

History and the Measure of All Things

By

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This is the eighth sermon in a series I'm calling "The Measure of All Things," based on the statement, "Humanity is the measure of all things," first uttered by the Greek philosopher Protagoras almost 2500 years ago. Two millennia later, social psychologist Erich Fromm expanded upon this idea in the aftermath of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, in his books, *Man for Himself* and *The Sane Society*. In the first of these, published in 1947, he argues our morality ought to be "based on the principle that what is 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity]...¹ *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*"² and "that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities..."³ In the second, published in 1955, he wonders if it's possible for an entire society to be insane but not know it because of what he calls the "pathology of normalcy," resulting in "consensual validation," the assumption that because "the majority of people share certain ideas and feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings."⁴

Today such insanity is marked by our consensual validation of myths and falsehoods justifying segregation and inequality and, what Fromm would call, the "idolatrous" placement of lesser, egoistic desires above human welfare and the unfolding and growth of every person. Perhaps the worst of these is our pathological acceptance of *εθνος*, the Greek word for "nation," and the root of "ethnic" and "ethnicity." The imaginary grid of separation, that map of the world implanted into our minds starting in elementary school, cannot be seen when we look at the Earth as it really is. Fromm said, "Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity."⁵ I'll say more about this in a subsequent sermon in this series, but today I'd like to focus on how the pathology of normalcy impacts our view of human history, of the events, that is, we choose to uplift or omit, and those we should recall in service of human welfare and individual growth, which, in a sane society, ought to be the sole criterion of all we do.

First, let me explain how I came to include the topic of history in this series. I'll begin by talking about three virtual reality experiences I've had. Among my very first experiences with VR technology was a 360-degree simulation of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. It began in a 1963 home theatre with an old film projector playing President Kennedy's speech announcing his plans to send astronauts to the moon. Next, I found myself descending the outside of the *Saturn V* rocket, before entering an elevator at its base. There, in place of pilot Michael Collins, I was suited up and standing next to Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, heading up to the command module. From there, I heard the original Kennedy Space Center

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴ Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

commands and countdown before blasting off. The capsule vibrated violently as we pushed through the Earth's atmosphere. Neil gave me a reassuring thumbs up a few moments before we emerged into the quiet calm of space. The command module then separated from *Saturn V* and headed toward the moon. Once inside its orbit, I watched out a small window as we rapidly moved across its dark surface, just before I witnessed a three-quarter-full Earthrise above its horizon. I was moved to tears, imagining what it must have felt like when those astronauts saw this same sight for the first time. I then found myself temporarily outside the craft watching it separate from the *Eagle* lunar module. Then I was transported inside the *Eagle*, sitting next to Neil, apparently in place of Buzz. I experienced its dangerous and delicate landing inside the Moon's *Sea of Tranquility* where I watched Armstrong take his first step and heard him say his immortal words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I even heard President Nixon's 1969 transmission to the moon, congratulating and thanking them for their historic accomplishment. Afterward, we left the moon, returned to the command module, headed toward Earth, reentered its atmosphere, and landed in the Pacific Ocean where the Coastguard was waiting to pick us up.

It was a powerful and emotional means of learning about this monumental piece of human history and achievement. So, at the time, I didn't give any thought to Armstrong's planting of the American flag on the moon, which he left on its surface, where it has remained unmoved ever since. I didn't think about it until I experienced a similar VR simulation of Alan Shepard's journey to become the first American in space in 1961. To be certain, venturing into space in 1961 was a risky and historic venture for anyone, but, observing it happen, I wondered why, as Americans, we can't celebrate the historic launch of the first person into outer space earlier that same year. Why isn't there a VR experience of Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin's pioneering journey? The answer, of course, is because the space program was born during, if not because of, the Cold War, and the desperation to quickly get a person into space, then to top Russia's accomplishment by landing on the moon, was part of the competitive space race. In other words, rather than acknowledging the great first by one of our global neighbors or being proud of our entire species because of Yuri Gagarin's historic achievement, our localized history mostly ignores him by honoring the first American in space instead. This kind of history reflects the insanity of our culture, our delusion of separation, our consensual validation. For when history is influenced by the pathology of normalcy, then the historian's civilization is viewed as normal while all others become uncivilized and insignificant.

