John Trumbull, "The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775." Photo credit: © Francis G. Mayer/Corbis.

S. T. Lee Lecture in the Humanities: On Writing and Teaching History

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This is a story I heard from J. D. McClatchy, the poet: Some years ago, a young teenage girl in a small town in California was walking past the public library. She was alone. Thinking that she had never been in a library before, she decided to go in and see what there was to see. Once inside, she started walking among the aisles of bookshelves, in no particular direction, just random looking. Then, at one point, she reached up, took a book off the shelf, opened it to the first page, and started to read. And she had read only the first page when she decided that she had to have that book. It wouldn't satisfy her to take it out of the library. She had to have it for her own.

So she put it back and went directly to the local bookstore, only to find they didn't have the book. So back to the library she went and stole the book.

She is today the chair of the English department of one of our leading universities. I'm not going to tell you her name because she still has the book. But I want to read to you what she read on that page that made her determined to have it part of her life. The book is *The Woman of Andros*, by Thornton Wilder, published in 1930.

> The Earth sighed as it turned its course; the shadow of night crept gradually along the Mediterranean, and Asia was left in darkness. The great cliff that was one day to be called Gibraltar held for a long time a gleam of red and orange, while across from it the mountains of Atlas showed deep blue pockets in their shin-

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> ing sides. The caves that surround the Neapolitan gulf fell into a profounder shade, each giving forth from the darkness its chiming or its booming sound. Triumph had passed from Greece and wisdom from Egypt, but with the coming on of night they seemed to regain their lost honours, and the land that was soon to be called Holy prepared in the dark its wonderful burden. The sea was large enough to hold a varied weather: a storm played about Sicily and its smoking mountains, but at the mouth of the Nile the water lay like a wet pavement. A fair tripping breeze ruffled the Aegean and all the islands of Greece felt a new freshness at the close of the day.

Now, that's about history, ancient history. But of course, it's very much more than that. We see the colors; we hear the sounds; we have a sense of scale, taking in the whole Mediterranean Sea. It is history in nature: the "fair tripping breeze ruffled the Aegean and all the islands of Greece felt a new freshness at the close of day." Yet it's also art. It is the art of literature applied to history with a result that's magical.

The starving steal bread: this young woman discovered she had a hunger for something she didn't know existed. History, in this instance, hadn't just touched her mind; it had touched her heart.

History is a lesson in proportions, a larger way of looking at life. History tells us, over and over, that nothing happens only where and when it happens. Every act, every event has antecedents and consequences. This ripple effect is found in both time and space, and in the human heart. History is also a lesson in ambiguities, teaching few certainties. But among the certainties it does teach are that nothing ever had to happen the way it happened: things could have gone off in any number of different directions, for any number of different reasons, and almost anywhere along the way. And there never was a foreseeable future or a simpler time past. These, too, are lessons of history.

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We turn to history – read and write history – to know who we are and where we've come from, to find out what happened and why. But history that sidesteps art, music, literature, and drama – history limited only to politics and the military and social issues – is history with a very great part of the human experience left out. For some chapters of history virtually all that we know is the art – ancient Egypt, for example. Or think of how much of what we feel about the Civil War comes from the photographs by Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan, or the paintings of Winslow Homer, or the Shaw Memorial on Beacon Hill. Or from the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

It's my fervent conviction that history ought to be taught in combination with literature, painting, drama, sculpture, and music. Art is the antidote to dryness – to the notion especially popular among young people that history is dry old stuff, of no interest or possible use. "That's history," they say. "Take it to the ash heap." But as the lines by Thornton Wilder so vividly testify, history doesn't have to be dull. It can even lift the heart.

You can tell a great deal about people, past or present, by what they love, just as you can tell a great deal about a society by what it loves. We know about Jefferson's love of architecture and gardening. John Adams read Shakespeare over and over, as he said, "to fathom the labyrinth of human nature." Lincoln loved Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." Surely the lines, "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil, / Their homely joys, and destiny obscure; / Nor Grandeur hear with disdainful smile, / The short and simple annals of the Poor," take us right to the heart of Abraham Lincoln.

