

The Future of Our Present

Historiography

the study of the writing of history and of written histories

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Historiography is the study of the writing of history and of written histories. It's from the Greek "historiographia," from *historia* 'narrative, history' + *-graphia* 'writing'. Historiography helps us to understand why someone wrote about a history in the manner they did and why historians differ in their accounts of an event or an era.

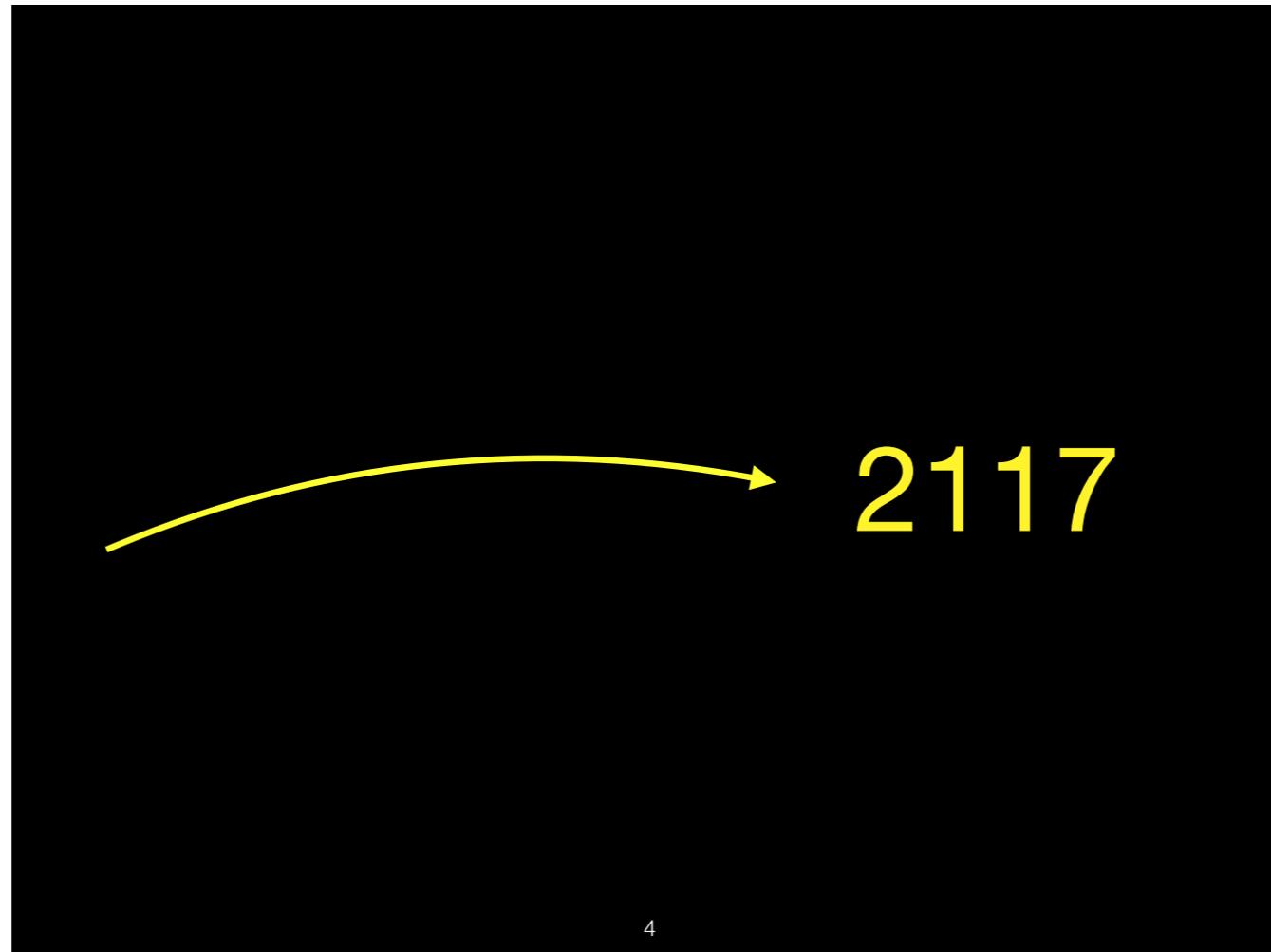
History

What happened in the past

What we write about the past

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History can be thought of in two ways: as what happened in the past and what we write about the past. So we can read Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* to find out why that war arose, who were the adversaries, and what the outcome was. But that's only the beginning: we can also learn a lot about Thucydides and his times by reading his *History* because the writing of any history is set in a context that is concerned with some things and unaware of others.



