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"Everyman"

An Essay Presented to the Kit Kat Club

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The title and the theme of this essay emerge from my intermittent but recurring reflections on the future of the past. I speak, of course, of what we commonly characterize as "history" -- an umbrella term that embraces, among other things, a formal academic discipline with associated research and teaching, an ostensibly well-defined body of knowledge reflected in the thousands of publications catalogued together in the stacks of major libraries, and a much less well-defined collection of records, artifacts, images, recollections, anecdotes, and myths that, taken together, form a powerful context for contemporary decision-making and planning for the future.

For purposes of this essay, I will focus principally on the last category, leaving an assessment of the vitality and contributions of formally trained historians employed in the academy and any

appraisal of the tenor and acceptance of their publications to another time -- or, at least, until the question/discussion period to follow.

My embarking on a consideration of "informal" history -- its rich content and its fuzzy boundaries -- is, I submit, consistent with our club's credo that an essayist should present a topic in which he has interest but not one in which he is so expert as to "have the answers." So, here it is -- a glimpse of a part of my world as I see it and an invitation to enrich my sense of what's going on in it with your very personal and, thus, valuable perspectives.

I ask you to consider four (4) points of tension now apparent.

First, the 1990's have reminded us of the very powerful role played by memory in recalling an historical episode or personality, especially when juxtaposed with the evidence contained in what is usually referred to as "the historical record." Surviving participants have a psychological investment in the occurrence and in assuring that what they regard as an accurate portrayal becomes the legacy to

generations long into the future (ideally, "forever"). Historians -- persons who seek to reveal the cause(s), dimensions, and major effect(s) of the occurrence by reliance on analysis of physical evidence, especially written records -- sift and weigh information, some of it irrefutable fact, to arrive at their descriptions and explanations. With increasing frequency, it seems, eyewitness recollections have clashed with historical interpretation. While several examples come to mind, the most widely-publicized recent case concerned The Smithsonian's (National Air and Space Museum) portrayal of the use of the atomic bomb to conclude World War II.(1) The debate (the mildest characterization that I can justify) crystallized around whether an exhibit marking the 50th anniversary of Hiroshima and V-J Day should be purposefully "commemorative" and patriotic. The matter pitted "scholars" against combat survivors, individually and collectively, whose memories coalesced around the horrors of the Pacific War and who saw the bomb's abrupt conclusion of the conflict as a veritable "life saver." Recent historical scholarship has characterized the use of the bomb more as a prelude to the ensuing Cold War and associated arms race; further, the massive casualties

(especially to civilians) and widespread destruction of non-military structures have been interpreted as a compelling reason for fearing and avoiding nuclear conflict subsequently. This episode, now nearly five years old, still raises both ripples and waves within The Smithsonian, within Congress, among academicians, and across the museum community at large. While the proverbial "final chapter" is not yet written, the episode resulted in heightened congressional scrutiny of their appropriations to The Smithsonian (and other cultural agencies including the National Endowments), the resignation of the director of the National Air and Space Museum, unflattering characterizations of one another by certain historians and certain veterans groups, and a heightened wariness throughout the museum world regarding the potential for disabling controversy which can arise when commemorations become the context for historical interpretation. Among the "lessons" that might be learned, is one that underscores the powerful sense of "ownership" often evinced by the public in response to a commemorative exhibit. For reasons we might speculate about, academic historians often write and publish interpretations which challenge conventional understanding -- indeed,

the public seems generally unsurprised by, if not always affirming of, such activities -- but a public exhibition seems to be subject to a different standard of acceptance. We might ask why this is so.

Closely related to museum exhibitions created to complement a commemoration are monuments and statuary and the more common form, historical markers. These representations literally "cast in stone" (or metal) a particular image or interpretation. By design, they are far more enduring than an exhibit; yet, for the most part, the monuments and statues are critiqued more often on the basis of the artist's symbolism than for their historical message. Historical markers are, typically, of a standard size, configuration, and appearance; their sameness often camouflages questionable historical interpretation, but when the public disagrees, the typical reaction is to erect another marker which helps to build fuller understanding. Often, though, the markers are not in close proximity to one another, and balanced understanding is far from certain.

