

NEARBY HISTORY: CONNECTING PARTICULARS AND UNIVERSALS

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To look for meaning in history is to look for connections. We find meaning when we see connections between one occurrence and another; between people and places; between causes and consequences; between past, present, and future. As we begin to perceive connections becoming more abundant and weaving together, we discern patterns, trends, or movements. To understand history, then, is to have a feel for the connectedness of things.

Novelist Wright Morris uses the idea of connections in recalling his childhood:

There's a story in the family, on my mother's side, that my Grandmother Osborn started west with her man, her Bible, and her cane-seated rocking chair. As things got bad she had to give up both her man and the Bible, and to keep from freezing to death she had to burn the chair. But first she unraveled the cane-bottom seat. She wrapped it around her waist, and when she got to where she was going she unwrapped it, put it in a new chair. Her kids grew up with their bottoms on it. The cane seat was the connection with all of the things, for one reason or another, she had to leave behind. Which is what these women were doing with me now. They were putting a cane seat, an approved one, in my bottomless chair. Making the connection. The rest would follow, naturally.¹

As historians and teachers of history, we are in the business of making connections. It comes naturally to us. Wherever we go we sit on chairs with cane-bottom seats. Indeed, it is our inclination to take a connected, all-encompassing view of human existence which distinguishes us from those who focus on one or another of its social, economic, political, psychological, cultural, physical, or other dimensions. We often employ their specific techniques, but while they concentrate on single elements we seek the connections to others.

Not so with students. Connection-making of the sort practiced in most classrooms neither occurs nor appeals to them. It may well be, as Ronald Butchart argued in a 1979 article in Teaching History, that students are not simply bored with history as conventionally taught, but that they are fundamentally alienated from it.² In our consumer-oriented, materialistic culture, the past has no apparent importance. They see no material benefits to be gained from its study. Consequently, they feel no pain in being cut off from it.

Contrast this alienation with the out-of-school population's apparent fascination with the past. Widespread interest in family history, which preceded as well as followed the appearance of [Alex] Haley's *Comet*, has taxed the energies and patience of archivists. The history of buildings, neighborhoods, organizations, and communities attracts growing attention. The whole nearby world appears to be of interest. Part of the concern for history shared by older persons is no doubt attributable to the fact that having lived a little helps them know how to make connections, to perceive relationships, to sort out the relevant and significant from the irrelevant and insignificant. But do younger persons have an inherent curiosity about the past--expressed in questions like: "Where did I come from?" and "What was it like when you were little?"--which is being stifled? Do those who teach the young neglect laying the groundwork for connection-making because they fail to start with people and

places that are at hand, close-by? Possibly they lack interest, or perhaps they do not understand how to proceed?

Consider this: at the 1981 meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Detroit, three neighborhood history projects were described by those involved in them. They were all excellent projects, helpful in understanding small communities--their celebrations, their activities in preservation and rehabilitation, and the relationships between the economic, cultural, and political benefits of these activities. None of the three speakers were trained as historians. Rather, they were trained in romance languages, librarianship, and fine arts; they were learning research methods in history on their own because they were interested. Fewer than a dozen professional historians attended the session.

The nearby world is not the only world to be studied in history courses in schools and colleges, nor does studying what is close at hand offer a magic formula for helping students make connections. But the nearby world offers fertile fields for study, which to ignore deprives students of an opportunity to make connections in ways that build historical senses. The term "nearby history" is used here to avoid the negative connotations and limited reach which has attached to other terms. "Local history" has long been a term of academic disparagement used interchangeably with "provincial," "nostalgic," and (worst of all) "antiquarian" in scornful reference to what were perceived as narrow and trivial interests pursued in unsophisticated fashion. Those who investigated this world from within a historical or genealogical society or as an independent venture responded by regarding academics as pedantic, aloof, and out of touch with reality. As well as being unnecessarily divisive, the term "local" or "community history" limits itself to a concept of place. Similarly, "family history" is confined to a consideration of relationship and "material culture" restricts the discussion to objects. "Nearby history" seems to encompass the entire range of possibilities for investigation in a person's immediate environment and to encourage thinking about the connections among the various elements. A course in history which pays no heed to the nearby past is one-sided and incomplete. A comprehensive course is one that finds ways to draw connections between the nearby past and the conventional core of political, economic, and social issues essential to the study of history. To state this position so forthrightly is to raise important issues of legitimacy, practicality, pedagogical soundness, and purpose. They should be considered one at a time.

