Proper Attitude

When one considers the study of history, “attitude” is not perhaps the first word that comes to mind. However, the proper attitude, a certain state of mind, is exactly what one needs, not only to succeed in the study of history, but also to enjoy the intellectual journey along the way. Here is the best news: there is no one “correct” attitude. The proper attitude is the one that excites you and makes you eager to learn more about history.

If a discussion of the proper attitude still seems a little strange to you, consider what can transpire with an improper attitude. Do you still remember high school history? Do you remember the endless series of dates and names that you needed to memorize for those horrible tests? Do you remember thinking after graduation that history was the last subject that could ever pique your interest? Well, that is what historians consider an improper attitude, and it breaks our hearts that so many people have been deprived of the rewards of learning about history, and themselves, because of a few mind-numbing high school history classes. In fact, many historians would agree that all of those dates and names do not even qualify as one of the top five most important aspects of our field.

As if the endless string of names and dates were not enough to dull your interest in history, much of what we learned as adolescents focused on topics that did not appeal to us. Even worse, some of our older textbooks were downright offensive, often ignoring or belittling large portions of humanity. If you ever stumble upon an old history textbook from the 1970s or 1980s (or even earlier), you might notice something strange and quite disturbing. There seems to be a preponderance of old, wealthy, white men in wigs waging war, or else majestic royalty directing their kingdoms to imminent glory and power. Where are women? Where are the contributions and experiences of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities? What is happening in steel mills and coalmines, on small farms, in Appalachia, in the Philippines, in Africa, or on American Indian reservations? When you think about these extensive and troubling gaps, most people only encounter one tiny portion of history, thereby presenting a lopsided, inaccurate, and often dull account of our amazingly vast and diverse world.

Yet before you get too excited and begin singing songs of praise that names and dates are not all they are cracked up to be, I must caution you. History might be so much more than a recitation of dry fact, but empirical data remain integral to the field. This should not come as a surprise. Consider any field of study, or even a hobby for which you possess a talent and passion. Let’s take playing piano, for example. Unless you were born the reincarnation of Mozart, I imagine you had to work pretty hard to master the basic mechanics of playing before your fingers began to slide effortlessly across the keys. Yet now you can play Chopin fluidly, and is that not much more thrilling than playing “Mary Had a Little Lamb”?

Think of history as a craft or a work of art. In order to excel, you must have a solid understanding of the nuts and bolts of the field, and that means understanding the basic timeline of history, as well as the central figures and movements that have propelled humanity forward (and, occasionally, backward). At first, this might not seem too exciting, but I think we can all agree that it is important to know that the Thirteen
Colonies did not fight the American Revolution against the Kingdom of Bavaria, and that the Middle Ages followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. Dry as this might sound, once you recognize what is required of you, it is far less unpleasant than you might think. It is also the necessary precondition for developing the proper attitude and learning to love history.

The next step in developing the proper attitude towards studying history is deciding what topics and events in humanity’s past most interest you. Where is your historical niche? This can be an incredibly rewarding journey, but it can sometimes be quite daunting. After all, you have ten thousand years of humanity and seven continents to grapple with, not to mention all the different forms of historical writing. So where to begin? The answer lies in stepping back and giving yourself a good, solid, introspective look. Who are you, and what inspires you?

Perhaps a personal story of how I discovered my historical attitude is as good a place to start as any. As a boy, I loved listening to my grandfather tell me stories of his early years. Growing up during Prohibition, he would deliver corn syrup to bootleggers, which they then used to dye their bathtub gin. He told me about learning to swim in the local quarry, about getting into mischief with his friends, about quitting high school to support his family during the Depression and, against significant odds, going back to high school to get his diploma. He regaled me with stories of World War II, and how his travels abroad altered his perspective on the world.

My grandfather was a compelling storyteller, my personal hero, and someone whose life experiences reflected much of US history during the twentieth century. Yet his name is not to be found in the history books, a fact I often found troubling. I started thinking in college about the millions of people like my grandfather who have the potential to inform and inspire us, but whose voices have not yet been heard.

Then, during my senior year of college, I discovered a form of history called microhistory. In microhistory, historians examine particular towns or cities. Sometimes they focus on one small, forgotten event that has the power to explain the origins of much more famous moments in history. Above all, microhistories include the individual voices and experiences of everyday people that the “big” histories of famous politicians, thinkers, and artists often ignore. In microhistory, I found my perspective and my voice, and perspective and voice are the foundations of the proper attitude.

My own journey of discovery might be some food for thought as you begin to develop your historical attitude. Some people find their voice through a particular historical perspective, like I did. Maybe microhistory is not for you, but another historical perspective is. Do you like to sit outside on a warm summer evening, drinking a glass of iced tea and pondering great philosophical ideas with your friends? If so, intellectual history (the history of ideas) might be the key to finding your attitude. Does the history of political movements fascinate you? Political history might be the avenue to follow toward finding your attitude. Does a great work of art contain the secrets of our humanity? Art history is calling you.

Although many of you might find your inspiration in the different ways that people write about history, it certainly is not the only path to developing your historical attitude. Look around you. Everything you see has a historical antecedent, and so much of who you are as a person is the product of intricate historical processes. Ask yourself: What
excites me about life? When you walk down the street, what are some of the ideas that cross your mind? Is it the theater? Cinema? Carpentry? Urban planning? Gardening? Do you ever wonder why they developed as they did? Their histories might surprise you.

I also encourage you to look at popular references to history, in the forms of historical fiction, film, music, or even old sitcoms. They might be fairly hazy on facts, and somewhat sensationalist, but if they allow you to expand your historical imagination, their inaccuracies need not be bad things. Just be prepared to rethink your point of view once you learn what really happened. For example, I love watching movies that were filmed during the 1930s and 1940s, or take place during that period. As I expanded my historical knowledge, I began to realize just how inaccurate or misleading most of them are. Still, that doesn’t stop me from watching them. I just watch with a much better eye, and, if anything, I find the screenings to be more enjoyable.

Once you get a handle on what you enjoy doing and what makes you want to sit down, think, and question, you are already most of the way to developing the proper historical attitude. In fact, the single most important factor involved in developing that attitude is being confident in who you are as a person and understanding your own point of view. If you do not have an independent point of view, you cannot discuss or debate the lessons of the past, and that is one of the most thrilling parts of studying history. Remember the famous ancient Greek aphorism guarding the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know Thyself.”

Once you understand yourself, your strengths as well as your weaknesses, you can begin to find your voice, which is another way of saying “attitude.” As I have mentioned, history is so much more than a collection of names and dates. It is the lens through which we discuss and debate the foundations of human society. How did we get to where we are today? Where will we head tomorrow? Perhaps the most important question for your development is: Where do I fit into all of this? Indeed, finding the proper attitude for you is the central question. The power of history lies in its ability to teach you about who you are and to force you to ask profound questions about human nature. Before you can do that, however, you must have some idea of the type of person you are and hope to become. Once you do so, then the fun of being a historian begins.