Curating the Past That's Alive in Our Minds

The author is immersed in the action and setting of the Fenno House parlor, Old Sturbridge Village, 1967.

Precisely fifty years ago, on a frosty Sunday when winters were truly wintry, having little or no zest for my graduate studies, and nothing particular to divert me from the bad tidings in the *Boston Globe* about Vietnam and Soweto and Selma, I thought I would borrow a friend's car and escape for a day from the poisonous effluvia of politics in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So I drove out to visit Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), an outdoor history museum in central Massachusetts that recreates life in rural New England in the early nineteenth century. The fresh country air, I thought, would refresh my spirit. Little did I expect that on that day I would find a lifelong vocation in public history.

For four or five hours, I slogged through the snowy lanes of the village, in and out of wooden buildings, coming face to face with men and women wearing aprons and bonnets, broad-brimmed hats, button-fly trousers, and high leather boots that made a lot more sense than my already soaked penny loafers. In midafternoon, I took refuge in the Fenno House on the Village Common, where a kindly lady put aside her handwork and invited me to thaw out in a Windsor chair that faced the fire. She described the 1720s dwelling and suggested I look over a period newspaper, a reproduction of the *Massachusetts Spy* from 1820, which sat on the candlestand next to my chair. I picked it up, adjusted my eyes to its tiny font, and shifted my chair several times to catch the light from the single candle on the table, the fireplace, and the last rays coming through the windows. And though my eyes were much better in those days, I found myself reading slowly, even moving my lips. Then it dawned on me.

The architecture of the room, the physicality of the paper, my reversion to reading aloud, the lightweight chair that allowed my movement, the candlestand, the candlestick, the different sources of light—all combined to form a single cultural artifact full of rich complexity, rooted entirely in the inescapable materiality of the place. My own body became an investigative tool to probe the actions, thoughts, and feelings of people long departed, and perhaps to recover a deeper sense of their humanity. Becoming a professional historian had trained me to seek out abstract stories. I had learned to speak of "ideological origins," "mimetic strategies," and "nationalist impulses." But I hadn't until that day in Sturbridge felt the concrete urgencies of the past.

From the Fenno House, I trudged over to the cavernous Village Meetinghouse, where I instantly realized that all those Puritan sermons I had parsed at Harvard University, at the feet of the great intellectual historian Perry Miller and his disciples, had been delivered on days like this to congregants wrapped in capes, blankets, and probably the family dog. I'd been studying these New Englanders for years. Now I could no longer recall what images I previously had of them, or whether I had any at all. I started to people the room with what I knew of the social history of the time and place—the rich folks down in the front pews, the tithingman on the look-out for the flirtatious glances of the young women, a wife cutting off the snoring of her husband. The words I had decoded in the quiet of the university library were totally transformed in the theatrical and experiential actuality of this building.

A historian can “people” a space with dozens of hypothetical stories worth investigating.

Embarrassed by my ignorance of the palpable realities of nineteenth-century men and women, I drove back to Sturbridge the next day and talked myself into a 30-hour-per-week job, at $1.10 an hour. Dressed in those funny costumes, I could hold forth as a schoolmaster, country parson, or lawyer for an audience of families with squally toddlers and surly teenagers, well-read older folks, honeymooning couples, and many, many social-studies teachers. In my off hours, I prowled through the museum’s library, searching through massive town histories and personal narratives for stories I could impart to “my” visitors. I constantly fought against the visitors’ romantic desire to enshrine the past, physically challenging as it surely was, as morally superior. Instead, it was the dense physical complexity of every historical moment which allowed me to visit it as a site that tested my imagination at every turn. I learned most by watching how the blacksmith knew by his acute color sense “to strike the iron when it was hot,” or when the cabinetmaker pressed his chisel harder on the lathe and his foot more rapidly on the treadle, or how the passage of carts slowed as the ice melted into mud on the roads. Observing the epiphenomena of everyday life, largely unrecorded in the archive, led me to think that there was a dimension of cultural and intellectual history that had escaped my notice and that of my teachers and classmates.