Is the study of the nearby past a legitimate undertaking? Consider how it encompasses a wide range of interests and trends, within the field of history and beyond it. It focuses on the grassroots, on ordinary folks in ordinary walks of life. It looks at the past from the bottom up and the inside out. It offers opportunities, specifically, to pay proper heed to the historical roles of ethnic groups, families, women, and minorities. It goes hand in hand with enthusiasm for studying regional characteristics and examining qualities of distinctiveness. It provides necessary underpinnings to preservation efforts and it capitalizes on interests in folk arts and crafts. Exploration of the nearby past complements enthusiasm for photography--taking pictures, studying them, and preserving them. Likewise, it offers an outlet for the desire to capture recollections from the past on tape. Studying the nearby past provides opportunities to approach history as stories to be found and retold, on the one hand, and as quantifiable data for analysis and interpretation on the other. It capitalizes on an interest in things, whether they be family antiques or artifacts preserved under glass in museums. It fits nicely with the desire of non-school, non-academic historians, museum curators, for example, to play a role in academic instruction in history. And it seizes upon the apparently growing interest in local history among academics. In a

sense, it revives the concern for nearby history shown by early generations of academic historians. Surely there is some legitimacy in all this.

Is the study of the nearby past a respectable undertaking? The ways in which historians of good repute have drawn connections between the particulars of the nearby world with the universals of the world out there will be discussed later. It is, perhaps, sufficient to note here that their endeavors have done much to affirm its respectability by enhancing our understanding of both the nearby and the distant, the particular and the universal. But consider something else. The June 1980 Journal of American History listed 175 recent doctoral dissertations; among them were at least 26 that seem clearly to fall into the category of nearby history. When you note that biographies were not counted in this category, this appears to be a substantial number. The June 1981 issue listed 160 dissertations, 33 of them dealing with the past nearby.

Is the study of the nearby past a practical undertaking? What could be more so? It is the past around us. It is there. It contains people and traces of the past that, in most instances, have not been studied to death. If students are puzzled by lectures on revisions of revisionism, think of what it means to them to be the first to study something of specific historical interest to them.

Is the study of the nearby past pedagogically sound? A fundamental pedagogical principle calls upon teachers to take students from the concrete to the conceptual, from the nearby to the more distant, from the particular to the general (and maybe back again). Studying the nearby past offers the first steps to larger and more general undertakings--something historians have known for a century.

Is the study of the nearby past purposeful? Done right, it is indeed. Recall that "history" derives from the same Greek root as "inquiry." Investigating the past of the nearby world trains students in inquiry. They can hardly engage in such inquiry without being clear on why they are doing it. Is it mere curiosity? Why are they curious? To what will their curiosity lead? Do they have a practical purpose in mind? Will their inquiry lead to an end product--a paper, a film, a tape, an illustrated lecture, a collection of papers for an archives or of artifacts for a museum?

As they seek to clarify their purpose, their subject will come into sharper focus. And as this happens students will learn where to turn for information and how to organize their quest for it. Continuing their inquiry, they learn how to use the information they gather. To use it properly, they need to know how to address questions to it. What can they draw out of their sources that will enable them to offer clear, accurate descriptions of their subjects, whether their subjects be people or places or events? Other questions will be aimed at finding ways of measuring change or sameness over time. Still others will seek to analyze causes and consequences. Out of it all students will begin to discern patterns and peculiarities. They will develop a feel for both the ordinary and the unusual. To do this, of course, they must learn how to treat traces of the past properly; to sort them out, evaluate them, test their credibility and applicability; to compare the message of one trace with another; to reconcile apparently contradictory traces; and so on.

Our responses to the questions raised so far have shown an enthusiasm for nearby history that may be misleading. We are mindful of the warning given by David Gerber in The History Teacher: The very temptations and enthusiasms offered by the study of local and community history, he says, "require that we look closely into the nature and consequences of this new trend." An unexamined

plunge, he continues, "into the current modes of popular local and community history may have classroom consequences which are, because of their tendency to present students with a false view of themselves and an incomplete view of the past, unproductive and even negative."³

In light of Gerber's worry that excessive enthusiasm for doing the history of the nearby world may carry high costs, it must be emphasized that such history, particularly if it is done under the sponsorship of professional historians and teachers of history, should be done well. If it is to have the sanction of schools and colleges, careful and explicit attention ought to be paid to drawing connections between the particulars of history in the world nearest to lives of students and the universals represented in the collective memory of humankind.

Ample evidence exists that such a standard can be attained. Connections between the particulars of the local scene and the universals of collective history have been drawn in some of the most innovative and impressive works of historical scholarship of recent years. They demonstrate the potential for locally-focused history to give clarity and elaboration to abstractions. At the same time, they demonstrate that precise and detailed examination of social, economic, and political processes at the local level can spawn new or revised generalizations. In sum, they affirm the assertion of British historian H.P.R. Finberg that family, community, national, and international history are a series of concentric circles, the study of each of which benefits from constant reference to the others.⁴

The broadest themes of concern to historians have been illuminated through the careful examination of local circumstances. The impact of currents of thought on social structure and personal behavior, for instance, received attention in such works as Darrett B. Rutman, Winthrop's Boston: A Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965) and Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Another transcendent issue, the pattern of mobility--social and economic, geographic and generational--was clarified for the colonial era in Philip J. Greven, Jr., Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover Massachusetts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970). Mobility in a later period received equally enlightening consideration in Stephen Thernstrom's pioneering work, Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) and a host of similar studies, outstanding among which were Peter R. Knights, The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860: A Study of City Growth (New York: Oxford, 1971), Clyde and Sally Griffen, Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poughkeepsie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), and Howard P. Chudacoff, Mobile Americans: Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha, 1880-1920 (New York: Oxford, 1972).

