

Unit 1: Video 3 Transcript

Q9: What is the most important thing a first-year student should learn from a history course?

A: Well, I think the best thing is — and I think historians have to do this as well — if we only see these people in the past as shadowy figures that we have to project our questions on to, we won't really get close to them. The whole idea is to try and understand them.

What I like to tell my students is, you know, look, history is like a big iceberg. The most significant part of it is beneath the surface where you can't see. So the first thing we have to do is look at the top of the iceberg, what people do or did. And then the second level is what they say they were thinking about. But the hardest part, the beneath the surface, is this getting to the sense of their way of being, this thing — what is this way of being? And it's very hard. Everyone knows what it is, but it's very hard to put it into words.

I think of one of the students we had from Quebec in a Quebec History course I did one year. And we were looking at René Lévesque's *An Option for Quebec* that came out in 1968. Why is it separate? Said, look, we have — we Quebecers have to separate. It's not against the English-Canadians, but it's to protect this way of being of ours that's so precious. So I said, "Michele, you know what he's saying?" "Yeah." "Explain it." "I can't." That's what we're trying to do. And I think we have to keep that in mind, and try and understand how these people saw themselves. Again, how they looked at the world, through their eyes. What it was like to be them. What it was like to be a habitant in Saint-Joseph in the 19th century. Very fascinating world if you look at it from their perspective.

It's difficult. It's hard. But so many enriching things about this life, that people in the rest of North America could maybe relate to in some ways and maybe not. Because the whole point was not to accumulate big fortunes, but to blow it all away at the Christmas holidays. I think it made them a little different than everybody else. But there's something in that that. These are the things that are important: the community, the family, things like that. I think people today can relate to that.