

Civic Saturday

April 16, 2019

“The Myths we Tell Ourselves” by Erin Kelley

Civic Readings

Patrick Henry

St. John’s Church, Richmond, VA

March 23, 1775

Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

From A History of Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington

By Mason Parson Weems

1800

This was a tough question; and George staggered under it for a moment; but quickly recovered himself: and looking at his father, with the sweet face of youth brightened with the inexpressible charm of all-conquering truth, he bravely cried out, “I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.”

Chief Seattle

1854 (?)

The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.

All things are connected, like the blood which unites one family. Mankind did not weave the web of life.

We are but one strand within it.

Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Sermon

I think maybe 5 minutes passed from the conclusion of last February's Civic Saturday to when someone asked me, "What's the topic for April?"

I'll never know that quickly what the next topic will be. I like to let the world around me influence and inspire the next topic.

Between then and now there certainly has been a lot going in which to find "inspiration". . .

Last month's revelation that wealthy families in this country have been sending their daughter's to Yale on football scholarships is kind of interesting. That scandal certainly opens the door to a discussion about access to the American Dream and the myth of upward mobility for all.

Of course, I can't leave out Mueller. All I can say there is that with every passing day, the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the president erodes our democratic institutions. There is a myth out there that western democracy always marches forward. That's a dangerous myth, folks.

As I look around at the news, honestly from Brexit to our continued shame along the Mexican border, my mind keeps going back to the myths we tell ourselves about who we are.

Now, as humans, I believe we need myth in our lives. Myths can and do play an incredibly positive role.

I believe, as Joseph Campbell writes in *The Power of Myth*:

Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth--penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images . . . Mythology pitches the mind beyond . . . to what can be known but not told.

Mythology is the main component of religion which is obviously a powerful and positive force in the lives of millions. (That isn't a pejorative statement aimed at

people of faith! Just an acknowledgement that the world over, religious traditions have sprung from deep-rooted stories aimed at helping us understand our origins and connection to a higher power.)

The world's mythologies have inspired great art from the epic works of Homer to any number of paintings created during the Renaissance and beyond.

Heck, even *Star Wars* is based on the mythic archetype of the "hero's journey." How can anything that led to *Star Wars* be bad?

But ... just because myths can be positive and life-affirming – and inspire the greatest film ever – that doesn't mean they're all worth keeping.

Especially if those myths have been presented as actual history; more specifically, the history of a nation and how it came to be.

I think the story of our nation needs to be rooted in truth. To do that, I want to talk about three things today:

- 1.) The creation of American myths, especially those founding myths that have taken on the status of history
- 2.) I'm then going to be that person – that total buzzkill – who ruins everything and I'm going to bust some of myths
- 3.) But then I want to conclude by talking about what we can do together to tell a much more inclusive – and epic – American story.

Creation of American Myths

Let's begin with the creation of America's civic myths.

America's founding myths (our civic myths) aim to explain who we are – or at least they help us explain ourselves as we wish to be. They can help establish a sense of civic character and, in some cases, provide moral foundation. That's the power of myth.

Except things get tricky when we consider the development and history of American myths.

The founding myths of other peoples and nations unfolded slowly. They had the span of centuries to develop and evolve. This obviously was not the case in America.

From the colonial settlement of Jamestown in 1607 to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, only 169 years passed. When we're talking about the creation of a nation – and of a “new people” – that's nothing. Especially compared to the rich heritage, traditions, and belief systems of Native Americans who have been on this continent for 15,000 years.

As a nation comprised of newly arriving immigrants and enslaved people – who themselves came from ethnic and cultural backgrounds dating back thousands of years – it was hard to identify a shared past. Especially when social & economic power structures were working so hard to keep people separated.

This search for “colonial connectedness” between disparate immigrant groups is certainly why one colonial feature – whiteness – eventually emerged as a unifying force in early America.

In the beginning it was not obvious or easy work to truly identify as one, nation-based people. Colonists were searching for a shared sense of identity that “America” – as a nation – just didn't have in those early days. (Maybe, at the town or colony level, but not “national.”)

