The Place of History

Address at the South Dakota Historical Society Luncheon, 2023

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So, I want to tell you a story. In the spring of 2020—almost exactly three years ago, as we meet today—my grandmother died here in Pierre. She lived a rich, full life, not slipping away until she was 107 years old. And with her passing, only my aunt remains, tying me in life to Pierre.

I mention my grandmother simply because she told me something, a few years earlier, about a charitable woman's organization called PEO, and as I thought about the questions that currently face historians, it wouldn't leave my mind. Whenever I tried to think about a way to explain, say, Hegel's 1807 theory of history as the dialectical unfolding of spirit in time, up jumped PEO. When I thought of how to apply Fernand Braudel's 1955 account of long-enduring history, of the tides of almost geological time, PEO leapt to mind. It was like a game of Whac-A-Mole, and however much I whacked it down, it kept popping up.

In the end, all I could do is surrender—and start today's talk by telling you what my grandmother told me. As near as I can calculate, out of her 107 years, my grandmother was a member of PEO for over eighty years. And she said that, down through the decades, the feeling of belonging to the woman's organization had changed. It did many of the same worthy things it had always done, but my grandmother could no longer sense that its members felt a deep bond with the group. They were something like friends, perhaps, but not something like family. The knowledge that one was a "PEO Woman" no longer contributed to these women's self-identity in the ways that it had once seemed to do. The weight of emotion and idea were faded. The reality had become less dense. It had become more about the living than the dead, less meta-

physically connected to the seven young Methodist women in Iowa who had founded PEO all the way back in 1869.

When Dr. Benjamin Jones, our state historian, invited me to speak to you today, one of the things he asked me to do is warn against some of the bad or weak ways of doing history, even while I spoke about the strength of historical place. And here, in the story of my grandmother, is an opportunity to observe that we must not be credulous in the discipline of history. We need, in fact, to hold a pretty healthy suspicion. Thus, for example, something isn't necessarily true just because it was said by a person who was present at a moment we wish to study. We have to ask ourselves if the person had motivations to perceive events in mistaken ways.

In this case, my grandmother's story of PEO may be nothing more than what I sometimes call "Old Man's History"—a sense that the world was so much better when I was young: the sky bluer, the girls prettier. We walked to school through miles of blizzards, and it was uphill in both directions. [laughter] In an 1860s poem called "Growing Old," Matthew Arnold points out that we still feel in old age many of the things we felt when we were young. We just don't feel them as intensely. To grow old, he said, is to "feel but half, and feebly, what we feel."[1] And the possibility exists that my grandmother was interpreting her own fading of intense emotion as a fading of the density of the group.

But the fact remains that we have plenty of other evidence that the old associations no longer have the weight they once had. There was much talk, thirty-odd years ago, about the decay of the mediating institutions between the individual and state, from the aristocratic cultures' sense of family (what Edmund Burke called "the little platoon we belong to in society") to the churches that Alexis de Tocqueville called "the first of [Americans'] political institutions."[2] Indeed, when Tocqueville published *Democracy in America* in 1835, he observed:

1. Matthew Arnold, "Growing Old." *Poetry Foundation*, 2006, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52311/growing-old. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

2. Edmond Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, part 1, https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/burke1790part1.pdf. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Mansfield and Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 280.

> Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general, and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate. Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you perceive an association in the United States.[3]

The classic text of communitarian worry about the loss of these American associations is Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000 (expanded from a widely discussed 1995 essay). Using data from bowling alleys, Putnam pointed out the curious fact that bowling leagues had much declined from the 1950s and 1960s, while bowling itself had remained fairly stable. People still went bowling. They just went bowling alone or in small groups of family and friends. The sense of needing to join a league, an association, an entity with social weight, had been lost somewhere along the way.

Think of all the declining clubs and dying institutions in your own towns. The Odd Fellows. The Elks, the Moose, and the Lions clubs. The American Legion and the VFW. The Kiwanis. Remember the Izaak Walton League? The Red Cross. The Masons.