The ebullient Theodore Roosevelt – emblem of the confident, optimistic, new twentieth-century America – would close himself in a room and read by the hour from the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, poetry filled with grief and loss. And if he loved a book, he would read it again and again throughout his life. I don't know how many times he read *Huckleberry Finn*.

Then there was President Harry Truman, going as often as possible to the National Symphony, the supposedly prosaic Harry Truman. If the program included one of his favorite composers – Mozart, for example – he would take the score with him. Truman was the only twentieth-century president who never had the benefit of a college education, but he adored classical music and he never stopped reading history.

George Washington, in the midst of the most horrendous troubles of 1776, would sit late into the night writing long letters about how he wanted things done at the house at Mount Vernon – how the wainscoting must look, what color paint to use, how the siding for the kitchen should be handled. Reading these letters, you wonder, what in the world is he doing, writing about all that, when there was so much else he had to worry about? I think it was his way of maintaining an equilibrium – an emotional balance – to keep from cracking under the strain.

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When General Eisenhower first arrived in England to assume command of the D-Day operations, Churchill advised him to take up some other interest or pastime to help him bear the burdens of his responsibilities. Churchill said that painting had helped him immeasurably in this respect and suggested that Ike give it a try, which he did. And it did save him.

How many times in our drives around Washington or Boston do we look at the statues of bygone generals or politicians and wonder who they are? Yet turn on the radio and there's Gershwin – his music as alive as the day he wrote it.

One of the most vivid examples of how people respond to art, and how their response to art ought to be part of how we understand them as historical figures, is an incident that took place in London in the year 1786. Abigail Adams, during a visit with her husband to the London studio of the American artist Benjamin West, stood for the first time in front of a painting by young John Trumbull, commemorating the Battle of Bunker Hill – *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of*

Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775. Trumbull, a student of West's, had only just completed it.

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Now, Abigail Adams had been an eyewitness to the Battle of Bunker Hill, watching from a rock ledge in Quincy. She had also heard numerous accounts from people who had been closer still. General Warren – Dr. Warren – had been the Adams's family physician and a close friend. Now, for the first time, she was seeing the painting. In a letter to her sister, she said, "To speak of its merit, I can only say that in looking at it, my whole frame contracted. My blood shivered. And I felt a faintness at my heart." She then became extremely excited at the prospect of young Trumbull painting the whole story of the Revolutionary War and what a contribution to the country that would be.

There is more to us that comes from art, music, and literature than we realize, much that has become part of us and shaped us in ways most of us are unaware. Let me offer a few examples. Every time you say you're "green with envy" or "in a pickle," you're quoting Shakespeare, whether you know it or not. If you wrap up an argument by declaring "every dog has his day," that too is Shakespeare. If you observe that "To err is human," or "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," you're quoting lines by Alexander Pope. As for dear old Cervantes, we go along mouthing his words most of all, repeatedly, constantly, happily, one generation after another. Every time you say you "slept not a wink," or "give the devil his due," or call something a "wild goose chase," or say "that's the pot calling the kettle black," you're speaking lines from *Don Quixote*. "Turn over a new leaf." "Birds of a feather flock together." "Mind your own business." "Honesty is the best policy." "I smell a rat." "Mum's the word." All from Cervantes.

Why harp on this? Because you can't understand the people of our own time or any time without an understanding of the culture in which they live or lived. We mustn't just read what those of other days wrote; we should read what they read. Reading the letters of prominent Americans, the protagonists of our founding time, you find them saying things quite profound, or memorable, or moving. And then you find that the words are not theirs; they're quoting what were in their day lines familiar to all.

Of course, you understand, eighteenth-century society was highly advanced. Few, even among the most learned, worried over punctuation. You were free to spell a word however you wished. And no bothering with quotation marks. So often those wonderful lines, that leap out from letters and that are so often attributed to our founders, aren't their lines at all.

