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Mystic Chords of Memory: Learning From the American Story

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The following is adapted from an online lecture delivered at Hillsdale College on November 6, 2020.

Every generation of Americans, from the beginning, has had to answer for itself the question: how should we live? Our answers, generation after generation, in war and in peace, in good times and bad times, in small things and in great things through the whole range of human affairs, are the essential threads of the larger American story. There is an infinite variety of these smaller American stories that shed light on the moral and political reality of American life—and we keep creating them. These fundamental experiences, known to all human beings but known to us in an American way, create the mystic chords of memory that bind us together as a people and are the necessary beginnings of any human wisdom we might hope to find.

These mystic chords stretch not only from battlefields and patriot graves, but from back roads, schoolyards, bar stools, city halls, blues joints, summer afternoons, old neighborhoods, ballparks, and deserted beaches—from wherever you find Americans

being and becoming American. A story may be tragic, complicated, or hilarious, but if it is a true American story, it will be impossible to read or listen to it attentively without awakening the better angels of our nature.

Here's one, about the beautiful friendship of two remarkable Americans.

FINGERTIP MEMORIES

Helen Keller was 14 years old when she first met the world-famous Mark Twain in 1894. They became fast friends. He helped arrange for her to go to college at Radcliffe where she graduated in 1904, the first deaf and blind person in the world to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She learned to read English, French, German, and Latin in braille and went on to become practically as world-famous as her dear friend, writing prolifically and lecturing across the country and around the world. Twain, with his usual understatement, called her “one of the two most remarkable people in the 19th century.” The other candidate was Napoleon.

Keller lived into the 1960s and shared some of her fond memories of Twain in an autobiographical book she published in 1929. In particular, she records recollections from her last visit to her friend in his “Stormfield” home in Redding, Connecticut, which she thought of as a “land of enchantment.” She preserves for us a vivid image not only of Mark Twain—Mr. Clemens, as she called him—but of her own vivacious mind. About Twain she writes,

There are writers who belong to the history of their nation's literature. Mark Twain is one of them. When we think of great Americans we think of him. He incorporated the age he lived in.

To me he symbolizes the pioneer qualities—the large, free, unconventional, humorous point of view of men who sail new seas and blaze new trails through the wilderness.

As they gathered around the hearth one night after dinner at Stormfield, she records,

Mr. Clemens stood with his back to the fire talking to us. There he stood—our Mark Twain, our American, our humorist, the embodiment of our country. He seemed to have absorbed all America into himself. The great Mississippi River seemed forever flowing, flowing through his speech.

When Twain took her to her room to say goodnight, he said “that I would find cigars and a thermos bottle with Scotch whiskey, or Bourbon if I preferred it, in the bathroom.”

One evening, Twain offered to read to her from his short story, “Eve's Diary.” She was delighted, and he asked, “How shall we manage it?” She said, “Oh, you will read aloud, and my teacher will spell your words into my hand.” He murmured, “I had thought you would read my lips.” And so that is what she did. Upon request, and as promised, Twain put on his “Oxford robe,” the “gorgeous scarlet robe” he had worn when Oxford University “conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Letters.”

Here is Keller's recollection of the evening:

Mr. Clemens sat in his great armchair, dressed in his white serge suit, the flaming scarlet

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robe draping his shoulders, and his white hair gleaming and glistening in the light of the lamp which shone down on his head. In one hand he held “Eve’s Diary” in a glorious red cover. In the other hand he held his pipe. . . . I sat down near him in a low chair, my elbow on the arm of his chair, so that my fingers could rest lightly on his lips.

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“Everything went smoothly for a time,” she wrote. But Twain’s gesticulations soon began to confuse things, so “a new setting was arranged. Mrs. Macy came and sat beside me and spelled the words into my right hand, while I looked at Mr. Clemens with my left, touching his face and hands and the book, following his gestures and every changing expression.”

