

Keyser

Two months ago, Kori bore my first grandchild, Kevin James Hall. I haven't yet held him, but I will soon, said with the necessary qualifiers.

I have long awaited this grandchild: if there is anything I regret during the course of my life it's that Dad didn't live to see grandchildren, or even his children grown. He married at thirty, was dead at forty-two. He left me with memories that are obligations to pass on to generations not yet conceived.

Dad was curious about who he was and from where were the Kizer roots: during his War-time campaign through Europe, he asked local people how they pronounced his name. He looked for where K-i-z-e-r was pronounced as Kaiser. The only place he found was in Luxemburg, and his conclusion was that we were from there. But he couldn't know for sure, for no family memories remained of our continental history. The stories were lost.

What Dad didn't know was that a written history of the Kizer/Keyser family in America does exist, a history that goes back to Dirck Gerritsz Keyser, who married Cornelia Govertsz, daughter of Tobias Govertsz, a Mennonite minister, the minister who signed the Dordrecht Confession of Faith, 1632 CE, for Amsterdam. This Dirck Keyser immigrated to America with the first contingent of Mennonites and is buried in Germantown. However, when the family ceased attending weekly services with neighboring Mennonites and began attending with Old German Baptists then with other Baptists and finally with the local Church of Christ, the family forgot its memories. The stories were no longer told; religious enthusiasm had dissipated, disappearing as dew under the noontday sun, enthusiasm that had caused ancestors to literally place their lives at risk for their belief in God and in separation from the State.

Dad attended no church, and by his War-time service, he obviously did not hold the pacifist views of our Mennonite ancestors ... his religious faith is typical of the religious heritage of America, where some form of belief in God is part of a culturally retained memory that has forgotten the details, the nuances, faith itself. It is now not only patriotic to serve in the Armed Forces, but considered service to God. Most Christians believe that dual citizenship—American and that of heavenly Jerusalem—can be held without falling into a philosophical paradox.

My memories begin with an image of a green sky. The snippet is very short, less than a second. Years later Mom said that green sky occurred the day my brother Ben was born. The color was caused by the tornado, which convinced her to give birth to Ben at home rather than in the hospital. I was sixteen months old, and I'm certain that Ben being born at home was an exciting enough event to have created all kinds of memories. But the only memory of that day I have ever been able to recall once my memories became seemingly continuous is the color of the sky and the presence of someone behind me.

Another snippet of memory (that of me crawling up a ditch bank) is from a few months after Ben was born. Again, the snippet relates to a traumatic event: apparently I had opened the rear car door while Dad and Mom were on a

backcountry road in Indiana, and I fell out, landing down a ways in the drainage ditch. I only remember crawling a few feet up the bank and watching the car get smaller and smaller, then bigger and bigger. Nothing else. I don't know if I was hurt. I don't remember getting back into the car. I only remember an instant of panic at seeing the car leave me behind. This instance of panic might be a few seconds in length, but it seems shorter than that. It seems more like glancing at a few frames of film. But those few seconds have stayed with me whereas being stepped over by a cow while Mom was milking, and being bitten above the eye by Mom's collie, both incidents occurring about the same time, aren't retained in my conscious memory.

My youngest sister Marie has only two memory snippets of Dad. One the bologna hats (Dad frying bologna), the other of Dad carrying her down a flight of stairs on his shoulders. Both of these snippets are only a few seconds long. They are for her Dad. Until she read a poem of mine, she didn't know Dad's favorite blossom was four-petal, white dogwood.

I used to think about dying young; I suspect it was normal not to see myself living longer than Dad. I didn't want to leave a young family. As a result, my daughters were born when I was 21, 23 and 25; I married at 18. I didn't want to wait until I was older as Dad had, thanks somewhat to Hitler. I didn't want to have a three-year-old (Marie's age) when I was 42. I didn't want to do to a child what Dad's death did to her. But until I was older I never really considered that there is no guarantee of anyone living through tomorrow. Yes, statistics favor youth. Accidents, however, neither check your age nor your health before they occur.

When I see a dogwood in bloom, I remember why I wanted children when I was still young; remember why the blossoms cause me to confront my mortality, even my heritage. Yes, their petal structure has cultural significance. Yes, this significance is important to me. This significance might have had something to do with why Dad liked them. A dogwood in full bloom reminds me of battlefield cemeteries, green and white, the blossoms as temporary as life.

The cross is the enduring symbol of death, not life.

