

Consideration and Care for All

Once upon a time there was a bustling city called Dinas, near where a river met the sea, surrounded by excellent farming land, and favoured by a moist yet warm climate. Fully 10,000 people lived in Dinas and its Ruler was a wealthy man. He had a huge appetite for food and clothes. He lived in a splendid palace in the centre of the city, surrounded by high walls and guarded at all times by his personal army.



Around the walls of the Ruler's palace the streets were cleaned daily. There were other smart areas of the city where the rich people lived and these too were clean and safe. But most of the city was permanently piled high with rubbish and smelled putrid. The homes were small and people lived in fear of crime, fire, and disease.

The family

And yet for many there was work in the city. One man who lived there was Otac, who worked at the docks, loading and unloading boats and ships. He was short but strong. He could not read but he could count, which was useful in his job. Shortly after his 18th birthday he met and married a girl called Anne and

soon they had two young children, a boy and a girl.



They stayed healthy and all was well for them. They took care of themselves and kept the rubbish outside their house. Nobody got the better of them.

Otac and Anne taught their children how to survive in the city. They taught them how to buy and prepare food, how to take care of their property, and how find their way around the city. They instructed them always to stay with their parents and showed them which parts of the city were too dangerous to enter. They taught the children to speak, to count, to run from danger, and how to behave when soldiers were near. They taught them to avoid being tricked by others. They also taught them their religion.



Most Dinasians, like Otac and Anne, prayed to the Three Gods. They also followed the Requirements of the Three Gods, which included not eating certain foods, not doing certain activities on particular days of the

week, wearing particular clothing on special days, and praying four times a week. They also were Required to beat their children before Monday prayers, but Otac and Anne did this only very gently and their children were not hurt. Not all families were so gentle and the parents felt a little guilty that they did not follow the Requirements with complete sincerity.

About 30 years earlier, some migrants into the city had brought a different religion. They had formed a community that now numbered over 1,000 people and they had built what they called a Peace Palace in the city. Otac thought it looked more like a castle and would be easy to defend if attacked. He was not the only person to be suspicious and there was tension in the city as a result of the growing numbers and boldness of this new religion.

A disturbance

One summer, when Otac's children were just less than 10 years old, the people of the Peace Palace gathered in a large crowd in the centre of the city and marched together, waving flags and shouting about how their religion would conquer all. Other citizens were mostly scared but some became angry. Fighting began and by the evening the Ruler's army had surrounded many of the marchers as they sheltered in their Peace Palace. Otac watched from a safe distance.

Just when it seemed the marchers would have to surrender someone noticed smoke from the other side of the city, near the river and the sea. Looking in that direction, Otac had an uneasy feeling and when someone came rushing towards him in the street shouting of an invasion, Otac decided it was time to get his family to safety. Even if the Ruler's army won there would be danger in the city for at least a few days and if the Ruler's army lost then Otac and his family would face death,

slavery, or worse. He was determined to keep them safe.



He rushed home and shouted at his family to get dressed to travel, while hastily packing as much water and food as he thought they could carry. He had no plan other than to leave the city and perhaps move along the side of the river, heading inland.

Refugees

By morning they had travelled a few miles and the children were very tired. There were many others doing the same as them. The frightened parents looked back at the city and were even more worried when they saw that the smoke was thicker than before. Worse still, they could see in the distance large groups of people in blue clothing which they took to be enemy fighters. Unfamiliar boats could be seen on the river and some were heading upstream. The fleeing citizens were being hunted down by a victorious invading army.

So Otac and Anne urged their children to keep going, despite their fatigue. Some of the refugees fled along by the river, which was a source of water and important on what was becoming a hot day. Others moved away from the river, risking thirst to get further from the pursuers. And so, gradually, the refugees became more and more spread out.

Otac and Anne could see that the pursuing boats were catching up so, filling their water bottles one last time from the river, they headed away across the plain towards low hills and the high, arid mountains beyond. They had no idea what lay before them but knew that they did not want to be caught. Perhaps death by starvation or thirst would be better.



