ARTICLES OF HISTORICAL FAITH

EXCERPT FROM ADDRESS UPON ACCEPTING

THE HIETT PRIZE IN THE HUMANITIES

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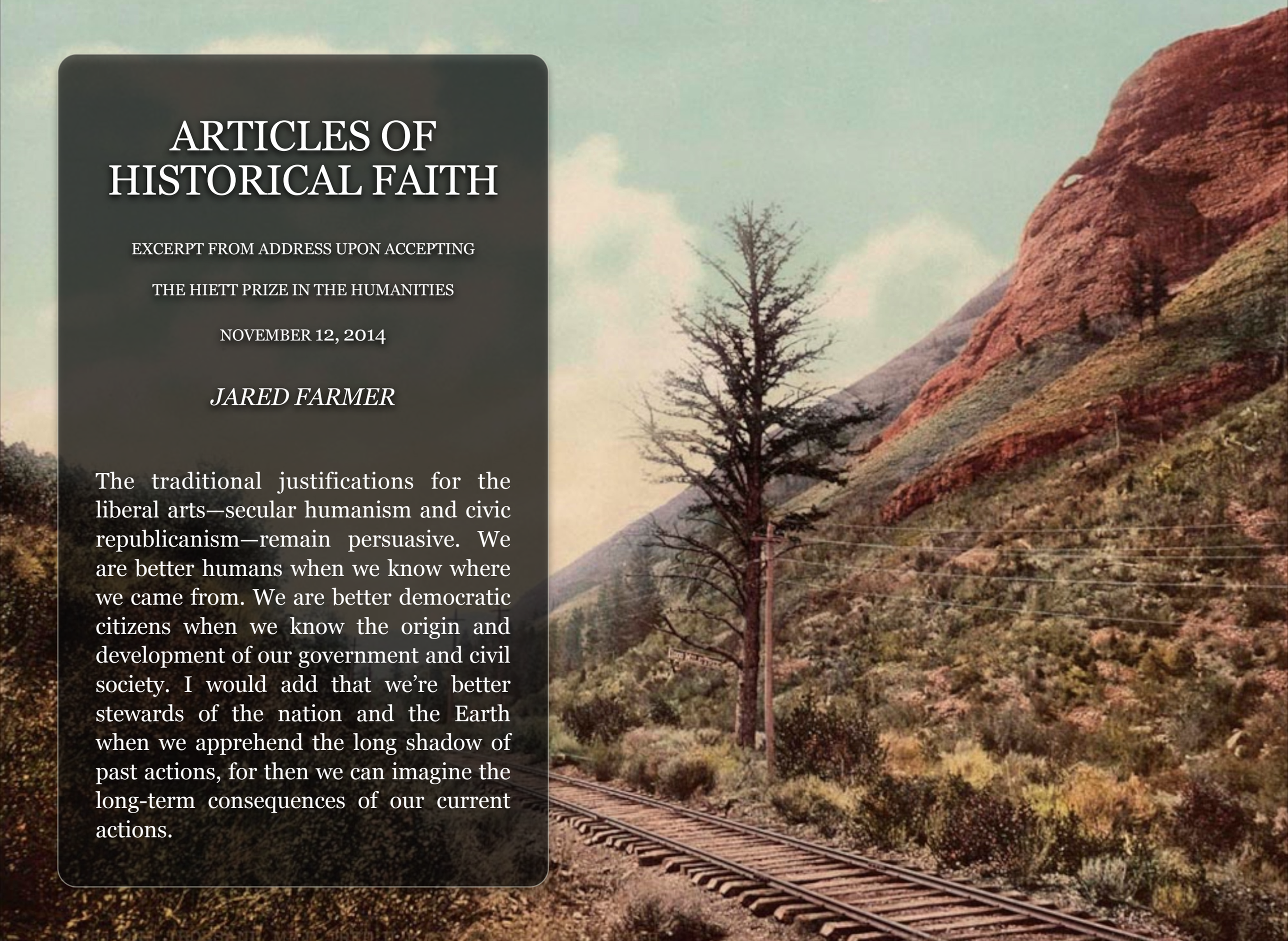
The traditional justifications for the liberal arts—secular humanism and civic republicanism—remain persuasive. We are better humans when we know where we came from. We are better democratic citizens when we know the origin and development of our government and civil society. I would add that we're better stewards of the nation and the Earth when we apprehend the long shadow of past actions, for then we can imagine the long-term consequences of our current actions.