A few days ago I called my Uncle Jerry to ask about how Grandpa acquired that second forty acres of the farm. He didn't know. My uncle was the youngest of seven children and born ten years after Dad. While there is much he remembers, there is also much nobody told him. The fire that destroyed Grandpa's first board house (there had been a log house previously) was in 1921, four years before he was born. That fire had deeply impressed Dad, who was six. All my uncle knows of that fire is the house had been yellow. For my uncle, the buffalo wallow was already tiled fields by the time his memories begin. However, he did tell me that second forty was the west-side of the farm, something I hadn't known.

By right of first-born birth, I have the obligation of remembering Dad for my sister Marie; of relating to her what I know to have occurred prior to when her memories begin. This is actually every living person's obligation, and in other cultures and in simpler times, it was an obligation taken seriously. Stories kept history alive as well as the lessons of history. But with global television, with five and more movie channels continuously broadcasting, with video games and the future emphasized, the stories of the past seem merely nostalgic. They might be

interesting, but for too many, they aren't meaningful. The silicon chip has changed everything, but so has the story I told about Marie remembering Dad frying slices of bologna, and as the outside edges of those slices shrunk, their centers bulged up to make them look like little hats.

We live in a story; our lives are a story we tell, and if all of those stories were told better, Jerry Springer wouldn't have a show.

If we are to have that bright, bold future too many politicians promise, we shouldn't be looking to the future but to the past. The future will be upon us before we know it.

When I began running around Kodiak Island, one of the places experienced skippers warned me about was Olga Bay. Its entrance is a long, deep, narrow channel between bluffs. The bay is large and its entrance small; so sea level in the bay is several feet higher than in the Pacific. As a result, the falling tide runs very fast while the rising tide pushes against that gravitational fall. If a skipper is to keep from running into rocks or bluff or aground, the skipper can't look where he or she is headed. No person or boat can react fast enough; the current is too swift. But the skipper must watch where his or her boat has been.

Skippers steer a straight course into Olga bay by gauging the disturbed water behind their sterns. The moment they quit looking behind them, they will run into some obstacle. The course is steered by adjustments made to the passage of the past.

The 2008 banking crisis that will cost American taxpayers a trillion dollars or so to repair, if repair is possible, comes from forgetting lessons learned in the Great Depression, comes from changes made in banking law during President Clinton's administration.

Society responds as sluggishly as a ship. A rudder change doesn't translate into an instantaneous directional change. The bow is a long ways in front of that rudder. A lot of water has to pass under that bow before enough water is deflected to push the bow off its course.

The biblical record of humanity doesn't begin in Genesis, but in the epistle of John when *the Logos* speaks the world into existence. But as a society looking into the future, we won't consider the possibility that this world could have been spoken into existence. We don't see the relevance of ancient stories in our lives. Rather, we are like a fish tender heading into Olga Bay, oblivious to the need to be guided by our cultural stern wake.

If I don't tell Kevin James Hall that his great-grandfather's favorite blossom was white, four-petal dogwoods, Kevin will mature just fine. He will be just as strong, just as tall, just as smart, and just as likely to have to fight another Hitler as was my dad. However, if I tell Kevin that his great-grandfather's favorite blossom was dogwoods, and that when I see dogwoods, I see those green fields in France where thousands of white crosses remember American soldiers who died fighting to create the story of America, he will find himself involuntarily linked into that story which will then become his to steer.

Some cultural critics would not want him to learn about a metatext created by his forefathers, a story that has excluded "others." Their perception of story, however, limits what these critics are able to perceive. Perhaps if they were to look behind them, they would see that all stories are currents and crosscurrents

in a single larger story about why we are here.

Most bays around Kodiak Island are easy to navigate when looking forward from atop a flying bridge. Skippers don't have to check charts or depths. They only have to punch in Loran C coordinates, or now GPS coordinates. Sometimes they don't even have to stay awake ... once Ollie Harder fell asleep when he rounded Buoy Four, ten miles out of Kodiak. His vessel was on autopilot, and didn't make the little two hundred foot dogleg into the channel. It ran aground on the end of Near Island. And even if Ollie had been awake, looking behind him wouldn't have done any good. All that mattered was his failing to stay awake.

For all of my life, we have been a nation on autopilot, skippered by a succession of sleepy politicians, one with his pants around his ankles. So far we have avoided running aground, but if we travel far enough for long enough, we will enter a figurative Olga Bay where we can only go safely forward by remembering our past through our stories. My contention is that we have entered that channel.

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