By nightfall they had reached the low hills but were exhausted. They rested for a few hours, keeping silent and not risking lighting a fire. It was cold but they had brought two blankets and these helped greatly. Twice during the night they thought they heard people moving, but they did not know if it was soldiers or other refugees. The next morning they moved on, keeping low and stopping often to look for danger.

Death hovers

This went on for another night and another day but by the end it seemed that they were

utterly alone – and lost. The pursuers had perhaps given up, but they could not be sure. The family was now in a hot, dry, rocky area and their water was running dangerously low. The parents saved the last few mouthfuls for their children and hoped that they would find some water or a plant from which they could extract moisture. But there was nothing. Otac wondered about risking a return to the river but looking back he saw the reflection of sun on shiny metal. Soldiers were still there, blocking their path back to water.

Another two days later and the family were all desperately thirsty, weak, and suffering from the hot daytime sun. They could barely move and were sheltering in the shade of a large rock. Now, even if their path back to the river was safe, they did not have the strength left to follow it. Death seemed inevitable.

Unexpectedly, a strange voice spoke to them, saying something like: 'Greetings travellers. May I help you?' The words were in a dialect of their own language, but with a strange accent. Moments later a stranger dressed from head to toe in loose purple cloth approached with a bottle of water and gave some to each member of the family.

'Do not speak. Just rest and drink this.' said the stranger, unwrapping his face so that they could see him properly. He continued 'Tonight you will rest with me and tomorrow I will take you to safety.' The family was too tired to ask where that might be, but Anne wondered if they might be escaping one danger only to face another. In her experience, when someone offered help and asked for nothing in return it was always too good to be true.

The next morning, before the sun appeared on the horizon, they set off with the stranger. The path took them into the mountains and upwards.



It was tiring and hot, but the stranger waited patiently and helped the children over the rocky parts. That evening the path seemed to disappear into a large crack in a vertical cliff of rock and the stranger led them into the darkness of the crack. A few minutes later they emerged into the bottom of a steep gorge and all around them were lights. They had arrived at a settlement of some kind.

The secret city

This was in fact their first glimpse of a secret city that had been in the mountains for over three centuries. They were taken through a doorway in the rock itself which opened out into a large room – a man-made cave which already had people within. In the dim lamp light they realised from the clothing and the accents of the others that they were with other refugees from Dinas, but they did not recognize anyone.

Nobody else seemed to know where they were or what the future held, but there was food and water and they were soon asleep on blankets.

The next morning Otac decided to leave the cave room and see what was outside but as he approached the doorway two men who were not refugees came forward and stopped him. They asked politely that he stay in the room but they were not going to let him out. Anne's fears seemed confirmed. They had

escaped one fate and now faced some new danger.

But soon more food was brought and later that morning they were visited by a group of older men and women from this strange settlement. In their dialect they asked the refugees many questions about who they were, what they had been doing, how they lived, and where they had come from.

Although these elders were dressed simply and spent hours in conversation with the refugees, it seemed that they were important people in the settlement because the guards treated them with great respect. The elders also seemed highly intelligent and soon learned everyone's names and skills.

One of these elders spoke to Otac and Anne. Otac had a question of his own. 'How do you live in these mountains? Surely they are too hot during the day, too cold at night, and there is no water or earth in which to grow crops.' The elder looked at him and replied 'Good questions', but he did not answer them.



Eventually they left, except for one man, the one who had spoken to Otac and Anne. He spoke to everyone saying 'You have reached the city of Oras, which has been in these mountains for centuries. We understand that you probably have no homes to return to and fear death or slavery, so we will try to give you a home. However, we have limited resources and cannot take you all in. We now

have to decide who is to leave.’ He then turned and left.