Once, working with the Adams papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, I came upon a sentence that stopped me in my tracks. It was in a letter from John Adams to Abigail. He was trying to keep her spirits up in the midst of the Revolution when everything looked so bleak. He said, "We cannot insure success [in this war] but we can deserve it." I thought, what an amazing line. And, how different from our own time, when all that seems to matter is being first. He was saying that though the outcome is beyond our individual control, how we conduct ourselves is ours to control. And then I happened on the same line in some letters of George Washington, and I thought, this has to be something they are quoting. So I took down *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and turned to the section covering the eighteenth century, and after a page or two, there it was.

It's from the play *Cato* by the British writer Joseph Addison, which was the most popular play of the eighteenth century in the English language, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Now, it happens that George Washington was an avid theatergoer. His passions were architecture, landscape design, interior decoration, and the theater. He was known to have attended the theater at least seven times during a visit to New York, shortly before the Revolutionary War. We know he saw *Hamlet* at least once, and over the years he is thought to have seen *Cato* six or seven times. He even had a performance staged for his officers and troops at Valley Forge.

In the real-life struggle of the Revolution, Adams, Washington, and the others saw themselves as cast in lead parts in one of the great historic dramas of all time, and they drew on history for guidance and inspiration. It was not American history – that had not been written as yet – but classical history. The educated among them were fluent in Greek and Latin and could read Thucydides, Cicero, Tacitus, and others in the original. Those who could not read Greek and Latin read the classics in English – or drew inspiration from the play *Cato*.

Again and again during the Revolution, when pouring out their innermost thoughts in private correspondence, these leaders of the Glorious Cause, referred to themselves as playing a role on the stage of history. "Act well the part. Therein, the honor lies." The line is from Pope, one of Washington's favorite poets.

They knew they were part of history, and that they would be judged by history. Such an understanding can be a powerful motivation for exceeding what you take to be your limitations.

A poignant and telling example of this is the story of Nathan Hale. Nathan Hale was one of six brothers who enlisted and fought in the Revolutionary War. Newly graduated from Yale, he was an attractive and popular fellow, and quite naïve. When he volunteered to cross the British lines to bring back intelligence, his friends urged him not to go, warning him that he was not suited for such an assignment. As it was, he was caught and hanged by the British almost immediately, in New York in the summer of 1776. His last words, famously, were, "My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for my country." And they are words straight out of the play *Cato*.

We have to break down the barriers between art and history, music and history, science and history, medicine and history.

I think he delivered the line this way: "My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for *my* country." Not your country, you who are about to hang me. *My* country. And of all that motivated those American soldiers, I believe that was foremost: it was their country, and they would have it their way. In the scores of letters and diaries I read for my book *1776*, many written by men in the ranks, many by junior officers (who were, in effect, men

in the ranks because they were elected by their fellow men in the ranks to be lieutenants), I saw no references to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," or "all men

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are created equal," or the Declaration of Independence. Rather, they seemed to be fighting for their country and a future in which they would have the say about their country and its destiny. Besides, they didn't want the other side to win.

If you understand what the theater and the classical ideals of virtue, honor, and character – character is a Greek word – meant in their time, you begin to understand much about why they were the way they were. And they weren't like we are. They lived in a different time and culture. And by the way, they didn't live in the past. Nothing ever happened in the past; it happened in the present, their present, not ours. Adams and Washington didn't walk about saying, "Isn't this fascinating, living in the past? Aren't we picturesque in our quaint clothes?"

Their present was vastly different from our own. But if we read what they read, if we understand the plays they loved, if we listen to their music, if we look at their paintings, we begin to understand them in ways not possible with the conventional approach to history.

We have to break down the barriers between art and history, music and history, science and history, medicine and history. For it's all part of the same experience – the human experience – and ought to be studied that way, written that way, and taught that way, especially to our children. We have been raising several generations of young Americans who are by and large historically illiterate. I have lectured on college campuses all over the country, and what they don't know is staggering.

