



BECOMING ORDINARY

TURNING POINTS THAT TRANSFORM HISTORY ORGANIZATIONS

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“The next time it may be you, or your daughter or mother,” warned the mimeographed leaflets, urging “every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial.” The previous Thursday, December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks had been arrested on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. It became a turning point for civil rights, triggering a 380-day bus boycott that lasted until the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* that segregation, even outside public schools, violated the Fourteen Amendment.

Rosa Parks is often portrayed as a tired and ordinary black seamstress who quietly took a stand against segregation by sitting down. Delving deeper into the story, you quickly discover that Parks was actively involved as a leader in the civil rights movement, investigating and documenting cases of abuse against African Americans and women and participating in a national network of people who were fighting for reforms through lawsuits, bus boycotts, and other strategies for decades. Parks did not plan to be arrested that cold December day, but when the opportunity arose, she seized it. Her motivators were the heart-wrenching crimes against Recy Taylor and Gertrude Perkins and the tenacity of E. D. Nixon and Jo Ann Robinson.¹ Her success was not accidental nor exclusive. She was

¹ In 1944, six white men raped Recy Taylor in Abbeville, Alabama; in 1949, two white police officers raped Gertrude Perkins in Montgomery, Alabama; E. D. Nixon was the head of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and president of the Alabama branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Jo Ann Robinson was an English professor at Alabama

one of many seemingly ordinary people whose aspirational vision, contemporary relevance, and personal passion overcame seemingly impossible situations, finding a way where there seemed to be no way. They looked and lived like many of their next-door neighbors, but they made extraordinary and meaningful changes to the everyday lives of Americans.

Parks' actions inspires us today, a reminder of the tremendous changes that are behind us and an encouragement for what we face ahead. Museums, historical societies, and historic sites are filled with stories of people like her that can inspire and inform our visitors. For example, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann pioneered the humane treatment of mental illness and Vivian Simpson forced the University of Maryland to end discrimination against women, but few people in my hometown of Rockville knew these women were part of our community until the local historic preservation organization published a booklet about them a couple years ago.²

Rosa Parks' experience can inspire history organizations, who are also in the midst of extraordinary change, albeit of a very different kind. The economic downturn that began in 2008 threatens many museums, historic sites, and historical societies, even those who have large endowments and attendance. But the change is bigger than the current economic recession. Surveys over the past thirty years by the National Endowment for the Arts show that attendance rates at historic sites have fallen from 37 percent in 1982 to 25 percent in 2008, and that it has accelerated in the last decade. We're not alone, however. Similar declines are occurring at concerts, dance performances, craft fairs, and sporting events.³

Some scholars attribute the decline to the shift in educational policies in the 1980s that began to eliminate history, music, art, and sports from the curriculum. The reduced exposure to these activities as children resulted in reduced participation as adults.⁴ Political scientist Robert D. Putnam sees something larger and more pervasive. In *Bowling Alone*, his best-selling study of community, he showed that, "For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without

State University and president of the Women's Political Council. Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 84-134.

² Mary A. van Balgooy, *Women Who Dared* (Rockville, MD: Peerless Rockville, 2010).

³ Sunil Iyengar, Tom Bradshaw, and Bonnie Nichols, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009).

⁴ Nick Rabkin and E. D. Hedberg, *Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011).

warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current.”⁵ The growing pressures of time and money on two-career families, the social isolation that comes with suburbanization, and the privatization of leisure time due to electronic media (such as television and the Internet) have played a role but more significant is the replacement of the “long civic generation” by their less involved children and grandchildren. The “long civic generation” was one of the results of the Progressive movement, urbanization, and the civil obligations induced by several wars. With their slow disappearance, people visit less, join less, volunteer less, give less, trust less, and vote less. During the past fifty years, America passed through an extraordinary change that is undermining the foundations of our communities, including history organizations.

Although the trends are headed down, it doesn’t mean we’re out—yet. Even though visitation is declining, Americans have a broad interest in heritage and regularly participate in historical activities, such as taking photographs to preserve memories, watching movies about the past, or attending a family reunion.⁶ Tourism is a major industry in the United States and most adults include a cultural or historical activity while traveling.⁷ Our shared identity as Americans serves as stronger bond than occupation, religion, race, and ethnicity, suggesting that history organizations have enormous leverage.⁸ Even outdoor enthusiasts stated that after their top choices of walking and jogging, they most enjoyed visiting historic sites.⁹ Indeed, ordinary museums, historical societies, and historic sites can be the tipping point in our communities to improve civic engagement and increase the quality of life. Valuable opportunities await us if we are willing and able to grab them.