And then ... the Revolutionary War. The Revolution provided that one, singular, magnificent, and, frankly, story-worthy event around which the colonists could unite and develop shared identity. (If being pissed about having to pay taxes doesn't unite you, I don't know what will.)

These founding stories from the Revolutionary Era began as “ancient” myths of other nation's began – that is, orally.

Early colonial and post-Revolution America was a land of taverns and meeting houses. People met regularly in these public spaces and shared news & stories.

(Of course, word-of-mouth was the only way news could spread amongst the enslaved.)

As an aside, it's worth noting that by 1770 colonial Americans – including women & children, though not as much as men – consumed alcohol with every meal. The average colonist drank about 3 ½ gallons of alcohol per year. The modern rate is only about 2 gallons. (Although I saw a chart that says New Hampshire drinks 4 gallons.)

You think maybe some of our founding stories got embellished a bit? Maybe lost some complexity & nuance in re-tellings?

Maybe got simplified? Maybe erased elements of shame? Erased entire groups of people?

As Ray Raphael writes in his book *Founding Myths*, “This vibrant oral tradition helped produce a history that was detailed but unfettered. Divested of any need for documentation, it went freely wherever it wanted.”

Eventually, this fanciful past was put in service of “the political present” as Raphael also writes. Myth was used as a nation-building tool in early America. Over the course of a single generation, tavern stories that mythologized Revolutionary leaders into great and virtuous men, became official history.

In 1790 Noah Webster – the Father of American Scholarship & Education whose books taught 5 generations of school children – wrote, “every child in America, as soon as he opens his lips ... should rehearse the history of his country; he should lisp the praise of Liberty and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in his favor.” (Please feel free to note the gendered language in all that.)

The creation of America's origin stories – the creation of American myth – coincided with the creation of our public school system. In effort to be patriotic, myth was recorded as fact. It went from being part of rich and evolving oral tradition, to being the printed word – and thereby “fixed.”

It became the official telling of who we are.

These stories were meant (purposefully meant) to shape our thoughts around liberty, freedom, and democracy, but also personal responsibility, honesty, thrift, and any other number of civic virtues.

And it's not that those virtues are "bad." But they were being reinforced by those with a very particular kind of background and vision (point of view) for how America should be organized.

Myth Busting

So what are some of those myths – especially myths that emerged during the colonial & Revolutionary era – that have been translated into history? And what are some of the intended and unintended consequences of these stories?

- Puritans did not come to America seeking religious freedom – they came seeking religious purity. (Their name really kind of gives it away...) Among other things, they banned Jews & Catholics from voting & holding public office. These were not people who were cool with religious freedom for themselves, but no one else.
- Thanksgiving. I hope we all know the "Pilgrims & Indian" story from our school days is not real. I hope we also know Columbus didn't "discover" America. That's like me "discovering" \$5 in your wallet. While we're at it, never trust Disney for your history: The Pocahontas/John Smith story was not a romance. She was 12 and he was 28. Her life was tragic and short and her name was Matoaka. (Ma-toe'-a-ka)
- George Washington did not chop down a cherry tree and then tell his father he "could tell no lie." Yes, Washington strove to live a virtuous life, but he was not an infallible god. Early stories treat him like one and visual art of the period *literally* depicts him becoming a god. (Rotunda of Capitol, fresco: *The Apotheosis of Washington* ... "apotheosis" means to achieve divine status.)
- Patrick Henry's "Give me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech? There is no actual transcription of that speech. It wasn't written down until 1817 – 42 years later – by Henry's biographer, William Wirt, who wasn't there.

- Paul Revere’s midnight ride shouting the “the British are coming” was not as dramatic as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem makes out.
- Molly Pitcher – the woman who started loading canon artillery at the Battle of Monmouth when her husband was wounded? She never existed.
- Chief Seattle – whose story is not a part of American *colonial & Revolutionary Era* history, but it’s almost Earth Day so I know memes with his words are starting to pop up – well, those words we read should be attributed to Ted Perry. A Hollywood scriptwriter who penned those words in 1971. (Perry, by his admission, based his embellishment on an account of Seattle’s speech ... but that account was written 33 years after the fact.)

