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Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts

The choice between the two seemed absurd but this was exactly what the debate about national history standards had become. “George Washington or Bart Simpson,” asked Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) during the 1995 Congressional debates on this subject: Which figure represents a “more important part of our Nation’s history for our children to study?”¹ To Gorton, the proposed national standards represented a frontal attack on American civilization, an “ideologically driven anti-Western monument to politically correct caricature.”² The Senate, in apparent agreement, rejected the standards 99-1.

The standards’ architects did not take this rejection lying down. Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn, the team largely responsible for collating the reports of many panels and committees, issued a 318-page rebuttal packed with refutations of Gorton, his chief sponsor, Lynne Cheney, then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and their various conservative allies—many of them op-ed columnists and radio talk show hosts. Gorton was right, Nash and his colleagues admitted, in claiming that no standard *explicitly* named George Washington as the first president. But this was a mere technicality. The standards asked students “to examine major issues confronting the young country during [Washington’s] presidency,” and there was more material on

Washington as the “father of our country” in the standards for grades K-4.³ To counter Cheney’s claim that Americans such as Robert E. Lee or the Wright Brothers were expunged because they had the misfortune of being dead, white, and male, Nash and colleagues added up the names of people fitting this description—more than 700 in all—and announced that this was “many times the grand total of all women, African-Americans, Latinos, and Indians individually named.”⁴

Similar exercises in tit for tat quickly became standard in the debate over standards. But just below the surface, name counts took on an uglier face: Each side felt it necessary to impute to the other the basest of motives. So, to Bob Dole, the Republican presidential candidate in 1996, the national standards were the handiwork of people “worse than external enemies.”⁵ To Nash’s team, critics of the proposed standards were driven by latent fears over a diverse America in which the “new faces [that] crowd[ed] onto the stage of history ruin the symmetry and security of older versions of the past.”⁶ In the barroom terms befitting such a brawl, those who wrote the standards were traitors; those who opposed them, racists.

The rancor of this debate was rich soil for dichotomous thinking. Take, for example, the forum organized by the journal *American Scholar*, the official publication of the national honorary society Phi Beta Kappa. *American Scholar* asked eleven prominent historians to write a thousand words in response to the question, “What history should our children learn?” Should children learn “the patriotism, heroism, and ideals of the nation” or “the injustices, defeats, and hypocrisies of its leaders and dominant classes”? In case panelists didn’t get the point, they were also asked whether the United States represented “one of the great historical success stories” or “the story of one opportunity after another lost”?⁷ Fortunately, sanity prevailed. Yale’s Edmund Morgan, author of the *Stamp Act Crisis* and thus no newcomer to the topic of propaganda, noted that any answer would necessarily “look more like slogans than any reasoned approach to history,” adding, wryly, that he didn’t need “a thousand words to say it.”⁸

Given the tenor of the debate, some might wonder why history was ever considered a part of the humanities, one of those disciplines that are supposed to teach us to spurn sloganeering, tolerate complexity, and cherish nuance. Writing at the turn of the century, Woodrow Wilson and other members of the Committee of Ten noted that history went well beyond particular stories and names to achieve its highest aim by

endowing us with “the invaluable mental power which we call judgment.”⁹ Sadly, the present debate has become so fixated on the question of “which history” that we have forgotten a more basic question: Why study history at all?

The answer to this neglected question is hardly self-evident. Americans have never been fully convinced of history’s place in the curriculum. History education may be riding a momentary crest of interest, but its roots do not run deep. Many states set minimal requirements for the study of history. Schools of education offer future teachers courses in the teaching of mathematics, the teaching of science, and the teaching of literature, but we would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of courses in the *entire* nation devoted to the teaching of history. History is getting a lot of airtime in national policy debates, but in the places that matter most—the schools where kids learn and the colleges where teachers are taught—history’s status is anything but secure.

In this chapter my focus is not on which history is better—that of the victors, the vanquished, or some Solomonic combination of both. Rather, I take several steps back from the current History Wars to ponder another question: What is history good for? Why even teach it in schools? My claim in a nutshell is that history holds the potential, only partly realized, of humanizing us in ways offered by few other areas in the school curriculum. I make no claim of originality in arguing this point of view. But each generation must ask itself anew why studying the past is important, and remind itself why history can bring us together rather than—as we have seen most recently—tear us apart.

The argument I make pivots on a tension that underlies every encounter with the past: the tension between the familiar and the strange, between feelings of proximity and feelings of distance in relation to the people we seek to understand. Neither of these extremes does justice to history’s complexity, and veering to one side or the other dulls history’s jagged edges and leaves us with cliché and caricature. Achieving mature historical thought depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity and distance from the past.

The pole of familiarity pulls most strongly. The familiar past entices us with the promise that we can locate our own place in the stream of time and solidify our identity in the present. By tying our own stories to those who have come before-us, the past becomes a useful resource in our everyday life, an endless storehouse of raw materials to be shaped

or bent to meet our present needs. Situating ourselves in time is a basic human need. Indeed, it is impossible to conceptualize life on the planet without doing so.

