

It's all Greek to me now

by Sabine Eiche

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Many years ago a friend and I went on a long road trip, crossing monotonous territory, with no radio in the car. My friend soon had a eureka moment. He decided he'd teach me the Greek alphabet. The lesson kept us awake and entertained for the duration of the trip, and by the time we unpacked the car I could recite the 24 Greek letters almost as fast as I could say the ABC's of the Latin alphabet.

What pleased me most about my lesson, however, was that it had given me my own eureka moment, letting me connect a whole company of words to their Greek source. I'm embarrassed to admit that it hadn't occurred to me before that the word alphabet is simply the combination of the first two Greek letters—alpha and beta. And when I found out that delta, the fourth letter, is shaped like a triangle, I understood why it became the word for the triangular body of alluvial land that builds up where rivers exit into the sea—like right here in Richmond, which sits on the delta of the Fraser River.

The smallest letter of the Greek alphabet is iota, from which we derive our little word jot. When we say "I don't care a jot," we are stating that the matter is of no importance to us.

Omega is the last Greek letter, which most of us now associate with the Swiss luxury brand of watches, an appropriate name for a timepiece that is supposedly the ultimate of its kind. Omega, by the way, literally means big O, to distinguish it from the other O in the Greek alphabet, omicron, the little O—

mega for big and micro for little. There is still plenty of life in the qualifiers mega and micro, to judge by their frequent appearance in our modern vocabulary.

Sometimes the link between an English word and its Greek root is more difficult to perceive, as in “gamut,” which is based on gamma, the letter following alpha and beta. In Medieval music, the lowest note, in the key of G, was called the gamut; several centuries later the gamut encompassed the entire series of musical notes. Eventually the word stretched beyond the confines of music to mean the full range of a thing – we speak of the gamut of emotions, for example.

You noticed the word eureka at the beginning of the column? It’s Greek, of course, meaning “I’ve found it!” It was most famously spoken by the ancient philosopher Archimedes as he lowered himself into a very full bath. The water spilling over the edge gave him the idea for the solution to a vexing problem. Today, when we say eureka, we use it just as Archimedes did, exclaiming our joy at finding the answer to something.

The prefix “eu” in Greek adds the sense of well or good. Words in the English language beginning with “eu” therefore have positive connotations. For example, a euphoric person is an ecstatic person; a euphemism is a mild expression or word replacing a harsh one. Names, too, fall into this category, such as Eugene, meaning well born, and Eunice (also spelled Eunike), signifying good victory.

And now finally it’s clear to me why “Nike” is such an apt name for the sporting goods company. Eureka!