

2020 Ohio Academy of History Presidential Address

“We are more than stardust.”

Marsha R. Robinson, PhD

Miami University

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A tiny speck of complex stardust called the coronavirus caused us to delay the conference until next year. We know that epidemics and pandemics affected historians who advised monarchs and governments in past centuries. Some historians contributed to social media and news articles their knowledge about communities that isolated during the pandemic flu of the last century. Stay-at-home orders and lifestyle changes are not news to our profession. Nevertheless, I feel obliged to maintain an Ohio Academy of History tradition by attempting to encapsulate the sum of what my research has taught me and by delivering that nugget of knowledge in the form of a phrase to share with scholars more seasoned than me, with graduate students and new faculty, with public historians who create primary documents and with the guardians of the archives.

We are more than stardust.

Well, there it is, to borrow a phrase from Britain’s Prince Charles.

What is my proof? Stardust does not murder. Oh, asteroids and moons may collide, nebulae and black holes may erase entire solar systems where life as we do or do not know it dies in the process. None of that activity is a willful act of murder.

If humans are only stardust, then they cannot commit murder. Murder involves pain for the victim, the victim’s circle of humans and for the whole human family who is deprived of the victim’s brilliant, unrealized contributions. Stardust feels neither loss nor grief. Murder, loss and grief, like the mourning which begins the morning after wars as Ashoka once learned, prove that humans are more than stardust.

Historians, more than philosophers or scientists, have the sacred task of reminding the human family that we are more than stardust. In recent years we historians are facing a challenge from those who privilege the science of education above the content that we

historians hoard. I say hoard on purpose. In the last forty years, far too many historians have abandoned our public role. We rewarded only those who inhabited archives and abandoned the survey classes to work only with the almost-worthy graduate student. My predecessors Lavanya Vemsani and Steve Conn made comments on this theme in their addresses. I agree, especially when I reflect on the culture of too many professional historians whom I have met from around the world, especially while I was trips to archives. We laude those who hide in archives, or who ration hoarded knowledge by trickling it only to those who can afford our hardback books and the dictionaries for our vocabulary. Some of us may even discourage those who teach the general public. Consequently, the depth of historical knowledge among political leaders and the voting public evaporates.

In our absence from public space, journalists, fiction writers, and possessors of scales, protractors and tabulators fill the void we created. We desiccate public discourse when we do not disseminate ubiquitously our findings to those whose taxes and tuition fees feed us. Those who finance our research addictions do so because they know that they and we are more than stardust. In response to our hoarding of knowledge in violation of our Platonic social contract, they are cutting our rations, taking our gilt place cards from our dining halls, and denying us more tallow and quills. It is getting cold in the global academy, as cold as outer space.

Are we ready to repent?

If we want our privileged lives to continue, and if we want our colleagues and students to continue our craft, we must return to our sacred role that is perhaps the oldest political function. We must conserve, liberate and serve the stories that separate us from animals, that make us humane, and that affirm what we all know to be true. Humans are not mere stardust.

Even into the late twentieth century, before we retreated to the archives after that heady time of the 1960s, we were advisors to monarchs and to generals. We did more than remember the intermarried royal lineages, consequent transfers of property and the dissatisfaction that fermented into skirmishes, feuds and wars that populate social media. Such things are the quantifiable detritus of politics. Historians are the conservers of emotion and the human experience. Military strategist von Clausewitz recognized the sum of a community's public memory as the engine of the will to fight. Historians know what brought joy to the

citizens in the past. Joy-filled lives are the foundation for political stability according to Kautilya's political theories. Historians also know what brought pain that lashes out and infects neighbors across a border or behind a portcullis. Glorious warfare is not the representative essence of history because there are always tears that drown its flames. Many are the times when students asked me, "Hannibal versus Genghis Khan: who wins if all weapons are equal? Shaka Zulu versus the Bruce? Julius Caesar versus Tokugawa Yoshinobu?" I tell them to measure by the number of orphans and widows.

More than once, in the U.S., U.K. and Norway, students asked me, "Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini were efficient and it's okay to admire them for that, right?" Stardust might agree. I remind the students of some of the overlooked targets of that efficiency such as Slavic Eastern Europeans, Pacifica, the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia and the Norsemen in Denmark, the Netherlands and Oslo, especially the women. Pain like theirs is not an inherent feature of stardust and only stardust would unwittingly aspire to repeat Hitler's or Tojo's or Mussolini's patterns of such efficiency. Stardust is the product of education systems where historians do not rein in the tabulators, calculators and technocrats. Historians must conserve and transmit our hoard of emotional narratives because therein exist the vital elements of humane international and domestic relations; furthermore, we must do so without consigning to morgantic ostracism in the global Academy those who transmit research findings to the general public.

