

An encounter with the power of history

The author explains why he wrote this book.

I'm growing old now. Like you, I always knew it would happen—on an intellectual level at least. But on an emotional level, I never really believed it. Not sure that I do yet. It's a funny thing how emotion can trump reason. I discussed this idea one day with Molly*, a bright young professor I met when I returned to college to obtain my teaching license.

Molly argued that reason was the greater force in history, while I held out for emotion. We came from different backgrounds that represented opposite poles along the reason-to-emotion continuum: Molly had earned a PhD in history, and I had been in a war. She went off to teach history at an Ivy League university, and I went off to teach history in a small working-class community in southwest Colorado.

It was the war that got me interested in history. Like other teenage boys in the late 1960s, I was plucked from my hometown, issued a new wardrobe, and sent on an all-expenses paid trip to Southeast Asia courtesy of Uncle Sam. I didn't have a clue what a kid from Ohio was doing on the other side of the world, living in a hole in the ground and carrying a fully automatic weapon. That's when I started reading history, the history of America's involvement in Vietnam.

I read about the chain of events that led from the French colonial occupation of Indochina to me hunkered down on a hilltop somewhere east of Laos eating my C rations. And I learned about something else from reading the history of Vietnam: I learned about a thousand-year-long

*Name changed for privacy.

pattern of tenacious Vietnamese resistance to foreign invaders, who included the Chinese, the Mongols, the French, the Japanese, and now the Americans.

Learning this history was almost like a religious experience; it removed the scales from my eyes. It reminds me now of the words of the former slave ship captain who wrote “Amazing Grace”—I once was blind, but now I see. I could see that history was available for the taking, and it possessed an awesome power to enlighten. I was now in a position to think my own thoughts and reach my own judgments about the war in Vietnam, and I concluded that the American war effort was no more likely to succeed than previous invasions of Vietnam. As it turned out, history proved me right.

This wasn’t the first time that I had experienced an emotional response to learning some history. The first time was when I was maybe five or six years old, and I gained a primitive understanding of the concept of historical chronology. One day it occurred to me that knights must have come before George Washington, and he must have come before cowboys. The past wasn’t just a jumble of events, after all—it followed a sequential pattern; it could be *intelligible*.

The sense of empowerment I felt at that moment was not unlike the feeling I experienced years later upon learning about the history of Vietnam. In both cases, I felt as though I had acquired important insights into how the world works.

I don’t know how common it is for people to get excited like this about learning a little history, but I’m pretty sure millions have shared with me a very different emotional response to historical learning. Return with me now to those less-than-thrilling days of yesteryear when I was a student in junior high school, seated at my desk on a warm spring afternoon. Sunshine and freedom are beckoning from just beyond the open classroom window when all of a sudden the teacher utters those five dreaded words: “Take out your history books.”

Instantly, my world goes dark and shrinks to the size of a shriveled-up pea. “Open your books to page 357,” the teacher intones. The book is thick and gray with dark blue lettering; it has graffiti scrawled on the edges by previous captives. The act of opening the book releases soporific vapors redolent of the old and the boring, which render futile any further attempt at concentration. Impenetrable blocks of text swim before my eyes, threatening existential annihilation. I look at the clock: 45 minutes until the bell. Then everything goes blank.

Does this scene from my youth (with some grown-up embellishment, of course) feel at all familiar to you? I have no way to prove it, but I

suspect that this sort of negative reaction to history learning is far more common than the joys I recounted earlier. (It's worth noting that both of those happy occasions occurred outside school.) This junior high episode reflects my general experience with history education through my freshman year at Ohio State, which, if anything, was even bleaker.

Undergraduates at that time were required to take a series of three introductory-level history courses set in a hot, creaky third-floor auditorium. The historical content consisted of an endless succession of European wars and kings with Roman numerals after their names. The instructor was a disembodied battery of television sets distributed around the room. Machines administered and graded exams. It was like living death.

A notice from the draft board and the possibility of actual death in a distant land delivered me from these dreary circumstances and taught me that historical learning could involve more than tedious memorization of pointless facts. History had the power to enlighten! After I returned to civilian life, history continued to exert its pull until I acquired a history degree in my early thirties, and midlife found me standing in a classroom facing 28 teenagers and a fearsome responsibility: to teach them about the world, no less.

As a history teacher, I tried to do all the right things. I assigned my students research projects, simulations, and source-analysis activities; my students examined important events from the past, essential questions, and big ideas. But no matter what I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that my history teaching wasn't effective—that my students weren't leaving school with knowledge that would be useful later in life. Their learning seemed to fade quickly, leaving behind little more than half-remembered facts and vague traces of historical events. My teaching wasn't conveying the power of history.

What's more, other history teachers didn't seem to be effective either. Don't get me wrong; there are wonderful history teachers out there who make history interesting to their students. But that's not the point, is it? Education is supposed to provide knowledge useful in the future, and I saw no evidence that history teachers had found a way to provide their students with a meaningful understanding of history that would be useful in life. My nagging internal doubts were reinforced by external evidence, including decades of nationwide testing that showed American students scored much worse in history than in the other core subjects of math, language, and science.

I was frustrated by the huge chasm that separated history education's potential from its practice. I knew from firsthand experience that

history possessed an awesome power to enlighten, but on a national level I saw political leaders making terrible decisions that no one with even a rudimentary understanding of history should make. All the while, I knew that my profession—and I personally—wasn't helping citizens to acquire the kind of useful historical understanding that might limit such costly ignorance in the future.

Yet I didn't see educators talking about such matters—which only heightened my frustration. Leaders in the history-education community appeared to be consumed with matters like writing voluminous content standards, promoting extensive factual memorization, glorifying high-stakes testing, and devising various instructional fixes meant to divert attention from history education's fundamental lack of relevance.

It seemed to me that history educators were whistling past the graveyard, and society was squandering a vital national resource. I felt that I had to try to do something about it, so when I left classroom teaching, I gave myself a new full-time job—to find the answer to one simple question: How can history education be made useful?

I figured that writing a book would be the best way to pursue this goal, but such a plan had serious flaws. In the first place, I didn't know if an answer to my question existed, and if it did exist whether I would be able to find it. Furthermore, I had never written a book, and I didn't know if I could express my thoughts effectively or if anyone would care to read what I was thinking anyway. Plus, the whole thing promised to be a lot of work. Given these entirely rational reasons not to write a book, why did I proceed?

I had little choice in the matter. My belief in the power of history was so strong, and my frustration with history education was so intense, that I was compelled to undertake a quixotic mission to set things right—even if nobody would ever read what I wrote. In the final analysis, this book was born of gut-level feelings that demanded release.

Once again, emotion had trumped reason.