A second point of tension is the extraordinary recent advances in

computer and telecommunications technology which have increased in exciting and significant ways the variety of mediums through which information can be obtained and shared. Holography, interactive video, the Internet and World Wide Web and CD-ROM's have joined the more familiar forms of reproducing or simulating the "real thing." Most of the newer technologies allow experiences and/or information on demand. The user or visitor need not bother with time-consuming travel, possibly inclement weather, or the vagaries of fixed hours of operation and access at a museum or library. Such technological accessibility is truly revolutionary in its benefits for persons for whom distance and disability represent insuperable obstacles. Most major cultural and educational institutions now promote their holdings and offerings via the new technologies, and in so doing, they are seeking heightened visibility which, in turn, they hope will stimulate more visits by better informed visitors and, possibly, more generous support. Inasmuch as the technological advances are expensive, a question invariably arises as to whether a cultural institution's "marginal dollar" is better spent in traditional ways (purchase and care of collections, exhibits, public programs, and bricks and mortar) or on

the essential trappings of electronic access. This institutional issue has a parallel in each of our lives: will we spend our "discretionary dollars" and our limited "leisure time" by purchasing and using modes of technological access and acquiring information and entertainment through these indirect means? Or, will we validate the traditional modes of operation of museums and libraries by patronizing them in person, through admission fees, membership dues, retail purchases, and contributions? Today, no established museum can ignore having an electronic "presence," but maintaining access for both in-person and virtual visitors is inherently not cost-effective. To date, our search for a "golden mean" has not been successful, but the trend is increasingly inclined toward technology.

A third area of scrutiny concerns the extent to which contemporary Americans know, use, and even "like" history. For roughly fifteen years after the bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976, the prevailing view was that our fellow citizens, especially our adolescents, know little and cared less about what a variety of professional arbiters regarded as an essential body of historical knowledge. Several studies documented this deficiency to the extent

that it was characterized as a national crisis and triggered Congressional endorsement of national history standards as a frame of reference for history and social studies teachers across the country. The impetus for certain of these dire analyses was the National Endowment for the Humanities and especially William J. Bennett and Lynne Cheney, NEH directors during the Reagan administrations. Reinforcement of this notion of historical ignorance and, worse, apathy came from a choir of conservative and articulate commentators including Bennett and Cheney, among others. The concerns that were raised were not confined to American history but broadly included apparently low regard for and awareness of literary classics, major philosophical works, and general principles of democratic government. Not coincidentally, this same period spawned what has come to be labeled as "political correctness." As applied to American history, the "PC movement" appeared to many to be a radical critique of everything our textbooks and teachers had emphasized. Where the conservative critics saw historical ignorance, the advocates of political correctness saw irrelevance. Ironically, it seemed that Americans were being told by conservatives and liberals

alike that they didn't know enough of the history that would be useful to functioning at the end of the 20th century; of course, the two groups of critics were poles apart as to what constituted an appropriate array of accessible information or historical frame of reference.

The principal problem with the perception and the assertion that Americans were both under-informed and misinformed about American history was that a variety of historical activities (and public participation in those activities) were flourishing. Historical sites and museums proliferated, the ranks of reenactment groups swelled, historically themed films and television programs were commercially successful (especially those of Ken Burns), and even amusement parks emphasizing nostalgia were booming. What was the motivation which elicited this energetic response from a population toward an interest about which they ostensibly knew little and only a scant amount of what they did know was relevant or politically correct in the context of the 1990's? In recognition of this broad but ill-defined level of enthusiasm about lives and times that preceded us, another comprehensive study was undertaken, and the findings are both

interesting and suggestive as we prepare to leave the 20th century.

The principal interpreters of this recent analysis of the public's sense of history are Roy Rosezweig and David Thelen[1][2] Based upon extensive survey research, their recent book, The Presence of the Past, discerns that the term "history" has become too long associated with learning experiences that many Americans regard as unattractive, unrewarding, or distasteful; what respondents do resonate to is the simple phrase, "the past." Perhaps not surprisingly, the respondents also indulge their interests in the past through persons and places especially close to them: family, community, church, etc. Their apparent lack of a working knowledge of the highlights and central themes of national history are seen more as a reflection of their priority of interests not as a manifestation of non-interest. Thus, genealogy and family history, local historical organizations and projects, reenactments and festivals all are on the upswing at the expense, apparently, of more traditional, nationally-focused experiences.