I’m going to stop here before you start calling this sermon “Erin Ruins Everything.”

There’s a lot more I could share. I haven’t even touched on the civic myths that emerged after the Civil War – like the “Lost Cause” and how the Civil War wasn’t about slavery. You can even move things into the 20th century regarding the myths we’ve created around people like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy.

These later myths emerged because they followed in the vein of earlier colonial/civic myths.

That is, there is a kernel of truth to all these stories and they have been embellished in order to help Americans feel united and, in many cases, better about themselves. Better about ourselves. About our origins and our purpose as a people.

Like I said, there’s a kernel of truth in each myth I just mentioned. Technically the Civil War was about “states’ rights” . . . to own slaves. (And ignoring that last part, definitely helps us feel better about ourselves.)

Going back to those colonial/Revolutionary myths I just busted:

- It is true Puritans came to America because they were being persecuted in Europe. They were really unpopular (and unpleasant) so the persecution was

real. So if that part is true, why does it matter how to talk about Puritans in terms of religious purity rather than freedom? Because religious intolerance, not tolerance, is what was here first. We can't root that out without acknowledging it.

- Did Pilgrims interact with Native Americans and share food with them? Sure. But it was hardly a celebratory meal. In my opinion, the better Thanksgiving story is how Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation in October of 1863 asking American citizens to set aside the last Thursday in November to join in "one heart and one voice." Gettysburg had occurred in July resulting in 51,000 casualties with almost 8,000 dead. In the midst of horrifying violence, death, and grief, Lincoln asked Americans to pause, be thankful, and remember those who might be suffering more. If the traditional Thanksgiving Day story is supposed to teach of lessons of tolerance and forbearance, well, I think the other story does a better job (and it's actually true).
- George Washington, as I've said, wasn't a god. He, like Lincoln, MLK and JFK was smart, talented, and committed to his country. But he, and all those men, were fallible. Maybe if we de-apotheosized some of our mythic American heroes, we'd be better at grappling with the complex legacies they left. Maybe we'd be more comfortable talking about how our Founding Fathers owned other human beings. How Lincoln's attitude on slavery evolved (he was not born "The Great Emancipator" and the emancipation was limited). Maybe we'd be able to better see MLK's fiery radical side (because he had one) and JFK's imperfections.
- Then we have people like Paul Revere and Molly Pitcher. Revere did warn others about British soldiers (just not as flamboyantly as in the poem and in real life he was captured). Dozens of nameless other men did the same. Molly Pitcher ... well, she was a composite folk hero of the many women who supported the Revolutionary War effort

The Revolutionary War was not fought and won by a few great men doing great deeds!

So many of our founding myths and stories are hero focused. And while that works wonderfully for *Star Wars*, when you think about it, is rather anti-

democratic. Yes, there were some phenomenally brilliant men who guided this nation's creation ... but they couldn't have done it without the nameless thousands who supported them.

They couldn't have done it without the men and women who picked up arms or otherwise supported the troops.

They couldn't have done it without the colonial women and enslaved people who worked the farms, managed businesses, and cared for children while war raged.

"We the People" are as much a part of our founding story as the Founding Fathers, but we're largely absent from our own founding myths.

Just as that Noah Webster instructed "every child in America ... [to] rehearse the history of *HIS* country," these myths weren't for everyone. They don't include a lot of us and they paved the way for "bigger" myths . . .

These founding myths are stories based on the lives of people who often had the most power, wealth, and advantages of the time. For these individuals, the American Dream was totally achievable. (They wrote the rule book!) Should we be surprised then when those with power and advantages today bribe their way into elite schools? Being denied the American Dream doesn't even register to some people.

