If We Don’t Know Our History, We’re History!

by Jason Caros
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Survey after survey, national test after national test indicate a striking ignorance of history by our younger generations. This is due, in part, to a trend in education during the 20th century that has disparaged and diminished the importance of academic “knowledge” in schools in favor of “process” oriented learning. Additionally, nation-wide assessment of certain skills and subjects in school such as Reading, Writing, Math and lately Science has further relegated the other core subject area of Social Studies to a secondary status, especially in the elementary grades (Social Studies in Florida includes Civics, Economics, Geography, and the mother subject History). Every American should be concerned about this lack of historical knowledge as history is one of the main agents that binds our nation together and teaches us essential life lessons.

What is history? Too many people think of history as merely a story – and it is often taught and received as a boring one at that. But history is so much more than story and should be appreciated and learned by everyone. The French natural law philosopher Etienne Gilson once said the following about the subject: “History is the only laboratory we have in which to test the consequences of thought.” This is an interesting way to speak about history isn’t it? A couple words in the quote really stand out and appear more likely to be used in another setting, science. For instance, Gilson said history is a laboratory. Laboratories are places where experiments are held and where people with white lab coats and safety goggles work, right? In science laboratories items are tested, but in the history lab the focus of the test is ideas or thoughts and the consequences of those ideas are the important discoveries. We should all be concerned with the consequences of thought because as one saying goes: “Thoughts become words, words become actions, actions become habits, habits become character, and character becomes destiny.” This wisdom applies to both individuals and societies.

Every time I ask people, including teachers, about the original meaning of the word history they typically say “history means ‘his’ story,” or they will say it simply means “story.” But if you look at the Greek root meaning of the word history you might be surprised to learn it means ‘inquiry’ or ‘investigation’ and ‘knowledge.’ Did you know the Latin word for science also means investigation and knowledge? Yes, that’s right. History and science are synonymous, at least in the original context of the words. Having this in mind Gilson’s quote makes more sense. History should not be boring or passive but instead an active exercise involving investigation and ultimately the acquisition of important knowledge that benefits individual lives and civilizations. As the quote suggests, ideas have consequences and it is in the laboratory of history where we learn from the consequential ideas from the past.

Generally speaking, history is one of the greatest teachers we have but there are three specific points I would like to emphasize about its importance to us as a people. First, in Western societies history has always been a main topic of study and has provided a springboard to the study other subjects such as literature; it has also been a source for
work on skills like reading and writing. In terms of successful literacy development, history provides students with a wealth of conceptual knowledge that enables them to become good readers, and since reading is essential to overall academic success history instruction should be at the top of educational priorities.

Reading requires knowledge of ‘words and the world’ to borrow a phrase from educational researcher E.D. Hirsch and there is no subject that does a better job of providing this type of knowledge than history. In our nation we have major problems with literacy at the middle and high school levels and this is due in large part to students’ lack of ‘knowledge’ not the lack of reading ‘skills.’ We do a very good job of teaching students how to ‘learn to read’ in the early grades, but fall short in providing them with the important academic knowledge that enables them to ‘read to learn’ later on. In order to read to learn you need to have a rich vocabulary. For example, reading experts estimate that in order to understand what you are reading you need to know approximately 90% of the words and concepts in a passage so you can figure out the other 10% you do not know. Subjects such as history help provide students with the vocabulary and contextual knowledge they need to become advanced readers.

A second benefit of the study of history lies in the connection between history and good character. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote: “The task of history is to hold out for condemnation every evil word and deed, and to hold out for praise every great and noble word and deed.” Examples of strong character may or may not exist in a child’s immediate environment or even in the memories of a parent but they do live on in the annals of history as suggested by Tacitus. In the history of our nation we can see examples of virtue in the courage and sacrifice of the Founders of this nation during the Revolutionary Era, in the moral fortitude of the reformers of the Second Great Awakening, in the creativity and perseverance of the inventors, writers, and scientists that helped make this nation great, and so on. Students can learn from and become motivated by great ideas and great actions and find in the heroic men and women of the past important role models. Likewise they can see the consequences of vice and negative activity and hopefully avoid some of the pitfalls of those who have come before us.

One of the recent trends in education has been the rise of character education programs or courses in values, whatever values means. Supporters of these types of programs point to increasing incidents of violence in schools, a general lack of civility, and a lack of civic participation by our youth. I submit we do not need classes in values but instead need good courses in history and literature (another excellent source of historical knowledge and lessons in human nature). Teachers have plenty of material to work from and do not need to recreate the wheel, the Sumerians already did this for us a few thousand years ago.

A final point about the importance of history pertains to our heritage - history is the key transmitter of it. Our American heritage, and the inheritance of Western Civilization, is not passed on to us genetically. It must be learned and earned by each generation. Some of this passing on is done in the home, in churches, and other institutions but the main source for our historic memory comes from a formal study of history.
A couple months ago I had the great fortune to be able to listen to a World War II hero speak to a group of fourth graders about his experiences in war. Doctor Giles McCoy served in the Marines during the war and was asked to sail on the U.S.S. Indianapolis during its special mission to transport the atomic bombs safely to their destination in the Pacific. After delivering the bombs, the Indianapolis was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine while on its way back and sank in-between Guam and the Philippines. He vividly described his experiences with several hundred other sailors and Marines that floated on the sea for almost five days while they waited for rescue. During this time hundreds died of shark attacks, exhaustion and other calamities. Dr. McCoy continued on with the captivating account and in his conclusion said something to the children with more passion than anything else he had said; his eyes watered as he spoke. He told the students he was proud to have been able to serve his country during World War II and later the Korean War and to live a good life with his family afterward, and that he gladly would do it all over again. Then he spoke about the blessings we all enjoy living in this country and urged the students to dedicate themselves to protecting the freedoms we have here. He finished by saying “freedom is not free, you have to pay for it!” This was a history lesson that impacted everyone in the room and one I will not forget.

Aleksander Sohlzenitzyn, the famous Russian philosopher and dissident during the Communist era of the Soviet Union once warned, “If you wish to destroy a people you must first sever them from their roots.” Cutting off the historic roots of their countries was what the Jacobins tried in do in France, the Soviet Communists tried in Russia, and more recently the Khmer Rouge attempted in Cambodia when they said, “this day is zero.” Thankfully, they were unsuccessful in the end. In order to preserve the good and true elements of our culture we must have a historic memory, we must work in earnest to safeguard our historic roots. If we want to enjoy the freedoms the Founders of this nation helped to procure for us, and countless others have helped maintain, we need to learn about and preserve our past. If we do not want to become history we need to learn our history!

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1 I am not suggesting ‘process’ or skills are not important but instead the idea that strong content ‘knowledge’ is essential to academic success. This may seem like a no-brainer but comments such as the following fallacious statements appear regularly in educational journals: “if we focus on skills students can learn any important knowledge they need later on;” “information is less valuable today than knowing how to think in new situations;” or “students can just look up information when they need to.”