Eight months later I returned to Cambridge with renewed energy to finish my PhD course work and exams. And then Old Sturbridge Village came knocking—offering a real job (at $8,000 per year) as a historian in residence, charged with providing our costumed interpreters with broader contexts for the little corners of history they represented. I leapt at the opportunity.

.

As I began my work at Sturbridge, I needed to find a pedagogy that would invite museum visitors to explore the past. At the time, there was scarcely any scholarly literature and few instructional guides in museum studies, material culture, or public history. One or two graduate programs had begun to attract students interested in museum careers, but even they relied more heavily on hands-on experience than readings and classroom work.

I began to note how our visitors moved from one encounter (with an artifact, an interpreter, or a crafts demonstration) to another. Too much of their day consisted of disconnected fragments, rarely tied to larger ideas. How did the gallery of clocks ring out with ideas about the way a sense of time changes with industrialization, and could we see the shifts in the way artisans organized their labor? What did the newly restored general store, its shelves stocked with reproductions of goods imported in that earlier era of globalization, say about the integration of local agricultural and handcraft production with regional markets? What did the taste for printed cottons teach us about the decline of domestic spinning and weaving?

The problem was built into the conventional model of almost all museums at the time. In art museums like the Met or MOMA, works were usually arranged alone, surrounded by white space, their original settings in studios, churches, or burial tombs conveniently erased, and each labeled with only minimal information about the artist, the medium, and the donor. In great libraries like the Morgan or the Huntington, long identification labels frequently shared the vitrines with treasured books and manuscripts, to be read only by the cognoscenti willing and able to understand them. In history museums, many of the objects were marvelously mysterious, like old farm implements, and required extensive description, diagrams, and period illustrations to make them comprehensible, but the interpretation of each object was disconnected from what came before and after. In all such venues, the more the visitors brought to the encounter, the more they could take away. But woe to the uninitiated and

the unassisted.

Early American museums chose objects for their oddity, and usually displayed them in isolation.

The one-artifact-at-a-time approach to display—probably a better word than exhibition—foreclosed a more coherent interpretation of the American past. What linked the objects was their rarity, or their superb individual quality, and not how they each contributed to a lucid exposition or narrative about American history.

State and local museums then usually featured a core exhibition of a long, winding timeline. Era after era succeeded one another. The first gallery invariably focused on local Indian tribes, whose "lives in harmony with nature" were illustrated by a diorama and display case with a dozen dark brown archaeological specimens—pots and fabrics and arrowheads. Succeeding exhibition cases featured a predictable progression of Pioneers (flintlocks and wolf traps); Settlers (axes and aprons); Founding Fathers (inkwells); Inventors (patent models); Captains of Industry (engravings of sprawling factories); Immigrants (colorful folk costumes); Governors or Presidential Candidates (campaign buttons picturing men with beards); and Veterans of the World Wars (posters, packs of Lucky Strikes, ration cards). The past lay across a great divide; how we got from one era to the next unexplored. Chronology took the place of interpretation.

Though the objects on display were drawn from local examples, the story they told was generic: America was anywhere and everywhere a tale of endless economic progress, democracy, and the expansion of science and industry. A similar narrative framed the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of History and Technology (NMHT, now called the National Museum of American History), where mechanical marvels—locomotives, combines, and die-stamping

presses—marched across immense galleries, proof of America's exceptional genius. Much of the actual quotidian experience of Americans—the communities they shared, the skills they used, and the relations they had with one another—was excluded. Public history, largely inattentive to the lives of ordinary folk, was instead a celebration of the rich, the powerful, and the famous.

