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Judge Sewall's Apology
ISBN13: 9780007163632

Q: How did you find Judge Sewall's journals? Sewall's *idées fixes* range from noble to trivial . . . what fascinates you most about this man?

A: I think the most fascinating thing about Sewall is just that—he covers the whole gamut of human life from the noble to the trivial. This makes him unique among people of his period. He's the only one who comes down to us as a complete person.

It seems to me such a privilege that we can know what a seventeenth-century man dreamed about, for example. In some respects his dreams—especially his nightmares—are very recognizable to us. He frequently dreams of the loss of his wife or children. It's very touching that he recounted some of those dreams in Latin, so that if his wife read his diary she wouldn't be able to understand those passages and become upset.

Perhaps one of the most enjoyable aspects of working on the diaries involved making connections that Sewall doesn't explicitly make for us. There's one entry when he describes taking his wife to Dorchester to eat strawberries in the orchard of some friends of theirs. Two or three weeks before that entry he describes a dream in which he hears his wife has died while visiting Dorchester. Quite obviously, though he nowhere says so, he takes her to the same place in order to confront and exorcise that nightmare, though of course she would never have known that was his real motive. Moments like that made me feel really in touch with another human being across the gulf of time, a man with very recognizable strengths and weaknesses.

The point is, he always seemed to confront those weaknesses. That's the significance of his great apology. And even when he appears rather petty, he can come across as admirable too. There's one occasion when he gets very upset because he believes he's been snubbed - William Stoughton, the Deputy Governor, hasn't invited him to a party. That despondency at being left out is something with which most people can relate. But at the same time it casts retrospective light on Sewall's courage in arousing Stoughton's wrath in the first place by publicly apologizing for the witchcraft trials (in which Stoughton had been the chief judge).

I love the fact that Sewall enjoyed picnics, good food and drink, and took such pleasure in his family. His battle against the fashion of periwigs is very endearing; and so is his enthusiastic and disaster-prone courtship of Boston ladies after the death of his beloved wife, Hannah. He gives a human face to the Puritans.

Q: Theories purporting to explain the Salem crisis abound and suggest a hallucinogenic fungus was involved. Do you see your interpretation of the Salem witch crisis diverging far from the extant body of work on this subject?

A: The theory that the victims in the witch trials were suffering from ergot poisoning has been dismissed by all serious historians of the crisis, as well as by medical experts with knowledge of the subject. One basic flaw in the theory is that contemporary witnesses agree the girls involved showed no signs of being ill except while under witchcraft torments. They seemed to switch their sufferings off and on as required. Another is that cases rapidly appeared in other places, particularly in the north of Massachusetts.

Scholars have put forward a number of different theories to explain the origins of the witchcraft panic. These include gender and sexual issues; problems with property and social status; trauma caused by the Indian wars. Each scholar is tempted to put forward his or her own explanation as the key to what took place, though the truth is probably that all these factors (and no doubt others) combined together to bring the calamity about.

What makes my perspective on the witchcraft different from that of previous authors is that I'm not primarily concerned with what actually caused the crisis. My interest is in what the authority figures in the community, and Sewall, in particular, *thought* was happening. So I didn't deconstruct the testimony of the trials in hopes of discovering concealed motives, but rather tried to follow the story people were actually telling.

The so-called victims and confessors all contributed to a collective narrative of alien invasion and rapid expansion. Evil forces were entering the community and multiplying exponentially. In a sense, these testimonies were recapitulating the history of the own settlement, from the original landfall just one lifetime before. But whereas the colonization of New England had been a Christian mission, what was happening now was seen as its dark alternative, in fact a kind of anti-colonization, embodying a reversal of the original values of the settlement. That's why I used the image of the reflection of the House of Usher in Poe's short story, to try to give a sense of history being turned on its head.

It's not difficult to see why an alternative narrative came into being and had such power. There was a prevailing sense that the community had lost its way, and jettisoned its original values. Religious backsliding and the rise of secular values led many people to feel that their generation had betrayed the trust of the original founders. It was as if people suddenly wanted to confront the dark side of their experience rather than the optimistic version.

