Practically Human
College Professors Speak from the Heart of Humanities Education

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Editors
Who Wants to Live in the “Real” World?

William Katerberg, History

Lexington, Massachusetts. April 1775.

Some seventy colonists face seven hundred soldiers in a skirmish that will start the American Revolution. The inexperienced rebels show courage as they line up on the commons to face the better-trained and much larger force. But when a shot rings out and the British regulars start firing, the rebel militia is quickly scattered, and the regulars march on to Concord, where, later that day, “the shot heard round the world” will be fired.

In an experiment, education professor Sam Wineburg had students and teachers read textbook accounts of the battle and examine primary records from the time. He was interested in how people think about the past. Professor Wineburg gave two drawings of the battle to Derek, one of the students in his experiment. He asked Derek to decide which drawing best fit with what the textbook and records revealed. One showed the colonists scattering, which fit with what Derek had read. But Derek picked the other drawing, which showed the colonists hiding behind trees, reloading their muskets and firing at the regulars. It would
be crazy for them to stand out in the open and get shot, Derek explained to Wineburg.¹

Derek’s reasoning was logical, Wineburg observes, but wrong. Derek assumed that the colonists would fight as he would fight, as soldiers trained today would fight against superior forces. He didn’t see what the records were telling him: the colonists stood in a line, out in the open, and were routed by the larger force of British regulars. He couldn’t imagine them doing that. He didn’t think to investigate the military practices of that time. Instead, he read the records of the battle, which seemed strange from his viewpoint, and revised them into something that made sense to him.

The example of Derek suggests that historical thinking is unnatural. It goes against the grain of how we think and act in our daily lives, where we assume that people—“normal” people, anyway—are pretty much like us. This is especially true when we think of our own nation or religious tradition. When we encounter people who seem strange, it’s easy for us to dismiss them as stupid, crazy, or evil. Sometimes we cannot see how different people in the past were, so blinded are we by our own contemporary eyes. Understanding the past requires us to see both what is close to how we experience the world and what looks foreign and distant.

In one of my classes I have students read a book about the American family. It starts with families in the 1600s—Native American, Puritan, slave—and carries the story into our time.² The book shows how different families today are from those in the past: the function of the family in the community, the responsibilities of children, the roles of women and men, the place of the family within the structures of society. This study argues that the growth of individualism in American society in the 1800s and 1900s transformed families, particularly giving new opportunities to women as
they gained legal equality and freedom. Families clearly are not eternally the same. They vary in significant ways from society to society, and they change over time. Not surprisingly, some people think changes in American family life have been good; others think they have been damaging.

As part of a writing assignment, I ask students to discuss whether they’d prefer to live as families did in the past, when the roles of women and men were more strictly defined, or as people do in the present, when individualism has made roles more interchangeable and fluid. Which would you choose? Most of my students choose present-day family life, but some choose the past. (As you might expect, more male students than female choose the past, when men had more power and women faced many constraints.) I ask students who say they’d prefer to live as families lived in the past whether they’ve thought about the fact that colleges had no female students. As women, they would not be here; as men, they’d have no women in their classes or on campus. Usually, none of them have thought about this. They know, intellectually, that as children they would be considered part of the family’s workforce. They understand that as women they would have limited property rights and no voting rights. But they do not understand that the separate roles of women and men would mean that marriage relations would be far more formal than the easy give-and-take between the sexes to which they are accustomed. They do not realize how this profoundly different way of life would affect them and take away many things that they take for granted—such as women going to college and being able to choose a “traditional” women’s role. Such things would no longer be choices but imposed. Students miss the fact that families in the 1600s should look strange to them, that their own lives would look to strange to people from the 1600s,
and that something so basic to human existence as family life has changed significantly over four hundred years.

But so what? What good is training yourself to think historically? Why spend time in college learning to do it? I can give you lots of reasons: It will make you smarter, make you more money, and make you a better citizen. You might even enjoy doing it. But the most important reason is this: learning to put “reality” into question, to not take the world for granted, to understand that “reality” changes and that it can be changed—these are some of the most practical and hopeful things that you can discover. Let’s start with the money.

A Desired Commodity for Industry

You can indeed make good money with a humanities degree. I have friends who studied history, as I did, but aren’t teachers. They include business owners, speech writers for politicians, government bureaucrats, lawyers, pastors, and chefs.

My most financially-successful friend got a PhD in US history and wrote a book about the Vietnam War, but decided she didn’t want to teach. She went into the business world instead and now works for a head-hunting firm. When big companies like GM or Ford, or large charities like the Red Cross need a new CEO, they hire a head-hunting firm. The firm does research on the organization—how it operates, its problems, its goals for the future. After helping the organization figure out what it needs, my friend helps her client find the right person for the job. Most of the people at my friend’s head-hunting firm have degrees in business. Her bosses found that she did the job differently. She noticed things and had ideas that her colleagues with MBAs missed. She was trained to think as a historian, not
as a typical businessperson, and she brought that perspective to her job. She quickly climbed the corporate ladder and became a partner in her firm. She finds her job intellectually stimulating and rewarding, makes lots of money, and has no regrets about studying history.

