

History's Lessons: Howard Zinn, Will & Ariel Durant, and Us

Julia Older

Delivered at UUFRC on Sunday October 12, 2003

Today we celebrate, as we say in Berkeley, Indigenous Peoples Day. We hesitate to call it Columbus Day because of all that we have, more or less recently, begun to talk about that was true of Columbus. The fact that he acted in a brutish manner here in "the New World." He killed people. He enslaved people. He tortured animals. It is also true that he was an intrepid adventurer, an explorer, a competent commander, and a great persuader. He did manage to get the funds from Ferdinand and Isabella to make the trip.

Prior to this time and for many years there had been a time in Spain of relative religious tolerance. It was called the "Convivencia." According to what I've read, and it is certainly hard to know how much of anything is really true, the stories go that it was a time when many expressions of religion got on pretty well with one another. There were certainly lots of Jews and lots of Catholics and lots of Muslims living close together. But, Ferdinand and Isabella had dreams of grandeur and they began confiscating land in the name of the crown to fund expeditions, to rule the seas and to claim new lands. They met this great Italian dreamer and decided to fund his expedition in the name of Spain . . . or so our romanticized version of the tale of how the New World is conquered begins. They also sent their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, to marry the sickly brother of Henry the VIII in England. A few years after her young husband died, she married the famous Henry. Strange that I had never connected that before, Catherine of Aragon and her parents Ferdinand and Isabella.

I was preparing to speak about history and human nature, and to that end I decided to read Will and Ariel Durant's book. Now they have many, many volumes on the history of the world, but they also have a slim little book called The Lessons of History. That is the one I headed for. It is more of a philosophic overview of the past, in which they try to see big patterns. Character, economics, growth, war, and government are chapters. They also acknowledge that all such attempts are created from the observer's own bias from which we can never escape. They say, "Most history is guessing and the rest is prejudice." A very post-modern way of thinking!

They say about wars that the motives of the usually hidden leaders may be economic but the result is usually determined by the passions of the masses.

They say that every vice was at one time a virtue. Pugnacity, brutality, sexual readiness and greed served the hunter well.

They say that when we lift the banner of justice and freedom, it is the poor who crave justice and the rich who desire the freedom.

They say that the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is inevitable, as is the eventual correction of that concentration. This concentration happens most quickly within a system that offers ample liberty. A tyrant or despot may slow it all down. This flow of economic resources from the many to the few and back again, they say, is the systolic and diastolic beat at the heart of the social organism.

They say that if freedom is absolute, it dies in chaos.

They say that economics achieves more ends than revolutions.

They say that it is of no use to talk about states' rights when financial institutions and money crosses borders. (And I say watch the European union)

They say that cooperation happens best when there is a common enemy. They say that the Earth will finally become one interdependent system when we finally have interplanetary wars.

And their final chapter: Is progress real? Every age has boasted of its time as the best of times. But, the Durants say all our technological advances are only new ways of getting to the same old ends: Acquiring goods, pursuing mates, fighting wars. And science itself is neutral. It will as easily harm as help. The Durants do hold up the Renaissance, which stressed mythology and art equally to science and power, as wiser than our current model. But, they say, we have not improved our purposes.

They don't have much optimism that things are getting better, but neither, I think, do they say that things are getting worse — although our modern weaponry puts quite a huge unknown in the mix. In general, they say: "The more things change, the more they stay the same." It is the best of times and it is the worst of times.

I don't know if that is true forever and ever, but I've been arguing for years that human beings have not been making any progress during the period on Earth that we have been writing and recording history, since Sumer and Egypt. Some things have obviously improved. Others have just as obviously gotten worse. Killing one another in the street is down; killing one another with bombs is up. Genocide

is alive and well. Slavery is flourishing; in fact it is cheaper now to own slaves than ever before in history. I have been unconvinced that our very nature is improving. But, I'm not done with my questions or my learning yet.

Take any slice of history and I think you will see terrible, awful discouraging things . . . and masterful, beautiful, exquisite things. Even within each person, as you have now heard me say many times, there is an inevitable mix of some things unpleasant, grasping, greedy, and self-serving, and some things shining and compassionate and loving.

Will and Ariel Durant, writing this summation of their lives spent wrestling with history, make many intriguing statements. In summation they ask: "What if every child were schooled for twenty years and given free access to books and museums that hold the accumulated experience of our species? Not just facts and dates but our entire moral, mental, technical and aesthetic heritage?" If any progress is real they say, it is because we are born into a richer heritage, a pedestal on which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises the ground and support of our being."

I read another book for this sermon. In fact, it was hard to stop reading. One thing kept leading to another. The next book was *You Can't Be Neutral On a Moving Train*, the autobiography of Howard Zinn (who also wrote *A People's History of the United States*). I picked it up at General Assembly. Our own Beacon Press published it. My beginning question was, how does it happen that someone develops such a thoughtful and critical way to look at what is happening? And how does that someone come to devote his life to social justice?

Howard was born in 1923. He volunteered for World War II because he wanted to fight fascism. He was willing to risk his life for that goal. He became a bombardier and flew many missions. One day orders came to bomb a little town in France — when France was already in the hands of the allies, but there were a few thousand German soldiers holed up in Royan. Each bomb bay was loaded with sticky fire bombs, which we later called napalm. The Germans troops were killed, AND the entire French civilian population of Royan. In Zinn's mind, it could not have been necessary. That was the seed that sparked the profound questions that led Zinn in a new direction. Years later, teaching at Spelman, a historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia, he was swept into the integration movement. Not suddenly out of a clear sense of obligation, but like most of the rest of us, step by step as he gradually become aware of injustice and did the next right thing. And then the next right thing. During the marches, he saw the terrible treatment of the blacks and, over and over again, the police refusing to protect them. The Federal Government knew. The President knew. It took time and commitment and personal courage to stay the course. Incrementally, Zinn stood for what he could see was right, stood up and learned to speak his truth even when he was afraid, and used his influence to gather more help.