Let's project 100 years into the future, to 2117: We are preparing to write a history of the Adventist Church during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While our focus here is on one particular denomination, the principles hold true for any historical enquiry of this sort.

True reflection of events and people

Understand motives, purposes, and outcomes

Pivotal events and influential people

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We want it to be a true reflection of the events and people of this time. We want to understand their motives and purposes as well as the outcomes of the actions they took.

We'll be looking for certain pivotal events and influential people who helped to reveal what that age was about.



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BUT: which events and people do we select to study out of everything and everyone that filled that time?

This is what the historian must decide.

C. Wright Mills (1916 - 1962)



C. Wright Mills, an influential sociologist in the 50s and 60s, thought that social science brought together problems of biography, history, and their relationships in a social structure. Those three—biography, history, and society—are the triangulation points, he thought, for the proper study of humankind. The idea was simple: every social study must be done within an historical scope and with historical methods. The social context makes the man. “The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted,” said Mills (*The Sociological Imagination*, 161).

“The historian represents the organized memory of mankind, and that memory, as written history, is enormously malleable.”

— C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

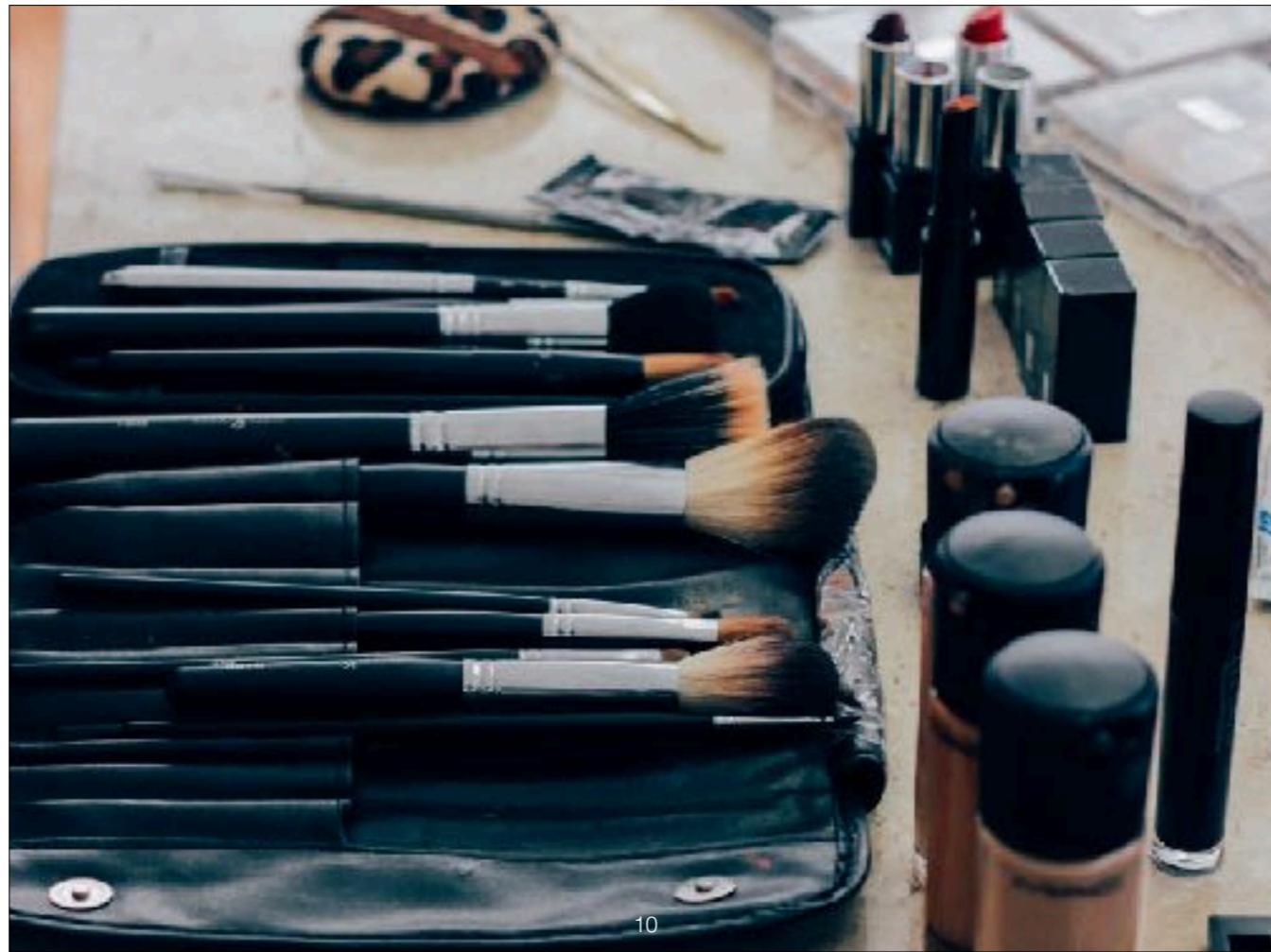
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“The master task of the historian is to keep the human record straight, but that is indeed a deceptively simple statement of aim. The historian represents the organized memory of mankind, and that memory, as written history, is enormously malleable. . . It changes also because of changes in the points of interest and the current framework within which the record is built. These are the criteria of selection from the innumerable facts available, and at the same time the leading interpretations of their meaning.”

