

# Looking at the Past, Seeing the Future

## Melody Flowers

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A student spoke out in class saying, “If the native peoples of the Americas would have been Africans the Spanish explorers couldn’t have caught them and exploited them.” The class gasped. I gasped. The student then said, “Didn’t you see the Olympics? Black people won most of the races.” After hearing this remark I steadied myself on the lectern, and repeated to myself several times, “This is why I teach history, this is why I teach history, this is why I must . . . teach . . . history.”

Yes, it is amazing what a history student can (and will) say in class. After attending my class for one semester, however, this student will be more aware of his surroundings and, moreover, aware of things and places that are beyond his immediate surroundings. In short, the student will be less provincial. This process begins when a student signs up for my class to get a history requirement out of the way and then realizes he or she has stepped onto the path to achieve increased historical mindedness.

Of course, to be honest, historical mindedness is not my term. It comes from one of my most respected history professors, Dr. Pat Zelman, at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. Dr. Zelman explained the process of developing historical mindedness in graduate school and most historians will agree the five goals detailed below are the minimum that a student of history should achieve to gain a real grasp of the queen of the social sciences; however, without this basic knowledge and understanding, students will continue to avoid history like the plague (and/or English composition classes). And, as I teach my first- and second-year history survey classes, I know what she taught me then is even more relevant now in my role as teacher as opposed to student.

### **Goal One: Sensitivity to Time and Place**

All students must come to terms with the notion that people in the past were vastly different than today. Yes, this sounds simple, but hearing things such as, “Man, people were stupid back then,” or “How gross! You mean you’re telling me they didn’t have cream rinse in the Middle Ages!” clearly indicates a history instructor’s job includes closing the gap in understanding people of the past. I stress to my students that as historians it’s a cardinal sin to hold our figures in history accountable according to our twenty-first century standards and values. People in the past had a different value systems. No, we can’t condone the act of burning alleged witches, but we can practice the art of psychohistory (i.e. putting historical societies or individuals under psycho-

analysis) and try to understand why they committed these atrocities.

Ideally, one of the best and quickest ways to become sensitive to the difference in time and place is to travel. This helps students at a minimum to understand more about world culture and, hence, give them the tools to be able to project themselves into historical roles to increase understanding.

Certainly, though, travel as a means to the end to achieve these goals is impractical.

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Within the confines of the classroom, however, what can be done is to move beyond names, dates, ever-shifting boundaries on maps, and who won a battle when. Happily, without denying the importance of the kinds of information generated by those categories in the last sentence, all of this can be augmented by approaching the survey class from the social historian's perspective. What was the art being produced? The literature? The music? What activities (and concerns) did all social classes have, not just the military and/or the elite? Students are too used to seeing names and dates on the page; instead, if they can connect with the lives of the people behind those names and dates then they can be moved far beyond the box that their own day-to-day lives occupy.

Given all this, however, there is one rule to keep in mind when studying societies of the past. No matter how careful we are or how diligent we work to understand people of the past, the fact is we can never really know what it was like to live in the past. While working so hard to understand the past we must also respect it for holding its space in the time and place continuum.

### **Goal Two: Awareness of Basic Continuities**

I also remind my students that when discussing or writing about history continuity and change are the two main pillars of good historical study. In regard to continuity I explain to them that good history makes you aware of the continuous flow of time without being dull. For example, a basic continuity noted over time is that civilizations rise and fall. The trick is to keep this interesting and, thus, brings us to our next goal: the ability to note change during these continuities.

### **Goal Three: Ability to Note and Explain Significant Change**

Just noting change is not enough to interest people in history. As I tell my students, hopefully you change your underwear every day and although this is important to you, historically it lacks significance. Finding and noting significant change requires a value judgment. Many times my students are afraid to form an opinion or make a judgment about events or people in history. I let them know if they are well educated

on the historical facts and can make their case then historical judgment is what keeps history alive. As long as an historian can make a legitimate argument for the how and why of significant change and tell us why it matters, then this history is significant.