As a professor, he encouraged his students to relinquish the safety of silence, for to be silent was to be complicit. He remains personally convinced of the possibility of surprise, and the importance of human action in changing what looks unchangeable.

OK, now put those two books to the side. I need to tell you what occurred for me as I was immersed in these histories and wrestling with my own philosophy. I noticed something that I had not put together before. That's the way these things happen. You sit there thinking about life and from left field something suddenly pops into place. It might seem a non-sequitur but there you are roaming around in ideas and you hear yourself say something that you might have been saying for a while but not really heard or fully understood.

Something finally sat up in front of me. I'm going to make a statement about human nature that I think I do believe, but the implications of it really shock me. I really thought that I had a different notion of what human nature is, but this hit me between flat the eyes. I'm not sure that you will instantly understand why this would be such a big deal within my philosophy of "how things are." Or, why all of this reading (and by the way, there were at least two more books, but I only have twenty minutes.) Maybe it will fall as something far more ordinary to your ears, but it suddenly came clear to me that I have been saying, and actually do believe, that if people have what they need, then their behavior is generally good. I have been saying this and acting as if this is what I believed, but I didn't take it back into my understanding of history or my personal philosophy and ask if it was congruent with the notion I have about progress. I finally noticed that I had an important belief that was hanging somehow outside of my philosophic and moral system.

Bronfenbrenner's quote has made sense to me, "given air and water and sun and soil, a plant does not need to be told how to grow." That seems true to me. If people are not worried about their needs being met, then a more communally responsible morality grows. That has been my operating assumption, even though I have many exceptions. I know kids who have been taught carefully and loved well who still make destructive choices, and I know quite a lot of folks who have had terrible lives and who are deeply compassionate and generous.

OK, the inevitable next step. If I believe that, that given what they need, people generally act in ways that care for community, then maybe I believe (and here is the big "Ah ha!") that there is something good about the universe. Maybe I do believe that "The arc of the world is long but it bends toward justice," as our own Unitarian forefather William Ellery Channing said. I didn't think that I believed that. I would have said, if you asked me, that the universe was neutral. Without a valance of good or bad. But I noticed as I thought about history and people who are or have been marginalized, and prison projects, that I do believe that if people feel safe, if people have their needs met, if they are not horribly corrupted or damaged, they are very likely to act in ways that care for one another. We

look to community not only for survival but to enjoy, and I say "That's good." That is not morally neutral. What does it do to my philosophy and my belief about the nature of the universe if I believe that people are better than neutral if they have what they need? I'm afraid it changes most everything.

Now I need to spend more time thinking about what our needs might include that need to be satisfied before community can be cherished. I'll revisit Maslow and some others.

I have been really dedicating myself to noticing what I notice. I know you have heard that before. I apologize for repeating it now and for saying it again in the future. Noticing is the core work of the human animal. We can reflect on our lives. Noticing is the essential starting place if we aspire to deserve the term "moral primates." That's British philosopher Mary Midgley's term for us. Moral primates. (More reading.)

Let's go back to Christopher Columbus, this man who in some situations acted brutishly. He lived inside a time when his personal behavior was probably ordinary. I don't think he was of greater brutality than his counterparts. I have no reason to believe that he was more brutish than other adventurers of his time. I don't imagine that he saw the consequences of his actions on others around him. Certainly not the natives who looked so different from his people or the animals. Until a few centuries ago, it was generally believed that animals didn't feel at all. They just reacted to stimuli but it was not an experience of pain.

Another event occurred in my mental life. (Yep, still more reading.) An article by Ken Wilbur, talking about the Iraq war and George Bush and Tony Blair, in which Wilbur said that Bush is a Blue. Ken Wilbur, in case you don't know him, is, according to his book reviews, "an astonishing visionary and philosopher. Often called one of the most significant thinkers of our time." He said that Bush is a Blue on the scale of moral consciousness and he behaves in ways you might expect a Blue to behave. Wilbur said it without the negative judgment that I might use toward Bush's foreign and environmental policies. Blair, he said, is closer to being a green. I'm kind of a Green, not to be confused in Wilbur's system with the Green Party. Although I'm kind of a Green Party person, too.

Ken Wilbur's Integral Psychology has a scale, a bit the way we have traditionally thought of the evolutionary scale. Wilbur's scale starts with Beiges, who are only concerned with being alive. Several steps away are the Reds, who will fight anything with little remorse. "Let me at 'em, let me at 'em." A bit more distant are the Blues, with a strict moral code. Wars for great causes are likely between Blues. Skip a few more colors to the Greens, who understand our connectedness and do not believe in war as an answer but are still not operating fully on a transpersonal level. I understand Wilbur to say that we are making moral progress. Collectively. That each of us starts as Beige and throughout our

lives has the potential of entering other realms. I was trying hard to avoid language that implies one realm is better than another. It is tough to avoid thinking of an ascending hierarchy. There is a kind of "isness" to the realm we live in. It is not our task to condemn Beige. Our energy would be better spent evolving ourselves.

Columbus was probably a good Red. Full of excitement and courage and willingness to take great leaps.

So here I stand now holding a bag of new questions. Mostly I am trying to notice what I take for granted. What is normal for me, for us, here in this time that will be thoroughly condemned in the near future? I hope to be ahead of the curve and, like Howard Zinn, be out there standing with those who do the work of justice. May we all keep noticing our lives and waking up and making connections and living compassionately whether or not we are sure that there is such a thing as progress.

Happy Indigenous People's Day. May you do good work for worthy causes and keep on learning.