Keller reflected that,

To one hampered and circumscribed as I am it was a wonderful experience to have a friend like Mr. Clemens. I recall many talks with him about human affairs. He never made me feel that my opinions were worthless. . . . He knew that we do not think with eyes and ears, and that our capacity for thought is not measured by five senses. He kept me always in mind while he talked, and he treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him. . . . There was about him the air of one who had suffered greatly.

Whenever I touched his face his expression was sad, even when he was telling a funny story. He smiled, not with the mouth but with his mind—a gesture of the soul rather than of the face. His voice was truly wonderful. To my touch, it was deep, resonant. He had the power of modulating it so as to suggest the most delicate shades of meaning and he spoke so deliberately that I

could get almost every word with my fingers on his lips. Ah, how sweet and poignant the memory of his soft slow speech playing over my listening fingers. His words seemed to

take strange lovely shapes on my hands. His own hands were wonderfully mobile and changeable under the influence of emotion. It has been said that life has treated me harshly; and sometimes I have complained in my heart because many pleasures of human experience have been withheld from me, but when I recollect the treasure of friendship that has been bestowed upon me I withdraw all charges against life. If much has been denied me, much, very much has been given me. So long as the memory of certain beloved friends lives in my heart I shall say that life is good.

When Helen Keller left the enchanted land of Stormfield on that visit, she wondered if she would ever see her friend again, and she didn’t. It was 1909, and Clemens would live just one more year. But, she writes for us, “In my fingertips was graven the image of his dear face with its halo of shining white hair, and in my memory his drawling, marvelous voice will always vibrate.”

Here's another story about an American whose name the whole world knows.

JOHN WAYNE

Twenty-two-year-old Marion Morrison, known to his friends as Duke, was carrying a table on his head across the soundstage of a John Ford movie. He was working as a prop man at the Fox Studio in Los Angeles early in 1930. Director Raoul Walsh was looking for a leading man for an epic western film he was developing about a great wagon train journeying across vast deserts and mountains to California. Walsh didn't want a known star to play the lead. He was looking for someone who would "be a true replica of the pioneer type." He didn't want the audience to see a part being acted; he wanted them to see the real thing—"someone to get out there and act natural . . . be himself." Then he happened upon the young Duke Morrison lugging a table across a soundstage.

"He was in his early 20s," Walsh recalled, "[and] laughing. . . . [T]he expression on his face was so warm and wholesome that I stopped and watched. I noticed the fine physique of the boy, his careless strength, the grace of his movement. . . . What I needed was a feeling of honesty, of sincerity, and [he] had it." Within a few weeks, after a quick screen test, Duke would be signed up for the part of Breck Coleman, the fearless young scout in an ambitious film to be called *The Big Trail*; he would more than double his income, from \$35 to \$75 a week. He had to let his hair grow long and learn to throw a knife—and he would have a new name: John Wayne.

Already, as the young frontiersman in *The Big Trail*, the man the world would come to know as John Wayne is recognizable. He is more athletic and beautiful than we remember him from his later pictures, and he has a sweetness and shyness of youth that recedes over time, but he is "tough

and in charge"; he has "a natural air of command." The widescreen film is still visually stunning and interesting to watch, but it was an epic flop and left Wayne languishing in B-movie purgatory for almost a decade before John Ford decided to make him a star as the Ringo Kid in the great western *Stagecoach*.

Ford was inspired by something similar to what Raoul Walsh had seen in Duke Morrison. "It isn't enough for an actor to look the part and say his lines well," said Ford. "Something else has to come across to audiences—something which no director can instill or create—the quality of being a real man." Ford added that Wayne "was the only person I could think of at the time who could personify great strength and determination without talking much. That sounds easy, perhaps. But it's not. Either you have it or you don't." John Wayne had it. As James Baldwin wrote, "One does not go to see [Katharine Hepburn or Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne] act: one goes to watch them be."

