

The History They Didn't Teach Me

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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Several years ago, Beverly and I visited the Oriental Institute in Chicago. There, housed in a building on the campus of the University of Chicago, are the relics collected by generations of archeologists, prizes from all over the near east--great winged bulls from Assyria, and the blue glazed brick gate of Ishtar from Babylon, small ceramic goddesses from Palestine, and hieroglyphs and scarabs and steles from Egypt. For the most part, the exhibits had not changed very much since I had visited the Institute while a student at the University decades earlier. Indeed, even the dust had a familiar look to it. However, as we turned a corner and headed toward the exit, there was a new exhibit, dedicated to the memory of one of the archeologists who had uncovered the treasures housed in the Institute, Dr. James Breasted.

As I examined this newest addition to an aged collection, my eye fell upon a very familiar-looking object. It was a book--a thick, red-bound school book. It was the text, written by James Breasted, which I had used in the fourth grade. Now, if you want a sense that the world is passing you by at a gallop, there is no better way than to discover an item you had used intimately and thoughtlessly, displayed as an artifact in a museum dedicated to archeology.

I stood and looked at that book for a long time. It had played an important part in my life. It was the first encounter I had had with the systematic study of human origins and developments. It set my feet on a path which I have followed from that day to this. In the fourth grade, and from the pages of James Breasted's book, I learned to love history. Throughout high school, History was my favorite course of study. I read historical fiction and books of history with an avidity which is hard to explain.

Over the years, I crammed my head full of facts. I was never very good with dates, but I understood the flow of history. I knew the sequence of Pharaonic periods in ancient Egypt. I could list the Roman Emperors from Augustus through the fall of Rome. I could recite the history of Charlemagne and recount the career of Richard the Lionhearted; I knew the crusades and their history. I could list the Kings and Queens of England from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth II; I knew the intricacies of the story of the Tudor dynasty and how it related to the Protestant Reformation. I knew Napoleon's career from Corsica to St. Helena. I could list the battles of the American Civil War chronologically and tell you who commanded on each side. In short, I became a history nerd.

It is not surprising that in college, one of my two majors was history. For four years, I took virtually every history course offered, and did a great deal of reading on the side as well. And in the years since, I have been a devoted member of the History Book Club,

filling my shelves with volumes about religious history, cultural history, military history. I find myself endlessly fascinated by the story of the human venture through time. Perhaps it is in the genes; my eldest sister was a history major, as is one of my sons.

The fascinating thing about all this, as I look back on it, is how very narrow my education as an historian has been. Despite years of study and more years of reading, what I have been taught about human history has been focused on a very narrow portion of the human spectrum. I have learned a very great deal about western Europeans. I have learned a very great deal about those civilizations in which western European culture is presumed to be rooted. I have learned next to nothing about the history of the vast majority of human beings. In all the years of my formal schooling, I was never offered a course in the history of China or India. In all the years of my formal schooling, I was never offered a course in the history of native American peoples. In all the years of my formal schooling, I was never offered a course in the history of Africa--except that history which extolled the European nations which brought civilization to the "dark continent." Indeed, I find it intriguing that in all the years of my formal study, Egypt was never referred as an African civilization. It was represented as the southern end of the fertile crescent, all of the diagrams and maps carefully lifting the great civilization of the Nile out of Africa, and attaching it to the non-African civilizations of Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia.

The history I absorbed during all those years was profoundly racist, focused upon the unexamined assumption that the civilizations of Western Europe represent the pinnacle of human accomplishment, and that other cultures are important primarily as they contributed to or impacted upon that civilization. It would require a number of jarring experiences before I would begin to understand how profoundly limiting and inadequate my knowledge of history was, and how the story we tell about the human experience may help or hinder us as we attempt to confront the challenges of a world become a global neighborhood.

I first became dimly aware of this when, as a junior high-school student, I learned the United States was at war in Korea. I immediately dropped by the public library and asked the librarian where I would find the books on Korea. She led me to a collection of books about Careers. When I repeated my inquiry, she replied that the library had no books on that subject. Indeed, no one had ever asked for books on that subject. We would fight a long and bloody war in a land we knew nothing about, and throughout that struggle, we would insist that the issue had nothing to do with the people of Korea or the history of the land, but was in truth, a continuation of Euro-American history--the historic struggle between Russia and the west.