When we are not in the archives, historians are the catalyst of progress and societal evolution for we shape the future by educating leaders. One can assume that we have all at some point in our careers discussed the impact on world history of professional graduate student Aristotle because he whispered dreams of India into Alexander's ears. Our undergraduates love to dash a little Santayana in their essays, hoping we will add a gold star to their grade. Some of our graduate students may tell us that General George Marshall learned that it is one thing to win the war and another to win the peace. Others might correct that by citing Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Usman dan Fodio or Túpac Inca Yupanquí. I can tell you stories of two twenty-first century kings. I met one king whose knowledge of comparative modernization history led him to take his nation from radio to high-definition television, from illiteracy to mail-

order public education, and from fickle tyranny to constitutional monarchy without creating a single slum. I met the history teacher of another king whose constitutional reforms mean that high school students will no longer face torture and prison for asking for better books. I also met several of his father's tortured victims. History teachers continue to change nations as we liberate our students from ignorance of the joys and pains of historic political agendas.

We must treat every student as a future powerbroker because we know about sleepers in class who later won elections or worked their way into high political offices. The world suffers when historians retreat to our hoards in the archives. Now, historians too are suffering because too many of us retreated from the 1960s people's history movement into some aloof conceptual space where culottes are de rigueur. A generation or so later and we have a new global era of dangerous demagoguery that is partially our fault because it could only have grown in the widespread ignorance that is the wake of our retreat. Perhaps only historians in public conversations can liberate us from crystalline repetition of the almost-compulsory courses of action spawned by such demagoguery.

Four decades and a couple dozen months ago, when televisions still used glass vacuum tubes, my family listened to AM radio on a cross-country trip through the Ozark Mountains where a disc jockey announced he would play a warped old 78 rpm found in Grandma Smith's hope chest. "If you rock in your chair on the porch, you should be able to match the warbles from the record playing just fine." Four years and a couple dozen months ago as I drove a few times through fly-over America where grain silos are taller than steeples on big box churches, and libraries are nowhere to be seen, I heard the rumblings of angry innuendo delivered as incontestable fact. I thought, "At any moment, we will all be cutting down our own tall cherry trees." The talk-radio voices are right about being incontestable. Where are the historians to out-shout them? Cognizant that they are pinched by the claws of ignorance because the science of teaching leaves too little room for historical content in the training of teachers, the pained public has created new twin gods: Information and Source. Have you seen these gods? If you have not been served a huge helping of this new religion, then I am now outing you as a history hoarder. Only those in the bowels of the archives are beyond earshot of our democracy's demand that we historians return to our sacred role. People are hungry for the historical

knowledge that they paid us to find. They are dismantling our academies desk by desk, graduate program by undergraduate major, tenure-line by department. They will continue to do so until our last tallow candle sputters in the cold breeze of budget cuts. Then, and maybe before we retire, we will freeze because we stopped serving the people who feed us. We left them in the hands of purveyors of stardust's numerical sequences with their narratives that contain neither joy nor pain. When our profession disappears into the political nebula that grew in our abandoned classrooms, no one will hear the murder of History.

This essay has taken far longer to write and to read than the instant in which I first had this thought about the correlation of stardust and humanity. I was sitting in the lobby of the Gerald Ford Presidential Library during a reception that was part of the first Big History Conference. I was in a conversation with one of the founders of this promising school of history and he explained the rational, crystalline beauty of this new gospel's narrative. As he spoke, I noticed in this narrative the silence of deep space where there should have been noisy human activity. If we are only the most complex arrangements of matter, is our behavior changeable? After all, there are pyramids everywhere around the planet and not a sign of alien life forms or their blueprints to be found. If we are only complex patterns of Goldilocks moments, does human agency exist? If we are only stardust, is domestic violence wrong? To be sure, it is not deemed wrong in some places such as a few European countries where more than once I have seen it practiced on the street in midday. It is just an ordinary pattern of life so who is to blame? No one is if we are only stardust and that is why the screams of pain cannot be heard in the space of Big History. At this point I asked him, if we are only stardust, then does murder exist? The implication of a positive answer leads to the death of humans by the hundred million. We know this.

This year, I may call you and ask you to serve in some way in our Ohio Academy of History because our mission is to "promote the development and dissemination of historical knowledge among the citizens and students of Ohio". I hope you will liberate some time in order to conserve the relevance of our much-needed and sacred ancient role outside of the archive, because every human on the planet, including you, is much more than stardust.~MRR