

The Weight of Congregational History: An Introduction and Philosophy

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Who really cares about history? As we wend our way through the ups and downs of the early twenty-first century, dwelling on the past seems like a luxury at best. If anything, our times call for people who are firmly planted in the realities of the present and are thinking hard about the worrisome future—not looking backwards at events that none of us can change.

Ask this question to the average person and the average answer will be that knowledge of the past will keep us from repeating old mistakes. Sometimes people will even back up their response with a quotation by philosopher George Santayana, that “those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.” But in all my years of teaching and writing history, and in watching the present unfold, I have yet to record one good instance where anyone took the past seriously enough to change their plans. In fact the closest example I’ve found was an article in *The Onion*, a satirical on-line newspaper, with the headline “Historians Politely Remind Nation to Check What’s Happened In Past Before Making Any Big Decisions.” The article describes the fear and wonderment of Washington politicians contemplating a new strategy called “Look Back Before You Act.” Thrilled to be included in present-day legislation, historians’ groups urged that “it never hurts to stop a moment, take a look at similar situations from the past, and then think about whether the decisions people made back then were good or bad.” “The things the historians were saying seemed complicated at first,” one politician complained, but upon reflection realized that their tips might be useful. Some actions in the past had led to “very, very said things [he]

didn't like," and might be avoided in the future. "I just wished they'd told us about this trick before."

The article is fantasy in more ways than one. The entire thrust of modern popular culture is that new is always better than old. Living in the past is not just unhealthy but pointless, we are told by endless guests on endless television talk shows and radio call-in programs—and sometimes even from an earnest church pastor. Certainly the caution is well-founded. Letting the past go is an important step toward healing, not just for individuals but for church congregations. I have been a clergy spouse for more than thirty years, and I have a pretty good idea of what toxic memory looks like. I confess that I have even picked up a few of my own—there are highway exits in the Boston area that I still can't drive by without an involuntary shudder. I don't doubt for a moment that most church leaders would prefer a concentrated effort at forgetting over one aimed at remembering.

Given all these warnings and qualifications, I am going to suggest two basic reasons why history is an essential matter for people of faith. In fact, I am going to argue that knowledge of the past is not a luxury or a hobby for history "buffs," or even a source of needless church conflict. It is simply central to the life of any spiritual community hoping to survive and thrive in the world today.

Knowing

In the course of my work at the Congregational Library I make visits to lots of local churches. Before I go I usually read up on their history a bit, hoping for some anecdotes to share during coffee hour. What these congregations don't realize is that most of the time I can see their

past written all over their present. We may think that every day is a new day, and life is what we make it—but in reality the past is never really past.

Sometimes this comes out in humorous ways, as in one congregation in a seaside town whose pastors seemed to drown with depressing regularity. The church people themselves were not particularly aware of this problem, and it only dawned on me after I sat down and read their three-hundred year history in one sitting. From the long-term perspective the pattern was grim and unmistakable.

For other congregations the past might manifest in even more subtle and negative ways. It may be a long and unspoken chain of sexual misconduct, covered up for years or even generations. It might be long-gone but traumatic relationship with a pastor, seemingly forgotten but alive in an undercurrent of resentment or distrust of church leaders.

Every local congregation has its own historical personality, some more obvious than others but all powerful in their own way. In fact, sometimes stories of institutional origin explain a great deal. It makes a difference if a congregation was founded as the result of an ambitious dream or an angry split. It makes a difference if the church began because of theological nit-picking or an urgent call for social justice. These old memories continue to reverberate across the years, though we rarely name them for what they are.

Knowing these stories, both the good and the bad, is so necessary. It is one thing to cull out a list of great achievements from the past and use that as your story. It is another thing to use history as a redemptive tool, a way of seeing and owning mistakes and missed opportunities—and then moving forward toward healing. This kind of knowledge of the past can be powerful. I know of one congregation, for example, that had always thought of itself as a righteous remnant. Way back when there had been a church split (these people believed), and the hard-nosed

minority who refused to compromise had walked out never to return. But this was not the real story. A little bit of research into church records unearthed a far different set of events. The minority had not left in a huff—they had been kicked out by the majority. Instead of a righteous remnant, the congregation was actually a group of people who had ostracized and excommunicated fellow church members. This congregation now has a small ritual to remind them of the past: whenever a meeting threatens to become hot, and tempers are wearing thin, someone gets up and walks over to the door and slams it. We are people capable of throwing out others who disagree, the message is. We did it once, we may well do it again. This act of exclusion is one important and unforgettable piece of who we are.