But in viewing the past as usable, something that speaks to us without intermediary or translation, we end up turning it into yet another commodity for instant consumption. We discard or just ignore vast regions of the past that either contradict our current needs or fail to align tidily with them. The usable past retains a certain fascination, but it is the fascination of the flea market, with its endless array of gaudy trinkets and antique baubles. Because we more or less know what we are looking for before we enter this past, our encounter is unlikely to change us or cause us to rethink who we are. The past becomes clay in our hands. We are not called upon to stretch our understanding to learn from the past. Instead, we contort the past to fit the predetermined meanings we have already assigned it.

The other pole in this tension, the strangeness of the past, offers the possibility of surprise and amazement, of encountering people, places, and times that spur us to reconsider how we conceptualize ourselves as human beings. An encounter with this past can be mind-expanding in the best sense of the term. Yet, taken to extremes, this approach carries its own problems. The past “on its own terms,” detached from the circumstances, concerns, and needs of the present, too often results in a kind of esoteric exoticism, precisely the impression one comes to after a tour through the monographic literature that defines contemporary historical practice. Much of this specialized literature may engage the attention of a small coterie of professionals, but it fails to engage the interest of anyone else.¹⁰

There is no easy way around the tension between the familiar past, which seems so relevant to our present needs, and the strange and inaccessible past, whose applicability is not immediately manifest. The tension exists because both aspects of history are essential and irreducible. On the one hand, we need to feel kinship with the people we study, for this is exactly what engages our interest and makes us feel connected. We come to see ourselves as inheritors of a tradition that provides mooring and security against the transience of the modern world.

But this is only half the story. To realize history’s humanizing qualities fully, to draw on history’s ability to, in the words of Carl Degler, “expand our conception and understanding of what it means to be human,”¹¹ we need to encounter the distant past—a past less distant

from us in time than in its modes of thought and social organization. It is this past, one that initially leaves us befuddled or, worse, just plain bored, that we need most if we are to achieve the understanding that each of us is more than the handful of labels ascribed to us at birth. The sustained encounter with this less-familiar past teaches us the limitations of our brief sojourn on the planet and allows us to take membership in the entire human race. Paradoxically, the relevance of the past may lie precisely in what strikes us as its initial irrelevance.

I approach these issues not as a historian, someone who spends time using documents to reconstruct the past, but as a psychologist, someone who designs tasks and interviews that shed light on how we come to know who we are. Similarly, my data are not found in archives but are created when I sit down to interview people from all walks of life—teachers, practicing historians, high school kids, and parents. In the following three vignettes, I offer glimpses from this program of research. The first comes from a high school student's encounter with primary documents from the Revolutionary War; the second, from an elementary school principal's reactions after reading the diary of a midwife from the turn of the nineteenth century; and the third, from a historian's encounter with documents that shed light on Abraham Lincoln's views on race.

In these vignettes, I try to show that historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement, I argue, actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think, one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to change the basic mental structures we use to grasp the meaning of the past. The odds of achieving mature historical understanding are stacked against us in a world in which Disney and MTV call the shots. But it is precisely the uses to which the past is put that endow these other aims with even greater importance.

THE UNBRIDGEABLE RUBICON

Let me begin with Derek, a seventeen-year-old Advanced Placement history student (and later the salutatorian of his senior class), who participated in one of my earliest studies. I remember Derek clearly because it was in working with him that the questions I take up here first came into view.¹²

Derek participated in a study in which high school students (as well as professional historians) read a series of primary sources about the Battle of Lexington. Derek read that British forces encountered the minutemen standing in their way on Lexington Green. He remarked on the unequal numbers of the combatants—something on the order of hundreds of British regulars opposed seventy or so colonists, according to the documents. He noted that when the encounter was over, eight colonists lay dead, while there was only one casualty on the British side. This suggested to him that the engagement might have been more one-sided than the term “battle” suggests. These were astute observations that reflected Derek’s keen intelligence and made him stand out among his peers. However, when asked to select the picture that best reflected the written evidence he had reviewed, Derek did not choose the one that showed the colonists in disarray, which would have been the logical choice given his earlier observations. Instead, he chose the picture that showed the colonists hiding behind walls, reloading their muskets, and taking aim at the Redcoats. Derek believed that this depiction was the most accurate because

it gives [the minutemen] sort of . . . an advantageous position, where they are sort of on a hill and I presume somewhere over here is a wall I guess. . . . The minutemen are going to be all scrambled, going to be hiding behind the poles and everything, rather than staying out here facing [the British]. . . . You know there’s got to be like a hill, and they’re thinking they got to hide behind something, get at a place where they can’t be shot besides being on low ground, and being ready to kill. Their mentalities would be ludicrous if they were going to stand, like, here in [the depiction showing the minutemen in disarray], ready to be shot.¹³

Judged by conventional definitions of what we want kids to do in history classrooms, Derek’s reading is exemplary. In the words of the Bradley Commission, the report that launched the current reform movement in history education, students should enter “into a world of drama—suspending [their] knowledge of the ending in order to gain a sense of another era—a sense of empathy that allows the student to see through the eyes of the people who were there.”¹⁴ Derek has not only tried to see through others’ eyes; he has attempted a reconstruction of their world views, their “*mentalités*.” However, Derek’s reconstruction holds true only if these people shared his own modern notions of battlefield propriety: the idea that in the face of a stronger adversary, you flee behind walls and wage guerrilla warfare. Derek’s reading poses a striking irony. What

seemed to guide his view of this event is a set of assumptions about how normal people behave. These assumptions, in turn, overshadowed his very own observations, made during the review of the written testimony. Ironically, what Derek perceived as natural was perceived as beastly by the Puritans when they first encountered this form of combat. By the sixteenth century, European warfare had evolved into a highly complex form of gentlemanly encounter: It was not unheard of for combatants to wage war during the day and dine together at night. Battlefield engagements conformed to an elaborate etiquette, in part the result of the cumbersome sequence of actions—up to forty-two separate steps—involved in firing and reloading a musket.¹⁵

