Supplemental reading to accompany

Peace Literacy Curriculum
Introduction: The Allegory of Metis

This supplemental reading can be used to meet Common Core Standards in English Language Arts for Reading and Writing from K-12. Here, for example, are the Standards on Craft and Structure for Grade 7:

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.4**
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.5**
Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.6**
Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others.

**Instructions for use of the supplemental reading:**

Give each student a copy of the reading. Read the text out loud to your students one page at a time. After you read them each page, have students:

1. Re-read the page to themselves and circle any words they don’t know.
2. Share the words with the class.
3. Define the words and write the definitions in the margin as a class (the definitions can come from other students, context clues, a dictionary, or from you)
4. Summarize each paragraph in one sentence in the margin. This can be done individually, in table groups, or as a class.
The Allegory of Metis:
How to Make Good Decisions, Take Effective Actions,
and Unlock the Power of Waging Peace
by Paul K. Chappell

What is the greatest power that human beings can possess? How can we make good decisions and take effective actions? How can we improve our lives and increase peace, justice, and well-being in our world? A mythological allegory written nearly three thousand years ago by the ancient Greek poet Hesiod gives us important guidance. The following allegory is derived from Hesiod’s book *Theogony*, which was written around the eighth century BCE and based on stories that existed before he was born.

In Greek mythology, Zeus is king of the gods. When other deities challenge his authority, he relies on two bodyguards to help him protect his reign as king. These bodyguards are Kratos (a winged male deity symbolizing brute force) and Bia (a winged female deity symbolizing violence). In *Theogony*, Hesiod wrote, “Kratos and Bia, whose house is not apart from Zeus; they never sit nor go, except where the god should lead them, but always are stationed by deep-thundering Zeus.”

Zeus maintains his reign as king not only with the help of his bodyguards Kratos and Bia, but also their winged sibling Nike, goddess of victory. Nike’s name in Latin is Victoria, which is where we get the English word “victory.” The mother of Kratos, Bia, and Nike is the River Styx—the mythical river that divides the Earth and the underworld. Their father is Pallas—a Titan who served as the god of warcraft before the war deities Ares and Athena were born.
The Titans were an earlier race of gods. The Titans Cronos (god of time) and Rhea (goddess of fertility) gave birth to a later race of gods called the Olympians, which included Zeus and his siblings Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia.

The River Styx offered the service of her children Kratos, Bia, and Nike to Zeus so that they could help him overthrow his father, the tyrannical Cronos who reigned as king of the gods before Zeus came to power. Cronos was an abusive parent who did not want his children to become more powerful than he. To prevent his children from growing, Cronos tried but failed to swallow Zeus and successfully swallowed all of Zeus’s siblings. Originally, Zeus used brute force (Kratos) and violence (Bia) to stop the abuse of his father. But when Zeus defeated his father during the War of the Titans and became the new king of the gods, he used brute force and violence to commit abuse. In this way, brute force and violence have a dual nature—they can be used either to stop abuse or to commit abuse.

Kratos, Bia, and Nike are forever loyal to Zeus and help him maintain his reign as king, but there is a force more powerful than brute force (Kratos), violence (Bia), and the ability to win through brute force and violence (Nike). That more powerful force is Metis, a female deity who symbolizes good decisions, effective actions, discernment, forethought, skill, awareness, and wisdom. As a common noun, “metis” (lowercase) refers to our ability to make good decisions, take effective actions, and act with discernment, forethought, skill, awareness, and wisdom. As a proper noun, “Metis” (uppercase) refers to the goddess who symbolizes these attributes.
Metis was Zeus’s first wife. During the War of the Titans, Metis served as Zeus’s strategic adviser, giving him vital guidance that allowed him to defeat his father. After this war, Zeus learned about a prophecy that foretold how he and Metis would have a son destined to overthrow Zeus. This son would have such powerful metis that not even the combined might of Kratos, Bia, Nike, and lightning (the most powerful divine weapon, which Zeus uses to bind and imprison other gods who oppose him) would be able to protect Zeus’s reign as king from the immense metis of his son.