Ten years ago, Richard Moe as president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation asked if there are too many historic house museums.¹⁰ It’s an intriguing question but it hasn’t generated the right kind of debate. Instead it’s prompted discussions about how and when to launch a national “spay and neuter” program for historic sites, and avoided more important questions. If

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000): 27.

⁶ Roy Rosensweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 234.

⁷ *Historic/Cultural Traveler* (Washington, DC: Travel Industry Association, 2003).

⁸ *National Social Capital Community Survey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, 2006).

⁹ Osiris Group, Inc., *Think Outside: Promoting Natural Assets and Experiences in the Philadelphia Region* (Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, 2005).

¹⁰ Richard Moe, “Are There Too Many Historic House Museums?” *Forum Journal*, 16 no. 3 (spring 2002): 4-11.

history and heritage is important to our society, why are so many history organizations struggling? If museums, historical societies, and historic sites are part of a basic educational network that includes schools and libraries, wouldn't our nation be better off if there were more?

Every history museum, historic site, and historical society is ordinary—it's just that they choose what kind of "ordinary" they want to be. One definition is to have "no exceptional ability, degree, or quality" so in that sense, when history organizations are unable or unwilling to make a difference in their communities, there are too many of them. Living in the doldrums, they are content to be superfluous. The other definition is "commonly encountered; usual." When a history organization is a vital and everyday part of their community, they can be encouraging, strengthening, and transformative. We need more of these.

History organizations choose the impact they want to make. Sometimes the choice is intentional and brought in by a visionary leader or strategic plan, but it can also come about through organizational confidence and maturity. These transitions can occur quickly or over many years, and unlike puberty, there's no guarantee that an organization won't return to its previous condition. In my work with dozens of history organizations over the past thirty years, I've witnessed three typical turning points that resulted in extraordinary activities and programs.

1. DOING HISTORY WITH PASSION

The first turning point occurs when history organizations practice history. If we are in the "history business," history should permeate and inspire everything we do. Fifty years ago, historian Barbara Tuchman asserted that, "Being in love with your subject. . .is indispensable for writing good history—or good anything, for that matter."¹¹

How do we know someone is in love? Observe what they say and do. Do they talk about history with feeling and interest? Do they spend time with history actively and joyfully? Does history influence their thinking and do they want to learn more? Now evaluate your organization's staff, volunteers, and trustees, particularly those in high-level positions--are they passionate about history? Certainly we need skilled attorneys and financial managers, but we also need to sustain and grow the enthusiasm for history. If it's impossible to find someone who is both a whiz at finances and a history buff, don't place them in a position where they make strategic decisions about the organization. They

¹¹ Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 14.

will be tempted to do what's best for the bottom line, not what's best for the mission. Likewise, a board can't be filled solely with historians; they need to bring other needed skills to the table.

Practicing history isn't just collecting objects, verifying facts, and presenting anecdotes about the past. It's an investigation to answer a question—an "inquiry" which cracks open the etymological nut at the source of the word, "history." Are your events, exhibits, programs, and publications answering questions that intrigue your visitors and addressing issues in your community? Are your activities producing some thoughtful leaders or only consumers and followers?

Embracing scholarship and original research should be an ordinary part of our work as history institutions. Although the past doesn't change, our understanding of it does. Bringing a different perspective or question to well-worn sources can result in entirely new revelations, as demonstrated by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's study of a community through a midwife's mundane diary or Doris Kearns Goodwin's examination of Abraham Lincoln's presidency through his everyday relationships with his cabinet members.¹² By working with outside experts, you can assess your public programs to keep them sharp, identify the needs and opportunities for research, and mine your collections to find the significant stories of the ordinary people who worked and lived in your community.¹³ Don't hesitate to ask professors, authors, or curators for help—they welcome the opportunity to work with others who care about their subject and to get an opportunity for a behind-the-scenes peak at the collections.

