

JD Van Hook

HIST-103

Dr. McKenzie

3 May, 2023

Final Exam

Dear Roommate,

I hear that you are dreading taking a history course because of the misconception that history is nothing more than the knowledge of past names and dates. I know it is easy for history to seem that way to you due to all that you have maybe encountered with history up until this point. Although, I actually strongly disagree with this line of thinking. I wanted to write you a letter to display my thoughts on what history really is, display some christian values I have learned in history, and apply them to some of the reading I have done this year in class. All of this in hopes that you would be more eager to take your history class, and maybe even become a history major when it is all said and done!

When defining what history is, it might be better to first start with what it is not. The first distinction that we need to make is that history is not the past, and actually could not be further from it. The past is the make up of all moments in time, or everything that has happened up until this point. The past is vast and incomprehensible to the human mind. In my class this semester to better understand this concept we drew from an illustration from C.S. Lewis. This illustration models a roaring cataract or waterfall, enormous in size and overwhelming in power. We said that if we were to only take only a single drop of water from that cataract we could call that maybe one second in time. Even then, trying to record everything that happened in that single second of time would never be possible for one person in a lifetime. So instead of thinking of

history as the past, we should think of it more as the remembered past. Furthermore, just because we know something does not mean it makes an internal impact on our lives. So an even better way to explain what history is, is to say that it is relived experiences that help us connect and interpret the past to ultimately have an impact on you today. History starts at the humble state of our minds that we can not know all of the past. Instead, we can awe at the glory of God's divine omniscience and can look to the remembered past to learn and grow as an individual.

Not only does learning history evoke a humbling spirit as a christian to who God is, but it can also help train our hearts to create habits of thinking christianly about the past and even to others today. There are key habits that stick out to me as new concepts that I learned this semester through history. The first, comes from Beth Schweiger noting that, "In history, the call to love one's neighbor is extended to the dead" (Schweiger, p. 62). This concept is easy to understand but more difficult to apply. A couple of reasons for this could be because of the difficulty in loving someone whom you have never met, especially when their actions don't line up with your morals today. Another is the imbalance in power that we possess as the present and our ability to use their words to fit our own agendas. Even still, as we are called to love our enemies today it also extends to God's people and creation in the past.

Another concept that can change the way we think comes from our readings of Sam Wineburg. He challenges us with the ideas of postponing judgment and practicing metacognition (Wineburg, pp. 9, 22). Oftentimes, when thinking about the past we have a type of "presentism" mindset that can overlap our current environments, morals, and thoughts with ways that people lived or decisions they made in the past (Wineburg, p. 19). Unfortunately, because of presentism, even if it is subconsciously, we often judge others on what they might have meant or thought even though we were not there. Being aware of our presentism mindset we can postpone our

judgment about what someone might have thought or experienced. To counter this further we can think of “metacognition” or thinking of our thinking as we are thinking. Doing this can create a stronger character in us that is aware of how we interact with the past and avoids the attitude that we understand the entirety of others' situations, or putting ourselves in God's shoes so to speak.

Many of the principles and ideas that we learned in class can be practiced through the readings of historical primary documents. Let me take you through the process of what this may look like through a specific story. For example, through the readings of Harriet Jacobs in her writing *Incidents of a Slave Girl* there are many assumptions that would be easy to make regarding her intentions, actions, and thoughts. One story Jacobs writes about is when she witnessed a young slave girl, who was nearly white, dying soon after birth. The mother of the child was mourning yet the mistress mocked her while smiling saying that, “I'm glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too” (Jacobs, p. 422). After hearing this story the first practice we have learned to take is metacognition, as I have referred to earlier in this letter, and be fully aware of how we are thinking. We then apply the state of humility and awe of God, remembering that we do not know the full story as only God does. It would be easy to immediately read this story and take the side of the mother, resenting the mistress. Remembering that we are called to love the other person across from this document we instead care for the Mother, the daughter that died, Harriet Jacobs that witnessed it, and even the mistress. There can be a place in our hearts to understand that the mistress was likely surrounded by slavery all of her life, and she was likely deeply hurt that seemingly her husband had this child with a slave after cheating on her. Not to excuse her actions, but we do not cast our immediate judgments on her as we do not know her feelings, the full story, or her intentions. Even still, through reading this history we postpone our judgment and take a heart of love to care for all that were a part of this sad story.

