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History in the Face of Catastrophe

After my son died, how could I know anything for certain?

Michael Woloschinow for The Chronicle

By Stéphane Gerson | FEBRUARY 04, 2018

A little over a decade ago, I edited a collection in which North American historians of France explored their personal and professional relationships to the country they studied. Their essays made history come alive as a craft embedded within social forces, family dynamics, intellectual lineages, and political convictions.

Few of the contributors explored, however, the ways in which this craft and their relationships to the past were steeped in their emotional lives. The truth is, my co-editor and I did not steer them in that direction. The thought never crossed our minds, not even when one contributor, the medievalist John W. Baldwin, disclosed that his daughter, Birgit, had been killed by a drunken driver in 1988. After her death, Baldwin wrote, he and his wife "retreated to their house in Baltimore, pulled the blinds to their studies, and drowned their bereavement in work."

The image of this bereaved couple in a darkened house proved so piercing that I could think of little else while editing Baldwin's essay. And yet I never pondered the bigger questions at work in this passage. What does it mean exactly to drown one's bereavement in work? What happens to our scholarship when catastrophe drags us into immeasurable depths and alters something fundamental in our emotional makeup? What happens to history (in this case) when work becomes a refuge, an escape, a way of structuring one's days, or something else altogether?

This collection came out in December 2006. A year and a half later, my youngest son, Owen, died at the age of 8 during a rafting trip on the Green River, near the border between Utah and Colorado.

The outfitters' brochure had advertised the four-day vacation as family fun for novice rafters and children age 7 and up. This seemed ideal for first-timers like us. That first morning, the Green was so still that we could almost see our reflections on the glassy surface. Mayhem hit after lunch, on a stretch known as Disaster Falls: lost paddles, three passengers in the water, overmatched guides, an 8-year-old boy sucked under.

Like Baldwin, I returned to my office a few weeks after the funeral. I returned to my historical research, but without any of the necessity and pleasure I used to feel while combing through archives. I became a historian pro forma, absent from professional meetings, oblivious to the latest scholarship, unable to comprehend common phrases in my field, such as "the crisis of late modernism." What could this mean? Why would people write such things?

I plugged away at my research because I had to plug away at something. On some days, I felt tempted to spend all of my time at my desk, in the hope that work might provide a relief from the pain. But this also felt like a retreat from grief and from Owen, as if I were moving on and moving away at the same time.

My wife told me not to give up, perhaps because she feared that, if I did, she might give up herself. But in the classroom, which I had previously approached like a seasoned performer, capable of owning the stage or improvising with my students, I now rarely ventured beyond the lectern, rarely made any point with conviction. I suffered from a crisis of audacity and authority, rooted in my inability to know anything for certain.

And so I came to believe that my work had, like so many other things, fallen victim to this catastrophe. This was true: The scope of my questions, their conceptual reach, my engagement with other scholars and students had narrowed.

And yet I did not cut myself off from history. I now spent considerable time in eras other than my own, returning to the past with an urgency I had never felt before. Without realizing it, I grieved not only as a father and husband, but also as a historian. And this, I later came to understand, broadened my relationship to history. It made me a different kind of scholar.

One of the first things I did after the accident was to summon my late grandparents. I did so on the river's edge just hours after the accident, when reciting the Shema, the Jewish declaration of faith. As I uttered the prayer's opening line, I neither pondered its meaning nor expressed devotion nor implored God to look after Owen. Instead I felt the enormity of the moment and the presence of untold generations who had recited such words while facing their own tragedies. Without being devout, I yearned for some inscription in history.

My childhood, in Brussels in the 1970s and 1980s, had been colored by the epic story of my grandparents' survival in Belgium and France during World War II. Their everyday lives seemed normal enough. They dressed in the morning and ate breakfast as I did; they gossiped and quarreled and laughed like everyone else. But they embodied history: They had experienced something I had not, and their proximity to danger and death had made them a different kind of people.

After the accident, I felt their presence. Although my grandparents had been persecuted whereas I had not, we could now enter a different realm of existence and encounter together shock and sorrow, and perhaps resilience. In their company, Owen's death could exist in its banality and its historical magnitude, at once a ripple in the flow of everyday life and a disruption of the universe.

But my grandparents had not buried a child, and my experience could not be theirs. This led me to canvass the past for other bereaved parents who might understand me, make themselves available, and share their stories without always expecting me to reciprocate.