Q: Time and again, Judge Sewall surprises the reader with a remarkable (especially given his era) ability to see a commonality in people and universality in the human experience. What contributed the most to this open-mindedness?

A: In some ways this question takes me back to question #1. Sewall loved and valued life's small things. He argued, for example, that his stomach, low status organ that it was, would be included in the resurrection of the body, even though eating would be unnecessary in heaven (I'm sure he regretted that!) This attitude reflected a very open nature and meant that, in a hierarchical age, he could be interested in people from all levels of his society.

He seems very modern in his support for groups that in one way or another had been subordinated or oppressed: Native Americans, black slaves, and, in an essay written late in his life, women. These allegiances reflected both his character and his beliefs.

Like many Puritans he thought that the millennium was imminent and would be brought about by the conversion of the lost tribes of Israel. But his particular spin was that the Native Americans themselves were those lost tribes. He held on to this idea all his life, though many of his contemporaries were hostile or contemptuous of Native Americans. He did his best to defend their land rights and educated an Indian boy for Harvard in his own home. I love to think of that boy, brought up speaking Algonquian, learning Latin and Greek under Sewall's supervision, and ending up as a student at America's most famous university (at that time, of course, its only university).

Sewall was equally enlightened about the situation of blacks, even though he didn't have a millennial theory to prove in respect of them. He's extremely impressive in his furious attacks on slavery and in his ultimately successful attempt to free a man called Adam from bondage to one of his fellow judges. In the end, I don't think this tolerance and generosity of spirit can be explained away. While many seventeenth-century people seem to have closed and prejudiced outlooks, Sewall responded to the challenge of early America in a much less defensive fashion, as if being in a new country enabled him to see people with fresh eyes. I wonder if that's to do with the fact that though a second generation American he'd had the landfall experience personally, having been brought to the country when he was a small boy?

Q: Many settlers believed that the colonies would play a central role in Biblical prophecies, thus prey to diabolical conspiracies. Do you see remnants of that belief today? Are we in danger of a similar hysteria?

A: Fear of conspiracy has a strange tendency to become a sort of conspiracy in itself. That certainly happened in the Salem crisis, with the prosecutors egging the afflicted girls on to develop their narrative of possession and invasion. The same mechanism can be seen at work in McCarthyism and Arthur Miller was right in the basic parallel he drew in his play *The Crucible*, even though his events and characters are pretty remote from historical reality.

But it's not so much the mechanics of conspiracy and the self-defeating nature of conspiracy theory that worry me about the present political scene, more the rise of fundamentalist religious belief. Al-Qaida is obviously a conspiratorial organization, but equally obviously it is a fairly ad hoc and loose grouping, without a coherent agenda or structure. However, it is fueled by the fanaticism of the individuals and small groups who actually commit terrorist acts, and that fanaticism, in turn derives from a simple-minded religious absolutism, a cold-hearted literalism and dogmatism that has no spiritual life in it.

Christianity and other great religions emphasize tolerance, generosity, and forgiveness, but fundamentalists often dump these values and become exclusive and self-righteous. This sort of betrayal is evident in certain acts and words of so-called Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus in the last few years, and of course you can see it in the behavior of some of the Puritans.

But, at the same time their system of belief involved strenuous self-questioning, and in the case of a man like Sewall, this discipline made it possible for him to identify his mistakes and become a richer personality as he moved through his life. Meanwhile, his friend Cotton Mather went through all the motions of self-doubt, writhing around in the dust on his study floor, weeping and beating his chest, yet still comes across to us as odiously pleased with himself. I think he was actually proud of being better at self-abasement than anyone else.

Arrogance, intolerance, and cruelty can always find their justification in a system of belief, but luckily so can love and kindness. It seems strange to me that Islamic terrorists can pray to Allah, the all-merciful and then go out and kill innocent people, but some of those involved in the Salem crisis showed a similar contradiction. I'm thinking of the way the minister Samuel Parris, and the justice William Stoughton behaved towards Rebecca Nurse, or the despicable glee the minister Nicholas Noyes displayed at the execution of the last batch of alleged witches. What matters in the end is what personal qualities the individual brings to bear on his or her religion.

