

Kentucky Wesleyan College
Providing a different point of view on pertinent topics



September 2021

Enjoy this month's edition of *Wesleyan Way Perspectives*, and don't forget to join us this Thursday, Sept. 16, at 5 p.m. CT, for a special Virtual Third Thursday hosted by Dr. Cousins. He looks forward to meeting you then. We hope to see you there!

Zoom Meeting ID: 951 8880 3415

History Teaches Humility

In the winter of 1841, Emily Bruce, wife of Lawrence Bruce of Monroe, Ohio, gave birth to the couple's first and only child, a dark-haired baby girl named Adelaide Eliza. Adelaide's time with her parents was short. Mother Emily died at 23; Lawrence passed at 30, just after Adelaide's seventh birthday. No other records of Emily or Lawrence survive. We can assume they were farmers—most Ohioans were—and that they died of something like yellow fever or pneumonia—many Ohioans did. But all we really know is that they died young, had one child and were buried in Ohio.

Adelaide's own survival was never guaranteed; in the 1840s less than six in 10 children made

it to the age of 5 and chances of contracting a fatal disease increased in adolescence. But Adelaide, orphaned child she was, had a wonderful life. Disease did not take her, the Civil War did not touch her, and when she did pass, at the ripe age of 87, she left behind eight living children, dozens of grandchildren and scores of great-grandchildren. The great-great and great-great-great grandchildren of Adelaide, including myself, now number in the many hundreds.

Every family genealogy has its share of incredible but historically unremarkable chain reactions leading to present day. These twists and turns of causation pass through individuals and remind us that every life is blessed with astonishing potential and enduring significance. As a decedent, I am grateful for Adelaide's life; as an historian, I am impressed by the rich complexity of that life. There are great lessons in her history and in the histories of all our ancestors. Those historical lessons compel us to show deference to the lives that made ours possible, to judge them as we hope to be judged, to value our own contributions with respect to theirs, and to nest our originality, our perceived uniqueness, within time's great unbound continuum. In short, history teaches humility.

History teaches humility through perspective. It is only natural to frame accomplishment by yardsticks of the past; after all, we can only know progress if we know what we are progressing from. But one generation's certitude of enlightenment is another's definiteness of embarrassment. Of course, this works both ways. The old have always had contempt for the young who are too privileged, too profligate, and far too soft for the hardness of adulthood. Generation shaming will always be a feature of modern life. Knowledge of its long history and assured future should compel us to extend mercy to our forebearers as well as our decedents.

History teaches humility through its inherent mutability. Standards and habits of living, etiquette, health, wealth and acceptance are time bound and site specific. Choices of individuals and the collective wisdom of the group seek reference and find confirmation from prevailing norms. The past is therefore best appreciated and assessed in the past, by its merits and on its own terms. You and I may be remembered for all the good and none of the bad, a little of both or none of the above, but the value of our lives will be determined by those who care enough to appraise us. Trust that our yet-to-be-discovered flaws will frame those characterizations.

Finally, history humbles us with the reality that all knowledge—and all the products of all that knowledge—exist as compounding interest on God's initial deposit. Ecclesiastes 1:9 can be translated as, "there is nothing new under sun." Said in another way, what we mistake for originality is just the latest expression of accumulated experience. Behind every great breakthrough are many others, each with separate histories and contributors that are, in turn, reliant on breakthroughs of many others. We should be aware of our place in line and humbled by the lifetimes of work preceding our own.

Historical humility inspires gratitude and manifests in grace. Modern life is hard for many but was harder, by orders of magnitude, for most throughout human history. We cannot understand the hardships of prior generations but we can appreciate those who suffered and celebrate those who brought an end to that suffering. We draw inspiration from their sacrifices and dignify their memories by giving credit for the comforts, safety, luxuries and freedoms purchased at unthinkable costs. We act in repayment of those debts by extending grace to others, listening, understanding, learning, sharing generously and forgiving abundantly. Humility gives paths to learning by reminding us of humanity's inherent imperfectability.

When we see ourselves as part of the great chain of historical causality, when we understand that history is constructed with the benefit of hindsight, and when we account for the complexity and mutability of the past, we are brought down from sneering heights of personal aggrandizement. From here, we can dialogue and debate in the spirit of mutual benefit. We can see the value in unfamiliar ideas, reverse long-held opinions and change perspectives. Those of us trusted with the custodianship of Kentucky Wesleyan College have a special relationship with the past and a special reason to be humbled. After all, our college is a permanent reminder of our own impermanence. It is more consequential than any one of us because it represents a vast collective. Its memories are deeper and its traditions more meaningful because they were curated over generations.

Custodianship requires historical humility. We honor traditions and memorialize work that made ours possible; we contemplate the perils of each decision and the potentials of indecision; and we celebrate threads of common bond while searching out new connections. Humility guides all of this. Humility submerges individual interests in ways that benefit the whole—right-minded governance and open-minded, close working collaboration hedge intemperance. And humility begs us to meditate daily on the work done and what is to come. The opposite of humility is, of course, arrogance, a posture of self-satisfaction and self-significant importance. When we squint narrowly at the past, we lose our bearings and give the basest, most ignoble parts of our nature free reign; we celebrate celebrity instead of the dignity of work and search for comfort instead of responsibility; we sacrifice the eternal consequence for temporal influence. Humility gives balance, restores perspective and clarifies meaning. The best guide to humility is history and the best, most humbling histories are our own.

Best wishes,

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