The culture of large-scale warfare clashed with the mores of the indigenous peoples the Puritans encountered along the New England coast. Among the Pequots, for example, a military culture of symbolic acts prevailed. The norm was not face-to-face encounters with massive bloodshed, but small-scale raids that settled feuds by exacting symbolic tribute. This clash in traditions led to ruinous confrontations, as when the Puritans encircled the entire Indian village at the Mystic River in 1637 and burned it to the ground. Solomon Stoddard, writing to Joseph Dudley in 1703, explained:

If the Indians were as other people are, and did manage their warr fairly after the manner of other nations, it might be looked upon as inhumane to persue them in a manner contrary to Christian practice. . . . But they are to be looked upon as thieves and murderers. . . they don't appear openly in the field to bid us battle, they use those cruelty that fall into their hands. . . . They act like wolves and are to be dealt with as wolves.¹⁶

It is not that Derek was a careless reader. On the contrary, his reading was fluent, and his skill at monitoring his own cognition (what psychologists call “metacognition”) was enviable. But when all was said and done, Derek’s encounter with these eighteenth-century documents left him unfazed. The colonists’ behavior did not cause him to stand back and say, “Wow, what a strange group of people. What on earth would make them act this way?” Such a reaction might lead him to contemplate codes of behavior—duty, honor, dying for a cause—foreign to his world. These documents did not spur Derek to ask himself new questions or consider new dimensions of human experience. Instead, his existing beliefs shaped the information he encountered so that the new conformed to the shape of the already known. Derek read these documents but he learned little from them.

Derek's reading raises questions that lie at the heart of historical understanding. Given what we know about the entrenched nature of beliefs, how, exactly, do we bracket what we know in order to understand the thinking of people in the past? This is no easy task. The notion that we can strip ourselves of what we know, that we can stop the "spread of activation" set off when we read certain words, recalls Allan Megill's notion of hermeneutic naiveté, or the belief in "immaculate perception."¹⁷ Among philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer has been the most instructive about the problems this position entails. How can we overcome established modes of thought, Gadamer asks, when it is these modes that permit understanding in the first place?¹⁸ We, no less than the people we study, are historical beings. Trying to shed what we know in order to glimpse the "real" past is like trying to examine microbes with the naked eye: The instruments we abandon are the ones that enable us to see.

This position differs considerably from the classic historicist stance one finds in Robin Collingwood and others. For Collingwood, "all history is the history of thought," the ability of the historian to put him- or herself in Julius Caesar's mind, "envisioning . . . the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it."¹⁹ Collingwood believed that we can somehow "know Caesar" because human ways of thought, in some deep and essential way, transcend time and space.

Not so fast, say contemporary historians. Consider the words of Carlo Ginzburg, the eminent Italian historian and author of the best-selling *The Cheese and the Worms*:

The historian's task is just the opposite of what most of us were taught to believe. He must destroy our false sense of proximity to people of the past because they come from societies very different from our own. The more we discover about these people's mental universes, the more we should be shocked by the cultural distance that separates us from them.²⁰

Or these words from Robert Darnton, award-winning author of *The Great Cat Massacre*:

Other people are other. They do not think the way we do. And if we want to understand their way of thinking we should set out with the idea of capturing otherness. . . . We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock.²¹

Or these from Richard White, historian of the West:

Any good history begins in strangeness. The past should not be comfortable. The past should not be a familiar echo of the present, for if it is familiar why revisit it? The past should be so strange that you wonder how you and people you know and love could come from such a time.²²

In coming to understand how we differ from Caesar, can we ever “know” him in the way he knew himself or in the way contemporaries knew him? Even if we were convinced of the possibility, how would we know we had succeeded, short of appealing to necromancy? In other words, the point made by these contemporary historians seems to be the opposite of the one cited earlier—that the goal of historical understanding should be to “see through the eyes of the people who were there.” If Ginzburg and others are right, the goal of historical study should be to teach us what we *cannot* see, to acquaint us with the con-genital blurriness of our vision.

Even the notion that historical knowledge should serve as a bank of examples for contemplating present problems has come under challenge. The more we know about the past, claimed the philosopher of history Louis O. Mink, the more cautious we should be before drawing analogies to it. Historical knowledge in Mink’s view can sever our connection to the past, making us see ourselves as discontinuous with the people we study. John Locke, for example, is no longer our contemporary by virtue of his seemingly “modern” understanding of government and human motivation. Instead, our awareness of discontinuity with Locke forces us to reconcile two contradictory forces: intellectual proximity with the Locke of the *Second Treatise on Government* and intellectual estrangement from the anti-empiricist Locke, author of the rarely read *Essay on the Reasonableness of Christianity*. In studying the Locke who fits our image as well as the Locke who complicates it, we can come to know a more nuanced personality. Locke becomes more than a projection of our own views. “The new Locke,” writes Mink, “is accessible in his remoteness and strangeness; it is precisely his crotchety Calvinism which changes our understanding of all his views although it destroys the illusion that in political and philosophical discussion we are communing with Locke as with a contemporary.”²³ Put differently, when we think about Egyptian drawing and representation of perspective, we can no longer “assume that the Egyptians saw as we see, but could not draw as we can.”²⁴ Rather, we must consider the possibility that they drew differently because they *saw* differently, and that there is something about this way of seeing that is

irretrievably lost. Much as we try, then, we can never fully cross the Rubicon that flows between our mind and Caesar's.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

