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Mom

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Mom

Abstract

I study the Civil War because of my mother. It's a simple truth.

My Mom, more than anyone else in my life, taught me to be the historian that I am. She is present in so much of what I do when I process the past.

I lovingly refer to her as my idiot-filter. She was a theology major in her undergraduate training, studying comparative religions. I've never read her thesis, I know it's in a cupboard at my parents' house, but I vaguely remember that it was centered around comparing Christ with the other messianic figures of his era. She looked at the world as a game of measures, sizing up one thing and another, looking for the moving parts, seeking the humanity in what we call the divine. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Mom

TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 2014

I study the Civil War because of my mother. It's a simple truth.

My Mom, more than anyone else in my life, taught me to be the historian that I am. She is present in so much of what I do when I process the past.

I lovingly refer to her as my idiot-filter. She was a theology major in her undergraduate training, studying comparative religions. I've never read her thesis, I know it's in a cupboard at my parents' house, but I vaguely remember that it was centered around comparing Christ with the other messianic figures of his era. She looked at the world as a game of measures, sizing up one thing and another, looking for the moving parts, seeking the humanity in what we call the divine.

She taught me to look for people, not heroes. She taught me to look for people, not villains. She kindled in me the light of that quest for finding the humanity if the past.

It started in elementary school. She signed us up for an afterschool activity, they called them clusters, about genealogy. Like most genealogy primers, it was taught by a dedicated local amateur. We dabbled. We played. We learned about microfilm and the Mormon Church, about tracing who was who when, and what they did with their lives. We sought out ancient obituaries for lists of survivors, fathers, mothers and places of birth. We combed for evidence.

But the best piece of evidence was right under our noses the whole time. There is a family bible, nestled on a shelf in their house as well, with the classic inscriptions penned neatly in the cover. The words caught both of us: "William Henry Francis - Killed at Gettysburg, 2 July 1863."

It's amazing what that one word, "Gettysburg," can do to the heart of an American fourth grader whose mother is a not-so-closeted Lincoln devotee. A sliced out signature, bought by my parents on some long ago trip to that sainted town, reading, "A. Lincoln," hangs on their wall. Lincoln, and with him a handful of words he spoke in that Pennsylvania town, loomed large in my upbringing.



My kin.

When I was a baby, my Mom didn't know any lullabies. She sang me to sleep with the piece of classical music she loved most: Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. I have war (perhaps of the cold and Napoleonic stripe) somewhere in my roots.

We went searching. We dug hard for William Henry. We traveled all across New York's Madison County, digging through clerks' records and musty old books. We found him again, in the [Union \(now Walker's\) Corners Cemetery](#). But the headstone there reads something different: "Buried at Gettysburg."

That led to more digging, new skills. We discovered how pensions work. We found out that just because you were from New York, that didn't mean you fought for New York. We found the 14th United States Regulars, we pinned down where William Henry Francis fought, bled and died for his country.

Then the trail went cold. We tried again and again, I tried again and again. We could never find his grave. William is missing forever. I have no stone to lay flowers on 150 years after he died alone and forgotten in a muddy stream-bed.

So I just kept right on digging. If I could never resurrect William Henry Francis, flesh of mine own flesh, I could do it for dozens, hundreds, thousands of others. I could bring back the whole human, not just the caricature. I could show the whole person, not just the portraits we hang on walls. My Mom taught me that life today is messy. Why did we assume that the past was messy too?

So then we come to Monday. My fiancé and I were both jarred from bed this morning by ill tidings. My Mom was sick.

I had already taken off of work. Jess and I were getting our marriage license. I would set out for North Carolina to check on Mom right after we finished that paperwork at the County Court Clerk's office. We drove down off of Seminary Ridge and into Gettysburg, the town where my Great-great-grand-uncle died, the town where my Mom's Abraham, the man she dreamed of and conjured in her imagination, spoke. It was different than the clerk's office where we found a cemetery register that led us to Union Corners over a decade ago.

Jess and I swore an oath. The woman recording our information asked us for our vitals. Our information needed to be 100% correct, but if we were unsure about our parents, we could, "get it close."

But it was important to us. The woman asked my Mom's birthplace, her maiden name, her profession. I answered, "school teacher." I could have said she was a ballet dancer, a war protestor, a theologian, an historian, a sage, a patient editor or a devoted friend. But school teacher seemed like just enough.

As the woman typed in the information, I leaned to Jess. "A hundred years from now, some snott-nosed historian like me is going to use that information to track us down, to reconstruct today." We will forever reside in the Adams County Courthouse, on view for any future genealogist who wishes to come poking.

I streaked down the highway to Durham, to Duke University Hospital. I held my Mom's cold hand, whispered, "I love you," in her ears. She was sick. It was bad.



Mom with the 14th U.S. Regulars monument,
November 19th, 2012.

She coded. The entire ward's staff rushed to her bed. My Dad and I watched as the heroes pumped her chest. They worked her heart incessantly, trying to breathe life back into her for eight minutes. It was an eternity.

It didn't work. My Mom died Monday night, 149 years after that bearded man she loved almost as much as her devoted husband. She's gone cold, like everyone I study, I resurrect from the past. [Practical necromancy](#) might be possible, but perhaps it's slightly *less practical* than I had thought. I can bring her back to life easily enough, but I'll never make her live. This scar is here always.

I don't know how to end this. Maybe that's because there isn't an ending yet, only a different sort of beginning than we all expected. Mimi Francis Rudy is enshrined in a database, a tiny scrap of paper in one archive in one county courthouse in a town known the world over for what they did there and what he said there.

Her great-grand-uncle might not have a grave, but she will soon. And I'll put flowers there for her and for him.

And my Mom will live on, another of the real human in my catalogue. She's likely the most important one of all, really. She started this whole mess.

Now it's up to me to finish it. Oh, that I may have her strength, or at very least a fraction of it.

*Don't worry that it's not
Good enough for anyone
Else to hear
Just sing, sing a song.*