The ability to note significant change has become more popular as an historian's tool in the last thirty years because the interest and need for better social histories have increased. Omitting the "Great Man" theory in history and the histories of war has left historians with everyday people who need and deserve a history. Historians discovered that delving into the lives of, say, French peasants lent much more weight and layers to the reasons for the French Revolution than just the usual oppressive absolute monarchy. By studying and recognizing these significant changes over time we see how our past created our present. But, to be able to study these changes, we need to know what caused these changes, our next goal.

#### **Goal Four: Sensitivity to Multiple Causation**

What causes changes in history? Marxists would say economics changes everything. Some say great people cause change; however, most historians say that many things cause change. I explain to my students that if you are having coffee with one of your colleagues and they make a statement that says A caused B, watch out. Rarely is it that just one thing caused a significant change in history because simple causation is usually wrong.

For example, some say Herbert Hoover caused the Great Depression of the 1930s; in reality it was a culmination of national and international economic situations, stock market mismanagement, the Dust Bowl, and other factors. To really understand how and why change takes place, good historians look at areas such as economics, politics, social movements, technology and philosophical trends.

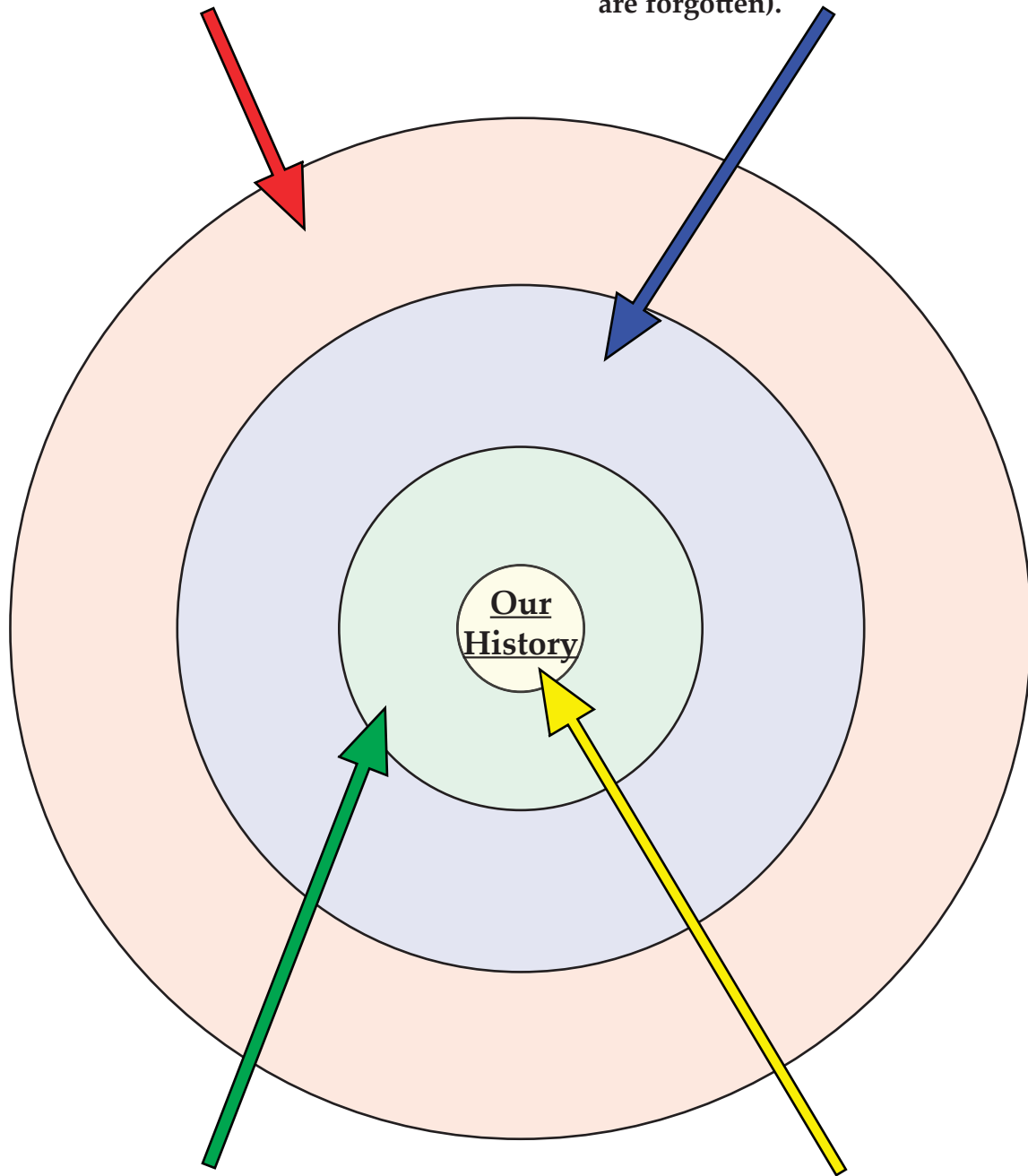
#### **Goal Five: The Understanding that Written History is a Reconstruction**