How willing are we to press this point? Exactly when in the flow of human experience does last month become strange, last year remote? Indeed, when pushed to its extreme, the consequence of thinking that there is no continuity with the past is as grave an error as thinking that the past directly mirrors the present. David Lowenthal reminds us that the past is a “foreign country.”²⁵ A foreign country, not a foreign planet. To replace naive historicism with a rigid sense of disconnection is to play mental musical chairs, to give up one reductionism only to adopt another.

Historical thinking requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off, and, second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past. It was precisely this paradox that drew me to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*, which narrates the story of Martha Ballard, a midwife who lived between 1735 and 1812. As Carl Degler wrote in his review of the book, Ulrich “unravels the fascinating life of a community that is so foreign, and yet so similar to our own.”²⁶

About the time I was reading this book, I was asked by a group of educators in Minnesota to develop a workshop on history as a “way of knowing,” something beyond the compendia of names and dates that history had become in the course of that state's affair with “outcome-based education.”²⁷ In the two days of this workshop, I chose to contrast learning history from books like Ulrich's with the approach most familiar to participants: learning history from history textbooks.

As vehicles for creating historical understanding, textbooks present intriguing challenges and create a set of problems all their own. Textbooks pivot on what Roland Barthes called the “referential illusion,” the notion that the way things are told is simply the way things were.²⁸ To achieve this illusion, textbooks exploit various linguistic conventions. First, textbooks eliminate “metadiscourse,” or the existence of places in the text where the author intrudes to indicate positionality and stance. **Metadiscourse is common in the writing historians do for one another, but it is edited out of the writing they do for schoolchildren.**²⁹ In addition, traces of how the text came to be are hidden or erased: Textbooks

rarely cite the documentary record; if primary material appears, it is typically set off in “sidebars” so as not to interfere with the main text. Finally, the textbook speaks in the omniscient third-person. No visible author confronts the reader; instead, a corporate author speaks from a position of transcendence, a position of knowing from on high.

I began the Minnesota seminar by giving the twenty-two participants a selection from Winthrop Jordan’s *The Americans*, a widely used U.S. history textbook for the eleventh grade.³⁰ In describing the colonial economy during roughly the same period as Ballard’s diary, Jordan focuses on “triangular trade,” the nexus of routes involved in the exchange of slaves, sugar cane, and rum between the colonies, the West Indies, and Africa. The story is organized under the boldfaced heading “The North Develops Commerce and Cities—Molasses and Rumbullion,” with women appearing in the story only in the section entitled “Family Farms.” The following paragraph about the role of women in economic life became, for the next two days, the touchstone against which we assayed our own developing understanding and the text that, in the final hours of the workshop, we attempted to rewrite.

Anyone who has ever lived on a family farm knows that such a life involves long hours and hard work for everyone. Children worked at least part time from the age when they could be shown how to shell peas, shuck corn, or fetch firewood. Women performed an unending round of tasks. They cooked in metal pots that were hung over the open fire place. They baked in a hollow compartment in the chimney that served as an oven. They spun rough cloth and sewed it into clothing for the family. They washed clothes and bedding in wooden tubs with soap they made themselves.³¹

After examining this passage and the surrounding narrative, we turned to Ulrich’s book. As a text for exploring historical thinking, this work offers multiple points of entry. Each chapter starts with several pages from Martha’s diary, with eighteenth-century spelling and grammatical conventions intact. Only after giving the reader a feeling for the kinds of evidence she reviewed does Ulrich go on to explore themes and trends that spring from Martha’s life. The following diary excerpt is representative of the kinds of materials participants studied:

November 15 6 At Mr Parkers. Mrs Holdman here.

Cloudy & Cold. Mrs Holdman here to have a gown made. Mrs Benjamin to have a Cloak Cut. Polly Rust after work. I was Calld to Mr Parkers aftern. Mr Ballard is better. . . .

17 F At ditoes & Mr Poores. Birth 47th a daughter. At Capt Meloys allso Rainy. I was called from Mr Parkers at 2 hour morn to Mr Poores.