— C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 144-45



One way we could try to understand what the historian does is to ask ourselves what we would save right now for the historians of the future? How would we select what we thought future historians would be interested in?



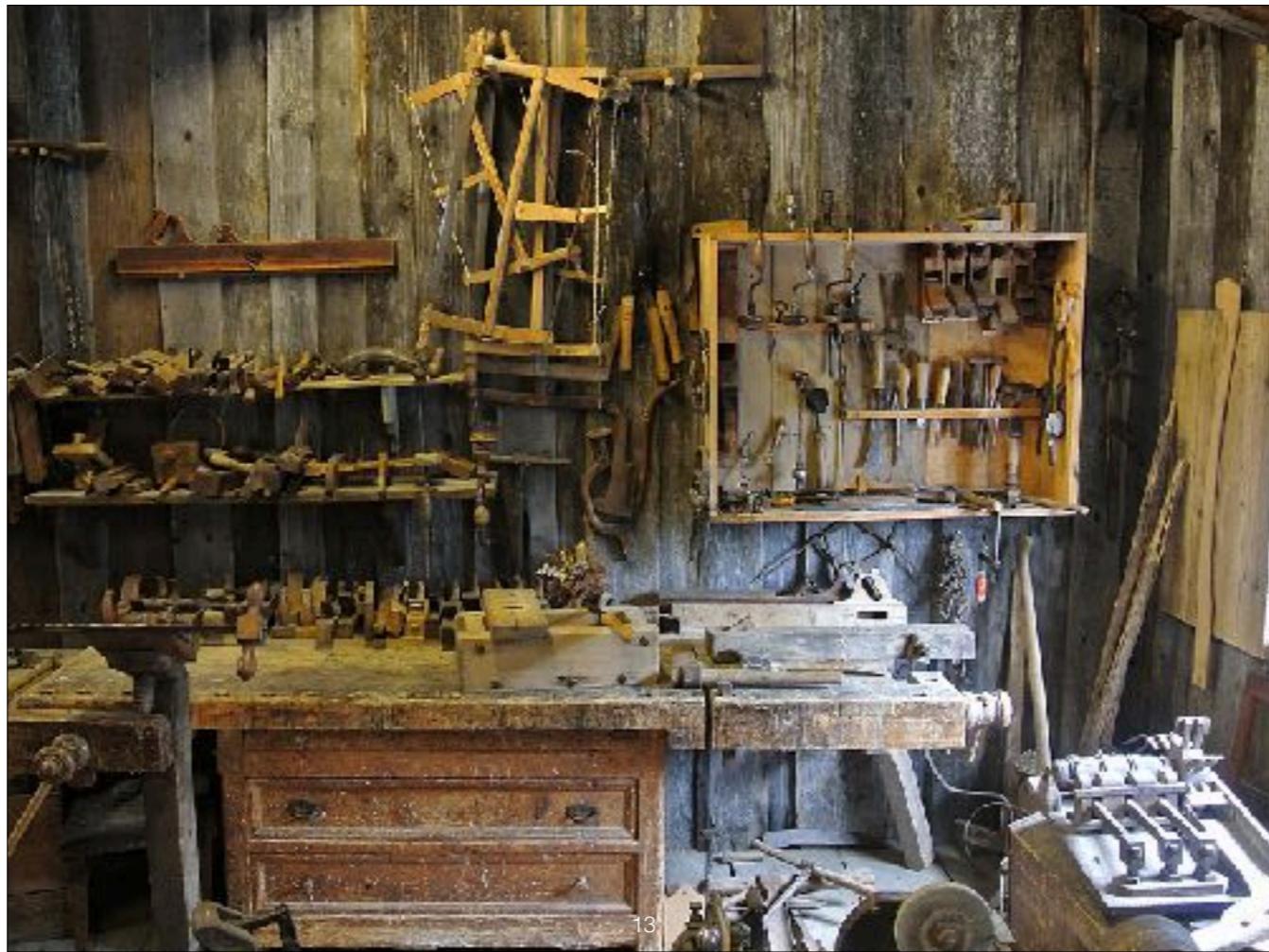
We could save absolutely everything.