Back in the 1930s, the Nazis made several efforts to suppress the Rotary Clubs that had spread to Europe from America, fearing that there was a group feeling, an institutional weight, that threatened the Third Reich.[4]

Ah yes, those dangerous Rotarians. [laughter] I know, I know, we want to laugh at the idea of the Rotary as a deep metaphysical entity—but here I want to mention another danger we need to be aware of, when we do history. And that is the temptation to think that people in

3. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 489.

4. "German Rotary Disbands," *New York Times*, 1 Sep. 1937, p. 5, https://www.nytimes.com/1937/09/01/archives/german-rotary-disbands-43-clubs-were-banned-by-nazis-as.html. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

the past were all idiots. Fools. People who stupidly failed to see what we now know.

Too much of our history is now taught this way. It is a kind of terrible simplifying of the past into a pair of monoliths: we morally enlightened ones versus the undifferentiated dark ages of the past. The truth is that in every age, people were addressing the problems of birth and death, and social organization, with the tools they had available. The Nazis were wrong to think the Rotarians much of a threat, but they were not idiots for imagining that the Rotarians *might* be so.

Part of their objection derived, of course, from the fascinating way that the concept of "the Party" works in totalitarian regimes. Karl Marx addressed something of this in his 1850 analysis of "permanent revolution," and Benito Mussolini famously defined the platform of the Fascist Party in Italy as "Everything in the State" and "Nothing outside the State."[5] The Nazis were fearful of every association that was not the Nazi Party, from scholarly conferences to gardening clubs. Part of the purpose of banning Jews from public life was to implicate every German organization in Nazi evil, by forcing them to expel their Jewish members. But the Nazis also suspected that private organizations, from the churches to the Rotarians, gave people a weight, a density, that made them harder to absorb in the identity of Party and *Volk*.

As it turns out, they were wrong. The tide of modern society had already turned in the other direction, toward the disenchanting of identity. And recognition of the evil of the Nazi Party would only add to modern suspicion of institutions and associations.

Still, the question remains: Without some institutional weight, without any density to our identities as belonging to associations, what becomes of us?

This is the crisis of America today. We share fewer and fewer communities that lie outside the economic and partisan arenas: our work and our socio-politics. The Tocquevillian sense of America formed by mediating institutions is all but gone, and increasingly—in social me-

5. Karl Marx, "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League," https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023; See Charles F. Delzell, "Remembering Mussolini," *Wilson Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1988).

dia especially, as it devours older forms of communication—Americans associate only with those with whom they agree.

Our neighborhoods may still force us to live with some disagreement. G.K. Chesterton once quipped, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people."[6] But how many organizations do we actually have, in which membership in the organization outweighs strong political or social disagreement?

Would you vote for someone, for example, just because that person was from your own state? Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, at the 1972 Democratic convention, was, as far as I can see, the last candidate who could be described as a Favorite Son, even though American political history once had a long line of Favorite Sons—local figures who carried the votes of their state's delegation into a political convention. How now, in 2023, fifty years later, are we to believe that there is something *special* about us, something of weight in our identities, that comes from being, say, a South Dakotan?

Or a Methodist. A Midwesterner, an Elk, a union member, a PEO woman. Or even an American, for that matter. A young person recently told me, in some exasperation that I didn't *get it* automatically, that the history of America is simply a tale of repression, violence, and bigotry. To try to make any kind of historical distinction—between, say, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, or between the nineteenth-century experiences of race in abolitionist Wisconsin and slave-holding Mississippi—is to give countenance to evil. It is to brush away the essential moral point. And once we understand the irredeemable historical foundation of contemporary society, we can see that the nation grants us no more identity than a phone book does. Nations, like phone books, are just lists of people who happen to live in the same area code.