The study of political leadership, too, has benefitted from close attention to local circumstances. Edward M. Cook, Jr., The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and John M. Allswang, A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1971) reflect the range of possibilities. The effect of international strife on a society is another universal theme which can be dealt with profitably by the investigation of local particulars, as ably demonstrated in Robert A. Gross, The Minutemen and Their World (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).

Themes of universal importance--modernization, industrialization, and urbanization--have been most successfully explained in terms of the evolution

of particular communities. The shift from traditional, repetitive, pre-industrial society to a modern society with a faith in progress through technology, efficiency, and bureaucracy has been illuminated in such works as Michael H. Frisch, Town into City: Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). Industrialization and its social effects have become better understood through such works as Thomas Dublin, Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1869 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City (New York: Pantheon, 1978). The complex process of urbanization has been better appreciated as a result of studies like Sam Bass Warner, Jr., Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) and Howard L. Preston, Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979).

Ethnicity, the varied experience of different cultural groups, and the clashes between them offer yet another historical universal which benefits from the examination of particulars. Individual ethnic experiences have been revealed in, among others, Kathleen Neils Conzen, Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), Humbert S. Nelli, Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility (New York: Oxford, 1970), and John Modell, The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900-1942 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). Relations among ethnic groups have been illuminated in Ronald H. Bayor, Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-41 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

The topics of universal applicability and the historical works that use particular localities to explore and clarify them which have been mentioned here represent only a minor fraction of the successful efforts by scholars to enhance general historical understanding through contemplation of the nearby world. Similar connections between particular and universal can be drawn by students. If the product is less grand, perhaps, the intellectual process of linking a tangible reality to a distant abstraction is equally attainable and worthwhile.

To use nearby history effectively in the classroom one must have a clear understanding of one's objectives and appropriate techniques to achieve them. We offer here a set of suggestions, based on our experiences, observations, and conversations with others who have learned by doing, whether to good avail or for naught.

First, we find it helps to begin with the premise that you don't take history to students, you bring it out of them. For us, a good way to arouse student interest has been to use a single piece of evidence, something specific, that relates to the student's past--a document, an artifact, a picture, or possibly a document that he or she constructs out of a recorded interview with a knowledgeable person. We have had success with putting students to work finding out everything they possibly can relating to this single, specific piece of evidence. One student, for example, found a copy of the job application form filled out for his grandmother after the death of her husband when she was a young woman. A recent immigrant from Poland who spoke no English, she faced many obstacles in providing for her family and raising small children. Fascination with her plight drew her grandson into a study of labor conditions, immigration and citizenship laws, and schooling in the 1920s and inspired him to urge his relatives to contribute copies of other interesting documents to a family archives.

Second, we aim at investing students with a sense of context--and that at the very outset, with the single piece of evidence they start with. We think it helps out students to establish the understanding that the "content" of history exists simultaneously with other such content and that one cannot understand one piece of the content apart from the others. Two ideas are critical. First, many things happen at once, involving many people in many places. Simultaneity alone is a relationship, but cause and effect relationships are also discernible in simultaneity. And things happen consecutively, there is a continuity to history, events have consequences. To have students grapple with simultaneity and continuity in analyzing a given piece of evidence is a valuable exercise. An assignment we have used for such an exercise has called for students to write the history of a notable but not especially dramatic day in the history of their community, something like the cornerstone laying for a school or church building, for example. The day draws its significance, students often discover, from the context in which it occurs.

Third, as we move beyond the beginnings, we find it aids students if we insist that they work with different kinds of evidence: the printed word, the spoken word, artifacts, pictures, and so on. We discourage undertakings that rely only, let us say, on tape recorded interviews. This helps to demonstrate that historical knowledge is shaped from many types of evidence, each with its own values and limitations. A newspaper account of a significant occasion, accompanied by a photograph, can be used to encourage interview responses and to demonstrate the interplay between kinds of historical evidence.

