

Family history as political therapy

by Ched Myers

Ched Myers leads workshops on national spirituality and politics which include a focus on family history. Myers, a Witness contributing editor, lives in Los Angeles.

Most of us in the U.S. suffer from a profound alienation from history. In our imperial culture, inconvenient historical narratives have tended to be silenced while legitimating narratives have been mystified. We live with a peculiarly unaccountable, if not amnesiac, relationship toward the past.

Whether we recognize it or not, however, our past remains embedded in our present, an umbilical cord between the children of today and the parents of long ago. What Freud said about the self ("That which is unconscious is bound to be repeated") Santayana affirmed in terms of society: "Those who do not remember history are doomed to repeat it."

In light of this, I have found that family history work can be an important tool in deepening our commitment to the theology and practice of justice and peace. It enables us to discover how our ancestors participated in and were impacted by wider collective historical experience. In so doing we discover how trauma (economic displacement or flight from war), oppression (victimization by prejudice or religious persecution) or privilege has shaped our own family story. By grieving tragedy and celebrating goodness we can heal the alienated past.

The "geneagram" is a tool that family therapists look to for evidence of system-

stressors in one's genealogy. While therapists look for alcoholism, suicide and divorce in order to determine intergenerational patterns of trauma, we should also include factors such as cultural tradition, social location and economics.

I encourage participants to try to trace their genealogy back to the generation(s) that emigrated to North America — a formidable but revealing task. We explore the following kinds of questions:

- Under what circumstances did the immigrant generation leave, and how voluntary was it?
- Who did they displace upon arrival in North America, in terms of land and/or work?
- What discrimination did they experience, and what strategies of survival or accommodation resulted?

We then look at questions of "cultural erasure" and assimilation over time.

When and how were native languages or dialects suppressed? How did traditional family patterns and distinctive ethnic practices atrophy? How many times did the family move regions? What about ethnic mixing, segregation or racial tensions?

We next probe socio-economic issues. How, if at all, was land procured and wealth obtained and consolidated from generation to generation? What entitlements were passed on, and what internecine rivalries resulted? Was the family fractured along class lines? How was the family system shaped over time

by experiences of unemployment or elite work, by poverty or affluence, by education or lack thereof? What kinds of opportunities were there for women?

Finally we look at political factors. What wars or revolutions impacted our ancestors? What relationship was there to slavery or to the many "Indian wars" across the continent?

This work can show us how the structures of gender, race, and class privilege or oppression have shaped our own families. But it can be difficult work. As significant as what we do know about our family stories is what we do not know, since much information has been suppressed or forgotten. Moreover, our families' self-narratives are inevitably layered with legends and half-truths, as certain things have been idealized, scapegoated, or covered up. For these reasons participants often feel frustrated in this inquiry, or are surprised at how the exercise provokes deep feelings of anxiety, confusion, or sadness.

At one workshop, a woman from New Orleans began to weep as she remembered her Cajun grandfather reading to her from the prayerbook in French. A priest grimaced as he told of the civil struggle in Ireland during the 1920s that resulted in his family's migration

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and of the anti-Irish sentiment they encountered in the U.S. A friend from Nebraska was deeply troubled when, at his family centennial, he discovered that his German immigrant great-great-grandfather had been given squatters rights on Indian land through the Homestead Act of 1862. A Canadian school teacher told about how his 19th-century Scottish ancestors were given cheap one-way tickets

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to the end of the train line in western Canada, and seemed to understand that they were being used as a “buffer class” between the wilderness and the settled cities.

At another workshop I was impressed at the recurring phenomenon of “family jokes” that allude to “shady” circumstances in the immigrant generation. One woman spoke about her Italian grandfather’s “Mafia” connections; another referred to her ancestors as “Irish rogues”; a third man shared that his Swiss grandparents were laughingly called “cow-thieves.” My own father used to joke that his Mexican ancestors “should have stolen land instead of horses.” These are all related as humorous family lore, yet one wonders whether they might not articulate an unconscious derogation of one’s own immigrant roots. Might this subtle form of self-contempt be a way of distancing oneself from embarrassing class origins, or of coping with the pain of severance from the homeland — or both?

Therapists are beginning to recognize the ways in which contemporary immigrant families trade their mental health (which is embedded in cultural identity) for conformity, in order to survive both racism and economic marginalization in the strange and new land. What toll did these same trade-offs take on our ancestors? Does persistent anti-immigrant sentiment in America — a nation of immigrants — suggest that there is something unresolved in our collective unconscious about these traumas?

We have lauded the immigrant habit of remaking their names, their stations and their destinies. But Wallace Stegner reminds us that “the rootlessness that expresses energy and a thirst for the new and an aspiration toward freedom and personal fulfillment has just as often been a curse. Our migratoriness has hindered us from becoming a people of communities and traditions.”

Excavating family texts helps unmask myth and reality in the American “melting pot” experience, particularly concerning social mobility and displacement. It also clarifies the socio-historical matrix of inherited family patterns. These can be as shadowy as secrets concerning miscegenation, as simple as why certain foods are enjoyed, or as fundamental as the tendency for one parent’s cultural or class heritage to receive more emphasis in a family than the other’s.

With this historical pedagogy, Third World students might not feel quite so alienated, for they would have equal place to tell their stories and vent their feelings about past injustices. Dominant culture students, on the other hand, would learn that history is about “open” wounds, not a closed and irrelevant past.

Connecting our own family texts with the wider historical context offers us an understanding of who we truly are. This is a different way of learning history from our rote memorization of the names and deeds of presidents and generals in school. It is historical narrative from the perspective of regular folk. In such an approach we assuredly encounter the main plot lines of the dominant history: in the case of my family, a major European war, the effects of the English industrial revolution and the saga of the transcontinental railroad. But we also meet rich ethnic variations, hidden stories, and regional sub-plots: Wisconsin farmers, Bavarians in New Orleans, and Hispanics in the gold fields.

How different the teaching and learning of history in school would be if it proceeded upon such inductive lines! Why not allow a portrait of bigger historical events and forces to emerge from the reconstructed texts of each student’s family story? Rather than committing disembodied dates and names to short term memory, I suspect students would become interested in historical data that is linked to their family. This was certainly the case for me. As an anti-war activist I am interested in the Franco-Prussian war because it made some of my ancestors refugees and resisters. The Jacobs’ emigrated from Bavaria to Louisiana to escape the emerging German empire and the Franco-German war in 1870.

As an advocate for immigrants’ rights I am interested in the social history of early 19th-century England because it pushed my ancestors out. I yearn to know why a poor man would leave the Azores for California. Francisco Mendosa came to California in 1848 via Veracruz Mexico, and married a Mexican Californian. He ended up a day laborer in the Sierra foothills.

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“In this way history can serve as cultural therapy, releasing for us and our students the repressed images of our full humanity,” writes anthropologist Christopher Vecsey. I concur with him that by re-connecting with history we “envision ourselves darkly” so that we can in turn “imagine ourselves richly.”