It seems scarcely credible today that when the NMHT opened in 1964, it displayed almost no images of African-Americans or Indian peoples. Not a single working-class home or neighborhood in the United States was then deemed worthy of preservation or interpretation. The enormous architectural legacy of American industrial places, from Maine through New York City's Soho district and west through the Great Lakes states, was in danger of being destroyed by urban-renewal programs. At plantation museums in the South, the lives of enslaved people were invisible—"meals were served" and "cotton was harvested." The immigration stations at Ellis Island and Angel Island were abandoned ruins. Museums of decorative arts often cut off their collections at 1820, deeming unworthy the public's interest in machine-made furniture.

Hands-on learning leaves the strongest and most long-lasting impressions.

Coming of age in the 1960s, my generation of museum historians aimed to shatter such a simplistic teleology and to explore themes that took a more critical stance on our nation's history. As devotees of the new social history, we wanted museums to open for investigation the everyday experiences, perspectives, and agency of ordinary people in the past. Not to leave visitors gawking at their weirdness, but to have them put themselves in the shoes of Americans dealing with the threats and promises of their times—a boom-and-bust economy, intergroup rivalry and conflict, shifting family roles, as well as more powerful disruptions like enslavement, immigration, impoverishment, violence, epidemic, and dislocation.

The answer to fragmented visits and implicit teleology had to be both pedagogical and historiographical. At Sturbridge, I had experimented with coaxing visitors to participate, through a variety of hands-on experiences, in "thematic" tours about Family Roles (should farmers send their daughters to work in textile mills?), Work (how did mechanization transform the skills of rural people?), and Community Development (who would benefit if the town built a high school?). At the end, the visitors' "findings" represented the heart of the "wrap-up." The great cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner taught us that visitors would take away more of what they said and did than what we offered, so it was important to get them to "externalize" their understandings.

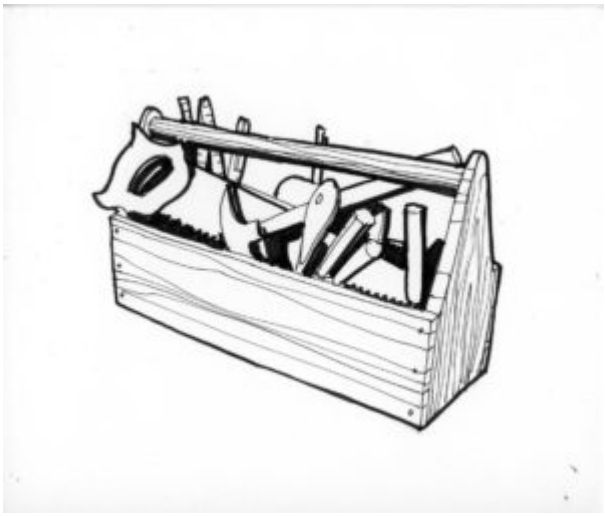
After leaving Sturbridge, I joined in 1980 with my friend Sam Bass Warner, a great historian and public citizen, to create the American History Workshop, a collaborative of scholars, educators, curators, designers, and media producers working to bring fresh scholarship, imaginative design, and effective pedagogy to supplement the staff resources of cultural institutions. The workshop has since been the vehicle for my professional career, through more than 500 projects in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia.

.

In each case, we have construed the museum visit as an experience in time as well as space, a performance in which the visitors played the leading roles. My first artistic love had been the theater, and increasingly I saw the museum space as a stage, but with a more flexible toolbox for engaging visitors. Our exhibitions could present a range of historical evidence that far surpassed the texts that our academic colleagues discussed—artifacts, remnants of places, sounds and images (through film and video), and gestures (in performances and demonstrations incorporated into the visitors' pathway). Technical aids have been continually proliferating: beautifully rendered graphic panels, audio-visual programs, computer-interactive devices, role-playing and simulation

exercises, and stagecraft that recreates historical spaces, moments, and situations.