Fourth, we encourage students to seek to tell a story as they carry their research farther. This seems to help them find a conceptual framework for their investigation. Such frameworks do not need to be elaborate. Consider the possibilities, we tell them, of this single conceptual scheme for telling the story of a family, an organization, or a community: (1) Origins; (2) dynamics; (3) milestones; and (4) character. It is natural to pay attention to origins; doing so compels one to think about people who were in on them, their time, their place, and so on. In examining dynamics, look at what moved the people, how power was held and used, and how decisions were made. Again, people are at the center of the examination. Contemplating milestones means that one considers such things as times of marked change, great occasions, measuring points on the continuum of routine, and turning points. In looking at character one seeks to put a finger on distinctive features that set one's subject apart from others of the same general type. A story told against such a framework will very likely survive critical measurement against a number of important questions: Does the story deal with people, both as individuals and in groups? Is it clear on time and space? Are events clearly delineated? Does the story have some ideas packed into it?

Analysis, particularly with concern for change over time, is part, too, of historians' work. We have found it worthwhile to urge students in telling a story, to keep in mind that the past is filled with subtle developments as well as obvious ones. Some matters that are conspicuous at the moment when they occur have sometimes been labeled manifest events. The really significant manifest events are sometimes called epic events. At the same time, there are slight alterations occurring in unspectacular aspects of life, many of which go largely unnoticed by contemporaries but which over a long term represent significant change--shifts in family size or structure, economic patterns, or assimilation of minorities into the dominant culture, for example. Some historians call these latent events. The relationship between manifest and latent events is a central consideration for historians. As Bernard Bailyn has pointed out, "the essence and drama of history lie precisely in the relationship between latent conditions, which set the boundaries of human existence, and the manifest problems with which people consciously struggle."⁵ Involving

students in the use of composite census data on the one hand and the information the census provides about individual families on the other, perhaps showing them on the move from one state to another and yet another, can give them a sense of these relationships.

Fifth, we find it pays to stress the proper use of traces from the past, the documents, artifacts, memories, and other survivals that can be put to use in forming an historical understanding. Be clear, we tell students, on relationships between the traces and the events or ideas to which they are related. Do not make a trace do more than it is capable of doing, we insist. It seems to help if we explain that traces always need to relate to events in positive and identifiable ways, and that it is unsafe to assume much from the absence of a trace. (Suppose, for example, that a family has a tradition of recording its holiday gatherings with family portraits. A gap in a series of such portraits would not necessarily indicate that no gathering had occurred at the time of the missing portrait.) We try to show students how they can enhance their understanding of one trace by relating it to others. Above all, we strive to teach students that traces do not exist in isolation. A most important question to be faced in the study of history is: How do we know that we know? Careful work with traces, first-hand, helps students raise that question at the proper moments, whether they are reading, researching, or writing history.

Sixth, we consider it important to avoid the negative aspects of what might be called the "science fair syndrome." We believe in involving everyone. We try not to put too much stress on winners or on attractiveness of projects or exhibits they might make. We don't set up the assignments so that only the most able students have the opportunity to engage in the pursuit of the history of the nearby world. Average and below average students have as great a need as the brightest student to understand the influence of the past on their circumstances.

Done properly, nearby history can reawaken interest in the academic pursuit of history, persuade students of the value of historical study and inform the search for universals by increasing awareness of particulars. It offers a means, in other words, for making vital connections. That well-known social philosopher Henry Ford acknowledged the value of nearby history once he outgrew his "history is more or less bunk" phase. He began concentrating his earnest, if not always well-directed efforts upon preserving and presenting nearby history through his vast collections of artifacts relating to the lives of ordinary folks. At the entrance to Ford's Greenfield Village museum stands a sign with his conclusion to which we heartily subscribe: "The farther you look back, the farther you can see ahead."

NOTES

¹The Home Place (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968; originally published in 1948), 59.

²Ronald E. Butchart, "Pedagogy of the (Less) Oppressed: Second Thoughts on the Crisis in History Teaching," Teaching History, IV (Spring, 1979), 3-9.

³David A. Gerber, "Local and Community History: Some Cautionary Remarks on an Idea Whose Time Has Returned," The History Teacher, XII (November, 1979), 8. Gerber's article, incidentally, includes a valuable review of three waves of interest in local and community history. The first of these he sees as centered in pre-Civil War New England, initiated by native white Protestants to extol the supposed virtues of the world their ancestors had created and to credit that world with giving rise to the Revolution. The second, prompted by

the Centennial celebrations, responded to dislocations resulting from industrialization, urbanization, and the beginning of an influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. In this second wave, he says, appeared the first generation of academic historians, "heavily comprised of Anglo and Germanophiles influence by germ theories of civilization. It set as its goal the discovery of the distant Anglo-Saxon origins of idealized American institutions." The third wave came with the depression. It celebrated folk themes and folk peoples, quite in contrast to the elitist character of the earlier waves.

⁴H.P.R. Finberg, "Local History," in Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp, Local History: Object and Pursuit (Newton Abbott: David R. Charles, 1967), 39.

⁵Quoted in Michael Kammen, ed., The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 38.