And we repeated the same folly a decade later, when we allowed ourselves to become embroiled in an even more bitter struggle in Vietnam--a struggle which had long roots in the history of Southeast Asia--a struggle we never understood because we insisted on interpreting it in terms of an overlay of Euro-American history and concerns. Had we been able to take indigenous people seriously enough to learn their history, much bloodshed might have been avoided. But we did not know them or their history and so we found ourselves mired in a catastrophe we did not understand and could not evade.

But perhaps the most immediate evidence of the cost of the history we were not taught lies closer to home, an ignorance which continues to inflict heavy damage upon us. Two weeks ago, in her sermon on *The Human City*, Beverly made reference to the small city in which we grew up. She mentioned the African American community which was invisible, hidden in the center of the town--a community comprised of people who were not allowed into our public schools, our parks, our museum, our library our swimming pool, our churches; a community of people whose existence was never reported in either of the city's daily papers; a community of people who were rarely ever seen in the city's major shopping area or in the farmers' market; a community of people whose homes, ironically, were clustered around the county jail. But most telling of all, it was a community whose history was missing from the pages of the books I read; whose history was largely ignored in the teaching I received.

Oh, to be sure, I knew about slavery. I knew that from the early days of European settlement people had been enslaved on this continent. There had been indentured servants--people who had agreed to provide a period of labor in exchange for passage to the new world. There had been Native Americans, who proved unsatisfactory slaves because they could not endure the harsh conditions, and insisted on dying. And there were African Slaves who were considered property. We were taught in a dozen subtle ways that the Africans probably had the best of it. There was a limit to the duty owed by indentured servants. It was in the economic interests of the masters to get as much out of them as possible during the time they owed. There was little incentive to treat them with kindness or compassion. African slaves, on the other hand--while they were enslaved for life, and their children were also enslaved, and their grandchildren--were simple folk, largely uncivilized, not expecting much of life. And, because they were property, it was in the best interests of their owners to treat them with care and assure their well-being. We were taught that in many ways American slaves were better off here than they would have been back in Africa. After all, here they were assured a place to live, clothing, food, a Christian culture and the benefits of Western Civilization.

The picture of life for African Americans before the Civil War which was painted in the history I learned was of a simple people, well-cared for and basically happy with their lot, until outside agitators, northern moralists, began their meddling. Filling the slaves' heads with promises of freedom and plenty, a world in which they would be as good as their masters, these abolitionists destroyed the near paradise of the old South. After four years of war, we were taught, ignorant and untrained ex-slaves were set to rule over their former masters in what has been called the Reconstruction Era--a time of cruel mismanagement, scandal, abuse and corruption. Then, as the century drew to a close, "the era of misrule ended," and African Americans disappeared from our history books.

In all of that teaching, I learned little or nothing of the true nature of slavery; I heard little or nothing about the desperate yearning for freedom which drove African Americans to rebellion and revolt, murder and even suicide over and over again, leaving much of the South in a state of fear and alarm; in all of that teaching, I learned little or nothing about the continuing racism which, after emancipation, exhibited itself in segregation laws, and economic constraints which held large numbers of African Americans in peonage. I

learned nothing about the contributions made to the nation by African American artists and poets and musicians and inventors. We learned about Stephen Foster, but not about Scott Joplin; we read Sandburg, and Frost but not Dunbar or Langston Hughes; we barely knew the names of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass. African American history, which was a vital part of our cultural heritage was ignored, passed over, dismissed.

Small wonder that I was caught by surprised when, in 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States began the process which would strike down the laws establishing segregation in this country. The consequence of the history I was not taught was that it had never occurred to me that there was a moral issue in the way my hometown, my school, my life were organized. African Americans were invisible in my text books, in my school, in my town; surely, that must be the way they wanted it. Only slowly did I begin to uncover the hidden history; the untold story, the unspoken truth. Only slowly did I begin to remove the callous which had grown over my conscience.