There was a desperation in that young man that worries me. My grandmother was a Congregationalist. A Dakotan—born in Blunt and living long in Pierre. An American. A Midwesterner. A child of the prairie. A mother. A PEO woman. On and on. She carried about her a density of association and connection that gave her existence a weight. A gravitas. A multifaceted identity.

6. G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, chap. 14. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/470/470-h/470-h.htm. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

That young acquaintance of mine, estranged even from his family, has few such connections, and those he does have are almost entirely politically defined. The broad shoulders of life in a democracy—what Emerson would have called the habits of a democratic mind—are alien to him. The existence of those with whom he disagrees is, for the most part, an affront and a moral outrage.

The question is what we can do about this American crisis of failing community. In a large sense, on a national scale, I do not know the answer. The communitarians of the 1990s thought that all we needed to do was awaken people to the need for community, and everyone would rush out and create new communal organizations. They proved wrong, in part, as I wrote in my book *An Anxious Age*, for the logical reason that "rebellion against rebellion doesn't escape the problems of rebellion, and a chosen tradition is never quite the same as an inherited one."[7] But also, I argued, they failed because strong associations are formed with a shared goal beyond the association, not from the vague idea that it would be nice if we had community.

Still, individually, on a local scale, I think there may actually be an approach to an answer in what all of you here in the State Historical Society have been doing—for this smaller answer involves history and, maybe especially, the history of local place.

Some years ago, I proposed a maxim, a way of putting our self-identities in context, extracted from my thinking about the importance of death in social organization. And that maxim was this: *The significance of life comes from the future. The richness of life comes from the past.*[8] We live unto the future because we have children to support, bills to pay, tasks to be done. But our lives are thickened, made rich and tangible, by the extent to which we are connected to the past.

Some polling suggests that only a third of children in the twenty-first century, children born in the past 23 years, can name all four of their grandparents (about half the rate of the general population).[9] My own

7. Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (Image, 2014), p. 235.

8. Joseph Bottum, "Marion Montgomery, 1925–2011." https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/marion-montgomery-1925-2011. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

9. See, for example, "A third of Americans can't name all four of their grandparents. Here's why it matters," *Deseret News*, 22 Jan. 2019.

experience teaching undergraduates is that well under five percent can name even three or four of their eight great-grandparents.

We could argue that this is merely an effect of the breakdown of the marriage culture, and my young friend would certainly say that the decay of the old social system of marriage is a good thing. But regardless of one's position on social issues, we seem consistently to have the same results from every social change, like a rachet that bites in only one direction: toward a weakening of the past and consequently an impoverishment of life—despite the fact that over 80 percent of Americans say that knowing their heritage is important to them, while scholarly studies have shown that adolescent self-identity and well-being benefit greatly from knowing family history.[10]

What we need to give ourselves and our children is the sense of belonging that comes only with a grasp of history—a connection to the past through the stories we tell of time gone by. "We are born with the dead," as T.S. Eliot once wrote. "See, they return, and bring us with them . . . / A people without history / Is not redeemed from time."[11] History is not the past, exactly, but the past as organized by understanding and narrative.

I suppose I should mention here a third warning about the study of history. And that is the danger of useful history. Perhaps it's true, for example, that the fall of ancient Rome contains lessons for modern polities. Indeed, Americans since the time of the Revolution have been obsessed with claimed parallels between America and the collapse of the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. But every time we see such parallels being asserted, every time we encounter morphological history, we should be suspicious. The more we know of history, the less useful history proves in any immediate political or social sense. The differences are always greater than the similarities.

Still, that doesn't mean that history is *un*-useful. Its greatest power is its thickening of life and its ability to provide a ground for the roots of

10. See, especially, R. Fivush, M. Duke, J.G. Bohanek, "'Do You Know...': The power of family history in adolescent identity and well-being," *Journal of Family Life* (Feb. 2010).

11. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" (from "Four Quartets"), http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023.

community. And we gain that usefulness by having robust and accurate accounts of the past—in places to which we have connections.