The award-winning books *A Midwife's Tale* and *Team of Rivals* wouldn't have been possible without the staff and collections of many state and local libraries, museums, historic sites, and historical societies, so the second step is increasing access to your collections. Historical societies have amazing collections, but much is unknown because inventories and finding aids aren't available. Cataloguing all those collections to make them intellectually and conveniently accessible is ideal, but often out of reach. Tackle this project methodically by identifying the discreet groups that will be valuable to most researchers, and then process them in ever-deepening levels, starting with a simple description of each group and eventually describing each item. In the meantime, simple resources such as a footnoted timeline, a bibliography of best books and articles, and a guide to sources for your site

¹² Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

¹³ AASLH can help you do history more effectively. Look for inspiration in Carol Kammen's "On Doing Local History" column in *History News* or if you're ambitious, complete the *Standards and Excellence Program Workbook* (StEPs).

or community, provide a springboard for researchers studying a topic and using your collections. Today's digital age has made it much easier to share the collections with much less impact on the organization, so consider sharing frequently requested documents and photographs online, perhaps even your entire catalogue. Indeed, humdrum records contain a "powerful history," according to Ulrich. "Martha Ballard's diary forced me to reassess [conventional] history. In some ways, it turned the story upside down."¹⁴ That mundane midwife's diary in the Maine State Library also earned her a Pulitzer Prize, Bancroft Prize, and six other national awards.

2. MAKING HISTORY MEANINGFUL

The second turning point occurs when history organizations become more meaningful and relevant to their audiences. Good writers always have the reader in mind and are continually asking, "will they turn the page?" History organizations can ask similar questions such as, will they return? Will they recommend us to their friends? Will they be convinced to support your organization? That means understanding your visitors, a knowledge that continually changes because visitors are continually changing.

Recording attendance is a good place to start, but that information often lacks sufficient detail to inform decisions. It's like a restaurant noticing that sales are down, but not knowing whether it's happening at breakfast, lunch, or dinner or due to the food, service, price, or neighborhood. Attendance statistics are more valuable when we capture a visitor's demographics and behavior (e.g., age, residence, repeat visit) against all of an organization's programming (e.g., tours, events, site rentals, website) consistently over several years.

While museums and historic sites often claim to know their visitors, they typically have only a superficial understanding of the public's interests, motivations for visiting, and preferences for learning. Boards and directors bemoan the lack of response to exhibits, events, and programs but fail to remember a key principle: people build relationships with people, not companies, brands, products, or organizations. Use the wrong message or medium, and you'll be ignored.¹⁵ Visitor research helps find the connections between what you offer and what your audience wants. For example, the San Francisco Travel Association's recent study showed that historic sites are the most important

¹⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Change is a Crossroads," *History News*, 68 no. 1 (winter 2013), p. 8.

¹⁵ Karen Freeman, Patrick Spenner, and Anna Bird, "Three Myths about What Customers Want," *HBR Blog Network*, May 23, 2012.

destination for heritage travelers, but more important to tourists are affordability, variety, beauty, relaxation, and food.¹⁶ Armed just with that knowledge, your museum or historic site could be more attractive by relocating seating, improving the appearance of your site, or building relationships with nearby restaurants and attractions to offer discounts to your visitors.

Being relevant also means helping people make decisions or developing a better understanding of the issues that face them everyday. They want to know how they fit into the places and times that surround them—and we have the ideal tool in our hands. The best kind of history explains the past and informs the present. For example, what does the history of a popular park or neighborhood event tell you about your community? If there's a troubling national issue, such as unemployment, political corruption, racial conflict, or gang violence, how has it been handled locally over time? No doubt you'll find some ordinary people who took risks and some extraordinary turning points that changed the outcome. You'll also bond neighborhoods and build understanding by sharing the lives of fellow citizens, past and present, familiar and unknown.

History—and history organizations—makes this possible by exploring varied sources, weighing evidence, coming to conclusions, and most importantly, providing an interpretation. That means a thesis, a proposition, or an opinion that people can accept or reject. Exhibits, tours, and websites often shy away from rendering an explanation because it can provoke conflict or controversy, but as Barbara Tuchman noted, “There is no such thing as a neutral or purely objective historian. Without an opinion a historian would be simply a ticking clock, and unreadable besides.”¹⁷

Our visitors need to develop these skills as well so they can be informed citizens and make wise decisions. Educational psychologist Sam Wineburg found that student and teacher perceptions of historical research are quite different than what historians actually do. Students are trusting and will read a document without question from start to finish, assuming it's accurate and authoritative. Historians are skeptical and instead scan the text to get their bearings, then spend much more time questioning the source, its purpose, and its connections to people, places, and events. For historians,

¹⁶ Destination Analysts, *San Francisco Arts and Cultural Travel Study* (San Francisco: San Francisco Travel Association, 2010).

