

A little learning is a dangerous thing; more is better

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, August 27, 2014, p.17

You may have heard the phrase, “A little learning is a dangerous thing.” It’s found in Alexander Pope’s poem “An Essay on Criticism,” composed in 1709. Pope wrote “A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again.”

What does it mean? In effect, Pope is saying that a little learning or knowledge (the “shallow draughts”) will only befuddle (“intoxicate the brain”), misleading us into thinking we know more than in fact we do. Remedy for this problem lies in continuing to learn (“drinking largely” at the “Pierian spring,” the spring sacred to the Muses and the source of the knowledge of art and science). But the idea expressed in those verses is much older than the 18th century. It’s possible that it goes back a few thousand years.

As happens so often, etymology can shed some light on the matter. The focus here is on our English word learn, which developed from the Anglo-Saxon “leornian,” meaning to learn or to study. It’s akin to “lernen,” the Old High German (8th-11th centuries) and modern German word for learn, and, going further back, to the Gothic (roughly 4th-8th centuries) “lais,” which translates as “I know.” The base sense of “lais” is to follow or find the track. Ultimate source of the word is in the Proto-Indo-European language – “leis,” meaning track or furrow. Related to this are, for instance, the German word “Gleis,” meaning track or rails, the Russian “lekha,” signifying garden bed (where there are furrows), and the modern English last, in the sense of a shoemaker’s foot model, which is derived from the Old English word “last,” footprint (a kind of track).

“Lira,” the Latin for furrow, track, comes from the same stem and is thus related to our word learn. The process of learning is like following a track. Interestingly, the Italian verb for studying or taking a course (at university) is “seguire,” which means to follow. The Latin “delirare,” literally to go out of the furrow in ploughing, was soon transferred to persons and meant to become insane. Our words delirium and delirious are based on “delirare.”

When we use the expression to go off the rails, in other words to behave irrationally, we are formulating the same concept expressed by the Latin “delirare.” To stop following the furrow, to deviate, to go off the rails, will “intoxicate the brain,” in Pope’s choice phrase. Getting back on, that is getting back to learning, is the solution to sober, or clear up, the intoxicated brain.

Inevitably, when you follow the furrow, you become aware that it continues to the horizon, and you know the horizon is always beyond reach. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle summed it up neatly when he noted “The more you know, the more you know you don’t know.” But he wasn’t the first. A couple of centuries earlier, the Chinese philosopher Confucius had observed, “Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.”