More specifically, I believe the study of history cultivates four valuable qualities: empathy, imagination, skepticism, and humility.

First: empathy. When we consider people in the past, we try to understand them on their own terms. Historians routinely become intimate, so to speak, with dead people who did things that today would be deviant, immoral, or illegal. You don't have accept absolute moral relativism to be a good historian, but you do have to accept alternative worldviews. By practicing historical thinking, you become more tolerant, more open-minded. You go beyond yourself. And you exercise compassion as you consider the pervasive injustice, pain, and violence in human history.

Second: imagination. It's hard not to be moved by the strangeness and variety of past human experience. By appreciating strangeness, we enlarge our sense of the possible. You've probably heard the adage, "The past is a foreign country." People there think differently, act differently. They're weird. They behave in confounding ways. They talk funny. They arrange their societies in peculiar forms. They worship different gods. The very strangeness of the past is inspirational in the sense that it reveals to us the vast capacity of the human imagination, and allows us to imagine different futures. There have been so many religious beliefs, so many gender roles, so many family structures, so many power structures, so many languages, and so many artistic, musical, and literary forms. The irrepressible and adaptable force of creativity is an awe-inspiring human tradition.

The third quality is skepticism. Historians must work with absences. Finding evidence is hard; interpreting it can be even harder. Those documents that survive in archives may contain errors, lies, or biases. The meaning of sources is often hidden for the simple reason that these things we call "sources" were usually not created for us. Often it requires a taxing amount of contextualization before their meanings become just partially clear. Pieces of evidence—written, oral, artifactual—must be weighed against each other. A good historian never takes a source at face value. This practice of skepticism is an everyday virtue, too, for we encounter falsehoods all the time. Politicians habitually speak untruths even on those rare occasions when they don't mean to. Various governments, corporations, and institutions have well-financed departments of deceit. On a more personal scale, our memories routinely deceive us. History can help. It is a corrective to the

failings of memory, the half-truths of folklore, the truthiness of advertising, and the falsity of propaganda.

Finally: humility. The more you know, the more you know you don't know. You begin to sense the vastness of everything you can never know, the totality of what has been lost. It's humbling. So too when you've read enough histories to realize that all humans, all societies, have dealt with the same core issues. The world changes all the time, and faster every year, yet the same questions continue to trouble us: What is the purpose of life? What is the value of an individual? What are the proper roles of men, women, and children? What's the best way to allocate resources, and divide the burden of labor? What and how should we eat? Which non-human life forms do we include as honorary community members, and how do we best care for them? And so on. There may be no ultimate answers, only temporary, imperfect solutions. And every human, every society, has confronted the same ultimate problem—mortality. This, too, is humbling.

If you combine these four qualities—empathy, imagination, skepticism, humility—you get something like what I would call wisdom.

Historical wisdom should not be confused with foresight. Many strangers have asked me, upon ascertaining my profession: So, professor, does history really repeat itself? Are we really doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past? There are of course famous answers to these familiar questions. Marx, paraphrasing Hegel, remarked that history occurs twice, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Ostensibly Mark Twain said (meaning Twain never said), "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes."

My stock response is not so pithy. I say no, history never repeats itself, but every group of people eventually contends with the same category of mistake, an unintended consequence of a choice that seemed like a really good idea at the time; and it is this process —the unwitting repetition of ironic blundering followed by creative adaptation—that unites human societies across time.

I realize my answer is not exactly comforting. The practice of history, unlike the practice of religion, is neither designed to provide existential serenity nor material security. It is, instead, designed to provide philosophical equanimity. This world needs poets, peddlers, prophetesses, and organization men. But it also needs some secular wise men and wise women to put things in perspective.