The last goal a student should achieve (and I believe the most important) is to understand that history is a written reconstruction. So many of my students look at their textbook as the final word on any given historical subject. The best way for me to explain to them about the reconstruction of history is to show them that history is different from the past. I do this in the following diagram.

*Rarely is it that just one thing caused significant change in history.*

1. The largest circle represents everything that has happened in the universe up to this point.

2. The second largest circle represents everything that has happened and is remembered (because many things are forgotten).



3. The third largest circle represents everything that was remembered as well as recorded and written down.

4. The fourth circle represents everything remembered, written down, and that has survived events such as wars, natural disasters, fires, and so on.

This diagram allows students to understand that events in the past cannot possibly be recreated. History that we read today is only a reconstruction or reflection of what happened in the past and, moreover, if you educate yourself well enough epistemologically and on the “facts” as we know them this means anyone can be an historian. I stress to students: we (including me and all your other history teachers) are students of history. Therefore, as diligent and thoughtful students of history we are allowed to make judgments concerning history. We are also allowed to write history from our own perspective and it is these different perspectives that make history personal and interesting. Essentially, I try to help the students understand their story of an event is just as valid as anyone else’s as long as they’ve done the groundwork to make their case.

It’s important that students realize ALL historians bring to their work their own set of values, and prejudices that are ultimately reflected in the history they write. There is absolutely no getting around this fact. Each historian is writing with an agenda and is also writing with a certain audience in mind. This is no surprise to most educators, but it is to students. I emphasize this fact with students and explain this is really okay. The only thing they must do

when studying a history is to realize this fact and meet it head on. Analyzing primary sources by combing over what the intention of the writer is and what baggage they might be bringing to the history is standard historical practice in my classes. Of course, there are plenty of warnings about historians who call themselves revisionist but are nothing more than crackpots. Yes, the German Holocaust did happen even though the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, an historian of sorts, said it did not.

Allowing students to see that history is flexible, viable and not entombed in some old stodgy textbook written by people they’ve never heard of actually seems to invigorate them. They realize history is not just dates and names, but is a medium of expression. It is also important to note that this method of teaching history may present the instructor with projects entitled “Martin Luther: Punk or Priest,” but I’ll take this any day over Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

Students will achieve these goals of historical mindedness and increase their awareness of their surroundings, other cultures, other times and, most importantly, of themselves. The paramount benefit that history gives to students is that it assists them in finding their own identity. Their global history defines them as a people, their national history defines them as Americans, and their family history defines them as a person. So after my student made the remark about African Americans being in the Olympics I sent him to do some research. Upon returning he said, “Hey, I was looking up some of the winners in track and field for the Olympics and found out a guy from Texas won a major race.” I responded, “Well, yes, so what do you think about that?”

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He said, "Man, he's a skinny white guy from Baylor. I guess my Dad was wrong about African Americans winning all the races." "Yes," I said, "and now you know."

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