Doct Page was Calld before my arival. I Extracted the Child, a dagt. He Chose to Close the Loin. I returnd home at 8 hour morning. Receivd 6/ as a reward. Mr Ballard & Ephm attend worship, Dolly & Sally aftern. Charls and John Coks supt here. I was calld to Capt meloys at 11 hour Evening. Raind. Birth Mr Poores daughter X X³²

Such excerpts formed one part of our inquiry. We also examined tables of delivery data compiled by Ulrich from Martha's diary, and compared these with statistics from Dr. James Farrington (1824-59), born a generation after Martha, when midwifery had fallen into disfavor and doctors had turned to bloodletting and the use of opium derivatives such as laudanum during delivery.³³ We puzzled over what seemed to be dramatic changes in how midwives were viewed, from the turn of the eighteenth century, when Martha stood beside doctors at an autopsy, to less than twenty years later, when a Harvard professor wrote that "we cannot instruct women as we do men in the science of medicine; we cannot carry them into the dissecting room . . . without destroying those moral qualities of character which are essential to the office" of midwife and woman.³⁴

From correcting and expanding the initial textbook account, we ventured on to question the rarely articulated assumptions that guide the writing of textbooks. Such assumptions were thrown into relief when we placed the textbook alongside Ulrich's narrative. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is present in the story she tells, sharing how she pieced together the labyrinthine social relationships of colonial New England from the haziest of references; how she immersed herself in the world of herbal medicine to decode cryptic allusions to traditional remedies; how, in order to understand the work of Martha's husband, Ephraim, she had to learn about the operation of sawmills in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As we dove deeper into Martha's world and work, we could not help thinking about the world and work of the historian. We marveled at the author's steely resolve in the face of the persistent question: "When will the book be finished?"³⁵ We found it impossible to learn about Martha Ballard without learning about Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. It helped that the historian made no attempt to hide. In fact, Ulrich placed herself squarely in the text, as, for example, when she described how other historians found Martha's diary "trivial and unimportant." That such a view could come from men writing in the nineteenth century was, perhaps, understandable, but when a feminist history written in the 1970s characterized the diary as "filled with trivia," it was too much for Ulrich.

It is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies. To extract the river crossing without noting the cold days spent "footing" stockings, to abstract the births without recording the long autumns spent winding quills, pickling meat, and sorting cabbages, is to destroy the sinews of this earnest, steady, gentle, and courageous record. . . . when [Martha] felt overwhelmed or enlivened by the very "trivia" the historians have dismissed, she said so, not in the soul-searching manner of a Puritan nor with the literary self-consciousness of a sentimentalist, but in a plain, matter-of-fact, and in the end unforgettable voice. For more than twenty-seven years, 9,965 days to be exact, she faithfully kept her record. . . . "And now this year is come to a close," she wrote on December 31, 1800, "and happy is it if we have made a wise improvement of the time." For her, living was to be measured in doing. Nothing was trivial.³⁶

This short excerpt bears witness to the profound changes in historical writing over the last half-century.³⁷ Historical narrative is no longer restricted to great acts of statecraft but now encompasses everyday acts like childbirth and the daily routines of ordinary people trying to make ends meet. While this passage reflects the influence of social history and feminism, it also highlights the new, more active role of the historian in narrating the past—something that distinguished Ulrich's writing from the textbook prose that participants knew best. Ulrich the storyteller is in the thick of her story, sharing her anger at previous historians' dismissal of Martha's diary, identifying with her protagonist's patience and resolve, showing sadness as Martha's life comes to an end. In revealing Martha Ballard the midwife, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich reveals herself. From the power of Ulrich's voice to the power of Martha's indomitable spirit, this excerpt, when read aloud, moved several participants to tears.

Colleen was one of them. An elementary school principal, Colleen had last studied history when she was a high school student. She signed up for the workshop because her school was moving toward an interdisciplinary curriculum and she wanted to understand how history might be combined with other subjects. At the start of the workshop, she admitted that she had a "bad memory," a statement of deficiency in the attribute she thought most important to historical study. But Colleen was surprised by the workshop's end. She was immediately drawn into these documents, identifying with Martha's endless cycle of work in and out of the home, and the competing demands of her roles as mother, career woman, wife, and community leader. The chance to work with original sources was new to Colleen,

and she found it invigorating. During the two days of the workshop, she was among the most vocal and passionate participants.

At the end of the second day, we asked participants to “rewrite history,” to take what they had learned and compose a narrative on the role of women in the economic life of colonial and post-Revolutionary America. We gave them the option of amending the selection from Jordan’s textbook or putting it aside and starting from scratch. Colleen chose to put it aside. She took pen in hand and wrote furiously, scribbling a few sentences, muttering under her breath about how angry she was at the textbook, crumpling up the paper, and starting again. She wrote without interruption for thirty-five minutes.

You might predict that Colleen’s essay would bear the traces of this passion, giving voice to the range of emotions—from identification and recognition to anger and resentment—that she felt as she worked through the documents. But this was not the case. Colleen’s detached writing trudged along like the textbook prose she sought to banish. Narrated in the third person, Colleen’s account strove for objectivity, or, as she put it later, to “keep my emotions out of it.” Nowhere in her two-page history does the word “I” appear. Absent are indications of emphasis, judgment, and doubt. To be sure, the content had shifted. From Colleen we learn that women like Martha Ballard contributed to the colonial economy as midwives, by engaging in small-scale textile production, by raising poultry, and by myriad other activities. The facts may have changed, but the epistemological stance of the text remained firmly intact.

Like Derek before her, Colleen faced a conflict between two spheres of experience: her immediate experience in reading these texts and her prior experiences, especially her memories from high school. Her frustration boiled over when she put pen to paper and could not find a way of resolving the belief that history had slighted her as a woman and the belief that when writing history one should be cool, dispassionate, scientific, objective. In rewriting history Colleen confronted herself, but rather than engage this self and make it a part of her story, she interpreted her job as one of self-effacement—removing from the story her passion, her anger, and even her own experience as a mother. As a result Colleen was nowhere to be found in her creation.