Many New Englanders in the 1690s feared that society was becoming secular, yet, more than three centuries later, so much of the conflict and suffering in the world has the word religion tacked on, by way of justification or explanation. I love these lines from W.B. Yeats:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Interestingly, though, they don't apply to Sewall. He held on to his passionate convictions, but they never stopped him from being open to others and accepting of difference.

Q: How did you shape your biography of Samuel Sewall?

A: Good question - with difficulty. There were two main problems. The first was that the most traumatic event in his life, the witch crisis, lasted a little more than six months. That spanned only about one one-hundred-and-sixtieth of his life as a whole. But the story had to be told. I didn't know much about what had actually happened at Salem before I began writing the book and realized most readers would be in the same boat. But there were moments when I wondered if it was even possible to do any sort of justice to that episode - it's such a complicated story and involved so many people, such a bewildering array of points of view.

Eventually, I managed to compress the main events into four chapters. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But maybe something has been gained as a result. Book-length treatments of the crisis occasionally seem to go out of focus. As a reader, you begin to lose your grip on the overall picture. I'd like to think my shorter narrative makes it more possible to hold the whole episode in your head without missing out on its complexity.

The other problem applies to all biographies. Life doesn't have to have much of a shape. Books, however, do. (And there's also the fact that most lives tail off into old-age and death, and that can be a bit of a downer.)

Insofar as he was known at all, Sewall had a reputation for two things. The first was his apology. The second was for his detailed accounts of his courtship of certain Boston ladies, late in his life, after his beloved first wife had died. At a certain point in my research it began to dawn on me that these two episodes were related. In other words that his apology had made it possible for him to describe the courtships in the way he had.

The trials involved a simplistic way of viewing human behavior, as if people were puppets being operated on by the forces of good and evil. As the trials wore on that attitude became discredited. The key words, as far as I'm concerned, were uttered by Rebecca Nurse when she was accused of not weeping at the sufferings of the afflicted girls. She replied with simple dignity: 'You do not know my heart.'

What's remarkable about his accounts of his courtships is the way Sewall respects the mystery of the women he woos. In the past,

commentators have seen these descriptions as quaint, funny, or just sad. They seem to me to have missed the most important point, missed it by a mile, as Mark Twain would say. Sewall, in the early eighteenth century, suddenly proved capable of writing about human relationships with all the psychological complexity of a late nineteenth-century novelist. No one else in America would achieve this detailed and non-judgmental observation of people's behavior for many years. How come Sewall managed to? I believe that the experience of the trials, and his ultimate repudiation of the attitudes that underpinned them, gave him the necessary alertness and sensitivity to achieve it.

Making that connection gave Sewall's life a shape and therefore, gave my book a shape, too. And, of course, as a story-teller I believe shape provides meaning.

Q: Are you planning another book? Could you tell us about it?

A: For many years I wrote just novels. Then I wrote a book on American utopian experiments and found non-fiction was creative and rewarding as well. So nowadays I alternate fiction and biography. My novel *Fat Hen* was followed by *Ann the Word: The Story of Ann Lee*, *Female Messiah*, *Mother of the Shakers*, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun*. Then came another novel, *Prospect Hill*; after that, my book on Sewall. So now I'm writing a novel again.

I find this alternation refreshing. If you try to follow one novel too quickly with another there's a great danger of writing the same book twice. And when you've completed a biography, you need time to feel your way towards a new project, do some preliminary research and draft a proposal.

In some ways, biography is a branch of history, but in other respects, it is itself a form of novel. Whether you are dealing with fact or fiction you have to be a story-teller. When you explore a person from the long ago, like Ann Lee or Samuel Sewall, you are in a sense *creating* a character, because the person will only exist through your words. That's the exhilaration of it. (But behind this creativity is the discipline of fact. I would never make an assertion I couldn't support from a source. When Sewall or his contemporaries speak, their words are taken without alteration from original records.)

By the time I finished my book, I had a sense of Sewall as a living breathing person, as I had with Ann Lee previously. But ironically you get the same conviction with a fictional character when you write a novel. At a certain point he or she will begin to take on an autonomous existence, or at least seem to. Your characters develop the capacity to surprise their creator.