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Mark A. Scherer, World Church Historian

"Through the Mists of Time: Chats with the Church Historian"
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A brief essay on the historian's task does not usually express the excitement and passion inherent in the human story. Absent from such paragraphs are the graphic accounts of the successes and achievements, trials and tribulations of decisions, both important and insignificant, that chart the course of human progress through time. Such an essay does, however, establish ground rules for serious explorations that transform the dull, rote recitation of names, places, and events in the past that lack meaning, into the life-aligning lessons of history. In a very real sense, for better or for worse, the decisions and actions of our predecessors are their gifts as well as to our descendants. Let us grasp both the liberties and limitations of the discipline of history in order to properly utilize those gifts in the present.

Besides being captivated by the enthusiastic instructional style of my history professors at Graceland College, the interpretive nature of the historical discipline attracted me to the profession (my low C in college algebra—a hard-fought, but victorious, battle—also weighed heavily in my decision). As an impressionable young student, I learned that the nature of the historical discipline—rather than being an arena of study full of facts, dates, and certitude—is actually subjective, mysterious, and, at best, interpretive. In those early years, I anticipated the important historical questions of who, what, where, how, and when. For a budding historian of average intelligence and untapped ability, those were the easy ones.

The most challenging questions, and certainly the most difficult to answer, asked, “Why?” In dealing with this question, the human intrigue emerged. The answer to why was built on the foundational information created by the previous questions but required much more careful reflection.

Now, as a professional historian, I find “Why?” still attracts my greatest interest and attention. For example, asking “Why was the church was restored in upstate New York?” seems more interesting (and perhaps important) than being asked “What is Newell K. Whitney's middle name?” (It’s Kimball.) Frequently, the inquiries of why are the most difficult to answer because of their interpretive nature. Undoubtedly, I frustrate those who assume an objective history when I give my answer without hesitation, but with some qualification rather than with absolute certainty. On numerous occasions I have stated that my responses have, at best, a “five-year warranty.” This is because my knowledge of the past continues to grow as new documents and artifacts surface and change my understanding. Thus, I constantly review what I believe about things historical.

There are at least two aspects of the historical discipline that do not change, however. One historical axiom comes from Spanish philosopher George Santayana who suggested that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes. The accuracy of this suggestion has withstood the most important test in the historian's toolbox—the test of time. Most thinkers agree that those who do not know or appreciate their history (victims of what I refer to as “historical amnesia”) cannot have a vision for their personal future or for those in their charge. The two—the past and the future—are inseparable.

A second historical constant may be somewhat surprising: “history never repeats itself.”

The historical context of an event, which includes the geographical setting, the affect of outside pressures, participants, and impact on future events, can never be exactly replicated. Though seemingly in contradiction to Santayana's thoughts above, this axiom cautions those who would make simplistic judgements about the relationship between the circumstances of the past and the present. The lessons from that history will always be available to the serious analyst who will then be able to avoid the "mistakes" to which Santayana referred.

Historical analysis gone awry can be hazardous, even dangerous. There are many pitfalls, but I will mention only five. *History as hindsight* is a common temptation in the study of a historical figure. Here we fix blame and render judgment for those making a decision when we, a hundred years later, have the benefit of knowing the results. In so doing, we become "arm-chair quarterbacks" in our assessment of historical decision makers without realizing that the person making the decision did not know its consequences at the time of its making.

Presentism is the common failing of imposing the values of today upon a people of an earlier time. For example, we want so much to believe that the early Latter Day Saints were vocal abolitionists standing solidly against slavery when the historical record on this point is unclear. Wishful thinking can distort the record, and thus the lessons of the past.

Horse blinder history is an unwillingness to consider the legitimacy of a differing historical position simply because of disagreement. Those who pursue the historian's task with preconceived notions and refuse to consider alternative possibilities are not intellectually honest and rarely arrive at dependable conclusions.

Finally, the closely related, *Pick-and-choose history* is considering only those facts that support a historical position while discarding relevant facts that may conflict with it. Like horse blinder history, pick-and-choose history is usually motivated by the pressure to conform to a specific ideology or faith system that obstructs free thinking and honest historical analysis.

The heavy price of committing these errors is a false history that leads to a superficial identity in the present, and a hopeless future. When we share an authentic account of our history (as best as our humanity will allow), we testify to our integrity as a people who are reconciled with their past, honest with their present identity, and have great hope for their future. Historians make their greatest contribution when they impart the lessons learned by earlier people who stood at the crossroads of their decision making, chose their path, and lived (and died) with their decisions. Those lessons, if applied properly, can guide us to full and productive lives, both individually and institutionally.