

## Ancestors

I never took much interest in my personal past. My understanding of family history was pretty limited when I was growing up. My father's parents were Polish, part of the first big wave of immigrants who passed through New York harbor a century ago. They were called *za chlebem* because they were peasants, landless laborers who came to America in search of subsistence or *chleb*, which means bread. Al, my father, was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, but met my mom in Oklahoma where he was attending the University of Tulsa on a football scholarship as a fullback with the Hurricanes. He actually played a season or two of pro ball after college. But then he died just a few years after I was born, when I was five, and my mom more or less lost touch with the Kowalski side of the family on the East Coast. So I never really got to know my aunts or uncles or to hear much about the old country. I never learned the language or heard it spoken. I guess they were from Lodz, which is a biggish city somewhere in the middle of Poland, but I'm not really sure.

And as to my maternal roots, I knew little more. My granddad came from the small crossroad of Shannon, Texas, which had a post office at the time he was born, but none now, no schools or stores or churches at all, pretty much the middle of nowhere. The stories I heard around the dinner table were few in number but repeated often. He liked to tell, for example, how his grandmother had fallen from a tree near her home in Missouri and broken her arm. A horse doctor set the fracture so badly that the limb became infected, and the medic from a nearby encampment of the Union Army had to amputate. That anecdote traced us back to the Civil War, and there were vague suggestions that our family might have been descended from Daniel Boone, but those were tall tales. My grandmother's family was from Germany. Her father and his big brother were about to board ship to sail for the U.S. when the Kaiser's military police nabbed the older boy who was of draft age, but ten year old William was allowed to sail, and had his train ticket to Kansas already bought and paid for. Arriving in New York, he found a German speaking policeman who helped him locate Grand Central Station and, with the 25 cents he had in his pocket, he bought a loaf of bread and a piece of bologna that took him all the way to meet his relatives in the midwest.

Good yarn, yet that was about all I knew of my genealogy. My people were peasants, Polacks, draft dodgers, hardscrabble farmers and pioneers, the kind Emma Lazarus wrote about in her poem "The New Colossus" that was penned to raise money for the Statue of Liberty, the beacon that would greet so many of our ancestors, twenty-two million of them, who came through Ellis Island in the years between 1870 and the First World War. The tired, the poor, the hungry, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Those were my forerunners, those nameless migrants, anonymous, undistinguished, lost to history, the wretched refuse unknown to fame. Like the majority of Americans, I tried to assimilate, to look forward instead of backward, or if I thought about my forebears at all, I thought about Plymouth Plantation and the Founding Fathers and the legendary foundation myths of Jamestown and Lexington and Concord that frame our national saga of creation.

But all that changed rather suddenly. It was only recently, a couple of years ago, that I found out that my twelfth great grandfather was Richard Warren, who indeed did come over on the Mayflower, and brought his wife over three years later in 1623 on the good ship Anne. And before the Pilgrims, I actually had kin in Jamestown, in the person of William Slaughter, who landed in Virginia in 1617 aboard the vessel "George" and was killed by the Indians five years later. You see, my brother-in-law, who has a Ph.D. in genetics, likes to snoop through old family chronicles and decided to trace my descent, which is illustrious as it turns out. For instance, Terry discovered that I have a great grandmother, eleven times over, Mary Allen Toothaker, who was condemned as a witch in Salem, while her husband, Roger, likewise died in Boston prison. Who knew? There are a whole slew of names both notable and notorious on my family tree. The topper may be my great grandfather fifteen generations back Thomas Flamank who was drawn-and-quartered in London in 1497 for leading the Cornish Revolt, which was an uprising of local miners against the king's levies. In case you're curious, this means that I am related by blood to George Washington, FDR, Henry Thoreau and not least of all Sarah Palin. Which reminds me of the quip from Mark Twain (no relation, by the way!) who said he paid a genealogist \$50 to unearth his family history, and then a similar amount to bury it again.

Yet, what difference does it make? What does it ultimately matter whether my ancestors came from Plymouth Rock or Standing Rock? I suppose it might have made a difference, early in my career, to have claimed membership in the Mayflower Society. American is a class society, after all. The old Spanish families in New Mexico, I understand, look down on more recent immigrants from south of the border. Having a pedigree carries a premium. It matters whether your last name is Kowalski or Bush or Kennedy or Lockridge, which was the surname of that little girl who lost her arm in the 1860's. Probably it shouldn't make any difference at all, because if there one established truth that both science and religion can agree on, it is that we belong to a single tribe, one extended family whatever continent we come from, whatever the color of our skin, with as little difference between our DNA as there is between peas in a pod. We are truly sisters and brothers, all more human than otherwise.