Unrestrained, passion distorts the story we seek to tell. The balancing of perspectives requires us to step back and see things in other ways, an exceedingly difficult thing to do when anger sears our gut. But Colleen went to the other extreme. Rather than compensating for her

subjectivity by sharing it with her reader, she tried to construct a story without a teller—to deal with her deep feelings by pretending that they did not exist. In the end, Martha Ballard, a person brought to life in the primary documents, returned to a still life in the document Colleen herself composed.

Ironically, then, Colleen's text bore a greater resemblance to Jordan's *The Americans* than to Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*. The textbook and all that it symbolized became for Colleen, and other workshop participants, not *one* way of transmitting the story of the past, but the *only* way.

THE WEAVING OF CONTEXT

How do we navigate the tension between the familiar and the strange? How do we embrace what we share with the past but remain open to aspects that might startle us into reconsidering what it means to be human? The distant past—the burial practices of ancient Egypt, the medical practices of the Middle Ages, the hanging of witches in Salem: These jar us with their strangeness. But what about the more recent past, a time like ours with televisions, radios, cars, and planes, a time that looks superficially like the present except for old-fashioned clothes and hairstyles? How do we approach this past so that it emerges as something more than a faded version of the present?

These questions came into focus when I visited a Seattle high school to observe a class that had watched the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize." On the day I arrived, students had seen the segment in which Governor Ross Barnett physically bars James Meredith from registering at Ole Miss. In the ensuing discussion, the teacher asked students why Barnett objected to Meredith's enrollment. One boy raised his hand and volunteered, "Prejudice." The teacher nodded and the discussion moved on.

That simple "prejudice" unsettled me. Four hundred years of racial history reduced to a one-word response?³⁸ This set me to wondering what would it take before we begin to think historically about such concepts as "prejudice," "racism," "tolerance," "fairness," and "equity." At what point do we come to see these abstractions not as transcendent truths soaring above time and place, but as patterns of thought that take root in particular historical moments, develop, grow, and emerge in new forms in successive generations while still bearing traces of their former selves?³⁹ If Ross Barnett's problem was that he was "prejudiced," how would these students and their teachers regard Abraham Lincoln,

variously dubbed the “Great .Emancipator” or “White Supremacist” depending on social fashion and current need?⁴⁰

To study this question, I put together a series of documents that combined the words of Abraham Lincoln with the voices of some of his contemporaries: Stephen Douglas, Lincoln’s opponent for the 1858 Senate seat from Illinois; John Bell Robinson and John Van Evrie, religious racialists who looked to the Bible for justification of slavery; and William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who worked tirelessly for emancipation.⁴¹ In the same document set I included three documents by Lincoln, each reflecting a different situation in his life: the keen observer traveling up the Mississippi in 1841 and seeing slaves chained together “like so many fish upon a trot-line”; the candidate, debating Stephen Douglas before a largely pro-Douglas crowd in Ottawa, Illinois; and the beleaguered, war-weary president, addressing a group of freed slaves in 1862 about the possibility of founding a freedmen’s colony in Central America.

I presented these documents to a group of college history majors and nonmajors, all of whom were enrolled in a fifth-year program to become public school teachers. I asked them to read through these documents and tell me what light they shed on Lincoln’s thought. Although there was great variety in participants’ responses, two broad trends stood out. One group took Lincoln’s words at face value. They saw these words as offering a direct window into Lincoln’s mind, unobstructed by either the particular circumstances in which they were uttered or the passage of time between 1860 and today. Lincoln was a racist, pure and simple. Other, more careful, readers recognized that they needed a context for these words. But rather than fashioning a context from the raw materials provided by these documents, they borrowed a context from their contemporary social world.

Faced with seeming incongruities in Lincoln’s position, we have at hand an array of contemporary social forms and institutions—press conferences, spin doctors, response dials—which allow us instantly to harmonize discrepant information. Even if we recognize the vast technological changes in the political process between 1860 and today, we often perceive a unity in ways of thinking that span the breach of time. In many readings by college students, Lincoln and Douglas become our contemporaries in top hats, much like characters from a James Michener novel who happen to dress funny but whose behavior and mannerisms are those of our next-door neighbors.

In other words, “presentism”—the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present—is not some bad habit we’ve fallen into. It is, instead, our psychological condition at rest, a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally. If Lincoln seems to be saying two different things, it is because he is speaking to two different audiences, for in our world we know exactly why George W. Bush says one thing to Kansas wheat farmers and another to New York City stockbrokers. In resolving contradictions in Lincoln’s words, we turn him into one of us: His goal is to get elected, and he has spin doctors to help.⁴²

I broadened my study by asking several working historians to read these same documents. Some of them knew a great deal about Lincoln and had written books about him; others knew little more than what was required to give a few lectures in an undergraduate survey course.⁴³ Bob Alston, a middle-aged Caucasian Americanist, fit into the latter group. Like most members of his department, he taught undergraduate survey courses spanning all of American history, but the majority of his upper-level and graduate courses were in a different specialization. During graduate school, he had taken examinations that covered the Civil War but had not studied this period extensively since then.