Later a large group of guards returned and called out the names of a family of refugees. When they came forward the guards took them out of the room. Several minutes later the guards returned and called more names. This was repeated several times. Otac and Anne wondered what it meant. If your name was called did that mean you were staying or leaving? They wanted to stay but were not sure. These mountain people were different. They were strange.

Then their names were called out, along with the names of their children. Outside in the daylight they were greeted by the elder who had spoken to them earlier. He said ‘You can stay if you like. I am a Teacher here and a Governor. I will be your guide until you are ready to make your own decisions.’ Anne asked him why they were being allowed to stay and he replied. ‘Otac asked the right question. Others did not. Some asked who was the ruler of our city. Others asked why they could not have different food, or more food. Others wanted to know why we do not worship the Three Gods.’

Otac was confused. What question had he asked? He also wondered why he and Anne had forgotten to pray to the Three Gods when they desperately needed help. He felt guilty but at the same time part of him questioned the power of the Three Gods if they had allowed Dinas to be overcome.

As if reading his thoughts, Teacher said ‘You asked how we can live here, in these arid mountains. That is the right question.’ He continued, ‘We teach the answer to this question to all our children and you will learn alongside yours. If you do not then you will have to leave. Our resources are limited.’ He then showed them through a doorway into a

small living area that was to be their new home.

Lessons

Over the next several weeks Teacher spent an hour or more with the family each day, explaining how the city survived. He explained that there was rain and it fell very heavily, but only for about two weeks a year. Some of that rain was caught in underground lakes that had been extended by the people of the city over the centuries. They had also laid pipes and added gates to control the flow of water. As a result there was enough water to support over 1,000 people and their animals and agriculture¹. There were many valley floors that, while narrow, had been made fertile by careful management of fertilizer. Nothing was wasted.



The various water storage lakes, valleys, and homes were linked by a network of tunnels and stairways. They soon got used to the steps and their legs became stronger and less easily tired by the unfamiliar effort.

Finding roles

In addition to their lessons with Teacher, the family members were asked to find useful roles for themselves. Teacher said ‘You are

¹ The ancient city of Petra, in Jordan, flourished in part due to expert capture, storage, and use of water. Otherwise not much of what is known about Petra is similar to the fictional city of Oras.

capable so you must be productive. Our resources are limited.’ Otac opted to try being a porter, carrying loads for people around the city, including some work moving stone from the continuing excavations to locations where it could be used for building. Otac was strong and soon able to earn enough to pay for most of the things his family needed. He was so successful that one of the other porters decided to retire and take up another, less physically demanding role instead.

Anne and the children opted for farming and were able to find roles helping a successful farmer tend crops and control goats and captive birds. This too brought in Oras money they were able to spend on what they needed.



The Oras philosophy

Their lessons with Teacher covered the layout of the city, which was much larger than they had realised at first, how it used water, how various types of food were obtained, and many other practical matters. They also covered the city’s philosophy of consideration and care. The family members were required to learn how a large number of behaviours affected others. These ranged from murder to leaving the lid off a water jar. Teacher would explain and then ask them each to show that they had learned the lesson by recalling all the consequences of the behaviour.

For example, water for drinking was stored in jars with lids. It was not good to leave the lid

off a jar after use because this might allow animals to enter the jar and because it had been noticed that the amount of water in a jar slowly reduced if the lid was left off. Wasting water was a very important matter in Oras because of the limited supply. Some years the rainfall was less than usual and there was always a danger of running out of water towards the end of the dry season. The family had to learn every step of this chain of events that linked leaving a lid off to people in Oras potentially dying of thirst.

Another consequence that was often mentioned was that of making unnecessary work for others. Teacher explained that ‘Our resources are limited. If we do not do everything we can to get the best life with the least effort then we may die. This means not making unnecessary work for ourselves or others. For example, you will see that there is no rubbish in Oras. Nobody dumps things they do not need because we cannot have waste and because just dumping makes work for someone else. In Oras we call work “steps” because so much of our work involves climbing steps. It is wrong to make steps for others unnecessarily.’

