

Learning from Sullivan Ballou: Meditations on a Rhode Islander's Civil War

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It is my pleasure to be with you tonight to take part in this induction of initiates into the University of Washington chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Let me begin by extending my congratulations to each of you new initiates, and to your friends and family members who are with you here this evening. I was initiated into the Phi Beta Kappa chapter at the University of Tennessee some twenty-six years ago, and I still remember that as the proudest accomplishment of my undergraduate career.

The problem is that I don't remember anything else about that evening. When I began to think about what I might say to you tonight, I naturally looked back to the only Phi Beta Kappa induction address I had ever heard, and I quickly realized, to my chagrin, that I couldn't recall a thing about it. I remember nothing about the speaker and nothing about his (or her?) topic; indeed, all I can recall is a rather vague sense of irritation at having to sit through a lecture before being awarded my certificate and key. That wasn't much help. So I then decided to imagine the perfect Phi Beta Kappa induction address in my mind's eye so I could strive to recreate it. The ideal talk, on an occasion like this, I concluded, would be erudite, entertaining, challenging, at crucial moments inspirational, and above all, brief. Daunted by such demanding criteria, I finally decided simply to tell you a story. This is, after all, what historians do a great deal of the time and what, in my opinion, we ought to be doing more. Sadly, academic historians today have become so enamored of social science theory and so focused on writing exclusively to other scholars that we have lost sight of the importance of narrative to the historian's craft, of the sheer

power of story to captivate the imagination, engage the heart, and challenge the mind. My story is not a story without a purpose, I hope. I do plan to sneak in some historical thinking along the way, placing the subject of my story in historical context, trying to explain his behavior and evaluate his ideas.

My story's central character is one Sullivan Ballou, a major in the Second Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry, a unit which, in the summer of 1861, was commanded by Colonel John S. Slocum. Slocum's regiment was part of a brigade of Rhode Island and New Hampshire men commanded by Colonel Ambrose Burnside, whose brigade was part of an army of volunteers from all across the North commanded by General Irvin McDowell, who in turn took his orders from the recently inaugurated president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. For weeks now, the new president had been pressing McDowell to move forth and subdue the military forces of the so-called Confederacy then congregating in northern Virginia scarcely twenty-five miles southwest of the White House.

Let me make two important observations at the start: The first is that we really don't know much about this man. He was the son of Hiram and Emiline Ballou and spent his boyhood in a rural area north of Providence, Rhode Island. His father died when he was young. He was well educated, attended Phillips Academy and then Brown. He studied law in New York and then in 1853, at the age of twenty-four, he was admitted to practice law in Rhode Island. At about the same time he was elected to the Rhode Island legislature (serving two terms) and took a wife, wedding Miss Sarah Shumway, eight years his junior. According to the Federal census, on the eve of the Civil War he was a thirty-one-year-old attorney practicing law in the mill town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where he and Sarah were raising their two sons, four-year-old Edgar and one-year-old William. This is not a lot of information to recreate a life with, although

actually a bit more than survives for most Americans from the nineteenth century. Historians know that, if we are lucky, we can hope to find a name in a census book, an entry in a tax ledger, perhaps a line in a family Bible or a notation in a school roster, sometimes an epitaph on a tombstone. We cannot study the distant past for long without feeling the force of Thomas Gray's sober insight in "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." The British poet places his narrator in a mist enshrouded cemetery where he contemplates the terse entries on the gravestones and meditates on "the short and simple annals of the poor." As we study the human past we are reminded not only of the brevity of life—that our lives are but puffs of smoke that soon vanish—but also of the scant trail that most of us leave behind to testify to our brief sojourns, our footsteps leaving but the faintest of echoes for posterity.

Second, although we really don't know much about Sullivan Ballou, and the scattered details that survive only hint at the textured reality of a life lived, we do have some insight into his private world, indeed, telling, intriguing, even haunting insight. That this is so is thanks to nine extant letters that he penned to his wife during his time in the army, most especially one written from camp near Washington, D. C. on the 14th of July, 1861, exactly one week before the first major battle of the Civil War. To make sense of that letter requires that we know how and why he came to be in that camp, which in turn requires understanding of the historical context and a good deal of extrapolation from the handful of personal details that remain.

Ballou wrote home from the outskirts of Washington as part of the largest army in U.S. history up to that point. This in itself is significant, for Americans were traditionally suspicious of large armies. They were potential tools for tyrants, unnecessary in a free society except in time of great peril, when citizens would leave their plows and workshops temporarily and take up weapons in defense of their country. Thus the very presence of some fifty thousand soldiers

in northern Virginia that summer spoke powerfully of a widespread sense of national emergency. Although the crisis was young, its causes had unfolded slowly over a couple of generations. At bottom was the conviction, in both North and South, that the other region had embarked on an agenda utterly incompatible with their own regional interests and that the political system was powerless to defend them against this threat to their quality of life. Years later, southerners were wont to remember the conflict as a principled contest over the abstract doctrine of state sovereignty only incidentally related to the protection of slavery, while northerners would recall the struggle as a principled crusade to purge the nation of the moral blight of human bondage. Neither was strictly correct, for on both sides pragmatic calculations of material self-interest had intertwined themselves inseparably with more intangible ideals, a complexity that both sides conveniently forgot as they selectively reconstructed the past with an eye to self-justification. Ultimately, the election to the presidency of a regional candidate whose name was not even on the ballot in the southern states, followed by the rapid declaration of secession from the Union by seven southern states, followed in turn by the first shots fired in anger off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina at Fort Sumter, led Americans North and South to overcome their longstanding aversion to massive military mobilization.

