I would suggest, persons who have faith in new progress and therefore possess an intellectually optimistic disposition—i.e. teacher-scholars— are probably more interesting and better professors. They are also, perhaps, Athenians. Upon reflection, I am fairly certain that Professor Rosovsky was correct. And I hope that you—my esteemed AJHA colleagues, Athenians all—will not disagree.

Thank you.