Otac noticed that Teacher was right about there being no rubbish in Oras. There was also no putrid smell, though of course the smell of manure was common on the small fields and around the goats.

This philosophy of not making unnecessary ‘steps’ was applied by Teacher to every detail of life in the city, from how to buy and sell things in the markets, to how to wash yourself, how to deal with animal dung, when it is acceptable to make a loud noise, who should be helped with their chores, how older people are to be treated, how to raise children, and many more topics.



Even the most important people in Oras ate no more food than they needed because carrying extra weight was unnecessary work, and particularly important when you had to climb so many steps in a typical day. Excess food also meant excess work to create and prepare the food, and then clean up afterwards. 'It is better to store food in a cave then carry it around your waist.' said Teacher, adding 'Some people find this harder than others and need more encouragement, but in Oras our food is limited.'

It was also frowned upon to be physically inactive for more than a day or two. Citizens of Oras were expected to use their muscles every day and to rest them. If not, the consequence, they learned in their lessons, was that their muscles would become weaker or damaged, making them unproductive.

Another idea at the centre of the Oras philosophy was that some of their resources were shared. Water was the most important shared resource. Every citizen had to

understand that if they considered only their own interests then each person would use water liberally and the water might run out for all of them before the rains came. So everyone had to be careful with water at all times and put the interests of the city first.

Mutual consideration and care

Being productive was a big part of the Oras philosophy but people who were less productive, due to age or illness for example, were cared for. 'Who would stay in a city like this if we did not care for each other in time of need?' asked Teacher.

Otac and Anne saw this in the families of people they met and became friends with. They found families who cared for each other's children in emergencies, who called in on elderly neighbours with no relatives, and who shared their food with people who were ill or disabled.



Anne in particular felt that Oras was a safe place. There were no parts of the city where she felt wary and worried for her children. As far as she could see, the philosophy of mutual consideration and care was practised across the whole city and provided safety and security from birth to death.

Although Oras had no religion, the intensive teaching of its philosophy helped people towards a cooperative way of living together.

The tanks

One morning Teacher took them a short way up into the mountains where they met an older woman near the entrance to a tunnel. The woman was introduced as 'Our Water Master for the past 23 years.' She led them all along the tunnel to a dark cavern that sounded like it must be huge. She stopped the family suddenly then lit two lamps and held them up so that the family could see what lay ahead. It was good that she had stopped them because beyond a low wall was a steep drop and at the bottom of it they could see deep water. The water continued away into the darkness.

The Water Master explained that this was the main water storage tank of the city and at this time of the year was about half full. She talked about how the water level was measured and monitored throughout the year and how decisions were made about use of water. It was quite complicated and the family were glad the Water Master knew her job so well.

Consequences

One day Anne asked Teacher 'You have said that every child is taught the philosophy of Oras but what about people who fail to consider others as they are taught? In Dinas life was so different and I cannot believe that

everyone lives up to the expectations of Oras.' Teacher nodded and said 'Yes, some find it hard. If someone fails to give the required consideration then they must return to lessons and relearn. The lessons are about what they have done wrong and they must continue taking lessons until they pass a test².'

'But does anyone reject this teaching?' asked Otac. Teacher explained: 'Sometimes, but that is rare. The consequences we teach can be seen or inferred by anyone. They are facts. It would be harder for Teachers if we had to convince people of the existence of supernatural beings or places. Sometimes the people of Oras have made a decision to live in a particular way that only works if we all agree, but our agreement is a fact.'

Teacher continued 'We insist that people show they have thoroughly learned the consequences of their actions for others and themselves, as we understand them. They must do that to become adults in Oras. However, we want people to think for themselves so they do not have to agree with our current analysis. Sometimes our favoured behaviours change as we learn more. Anyone can help us reach a new level of understanding.'

