

Wisdom of the Historian
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Every field of endeavor gives knowledge. It is up to the individual to transform that knowledge to wisdom. Thus, my Judo master, Mr. Inagi, in the finest Japanese tradition, attained the wisdom to transform a sport to a life philosophy.

What is the historian's special fount of wisdom? The first wellspring is the knowledge exemplified by Santayana's aphorism, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Unexceptional news reporters and commentators may observe the range of human behavior, from nobility to depravity, with great emotion and intensity, but without knowledge of history they can have no perspective. They may perhaps be compared to blind people who build a town at the base of an active volcano. After eruption buries the town, the few blind survivors, with tear-filled, unseeing eyes but with only that single experience and no awareness of the volcano towering beside them, rebuild the town atop the ashes.

The historian sees the volcano and knows its record of eruptions. Of course, merely remembering the past is only the first step. To attain wisdom we must learn from it. That is where the historian's wisdom enters. The wise historian, knowing the record of both inanimate and human nature, knows that rebuilding the town in the same place will invariably lead to a repeat of the same disaster.

Thus, Will Durant began his 11 volume *Story of Civilization* by defining Civilization as "social order promoting cultural creation," and then added the caveat that "Civilization is an interlude between ice ages." Durant's study of history (plus biology) led him from the standard religious practices and beliefs of his childhood and the partisan politics of his age to a grand overview in which he acknowledged aspects of religion he came to assess as necessary to the maintenance of civilization.

The wise historian, experience with human behavior will neither exclusively apotheosize nor demonize complex behavior. Thus, in *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, Samuel Eliot Morison celebrated Columbus's persistence and nautical genius at the same time he detailed his inordinate greed and horrendous behavior as an enslaver long before the recent this generation chose to focus solely on excoriating

Columbus's flaws. Morison showed how the behavior of Columbus and too many of his compatriot Conquistadors was a mixture of human nature and a consequence of the background of newly victorious, militant, paranoid Catholic Spain over centuries of struggle against the Muslim 'infidel'.

Wise historians allow themselves to recognize the complexity of life we are all immersed in. Page Smith, in his eight volume *People's History of America*, celebrated the ongoing miracle of the American experiment but also noted how climate, partisan interests, and greed inscribed in human nature led to the tragic flaw of slavery and its monstrous cost and legacy in the founding and history of the United States. And Doris Kearns Goodwin in *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, stressed what Lincoln recognized, namely that passing the glorious 13th amendment was only accomplished using the basest of methods.

Certain issues repeatedly bubble up to the fore as shortlived headline causes célèbres that roil our passions as if they were new. One such is the gross inequality of wealth, recently expressed in terms of the 99%. Historian Walter Scheidel addressed this problem in *The Great Leveler*, documenting with planetary perspective and near mathematical precision (given in terms of the Gini coefficient) how equality of opportunity invariably leads to a consistently large measure of inequality of outcome (i. e., income) that increases with the longevity of governmental stability. The only events that have ever levelled human wealth have been cataclysms such as government collapse, revolution, major depression, total war, and pandemics such as the Black Death (far more lethal than Covid 19), all of which have leveled by the wholesale destruction of wealth. Again, the wise historian, knowing human nature from the long record of human behavior may be dismayed but is seldom shocked. Indeed, Scheidel's parting advice is that if your dream of equality is realized you will almost surely get something you didn't wish for.

I conclude with two wise historians, who provide the only two books anyone would ever need to understand the nature of and proclivity to autocracy and extremism. The first, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell is written as a novel, a parable, but, with only a small change of characters is a damning, incisive tale of great pathos of this all too human menace.

The second is *The True Believer* by Eric Hoffer. Hoffer pointed out, for example, that the United States will remain immune to such extremism as we have recently touched so long as its unbounded economic opportunity persists. Remove those opportunities (vis a vis the declining middle class) and America will become

vulnerable to demagogues. And always accompanying the demagoguery is a relentless barrage of lies, the replacement of fact by unreality, and the demand for unbounded, unquestioning loyalty, even wholesale sacrifice, to an immensely egotistical leader, worshiped as inerrant and godlike.

What are we to say of such great historians? Are we to say when they foretell what will happen again and again – based on what they show us has happened again and again – are we to say, “How prophetic?” Perhaps, but we should surely say, “How wise!” And may we all acquire the wisdom of historians! Only then may we maximize our great natural qualities while ameliorating or minimizing the tragedies of our all too human flaws.