What this reveals is that nearly three thousand years ago, people understood that our ability to make good decisions, take effective actions, and act with discernment, forethought, skill, awareness, and wisdom is more powerful than brute force (Kratos), violence (Bia), the kinds of victories (Nike) that result from brute force and violence, and the ability to bind and imprison (lightning). In other words, people living thousands of years ago understood that mental prowess is more powerful than physical might. They realized that the intelligence and wisdom of metis could outsmart mere brute force and violence, foresee and avoid traps that can bind us, and that metis was the greatest power that human beings could possess.

Since Hesiod wrote this allegory nearly three thousand years ago, history has shown how metis can overcome brute force, violence, and binding power. According to the research of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, in the modern world the method of nonviolent direct action (which relies heavily on metis) is more likely than violence to defeat a militarily superior adversary. Chenoweth tells us, “From 1900 to 2006, nonviolent
campaigns worldwide were twice as likely to succeed outright as violent insurgencies. And there’s more. This trend has been increasing over time, so that in the last fifty years, nonviolent campaigns are becoming increasingly successful and common, whereas violent insurgencies are becoming increasingly rare and unsuccessful. This is true even in those extremely brutal authoritarian conditions where I expected nonviolent resistance to fail.”

When people in the ancient world combined components of metis with violence, they could defeat adversaries who greatly surpassed them in violent power alone. One example is the Biblical story of David using components of metis to defeat Goliath. However, pure metis doesn’t rely on brute force and violence and is able to surpass their power.

Because Metis was prophesied to give birth to a son who would be pure metis and far more powerful than the brute force of Kratos, the violence of Bia, their sibling Nike, and the binding power of lightning, Zeus’s grandparents Gaia (the goddess who symbolizes the earth) and Ouranos (the god who symbolizes the sky) advised him to swallow Metis so that she could become his thinking and to prevent his son from being born. Zeus followed his grandparents’ advice by swallowing Metis, and from then on he maintains his rule over the universe because she forever resides in his torso.

In addition to his grandparents advising him that he should swallow Metis, Zeus had learned the behavior of swallowing other gods from his father Cronos, who tried to swallow him. As mentioned earlier, Cronos swallowed Zeus’s siblings (Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia). Since gods cannot die,
swallowing them doesn’t kill them but is an effective way to constrain them. Swallowing them or binding them in Tartarus (the underworld) was a way to remove any threat they posed.

Like all Greek deities, Metis is immortal and cannot die. So when Zeus swallows her, she remains alive in his torso. Because she is the embodiment of thought, she merges with his mind, and since she is the wisest of all Greek deities, Zeus uses her to think for him. Hesiod tells us, “Zeus put her away inside his own belly so that the goddess should think for him, for good and for evil.”

One reason Metis resides in Zeus’s torso after being swallowed is because the ancient Greeks mistakenly believed that thinking happens in our torso rather than in our brain, so the torso seemed like an appropriate place for Metis to reside. They believed this because we feel our emotions in our torso, such as “butterflies” in our stomach when we are nervous, feeling “sick to our stomach” when we hear bad news, our heart beating rapidly when we are afraid, or our heart “fluttering” when we fall in love.

Swallowing Metis allows Zeus to maintain his reign as king, because the powerfully discerning mind of Metis can foresee every trap his opponents might devise to end his reign. As a result, Zeus may be king of the gods, but in a way he does not actually rule the universe. A person reading this allegory could interpret Metis to be the true ruler of the universe, because she resides in Zeus’s torso and becomes his thinking. Various deities such as Prometheus and Hephaestus have a high degree of metis without having to swallow the goddess who embodies metis. Zeus also had some metis before swallowing Metis. But when he swallows her, he goes from simply having metis to becoming a personification of metis.
If Metis cannot be outsmarted and she can foresee every trap, how was Zeus able to trick her into being swallowed? One possible explanation is that Metis wanted to be swallowed, that this was actually part of her plan so that she could merge with Zeus’s mind, become his thinking, and in this way rule the universe.

