

One of the stories I love to tell is about two newlyweds—let’s call them Marie and John—well, they were celebrating their first real holiday together. They made plans for the big meal—of course, good food is pretty much universally the focus of all great celebrations! Marie decides to bake a ham like her family always has done. She pulls out the ham, chops off both ends, and sticks the ham into the oven.

John is startled. “What’s that all about, Marie?” he asks.

She says, “What’s *what* all about?”

“Chopping the ends off the ham before you put it in the oven,” he replies.

“Well, I never really have thought about it,” says Marie. “That’s just the way my family has always done it. I’ll call my mother to find out why.” A little bit later, Marie gets back to John. “My mother didn’t know why we do it either, so she called her mother. And Grandma said that when she first started baking hams for her family when she was just married, her oven was too small for a ham to fully fit, so she always cut off both ends of the ham.”Heh.

Well, now, is your workplace enterprise cutting off both ends of the ham it’s cooking, when it is wasteful and unnecessary and without even knowing why? The truth is, I guarantee that your enterprise—if it’s been in existence any length of time at all—is doing just that, somewhere, somehow—it’s likely doing so in many particular ways, as part of its operations, or marketing, or advertising, or management of people.

But at the same time that Marie learned about cooking hams, Marie’s mother and grandma also taught her to thoroughly wash fresh vegetables with water before peeling them to properly remove almost all the disease-carrying bacteria. And that was...and is...a really good thing to do!

Here’s the double takeaway: first, avidly learn history, but, second, work to apply its lessons properly! Yes, learn history about your workplace enterprise and its competitors, about your industry sector and other industry sectors, about your nation and other nations, about your culture and other cultures. And while you are learning and contrasting what you have learned, pray for and gain the wisdom and discernment to keep ahold of the crucial vegetable washing but discard the wasteful cutting of the ham-ends.

Astute historian John Lukacs, an expert on Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler and their adversarial relationship, said this: “Knowledge of the past is the very opposite of a burden.” But many clearly do consider historical knowledge a burden to pursue. I think, for many of us, that was implanted early on, when students experience inept and boring history teachers who have no clue about how to communicate the breathtaking relevance of history. Still, I never cease to be amazed about how little history many people seem to know, unless perhaps it’s about music events or football statistics or the like.

But knowing and applying history wisely is one of the greatest tools for every person to acquire. Relevant history of nations? Politics? The Kingdom of God? Competitors to the Kingdom? Your workplace industry? The industry about to replace your industry? Your workplace enterprise? Your looming competitors?

Notice that these histories listed are both “macro” histories of nations and kingdoms as well as “micro” histories like your workplace enterprise and its industry. Both macro and micro are significantly important and must be astutely intertwined to reach practical, strong, and successful solutions.

Here the truth of it. Only when a leader absorbs, filters, and wisely acts upon enough relevant history will that leader be the steward his or her organization deserves. Let me repeat that. *Only when a leader absorbs, filters, and wisely acts upon enough relevant history will that leader be the steward his or her organization deserves.*

Perhaps the most famous quote about history came from the professor and thinker George Santayana a century ago. I'm sure you've heard it before: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Isn't that incredibly insightful? And isn't it wonderfully succinct? You see, as Santayana says, if you and I cannot remember the past, we are condemned to fall into the same traps, the same wrong thinking, the same blind alleys that others before us did. Every nation, every enterprise, every church, every culture, every family...every one of us needs to learn from history in order to avoid making the same mistakes of those who preceded us.

Have you seen new restaurants open their doors and proceed to make well-known mistakes that are obviously avoidable? Have you seen a church open its doors and proceed with the same faulty, self-serving traditions in place—instead of the living Christ? Have you seen nations try the same old paths of empire-building and of failed centralization of economic decisions and resources in government? You see, this is really about people falling into the same, avoidable traps that others before them have fallen into. Santayana was certainly correct: we must remember the past!

But now, I am going to give you a key companion to Santayana's brilliant quote. Here it is: "Those who revere the wrong past are condemned to repeat it." This companion to Santayana is the cut-off-the-ends-of-the-ham version, the why-in-the-world-are-you-doing-that-again version. Here's a repeat: "Those who revere the wrong past are condemned to repeat it."

Companies, nonprofits, churches, families, nations...it's kinda hard to find any one group that is not doing some revering of the wrong past. Check your organization for that! But, unfortunately, when one takes a deeper look in this area, there are numerous examples of a really lethal manifestation—where revering the wrong past ultimately results in blatant failure. Here are some examples.

Germany pursuing a supposed thousand-year Third Reich led by Hitler last century. Revering the wrong past. Kodak, the dominant photo-film company for decades, actually inventing the first digital camera but then languishing in its stewardship of that new invention by clinging to its non-digital markets. Revering the wrong past. Churches centrally focused on the Mosaic Law (that actually increases sin, says Romans 5:20)...so, the law as the supposed centerpiece for the Christian, instead of the blood-bought grace of Christ. Revering the wrong past.

So here are the two major keys for your organization: like Santayana, remember the past in order to not repeat it...but also do not revere the wrong past! Here are some "rules of the road" to implement this.

1. Become thirsty to continuously learn history specifically relevant to your roles in life.
2. For your organizations, wisely research and discern just who are the historian-storytellers who are astute and accurate, whether in written form or in oral tradition.
3. Great biographies are often the best history, but again, accuracy is often in short supply. So read bios but beware of those books that are either a worshipful public-relations ploy or a hit piece.
4. Read my book review of *The Purpose of the Past* at TheWhitestoneForum.org/Reviews. Author Gordon Wood is seminal in clearly pointing out any bias of the historians he himself reviews.
5. Remember, the only totally reliable personal and organizational autobiography and history ever written is the Bible—God-breathed and telling the real truth about both God and humanity.

So, about your history knowledge: how's your base, your gathering and your use of that knowledge...from macro to micro? Need to address any cut-off-the-ends-of-the-ham issues? Always! But remember to keep washing vegetables. The key: knowing enough to tell the difference between the ham and the vegetables!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Have you earned any “history scars” from you or your organization *failing to remember the past*? In your workplace enterprise? Give an example. In your church? Give an example.

2. Have you earned any “history scars” from you or your organization *revering the wrong past*? In your workplace enterprise? Give an example. In your church? Give an example.

3. Using the five “rules of the road” in the episode and any other sources, how are you doing in your personal and professional development in properly using history, from macro to micro? Give examples.