Over the course of the 1980s, however, it became clear to me that we were failing. Visitors did not exactly warm to these exhibitions of the new social history. They did not identify with “ordinary people” in the past, and they quickly wearied of social-science generalizations about urbanization or deindustrialization. A turning point came when we started to outline the tour programs of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Instead of an interpretive exhibition that would explore the evolution of working-class life in New York City’s famous gateway neighborhood, the museum decided to animate its six-story 1864 brick building at 97 Orchard Street with apartments that would recreate the lives of distinct immigrant and ethnic families—one for German Americans and others for Irish, Eastern-European Jewish, Italian, Chinese, and African-American families. Teams of historians were enlisted to construct composite, “typical” life histories for the families.



.

The results were disappointing. Our historical consultants painted the facts correctly, but in overly broad strokes. All their imagined Irishmen, of course, worked on the docks, the Germans in furniture, the Jews in *shmattes* (garments). Each community was composed of diverse sub-ethnic groups (Sicilians, Neapolitans, etc.). The ambitious sons in each gravitated to influential positions in different niches of public and economic life—the Irish to Tammany Hall and the police, the Germans to the shooting society on St. Marks Place and the unions. Added together, the family patterns our historians described had a sameness that threatened to turn the museum into a repetitive “soap opera” of how immigrants overcame adversity, group after group, year after year.

At that point, a genealogist working for the museum discovered the 1883 petition of Nathalie Gumpertz, a tenant at 97 Orchard Street, asking New York’s Surrogates Court to declare her husband Julius legally dead. She said that

Julius had gone to work one day in the depression year of 1874 and never returned. Informed that he could now inherit $600 from relatives in Prussia, Nathalie asked the court to declare Julius dead and to grant her the money. The census returns confirmed Julius's presence in 1870 but not in 1880. Then the fun began. Who was Nathalie? Was she Roman Catholic, Jewish, or freethinking? What could she do to support herself and three daughters when her husband vanished? As we researched those questions—learning about the education of German-American girls in New York City, the technology of dressmaking, and other subjects—we fleshed out the dilemmas of a household led by a single mother.

The Gumpertz narrative became a template for other tenement museum apartments, as we sought to construct stories around the lives of actual residents of 97 Orchard. Josephine Baldizzi, a daughter of Sicilian immigrants who had grown up there during the Great Depression, came forward to donate detailed stories as well as her father's tools, which he'd used for the odd jobs he scratched together to make ends meet. We found that visitors empathized and identified with these individual stories of real people more intensely than they ever did with the composite figures fabricated by historians.

The project taught me that narratives always trumped themes. Public history is far more than the dissemination of scholarly research to a wider audience. It is itself an alternative method of intellectual discovery. Visitors did not come to museums to get an M.A. in social history but to engage their hearts and minds, skills, and self-images, in an encounter with human situations structured by a time and place different from our own. Thematic exposition thus evolved into what I have come to call a "storyscape."

Working on interpretive plans for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, several American Indian cultural centers, and Holocaust museums also pressed me to acknowledge the political implications of cultural and historical recovery. I learned that almost every important new museum project had to bridge two roles—serving as the cultural expression of one ethnic group or another and contributing to a larger American narrative about socioeconomic power and its limits.

That didn't mean scoring political points with long didactic labels—usually less likely to make an impression on visitors as they might on scholarly review committees. Our goal was to maximize the visitors' opportunities "to see themselves in the story," to represent multiple perspectives in the working-out of the historical events, and to leave the ultimate conclusions open-ended.

Slavery in New York at the New-York Historical Society aimed to engage visitors ever more intensely with the African and African American presence in the city.

We had our best chance to display this methodology in a series of six blockbuster history shows for the New-York Historical Society in 2005-2011. In the first, *Slavery in New York* (2005), we avoided editorializing about "the nefarious trafficking in human beings" in favor of demonstrating how fundamental the institution was to the economic and physical development of the city—a surprise to most New York visitors, Black as well as White. Even more important, the exhibition drew visitors slowly away from an outsider's view toward embodying the perspectives and voices of its African and African-American citizenry. "Curating the silence" became our byword, following in the footsteps of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1997).