Church bulletins, receipts, papers written for conferences, certificates of ordination, notes from board meetings and General Conference sessions—you get the idea.



Nothing would be inconsequential;



Everything could shed light on what our lives and our concerns were like in this time. Our purpose would be that historians would have as complete a record of what happened as possible. . .



So that finally they would create a story that was coherent and consistent and illuminating.

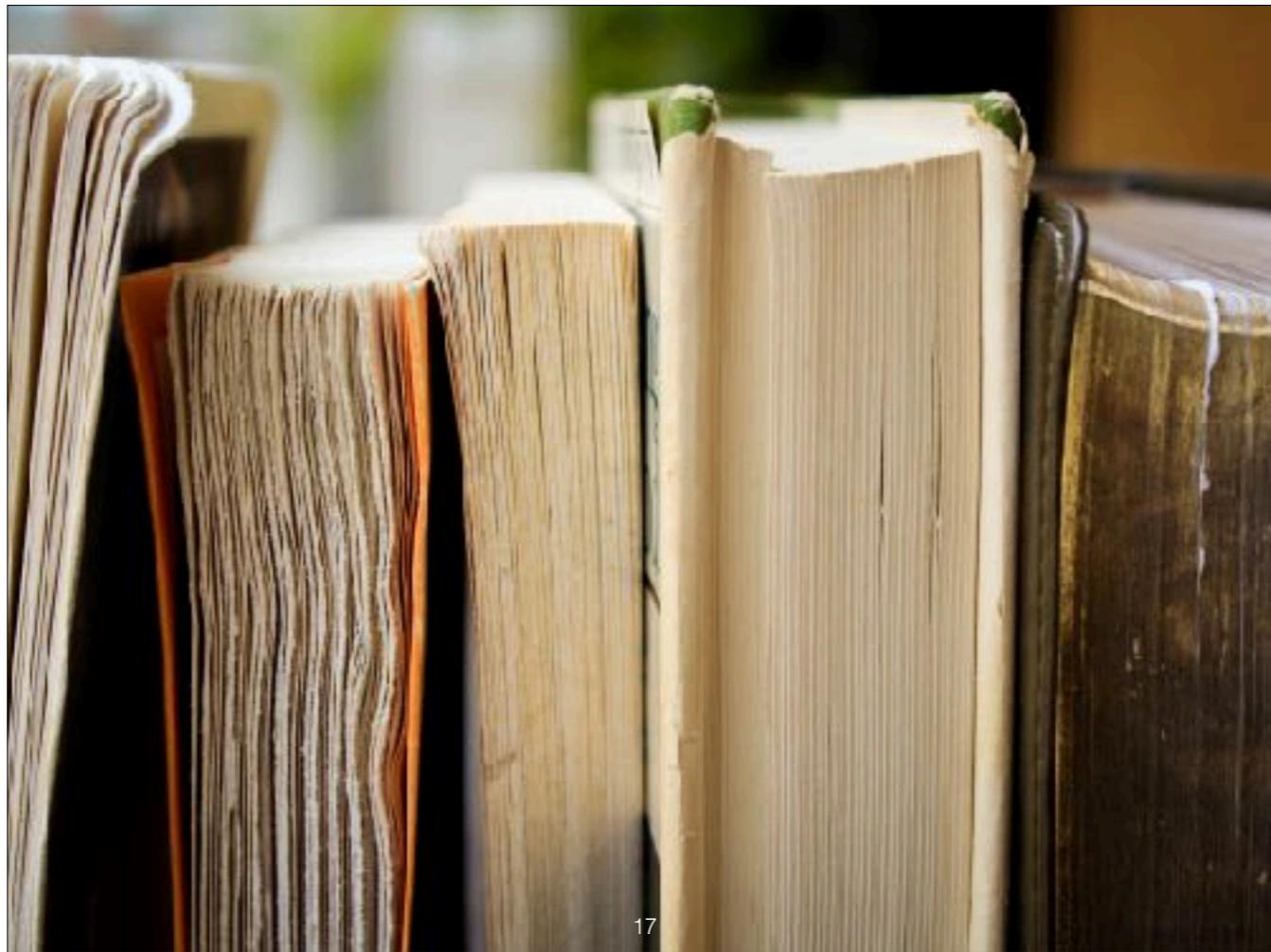
Save everything

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So that's one way: Save everything: leave the sorting to them.



But that's not really how we work, is it? At the end of a semester a teacher goes through her files and tosses out what cannot be used again. When we move we try to lighten our loads and keep what we deem is essential.



After we die our children will go through our stuff and try to dispose of it considerately.



A lot of it will be obsolete or outmoded or defunct, seeing as how advances in technology, for example,



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creatively destroy the tools and toys of yesterday.



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But that won't matter. What our children will most likely keep is that which has special value to them . . .



because it reminds them of their childhood



or of special moments in their lives . . .



. . . or it reminds them of who we were for them.



In other words, our children—all of us, really—keep for the future anything that means something to us.

Save what matters to us

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That's another way: Save what matters to us.

So part of the work of the historian would be to discover why that was important to us and how that fit into the larger scheme of our society. Comparisons will be made between this person and that, this culture and that, or this time period in our culture versus an earlier period. We learn through comparison and contrast.



E. H. Carr
1892-1982



What is History?

