

A 'LITTLE' WAY TO BIG HISTORY

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Although my major is sociology, and I have never taken a course in Big History, the impact that Big History has had on my life would be hard to overestimate. Big History helped me discover a new application of the physician's code, *Primum non nocere* (Do no harm, which teaches a careful attitude to human life, one learned over centuries. My own expansion of this dictum came to mean a careful attitude to the world, understanding not only the nature of the Earth but the entire universe. It starts with realizing the value of our own human life and grows from there.

I was born in Gubakha, a small mining city in the Ural Mountains of central Russia. As a girl, I liked to read, especially Alexander Dumas' stories of the three musketeers. Then I discovered Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, along with the poems of Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva. Russian literature is rich with themes of global ethics, which gave me a strong sense of humanity. For example, let me share with you Marina Tsvetaeva's poem, 'I Know the Truth!...', from 3 October 1915.

*Я знаю правду! Все прежние правды – прочь!
Не надо людям с людьми на земле бороться.
Смотрите: вечер, смотрите: уж скоро ночь.
О чем – поэты, любовники, полководцы?*

*Уж ветер стелется, уже земля в росе,
Уж скоро звездная в небе застынет вьюга,
И под землю скоро уснем мы все,
Кто на земле не давали уснуть друг другу.*

*I know the truth! All other truths - out of my sight!
 There is no cause for us to hold these fights and battles!
 Just take a look: there's evening, look: there's night.
 Why do we fight - o poets, lovers, and commanders?*

*The grass is dewy and the wind has settled down,
 And soon, the vortex of the stars will stop,
 And we shall all sleep with our foes below the ground,
 Though on this earth, we kept each other up.¹*

My own practical understanding of the value of life came early, when I was nine years old and my relative, Alexander (Sasha) Nazarenko, was dying of lung cancer. For several months, he faded away, suffering with great pain. I looked at my family and saw that something terrible was happening, something I'd never seen before and couldn't understand. But his will to live, a desire shared by all my family, gave me the incentive to think about what life is, why we live, and how we all appeared on the Earth.

In my elementary school there were Christians and Muslims; we were friends and understood each other, talking the same Russian language, despite the fact that we grew up in different cultures. In their homes, they spoke Tartar or Bashkir, and believed in Allah instead of Christ, but we didn't think that we belonged to different ethnic groups. There weren't insurmountable differences between us.

My father was a coal miner; he loved nature and taught me about the natural world when we went for walks together. My mother was a physics teacher and taught me to ask questions about the world. I well remember my children's encyclopedia and how it described the cosmos, Earth and nature. The eye-opener for me was when I learned that humans went into space in 1961. I asked my parents about space flights, about planets in the solar system, stars ... it was the first time I felt like part of not only my family or my school class, but part of a larger world.

1 Marina Tsvetaeva 2003. This poem was translated by Andrey Kneller, a celebrated translator of Russian creative works. Born in Moscow, he lives and works in the United States. Andrey kindly provided us with this translation of Marina Tsvetaeva's poem, 'I Know the Truth!...'. His website, *Discernible Sound*, may be found at (<https://sites.google.com/site/poetryandtranslations/>).



Katya with her mom and dad – Vladimir and Nadezhda Sazhienko, in Gubakha, Perm Krai, Russian Federation, 1992.

My sense of the world seemed to grow towards infinity, but this was not reflected in school, with its rigid division of subjects. The education system seemed so illogical. We would study biology and chemistry in the classroom but not learn how these sciences were related. I constantly asked why events happened the way that they did. The answers weren't in our textbooks, which gave the impression that history occurred by blind chance, as unconnected events. It also seemed that the histories of different countries were not linked to each other until the European Middle Ages, as if all cultures and societies had lived in different universes.

As I continued my studies in high school, even my faith in the mutual understanding and trust of humanity was shaken. I worked as a teenage reporter for our city newspaper and spoke with a lot of people who had lived during the 2nd World War. The greatest impact this made on me came during an interview with a woman who had been a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in her childhood. Of course, I already knew about the concentration camps – we had heard a lot about them in history class, read books and newspapers about them, and seen films of them. But an eyewitness and participant in these events changed my worldview.

