

Learning to Count Our Blessings:
A Teacher's Review of
Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering:
Death and the American Civil War*

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In 2011, a teacher observing a room full of students has no idea how many of them have experienced the death of a loved one. Should the teacher actually survey the class, he or she would probably find that very few students have lost a parent, sibling, or friend. Thanks in large part to modern medicine, death has little immediate meaning for many Americans today. We may learn through the media about the loss of soldiers fighting distant wars, the death toll from far-away natural disasters, or tragic accidents and brutal murders in other cities or neighborhoods; nevertheless for most of us, death today is more of a concept than a reality. Not so during the Civil War, as Drew Gilpin Faust explains in *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008). During that conflict, it would have been highly unusual for a teacher to know a student who had not been directly affected by death. Using stunning statistics, haunting anecdotes, and powerful images, Faust's exhaustively researched book examines death and dying during this American turning point from every angle. Faust leaves her readers with the understanding that for most Americans from 1861 until long after the Civil War ended, death was a daily part of life whose unprecedented frequency had lasting effects on American society. The challenge for a twenty-first century high school teacher is to convey an understanding of these effects to students for so many of whom death is only something seen on the small and large screen. Faust's book provides teachers with multiple stories and examples to draw from, helping them to

go beyond briefly mentioning the numbers and encouraging a deeper analysis of the staggering impact of death and suffering during the Civil War.

Faust combines a thematic with a chronological approach to her analysis. Each chapter title is a gerund: “Dying,” “Killing,” “Burying,” “Naming,” and so on; the chapters examine these concepts while also moving the reader gradually through and beyond the years of the war. “Dying,” for example, considers the antebellum concept of the “Good Death” that was so closely tied to the strongly religious sentiment of the era. When the war began, death on the battlefield precluded the classic “Good Death” experience, so Americans attempted to adapt the concept to the reality. Faust cites many letters written by surviving soldiers to loved ones of the deceased that clearly attempt to “present evidence of a dead comrade’s ease at dying or readiness for salvation.” (31). These letters tell stories, and Faust conveys these stories in a manner than can at times make her book a page-turner. Teachers would do well to memorize one or two of these stories of dying soldiers for their classes. Better yet, if time allows, give sample letters to groups of students and ask each group to tell that soldier’s story out loud.

“Killing” and “Burying,” Faust’s next two chapters, continue to focus on the ordeals of soldiers in the field. Again, she uses soldiers’ stories to convey the horrors associated with both experiences. Men grappled with the question of killing in religious terms: how was it justified in light of the sixth commandment? Why was one man killed and the person next to him spared? The Civil War was fought using traditional methods in the face of the more modern weapons of the early industrial

age, resulting in massive numbers of dead and gruesome experiences for the wounded. Those who survived, still reeling from the carnage they had witnessed, were then presented with the challenge of burying their fellow soldiers. Faust pays particular attention here to the two battles of the war, Antietam and Gettysburg, that produced the largest and most concentrated numbers of dead—and presented particular challenges because in both cases the Confederate army retreated, leaving their dead behind to be buried (perhaps) by their enemies. Both chapters include sketches and photographs to illustrate the gruesome details. No doubt most teachers who teach the Civil War have shown Brady Studio photographs to their students. The information conveyed in these two chapters—about African Americans’ roles in killing and burying, about the early abandonment of the use of coffins, about the increasing involvement of women (in voluntary organizations) in the process of recovering soldiers’ bodies—can add depth to any class discussion of Civil War battles.

Obviously, Civil War death did not affect only soldiers in the field. In “Naming” and “Realizing,” Faust considers the effects of death on a soldier’s loved ones, as well as the nightmare of not knowing whether a son, husband, or father was dead or alive. Realizing meant both learning about a death—which in many cases could take months, even years—and accepting its reality. Again, it is through letters that Faust provides evidence of families’ ordeals. For example, she details the story of the Bowditch family’s tortured reaction to the loss of their son Nathaniel: “Bowditch was not prepared for the force of grief that overtook him. In

Virginia to retrieve Nat's body he sought "concealment" from others lest they witness the feelings he could not hide." (167). The complex and fascinating ritual of mourning dress is also explained here; students would be interested to learn about some of the rules for mourning because they differ so dramatically from current practice. A school teacher during the Civil War years would have been well aware which of her students was mourning the loss of a loved one: people literally wore their grief on their sleeves.

In "Believing and Doubting," Faust takes a detour from the battlefields to explore the effects of Civil War death on Americans' religious beliefs. Questions arose about the nature of the afterlife, and ministers in the North and the South addressed parishioners' concerns in frequent sermons on the subject. The war's carnage also raised religious doubts. Faust examines the work of prominent writers of the time such as Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Ambrose Bierce and Walt Whitman and finds signs of changing views toward religion and "God's work" as the war progressed (although she is careful not to assume that these writers' attitudes typified those of the general population). "Civil War carnage," Faust writes,

transformed the mid-nineteenth century's growing sense of religious doubt into a crisis of belief that propelled many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive deity. But Civil War death and devastation also planted seeds of a more profound doubt about human ability to know and to understand. (210).