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E. H. Carr, one of the most influential historians in the twentieth century, noted in his Trevelyan Lectures at Oxford, called 'What is History?', that we should ask first, what the historian is like, then what was his or her society like at the time, because all historians are products of their time and they select from what they think is significant the facts that will tell the story as they see it.

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E. H. Carr, *What is History?*

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“As any working historian knows,” said Carr, “. . . the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts.”

“My first answer therefore to the question ‘What is history?’ is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”

E. H. Carr, *What is History?*

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History never repeats itself. Man always does.
Voltaire

"HISTORY DOES NOT REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME."
- MARK TWAIN

"WE ARE NOT MAKERS OF HISTORY. WE ARE MADE BY HISTORY."
- MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

History is written by the winners.
- Napoleon Bonaparte

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF, FIRST AS TRAGEDY, SECOND AS FARCE.
Karl Marx

"HISTORY WILL BE KIND TO ME: FOR I INTEND TO WRITE IT."
- Winston Churchill

But it's not as if we don't have some quick definitions of history to fall back on. Here's one from Voltaire, and another from Napoleon that we hear a lot, and one from Marx that refutes Voltaire, and another from Churchill who was going to set his own agenda, and then one from Martin Luther King, Jr., that casts us as more passive than we might think, and finally one from Mark Twain that brings this speculation to a chuckling halt. How might future historians of Adventism regard this moment in Adventist culture?

1. A conflict about theology between traditionalists and progressives.
2. A titanic struggle between an authoritarian president and recalcitrant members.
3. An economic struggle between wealthy unions and the church.
4. A moral issue on one side and adherence to policy on the other.
5. A generational divide between younger and older members.
6. An historic drama between the rising nations of the Southern Hemisphere and the setting nations of the North.
7. A cultural divide between apocalyptic and present kingdom.
8. A divide between evangelism of souls and social justice for people.