And it's our fault. We're not educating our teachers as they should be educated, in the full spirit of the liberal arts. From schools of education, year after year, we are graduating young people with degrees in education who are assigned to teach physics or history, who know little or nothing about such subjects. This must stop. How can they effectively teach something they don't know? More importantly, how can you love something you don't know, any more than you can love someone you don't know? We all know from our own experience that the teachers who changed our lives, who opened the windows and let in the fresh air, who gave us the chance to be excited about learning, were the teachers who loved what they were teaching.

One of the great teachers of teachers was Margaret McFarland, professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. Her most celebrated and influential student was Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers of television fame. And Fred Rogers, whom I knew from my work in public television, was the first to say that her ideas about teaching were the basis of all that he did with his programs. What matters above all, she said, is attitude. She said, "Attitudes aren't taught; they're caught." If the teacher's attitude is one of enthusiasm and commitment, the student gets that without explanation. "Show them what you love," she said.

The ways in which history can be made to come alive through art, music, and drama are plain as can be. Take a group of children out to draw the Brooklyn Bridge. Take them out onto the bridge, with their sketchpads and crayons and pencils. Very quickly, they're learning about how the bridge was built, why it was built, and what makes it important to the City of New York and the City of Brooklyn. It works. Just as a child cast as Dolly Madison or Frederick Douglas in a grade school production will never forget the experience.

That's the time to get them, in grade school. We know how fast they can learn a language at that age. They can learn *anything* fast. And what's more, they *want* to learn. Once, talking with a sixth-grade class in Montgomery, Alabama, I decided to try explaining how the locks work on the Panama Canal. Many adults have a hard time understanding how a ship nearly the size of the Empire State Building can be lifted some eighty feet above sea level using nothing but the force of gravity. But those children got it right away. And they did in part because they were not afraid to ask any question, not afraid that they might sound foolish. So they asked, and asked again. They wanted to know.

Right now, because of the "No Child Left Behind" program, much of history is being put aside. The concentration is on reading and mathematics. The reading programs are obviously important. But there's not a reason in the world why students can't be reading history. History can be literature. They could be reading Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. They could be reading Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." They could be reading Longfellow or Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*. They could be reading all kinds of great works by great historians because history is itself an art form.

Cervantes, in the seventeenth century, said, "Certain historians relate matters so concisely, leaving the most essential part of the story drowned at the bottom of the inkwell, either through negligence, malice or ignorance." Isn't that wonderful? Theodore Roosevelt, who began his first work of history here in Cambridge as a Harvard undergraduate (his *Naval History of the War of 1812* is still among the best works on the subject) and for whom history was a lifelong passion, said that historians must have "the power to embody ghosts, to put flesh and blood on dry bones, to make dead men living before our eyes." The eminent historian Samuel Eliot Morison, also of Harvard, wrote some years ago in an essay entitled "History

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as a Literary Art": "Professors who have risen to positions of eminence by writing dull, solid, valuable monographs that nobody reads outside the profession, teach graduate students to write dull, solid valuable monographs like theirs. The road to

academic security is that of writing dull, valuable monographs. And so, the young men who have a gift for good writing either leave the historical field for something more exciting, or write dull, solid, valuable monographs."

I don't think there's anything much more interesting than the history of our country. And we have to keep it our responsibility to pass that history on to our children and grandchildren. And that's not hard to do. Barbara Tuchman, when asked about this, answered in two words: Tell stories. History, like art, should touch heart and mind. J. H. Plumb, the British historian, once said we need more heartwise historians. How true.

I have three observations I would like to leave with you. One is from a composer, the second from a painter, the third from a dramatist.

Tchaikovsky, on the subject of inspiration: "Inspiration is a guest that doesn't visit lazy people." The second one is from *The Journals of Delacroix*, one of my favorite books. He said, "What I demand is accuracy for the sake of imagination." (When I tell people that to write history you need imagination, sometimes they think, "Oh, he's fooling around with it." But you have to have imagination to transport yourself into those other times, into the skins of those other people.) And lastly, you might like to know that the expression "There's no time like the present" was first used in a play written by Marie Delarivier Manley in the year 1696. ■

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