There was the Burgundian notary Jean-Baptiste Boniard who lost two children, including his 5-year-old daughter, Adèle, around 1800. He kept a detailed account of his last conversation with the girl, the "rosebud" who liked to kiss and comfort her father and who died while reciting a fable to him. Boniard was a fascinating character (local politician, journalist, amateur archaeologist and astronomer), but his relationship with his late daughter told me everything I wanted to know about him.

Other Victorian parents opened their souls in accounts of their loved ones' lives and deaths. Henry Bowditch, whose son, a soldier, died in Virginia in 1863, recovered his body and compiled memorial volumes and scrapbooks about his life. This is not how men were expected to grieve. Bowditch understood this but maintained his course. "The labor was a sweet one," he wrote. "It took me out of myself."

W.E.B. Du Bois faced unknown expanses upon burying his son, in 1899. "It seemed a ghostly unreal day — the wraith of life," he wrote. "We seemed to rumble down an unknown street." Granville Stanley Hall, a 19th-century gerontologist, felt that the death of his daughter by gas asphyxiation was "the greatest bereavement of my life — such a one, indeed, as rarely falls to the lot of man." Hall was 44, but this great fatigue, as he called it, made him feel much older. I rumbled down unknown streets with Du Bois and Hall, prey to a great fatigue that made me feel as old as they had.

Uncovering such memorials, journals, and poems — in original sources and the works of other historians — came instinctively. Part of my professional self, it turned out, had remained intact. But there was nothing scholarly about this exploration, no questions to resolve about grief across the centuries. It was companionship I sought. I wanted to know these men and women who, as the English widower John Horsley put it, kept "the uncertainty of this life ever in view." They inhabited a realm of pure emotion and allowed me to join them, to mourn in their company whenever I so desired.

I also delved into another history. My wife and I had booked this vacation without knowing anything about the Green River, not even the name of its rapids. Friends had taken this trip with the same outfitters a year earlier. Having signed up for a journey into a foreign, antediluvian landscape, we had not sought to know more about the waterway. I had already spent so much time

immersed in research that I resisted reading up beforehand. Doing so would have spoiled the inherent strangeness of the place.

Had I consulted but one book, I would have learned that these rapids had a dramatic history, populated by Native American tribes, trappers, homesteaders, cattlemen, rustlers, outlaws, dam engineers, outfitters, park rangers, and tourists. There was also John Wesley Powell, the explorer who first ran this stretch of the river with a crew, in 1869, lost a boat on the rapids and christened them Disaster Falls.

I know this because, not long after the accident, I began collecting information on the Green. What started as an episodic probe rapidly turned into an all-consuming inquiry. I downloaded articles, mined databases, called the Utah Bureau of Land Management, and pored over expedition reports, travel accounts, and geological surveys.

A natural and human history of the river and its inhabitants might just explain why things happened as they did the day Owen died. Each new detail, each precedent, each anecdote might just draw me closer to the truth of a river that, like the other protagonists in this story, was not evil but could not be fully innocent, either.

This inquiry taught me a great deal about river runners, the invention of whitewater rafting as recreation, and the economy of risk that governs this poorly regulated industry. It helped me uncover some of the unseen forces that had brought us to these rapids and shaped what we could and could not see and grasp and do that summer afternoon.

Still, history could not fully *explain* this inscrutable event. It could not account for the string of decisions small and large, the steps taken or not, the resolutions made too long ago to leave visible traces, the behavioral patterns that, like canyons in forsaken lands, deposited sediment so slowly that they seem eternal. History could not yield definitive understanding.

And yet history lived on as my obsession. Perhaps this is what we all need in the wake of catastrophic losses, some pursuit that will channel the manic energy and conflicted yearnings that well up within us. Another bereaved father I know took on martial arts and earned a black belt.

History also remained as presence and compensation: the history I wished I had known, the history that might have led us to make different decisions on rapids that never seemed as safe as we were told.

History channeled, finally, the mythic power of a place in and out of time, a place whose primeval energy had pulled us in and pushed us forward in ways I might never fully understand but could now feel. Owen and I came together within a history of nature and civilization that neither began nor ended on the day of his death, a history that no catastrophic event would erase. My son's life and death were now part of a history in which a single day stretched across centuries, and all generations responded to a man-made disaster by coming together around an 8-year-old boy.

John Baldwin said little in his essay about the historical work he produced while grieving, but he did hint at a significant change. His interests shifted, he said, from clerics and Latin toward lay aristocrats and their vernacular literature.