In 1773, Samuel Johnson visited Iona, off the west coast of Scotland—the island where, during the early Middle Ages, the Gaelic monks managed to preserve some classical Greek and Latin learning against the waves of invaders who were overrunning the Roman Empire. And touring the ruined chapels and monasteries, Johnson proclaimed:

> To abstract the mind from all local emotion would be impossible, if it were endeavored, and would be foolish, if it were possible. Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona![12]

It's a wonderful passage, sententious in the way only Samuel Johnson could get away with. But I want you to notice how much of the effect he describes about place depends on an awareness of history. Place is not meaningful in itself; story makes it so, if that story is powerful enough—even story as distant from Johnson's own eighteenth-century experience as the 2,100-year-old defeat of the Persians by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., or Saint Columba's 1,200-year-old founding of the Catholic abbey of Iona in A.D. 563.

The kind of history that might help us is the history that gives life to place—particularly our places, the land where we are native to the soil. This is the kind of history the late South Dakota historian John E. Miller often attempted, especially in his 2001 volume, *Looking for History on Highway 14*.

History is not collections of arrowheads, exactly, but the stories of people on the land on which those arrowheads were found. History is not sets of blue-glass bottles and china dolls in a local museum, but the

12. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland and the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), chap. 11.

lives of those who washed those bottles and held those dolls. Archaeology and genealogy are worthy pursuits, but they do not become history till they are thickened by stories with which we feel connection.

"We can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground," as Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg in 1863. "The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract."[13] And that tells us again what Samuel Johnson had told us: the idea that place is consecrated by real human action, and that the stories we have are what allow us to thicken our lives with roots in those places.

The benefits are many. "Provincialism is one of the chief supports of character," as Richard Weaver observed back in 1950. "To be of a place," he said, "to reflect it in your speech and action and general bearing, to offer it as a kind of warranty that you will remain true to yourself—this is what it means to have character and personality. And without these things there is no individuality. . . . These are reasons for saying that it is a good thing to have roots in a province or a locality and to express something of it in one's being. It is good to have a local habitation and a name."[14]

I want to consider, by way of conclusion, what it means to have thickened association—an ontological density to our small platoons and mediating institutions. History is the answer, of course, but history as shared with those with whom we feel in community—those with whom we are in communion. And place, a sense of coming from somewhere in particular, can contribute greatly to this.

But that creates a puzzle, for place is meaningless by itself. Only the human (or the Divine) can endow a place with meaning, and apart from the battlefields of Marathon and Gettysburg (or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem), such endowments are thin on the ground. How can we, in our ordinary places, find the meaning we need to make our lives richer and add density to our associations?

13. Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address." https://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_1.html. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

14. Richard M. Weaver, "The Meaning of Name and Place," *Southern Partisan Magazine* 1, no. 3–4 (1981).

A possible solution is to consider that—here, say, in Pierre, South Dakota—the most important piece of property in a town is the local cemetery. From Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century account of what early Christianity as a political force gained from the Roman martyrs, to Ernest Renan's classic 1882 lecture "What Is a Nation?" (which points out the social unity provided by the deaths of national heroes), a curious truth starts to shimmer into view. We might put this way: *The living give us crowds. The dead give us communities*.[15]

We create true communities only when we have shared dead. Everything else is artificial, and adventitious, and temporary, and incomplete. Every name on every tombstone in your hometown is yours: your roots, your shared dead, your community, your richness, your endowment. And your tasks as historians is to tell their stories in ways that help us rebuild our sense of place, and thereby our sense of belonging to a world—a world of meaning and purpose.

15. Joseph Bottum, "Death & Politics," *First Things* (June 2007), https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/06/001-death-politics. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

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On the cover: In 1919, citizens of Deadwood, South Dakota, paraded this effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, hanged it in front of the First National Bank on Main Street, and later shot it to pieces with shotguns.