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Can We Learn from History?

by Kathy Emery

The CEO's of Lehman, Bear Stearns, Merrill Lynch—to name just a few—never saw the economic meltdown coming. They have testified before Congress swearing that even if they had seen the collapse coming, there was nothing they could have done differently to prevent it. These are the same CEO's who are guiding our educational policy, asking for higher standards, merit pay for teachers, and more charter schools financed by Arne Duncan's \$5 billion "Race to the Top" federal stimulus fund. This is truly frightening—the same people who ignore history are guiding the changes in the nation's schools (see education publications on the Business Roundtable's and the National Center on Education and the Economy's websites and compare their recommendations with Obama's education speech last Tuesday).

In the interest of full disclosure, I was a high school history teacher for 16 years and was fired 3 times then blacklisted. Even 30 years ago, before high stakes testing, if you didn't teach to the test (the U.S. History Advanced Placement Exam or U.S. History Achievement test), you were considered a bad teacher. I was even worse than a bad teacher. I taught my students that there are patterns in history, rather than isolated facts to memorize. One of the patterns I taught was about the boom and bust cycle in U.S. history—the panic of 1837; the panic of 1857; the panic of 1873; the panic of 1893; the panic of 1907 and, of course, the great big Depression of 1929. I also taught my students about various social movements (e.g., the Populists) that tried to change the economic system in order to eliminate this cycle. You don't have to be a Marxist to understand that capitalism is essentially one big ponzi scheme. Or, perhaps you do have to be a Marxist (Marx was, above all, a historian). The captains of U.S. capitalism seem to be ignorant of the historical fact that the "market" promotes bubbles that must inevitably burst. Bubbles are driven by the need for capitalists to make profits for their investors (Wall Street demands a minimum 5 percent increase every quarter) by exploiting workers and the environment.

I have thought long and hard about our CEO's ignorance. Is it willful? The result of greed or short term thinking? Or, is it because all these CEOs were taught by history teachers who slavishly taught to the tests; thereby, teaching their students not to see the patterns in history that would allow them to learn from the past? [See Jonathan Kozol's *The Night is Dark and I am Far from Home* – conveniently out of print] As with everything, it is probably a mixture of all of these and more.

I do wonder at times, when seized by self-doubt, "what have I been doing with my life by teaching, studying and learning from history?" I mean, what's the point, if people can't learn from history? Perhaps they could if it weren't taught so badly? Or maybe humans, as a species, are like all other animals—only capable of acting on instinct, not rational reflection of past events? I had an amazing therapist once that told me that some of her patients would be learning from 10 years of experience while others would have only one year's experience ten times. My question, now, is what percent of the population is the former and what percentage is the latter?