The third virtual reality experience I'll mention involves a 360-degree series about today's astronauts called, *Explorers*. Its second episode is about the tremendous international cooperation between space travelers from many nations. 360 means I'm not just watching the story, I'm in it. At one point I was inside Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, in front of a glass wall listening to cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin, who explained he would remain within the sealed room a few days before his next mission to minimize the risk of carrying contaminants or contagions to the International Space Station. "To me there's no difference between a Japanese, and American, than a European, or a Canadian," the experienced spaceman told me, "What I know is that all the astronauts I've ever worked with have been decent people and excellent friends. It's true that borders really do disappear in this kind of community. I've never noticed any rivalry. In fact, I've always felt support from others and their readiness to help out. That's really worth something, you know."

Then another Russian cosmonaut said, “If an intelligent alien were to observe us on the ISS, above the Earth’s atmosphere, we would all simply be ‘Humans’ to it. That’s why I believe that we must learn to live together in space. Once we start getting better at living together in space, and once there are more of us living up there, maybe we’ll finally learn how to peacefully co-exist on Earth—as humans.”

The man who said this, our brother, Fyodor Yurchikhin, has participated in five space missions, including four long duration stays on the ISS. That’s where I encountered him, up there, looking down at the whole hoop of the world. Approaching 60 years old, he lamented the mission would be his last. So, “I spent my last week slowly drifting through the space station, looking into all sorts of nooks and crannies,” he said. He remembered his first space flight ever, on the Space Shuttle *Atlantis* in 2002, a Russian cosmonaut as part of the otherwise all-American crew of six. The 4.5 million-mile round-trip to deliver a 28,000-pound truss section to the ISS, took eleven days. “And I remember helping the guys to prepare for the spacewalks in their American space suits,” Yurchikhin said, “Back then I never imagined that one day I would perform a spacewalk wearing an American space suit.” He went on to take 9 spacewalks and is in 4th place for the most number of hours, almost 60, doing so. “The view of the Earth through the porthole,” he wondered, “Would I ever have the chance to see it again?”

Yurchikhin then stood up so the mission patch on his uniform was right in front of me. Every ISS mission gets its own patch, and since he was mission commander, he had a say in its design. “Since I understood that this would be my last mission,” he said, “I wanted a mission badge that would represent our expedition. Here is the orbit around the planet when humankind first learned how to fly around the Earth. The Earth is in the middle of this logo. So, we made a step from the first satellite to the International Space Station, the 52nd expedition to the ISS. Our next step was the moon as everyone knows. On the moon you can see a small footprint, it’s Neil Armstrong’s. Humankind has already been here. Next step is to Mars. But the next big steps for humankind are Jupiter and Saturn. Why? Because we found water on their moons. Next, and I always get asked why they are lined up in that order, this is the path of humankind. We may travel farther into the galaxy or some other place, but regardless of where we might travel to, we always return home, and our home is the Earth.”

This simple patch illustrates the point of today’s sermon better than a thousand words. When explaining the history of space exploration, Yurchikhin speaks as if it belongs to the whole of humanity, not just to those who limit it to an imaginary identity within fictional borders. I suppose a patch can only detail so much, but Yurchikhin left out the first woman in space. Who was she? Sally Ride? Sally Ride became the first American woman in space in 1983, but the first woman in space was another Russian cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshkova in 1963, when she spent 71 hours orbiting the Earth 48 times, more than all the American astronauts had done put together. Yet, at least in our country, we know the names of Alan Shepard, Neil Armstrong, and Sally Ride, while those of other humans who risked and gave our species as much, Yuri Gagarin, Valentina Tereshkova, and, more recently, Fyodor Yurchikhin are hardly household names.

The point is not to shame us for our lack of historical knowledge. That's what history books are for, to remind us of what we can't keep in our heads. What I'm getting at, rather, is the emphasis history should have according to our humanistic ethic. Instead of focusing on persons and events relevant to the national identity of only a few people, upholding the delusion of some people being separate and more special than others—than those outside our great walls, be they physical walls, or boundaries drawn on maps or images implanted in our minds—our history should emphasize the great people, events, and achievements of all people. It should emphasize our species, not our nations. Like those who've lived aboard and seen the world from the International Space Station, history should see us as one people on one small planet who should live together as one, reflecting the reality of our existence.

