

Where is the Humanity?

Looking through a typical social studies unit is often reminiscent (and an extension) of the textbook associated with the curriculum. Taking history as an example—specifically World History—the people are usually mentioned in relation to the politics, economics, and/or militarism of the time. Their names are in bold, black type. Pictures, if any, illustrate people who even appear old fashioned and “irrelevant,” taking on characteristics a painter or sculptor envisioned him/her later in time. These people have grand, fantasy-like stories of war, political reform, and/or sacrifice.

If one takes a moment to consider history from the perspective of a middle or high school student, it is no wonder that s/he may become disenfranchised with the “story” of history. It is a story full of people whom students have never known and who can be easily summed up in as little as a few sentences, or as much as a paragraph. They are also spoken of in the far extremes—very evil, very righteous, very humanistic, very politically conservative/liberal, and very old. These tidy categories make understanding historical concepts concise and simple. But they may not be accurate.

There are two main problems with this approach to human history. The first of these is that students may come under the impression that the only people worth discussing in history, or who make a mark on society, are those that have ruled an empire (Augustus Caesar or Xerxes), warrior kings (Henry VII), or those that lost their lives fighting for the underprivileged (the Gracchus brothers—Tiberius and Gaius). The women worth mentioning? Well, they led armies at the age of 16 (Joan of Arc) or seduced two of Rome’s most successful generals (Cleopatra). How does a student in a local school compete with such idealistic importance? How does one attain such fame?

The second issue with this approach is that it tends to dilute history. Frankly, it takes the humanity from history and replaces it with a dry, uniform story. What did these peoples do with their free time? For instance, was every moment of Henry VIII’s life spent making laws and crafting public policy? Was Alexander the Great always a military hero, thinking only of tactics through his days? Why are personalities such as Nero glossed over quickly, merely mentioning that he was a ruler when Rome burned—and blamed for its digression?

So, where is the humanity? Why are these people condemned forever to a prison of dull, methodical history? Students are people, as everyone else, and enjoy the weird, strange, ironic, and peculiar. The news today is full of people who do bizarre things, even those that are prominent figures. Is this then to be considered a modern phenomenon? Of course, it should NOT.

Human history ought to include the tumultuous relationship between Alexander the Great and his father, Philip, the deviant and literally insane life of Nero, the succession and deaths of Henry VIII’s six wives, the multitude of children born to Catholic popes and cardinals, the way Xerxes of Persia once ordered the sea to receive 45 lashes for ruining his ships during a storm, and all the hundreds of other “interesting facts” of history. Not only do these serve to possibly keep the

attentiveness of students in the classroom, but also to remind them that there are *people* behind the names mentioned in their textbooks; they are not just bold face terms or “facts” to memorize. These people fell in love, were angry, jealous, happy, and experienced deep disappointment. They fought for their independence, had to make a living, and either provided for their families or went hungry. The major names in history did not simply exist to simply sign decrees or win a decisive battle—they worried about who they would marry or if their significant other was making eyes at someone else. Somehow, the humanity needs to be brought back into history for the interest of students, the relevance of the material, and a more accurate portrayal of history.