'We are open to new thinking but if someone persistently chooses to behave selfishly despite knowledge of the impact of their actions then we know for certain that they do not wish to participate in the Oras way of life. They may be asked to leave because our resources are limited.'

² A modern UK example of this idea is the 'Speed Awareness Course' offered to drivers caught driving a bit too fast. It reinforces ideas now taught to new drivers. Relatives of mine who have attended the course found it interesting.

‘But what if they refuse to leave?’ asked Otac. ‘Then we make them leave and ensure they reach safety somewhere else.’ replied Teacher. ‘Our resources are limited and sometimes we have to impose a fair outcome. I am sorry when this happens but our society is more important.’

This was a reminder of the serious reality that was behind the seemingly gentle ways of Oras, but Otac and Anne had noticed already that they and their children felt safe for the first time in their lives and that the tidiness and fresh air of Oras brought calmness and joy.

Meetings

The family learned that Oras was divided into 21 districts and that each district held a meeting each week that every adult in the district was expected to attend. Otac and Anne were not allowed to attend because they had not completed their lessons but one day Teacher surprised them with an invitation.

‘Come to the next meeting tomorrow afternoon. You are not allowed to speak but you can listen and observe. I think it would help you understand how our city survives. You see, when children have mastered all 124 of the basic lessons they are ready to be full citizens of Oras. But, everyone forgets from time to time so one reason we have meetings is to remind people of the consequences of particular actions. We also talk about new discoveries and changes that should be made to the lessons.’

The next afternoon Otac and Anne sat down with others in the district in a shady canyon and listened as a citizen they did not know reminded everyone of the consequences of spending too much time in direct sunlight. This they recognized as lesson 13 but the

speaker had some interesting personal examples and some suggestions for avoiding sun when there was much work to be done. As they expected, he went beyond the obvious pain and scarring to discuss the reduced productivity and the burden on others from becoming sunburned.



Next a woman from another district talked about an incident where an insulting picture was painted on the outside wall of a home in her district. The perpetrator had not been identified and when she said that removing the paint had taken two hours and a jar and a half of water there was a murmur of disapproval from the listeners. Nobody seemed concerned by the insult though the woman pointed out that the people of her district had agreed that the insult had no basis in fact and should not have been given in any way. It was another transgression but, being

rare, was not a great concern. Someone said everyone should talk to their children and refugee neighbours and, at that, there was a loud chorus of agreement.

The next day, Otac told Teacher that the meeting had been interesting and asked if he and Anne could go every week. Teacher agreed that they could, then said 'I know that in Dinas you were worshippers of the Three Gods and you have mentioned that this involved frequent meetings. Were they like our meetings?' Otac thought for a moment before replying. 'Not really. The Three Gods meetings were based on stories about the Three Gods and their powers and preferences. We were reminded of the teachings of the religion, as with Oras meetings, but the religious teachings were mostly about the importance of remaining devout, following the rules about food, dress, prayer, and so on. This was supposed to be a moral education but it was mostly about devotion to the faith.'

Difficult discussions

Another aspect of the Oras philosophy that Otac and Anne found surprising and pleasing was the approach to discussing difficult decisions.

Teacher was also a Governor of the city, involved with decisions about policy matters and the ongoing building and maintenance works needed for holding and distributing water. One day they went to see Teacher for their lesson and found him with several other Governors talking about a plan to make a new tunnel between two valleys. One of the Governors strongly felt that the tunnel should be built without delay but the others were talking about things that should be checked and considered before work started. It seemed that some already had concerns about it. The proponent said, 'This tunnel is one of the most desired routes in the city and

more delay is foolish.' At these words there was silence. The proponent froze, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. He took a deep breath and said 'I apologize. Of course the flow of storm water has to be studied and the other factors you have mentioned. Doing so is not foolish and no Governor is foolish, as I very well know. Again, I apologize.'

