



History: The Meaning of Time

What if children were helped to think about the quality of different times in history?

Marge's elementary history class was exploring historical language, such as *century* and *decade*, as part of their history topic on colonial America.

"We learn historical language as we explore different periods in history, but I wanted the students to understand more than the technical terms. I wanted them to understand not just different lengths of time but that time has different qualities and feels different if you are living through it; not every decade or period is the same, and even the same time can be experienced differently depending on who you are.

"As the children came in, I had upbeat music playing and a balloon on my desk. I picked up the balloon and asked them to try to keep it in the air while seated for two minutes. After that, they sat quietly at their tables and listened to some peaceful music for two minutes. Afterward they discussed which had felt the longest, and we listed words to describe the quality or characteristics of the different "times" we had just experienced ("fun," "calm," etc.) and the way we reacted ("cooperation," "patient," "impatient," "trusting," etc.). Then we learned about the different units of time and words to describe them. We cut felt in different lengths to represent each unit. We used different colors of felt to represent exciting times, sad times, dangerous times, and so on. We talked about how the same time could be comfortable for some but distressing for others, and what could give hope in a distressing time.

"I ended the session with a short story I had made up about a boy and a girl who were children in colonial America in very different sections of society. I wanted to end with a story and whet their appetite for the topic to come."

What's going on here?

Marge saw her history lesson as a place to emphasize personal meaning and significance and reflective attentiveness, not just information, and she helped students to imagine time differently.

She engaged students experientially through her introduction, and continued to do this throughout (by adding the different colors). Marge also used storytelling as a way of helping students make personal connections, and used the discussion to encourage a relational focus.

She reshaped her practice by using features of the environment such as music, party favors, silence, and colors to create the atmosphere she wanted; by using key phrases ("sad times") to emphasize empathy; and by using an approach that involved storytelling and discussion.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Faith, hope, and love are about finding meaning and purpose in life. Life is not just one thing after another in time; events have significance and meaning. History is not impersonal; it is about people who experienced those events with joy, sadness, patience, and fear. Those people sometimes faced life with faith in God, hope for the future, patient endurance, and love of others.

What difference does it make?

The way Marge taught this lesson raised her class's awareness that there is more to time than just quantity, an insight that could help them reflect on their own times as well as past times. It also raised the possibility for empathy, since it focused on how other people may have experienced particular times.

Where could we go from here?

Insights into the quality of times could help children appreciate minority perspectives on history and the multiple experiences of a particular period.

Digging deeper

Life has been described as “one thing after another,” but such a view would have puzzled people in the Bible. For them, life was never just a collection of events and facts. Life was rich with meaning for people not only in the Bible but for much of our history. Belief in a good Creator assures people that he has not created a meaningless universe.

The Bible shows God as intimately involved in human history and ultimately as Lord of history. Christian and Jewish spirituality is not ahistorical; it is experienced in the ups and downs of people’s lives caught up in world events.

The Bible has more than one word for time: *chronos* is the Greek word used in the New Testament for length of time, and *kairos* is the New Testament word that often denotes the quality of time, its character, and its significance.

What is the purpose of life? What does it all mean? Every generation has asked these questions. Human beings are people in search of meaning. In the Western world people are more affluent than earlier generations, but life still seems empty for many. The Bible recognizes the struggle to find meaning in life. The book of Ecclesiastes, for example is about a man trying to find purpose in it all, and only after a long struggle does he find some purpose in life.

St. Augustine described the search for meaning as being restless.

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. St. Augustine

Faith in God gives purpose to life, and meaning is there to be discovered in the experiences that come to us. We do not have to create it. Purpose and meaning come through a relationship with God and others—we were made for love.



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