Visitors entered the next show, *New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War* (2006), under a hanging replica of a 500-pound bale of cotton, suggesting the dominance of the cotton trade on the politics and culture of New York City in the antebellum period, against which the city's community of free Blacks and sympathetic Whites fashioned a crusade for abolition and racial equality. In succeeding exhibitions, we tackled the construction of American nationhood in the nineteenth century through events like Lafayette's tour in 1824-25 (*French Founding Father: Lafayette's Return to Washington's America*, 2007) and the creation of the U.S. Army (*Grant and Lee*, 2008). In *Lincoln and New York* (2009), we dug deeply into the domestic civil war in New York City between Copperheads and Republicans, and its influence on the much more familiar national scene. Our final show at N-YHS, *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn* (2011), aimed to construe the effects of the eighteenth-century political upheavals, and particularly the Haitian Revolution, in delegitimizing social hierarchies.

All this experience informs my advice for young people aiming to carry their passion for history beyond the academy. In making that transition myself, I had

to overcome three hurdles. First, I had to redefine what I meant by the "audience" for my work—not only in its greater diversity but also in its role. At its best, public history engages the visitor's active curiosity with the curatorial and interpretive resources of the scholar. Much contemporary academic scholarship argues over issues that are of only remote concern to the wider public, like the exchange of gifts between English and American Indian groups in eighteenth-century Georgia. It gives long-winded answers to questions laypeople would never raise, like the congruence of FDR's economic policies with earlier currents of academic research.

Professional history is revisionist history.

Our history workshop begins by doing "content research" with our potential visitors: What do they now understand about the idea of "revolution"? What could make them see the federal Constitution as a jerry-built construction, with procedural compromises to overcome deadlock? How could they serve as witnesses for the resourcefulness of families in moments of economic distress or social exclusion? Incorporating the urgencies of potential visitors is not a matter of dumbing down the interpretive message, but of respecting museumgoers as thinkers.

The second hurdle was learning my trade. A museum historian doesn't have to master the design of computer programs. Working on a film doesn't mean that one needs to handle a camera or an editing suite. But it is critical to understand how design decisions, filmmaking techniques, or software protocols influence the narrative and the interpretation we are seeking. Many architects, designers, and media producers would rather that the historian simply turn over the research, and let them create the script or the space. We established AHW precisely to insist on the centrality of the historian to all stages of the interpretive work, from the initial concept to the choice of objects and interpretive devices, and even to the color, light, and ambient sound of the

final installation. Early in my career, I had decided I would not be satisfied as a "consultant." So in assuming the producer's chair, I had to learn how to set performance criteria for my subcontractors and keep the project on budget and schedule. I had to lean heavily on friends in design offices and advertising agencies, and to spend many weeks carefully observing how their projects evolved, in the service of learning the ropes.

The third hurdle was to grasp the organizational culture of my work. Taking courses in museum studies and public history can usefully sharpen a student's sense of the scope and focus of professional work beyond the academy. And by now there has been an explosion of writing, teaching, and public commentary about museums. Some of it aims to "theorize" the museum, often using it as evidence of everything that is disappointing in contemporary social and intellectual life. Others take the current museum as a given, recommending "best practices." Though I've enjoyed dipping into this literature, it has had only limited influence on my work. There is no substitute for immersion in the very different institutional world of the museum, the public-broadcasting station, or the art center. Seminar papers are very different from the sequence of proposals, alternate concepts, interim drafts, and final scripts that mark the stages of a public history project.

Ultimately, however, public historians are actors in the same intellectual milieu as their academic colleagues. Beyond their work as interpreters of the past, public historians today share perplexities that are both peculiar to our trade but also rooted in our wider intellectual landscape.