An especially interesting facet of this research was an inquiry about how and where the respondents acquired reliable information to indulge their personal interests in the past. Reflecting their interest in the familial and the local, respondents gave evidence of relying significantly on the personal experiences of family and friends. The only source deemed more reliable was a visit to a museum or historic site. When questioned further, respondents underscored the value of what the researchers called an "unmitigated experience" --- that is, confronting the real and the authentic without the use of an intermediary interpreter, unless that intermediating source was family or a reliable eyewitness in which case, the experience was deemed not to have been interpreted at all; rather, it was simply recounted as it actually happened. Of the more than 800 respondents, nearly 80 per cent regarded museums as the most trustworthy of sources, followed by 69 per cent for grandparents or other relatives and nearly 65 per cent for other organizations. In descending order of perceived reliability were college professors (54 per cent), high school teachers (35 per cent), nonfiction books (32 per cent) and movies and TV (11 per cent).[3]

The thesis advanced by The Presence of the Past does appear to explain what otherwise seemed to be a paradox between a low level of recall of historical facts and relationships long a fixture of high school and college courses and textbooks and the undeniable expressions of participation in a wide variety of what can be called "historical activities" but which we ought better label as "connections with the past."

The fourth and final issue is akin to that just considered. Seventy-five years ago, the highly regarded American historian, Carl Becker of Cornell, authored an article entitled "Everyman His Own Historian;" ten years later, he published a book-length examination of the same thesis. Becker observed and argued that the historical record is, inevitably, filtered and fitted into an historical interpretation as a result of the interests, concerns, perspectives, and understandings held by the interpreter himself (or herself).[4] In other words, that record does not appear to say the same thing to all its readers, nor does it always say the same thing to the same reader across time. We are each affected by our times and our

circumstances, and as these change and as our experiences accumulate, we tend to see ostensibly similar events differently than we once might have. As our reservoir of memories broadens and deepens, we develop more intellectual "pigeon holes" into which contemporary events can be dropped and analyzed as to how well they fit with what we already know (or believed) to be so and why.

If the conclusions arising from recent research are to be accepted at face value, we Americans are increasingly interested in our history but it is a more multifaceted history than that which has been the traditional synthesis of our development as a nation. And, to a growing degree, we Americans view both the distant and recent pasts through the lens of personal experience or, failing that, through the experiences of other (especially senior) members of our family. We trust what we see and what we feel; we are less persuaded by (and thus find somewhat less useful) the writings and pronouncements of teachers at whatever level. We reserve the right to decide which commemorative activities will energize us and how our enthusiasm will be exhibited. We appreciate an absence of barriers and filters

between us and the authentic places and things we want to experience. We value the real thing, but we are capable of responding energetically to the stimulation of a familiar anecdote, a family gathering, a relevant photograph, and/or a return visit to a significant place. History is not synomous with memory and experience, but memory and experience make any history that we see, read, or otherwise encounter a highly personal acquisition.

In closing, please bear in mind the thoughtful observations of two quite differently situated Americans earlier this century. President Harry Truman noted, "the only thing new in this world is the history that you don't know." And William Faulkner asserted, "the past is never dead. It is not even past."[5]

— Gary C. Ness

NOTES

1. See, for example, Edward T. Linenthal, "Can Museums Achieve a Balance Between Memory and History?," The Chronicle of Higher Education (February 10, 1995), pp. B-1 and B-2.

2. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen: The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life. Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

3. Ibid., pp.19-22

4. Carl Becker, Everyman His Own Historian, New York, 1935. Also, see Carol Kammen, "When the Past Speaks," History News, (vol. 54, No.1), Winter 1999, pp.3-4.

5. As quoted in William R. Ferris, "Heroes, Home Runs, History and the Humanities," in History News (vol.54, no.1), Winter 1999, pp.5-7.