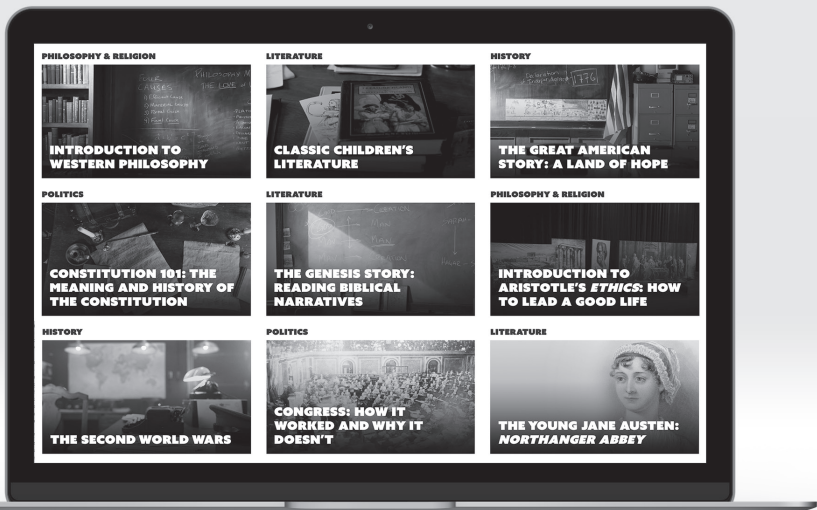
And Duke Morrison decided that John Wayne would be the kind of man he—and the audience—wanted to believe in. Whatever his flaws, and Wayne's characters had many, he would present on screen a character that had something admirable in it. This character took on added dimensions in his greatest films like *Red River* and *The Searchers*. But its essence was discernable from the earliest days. He had courage and self-reliance, obstinacy and even ruthlessness; but also generosity of soul and spirit. As his biographer Scott Eyman put it, he had the kind of "spirit that makes firemen rush into a burning building . . . because it's the right thing to do." He had "humor, gusto, irascibility"; he was "bold, defiant, ambitious, heedless of consequences, occasionally mistaken, primarily alone—larger than life." As one of Wayne's colleagues said, "John Wayne was what every young boy wants to be like, and what every old man wishes he had been."

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Wayne was 32 when he made *Stagecoach* and 69 when he made his last film, *The Shootist*, in which he plays the dying gunfighter, John Bernard Books. His oft-quoted line from that film would have been right at home in *The Big Trail*: “I won’t be wronged, I won’t be insulted, I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.” For 25 years, from 1949 to 1974, he was among the top ten box office stars every year but one. And he was more than a star for his time. Well into the 21st century, 35 years after his death, he was still listed as one of America’s five favorite movie stars; he became “indivisibly associated with America itself.”

The American story, still young, is the greatest story ever written by human hands and minds. It is endlessly interesting and instructive and will continue as long as there are Americans. The most important stories are those about what it is that makes America beautiful, good, and therefore worthy of love. In this light, we can see what might make America better and more beautiful.

On his 72nd birthday, May 26, 1979, as Wayne lay dying of cancer in UCLA Medical Center, the United States Congress, in a unanimous bipartisan vote, approved an order signed by President Jimmy Carter for striking a Congressional Gold Medal in his honor. Wayne would be the 85th recipient of the Medal. The first recipient was George Washington. Winston Churchill was awarded the Medal just a few years before John Wayne. As President Carter said, Wayne’s “ruggedness, the tough independence, the sense of personal conviction and courage—on and off the screen—reflected the best of our national character.” Wayne’s friend, actress Maureen O’Hara, testifying before Congress, said: “To the people of the world, John Wayne is not just an actor, and a very fine actor, John Wayne is the United

States of America. He is what they believe it to be. He is what they hope it will be. And he is what they hope it will always be.”

And finally, here’s a story about an American whose name you may not know, but will want to.