Need more convincing? Recently it was reported that tech firms like Google are hiring people with degrees in disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and history. “You go into the humanities to pursue your intellectual passion,” explains Damon Horowitz, “and it just so happens, as a by-product, that you emerge as a desired commodity for industry. Such is the halo of human flourishing.”

Horowitz is director of engineering for Google, specializing in artificial intelligence (AI) research; he is one of the company’s “in-house philosophers.” AI work was getting nowhere, he found, producing clever computers but nothing like human consciousness. This raised questions about what it means to be human. Horowitz thought he might better understand how to pursue AI—and make gobs of money for Google and himself—if he and other engineers and marketers at Google started to do some philosophizing about what it means to be human.

These companies have started hiring graduates trained in the humanities, thousands and thousands of them.

So there you have it. Become a desired commodity for industry and flourish as a person. But there’s more.

They Weren’t So Stupid . . . and Neither Are You

It’s easy for us to view people in the past as barbaric because of what they believed or how they lived. Perhaps some were. Perhaps we are. We should remember that many aspects of our lives will appear monstrous from the viewpoint of
people looking back at us a century from now. Think about it. What do you believe or do that people in the future will judge bizarre or immoral? Will it be the way we accept high concussion rates among football and hockey players because we like violent sports? The way we sexualize all aspects of life and put them on display on television? The inequalities gay and lesbian people face? Our worship of wealth? The way we use up resources, pile on debt, and produce pollution like there’s no tomorrow? These things are commonplace today. How will future societies judge us on these matters? It might be none of these things—issues that we debate and fight over today, depending on our politics, values, and tastes. But that’s the point. It’s hard for us to envision a society so different from our own, including our own society in the future, that we can’t imagine how people then will view many aspects of life that seem normal and unremarkable for us. (Now you’re starting to think historically, about yourself and your own society.)

Another goal of historical thinking is to understand people on their own terms. This does not require us to accept earlier thinking about how life should be lived as good or true, but simply to set aside, temporarily, our own ways and expectations so that we might try to think and feel our way into theirs. Take an extreme example. How did it come to seem normal and morally proper in some parts of Indian society to practice sati, the ritual burning of many of a prominent man’s possessions when he died—including his wife? In early nineteenth-century India sati was not widespread, but each year dozens of women chose, or were forced, to immolate themselves. Here’s an example that may be closer to home: imagine what it would be like to live in a society in which children start to work like adults at the age of ten or twelve, as was true in America and in Europe.
well into the 1800s (and is still true today in some parts of the world).

But what is the value of learning to see differences in how people from other societies or cultures understand the world from their point of view, not your own, and to resist judging them as stupid, insane, or evil? What is the use of understanding that people from other traditions might see us as barbaric?

Think of it as the “long route” to the self. None of us becomes who we on our own, solely by looking inside and finding ourselves. We become who we are through our encounters with other people, experiencing how they are different; in those encounters, we recognize things about ourselves. Sometimes we imitate others, learning from them and adapting their ways. Other times we reject things about them and cultivate in ourselves different sensibilities and practices. Some of this is conscious, but most of it happens without us even noticing what we’re doing or thinking. This is true not just of our relationships with our parents, sisters and brothers, relatives, and friends; it is true also of our encounters with strangers—people from different cultural traditions or nations—whether we meet them on TV, as a family that moves in next door, as classmates at university, or as tourists. This adaptation is true not only of day-to-day things like clothing, food, and social customs, but also of the values we hold about things like politics, religious practices, and family life. Other people and their ways play a vital role in shaping who we are; we, in turn, shape them.

We experience something similar when we study the past. We don’t encounter people in written records in the same direct way as we do people in daily life, but we can learn about how they lived and viewed the world. We can read their letters, diaries, novels, poetry, legal documents,
business records, and spiritual writings. This is true about people from our own past (say, American and Christian) or from the past in other societies and traditions (say, Iranian and Muslim).

When we study the past in this way, we learn that life and people have been different. Other subjects within the humanities explore differences between societies and traditions too (literature, religious studies, cultural anthropology), but history especially shows how ways of life in a society—such as how families work—can change dramatically. These changes can be for good or ill. But things do change.