Another explanation is that Zeus was able to disrupt the metis of Metis herself. How was he able to do this?

The ancient Greeks understood that many factors can cloud our metis and cause us to make shortsighted decisions that harm us and those around us. Three of these factors that can cloud and confuse our metis include: rage, alcohol, and sexual desire. There are countless examples in human history where rage, alcohol, and sexual desire have compelled people to make shortsighted decisions or take harmful actions that they later regret. Although rage, alcohol, and sexual desire can cloud and confuse our metis, we are always responsible for our actions. Making shortsighted decisions under the influence of rage, alcohol, or sexual desire (or all three at once) can have severe legal, social, and personal consequences. If we don’t learn how to wisely manage rage, alcohol, and sexual desire, we not only risk destroying our lives, but also the lives of others.

In Greek mythology, Aphrodite was the goddess of sexual desire. According to an interpretation of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Zeus appropriated Aphrodite’s seductive power and used it to confuse the thinking of Metis. With her thinking confused and mind clouded, Zeus was able to trick her into being swallowed. In the *Iliad*, Hera asks Hypnos (the god of sleep and dreams) to put Zeus to sleep so that she can do something behind his back. She also
has Aphrodite confuse Zeus’s thinking so that he cannot use his metis to discern and foresee Hera’s plan.

When Zeus swallowed Metis, he did not realize that she was already pregnant with their daughter, who would become just as powerful as her father. This daughter was Athena, who was born by bursting out of her father’s forehead. Because she is the daughter of both Zeus and Metis, she is the goddess of wisdom and has enormous power. She is the only deity that can match Zeus in strength and wisdom. Hesiod said Athena is “equal to her father [Zeus] in strength and in wise understanding.” The famous Greek city-state Athens, which became the most powerful and influential Greek city-state according to many historians, was named after Athena.

In the following passage, Hesiod describes why Zeus swallowed Metis and how she becomes his thinking:

Zeus, as king of the gods, took as his first wife Metis, and she knew more than all the gods or mortal people . . . Then Zeus, deceiving her perception by treachery and by slippery speeches, put her away inside his own belly. This was by the advice of Gaia (the Earth) and starry Ouranos (the Sky), for so they counseled, in order that no other everlasting god, beside Zeus, should ever be given kingly position. For it had been arranged that [from Metis] children surpassing in wisdom should be born, first the gray-eyed girl [Athena] . . . but then a son to be king over gods and mortals was to be born to her and his heart would be overmastering;
but before this, Zeus put her away inside his own belly so that the goddess should think for him, for good and for evil.”?

When Athena burst out of Zeus’s forehead, she was born fully grown, fully armored, and fully ready for action. Athena being born this way is an important metaphor that serves as a contrast to the human condition. Unlike Athena, who is the divine daughter of Metis and therefore born fully ready to fulfill her highest potential, as human beings we must gradually strengthen our metis so that we can take the challenging journey toward our highest potential. However, our society does not teach us how to strengthen all the components of metis, or even what metis consists of. By understanding how to strengthen our metis, we can increase our ability to make good decisions and take effective actions. We can also learn how to improve our lives, increase peace, justice, and well-being in our world, and unlock the kind of metis that our world needs now more than ever.

Many Greek sculptures recognize the power of metis by depicting Athena—the personification of metis—holding Nike in her hand. There are also Greek sculptures that depict Zeus—another personification of metis—holding Nike in his hand. Metis causes Nike to transform into a higher form of victory that is mightier than the weaker form of victory associated with Kratos and Bia. If we learn how to unlock our full potential for making good decisions and taking effective actions through metis, we can win important victories for peace and justice that are needed for human survival and prosperity, along with the health of our planet, in the twenty-first century and beyond.
1 Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 60.
3 The Success of Nonviolent Civil Resistance: Erica Chenoweth at TEDxBoulder, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJSehRIU34w.