

Revolutionary Spirits
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Seamus Heaney, the author of the poem “Digging,” was born and raised in the northeastern part of Northern Ireland, near the small town of Castledawson.¹ [The poem “Digging” was read just prior to the start of the sermon.] “Digging” was the first poem in his first volume of poetry. In the poem, Heaney reflects on his childhood in rural Ireland, where he and his brothers used to help their father collect potatoes. Digging potatoes and digging peat were familiar activities. The poem tells of Heaney’s wish to carry on the digging tradition in his own way.² Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

During my recent trip to Northern Ireland, I stayed at a bed and breakfast whose owner was personally acquainted with Seamus Heaney. Eugene loves history, and he never seemed bored by my family’s interest in researching our genealogical roots and branches.³ By sheer coincidence, his cousin lived in the rural district where my Stewart ancestors lived. Thanks to Eugene and to his cousin, we were able to enter the abandoned, dilapidated barn and house where some of our relatives lived. The calendar on the wall read 1952. Over 50 years of dust coated every surface. The morning that we left our lodging place, Eugene gave us a precious gift, a print of “Digging” by Seamus Heaney. “You also are digging. You are digging into your family history,” Eugene said.

Coming to terms with the past requires digging through the dust of decades and digging through the dust of centuries. I thought about the dust of centuries while reading *Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America’s Founding Fathers*, the new book by the Rev. Gary Kowalski, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Burlington, Vermont. I cannot say that the personalities of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Paine, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison jumped off the pages, but I certainly came away with a better sense of how they were “children of the Enlightenment.”

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seamus_Heaney.

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_a_Naturalist#22Digging.22.

³ See <http://www.laurel-villa.com> for information about Laurel Villa Townhouse in Magherafelt, Northern Ireland.

The “Founding Fathers” of this nation approached religion through corridors of reason. Gary Kowalski writes, “While Protestantism provided a nominal background for most colonists, the vast majority of Americans – like the larger number of the ship’s crew and passengers aboard the Mayflower – were unchurched and not eager to submit to any ecclesiastical body that might restrict their personal liberty.”⁴ “Political dissent and religious dissent were connected in their minds.”⁵

“[The Founding Fathers] preferred to discuss theology in quiet tones, through appeals to reason and common sense, rather than in the pulpit-pounding cadences of the revivalist,” Kowalski writes. “Mistrustful of emotions that could turn masses of people into heated mobs, they encouraged cool heads and critical thinking when it came to questions of faith.”⁶ The founders “favored fact-based arguments and testable hypotheses, trusting in the five senses more than the four evangelists [Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John] or five books of Moses.”⁷

When was the last time you heard a politician discuss theology in quiet tones, through appeals to reason and common sense? Today, we swim in a sea of sound bites. Woe to politicians who dare to speak off the cuff, for unscripted sentiments may come back to bite them. Given the dust of 200 years, it is fair to ask whether the faith of the country’s gender-specific “Founding Fathers” is relevant to our lives today.

Gary Kowalski would say “yes” because two misconceptions surround these men. “One is that they were devout believers, intent upon establishing a godly nation.”⁸ On the other side, the second misconception is that “they were of a wholly secular bent or that their religious beliefs – if they had any – were lukewarm or lightly held.”⁹ Through these misconceptions, the intentions of the founders are misunderstood, and misappropriation can follow. The founders were neither trying to establish a Christian nation nor were they secular or lukewarm in their faith.

⁴ *Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America’s Founding Fathers*, Gary Kowalski, BlueBridge, an imprint of United Tribes Media, Inc., New York, 2008, p. 5

⁵ Page 6.

⁶ Page 7.

⁷ Page 9.

⁸ Page 186.

⁹ Page 186.

