

**The Sins of Our Fathers**  
**Owning the Long Shadow Cast by American History**  
**By**  
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Once upon a time, while I was still a college student, I was in an all night restaurant drinking coffee and studying late with some friends. At some point we got into a debate about the merits of war. Being a pacifist, I was staunchly against war and argued it isn't good for anything. Before long a man sitting at a nearby table very loudly and angrily told me he'd fought in Vietnam so that I could sit there and say whatever I wanted, then told me to keep my damn mouth shut. Despite trying to reason with him, he became louder and more hostile until the manager came over, told the man I had a right to my opinion, and asked him to leave. He stormed out, leaving his wife to pay their bill and collect their belongings. As she departed, seeming sullen and embarrassed, she stopped at my table and said, "He still has nightmares about what happened over there."

Although it happened more than 30 years ago, the sting of this experience still hasn't entirely gone away. It was the first time I realized that publically expressing my views can create hostility and expose me to danger or retribution. It was also the first time I realized expressing my views can cause others to feel pain. And it was a firsthand experience of how different the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be an American can be. It reminds me of something Moritz Kundig, a member of our church, the architect of this building, wrote in his brief biography about his experience immigrating to the United States in 1951, "There are really two Americas. There is the one that welcomes you with open arms, the one that is friendly and helpful. And there is the other America, the one that looks down upon the immigrants and exploits them."

As with the fellow in the restaurant, these two experiences of America sometimes clash, and when they do, conflict can easily erupt. But I don't want to insinuate these two conflicting accounts are equal. One story, the welcoming, helpful, land of opportunity, greatest nation on Earth account is the official story, the story our government schools expect us to teach to our kids and to publically uphold whether we wholly believe it or not. The other story, the story of exploitation and prejudice, and so much worse, is mostly forbidden, forgotten, and ignored. Those who dare utter it, or even suggest there might be another less flattering story are shamed, silenced, ostracized, and, sometimes, much worse.

Just this week I was in a bookstore and saw two very different American history books, side by side, illustrating this point. The first is one some of you are likely familiar with, Howard Zinn's, *A People's History of the United States*. The back cover says, "Zinn has written a brilliant and moving history of the American people from the point of view of those who have been exploited politically and economically and

whose plight has been largely omitted from most histories.” In his first chapter, Zinn says, “this book will be skeptical of governments and their attempts, through politics and culture, to ensnare ordinary people in a giant web of nationhood pretending to a common interest.”<sup>1</sup>

The other book is entitled, *A Patriot's History of the United States*, by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen. On its front cover are the words of conservative political pundit, Glenn Beck saying it, “should be required reading for all Americans.” On the back is the claim that “readers will learn the truth behind America’s discovery, founding, and development, with an emphasis on the elements of public virtue, personal liberty, and private property that make this nation uniquely successful.” The review goes on to claim it’s authors, “don’t ignore America’s mistakes through the years, but they put them back in their proper perspective while celebrating the strengths of the men and women who cleared the wilderness, abolished slavery, and rid the world of fascism and communism.”

This second book, written through the bias of the official story that we’re supposed to teach children and publically uphold, not only repeats the old lies about Christopher Columbus being a heroic figure and great explorer, but begins to rewrite and distort history even further with it’s subtle claim that America is so great it even got rid of slavery. The first time I ever heard anyone utter such balderdash was just a few years ago, in 2011, when Republican Congresswoman and Presidential hopeful, Michelle Bachmann claimed, “the Founding Fathers who wrote the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence worked tirelessly to end slavery.”<sup>2</sup>

While it’s true that after much suffering and a civil war the United States, which remains institutionally racist to this day, did abolish slavery, claiming this is part of what makes ours nation great and was something the, so-called, founders intended all along, is like taking a glass of water and pouring it out until there’s hardly a drop left, then saying, “See there, it’s not empty, it’s 0.0001 percent full.” It’s a huge stretch! When we ignore our dark past as a nation in this way, and vilify those who dare bring it up, or who risk telling the forbidden history, we only prolong the evil and suffering we’re trying to avoid. “One reason these atrocities are still with us,” Zinn says, “is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it’s a mess that won’t ever go away if we just bury it.

This reminds me of a very old story from the Brothers Grimm, a coming of age tale about young man who doesn’t know how to shudder. He wants, more than anything

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<sup>1</sup> Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1980. 2003, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/05/michele-bachmann-in-overdrive-her-10-greatest-hits/>

<sup>3</sup> Zinn, *ibid.*, p. 9.

to be like everyone else and learn what it means to shudder. So he sets upon a journey to find out. No matter what he tries or how frightening the sights he sees, he always manages to go straight to sleep lying beside his comfortable, warm fire. Eventually he learns of a king who has promised his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can spend three nights in a nearby haunted castle. Many have tried but, so far, no one has come out alive. Naturally, the young man agrees to try in the hope the experience might finally teach him how to shudder. On the first night he's stirring his fire when a hoard of demonic cats and dogs with fiery red eyes and red-hot chains appear. Instead of being afraid, however, the bored young man invites them to play cards. Bet when they jump into his fire and try pulling it apart, he kills them all with his knife, throws them into a cold pond, then puts his fire back together and begins warming himself again. A little later, when he gets into bed, the bed begins jumping around the room, which he takes as great fun, yelling, "faster, faster!" Before long the bed gets exhausted and flips upside down, so the young man goes and falls asleep lying comfortably on the floor beside his fire.