Looking ahead, these are a few contrasts that historians might see about our age.
Keep these in mind and we will come back to them.

What events?

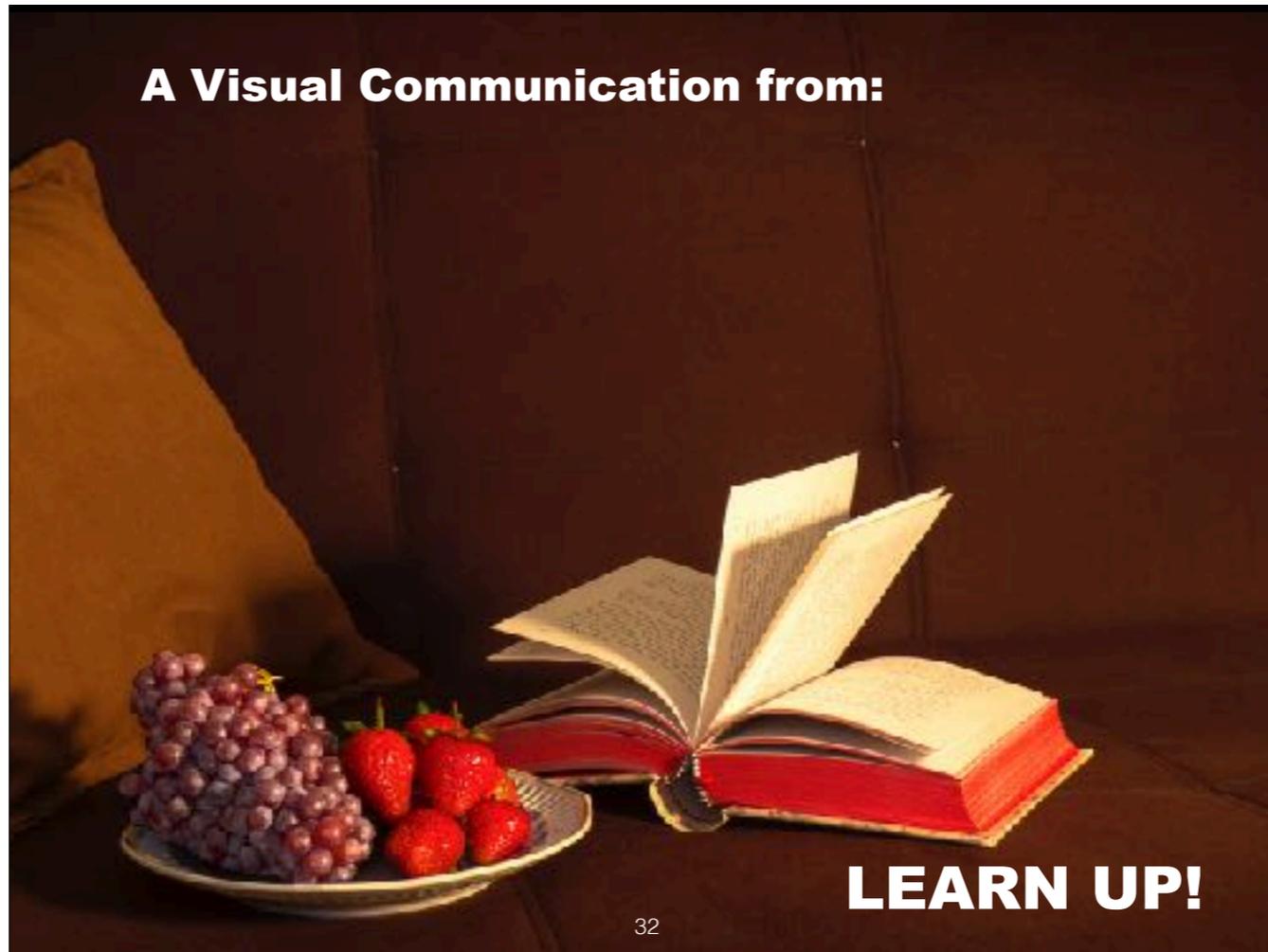
What issues?

Which people?

How do we select?

What do we future historians of the present age need to keep in mind? These things: What events? What issues? Which people? And how do we select what we'll use in our narrative?

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References

E. H. Carr, *What is History?* 2nd ed, 1987. London: Penguin Books

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