That process of mobilization vividly reflected the prevailing values of Americans in 1861. It was *democratic* (almost all officers were initially popularly elected), and it was *decentralized*. Indeed, there was so little centralized direction of the initial stages of mobilization that it is but small exaggeration to think of the war's first months as a time in which thousands of communities individually prepared for war. Largely through a process that mirrored longstanding patterns of community cooperation, deference, and consensus, men of military age in both North and South brought weapons from home, organized companies, chose their leaders,

scrounged for uniforms (in a myriad of styles and colors), and agreed on names for themselves such as the “Lincoln Rifles” or “Jeff Davis Guards.” They then endured a few weeks of training woefully insufficient to transform civilians into soldiers, and then rushed toward northern Virginia, where troops from both sides were congregating—Union soldiers to thwart an anticipated attack on the northern capital at Washington, D. C., Confederate soldiers to defend the sacred soil of the South from a dastardly Yankee invasion.

While awaiting battle, these young men frequently wrote to parents, wives, and sweethearts about their understanding of the conflict and their estimation of what was at stake. It was in this context that Sullivan Ballou wrote to his young wife. Here, finally, is what he had to say in his famous letter of July 14th:

My very dear Sarah:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure—and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but thine O God, be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.

. . . is it weak or dishonorable, while the banner of my purpose floats calmly and proudly in the breeze, that my unbounded love for you, my darling wife and children, should struggle in fierce, though useless, contest with my love of country?

I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm summer night, when two thousand men are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last, perhaps, before that of death—and I, suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart, am communing with God, my country, and thee. . . .

Sarah, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grow up to honorable manhood around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar—that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name. . . .

But, O Sarah! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the garish day and in the darkest night—amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours—always, always; and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath; or the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.

Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again. . . . Come to me, and lead thither my children.

Sullivan

We know little about what happened to Sullivan Ballou afterward. We do know that he never mailed this letter. It was not for lack of time or opportunity, for he did post more upbeat letters actually composed after the one on the 14th. My guess is that he knew the letter was too revealing, its premonition of death too disturbing to share with an anxious wife. So instead of mailing the letter, he kept it with him, carrying it into battle a week later near a small creek called Bull Run. Sullivan's name appears twice in the official reports concerning the battle. His brigade commander praised him as "deserving of the highest commendation as a brave soldier and a true man." His regimental commander reported more fully, if matter-of-factly: "Major Sullivan Ballou, while bravely assisting in changing the position of our center, was struck from his horse by a ball from a rifled cannon, and . . . left unconscious and dying." He appears to have

lingered for several days before dying in a Confederate field hospital. His body was exhumed ten months later, when the Union army gained control of the area near the battlefield, and it was only then that the letter was discovered and forwarded to his grieving wife. His remains were conveyed to Swan Point, Rhode Island, where they were laid beneath a marker with an inscription repeating his final message to his beloved Sarah: “Come to me, and lead thither my children.” Sarah never remarried after Sullivan’s death. She focused instead on raising her sons to “honorable manhood,” until she herself could finally lie down beside her husband some fifty-six years later. No copy of the July 14th letter survives in Sullivan’s hand, and I like to believe that the original lies with her.

Now, what can we learn from Sullivan Ballou? The answer depends on the questions that we ask. As a historian, I would want us to ask how representative his views were, where they came from, and what they can teach us about the ideological dimension of the sectional conflict. As a humanist, however, I care less that we learn *about* Sullivan Ballou and *his* world than that we learn *from* Sullivan Ballou for the sake of *our* world. To accomplish this requires that we be willing to pursue true “education,” by which I mean the pursuit of transformative knowledge that changes who we are, that shows us how to live and not merely how to make a living. With this in mind, let me point you toward two ways in which Sullivan Ballou’s example should challenge each of us.

First, it is obvious that, by the 14th of July, 1861, Sullivan Ballou **had clarified what he believed in**. How many of us can say the same about ourselves? In his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville lamented that “the majority of mankind will always stop short in one of these two conditions: they will either believe without knowing why or will not know precisely what to believe.” If I may speak candidly to you initiates, my hope is that Tocqueville’s

words will haunt you until you have followed Ballou's example. As I say this, I can hear you thinking that it was comparatively easier for that Civil War soldier than for you, that the prospect of imminent death has a way of bringing the most important questions into focus with blinding clarity. I disagree. As C. S. Lewis noted at the outbreak of World War Two, war "does not make [death] more frequent: 100 per cent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased." Indeed, as Lewis maintained, "War creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice." From this it follows that the question "What are you willing to die for?" is merely a subset of the more general question each of us faces each day: "What are you determined to live for?" As you move on from this university, what values will guide you? What vision will inspire you?

Second, as his letter makes abundantly apparent, Sullivan Ballou had not only clarified what he believed in, but he also **labored to articulate his beliefs in a winsome way to others.** May that be our goal as well. We live in a society that too often equates any expression of deep conviction with a bigoted dogmatism. I would counter that it is the height of selfishness to seek answers to life's enduring questions without sharing your discoveries with others. If we do not clarify what we believe in, our lives will be poorer, but as Sullivan Ballou realized, if we are unable or unwilling to articulate what we believe in to others, someone else's life may be impoverished also.