

Daily Lenten Devotional
Wednesday, April 16, 2025
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43—Jail Time and the Hog House



When someone says to me, I owe you an apology, I am now lost in series of questions. I am ruined because of this study. In the past when someone would offer to satisfy a debt of penance, my thought would be of grace or mercy, I would attend to the offender as someone in need of forgiveness. Now though I am lost in the idea of currency. How much is this apology that you owe? Is it a five-dollar apology; a twenty; a hundred-dollar apology?

Not all sins are the same. For me to make a mistake when referring to the year something occurred is an error, perhaps sloppy work on my part. For a surgeon to make a mistake is something that may have another level of impact, dire consequence. Someone can simply goggle the "Battle of Shiloh" and know it was fought in 1862 in Corinth, Tennessee. Where I had said "1863" would be a mistake perhaps conflating the Battle of Antietam. If I was a surgeon who replaced the wrong hip, no amount of googling will fix that. Not all sins are the same.

And thus, when someone says, I owe you a word of thanks, I am equally ruined for now I am led to wonder is this a big thank you, a courtesy amount of gratitude, something in the middle? I trust this is uncommon, not the sort of response a sane and well-adjusted person might have to such a declaration. Thanks is thanks. But is it? I have heard people say, "I can never thank you enough." I will confess even before this study such claims made me uneasy. A part of me always wants to say, there is more than enough. No need for endless thanks.

Where this actually becomes problematic is in the realm of collective memory, or in the more common term, history. History as collective memory is a valued currency that does have

greater and lesser sums, bigger and smaller costs. This is clearly true of individuals. Each of us has significant memories, markers, our "ebenezer" stones. Big moments and sometimes small moments of great value mark our lives. The curious part of this is that we don't always know them as such. The memories of greatest value might lurk in the shadows ever influencing us without awareness. In the opposite fashion there are things we "just can't get over," meaning there are memories of which we are too aware, too mindful and thus we carry them like a heavy yoke. History, though, is different from the personal memory, in that the value is fluid; the memory is shared, but the value of the memory is manifold.

During the recent battles regarding the purpose and value of the Confederate monuments, for instance the decision to take down "Monuments Row" in Richmond, Virginia, during the struggle to come to this decision it is clear that some people value the monuments and some do not. For some a large statue of Stonewall Jackson is a romantic notion of heroism and bravery, a person who died defending "the South." This statue satisfies a debt of honor. For others the statue adds to the debt of penance. To memorialize Confederate Generals was to make clear to all how the war may have been lost, but the cause was not. The rails of the fence are firmly in place, and separate but equal is much more than you deserve. Thousands of these statues still stand and still convey the intended message constructed a century ago.

This version of American history, the collective memory carved in stone or cast in bronze, while it is yet in place, or in play as it were, this living memory of history is ever changing in value. To say historical views have not dramatically changed in the last forty years is false. How the emancipation is understood or allowed to illumine the memory of the Civil War is finally taking the place it deserves. Not only as a turning point in the Civil War, but also as the shared shame of Jim Crow and segregation which shaped the life of the nation for a century. The enforced silence put in place by defining the Civil War as a matter of "states' rights" or the battle to "save the union", this narrative and the silence it fostered has experienced a tremendous change in value. Once a matter of gratitude, the memory has become a matter of penance as the truth regarding emancipation and the impact of slavery on the nation has become more honest.

What is owed of this memory is a profound question. How do we satisfy the debt owed to the 4 million slaves who were emancipated only to be bound by a socio-economic status which was "slavery by another name?" To remove the statue of Lee in Charlottesville may allow the amount of debt to no longer grow, but does it make the debt less? Does our collective memory when it achieves a greater degree of honesty, does this better memory heal the destruction of the false narrative?

What is owed is a profound question, yet to whom or by whom is the debt paid is just as challenging and perhaps even more sublime. For in this second question our collective memory takes on the question of culpability. Like the second commandment, do the wrongs of the past transferred forward to the third and fourth generation? And if the wrongs, the violence, the tragedies persist, when does the penance begin?

When I began this study a few years ago I was wrestling with this question in terms of my own ancestors. What impact does the actions of my ancestor have on me? Am I living off of their good works; am I expected to pay the price of their misdeeds? I will confess I looked at the devastation of slavery differently when I read the census records of family living in Alabama in 1850s and in the column marked "slave" there was a number. I felt a different connection to history when I realized how close the Tritles were to battles in the Civil War and the massacre at Wounded Knee. To see my ancestors who were born here in the 1640s and to think, a part of me has been here for nearly 400 years. The value of the collective memory changed in multiple ways.

Yet, where I wrestled the most was with two grandfathers, one who was taken to jail and another who killed his son and then took his life. What is more, in doing the research for this project, I found newspaper articles describing each.



Paul Trittle was a Navy veteran, a father of three, a beat cop in San Diego in 1953 when he was arrested, tried, and convicted of theft. Growing up I heard bits and pieces as children do. Yet, in digging through the on-line databases, it was strange to read the account of events and try to imagine the impact, what it would have looked like to "make the papers" so to speak. This changed how I looked at my grandfather.

The change was not a form of judgement. The change was how his life made more sense, his brokenness, his anger, his pride and greed. Things I heard made more sense; things that didn't fit into the normal flow of life, now fit together. Through the rest of his life this type of self-destruction occurred again and again. How I valued my memories of him was reappraised.

For another grandfather, the newspaper clipping was painful, truly awful. Don Van Whitt shot his wife and shot his infant son. His wife would survive; his son would not. After fleeing the scene of his violence, Don Van was pursued by blood hounds and a posse. He ran through the

woods behind his farm and then circled back. The newspaper published his suicide note and then described how he went out to a "hog house" and shot himself.

This was in Wynne, Arkansas in 1953. I would not know this or that he was my grandfather until 2015. Not knowing of him nor these tragic events, it is false to say this was a memory that shaped my life directly. Indirectly though I can see how his tragic act of violence reaches and influences the generations after him. Yet, what it truly changed was my appreciation for oblivion. I truly wish I did not know this. There is no good in this; there is nothing helpful in knowing this terrible moment, this tragic act of violence.

In the reappraisal of collective memory, in the shifting values of history, this are painful parts that must be known, must be considered in order for our gratitude, our honor, our penance to have real value. What we owe needs to be tallied with more than platitudes or grandiosity, just as the traumatic events continue to wreak havoc if they are repressed. Someone like Thomas Jefferson must be seen as great statesman and as a slave holder of 400 souls. To speak of the "empire of liberty" without the Trail of Tears or the domestic slave economy after the invention of the cotton gin will never satisfy the debt of memory, the price to be paid.

In this honesty, though, consideration must also be given to oblivion. So much of our lives are shaped by empire and conquest and acquisition, which means so much of our lives are shaped by slavery, by violence, by greed. There is a great value to be found in honesty; there is also a great deal of history where the best we can hope for is that it is forgotten or simply never known.