History is something we all do, even if, like the man who discovered he was writing prose, we do not always realize it. We want to make sense of our own lives, and often we wonder about our place in our own societies and how we got to be here. So we tell ourselves stories, not always true ones, and we ask questions about ourselves. Such stories and questions inevitably lead us to the past. How did I grow up to be the person I am? Who were my parents? My grandparents? As individuals, we are all, at least in part, products of our own histories, which include our geographical place, our times, our social classes, and our family backgrounds.

We use history to understand ourselves, and we ought to use it to understand others. If we find out that an acquaintance has suffered a catastrophe, that knowledge helps us to avoid causing him pain. (If we find that he has enjoyed great good luck, that may affect how we treat him in another way!) We can never assume that we are all the same, and that is as true in business and politics as it is in personal relations.

If we know nothing of what the loss of the Civil War and Reconstruction meant to Southern whites, how can we understand their resentment toward Yankees that has lingered into the present day? Without knowing the history of slavery and the discrimination and frequent violence that blacks suffered even after emancipation, we cannot begin to grasp the complexities of the relationship between the races in the United States.

History is bunk, Henry Ford famously said, and it is sometimes hard for us, perhaps especially in North America, to recognize that history is not a dead subject. It does not lie there safely in the past for us to look at when the mood takes us. History can be helpful; it can also be very dangerous. It is wiser to think of history not as a pile of dead leaves or a collection of dusty artifacts but as a pool, sometimes benign, often sulfurous, that lies under the present, silently shaping our institutions, our
ways of thought, our likes and dislikes. We call on it, even in North America, for validation and for lessons and advice. Validation, whether of group identities, for demands, or for justification, almost always comes from using the past. You feel your life has a meaning if you are part of a much larger group, which predated your existence and which will survive you (carrying, however, some of your essence into the future). Sometimes we abuse history, creating one-sided or false histories to justify treating others badly, seizing their land, for example, or killing them. There are also many lessons and much advice offered by history, and it is easy to pick and choose what you want. The past can be used for almost anything you want to do in the present. We abuse it when we create lies about the past or write histories that show only one perspective. We can draw our lessons carefully or badly. That does not mean we should not look to history for understanding, support, and help; it does mean that we should do so with care.

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Historians, the great philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood wrote in his autobiography, examine the past with a careful eye, even if it means exploding cherished myths. . . . That can often be intensely irritating when the historians raise qualifications and point to ambiguities. Do we really want to know that our great heroes, such as [George Washington], made silly mistakes? . . . I think we do, not for prurient reasons, but because a complex picture is more satisfying for adults than a simplistic one. We can still have heroes, still have views on the rights and wrongs of the past, and still be glad that it turned out in one way rather than another; but we have to accept that in history, as in our own lives, very little is absolutely black or absolutely white.

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History, by giving context and examples, helps when it comes to thinking about the present world. It aids in formulating questions, and without good questions it is difficult to begin to think in a coherent way at all. Knowledge of history suggests what sort of information might be needed to answer those questions. Experience teaches how to assess that information. As they look at the past, historians learn to behave rather like the examining magistrate in the French judicial system. What happened and why? the historian asks. History demands that we treat evidence seriously, especially when that evidence contradicts assumptions we have already made. Are the witnesses telling the truth? How do we weigh one version against another? Have we been asking the right or the only questions? Historians go further and ask what a particular event, thought, or attitude from the past signifies. How important is it? The answers in part will depend on what we in the present ask and what we think is important. History does not produce definitive answers for all time. It is a process.

History can help us to make sense of a complicated world, but it also warns of the dangers of assuming that there is only one possible way of looking at things or only one course of action. We must always be prepared to consider alternatives and to raise objections. We should not be impressed when our leaders say firmly, "History teaches us" or "History will show that we were right." They can oversimplify and force inexact comparisons just as much as any of us can. Even the very clever and the powerful (and the two are not necessarily the same) go confidently off down the wrong paths. It is useful, too, to be reminded, as a citizen, that those in positions of authority do not always know better. Because history relies on a skeptical frame of mind, whether toward evidence or comprehensive explanations, it can also inculcate a healthy propensity to question our leaders. They are not always right, indeed often the opposite.

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Humility is one of the most useful lessons the past can provide the present. As John Carey, the distinguished British man of letters, puts it, "One of history's most useful tasks is to bring home to us how keenly, honestly and painfully, past generations pursued aims that now seem to us wrong or disgraceful." Slavery once had its defenders. Think of the arguments over the position of the earth and the sun, of the conviction, apparently supported by science, that so many Victorians had that there were superior and inferior races, or the calm assumptions even a few decades ago that women and blacks could not make good engineers or doctors.

History also encourages people in the present to reflect on themselves. "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," the English novelist L. P. Hartley once wrote. . . . That is not to say that all values are relative; rather, we should be prepared to examine our own and not merely take them for granted as somehow being the best. . . . If the study of history does nothing more than teach us humility, skepticism, and awareness of ourselves, then it has done something useful. We must continue to examine our own assumptions and those of others and ask, where's the evidence? Or, is there another explanation? We should be wary of grand claims in history's name or those who claim to have uncovered the truth once and for all. In the end, my only advice is use it, enjoy it, but always handle history with care.