At every level, from individual to institutional, identity and memory are inseparable. One does not thrive without the other. I saw this quite dramatically when my adoptive daughter met her birth mother for the first time. The reunion was strange and tearful and awkward and wonderful for all of us, but what I remember most is Anna's transformation. She was the same loveable young woman we knew, but stronger in every way. In fact, she even looked physically different after learning her full story.

Even psychological research on the mechanics of human memory bears out this principle. Someone without a knowledge of their past—an amnesiac for instance—has no identity. They are a blank slate to themselves and everyone else. But the reverse is demonstrably true as well. People (and I would add institutions) with a strong sense of who they are have an easier time remembering things. This is why, they say, most of us can't recall much about our earliest childhood years: babies do not yet have a strong enough awareness of their personal identity to be able to organize and keep memories of their experiences.

We make sense to ourselves and to others within the context of memory. Certainly in one sense we are all unique, absolutely one-of-a-kind individual creations; but in a much more profound way, each of us has come about as the result of a "long choosing." This is a phrase from writer Wendell Berry, whose book *Remembering* describes the main character, Andy Catlett's, struggle with a sudden bout of amnesia. To those acquainted with Berry's stories about Port William, Kentucky, Andy is a familiar figure, having grown up in the town's rich web of family and neighborhood relationships. His disorientation begins during a cross-country plane trip to a scientific conference, where he is caught up in the security lines and body searches now a familiar part of the post-9/11 reality. In this world every stranger in an airport terminal is a potential enemy, someone to be kept at a safe distance. Somehow Andy makes it back to his home in rural Kentucky, but he is rough shape. He has literally forgotten who he is, and wanders about town looking for clues. His memories—and his sense of self—return only when in a confused dream state he sees his ancestors, walking together in an endless line. To Andy they are a "long dance of men and women behind, most of whom he never knew, . . . who, choosing one another, chose him." In other words Andy Catlett is not a self-made man living in an isolated blip of a town, but he and his home are the sum of hundreds of courtships and conceptions, choices and chances, errors and hopes. He exists because people decided to marry one person and not the other, to live in the country rather than the city, to have many children rather than just one.

Seeing

There is also a larger reason why communities of faith in particular need to form meaningful connections with their past: it opens us to the wider world. When my daughter was a

toddler, we lived in a dense city neighborhood, with trees and apartment buildings blocking out most of the sky. Every once in a while I'd strap on the baby backpack and we'd walk down to a big open stretch of river nearby, with a panoramic view of the city skyline and all of the roads and highways sweeping the cars in and out. "This is how big the world is, Anna," I would tell her as we stood and took it all in. This is how history works too—it ushers our small individual lives into another dimension. We have all seen history used in the opposite way, to shore up differences and rally the true believers to the cause. Some of the worst abuses of modern times have happened when people were cut off from their past or lied to about it. A triumphal view of American history without slavery or land grabs from Native American tribes perpetuates dangerous national myths. It encourages Americans to see themselves as "exceptional," carrying out a special mission to the world.

Religious communities do the same thing, of course. Attaching one's denominational history to a great event or famous person is a tremendously effective way of instilling pride and confidence in church members—and in that sense certainly not wrong. But with my historian's long-range backwards telescope I have seen many, many instances where churches used the past—or their particular version of the past—towards earthly rather than spiritual ends. To use an example close to home, in the early nineteenth century, when the legend of the Pilgrims and Plymouth Rock was first becoming established in the national memory, Congregationalists and Unitarians fought over their common founders with equal tenacity and zeal. In fact, they alternated control of the public events in Plymouth, with a Unitarian clergyman one year and a Congregationalist the next. So in one year the Pilgrim Fathers were the champions of free speech and freedom of thought, refugees from the intolerance of the English king. The next year a Trinitarian Congregationalist orator would describe them as the fearless guardians of

orthodoxy, braving exile and hardship rather than submit to the errors of the Church of England. After a while the public stopped listening, and after a longer while the arguments became less and less interesting even to those who were doing the arguing. But the lesson still sounds, that any campaign to “own” a plot of sacred historical turf turns us inward rather than outward, and we end up narrower than ever in our concerns for the world.