This was so different to arguments in Dinas, where people often insulted each other, lied, used tricks, and used threats to get their way. Anne asked Teacher later why logic, honesty, and respect were so important in Oras. He explained that poor decisions on important matters could have serious, even devastating consequences. Anne finished the lesson for him by saying 'And our resources are limited.' Teacher smiled and replied 'They are.'

The next day Anne was at the market with her children and met someone she knew had come from Dinas. The refugees from Dinas had, naturally, become friends because of their shared history, but had also made many new friends among the people of Oras. Anne told the story of the very polite argument and her friend said she had learned about their strict code of discussion in a different way.



She had been removing weeds from a garden when the owner told her to sort the weeds into separate piles. She had argued with the owner, telling him that they were just weeds and all looked the same, but he kept explaining why he wanted the weeds sorted in his odd way. Eventually she had told the owner that he was a bully in the hope that he

would leave but instead he told her to go home.

She had thought that was the end of it but the next day in the lesson with her Teacher the subject of weed sorting was explained at length and she learned how to sort even the tiniest shoots so that they could be used for different purposes. Her Teacher then raised the subject of discussing problems and explained that accusations of bad faith were a last resort and only to be made when there was clear and persistent evidence.

This was just the start of two weeks of lessons about how to discuss issues during which she had learned why almost everything she habitually said when angry was unacceptable in Oras.

Status

Otac found Teacher relaxed and modest but gradually began to realise that Teacher was a very important person in Oras. He was the best Teacher – the teacher most people wanted their children to learn from – and he earned the most from his teaching. He was also one of the three most distinguished Governors and, with no overall ruler, these Governors were the nearest thing to rulers of Oras. In Dinas he would have had a large house, horses, a carriage, and splendid clothes made from fine silk and threaded with gold. He would also have had servants and soldiers to provide security for his wealth. Here in Oras he wore clothes similar to others and lived in a home only slightly larger than most.

Otac asked Teacher to explain why he did not have and show greater wealth. Teacher replied, ‘My home is in a wonderful location – quiet yet central. That is enough. It was expensive to buy for those reasons. If I had a large home I would need to do more work to

keep it clean and tidy. I am happy to have my meals from the street food cooks like everyone else because it keeps my home smelling fresh and someone else cleans up. I have someone who helps me in my home because I am busy with city matters, but there is not much to do. In Oras our resources are limited so I spend my money on buying the skills of the best people. My hair and beard are trimmed by the best barber. My clothes are cut by the finest tailor so they fit perfectly and make me look younger than I am. These things require more skill, not more resources.’

‘But how are people to know you are important if you don’t display your success?’ asked Otac. ‘There are 1,041 people in Oras, including you and me, and I have spoken to all of them except for the youngest babies. All those people know me and that is enough. If I was not a good Teacher or Governor then people would be able to see that and I would not be important.’

Resources are limited

During their first six months in Oras the family noticed that the days gradually became hotter. Although it was normal to spend the whole day in shade, the heat was sometimes unpleasant. Teacher explained that it was the hot season but that it would end with the rains, which were due very soon.



He took them back to the cave with the main water storage tank and when they looked down they could see that the water was almost gone. Part of the lake floor was dry. It was a shock to see it so different from before and this brought back memories of the day they had almost died of thirst. For the first time they truly understood what 'our resources are limited' meant in Oras.

When those rains finally arrived the whole city celebrated for a week, staying in their homes most of the time to enjoy each other's company and some of the remaining food. There was also singing and dancing.

Otac and Anne cuddled up with their children at home and reflected on their lucky escape from Dinas and from death in the mountains. Anne said 'I miss some of my old friends because they were funny, but we have made so many new friends already. This is the first place I have felt safe. Our children can go about the city safely without us.' Otac agreed and added 'And I also like the clean, fresh air and the tidiness of the city. We have been lucky. Happy Rainy Season my love. Would you like another cup of our limited resources?'



Yuletide story, 2019

Matthew Leitch