Once the war was over, the painful process of accounting for and numbering the dead could be undertaken in earnest. As teachers, we are accustomed to

ratting off to our students the numbers of Civil War dead; in an age in which we rely on the government to count everything (more than once), we rarely stop to consider how those numbers were arrived at in the 1860s. Faust's account of the process is detailed and fascinating. Accounting for the dead was a joint project undertaken by military officials and private organizations alike, and it was not particularly well coordinated. Clara Barton, for example, took it upon herself to gather names of fallen Union soldiers by soliciting information from their comrades; eventually the federal government subsidized the efforts of the "Missing Soldiers Office" that she founded. Meanwhile, army officials sent repeated requests to commanders for names of lost or missing men. The task was made particularly difficult because the vast majority of Union soldiers had died in former Confederate territory, and many defeated southerners were reluctant to assist in efforts to locate the bodies of their fallen enemies. Faust argues that the federal government's slow recognition of the responsibility it held to find and account for the bodies of its own soldiers was a major cause of government expansion after the war. National cemeteries were created near major battle sites, into which disinterred Union soldiers' bodies were reburied in coffins; when finished, the undertaking cost the federal government over four million dollars.

The reburial program represented an extraordinary departure for the federal government, an indication of the very different sort of nation that had emerged as a result of civil war. The program's extensiveness, its cost, its location in national rather than state government, and its connection with the most personal dimensions of individuals' lives all would have been unimaginable before the war created its legions of the dead, a constituency of the slain and their mourners, who would change the very definition of the nation and its

obligations. (237)

The federal government did not provide the same services for dead Confederate soldiers, whose accounting, numbering, and reburial “was of necessity the work of the people, at least the white people; it became a grass-roots undertaking that mobilized the white South in ways that extended well beyond the immediate purposes of bereavement and commemoration.” (241). This process, while profoundly personal on one level, also served to “proclaim continuing devotion to the Confederacy” (247) and, Faust argues, contributed to the “cult of the Lost Cause.”

The final count of Civil War dead was subject to continual revision in the decades following the war. The numbers that Faust reports as “most widely accepted” are 359,528 Union and 360,222 Confederate deaths. These numbers include civilians and those who died from disease or accidents. Faust devotes the final pages of her book to analyzing ways in which survivors came to grips with the significance of those numbers. One death is significant to that person’s loved ones; the loss of over two percent of the nation’s population is significant to everyone. Coming to terms with these numbers was made especially difficult, she states, because despite the massive efforts of both the government and private citizens, “nearly half of the dead remained unknown, the fact of their deaths supposed but undocumented” (267). Although our students’ parents and grandparents may be aware that some soldiers missing in Vietnam are still unaccounted for, they are most familiar with the very immediate and specific information provided to current soldiers’ families regarding their deaths. The difference between the way the

government accounted for its war dead in the nineteenth century and the way it handles this now provides a good illustration for students of the expansion of our federal government. In a diplomatic way, it would be interesting to initiate a class discussion surrounding the demands of Tea Party advocates that government return to its Constitutional-Era size. Would this include eliminating maintenance of federal military cemeteries?

This Republic of Suffering is organized around a largely chronological framework: Faust works her way through the course of the war while considering each of her themes. This proves an extremely effective method, one that allows the author to consider many important tangents that would otherwise be difficult to work into a strictly chronological narrative. For example: the ways in which the African-American dead were treated differently from white soldiers is discussed in the chapter on killing; the prevalence of death from disease in the chapter on burying; the religious significance of Lincoln's Second Inaugural address in the chapter on believing and doubting; responses to Lincoln's assassination in the chapter on realizing; the uniquely horrible death experience of those in the Andersonville prison camp in the chapter on accounting. The framework does at times require Faust to circle back to topics considered earlier in the book; for example the chapter on accounting also deals with burial. The book is not, however, repetitive—the availability of a wide variety of evidence, carefully and thoroughly considered, ensures that each topic is considered from a new angle.

Faust's book is full of information that could be used to enrich and inform

classroom lessons on the Civil War. For one thing, it is a gold mine of stories that students would find interesting if told as the side-notes of a more broadly themed lecture on the effects of the conflict. As mentioned previously, students could also be asked to examine Civil War letters, so many of which are readily available online, in search of evidence of changing attitudes towards death and religion, efforts to account for the dead, and the similarities and differences between Union and Confederate deaths, burials, and methods of mourning. Furthermore, the book's topics can be a starting point for discussions about America today: how do we account for our dead—whose responsibility is it? What medical advances have lessened the likelihood of large-scale death from infection? How has the nature of warfare changed over time? And, of course, the images: this teacher, for one, will be asking students to analyze photographs of Civil War dead and use student comments as a starting point for a larger discussion of the role of death in our own culture.

We may not readily know today which of our students has lost a loved one, but we do know that it will happen to everyone eventually. Death is, after all, the natural order of things—and as such it is fascinating to all of us. Drew Gilpin Faust's book draws on our guilty interest in the gruesome, but it does so in a sensitive, thoughtful, and scholarly manner. As we face the world's multiple problems, *This Republic of Suffering* provides us not only with rich material for classroom lessons, but also with multiple reasons to count our own blessings.