The challenge of focusing attention in the age of smartphones.

I see three great challenges confronting our work today.

Do we still value attentiveness? I grew up worshipping at the altar of attentiveness. It was, after all, the means to every good end. If you wanted success in school, or in learning to appreciate literature or music, you had to

pay attention and stick with it. To my generation, the wandering mind was a dangerous outlaw. Though I loved watching *Sesame Street* in its early years with my young son (I was more attentive than he was), commentators blamed the program for abbreviating the attention spans of children. There followed the epidemic of attention deficit disorder, especially among young boys who might have been dubbed restless or obstreperous in earlier times. Economist Herbert Simon worried publicly about the danger of brief attentiveness to rational decision-making. But more recently, intuition, instinct, and snap judgments have made a cultural comeback. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, argues that effortful and rational thinking, or what he calls "System 2," is not only slower and more biased, but even more likely to be wrong, than "System 1," or intuition. The book has sold over a million copies since its publication in 2011. Malcolm Gladwell's racier *Blink: the Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2007), a celebration of intuitions, attracted an even larger readership. Psychologists, behavioral economists, sociobiologists, and spiritualists have converged on the idea of yielding to "gut" feelings, jumping to snap judgments, and eliminating extraneous filters that could lead to labored reasoning.

As I've noted, much of my museum career has been an effort to overcome the discontinuous nature of attentiveness. If anything, ubiquitous smartphones and social media have now made distraction even more tempting. It is so easy for our visitors to lose focus in attending to an ever-proliferating "elsewhere." We know that the museum experience—unlike film, theater, or even classroom instruction—is inherently built around intermittent encounters. Over the years, however, we have learned to acknowledge and turn potential distractions to our advantage. We help parents guide their children. We provide seating and contemplative spaces to relieve the physical strain of intensive looking and reading, and so on.

Can we now reinvent the rhythms of museum engagement to integrate new media into the process of learning and aesthetic pleasure?

The tyranny of immediacy. Timothy Wu's brilliant and breezy 2016 book *The Attention Merchants* traces "the epic scramble" of technology promoters "to get inside our heads." With the advent of recordings of live interviews and commentaries captured in the midst of an occurrence—first on radio and then television, then via audio and video recorders, and now on smartphones—our distance from global and local events has vanished. Immediacy has become the chief criterion of importance. No other source is more compelling than a report from the scene, bringing us that face-to-face encounter with a world-changing event, just as it happens, in the voice of ordinary participants or eyewitnesses. How desperately we've missed such testimony about the great events of the past! And how much we've tried to compensate for that gap by re-creating dramatic moments in individual lives. In some ways, that's been the capstone of my creative labors in museum design.

But slowly, perhaps insidiously, "immediatism" has undermined the value of

other kinds of information. Aren't there other actors, other actions, other causes and consequences that are worth interpreting? Is what happened on 9/11 only what happened at the tip of Manhattan or at the Pentagon or at Shanksville, Pennsylvania? Do the 2,500-plus "Portraits in Grief," capsule biographies of the 9/11 victims first published in *The New York Times* and now exhibited at the memorial museum in lower Manhattan, give us the whole story of what occurred that day? Of course not, but it's difficult to reinsert other voices—registering longer-term perspectives and contexts to tell us what the eyewitnesses miss—when our media privilege first-hand narratives.

Slowly, gradually, the insistence on immediacy has altered the role of public historians. Erasing the distance between the past and the present, between the witness and the observer, has turned up the heat in historical presentations. The *pain* of enslavement, or social exclusion, or economic exploitation, now pushes to one side the exposition of its *contexts in historical conditions*. Immediate reactions and consequences squeeze out slowly emerging causes. Public historians treating difficult subjects—racial violence, for example—themselves absorb the suffering of historical victims. As historical distance is effaced, the traumas of lynching are visited on those who study and interpret it for the public, and the public too may be deliberately exposed to the pain.