But still, I like knowing a little more about where I came from. For as I've gotten older, I've come to believe in the ancestors, the venerated dead, perhaps because with each passing year I come closer to becoming an ancestor myself. I've come to appreciate how nearly every culture and tradition tries to honor their matriarchs and patriarchs and other ancient worthies. For Jews and Christians, there are Abraham and Sarah and all their assorted kin whose biographies fill the pages of Genesis and the Bible's long lists of begats. For Asian cultures, remembering the departed is core to Confucian piety. Native Americans pray to grandfather and grandmother spirit, and the heart of many African religions is captured in Birago Diop's well known poem "Breaths"

The dead are not gone forever.  
The dead are not beneath the ground,  
They are in the rustling tree,

In the murmuring wood,  
In the flowing water,  
In the still water,  
In the lonely place, in the crowd:  
The dead are not dead.  
It is the breathing of our forefathers ...

Maybe you've listened to Sweet Honey in the Rock's version. Whoosh!

When we visited Korea, where my son was born, we were interested to see rock cairns, mounds of stones as high as you could reach, along the pathways where people strolled in the parks. Passersby would add a rock to the pile as they drew near, in remembrance of their predecessors, who had walked that way before. I liked the custom very much. Because the cairns were visible, concrete monuments to all those who lived and labored and faded on into obscurity to bring us to this fleeting point in time. And I personally have more and more of those stones gathered up in my private storehouse, more and more tributes and mementos, that I would like to add to the great piled heap of human history that preceded me. More tokens of gratitude and respect.

I would of course add a stone for Richard Warren and those hardy Pilgrims we celebrate at this season, recognizing that only half the passengers aboard the Mayflower were religious dissenters or motivated by faith. The other half were indentured servants and fortune-seekers who came to the New World for economic reasons, reminding us that we Euro-Americans were a motley and mongrel crew even in our fabled inception. I'd place a stone, too, for the Wampanoag, and the Pequot, and the Mashpee and other indigenous tribes that were nearly extinguished by the waves of settlement that followed, but who survived and live on to keep us critical and humble and repentant about our vaunted national origins. I'd place a stone for those who came to this country without papers, the undocumented, whose names appeared on no social registers, who came to escape pogroms and famines, and for all those who came in bondage, in chains and against their will, whose sweat and toil created the incredible wealth of this great nation but who never received their fair share of the rewards. I'd commemorate ancestors I may not be related to in fact, but whom I still claim as my moral and ethical antecedents: placing markers for Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, for Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, for union organizers and muckrakers and political agitators and for the veterans who died defending freedom on the beaches of Normandy and in the islands of the Pacific, and for the witches, too, the heretics and freethinkers who are part of my genealogy.

Whom would you claim and honor this Thanksgiving? Who do you memorialize? Whether your forerunners came on the Mayflower or were there to greet the boat, whether you are a Martinez or a Myerson or a Schultz, this land is large enough for us all, if only we are willing to open and expand the rolls of those we recognize as family. The table is bountiful. There are seats aplenty. And yet our nation has never seemed so anxious or divided as to who sits at the head of the board or the foot or deserves to partake of the feast at all. We are fractured and fragmented,

conscious that we do not all share the same beliefs or background, that our customs diverge, fearful of the stranger as we have become increasingly foreign to each other. The narratives of our American civil religion, the tales we learned in grade school of courageous voyagers in search of religious liberty, perhaps helped through that first hard winter by their Indian friend Squanto, no longer unite us as they once did, bearing as we know now such scant relation to the truth. Holidays that should be occasions for goodwill and fellow-feeling have become triggers for mistrust and recrimination. Where does healing lie?

Perhaps in knowing that wherever we came from, we all came from somewhere, that we are the recipients and beneficiaries of the work of many hands, that none of us is truly self-made but that each owes a debt to the struggle and sacrifice of generations gone by. Perhaps in the recognition that we are all equally proud of our own heritage whatever it happens to be, and mutually determined to be worthy successors of the forebears who perished so we could live. Perhaps in the commitment we make now to our posterity, to our offspring and their descendants whom we will never know but who carry our hopes for the future, determined to leave them a world as filled with grace and beauty as the one we received without our earning. And perhaps in knowing that the eyes of the ancestors are upon us and that, like them, we too shall be judged, for better or worse, in time.