Lubov' Kabanova had lived in a village near Leningrad (Petrograd, St. Petersburg) during the first months of the war. Her eyes were full of

tears and she didn't look at me while she told me her story. Her eyes still saw the past: burning huts with Jewish families inside, ships sinking beneath the waves in the Gulf of Finland, perpetual fear in the eyes of her mother looking out for her and her sisters. If the value of human life had been so important to me before, I now understood that this value hadn't always been so revered, even in recent history.

After listening to Ms. Kabanova, I understood that life is sometimes valued so low that people can be easily sacrificed. This made me consider how the sanctity of human life is not always treasured as it should be by individuals, societies or even humanity as a whole. I came to understand that this is a question of human development. Because most human thinking is anthropocentric at this stage of our evolution, many of our ideologies, social doctrines and even scientific disciplines proceed from the thesis that 'Man is the crown of the Universe.' But this is not true.

We are part of a larger universe. A wider, more generous sense of humanity is needed. We are only part of the cosmos – planets, stars and other celestial objects do not revolve around us: We are one tiny part of one of the galaxies. Despite this, the lives of animals, plants and humans, along with morality, science, art and other forms of culture are all significant phenomena that define the 'face' of evolution and progress.

Together, all these thoughts and feelings, as I was growing up, influenced how I came to understand things. My father died when I was twelve years old, so we moved to my mom's hometown of Kimry, near Moscow. I went to the nearby International University of Humanity and Nature, which fit well with my developing views of the world. This university is located in Dubna, one of the 'science cities' founded in 1955, during the Soviet era, for those engaged in the study of nuclear physics. The International University was a new school established in 1994.

One of the important things I learned there is that society develops in nonlinear ways, through many seen and unseen links between cultures. These connections are vital to the globalization process through which we are living today. The ability to comprehend at least the basics of other cultures is relatively easy to accomplish. The Parthenon or

Michelangelo's statue of David is accessible to people just by opening a book or surfing on the internet, and, if you have enough money, you can board a plane and see them in real life. In addition, we meet people of other societies almost every day. In a very real sense, cultures become the shared heritage of all the people in the world.

Although my major was sociology, I soon saw that this discipline, along with all the other social sciences, was insufficient to solve the problems that we identify as important. There are dozens of social specialties that allow us to explore problems deeply, but they don't allow us to see all the cause-and-effect relationships or to completely solve a given problem. Knowledge of other disciplines is necessary.

A resolution of this problem began for me when I took a course in cultural anthropology. Our professor, Akop Nazaretyan, told us about Mega or Big History, which integrates all the disciplines. Although it had not yet been established at my university, I began to independently read the literature on this subject – monographs, articles, internet resources and anything else I could find. Big History resolved the crisis of fragmentation that had developed between my worldview and traditional academic education.

Big History responds to specific issues, as well as fundamental questions and general themes. Overall, I believe that the most important thing that Big History teaches is that we have a responsibility not only to ourselves, our families and friends, and to our countries, but also to all humankind and its future, which may not continue to exist if our actions are wrong.

Big History can suggest solutions to these and other questions. For us to seek these answers, or not, is a private matter for each person. Big History helped me to make a choice, and it will, I hope, help many other people to make such decisions. Thus, the prospects for our civilization, our planet, and perhaps even the universe depend on us, on each and every person. It depends on whether we will give ourselves an opportunity to begin a new phase of evolution on Earth, created by our own hands. This is the main thing that I understood thanks to Big History.

Ekaterina Sazhienko was born in Gubakha, a small industrial city in the Ural Mountains, in the center of Russia. She graduated from high school with a gold medal, and then moved to Kimry, near Moscow. Katya attended the State University of Dubna, one of the Russian ‘science cities’. After receiving her bachelor’s degree, she combined her graduate study at the university with teaching world and Russian history, and social sciences, in high school. She is in the process of completing her PhD and writing her thesis on social philosophy. In her spare time, Katya plays classical guitar and travels a lot to Europe and different cities and towns of Russia. Her e-mail address is <cuore-87@mail.ru>.