It is possible that this evolution had long been underway. It is also possible that his daughter's death precipitated a deeper change in the way he practiced history or apprehended the Middle Ages. Grief may have closed or else opened something within him, perhaps, a mix of the two. I cannot know for sure — Baldwin died in 2015 — but I certainly felt a comparable shift within myself after Owen died.

Though history had lost its scholarly luster, it came alive in other ways. The past provided solace and companionship, immediacy and distance, inklings of understanding and a finer appreciation for what I could never understand. It allowed me to commemorate my son, expiate his death, grieve in the company of others, and soften the edges of our family tragedy.

The history I learned in graduate school and then practiced and taught rested upon reason and distance from my object of study. After Owen's death, I learned about my emotional life as a scholar. History, it turned out, lived inside me through sadness and longing, ache and melancholy, guilt and regret, surprise and doubt, solitude and anger.

In her classic *Allure of the Archives* (Yale University Press, 2013), Arlette Farge outlines an embodied historical practice that rests on the historian's openness to archives and capacity to imbibe the past. Farge invites historians to turn their senses and emotions into founding blocks of a hermeneutical relationship with actors whose archival traces they can inhabit, whose lives they can touch and imagine. A historical practice that remains attuned to the scholar's emotional and intellectual life can generate new and fuller forms of knowledge.

Scholarly practice, Farge tells us, is neither static nor divorced from the life-world that surrounds it. Historians feel things in the archive, as they interact with past lives and real human beings. This is not something most of us acknowledge. As a consequence, we do not readily explore all of the places from which we write. Our discipline, the historian Ivan Jablonka recently wrote, has led us to overlook the ways in which our emotional and bodily lives — our tastes and longings, our health and traumas — shape our historical sensibility and hence our craft.

Could we imagine a scholarly practice — one among many — which acknowledges that what speaks to us may also be what moves us? That what draws our attention or repels us may owe much to our emotional state at a given moment? That the historical actors and events we deem important may be the ones who touch something inside us? This practice would not privilege emotion alone; it would not deny reason. But it would not pretend either that emotion plays no significant role within our craft, that what we feel and what we think are not somehow connected, and that our work would not be enriched and made more honest by deeper recognition of this connection.

This summer my family and I will mark the 10th anniversary of Owen's death. To a large degree, the pleasure of archival discovery, the commitment to certain questions and debates, the intellectual stakes have returned to my life. But my craft, my relationship to the past have shifted and expanded.

In a used-book store in Brussels, I recently fell upon a bound collection of manuscript letters from the middle of the 19th century. The title, engraved in gold letters on the heavy black spine, caught my attention: *Death of Z.* The initial stands for Zulmé, a teenage girl who succumbed to a cholera epidemic in 1859. The letters are from her father, a French journalist who had sought political refuge in Belgium and now wrote friends that "my life and my happiness are over." On one page, he glued a sepia photograph of his fair-skinned daughter; on another, he listed all the books she was reading at the time of her death.

The volume sits on my desk. I have not dug in yet, not in full, but now and then I read one of the letters in which the father described his sorrow. "My apologies for these details," he wrote a friend a week after Zulmé died. "I know they might heighten your own suffering, but I am incapable of writing about anything else."

As I read lines such as those, part of me frames historical questions about the emotional lives of middle-class men, friendship within and across gender lines, codes of epistolary writing, and written expressions of grief and intimacy. Another part of me engages with this father and his correspondents, and perhaps with his late daughter as well, as strangers and companions whose internal lives are different but not divorced from mine. Certain expressions in this father's letters — about his confusion, his guilt and regret, his wife's pain, their marriage, his work — jump off the page. They move me. I want to understand and explain all of this, but I also feel compelled to retain a trace of this family's disaster, as if I owed it to them and, perhaps, to Owen as well.

All of this will lead me to notice and emphasize aspects of this family history that I would previously have missed. It will no doubt lead me to overlook and neglect others. In the past, I would have kept all of this from my readers. I would also have felt obligated to choose between these two forms of historical writing, as if my scholarly and emotional lives could not coexist.

In the historical practice I now imagine, both are necessary, both shape the other. Without either one, we will never fully know Zulmé, or her family, or the broader social world in which these forgotten folk lived and died and then vanished until, through an encounter that owes less to chance than it appears, they recovered a place in the annals of the past and the archives of history.

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