On the second night, while again stoking his fire and wishing he could learn to shudder, he hears a loud scream coming from the fireplace. A moment later half a body climbs out the chimney, followed moments later by the other half. The strange apparition is screaming in agony, so the young man says, "Here, let me blow on my fire to make you more comfortable." Even though a couple skeletons also pop in, when midnight strikes he has no trouble going to sleep.

On the third night, still wishing he might learn to shudder, several men appear carrying a coffin. When they open it the young man sees his dead cousin inside, goes to feel his face, and discovers it's cold as ice. So he lifts the corpse and takes it to the fire to warm it, but, of course, it remains cold. So he just puts the body back in the coffin and, again, has no trouble going fast to sleep.

Thus, having met the challenge, he gladly marries the princess but he still hasn't learned to shudder. It's not until the Princess, tired of hearing him complain about it all the time, waits until he's asleep one night, slowly pulls off his covers, then drenches him with a bucket of ice water. He awakes crying, "What is making me shudder? Thank you dear wife! Now I know how to shudder!"

If you've been paying attention you will have noticed the young man can't shudder because he's always near the warmth of his fire. He's never shuddered a day in life because it's always kept him warm. Even when surrounded by cold, dead, frightening things, he just takes them to his fire and pointlessly tries to warm them too, which, to me, is precisely what our official history attempts to do by shielding us from the coldness, and death, and horrors of our nation's past by telling a tale that is only glorious, heroic, and great. It is an uplifting story that doesn't make us to shudder.

In his book, *Iron John*, poet Robert Bly writes, “Children are able to shudder easily, and a child will often break into tears when he or she sees a wounded animal.”<sup>4</sup> But we often lose this empathic response to suffering, becoming numb to such pain, as we are trained in the ways of cultural inequality and discrimination. Yet those who cannot shudder, those who tell only the official story while cloistered together round the warm fire, afraid of the dark, uncomfortable with the cold, detest those who shudder or cause others to shudder by telling their haunting ghost stories round the same fire, those trying to bring such horrors to light.

“Most of us remember from our childhood,” Bly says, “how much the non-shudders hate the [kids] who can shudder.”<sup>5</sup> They bully them, especially the shuddering boys, and call them fraidy cats, and chickens, and sissies, and other names. But, “When a man possesses empathy,” Bly says, “it does not mean that he has developed the feminine feeling only; of course he has, and it is good to develop the feminine. But when he learns to shudder, he is developing a part of the masculine emotional body as well.”<sup>6</sup> Bly considers this ability to shudder a mark of maturity in everyone, of all genders, but considers those can’t, “undone, unfinished...” and “dangerous.”<sup>7</sup>

Just last month our own local community saw the clash between these two stories when our City Council voted to rename *Columbus Day*, “Indigenous Peoples Day.” Perhaps some of you remember the official story many of us learned as children. “In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. He had three ships and left from Spain; He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain. He sailed by night; he sailed by day; He used the stars to find his way.” As the poem continues it leads us to believe Columbus and his faithful crew were overjoyed when they spotted land and met the indigenous peoples there with kindness and joy, receiving food and spices from them, and trading with them in exchange for gold to bring back to Spain. “The first American? No, not quite. But Columbus was brave, and he was bright.”

In *A Patriot’s History of the United States*, Columbus is said to have “embodied the best of the new generation of navigators: resilient, courageous, and confident.”<sup>8</sup> According the *Patriots History* he admired the indigenous people he met, calling them, “very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces,” whom he hoped to convert to Christianity “by love rather than force.”<sup>9</sup> That’s about all it has to say about Columbus’ interactions with the natives, except to mention that after he “blazed the trail,”<sup>10</sup> other Spanish explorers came and rescued them from the “brutal regime” of the Aztec leader, Montezuma who was busy sacrificing human

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<sup>4</sup> Bly, Robert, *Iron John*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., U.S., 1990, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Schweikart, Larry, and Allen, Michael, *A Patriot’s History of the United States*, Sentinel, Penguin Books, U.S., 2004, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

victims at the rate of fourteen per minute. While it's true the Aztecs performed human sacrifices, the *Patriot's History* omits so many historical facts that it leaves us only with the official story of Columbus as a great explorer who not only discovered a new world, but was kind to its previous occupants who ended up much better off because of his discovery.