¹⁷ Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 29.

“Texts come not to convey information, to tell stories, or even to set the record straight. Instead they are slippery, cagey, and protean, reflecting the uncertainty and disingenuity of the real world.”¹⁸

As part of our work to make history meaningful, we need to make historical thinking visible. At museums and historic sites, visitors enjoy tours, exhibits, lectures, and books—the end products of history. Visitors rarely experience the uncertain process of sifting and weighing evidence that goes on beforehand. Science museums routinely teach visitors not only about the facts and theories of science but also how to observe and study natural phenomena to generate those facts and theories. Indeed, the popularity of “citizen science” suggests that ordinary people not only want to *learn* science, but *do* science as a means of civic engagement.¹⁹ Is such a thing as “citizen history” possible? Can residents of our communities be actively involved in the scholarly work of historical research and analysis? Absolutely.

Much of the work in “historical thinking” has been focused on students in the classroom using documents. Among the leaders in the field are National Park Service, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Wisconsin Historical Society, and the History Education Group at Stanford University.²⁰ These efforts are increasingly joined by projects where historical thinking includes adults, occurs outside the classroom, and uses artifacts, buildings, and landscapes as evidence.²¹

Archaeological excavations attract crowds of people who wonder what’s being discovered, and even volunteer to sit for hours moving gallons of dirt by the teaspoonful. The Hampden Community Archaeology Project in Maryland took it a step further by linking the history of a nineteenth century

¹⁸ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 66. See also “Historical Thinking Matters,” a website produced by Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and the School of Education at Stanford University.

¹⁹ Caren B. Cooper, “Links and Distinctions Among Citizenship, Science, and Citizen Science,” *Democracy & Education*, 20 no. 2 (2012): 1-4.

²⁰ Charles White and Kathleen Hunter, *Teaching with Historic Places: A Curriculum Framework* (Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1995); *Thinking Like a Historian* by Nikki Mandell and Bobbie Malone (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2007); *Reading Like an Historian* by Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

²¹ AASLH focused heavily on this area in the 1980s with the publication of *Nearby History* by Kyvig and Marty (Nashville: AASLH, 1982) and *Ordinary People and Everyday Life* edited by James Gardner and Rollie Adams (Nashville: AASLH, 1983).

industrial village to current urban issues by involving local residents (particularly teenagers) in the excavations, collection of oral histories, documentary research, and interpretation.²²

On the other side of the country, the Washington State Historical Society is launching a *Civil War Read-In*. Staff historian Lorraine McConaghy is working with hundreds of amateur historians around the state to better understand this northwestern territory's role in the Civil War. These volunteers carefully read a newspaper, a manuscript collection, or a county history and then enter the evidence they've found into an Omeka database, which is housed at the WSHS website. The *Read-In*, according to McConaghy, builds capacity in historical research, develops a new resource, and will help her to curate an exhibition, "Civil War Pathways," to open at the Washington State Museum in February 2014.

Historical thinking is also found on television. Now in its tenth season, *History Detectives* follows the twists and turns of research into intriguing objects owned by ordinary people, along with explanations of methods and sources. The companion website is rich with excerpts from the show, videos of "detective techniques," a blog that follows up on stories, and lesson plans and rubrics for teachers.

These are extraordinary and magical efforts. They shift the visitor experience from passive to active, getting them up close to historical artifacts and documents to encounter eureka moments and practice history. Essential to their success are passionate historians, curators, and other subject experts. Like the experienced chef in a kitchen, they provide directions, demonstrate techniques, make connections, ask questions, and suggest alternatives. In the end, they share delicious discoveries and create history enthusiasts. The joy we experience in our archives, collections, and places is contagious and shouldn't stay under glass or behind velvet ropes.

Finally, engagement relies on a masterful use of language, so we shouldn't shy away from techniques used for centuries by poets and storytellers in our tours, programs, and exhibits. Rather than efficiently saying that, "Just after my mother turned sixteen in 1959, she took the train from Mississippi to California," see how much more powerfully this idea can be shown in the hands of poet Natasha Trethewey:

²² Robert C. Chidester and David A. Gadsby, "One Neighborhood, Two Communities: The Public Archaeology of Class in a Gentrifying Urban Neighborhood," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 76 (fall 2009): 127-146.