Understanding that this is true of both others and ourselves—that we should not dismiss people who are different and that they shouldn’t dismiss us—has a humanizing effect and teaches humility. It’s a way of following the command in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to love our neighbors as ourselves. By learning to see both the strange and the familiar in our neighbors, both those next door and those around the world, and by remembering that they similarly find us strange, we learn to see others as human and not as enemies or monsters. We also come understand our own humanity better, learning to see ourselves as strange rather than familiar. The humanities teach us the habits of this kind of seeing.

The Hope of the Past

People sometimes say to those who have ideas they think impractical, “You need to deal with the real world.” People usually mean well when they say this. They’re half right. As individuals, we cannot always change how the world works. Neither is it helpful to respond with cynicism or to rebel in self-destructive ways. We need to adapt to the society
around us in ways that are practical and don’t compromise us morally so that perhaps we can change some small things about our circumstances.

In the long run, though, this advice is limiting. Learning the habit of realism is dangerous. It can lead to complacency or despair—so that we never try to change things—or it can lead us to assume that our way of life is as good as it gets. And as we’ve seen, for good or for ill, things do change. It’s not just that there are differences between societies; societies themselves change over time.

White American Christians once thought that non-white people and women were essentially different from white men and women—naturally and biologically different—and shouldn’t have the same rights. They owned black people and felt free to rape them, sell them, and separate parents and children. Slaves had a legal status little different from animals. A century ago in parts of the United States, it was publicly acceptable to lynch a black man on the simple accusation of a white person—beating, hanging, shooting, even castrating a black man, burning his body while crowds watched and photographers took postcard pictures of the corpse. The church-going people and government officials who participated in these events believed that the social order that justified lynching was ordained by God. But in 2008 the United States elected an African American president.

Things change, basic things. A century and a half ago, women were barred from most universities and professions. Today there are more women in US colleges and universities than men. Racism and sexism have not disappeared, nor has civil violence. But although many people once considered it natural, legal, and morally right to discriminate
against people of color and women, few would argue that point today.

Thus, one of the most useful things that studying history can impart is hope. This might sound strange, especially if your history teacher is a cynic who only points out the awful things in history. But hope depends on the possibility that life can change, especially for people who suffer from oppression or inequality, or the terrors of war, poverty, disease, or natural disaster. History makes no promise that things will get better; sometimes, things will get worse. But those who say that life is what it is and insist that we should accept reality as it is are ignoring what history teaches. They are choosing to accept the status quo for what it is, for practical reasons, because they’ve lost hope that things can be different, or because they benefit from the status quo. But things do change, and not just small things.

This insight isn’t unique to historical study, but it is an insight that has encouraged those who recognize the influence that the past has on us. Therapists help people with emotional difficulties, often from traumas in the past, to deal with their problems and change so they can live in more fulfilling ways in the future. Christian activists like Martin Luther King Jr. believed that God is working in history and that God’s people are partners in the story of God’s kingdom. Memories of God’s faithfulness in their own history, echoing stories of the exodus and the promised land in the Bible, gave civil rights activists hope, spurring their resistance against the segregated society in which they lived. During the 1960s, when civil rights workers were imprisoned and beaten, when equality for African Americans seemed far away, the hope that things can change, sometimes for the better, remained alive. It’s not a liberal or a
conservative lesson, or unique to the civil rights movement, but one understood by activists of every stripe.

**History for Life**

“I want to show how different the past was,” Natalie Zemon Davis said when asked why she was a historian. “I want to show that even when times were hard, people found ways to cope . . . and maybe resist it. I want people today to be able to connect with the past by looking at the tragedies and the sufferings of the past, the cruelties and the hatefulness, the hope of the past, the love the people had, and the beating that they had. They sought for power over each other, but they helped each other, too. They did things both out of love and fear . . . Especially I want to show that it could be different, that it was different, and that there are alternatives.”

Reality changes, and we shape that process for good or for ill as individuals and societies. This knowledge is a key component of hope and should spur us to action. Studying the humanities and cultivating a critical yet hopeful questioning of reality is a viable road to the good life in all its forms, from riches to a better understanding of oneself and others. It’s part of “the halo of human flourishing,” as Google’s philosopher-programmer Damon Horowitz put it.

But what does human flourishing amount to? Can you find the answer in a Google search? That flourishing includes the potential for interesting and even lucrative jobs in a variety of fields, including working for Horowitz and making Google search algorithms sing. But the humanities also give us the skills and inclination to go deeper than a Google search. For example, they encourage us to take a close look at Google itself. Should we admire it for its commitment to delivering many of the classic texts of celebrated
thinkers and writers for free online—from Aristotle and St. Augustine to Karl Marx, Mary Shelley, and Mark Twain? Or should we be wary of its commercial motives, as every search leads to an opportunity to shop?

If there is one genuine lesson, one piece of wisdom, that historical thinking and the humanities impart, it is this: do not be complacent.

How much more practical can it get?

Notes


