

HISTORY: A MATTER OF HONOR¹

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Let me, first of all, thank Professor Shirley for his most generous introduction. I am delighted to play a small role in this successful regional Phi Alpha Theta conference. I have taken a personal interest in Phi Alpha Theta for a very long time. Indeed, Professor Shirley may have invited me to talk to you today merely in order to add chronological diversity to these proceedings. I was first initiated into Phi Alpha Theta, after all, when Harry Truman was President of the United States.

Now, if your first reaction is: "Who is Harry Truman?" then my response is: "Look it up in a History book!" Looking things up is, after all, one of the purposes that the study of History serves. But a study of History serves other purposes also. As I shall try to suggest in the course of the next half hour, the study and the writing of History may even be defined as a matter of honor! Admittedly, when you first informed your parents or other relations that you intended to become a History major in college, their reaction may have been less one of honor than one of puzzlement. And why are you doing that? In the short run, after all, to become a History major does not teach you to become an engineer or a physician or an accountant or the CEO of a large corporation.

In the short run, the study of history is more likely to encourage us to become generalists rather than specialists. By that I mean that a historian is compelled to take some degree of interest in the many different ways in which human beings both organize their world and make it understandable to themselves. Human beings are social creatures who almost always live in nuclear or extended families, and those families congregate in neighborhoods, towns, and countries. They are also political animals who organize cities and states and nations that alternately send armies into the field or negotiate treaties with one another. They are part of the economic world as well: as consumers and as producers, as managers and laborers and even as retirees. They also demonstrate all manner of

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cultural, artistic, ceremonial, and ritualistic behavior and ways of explaining their world that we may define as religious in some cases and as secular in others.

Obviously no single historian can be expected to become a specialist in all these various facets of human experience in all the different centuries and on all the different continents, but historians ought to be reminded at regular intervals that, even as they plow their particular furrow, their furrow is part of a broader landscape that extends as far as the horizon. In both survey courses and more specialized courses, as students of the past we should retain at least some concern with facets of that past far removed from those that we may know best.

Among the Ancient Greeks, Herodotus and Thucydides began to practice the trade of history two-and-a-half millennia ago, and in 1400 the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun declared that "History is a discipline widely cultivated among nations and races. It is eagerly sought after. The men in the street, the ordinary people, aspire to know it. Kings and leaders vie for it. Both the learned and the ignorant are able to understand it."² And yet there have always been critics who have argued that the trick cannot be done. There have been philosophers, for example, who have contended, with a surface degree of plausibility, that the past cannot be recovered, however hard we may try. "The past is a foreign country," we are told; "they do things differently there."³ Indeed they do, and yet with effort we may find it possible to understand the thoughts and actions of some of those foreigners, even if a perfect translation lies beyond our competence. Yet other skeptics have contended that we are permanently barred by our built-in biases and assumptions from ever understanding any nationality other than our own, any social class other than our own, any gender other than our own, even any age cohort other than our own. How can a militant Palestinian truly understand the frame of mind of an Israeli, or—one might add—vice-versa? How can an ivy-covered academic possibly understand the daily life of either a hereditary monarch or an agricultural laborer? How can a patriarchal relic conceivably understand the mind of a dedicated feminist? How can an aging stuck-in-a-rut professor possibly enter into the mindset of a college freshman?

My general answer to such skeptics is the same as the one that the eighteenth-century English sage, Dr. Samuel Johnson, applied to a dog walking on its hind legs: "One does not expect to see it done well! One is surprised to see it done at all!" Because, in defiance of the

² Cited in review of Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 17, 2006, 11.

³ The first sentence of L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London, 1953).

philosophers and the skeptics, good history has been written and is being written all the time, history that has caused readers and listeners to conclude that they understand our own age and our own concerns better than before because a historian has placed them in context. History *has* been written that throws genuine light on the institutions that define our society. History *has* been written that clarifies why the decisions taken by particular governments, including our own, have turned out to be either wise or extraordinarily foolish. And why can such history be written? Because all human beings to some degree and some human beings to a very considerable degree possess the ability that we call empathy, the ability to place ourselves in the shoes of others, even others distant in time and place, distant in age and social status.

Such history *can* be written secondly because the discipline of history is and remains a collective undertaking, an undertaking that involves built-in checks and balances. A powerful and wide-ranging imagination may be a valuable characteristic for a historian to possess, yet it is a trait that does have to be kept within limits. Every fledgling historian who has ever had a bright idea and has wanted therefore to publish an article or even a book discovers—sometimes to his or her initial dismay—that it is not enough to complete the manuscript. One has to persuade editors and reviewers before any given piece is accepted for publication, and once the book is published one has to anticipate that other reviewers will publicly judge one's work. They will remind you of all the "facts" that you failed to check, of all the sources that you failed to consult, and of all the inferences that you failed to draw.

The difference between novelists and historians is that novelists too may use their imagination, but a novelist does not have to worry about an imagination that runs unchecked. Nothing need stop a novelist from imagining an Abraham Lincoln who bids farewell to his Springfield neighbors and catches an American Airlines jet to Washington, D.C. where he arrives just in time to be interviewed on television by Tim Russert on "Meet the Press." A historian who utilized his imagination in that particular manner would not be taken seriously, however, because collectively we know too much about the past. We possess a very good idea as to what was and what was not technologically possible during any given century and even what was plausible in the realm of social custom and ideas. For a historian deliberately to claim the privileges that we grant to the writer of fiction is to commit the crime of anachronism.

