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Your Fortune: Fried Rice and John Brown

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Your Fortune: Fried Rice and John Brown

Abstract

I had Chinese food Sunday night and it got me thinking. I know that's a very random thing to say, but it's the truth. We don't usually consider Chinese food to be brain food, but for me it can be very powerful stuff. I like the stuff they serve up from the back of the Giant Supermarket here in town. The people who work the counter are always very nice and it tastes just clean enough. I like a bit of mystery in my pork fried rice.

[*excerpt*]

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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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Your Fortune: Fried Rice and John Brown

THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 2012

I had Chinese food Sunday night and it got me thinking. I know that's a very random thing to say, but it's the truth. We don't usually consider Chinese food to be brain food, but for me it can be very powerful stuff. I like the stuff they serve up from the back of the Giant Supermarket here in town. The people who work the counter are always very nice and it tastes just clean enough. I like a bit of mystery in my pork fried rice.

But the thing that gets me thinking the most in any meal of General Tso's or Sweet and Sour Chicken is the fortune cookie. These little nuggets are always so poorly named. They rarely *actually* try to tell the future, which bugs me a bit. A fortune cookie never warns me I'm about to trip or about to be hit by a speeding train. Platitudes and weird horoscope mumbo-jumbo can only carry this mind so far. That and a few, "...in bed," jokes made with friends while munching after some Beef and Broccoli.

My fortune cookie on Sunday night had a Franklin-esque aphorism which really got the gears turning in my head: "Listening, not imitation, may be the sincerest form of flattery."

My brain turned back to this past summer. I've mentioned a few times that I piloted some experimental programming down in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, trying out some wild and different interpretive experiences we don't necessarily see that often when we visit historic sites. I let the visitors speak.

We so often paint our museums and institutions, our historic sites and interpretive programs as passive experiences, where the visitor is either explicitly or implicitly told, "look, don't touch; listen, don't talk" That's one of those phrases I hate, right up there with, "no photography allowed." Nothing makes me want to snap a photo more than a small pictogram of a camera in a no-smoking red circle. And when I hear the words, or get the vibe off of a docent or interpreter that this is a, "look, don't touch," moment, or the dreaded and condescending, "touch with your eyes," my fingers begin to twitch. My understanding of the world is based quite a bit on spacial relations and tactile space. Chock that up to the prime toy in my life having been LEGO.



Fortune cookies *usually* disappoint me.

I'm also a talker. Look over on the right-hand side of the blog for proof: a year's worth of back catalogue of rantings, ravings and my inability to keep my big, fat mouth shut. So telling me, "listen, don't talk," is the surefire way to drive me batty.

How many mes are out there in the world, itching to express themselves in environments we typically rope off for listening and observing only? And what could they have to share?

This past summer, I offered one example of what happens when we shut up for a few minutes and let our visitors talk. The results were simply amazing. I would take the crowd on an abbreviated John Brown program, hitting a few key points but [not worrying about being completist](#). Give them a few key pieces of the story: the tales of Dangerfield Newby and Thomas Boerly, along with a piece about [why someone might want to own a human being](#).



The engine house as it appears in the MOLLUS scrapbooks at USAHEC (Vol. 134, p. 6858) / PD

Then we would step into the magical place, the sacred, inviolable space. Every site has that place. At Harpers Ferry, it is the four brick walls of the armory fire engine house, known in later years as "John Brown's Fort."

The key to the whole moment was my demeanor. Over the course of the preceding half an hour, I have mostly presented to the crowd in a typical, everyday Ranger style. Moving into the Fort, I change my mannerisms. I sit down, lean back against the wall. I take my hat off and set it on the bench beside me. I speak more softly, not presenting but just chatting. I ask an open ended question: "Was John Brown right? Was violence the answer?" And then I shut up.

Magic would happen. On one tour, within minutes of the visitors beginning their tentative conversations, one man piped in that John Brown was, "just the same as Osama Bin Laden." I could have jumped in. I could have pushed and prodded. I didn't. The crowd did. Other visitors challenged the man in a respectful way. They pushed and pulled back and forth on Brown and his character. They chewed this man who used violence to try to end violence, this man who killed American citizens in order to make a race of men into American citizens. They truly tried to taste Brown.

On another tour, a nice British couple on holiday in the 'States compared Brown to both Nelson Mandela and the American Revolutionaries. That gave the crowd pause as they took in the moment, stirred it into the melting pot of ideas within their brains, and tried to see Brown from *that* point of view.

We would spend half hour in the Fort some days. Others, the conversation would stretch more than an hour and a half, with new visitors drifting in and out as the topic suited them. In all that time, I probably said five or ten sentences. That's it. The visitors talked, and I listened.

I listened. I bestowed upon them the same respect they had offered me for the past half hour as I

tried to unfold a few key moments in Brown's raid. Then I imitated them and listened as they tried to unfold their personal Brown and wrangle with his meanings in our modern land.

It wasn't hollow flattery, though. I listened, sitting in the calm cool of the Fort to show sincere respect. The marketplace of ideas is a powerful thing, if only we are humble enough to let it flourish. Every time I walk into that Fort now, I don't simply think about Brown in 1859. I think of the faces of those people who went on those journeys with me this past summer. I sincerely hope they're doing well.

And I sincerely hope they are still struggling with the morality of Brown. It flatters and humbles me to think that they might still be thinking of his struggle just because I had the crazy idea to shut up and listen.