In 1959 my mother is boarding a train.
she is barely sixteen, her one large grip
bulging with homemade dresses, whisper
of crinoline and lace, her name stitched
inside each one. She is leaving behind
the dirt roads of Mississippi, the film
of red dust around her ankles, the thin
whistle of wind through the floorboards
of the shotgun house, the very idea of home.²³

Through carefully crafted histories, the past can a compelling and enthralling experience in the hands of Liaquat Ahamed, Ron Chernow, David Hackett Fisher, Annette Gordon-Reed, Alex Haley, Laura Hillenbrand, Walter Isaacson, Erik Larson, Jill Lepore, David McCullough, Jon Meacham, Rebecca Skloot, Barbara Tuchman, and Isabel Wilkerson—many of whom are not academic historians.²⁴ These stories are carefully constructed narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end; follow a protagonist through conflicts and resolutions; call on the five senses; and rely on action verbs to drive the story.²⁵ The opening sentences of Thomas Jefferson’s biography by Jon Meacham provide a taste of this engaging type of history:

“He woke at first light. Lean and loose-limbed, Thomas Jefferson tossed back the sheets in his rooms at Conrad and McMunn’s boardinghouse on Capitol Hill, swung his long legs out of

²³ Natasha Trethewey, “The Southern Crescent” in *Native Guard* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 5.

²⁴ Liaquat Ahamed, *The Lords of Finance* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Ron Chernow, *George Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010); David Hackett Fisher, *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingeses of Monticello* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008); Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976); Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* (New York: Random House, 2010); Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Erik Larson, *Devil in the White City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977); Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012); Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010); Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Others Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010).

²⁵ To learn more about narrative techniques, see Mary Carroll Moore, *Your Book Starts Here* (Riverbed Press, 2011) and Nancy Duarte, *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2010).

bed, and plunged his feet into a cold basin of water—a lifelong habit he believed good for his health.”²⁶

Well-written books can be more than entertainment—they can also invoke extraordinary change. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Upton Sinclair turned statistics into stories, revealed hidden perspectives, and humanized ordinary people, such as enslaved Africans, native Americans, and immigrant workers, demonstrating through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Ramona*, and *The Jungle* that literature can transform a nation. Yet these novels were caricatures of reality, giving history organizations a distinct advantage: they are society’s bastions of the real and authentic. These documents, artifacts, and places should not only be preserved within our walls, but shared beyond them to allow extraordinary things to happen.

3. PURSUING AN ASPIRATIONAL VISION

The third turning point for history organizations occurs when they adopt an aspirational vision for improving society. Imagining a better America, museums, historic sites, and historical societies can follow examples set by such visionaries as Ann Pamela Cunningham. She believed that George Washington’s exemplary service during the nation’s formation would urge a “bond of Union and political regeneration” during a period of increasing conflict in the 1850s and that the preservation of Mt. Vernon would “commence a new Era in our political life as a Nation.”²⁷ Her vision of preserving the Union was sadly delayed by the Civil War, but her creation of one of the nation’s first historic house museums prompted the formation of many others in the century that followed.

Many historic sites, historical societies, and museums have aspirational visions within their founding DNA but these hopeful images may have been forgotten over time. That passion can be restored, however. Museums are already considered the most trustworthy places to learn about the past and serve as a common place for learning and discovery.²⁸ By using diverse collections and perspectives, history organizations build bridges among various groups and encourage mutual understanding. By exploring shared histories through exhibits, programs, events, websites, and

²⁶ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (2012), 1.

²⁷ Patricia West, *Domesticating History* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 15.

²⁸ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

publications, they engage people in many ways. By focusing on the local and nearby, they strengthen connections among neighbors. By saving significant places in their community, they publically demonstrate a commitment to its own heritage. These are exactly the characteristics that are essential for building strong communities—an aspirational vision I hope all history organizations share.

One piece, however, is often missing: a gutsy vision. The typical mission of collecting, preserving, and interpreting is not sufficient. Those are methods, tasks, jobs, works, or actions that define a purpose and explain “how” it will be accomplished. Needed is a goal, a destination, a target, the ends, an idealized description of the future that explains “why.” To borrow from grammar, it needs a transitive verb—a verb that requires one or more objects. What’s the object or purpose of collecting, preserving, and interpreting? As you fulfill your mission, what do you want people to know, feel, or do? What impact do you want to have on your community? How can you do history in the public’s interest? Every history organization will answer these questions differently because every community is unique, but ultimately, the struggle to answer them will result in a clear (and hopefully inspiring) vision.