When carefully reading the writing of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents of a Slave Girl* you notice many things that we can learn about the past through her own writing. When we first apply a loving but skeptical manner to assessing the trustworthiness of the writing we can pick up on key tones and emotions that can tell us more about the attitudes of the past, and her feelings towards the institution of slavery. We look at who Harriet Jacobs was writing to in this passionate story and that it could be exaggerated to appeal to her predominantly white and woman audience, with the book appearing in 1861 right on the eve of the civil war. These statements and ideas are not meant to discount the story that Jacobs tells, it just helps us make sure we can fully understand this historical document and notice more of her passion for the institution of slavery during this time.

After analyzing Harriet Jacobs tone in her writing through a loving and skeptical way there are other key informational concepts that can tell us more about her time. One suggestion is that the institution of slavery and racial equality were very separated for people during this time. Jacobs' writing can make you question if you have to believe in racial equality in order to feel for her. Although we do not know Jacobs intentions, the more you read the stories of Harriet Jacobs the more it sounds like she was trying to show the immorality of slavery and less of the fight for equality. As you take a moment to attentively read Jacobs' writing, you can pick up different attitudes and beliefs of the past as she never explicitly mentions being equal to whites or fighting for the same opportunities, only the horrors of her experiences in slavery. Today we can tend to combine slavery and equality into one category, but through reading past documents such as Jacobs' writing we see these categories were not always the same.

As you take your history class you get the opportunity to enrich your life in ways that you may have not yet experienced. I challenge you during this time to think historically, to

experience God's great power as you lovingly interact with his past creation, and to critically read past documents with an open mind as to what the documents can tell you about that time.

History has changed the way I think and I hope you enjoy your class just as much as I did.

From your friend,

JD Van Hook

Sources

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“When Time Began for Me”

It was the Summer of my sophomore year of high school, that is when time began for me. We had begun to start talking as a family about moving from our home in Wichita Kansas during that spring and I was not happy about it. We had lived there for 9 years, ever since I was in first grade. I was not ready for change and I was not eager to get up and leave my best friends that I had many memories built up with for many years. My Dad had received a grant to work with retired ministers in Nashville, where he grew up and where all of my family on both sides still lives. God had been working out through our hearts and plans for us to leave for months, yet only a week before we had plans to move out my Grandmother passed away. We flew out to Nashville for the funeral, then flew back to Kansas, and then drove back to Nashville for good with all that we had all in a matter of 2 weeks.

The Summer of my sophomore year was a chaotic, confusing, and frustrating time for me. Even amidst all the family I didn't usually get to be around I still felt very lonely. Not much in reality had truly changed. I still lived with my parents, I still went to high school, and I still was able to play baseball. Yet, it was the end of an era for me. It was the end of my childhood with my childhood friends, in my childhood home town, and with my childhood Grandmother that I would no longer be able to see even if it was on vacation. It felt like at this time in my life being in Nashville was not the only thing that was new. I began to study for my ACT, tour different colleges, and even drive places on my own. It was like I began to think about the future on my own for the first time as I recognized that the past would no longer be the same world anymore, or my world anymore.

Looking back now, I am so thankful for the move we made to Nashville. I learned so many different life lessons and gained so many friendships that I would have never got to have otherwise. I could talk for days about all the different blessings that my time in Nashville was for me and how it got me to where I am today. The amount of mental, physical, and spiritual growth would have never been the same for me if we had never left. Even still, I can look back through the struggle of my sophomore year summer, recognize that God had his hand over me, and say that was where time began for me.