These civic myths (and other global & economic forces) reinforced the idea democracy would always march forward in triumph over tyranny. Justice will always prevail. Defeating the British was no small feat and that momentous victory created a very distinct point of view; a point of view that influenced and justified America's later belief in "manifest destiny" and our imperial ambitions of the 19th century.

Even as late as 1989, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a political scientist named Francis Fukuyama claimed that liberal democracy marked "the end of history [and was] the final form of human government." (Over confident much?)

And we can't deny our myths have a very distinct hue. White Americans (even me with Molly Pitcher) we can see ourselves in these myths. Many can't. Even our

myths around “good immigrants” are racialized. Our “Melting Pot” myth focuses on Ellis Island and European immigration, not the West Coast’s Angel Island where Asian immigrants were processed or how migration on the southern border has historically been fluid.

Is it any wonder a sense unity around these myths just doesn’t seem to be working?

There are those who say that debunking these kinds of myths is just over-sensitive political correctness. I respectfully disagree.

Our myths, especially when presented as history, just don’t do the job they were supposed to do because they leave out too many. And you can’t have a successful democracy – a government by, for, and of the people – when “the people” are left out.

Besides all that, in my opinion, these myths just aren’t epic enough for who we are anyway.

Our Epic Story

Before I get to all that, I do need to confess something: I struggle with the role of these myths in our civic life.

Some of these myths I unequivocally think we need to get rid of ... Pocahontas, Pilgrims & Indians, the Lost Cause ... get gone.

But I can’t say the underlying intent was ALL bad regarding these stories.

Having a shared narrative, being able to reach back through the “mystic chords of memory,” is important for a people to have.

These myths were created to provide a new nation with a solid, shared grounding so that its people would know who they were and who they (who we) should strive to be.

These myths aimed to inform a sense of virtuous character.

They were supposed to help people develop a shared set of civic values. None of that is bad.

George Washington surely lied as a child (and probably a few times as an adult), but myths about his life were, in part, to instruct the American people on what they should expect from their leaders.

I don't think it's wrong for any of us to want to have a President for whom lying would be seen as an unthinkable and abhorrent act.

Even I have to ask myself: Does it matter if Patrick Henry really said, "Give me liberty or give me death?" We know he is credited with inspiring the Second Virginia Convention to action. We know he absolutely considered himself an American patriot.

We know Chief Seattle fought for the dignity of his people and the preservation of his land. His words were surely "westernized," and that's a problem, but when so many native voices have been erased from history, I find myself glad there was preservation of something.

I can't bring myself to say all our myths are harmful.

I can say, unequivocally though, that I don't think they're big and bold enough. They're not really *epic* in my mind.

As I said, most national myths evolve over centuries. Our story is still evolving. And we can play a role in that evolution. As the poet tells us, "there's an American lyric we are just beginning to tell."

"We the people" have the ability to make that lyric – to make our story - truly epic.

Actually, no, we don't need to *make* our story epic, because it already is epic.

The actual stories about our founding and the stories of subsequent generations and their ability to survive, thrive, create, and battle their way through walls meant to keep some from achieving the American Dream ... that's an epic story.

It's a story that is ready to be told. All we need are the storytellers.

That's you.

Yeah, that means busting some myths (especially the harmful ones), but it's got to go further than that.

It's got to be a commitment to honest investigation and introspection.

It's got to be a willingness to listen and engage in a process that can be challenging to your very identity.

And it means engaging in discussions with others on why a more inclusive and holistic telling of America's past is truly the epic story we deserve.

Yes, learn about John Adams and Thomas Jefferson ... but don't forget Abigail Adams and Sally Hemmings. Don't forget those for whom we have no names to say; because they mattered.

We are better citizens when we search for other narratives. When we dig deeper, examine the full context of our history and myths, and ask probing questions that expand the story.

We are better as a nation when we explore, share, and celebrate *all* of these stories.

Because they are truly *our* epic story.

Thank you again for being here today friends. Before we sing our final song together, we are going to cluster in small groups – Civic Circles – to discuss what you've just heard.

Do we need to bust civic myths?

Are some worth keeping?

Which American myths, if any, would you reinvent?