I have also seen local churches celebrate anniversaries or write histories in ways that obscure the outside world. They tell their stories in terms of building improvements and Sunday school attendance, pastors and pastors’ wives—nothing, in other words, that would be compelling to a non-member. These are certainly important milestones in the life of a local church and not to be ignored—but it is important to remember that they all took place against a background of wars and plagues and economic downturns and revolutions in morals and manners, events that affected everyone. It is tempting during an anniversary celebration to emphasize your local congregation’s uniqueness and to tell stories of great achievements. But this is an enormous missed opportunity, narrowing a community’s scope instead of inviting more enthusiastic participation in the great world beyond those church doors.

I understand the importance of spiritual history within the old and venerable piece of the Christian tradition, the image of a “communion of saints.” Most of the time we assume this phrase is about unity and mutuality among the living, about connections that transcend nationality, ethnicity, and religion itself. That is not a bad idea—definitely worth trying!—but it is not what the phrase originally meant. The communion of saints is an idea that grows more compelling as we begin to unpack its meaning.

The most obvious issue is “saints.” The word evokes all kinds of images and stories from medieval Roman Catholicism, of relics and miraculous cures and superhuman feats of spiritual

self-control. But let's open our imaginations a bit more. Historian Peter Brown describes medieval saints in a different way, as "invisible friends" of ordinary folk. Saints were people who had died and more than earned a good long rest in heaven, but in some way still cared about human beings on earth. They were at hand to offer miraculous help, but just as often comforting companionship through difficult times.

The author of the biblical book of Hebrews gives us an even more startling metaphor for this relationship between the living and the dead, a "cloud of witnesses," standing around the faithful to cheer them on as they "run the race" set before them. This famous passage also defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I imagine that at least some of those "things not seen" are the biblical people named in the rest of the passage: from Abel and Enoch to Abraham and Moses. All of them—the heroes of Jewish history, the women who received their dead by resurrection, and martyrs who endured torture and imprisonment—are near and available to us, not just as role models, but as spiritual companions.

Of course many if not most of our ancestors will make us uncomfortable. To begin with, they did terrible things—wars and genocides and inventions which led to the ecological disasters of today, just to name a few. They left behind huge messes for us to deal with. But they are also troubling because they are so different from us, sometimes in absolutely incomprehensible ways. Take for example, the story of "the great cat massacre" in early eighteenth-century Paris. As the story goes, the city's apprentices rounded up and killed hundreds of cats, apparently because the felines were getting better treatment than they were. That is a little odd in itself—but the most alien part of the story is that, according to historian Robert Darnton, people of the time found the massacre downright hilarious. They doubled over with laughter as those hapless cats were

beaten, and howled with mirth as they were subjected to mock trials and put to death on the scaffold.

People in the past are not dim imitations of ourselves, but different in ways both obvious and subtle. Our temptation is to reject them as somehow less enlightened than their descendants, as if we are higher up on the ladder of time. Or we simply hold up our hands and issue them a free pass because they lived way too long ago. The better response is to “honor difference,” in other words to give them the same thoughtful respect we would to anyone for another culture today, seeing them and trying to understand—and perhaps even judge—their actions within their social and cultural context. In other words, a “spiritual practice of remembering” calls us to redefine our commitment to diversity to encompass time as well as space.

We certainly cannot live without them. We live within a web of holy obligation. We are connected to people of the world today, and to those who created the world with their own labor. We are also connected to other invisible people: the unknown number of generations yet to be born. One of the most important things we can do, the way we care for the earth and in the way care for our local church life, is to recognize their mystical, aggravating, inspiring, puzzling, and deeply important continuing presence.