

The Imago School Scholarship Dinner Fundraiser

Collings Foundation, May 2, 2015

Linda Dey, Academic Dean, The Imago School

I love history and I love teaching history. I also love seeing things that help history come alive such as the things we're surrounded by here! I'd like to talk to you about why history is an important subject at Imago and about how we believe history should be taught. But first I'll begin with a short history lesson.

Some momentous events were taking place 70 years ago in Germany in May 1945. There's a good chance that some of you have parents or grandparents who were involved in those events. My father, Donald Dey, was a 24 year-old captain in the army in Germany in 1945.

The British and American forces which had landed on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944 spent months liberating France and the other occupied countries of Western Europe from the Nazis. Finally, in March 1945 the Allied troops reached the Rhine River, the border of Germany. My dad was a captain in the 83rd Infantry Division, also called the Thunderbolt Division. They were the first division to reach the Rhine at a town called Neuss. Dad was an artillery liaison officer with the 83rd, and he, as an observer for the artillery, directed the first artillery fire of the war across the Rhine. This earned him a mention in the *New York Times*.

After crossing the Rhine, British and American forces fought their way into Germany toward the Elbe River. Much to the dismay of some of the Allied commanders, they were kept from pushing on to Berlin. The leaders of the Allied nations had decided previously that the Elbe would be the line where the British and American troops would stop allowing the Russian army to take Berlin and the rest of Germany east of the Elbe. This decision, of course, had significant and unfortunate consequences for the future of Europe and the Western world.

The first Allied troops to meet up with the Russians on the Elbe met them at Torgau on April 25th. My father and the 83rd reached the Elbe at Barby on April 20th and were ordered to stop and wait for the Russians. On May 2nd, 70 years ago today, the 83rd artillery fired their last rounds of the war, and later that day the Russians arrived. After the official meeting of the American commander with the Russian commander, the men of each army mingled with each other, celebrating and exchanging souvenirs. My father exchanged his army-issue sunglasses for a silver cigarette case!

On that same day, May 2nd, 60 miles to the east Berlin surrendered to the Russian army. Six days later all German forces surrendered, an armistice was signed, and the official announcement of victory in Europe was made by the Allied leaders. Friday, May 8th, will be the 70th anniversary of V-E Day.

This short lesson doesn't allow me to show you much about how history is taught at Imago. For us history is not just about facts and artifacts. These things can be interesting (or not), but they have little importance without a context—without their placement in the chronological flow of history and without the ideas behind the actions.

History is not primarily about facts; it's about ideas! Our culture today seems to have a great interest in artifacts and snippets of history, but, as Jacques Barzun in *The Culture We Deserve* explains, this is not really due to an interest in history.

Our pastimes bespeak rather the collecting mania, antiquarian puttering, and the cultivation of nostalgia with bits and pieces of the past. None of these has anything to do with the use and pleasures of history properly so called...History is not a piece of crockery dredged up from the *Titanic*; it is, first, the shipwreck, then a piece of writing. What is more, it is a piece of writing meant to be read, not merely entered on shelves and in bibliographies. By these criteria modern man must be classed as a stranger to history; he is not eager for it nor bothered by the lack of it. The treasure hunt for artifacts seems to him a sufficient acknowledgement of the past.

(Let me add, I love to be able to put a bullet from the Battle of Gettysburg into the hand of a student who is slogging through his research for a paper on Civil War weapons.)

At Imago we intentionally don't teach social studies. Social studies is not concerned with chronology; rather, it focuses on the culture or way of life of one group of people usually over a limited period of time. Its purpose is to develop understanding and an appreciation of different cultures, a worthy goal; yet, in so doing, it can easily oversimplify the complexities of those cultures. And, of course, it cuts at right angles across the chronological flow of history and usually includes no discussion of why these cultures are the way they are.

Our purpose for teaching history is to equip our students to live and act in our moment of history by giving them an understanding of how we got to this point in the story. For, of course, history is an on-going story with a cause-and-effect flow of events. Unless it is taught chronologically, we lose the chance to see and understand this flow and, hence, to understand why things happen the way they do.

As Christians teaching history we emphasize that history is not the result of impersonal forces over which we have no control; it is, rather, the result of collective and individual choices of human beings made by God to choose the good but also able to choose what is not good. People's choices effect the flow of history.

This lesson sunk in for me while I was working on the film crew of *How Should We Then Live?* with Francis Schaeffer. This was a key moment in the development of my love for history. The premise of the series is the verse of Scripture: "As a man thinketh, so is he." In Francis Schaeffer's words,

There is a flow to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind—what they are in their thought world determines how they act...The results of their thought world flow through their fingers or from their tongues into the external world. This is true of Michelangelo's chisel and it is true of a dictator's sword.

The history books we use at Imago, while not published by Christians, have a Christian view of history in this respect. In the 5th grade the concept of a controlling idea is introduced in the text called *Four World Views*: "Controlling ideas are ideas that control or direct the way a person acts." How many of you have quizzed an Imago student on this definition? The text goes on to say: "Each culture has its own set of controlling ideas," and then students are taught the questions to ask to get at those controlling ideas of a culture.

History is much more than the amassing of facts, the accumulation of information. As with all our teaching at Imago, we seek to go beyond information to formation. We are seeking to form precious creatures made in God's image to be what He made them to be. The teaching of history can form students

as well as inform them. Let me illustrate how the teaching of WW II can be formative with an example from *The Sound of Music*, the musical which our 4th – 8th graders will be putting on stage in two weeks. One theme that is not developed in the movie but is in the stage version we are doing shows the kind of moral formation that history taught as we teach it can enforce.

The story is set in Austria at the time it is being taken over by the Nazis. The Austrians must decide whether to go along with Hitler who is trying to convince them that being joined to Nazi Germany is a great honor and in line with their common heritage. Two characters in the play, Elsa, Captain von Trapp's fiancé, and Max, a good friend, plan to go along, lay low, and survive, and they try to convince the captain that this is the best course for him as well. They sing a song titled "Be Wise, Compromise" to him. The captain, of course, will not accept this advice and chooses a more principled and dangerous course—to flee Austria with his seven children and his new wife.

It's our desire and prayer that students at Imago will be equipped to stand for what is good and true and will choose to do what they can to make a difference in the world for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom. The study of history can play a part in bringing this about.

Talk given at The Imago School Fundraiser at the Collings Foundation, May 2, 2015

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