Many of the founders were influenced by a theology called Deism. “America’s founders sensed the sacred in the laws and harmonies of nature, rather than in the miraculous suspension of those laws . . . When they referred to a deity it was most often under the rubric of Chief Architect or Great Designer – the God revealed in the workings of earth and sky rather than the traditional God of Abraham and Isaac.”¹⁰ Kowalski notes that Deism is often caricatured as lacking the capacity to emotionally engage believers. “And it is true that the European Enlightenment took an irreligious turn,” he writes. “But the Enlightenment in America was seldom atheistic, more often, it was soulful, earnest, and intensely moral.”¹¹

I felt like a curmudgeon during much of the time that I was reading the book. I seem to have been born without the gene for hero worship. Now and again over the years, I have been asked, “Who do you most admire?” or “Who has most influenced your life?” or “Who is the person, living or dead, who you would most like to meet?” I inwardly sigh, make up a story, and wonder why, left to my own devices, I am not drawn to asking or answering such questions. My indifference to heroes once caused me to lose a speech contest. This was years ago, in Toastmasters, and I had advanced to the state level in impromptu speaking. There were perhaps 300 people in the room. The protocol was for someone to state a word or phrase two times. Then the contestant would speak about the topic for three minutes.

I thought I was ready for any topic, but I was aghast when the man up front said “Eros.” “They want me to talk about Eros for three minutes in front of 300 people? Are they kidding? What a relief when the man repeated the topic: Heroes. “Hey, buster,” I wanted to say, “the ‘h’ in ‘heroes’ is *not* silent, and, by the way, I’m not into heroes.” I was not quite that direct in my response, but I lost the contest nonetheless.

Rather than the “Great Man” theory of history, I am drawn toward the likes of Howard Zinn, who, in *A People’s History of the United States*, focuses on the interaction of broad social

¹⁰ Page 21.

¹¹ Page 186.

movements and the life experiences of people whose faces are not found on currency.¹² Given my tendency to identify with the underdog, I had to squirm during the recent family history digging. It is likely that my Protestant Stewart ancestors were loyal to the British Crown and jumped at the chance to help colonize Northern Ireland. The Irish Catholics who were already living there? Well, that's the way the cookie crumbled. Better luck next time. ;)

I now have a better understanding of the animosity between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. It is not only about religion. It is also about economic winners and losers. Life for the "Ulster Scots" in the 18th and 19th centuries was not easy, but life was surely easier for them than it was for many other people. Most branches in my family tree wind their way back onto some small, hilly, rocky plot of land that was unable to sustain a farming family. In contrast, in the United States, the Stewart branch of my family tree winds its way back to the largest, most impressive gravestones in a southeastern Wisconsin cemetery.

When digging, one never knows what will turn up. Digging into the past, digging into the psyche means being willing to face discomfort. It might be the discomfort of finding out that our ancestors were slave owners or otherwise exploited others. For those of us who are white, it will be the discomfort of realizing just how much our ancestors benefited from *and we continue to benefit from* an economy which relied upon slave labor to generate much of its wealth during the country's critical early years. African Americans fought in the War for Independence. Kowalski notes that "African Americans were there at almost every major battle in the war for independence, and historians now estimate that roughly five thousand serviced in the Continental Army, making it the most racially diverse fighting force up until the 1950s when Harry Truman legally desegregated the military."¹³

Not long after the deaths of the Founding Fathers, the spirit of the Enlightenment faded. Religious revivals energized the country in the early 19th century. "Showmanship entered the pulpit," writes Kowalski. "By defining the individual as a spiritual free agent within an unregulated religious marketplace, the founders opened the field to revivalists vying to save

¹² See <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/zinnapeopleshistory.html>.

¹³ Page 153.

souls by whatever means possible . . . ¹⁴ Reason and showmanship anchor the worship tightrope that we walk. Religious liberals look for more than mere reason in religion. Religious liberals look for more than mere showmanship in religion.

Recently, over a dozen members of the congregation gathered in our own Founders' Room to kick off the new Worship Associate program. The overall goal of the program is to enhance the spirit of collaboration in planning and presenting worship services. By "worship," I mean "to shape that which is worthwhile." I am excited at the prospect of the collaborative crafting of worship that goes beyond mere reason and goes beyond mere showmanship. It matters what we are drawn to, what we are repelled by, and what we are indifferent to. The Unitarian Universalist religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs noted, "Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies . . . Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction. Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration."¹⁵

May we take to heart these words as we more intentionally collaborate in crafting worship. May we encourage digging, the kind of digging into the past and the kind of digging into the psyche that yield wisdom. May we not shy away from feelings of discomfort as our digging uncovers layers of truth. May it be so!

¹⁴ Page 190.

¹⁵ See reading #657 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.