Perhaps the greatest jolt came when I was serving my first church after seminary. I had come to understand that racism and segregation were evil and inconsistent with the ideals which the nation claimed as its basis. I had come to understand that simple justice required that old patterns be broken. But I did not understand how deep the racism ran until I encountered a play by Martin Duberman, entitled *IN WHITE AMERICA*.

The church had a group which regularly presented readers theater as part of the adult education program. On one occasion, they chose Duberman's documentary drama of the experience of African Americans in this country, from the beginning, before the Mayflower, through to the integration of the High School in Little Rock. I was shaken to my very soul. The tale of brutality, of cruelty, of suffering and of courage and persistence through inhuman treatment helped me understand for the first time how much of the history I had learned was a lie, and how morally impoverished we all are who who are products of that lie.

I did not know how many died on the passage from Africa to America; I did not know how many, laden with chains, threw themselves into the ocean rather than face slavery; I did not know the truth of slavery, and how African American mothers struggled to raise their children in the face of a system which denied the legality of their marriages and defined their children as chattel and refused them any education. I did not know the degree to which, after emancipation, the Euro-American culture consistently demeaned and diminished the African American male, forcing him to passivity or to rage, encouraging illiteracy and punishing any sign of self respect. I had not read the speeches on the floor of the United States Senate justifying lynch law and insisting upon the right of mobs to kill Black men. I had not known of the encounters between African American leaders and various Presidents of the United States who insisted, in the precincts of the White House itself, that a pattern of admitted injustice could not be challenged because it might conflict with greater national interests or might set off a pattern of reprisals. It was the history I was not taught; it was a history I needed to teach myself if I were to understand my own complicity in a continuing moral outrage.

It is a history I still need to learn; a history the entire nation has to learn. It is a history which much be learned in relation to our present challenges and opportunities. While I believe that while history is not prescriptive, it does have consequences. It does frame the challenges with which we must wrestle in the present. What we do not know, what we do not teach, what we hide from ourselves and each other, influences powerfully the circumstances of our lives in ways we do not understand. The hidden history of the African American in this land of plenty--more than three centuries of oppression, of subjugation, of living off the crusts of the larger society, of seeing a handful of potential leaders co-opted by the Euro-American culture while the vast majority are consigned to invisibility or worse, made the object of our fears and nightmares--shapes the challenges of our times.

The echoes of that untaught history can be heard in the current debate over welfare reform, and the rate of illegitimate births and minimum wage laws and a host of similar issues. The echoes of that untaught history can be read in the pages of a best-selling book which purports to use scientific statistics to demonstrate that African Americans are somehow intellectually inferior, despite the fact that no one knows what the I.Q. is or what Mr. Binet's test measures, or how it relates to acculturation.

If we knew the history of the great cultures built in Africa by native peoples, would we entertain a notion that the descendants of those peoples are *genetically* inferior? If we knew the full history of the African American people in the United States--their incredible persistence in the face of the unbelievable repression and suffering, their ability to sustain families and relationships in the face of uncompromising obstacles--would we allow ourselves believe that somehow their vitality has suddenly vanished at the end of the twentieth century. If we knew that history perhaps we might begin to understand that the so-called collapse of the Black family is more a response to our need for a scapegoat than it is a consequence of inadequacies in the African American community. If we knew that history, we might examine why we, as a society, so desperately need an underclass which is largely African American. If we knew that history, we might understand how inappropriate it is to apply our standard of success to a people formed in the maelstrom of centuries of unremitting hostility and persecution or to judge them in relation to the experience of other ethnic communities. If we knew that history, we might affirm that the very survival of African Americans among us is nothing less than a triumph of the human spirit, and we might celebrate their poets and artists and musicians for the incredible accomplishments they represent.

But we do not know the history. We know the lies; we know the distortions; we know the half-truths. We are shaped by the history they did not teach us and we judge and we establish policies on the basis of that ignorance. And the ancient, tragic patterns repeat themselves endlessly. Perhaps, if we could consign more of the history books and the assumptions they represent to museums, if we might open ourselves to the history we were not taught, we might, at the very least, learn to temper our judgments. And if we were lucky, we might discover there a more profound hope and affirmation on which to build a common future. The words are from Langston Hughes:

"The past has been a mint
Of blood and sorrow.
That must not be
True of tomorrow.