We ran into this phenomenon a few weeks ago when the author of a best-selling memoir called *A Million Little Pieces* turned out to have written a work of fiction. Oprah Winfrey, whose imprimatur had first turned the book into a best-seller, condemned the author for

feeling "the need to lie," and she apologized to her audience for initially leaving the impression that "the truth is not important."⁴

The truth ought to be important to all historians to the extent that it can be known. For historians, the recoverable past may appropriately be looked upon as a vast jig-saw puzzle for which we do not possess all the pieces. On some subjects, we may have very few pieces—such as, for example, the original King Arthur, who lived (if he lived at all) in sixth century Britain at a time for which we have virtually no contemporary records whatever. We have one jigsaw puzzle piece but ninety-nine are missing. Yet on many other subjects, such as the American Civil War of 1861-1865, we possess a superabundance of records. Even those historians who differ somewhat on the precise combination of conditions that led up to war agree on a great many highly important matters. They do not argue as to how many people participated or died or were wounded or what contemporaries read about the conflict at the time in their books and newspapers and in records of congressional debates. Unlike contemporaries, historians also have had access to numerous diaries and private letters and records of discussions in President Lincoln's cabinet. In the case of the American Civil War, unlike that of King Arthur, we possess ninety-five pieces of the jigsaw puzzle pieces and lack at most five.

Now, I concede that there have long existed historians who have felt sorry that history was not a branch of a so-called "social science" that imposes theoretical models on the past. They regret that history has not become a branch of anthropology or a branch of sociology or political science or even a branch of psychology. Such critics have regretted also that history as a discipline has been largely free from the kind of jargon that all too often seems to afflict professional educators and sociologists and psychologists. Most historians have considered it a virtue to be able to communicate with a wide audience. They accept the need to use technical terms when talking about, say, the history of law or the history of naval construction, but they oppose the notion that historians as historians should create adopt a specialized language whose necessary consequence would seem to be to set themselves off from ordinary people as possessors of, and guardians of an esoteric knowledge all their own. As the British scientist Peter Madawar phrased the matter a few years ago: "No one who has something original or important to say will willingly run the risk of being misunderstood; people who write obscurely are either unskilled in writing or are up to mischief."⁵

⁴ Cited in an Associated Press article in the (Champaign, Illinois) *News-Gazette*, Jan. 31, 2006, C-3.

⁵ *New Humanist*, December 1972, 314.

In recent years, other critics of the discipline of history have contended that historians should worry less about learning facts than about adopting theories and imposing them upon our understanding of the past. Thus a generation of literary critics has maintained that it is altogether impossible for historians to study or to write about anything real. All that historians have before them, according to such critics, are texts. Texts, they go on, have no fixed meanings. Every reader has the right to interpret every text in whatever manner he or she finds plausible. No interpretation is superior to any other. All is open to interpretation. All is relative.

I have sometimes wondered what would happen if such a post-modernist literary deconstructionist historian were to take his university pay check to his local bank in order to transform it into cash. What if the bank clerk should explain to him: "What you have called a pay check is merely a text, merely a piece of paper, and it is as appropriate for me to interpret that text as idle scribble as it is for you interpret it as an order to me to pay you cash. It is therefore as appropriate for me to deposit that piece of paper into a wastepaper basket as into that theoretical construct that you call your bank account." That type of deconstruction necessarily undermines altogether the notion that historians ought to be concerned with the systematic collection of evidence and the systematic drawing of conclusions.

The fact remains that happily we do not live in a world today in which anything can mean anything to anybody. The amount of money you have in your checking account at any given time is definite and not relative. If you are driving a car, red means stop and green means go for everybody; nothing is relative there. If you want to vote in the next election, then if you are seventeen you cannot register; if you are eighteen and a citizen and not in jail you can. We may find aspects of our world confusing, and there may well be aspects of that world that we find difficult to understand—for example, nanotechnology and genetic engineering. But our world is not, in every respect, arbitrary. We *can* find maps on the internet that tell us precisely where specific people live and where particular stores are located and how to reach them. Although you and I may never have met until today, you *can* understand the words I use, because the meaning of words does not change every day. When somebody proclaims: "All things are relative," the appropriate answer is: "Who says so?"

If the world in which we live is sufficiently comprehensible to enable us to live in it, why should the world of one hundred or two hundred or even a thousand years ago be altogether unknowable—provided that we do our research and draw the inferences that the available evidence permits. Historians who seek truth are more like

to come close to finding it than are relativists who insist that there is no such thing as truth.

The discipline of history ought to serve as a remedy for present-mindedness rather than as an excuse for having us in the twenty-first century impose our sensibilities on people and events of earlier centuries. Historians cannot avoid judging altogether, and they should not, but surely their first task is to attempt to understand the past rather than to impose on that past the favored nostrums of a later era. The Marxist or Freudian or Social Darwinist or multiculturalist or feminist or post-colonialist or deconstructionist cart ought not precede the evidentiary horse. The discipline of history can enable us to place the events of our own day—whether they be wars or hurricanes or supreme court decisions—in a context that makes them more understandable.

Let me sum up then:

(1) A good historian is a generalist who seeks to learn a little about a great many matters. In the process that historian learns to understand better both his own society and that of earlier centuries. History remains a lynchpin of any liberal arts education.

(2) Good historians develop and enhance, as a central skill, their powers of empathy.

(3) Good historians learn that there is a difference between truth and falsehood. Absolute truth may elude us and, like many trial juries, we may often have to rely on circumstantial evidence, but such evidence should suffice to enable us to distinguish conclusions that are more probable from those that are less probable.

(4) Good history adds that fourth dimension known as time to the often static models fashioned by social scientists. It is the enemy of the provincial, of the parochial, and of the over-simple. Good historians do not take a holiday from complexity.

All of these are virtues. All of these are honorable goals. All of these are values promoted by Phi Alpha Theta, and Phi Alpha Theta is an honor society that celebrates the discipline of history as an honorable activity and as an honorable profession. Why then ought we not look upon History as a Matter of Honor?