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THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

It has been said that a nation that does not respect its own history will have no future worthy of respect. If you don't know where you've been, how can you know where you're going? Perhaps the same idea holds true for organizations and institutions. Take the Theosophical Society, for example, a worldwide organization found in over 70 countries around the world, carrying on its mission since its founding in 1875. Although people become members of the Society for a variety of reasons, gaining a knowledge of its history may not be one of them. Yet an understanding of the Society's distinct and colorful past imparts a deep sense of appreciation and shapes one's perspective as to its true mission in the world.

To the extent that some members of the Theosophical Society are ignorant of its history, we have a situation that is merely symptomatic of a larger societal issue. For as recently as September 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute reported that less than 50 percent of the college seniors polled in the United States could identify the phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" as being a line from the Declaration of Independence. This level of civic ignorance is troubling, to say the least. But such a myopic view of the world is not limited to students in this country. The *Australian* reported in November 2007 that a majority of high school sophomores didn't know the Queen was their head of state. And a 2007 poll conducted in Sweden showed that 90 percent of the students had no clue what the Gulag was. Think about it. Tens of millions of people perished in the communist Gulags during the Cold War, enduring unspeakable hardships before expiring, and such a glaring fact of history doesn't even register as a blip on the radar screen of today's hip, plugged-in, high-tech youngsters who are perhaps more fluent in citing the names of contestants that have participated in the popular *American Idol* TV show.

In her well-documented book *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Josephine Ransom suggests that when we study the history of the TS, we should "watch the steady fulfillment of a purpose no matter what the obstacles. That purpose burns, an unquenchable beacon, along the pathway of the Society. It is unquenchable because its flame is fed from sources which we do not supply, and which none may extinguish save Those who in Their wisdom lit it so long ago."

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