As management guru Peter Drucker reminds us, the non-profit organization’s “product is a changed human being. Non-profit institutions are human-change agents. The ‘product’ is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into a self-respecting adults, a changed human life altogether.”²⁹ It is incredibly difficult for history organizations to have a courageous vision. To suggest how the future could be better or different suggests we’ve judged the present to be bad or incomplete—it’s so much easier to avoid controversy or debate. An honest exploration of history won’t allow escape us to escape difficulties and contradictions. History is the study of people, who are often complex, intricate, irrational, interwoven, and knotty. Strip out the difficult parts, and history loses its power to inform, educate, and inspire because it becomes less authentic, truthful, and human.

History organizations can be aspirational and seek to improve their communities, as witnessed in these two examples:

²⁹ Peter Drucker, *Managing the Non-profit Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), xiv.

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center preserves and interprets Stowe's Hartford home and the Center's historic collections, promotes vibrant discussion of her life and work, and inspires commitment to social justice and positive change.

The Anne Frank House cares for the Secret Annex, the place where Anne Frank went into hiding during World War II and where she wrote her diary. It brings her life story to the attention of people all over the world to encourage them to reflect on the dangers of anti-Semitism, racism, and discrimination, and the importance of freedom, equal rights, and democracy.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Anne Frank continue to inspire history organizations and their visitors. It may seem impossible to be inspirational if your museum or site isn't focused on an extraordinary person or event, but consider the history you preserve and interpret—why is it significant and important? In your community's history, what were the turning points? Who was involved? As decisions were made, what alternatives were rejected? What are the challenging issues today? How did they come about? What happened before and after? Who was involved? Every community has ordinary people who have made and are making extraordinary changes—we need to find them in our collections and embody their spirit in our organizations.

LESSONS FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

Turning points require extraordinary change in ourselves and in our organizations, but they are essential to our success and progress. As an example, let's look at the largest expansion of civil rights in American history—the granting of woman suffrage in 1920, which affected more than half of the population.

The first turning point occurred in 1848, when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Women were so unfamiliar with organizing a public meeting that the convention was chaired by a man, but it gave them the new opportunity to speak in public. As confidence grew, the next turning point occurred in the 1870s, when women tested the law by voting in elections (Susan B. Anthony being the most famous "test pilot") or advocated for changing the law (including an amendment to the Constitution). The movement then stalled for several decades. Despite the proliferation of state and local suffrage organizations, little happened except more

meetings, training workshops, and behind-the-scenes advocacy. Only after divisions within the movement and encountering continuing defeats, did they change tactics in the 1910s by introducing the suffrage parade and partnering with working women.³⁰

Parades seem unremarkable today but a century ago, they were a bold and dramatic act for women. The parades moved women from private parlors to public streets and mixed elite and working-class women. Marching on foot, speaking out in public, and associating with lower classes was undignified and “unladylike.” Yet, thousands of ordinary women stepped out of their ordinary roles to make the extraordinary happen. Seeking the vote, more than 20,000 women marched with 57 bands, 74 horses, and 145 decorated automobiles in New York City in 1915. The 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, DC prompted a riot, but it also introduced parades as a form of protest in the nation’s capital. Soon the extraordinary suffrage parade became an ordinary event around the country, prompting more confidence and new tactics, including White House pickets, arrests, and hunger strikes, but without the parade as a turning point, women may still be unable to vote.

Ordinary people can inspire us through their brave and courageous actions, and in every community, their impact can be felt even if their names have been forgotten. As history organizations, one of our roles is to remember their contributions. Secondly, museums, historic sites, and historical societies can also have an extraordinary impact. As UC Berkeley professor emeritus Randolph Starn observed, “It is no stretch, except perhaps for our professional egos, to suppose museums actually deliver more history, more effectively, more of the time, to more people than historians do. My guess is that many historians first got the itch for history from museums, surely more than from the textbooks they read in school.”³¹ Let’s give our communities the itch for history everyday.

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³⁰ Holly J. McCammon, “Out of the Parlors and into the Streets: The Changing Tactical Repertoire of the U. S. Women’s Suffrage Movements,” *Social Forces* 81 no. 3 (March 2003): 787-818.

³¹ Randolph Starn, “A Historian’s Brief Guide to New Museum Studies,” *American Historical Review* 110 no. 1 (February 2005): 68.