

Reinterpreting the Past

“The past is a source of knowledge, and the future is a source of hope.

Love of the past implies faith in the future.”

– Stephen Ambrose, American historian and author

“Where are we going?”

“I want to show you something,” I replied, pulling the car off the pavement and onto a narrow, dirt road. It had rained recently and we immediately hear the spattering of mud in the wheel wells. Fortunately, we only had to travel the road for a couple kilometres before reaching our destination. I pulled into the approach to a hayfield and turned off the key.

“I want to show you the one-room school house where your grandmother taught.”

My son looked around and shrugged. I stepped out of the car and motioned for him to follow me as I tromped off through the wet grass into the bush. We had only to walk about six metres to find the school. Unless you knew it was there, though you would never have noticed it. It was completely obscured by poplar trees and underbrush. Once a bright yellow, the paint was now weathered and faded – moss growing on the cedar shakes.

I pulled open the door and we walked inside. My childhood memories of the school stood in stark contrast with what I now saw before us. The windows had been smashed, the ceiling was collapsing and the ornate wood and coal stove had been stripped of its adornments by vandals. The blackboard remained with a few indiscernible words scrawled across it. The floor, however, appeared surprisingly sound as I strode across it.

“I remember whist drives here,” I said. “And my parents coming early to pump up the kerosene lanterns for light and then hanging them on wires above the tables.” Reflecting back, I could almost smell the kerosene and the strong coffee poured from large pots – could almost taste the homemade sandwiches and cakes.

“So Grandma was a teacher here?” my son said, looking around the empty room.

“Yep,” I acknowledged. “As the story goes, this is where she met your grandfather.”

I shared the tale how, upon hearing there was a new teacher at the school, Grandfather (then a bachelor) had volunteered to ride the eight kilometres on horseback one cold winter

morning to light a fire in the stove. He nearly froze but the hardship was rewarded when the pretty, young school teacher found the act chivalrous and him, awfully sweet. They were married a year later. I also told the story of how the school had to be moved from its original resting spot at a nearby intersection when the road had to be widened. Someone had laid claim to the old school but the few surviving members of the original community association intervened and had the building skidded by dozer to the final resting spot, where it now slept in obscurity.

“It’s a shame this great old building has been left to rot,” declared my son.

I agreed. Secretly, I harboured a desire to resurrect the old school to its original splendor. That would, however, have required a tremendous amount of time and capital which, unfortunately, were both in short supply. The old school could only be resurrected in my imagination.

All things go to history in their own time. I think it’s unfortunate how the past can sometimes slip away without some acknowledgement of the role it has played in the present. The old school gave many young people a first introduction to the world beyond the surrounding community and served as a genesis for relationships that endure generationally to this day.

Perhaps, as with the old school house, interpreting the past is really about looking for the beauty and significance of something which, upon initial examination, seems old, overgrown and beyond any perceivable application. Personally, I like to view the past as a source of knowledge, insight and inspiration. It is only through reflection that we often recognize the lessons that each event and every person we have encountered has brought into our experience.

I know people who prefer not to look back as all they see in the past is guilt, shame and blame. They can’t see the lessons the past holds because they focus only on the perceived inadequacies or unfairness of past events. Admittedly, some experiences are incredibly difficult to transcend and some life lessons take years to become apparent and applicable. There’s a question I like to ask and especially of those difficult and even crushing life experiences: how can I use this experience to live a life that is more positive, inspiring and heart centred?

When we can turn and face the past with an open mind and open heart, we can begin to see each event more objectively and can start the slow process of separating the grain from the chaff – the lesson from the pain, regret and denial we often feel. Acknowledging the past, openly and honestly, allows us to deal more effectively with its influence. There is beauty in the

past and with perseverance, we can discover it and step fully into the present with compassion and grace.

It was Charles Dickens, in his classic novel *David Copperfield*, who wrote, "It's in vain, Trot, to recall the past, unless it works some influence upon the present."

To me, Dickens is saying, to recall a past that is filled with nothing but pain serves no-one. To view the past as a source of knowledge, wisdom and insight – to regard it through the eyes of compassion – is to take the very best of our history and use it to build a better tomorrow.