Alston did not have an easy time, and in the beginning his reading is virtually indistinguishable from those of the stronger college students. From Document 1, Douglas’s opening statement at Ottawa, Alston stared his lack of knowledge in the face:

I don’t know as much about Lincoln’s views as I thought I did. I mean, as I read it and see Douglas perhaps putting words in Lincoln’s mouth, I’m not quite sure about what I do and don’t know about Lincoln. Douglas makes it sound as if Lincoln believes they’re equal, blacks and whites, on virtually every level but I don’t know to what extent Lincoln did or did not believe that. I know that he was very practically aware of the concerns of bringing them together as if they were equal in the same society at this point, but I don’t know enough about Lincoln’s views to make some other judgments I’ve been making.

In the second document, Lincoln’s rebuttal of Douglas, Lincoln states that he has “no purpose to introduce political and social equality” between the races. At this point Alston paused: “Just rereading the sentence again. Again trying to think about how Douglas’s statement about Lincoln thinking the two were equal could have some truth if it falls outside the realm of what Lincoln identifies as political and social equality.” Seven lines later, Alston stopped again: “I’m going back and rereading the

sentence. These nineteenth-century orators spoke in more complicated sentences. They weren't used to sound bites. I'm wondering what he means by 'physical difference':

If blacks have the "natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" one would assume that liberty and pursuit of happiness would indicate that they cannot be slaves at the same time. Similarly, if blacks have the "right to eat the bread which his own hand earns," that they have the right to the product of their labor, that is the pursuit of happiness or liberty, one form or the other, then if that is a natural right then slavery goes against those natural rights.

When the college students reached this point, they tended to locate this contradiction in Lincoln or created multiple Lincolns who said different things to different people. But Alston responded by calling attention to the contradiction, not dissolving it. Over the next five documents, his reading was a prolonged exercise in the "specification of ignorance." He asked, on average, 4.2 questions per document, and underscored what he did not know with markers such as "I don't have enough to go on" or "This makes no sense to me" a total of fourteen times. Only at the end of the task did Alston come up with something resembling an interpretation. It came in response to the passage in which John Bell Robinson appeals to God as providing a sanction for slavery. At this point Alston made the following comment (asterisks indicate places in the reading where he flipped back to previous documents):

Lincoln . . . talks about Blacks being endowed with certain things from God, but "usefulness as slaves" or a status of slaves isn't one of the things that he mentions. [I'm going to] look at some of the earlier [documents]. What I'm looking for is his discussion [of] the physical difference between the two and his discussion of natural rights [to] see if he links those at all to God.* It was Douglas* who linked Lincoln to believe about the Negro to God and the Declaration of Independence. But in this,*in Lincoln's reply, he refers—I'm looking here for reference to God—I'm not finding it but I haven't finished yet, he refers to the Declaration of Independence. But in the letter to Mary Speed* he did say "how true it is that God renders the worst of human conditions tolerable." But God didn't render slavery a condition that Blacks ought to find themselves in, according to Lincoln. Lincoln keeps going out of it in these things, he talks about the Declaration of Independence,* he talks about natural rights—I'm not sure where these come from in his mind—and he talks about natural differences. But he does not bring God into it other than to say that God makes, God allows people to make the worst of human conditions tolerable.* And that's a form of mercy, not of any kind of restriction on their status or behavior. What I thought—Douglas* has accused Lincoln of saying that Blacks had equal rights from the

Declaration of Independence and God. Lincoln didn't say that in these things. [He didn't say] anything about God, just the Declaration of Independence* and natural rights, wherever those come from.

This is a dense excerpt that itself merits interpretation. John Bell Robinson's reference to God sparked confusion and sent Alston back to Lincoln's response to Douglas. There, he searched for Lincoln's invocation of God. Finding only a reference to the Declaration of Independence, the historian returned to Douglas's opening statement. He then jumped to the letter by Mary Speed, written in 1841, where the word "God" is found but with very different connotations from Robinson's invocation. From the Speed letter Alston went back to the second document, Lincoln's response to Douglas, for another look at the reference to the Declaration of Independence and "natural rights."

In the course of this zigzagging comment, Alston referred to the previous documents eight times. He learned that whereas Robinson appeals to God to justify slavery as an institution appropriate for a lower form of manhood, Lincoln appeals to God to connect the races in common humanity. Through this intertextual weave, Alston learned that Lincoln justifies the equality of Africans, not by appealing to God, but by appealing to "natural rights," a view of Lincoln that comes remarkably close to Richard Weaver's "argument by definition" interpretation.⁴⁴ Although Alston started the task confused and full of questions, he ended up with a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Lincoln's position.

What Alston did here is misrepresented by notions of "placing" or "putting" Lincoln into context, verbs that conjure up images of jigsaw puzzles in which pieces are slotted into pre-existing frames. Contexts are neither "found" nor "located," and words are not "put" into context. Context, from the Latin *contexere*, means to weave together, to engage in an active process of connecting things in a pattern. Alston made something new here, something that did not exist before he engaged these documents and confronted his ignorance.

The questions Alston asked are the tools of creation, dwelling in the space between his present knowledge and the circumstances of the past. Alston is an expert, to be sure, but not in the sense in which that term is typically used. His expertise lay not in his sweeping knowledge of this topic but in his ability to pick himself up after a tumble, to get a fix on what he does not know, and to generate a road map to guide his new learning. He was an expert at cultivating puzzlement. It was Alston's ability to stand back from first impressions, to question his quick leaps

of mind, and to keep track of his questions that together pointed him in the direction of new learning. Such an approach requires skill, technique, and a great deal of know-how. But mature historical cognition is more: It is an act that engages the heart.