Yuval Harari's recent book, *Sapiens* does a good job of this, of taking the big view of human history, but so much of our histories seem to dwell on warfare, about all that drives us apart, shoring up our delusions of separation? The problem with such a focus is twofold. Firstly, peace doesn't leave much of an archeological record, whereas war and violence leave a lot of evidence to dig up. Such evidence may skew the historical record a bit. The second issue is, as Winston Churchill said, "History is written by the victors." Or, as Mark Twain put it, "Fluid prejudice is the ink with which history is written." For this reason, even more of the story is likely to get left out. Until very recently, for instance, we were taught as children that "in fourteen hundred ninety-two; Columbus sailed the ocean blue," to discover a new world. Of course, it wasn't new world, but one that had already been discovered and inhabited by other civilizations for a very long time. The poem ends with, the lines, "The Arakawa natives were very nice; they gave the sailors food and spice. Columbus sailed on to find some gold; To bring back home, as he'd been told. He made the trip again and again; Trading gold to bring to Spain. The first American? No, not quite; But Columbus was brave, and he was bright."

In truth, Columbus called the Arawak ignorant and wrote in his journal that, "With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."⁶ Columbus himself admitted that as soon as he saw them he took some by force, believing they could take him to their fields of gold. Finding none, however, he kidnapped as many of them as he could to sell as slaves instead. In one of his letters he wrote, "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."⁷ Within two years, according to Howard Zinn's, *A People's History of the United States*, "through murder, mutilations, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti [alone] were dead... by the year 1515 there were, perhaps, fifty thousand Indians left. By 1550, there were five hundred."⁸ A hundred years later the Arawak were gone, victims of the worse genocide in human history, eventually resulting in the eradication of more than twenty million people.

Painful examples like this means our historians must dig deeper, beyond the archeological records, beyond the cultural myths and delusions we've grown up with, as individuals and as a society, in order to see the injustices and human atrocities that got us here, so we can make apologies and reparations, and change the systems these old fictions have long held in

⁶ Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1980. 2003, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 5.

place. The book and recent film, *Hidden Figures* is a good example of how this can be done. It's about a team of African American women and mathematicians who were vital to the success of the early space program, whose significance had been all but buried in our white dominated, male dominated society. The forgotten story of these important women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, reflects both the challenge and thrill before today's historians. How many other hidden figures are there waiting to be discovered and unearthed, somewhere between the empty lines of those unfinished histories long completed?

This is why history is important in our discussion of the humanistic ethic, because history, as such, is not viewed as just a matter of getting the record straight, of listing dates and details, but because false histories reflecting the perspectives of those on top justify age old systems that continue harming and marginalizing people today. Earlier this month, for example, the Nobel Prize committee gave a 3-million-dollar award to physicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell, for discovering radio pulsars decades ago. The award, which Burnell will use to fund scholarships for women, nonwhites, and refugees studying physics, was given to her retroactively. For back in 1974 the Nobel Prize for her discovery was given to her male boss. Taking another look at history, discovering this hidden figure, allowed the Nobel committee to right a wrong, just as it can empower us to right other wrongs, or, at least, work to make sure they don't happen again.

So, along a similar vein, in addition to unearthing all the hidden figures, especially the accomplishments of women and the exploited peoples of the past, history must honestly uncover and expose our mistakes. So many nations remember only histories of their own inflated glory and achievements, while ignoring their errors and injustices, frowning upon, if not demonizing and criminalizing those who question their legends of greatness. In the U.S. we have a myth of founding fathers discovering a new world, where they declared independence from tyranny, courageously fought and won a revolution, established a constitution and country guaranteeing freedom and equality for all, welcomed the tired huddled masses of the world into its open arms, and worked to spread the light of its glorious message of freedom and democracy to those peoples hungering for it round the globe. But this myth doesn't talk much of the brutal genocide against this continent's first peoples, or of slavery, or segregation, or women's suffrage, of poverty and oppression, of greed and exploitation, of racist laws and the abuse of immigrants and refugees, or of voter suppression, or propping up authoritarian regimes around the world for its own purposes. Yet without remembering our failures and hidden figures, our entire history becomes a lie that only bolsters the false belief that we are separate from and better than those our story leaves out.

In ancient times, small tribes also created myths about themselves, to explain how and why they are here. Sometimes these myths became religion, and they were willing to exploit and kill anyone holding different myths. But sometimes they shared their origin stories with other peoples, and their shared stories became one, and so did the people who shared them. This is the power and possibility of history when it embraces the humanistic ethic, when the sole criterion of all we do is for human welfare and the growth and unfolding of every person.

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Some might say I've got my head in the clouds, to which I'd respond, much higher than the clouds, high enough to look down and see the whole hoop of the world.