“WE ARE ALL AMERICANS”

Ely Parker was born in 1828 to Elizabeth and William Parker of the Tonawanda Seneca tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy in western New York. Parker became a leader in his tribe at a very young age. Trained as a civil engineer, he earned a reputation in that field. In 1857, when he was 29 years old, he moved to Galena,

Illinois, as a civil engineer working for the Treasury Department, and there his life took a fateful turn.

He became friends with a fellow named Ulysses S. Grant. In these years, Grant was an ex-Army officer

working as a clerk in his father’s store. Parker later liked to tell the story of coming to Grant’s aid in a barroom fight in Galena, the two of them back to back, fighting their way out against practically all the other patrons. At about five feet eight inches and 200 pounds, the robust Parker referred to himself as a “Savage Jack Falstaff.”

When the Civil War came on, Parker tried several times to join the Union Army as an engineer but was turned down because he was not a citizen. When he approached Secretary of State William Seward about a commission, he was told that the war was “an affair between white men,” that he should go home, and “we will settle our own troubles among ourselves without any Indian aid.”

Eventually, with Grant’s endorsement, Parker received a commission,

with the rank of captain, as Assistant Adjutant General for Volunteers. By late 1863, he had been transferred to Grant's staff as Military Secretary. He soon became familiarly known as "the Indian at headquarters" and was promoted to lieutenant colonel and later to brigadier general. He may have saved Grant's life or at least prevented his capture one dark night during the Wilderness Campaign in 1864, when Grant and his staff, unbeknownst to themselves, were riding into enemy lines.

But Parker is rightly most remembered for something that happened in the parlor of a private residence in the village of Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865.

In the days preceding, Union armies had captured the city of Petersburg and the Confederate capital of Richmond. Grant and the Federal Army of the Potomac had put Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia in such a position that in the late afternoon of April 7, Grant, sitting on the verandah of his hotel headquarters in Farmville, said to a couple of his generals, "I have a great mind to summon Lee, to surrender." He immediately wrote a letter respectfully inviting Lee to surrender and had it sent to him under a flag of truce. It took Lee a couple of days of desperate failed maneuvers to come around to the idea. But by the morning of April 9, Lee had concluded that "there is nothing left me to do but to go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths."

They agreed to meet in the village of Appomattox Court House to discuss terms.

Grant had been riding hard for days on rough roads in rough weather. When he met Lee in the parlor of the brick house where they had arranged to meet, he had on dirty boots, "an old suit, without [his] sword, and without any distinguishing mark of rank, except the shoulder straps of a lieutenant general on a woolen blouse." Lee was

decked out from head to toe in all the military finery he had at his disposal.

After introductions, and not much small talk, Lee asked Grant on what terms he would receive the surrender of Lee's army. Grant told him that all officers and men would be "paroled and disqualified from taking up arms again until properly exchanged, and all arms, ammunition, and supplies were to be delivered up as captured property." Lee said those were the terms he expected, and he asked Grant to commit them to writing, which Grant did, on the spot, and showed them to Lee.

With minor revisions, Lee accepted, and Grant handed the document to his senior adjutant general, Theodore Bowers, to "put into ink." This was a document that would effectively put an end to four years of devastating civil war. Bowers' hands were so unsteady from nerves that he had to start over three or four times, going through several sheets of paper, in a failed effort to prepare a fair copy for the signatures of the generals.

So Grant asked Ely Parker to do it, which he did, without trouble. This gave occasion for Lee and Parker to be introduced. When Lee recognized that Parker was an American Indian, he said, "I am glad to see one real American here."

Parker shook his hand and replied, "We are all Americans."

The American story, still young, is already the greatest story ever written by human hands and minds. It is a story of freedom the likes of which the world has never seen. It is endlessly interesting and instructive and will continue unfolding in word and deed as long as there are Americans. The stories that I think are most important are those about what it is that makes America beautiful, what it is that makes America good and therefore worthy of love. Only in this light can we see clearly what it is that might make America better and more beautiful. ■