When reading Zinn's *People's History*, however, we learn a different story that should make any sane person shudder. Zinn also quotes Columbus' journal describing the peaceful Arawaks he encountered in the Bahamas, "well-built, with good bodies and handsome features,"<sup>11</sup> but he goes on to include the entire passage, which ridicules their "ignorance," and concludes by stating, "With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."<sup>12</sup> Columbus himself admitted that as soon as he saw them he took some by force so they could take him to their fields of gold. Yet, in all his expeditions, he never did find the gold he imagined and promised his financial backers. So, to help pay them back, he kidnapped as many natives as he could to sell as slaves. In a letter he wrote, "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."<sup>13</sup>

If I told you all that Columbus and his fellow "explorers" did to the indigenous populations they encountered it would make you shudder. Suffice it to say, as Zinn points out, "In two years, through murder, mutilations, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti [alone] were dead... by the year 1515 there were, perhaps, fifty thousand Indians left. By 1550, there were five hundred."<sup>14</sup> A hundred years later the Arawaks were gone, have succumbed to utter genocide. The indigenous peoples of Cuba and Mexico suffered similar fates. So much for the idea they were better off with the arrival of the Spanish explorers.

This is just one example of how these two competing histories, the official and the forbidden, conflict. As we have seen, if a new generation of historians, who ought more correctly be called *apologists*, have their way, our society will soon even deny its roll in the slavery of blacks. There is an oft-repeated phrase in the Hebrew Scriptures that says God will visit, "the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."<sup>15</sup> While I don't believe children ought to be held accountable for the actions of their parents, nor be condemned or discriminated against because of any conditions of their birth, I do agree that if we, as a society, do not own the injustices we've caused and allowed, they will haunt and hurt us and our descendents until we do. The Fall/Redemption theology associated with Christianity has privatized sin as a congenital condition each of us is born with, but the original Hebrew tradition holds that society is the sinner that must be redeemed.

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<sup>11</sup> Zinn, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 5:9

Theologian Matthew Fox says, feeling the pain of our pasts, the pain we have caused, links us with others and causes us to seek change. "All social movements and organizations were born of pain," he says, "Not privatized pain or pain kept to oneself or the wallowing in one's own pain, but pain shared. Unemployment shared. Unjust taxes shared. The evil, bitter taste and experiences of racism, of sexism, of ageism—all shared."<sup>16</sup> Today many individuals, recognizing the sins of our fathers, are refusing to uphold the old story; individuals like quarterback, Colin Kaepernick who is refusing to stand for the National Anthem. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick says. "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." And just this week another football player, Denver Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall was dropped by a major sponsor for taking the same position because, "the non-shudders hate the [kids] who can shudder."

But if, instead of digging up sacred burial sites in North Dakota to make way for an oil pipeline, we take our spades to our radioactive wastelands and begin digging up our Nation's past, there is plenty to make us shudder. I shudder knowing this country was not discovered or founded, as the official story claims, but taken by committing the worst genocide in human history against the indigenous peoples of this land. I shudder knowing it was built on the backs of slaves dragged here in chains where they were oppressed and brutalized, and on the shoulders of immigrants who were exploited and discriminated against. I shudder knowing that women in our nation have been denied equality since its inception, be it an equal voice, equal pay, or equal power. I shudder knowing about Jim Crow and segregation. I shudder knowing about McCarthyism and our nation's intentional criminalization of the labor movement. I shudder knowing about the Japanese internment camps. I shudder knowing about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I shudder knowing 1.5 million civilians were killed during Vietnam. I shudder knowing America's Drug War and its subsequent era of Mass Incarceration has disenfranchised minority voters, especially African Americans, at gravely disproportionate rates, criminalizing and impoverishing black fathers, brothers, and sons for generations to come. I shudder knowing a few people were allowed to use the 9/11 attacks as an excuse to go to War with Iraq, for their own selfish gain.

In his latest documentary, *Where to Invade Next*, Michael Moore visits classrooms in Germany in which teachers ask their students to bring items they wouldn't want to leave behind, to be placed in a single suitcase to help them understand the plight of the Jews in their country during the Nazi regime. Moore says, "They don't whitewash it. They don't pretend it didn't happen. They don't say, "Hey, this was before my time. What's this got to do with me? I didn't kill anyone. They treat it as their original sin, a permanent mark on their collective German soul; One for which

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<sup>16</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessings*, Bear and Company Publishing, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 145.

they must always seek redemption, and make reparations, and never forget.” He then shows us that they can’t forget because, rather than burying their radioactive pasts in the ground, they imbed the names of the Jews who once lived in their homes on the sidewalks outside their houses. Where are the plaques outside our homes remembering the Indians who once lived here? Where are the names of the slaves who were stolen from their communities to build our community? Instead, we name our streets after those responsible for such injustices, while ridiculing and vilifying the Michael Moores and Colin Kaepernick among us who are calling upon us to attend to the needs of our own nation’s collective soul by owning the sins of our fathers.

For there is greatness among us, and ours is a country that has accomplished many great things for ourselves and for our world, but we must still take an honest account of all the ways we’ve wronged each other and separated ourselves from our own neighbors so that together, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, native and immigrant, we can walk hand-in-hand toward a future in which we truly become a great nation and a great people.