

How many of us remember those Jell-O salads our moms or grammas used to make, long ago? Things got pretty strange for a while. Quivering towers of molded gelatin, filled with combinations of vegetables, or tuna, shrimp, chicken, cheese, or maybe hot dogs and olives. Perfection salad was basically coleslaw embedded in lemon or lime Jell-O. Jell-O desserts were usually more palatable, although I can remember some concoctions involving Miracle Whip and Jell-O that I actually turned down when it came time for dessert.

And as disgusting as some of these recipes might sound to us today, they were apparently tasty enough to keep showing up on supper tables for almost a decade. Some even survive to this day as old family favorites that get made on holidays and at family reunions.

What's weird is that if you go search for this stuff on the internet, there are hundreds of pages dedicated to preserving this tiny fragment of American life.

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" and "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

It's worth noting that both quotes come from novels. The first from "The Go-Between", a novel about the forbidden love between an upper class English girl and lower class lad at the end of the Victorian era, and the lives it damages. It is told as a memoir, the adult narrator recalling how he carried notes between the doomed lovers, and how he had forgotten the difficult memories and how he now sees them. The second novel, "Requiem for a Nun", is a brutal story of rape, murder, class, and racism, set in the American South during Jim Crow. Nun was Elizabethan era slang for a prostitute, and a nun is also one who redeems sinners.

Of such contradictions and complexities is the past made and remade.

The past is a foreign country – they do things differently there. Indeed, they speak another language, one that sounds like ours, but the words have different meanings. Indeed, the very shape of reality is different, seen through different lenses, worked with different tools and materials. We can study it, but can never belong, never be insiders.

But what is the past? Is it the histories we have written down? Is it the old photographs, the hieroglyphs, the graffiti on the walls of Pompeii? Is it the monuments, the ruins, the pottery shard in the dust? It is all of that, and more, and yet none of it. A photograph is not the past. A history book is not the past. A ruin is not the past.

The past is a story we tell ourselves to make sense of the present, and guide ourselves into the future. And the past is not just a foreign country, it's a contested country, one being fought over now as bitterly as any war.

What and who gets included in the past? What is the meaning of the events recorded in the histories? Whose version of the past is the 'true' one?

These are obviously not new questions. Societies are constantly reworking the past in some fashion, for many reasons. The past is not writ in stone, but rather in ink that fades and smears, constantly being written and overwritten, many times in the service of some political or ideological end. Some have noted that this results in the past being not just a foreign country, but a whole slew of foreign countries, each devised for the most part to serve the demands of the present.

There are as many pasts as people, histories beyond counting. How then are we to relate to the past, and make sense of it, and thereby make some sense of the present? Surely in all of that there are overlaps and commonalities?

Let me pause at this point and say that I'm not here to compare the merits or truths of these various pasts, such as the 1619 Project, or the elementary school version of American history. I'm just thinking about ways in which we use and misuse and sometimes abuse the past.

One of those is nostalgia - the excessive sentimental yearning for a return to some past period or unrecoverable condition. A little personal nostalgia for one's youth or a place you once lived is fine, but most of us know that trying to live in the past is not a healthy thing to do.

What's truly dangerous is nostalgia wedded to politics. The collective nostalgia for a time – an imagined past - that never existed, the idea that a nation or a people can be restored to a real or imagined former greatness has given us Trump and Hitler and other demagogues.

I think the greatest danger is editing the past to serve present ideologies, as if by somehow 'fixing' the past, the present could be made pure and the future assured.

Way back in college in the late 1970's some of my communist friends received a publication called China Today, the glossy party propaganda magazine, filled pictures of dams under construction and happy peasants fulfilling their production goals under the latest five year plan.

There were also photos of the CCP officials in charge – or not – because in many of those photos, the officials in question had been airbrushed out. They had thought incorrectly or failed to deliver on something, or perhaps simply took the wrong side in an internal political debate. And it wasn't subtle. Where they once stood in the pictures were smudged blobs. The obviousness was the point, and the message was clear. Get with the program, or you will be erased. There is only the party line, the official history, and everything else is counterrevolutionary and a lie.

A similar desire seems to motivate the current fashion of denouncing the past for violating current morality. Tearing down statues and removing portraits of men deemed evil and irredeemable by today's standards, as if their presence makes their complex pasts acceptable and approved. Removing words from the lexicon because they remind us of past wrongs has become a common practice, even if those words are no longer used in those ways. Teaching parts of the past, and not all of it, or teaching an extreme ideological version of our past; something partisans on both sides seek to do.

For some, the past has become a demon to be exorcised at all costs. Pulling down statues and prohibiting words doesn't right past injustices. Exorcising the past doesn't change the past, it only makes it easier to forget it. And forgetting the past is to forget ourselves and both the good and the evil that lies in the human heart. And when we forget, we don't recognize the real demon when it comes around again.

It's so tempting, this desire to edit or forget the past. We all do it on a personal level to a certain degree. We prefer not to remember the times we behaved cruelly. We bury traumas deep so as not to relive them, and we do it for our sanity and survival. We see our past actions through filters, like the old timey filmmakers, who smeared Vaseline on their lenses to make the aging movie star look younger and more attractive. And we deserve some grace for this.

We shouldn't do that with our collective past. We have to see it whole, and as clearly as we can. No Vaseline on the lenses, so to speak. Yes, our history, indeed all history, can be distressing. But to think it is all ugly and wear it like a chip on our shoulders does not serve. And trying to erase it only drives it underground where it gathers power in the shadows.

And what if the future needs that which we have buried or erased? We already know the answer to that question.

It is trite but true to say that along with all the violence and ugliness that needs healing, there is beauty and progress that needs celebrating. The first does not cancel out the second, or the other way round.

Only by embracing the past with clarity can we have a past worth passing on to our heirs. It's a messy past, full of contradictions, good and bad, and the struggle to survive. We need to see all of it without excusing or erasing any of it. Only by doing so can we begin to right the wrongs and make the good better.

Our ancestors did good, and did bad, and did so with the knowledge they had in the world they knew. It's easy to exclaim "What were they thinking!?" and deplore their actions and pass harsh judgements.

One day we'll be the ancestors, and those who come after will no doubt deplore our actions, and pass harsh judgements upon us ignorant and unenlightened fools. Maybe our monuments will be toppled, and our pictures airbrushed out, and our words deemed unacceptable.

So a certain humility is in order when it comes to judging those who lived in the foreign country of the past. One day that will be us, and we should never forget that, or them, or all of what they did.

Only then can we have a past worth passing on.