So, for example, when Alston encountered the phrase “we have men . . . capable of thinking as White men,” uttered by Lincoln in his address to the freed slaves, he was not only confused by the language but also visibly shaken by it. But rather than resolving his discomfort by concluding that Lincoln was a racist, Alston sat with this discomfort over the course of several documents. When he said, shaking his head, “I don’t know what Lincoln is saying,” he did not mean that he was confused by the words on the page, but something much larger: that he was confused by the world conjured up by these words, a world in which one human being could go to the market to buy others. What could Lincoln’s words mean in *that* world?⁴⁵ And what did he as a modern historian not know that prevented him from fully entering Lincoln’s world?

Alston’s reading shows a humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of the species. It grants people in the past the benefit of the doubt by casting doubt on our ability to know them as easily as we know ourselves. This does not mean that we cannot judge the past—we cannot help making judgments. But it does mean that we must not rush to judgment. Other readers used these documents to confirm their prior beliefs. They encountered the past here and labeled it. Alston encountered the past and learned from it.

A UNICORN OR A RHINOCEROS?

Several years ago I went to see *Schindler’s List*. I had long been acquainted with Steven Spielberg’s oeuvre—what parent isn’t?—so I was wary. I was drawn into the movie immediately, but what stays with me years later is what happened after the final credits rolled. I watched the man in front of me turn to his wife and say, “I never understood what happened then until now, right now. Now, I know.”

I don’t want to read too much into this comment, other than to note that it was a fragment of the present, shot on location in Kraków, that gave birth to this man’s understanding. As I sat in the theater, my thoughts settled on the puzzle of understanding set by the Italian chemist Primo Levi, whose writings on the Holocaust, lyrical and haunting,

always offer insight. “Among the questions that are put to us,” wrote Levi, “one question is never absent; indeed, as the years go by, it is formulated with ever increasing persistence and with an ever less hidden accent of accusation.”⁴⁶ The question Levi refers to actually has three parts:

1. Why did you not escape?
2. Why did you not rebel?
3. Why did you not evade capture before they “got to you”?

Levi describes what happened when he spoke to a group of fifth graders in an elementary school:

An alert-looking boy, apparently at the head of the class, asked me the obligatory question: “But how come you didn’t escape?” I briefly explained to him what I have written here. Not quite convinced, he asked me to draw a sketch of the camp on the blackboard indicating the location of the watch towers, the gates, the barbed wire, and the power station. I did my best, watched by thirty pairs of intent eyes. My interlocutor studied the drawing for a few instants, asked me for a few further clarifications, then he presented to me the plan he had worked out: here, at night, cut the throat of the sentinel; then, put on his clothes; immediately after this, run over there to the power station and cut off the electricity, so the searchlights would go out and the high tension fence would be deactivated; after that I could leave without any trouble. He added seriously: “If it should happen to you again, do as I told you. You’ll see that you’ll be able to do it.”⁴⁷

This boy did everything we want from our students. He engaged with the subject matter, he drew on his background knowledge, he formulated questions and offered solutions. Lest we attribute the boy’s question to his tender age, we should bear in mind that these same questions have been posed by people far older and far more knowledgeable. For this boy, as for many of us, Levi’s experience inspires incredulity: This youngster cannot believe that so many could miss what is, in his mind, so very plain.

In his response, Primo Levi echoes one of the central themes that I have explored here: the seductiveness of coming to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of our “lived experience.” But for Levi the problem is broader than one of historical knowing. Our “inability to perceive the experience of others,” as he put it, applies to the present no less than the past.⁴⁸ This is why the study of history is so crucial to our present day and age, when issues of diversity dominate the national agenda. Coming to know others, whether they live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium, requires the education of

our sensibilities. This is what history, when taught well, gives us practice in doing. Paradoxically, what allows us to come to know others is our distrust in our capacity to know them, a skepticism about the extraordinary sense-making abilities that allow us to construct the world around us.

A skepticism toward the products of mind can sometimes slide into cynicism or solipsism. But this need not be the case. The awareness that the contradictions we see in others may tell us more about ourselves is the seed of intellectual charity. It is an understanding that counters narcissism. For the narcissist sees the world—both the past and the present—in his own image. Mature historical knowing teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born. History educates (“leads outward” in the Latin) in the deepest sense. **Of the subjects in the secular curriculum, it is the best at teaching those virtues once reserved for theology—humility in the face of our limited ability to know, and awe in the face of the expanse of human history.**

On his journey from China to India, the Venetian traveler Marco Polo ventured into Basman, believed to be Sumatra, where he chanced upon a species he had never before seen: the rhinoceros. But Polo did not see it that way. As his diary records, he saw instead

unicorns, which are scarcely smaller than elephants. They have the hair of a buffalo . . . [and] a single large, black horn in the middle of the forehead. They do not attack with their horn, but only with their tongue and their knees; for their tongues are furnished with long, sharp spines. . . . They are very ugly brutes to look at . . . not at all such as we describe them when . . . they let themselves be captured by virgins.⁴⁹

Our encounter with history presents us with a choice: to learn about rhinoceroses or to learn about unicorns. We naturally incline toward unicorns—they are prettier and more tame. But it is the rhinoceros that can teach us far more than we could ever imagine.

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