Public historians want history to be relevant and personally meaningful. But they also need to help visitors, viewers, and readers to step back and detach themselves from history's horrors. My generation of historians and curators has worked hard to claim a space for critical history in our museums and historic sites and, at the same time, to make our storytelling emotionally compelling. We don't want museums to become "books on the wall," dense and dreary with arid generalizations, but we have to resist the alternate danger, that we become uncritical shrines or memorials, or weak substitutes for community social service agencies.

Can we make coherent sense of our fragmented storylines? Our old triumphalist narrative of America masked a lot of troubling episodes, construing the story of a segment of mostly White, middle-class men as THE story of America. Two generations of historians have recovered many of the missing pieces of our diverse national experience. But today synthesizing the history of our nation in any way has become as daunting as overcoming the fragmentation in our politics. The New Left's suspicion of "the system" has converged with the New Right's antagonism to big government, amounting to what the historian Daniel T. Rodgers describes as "the narrowing down of institutional society into word-pictures of isolated individuals." We have millions of great stories, but what do they add up to? For every saga of a dream fulfilled we seem to have another heartbreaking tale of a life impoverished or lost.

Are we always getting closer to the truth when we get the “original” story?

By the end of the Obama years, many historians may have grown complacent about the value and challenge of stronger narratives. Fragmentation could plausibly be read as diversity. Was that not a good thing? Then, quite suddenly, the 2016 election revealed a huge hole in our profession’s thinking about the nation’s character and evolution. Where had this Trump coalition come from? Where had it been hiding all these years? Other fissures appeared. How could the triumphalist narrative of the civil rights revolution—a staple of museums across the nation—survive in the wake of renewed attention to police shootings of Black men or, more broadly, in the attack by Michelle Alexander and others on mass incarceration as *The New Jim Crow* (2012), yet another chapter in the control of Black men? How could longstanding narratives about prosperity survive the evidence of growing inequality and wage stagnation, even in the midst of a very long economic expansion?

All these phenomena—Trump, Black Lives Matter, and the disappearing middle class—warn us against grasping at “happy endings” in our public history narratives. Can we develop storyscapes that show how they relate to deep and persistent patterns in our national experience? Will institutions dependent upon public support—whether tax-supported or market-driven—accept presentations of the unresolved, incomplete, and even ongoing tragedies of American history?

Perhaps one day a history department will reframe its program to help its students address these questions and seize the opportunity to answer them, but after a half century I’m doubtful. In many graduate schools, there is now much talk about public history as an alt-career, a fallback in the very real likelihood of missing out on an academic position. But few departments actively assist students in gaining the skills, the perspectives, and the sensitivity to institutional cultures that are needed for success beyond the academy. Few members of history faculties have the personal experience to guide students in finding new ways to do history beyond the university. And unlike many other fields, the faculty-development system in history has made it impossible to recruit senior practitioners of these historical arts as mentors.

I often get phone calls from graduate students desperately seeking advice. Some say, without knowing how reckless it sounds to me, “I want to do what you’ve done.” But my example is probably irrelevant now. I had the fortunate opportunity to finish my PhD dissertation while I worked full-time in a museum. When I got my degree, at age 32, I had already completed seven or eight years of museum work and built a network of colleagues I could rely upon for a lifetime of collaboration and companionship. Instead, I refer my inquirers to the brave young historians I know who’ve more recently jumped ship and struck out on their own. Some have found work in museums or with documentary-film projects, but others are developing apps, websites, podcasts, and games, writing books and curricula, collaborating on public art projects, and creating and leading tours. All of them would agree that doing this work well couldn’t wait until one has tried and failed to succeed as a university professor. In sum, my advice is: Start now.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.4 (Summer, 2017).

Richard Rabinowitz is founder and president of American History Workshop. His most recent book, *Curating America: Journeys Through Storyscapes of the American Past*, is published by the University of North Carolina Press.