Is History Wasted on Everyone? [1]

November 7, 2022 Memoir [2]
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Essay by Martha Nichols

On Wishing Life—and Elections—Didn't Change So Fast

My father wanted me to love history. I don't recall him ever saying he loved history himself—*love* in all its untapped depths sounds like my word rather than his. It's possible, though. A political scientist, in the mid-1970s, he marched me through a college textbook during my senior year of high school in preparation for the American History Achievement Test. He was appalled by the lack of history I'd been exposed to in my public school. Yet I think he enjoyed the challenge, too, the chance to combat my ignorance and misdirected passion. Probably all I remember of the Louisiana Purchase or the Alamo is from those long-ago grill sessions with him.

But it's all turned shadowy as well—the dates, the main players, unless I Google to pin down a fact. If life were a flipbook, my father would age every few flicks of a fingernail but keep shaking his head at me as the decades stuttered

by, telling his darling daughter—his words—that history is wasted on the young.

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What is something you want people in the future to know about your experience?

On Election Day 2020, I saw this question posted on a lawn sign, and just like that, I heard my father's voice again. Maybe he even steered me to look at the sign when I went out for a walk. I don't mean with the literal touch of a skeletal hand—if an atheist could be said to have an afterlife, he'd be howling at the thought—but with his fierce questioning throughout my life.

I wished many things on that election day, but the biggest was to have my father with me, whole and alive. He'd always pushed me to vote, made sure I was registered for my first election, told me to get more involved in electoral politics. I didn't believe in omens, but at my own house, one of the Biden-Harris signs had blown down by our driveway. It was the first thing I saw when I opened the door. I fixed it, telling myself to get a grip.

Tuesday, November 3, 2020, was alternately bright and shadowy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gorgeous but in the low 40s. As I walked alone, the wind whipped brown and gold leaves into spirals. I scuffed through piles that would have thrilled me as a girl in Hayward, California. Brattle Street was quiet before noon, with only a few passing cars and masked people.

I thought I had the mission for this expedition down. Then I saw that sign with the question outside the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House, headquarters of the Cambridge Historical Society. It was next to other lawn signs with quotes from Cambridge residents, part of the Historical Society's "Cambridge & COVID-19 Collection" online. Some sample responses:

Life changed dramatically in a very short time.

I am doing okay, but I am starting to feel as though my life has no purpose.

I took a few notes on my iPhone. I let my mask slip under my nose so that my glasses wouldn't fog. Nobody else was nearby on Brattle Street—I'd checked, because checking the distance from other humans had become a habit, the way I look for oncoming traffic.

What is history?

All the stuff that happened, Dad.

How do you know it really happened?

It's all written down, like here.

Honey, you don't understand.

When my father would tell me history is wasted on the young, he knew I resented it. But living in San Francisco in the 1980s, I had danced away from history in clubs like the I-Beam. Then it was all fear of Cold War annihilation and nuclear winter, Madonna, Prince, Yasser Arafat, benighted ventures like the Falklands. The country was spinning itself into some glittering simulacrum of wealth and forgetfulness. I didn't want money, but I wanted to remake my own history, which seemed small and pathetic, without the right kind of bravery.

Maybe I'm old enough now, Dad. I realize how hard it is to retrieve what's been lost. You were like Atticus Finch to me—or Gregory Peck playing Atticus Finch—both your kindness and cynicism flashing from hazel eyes under heavy dark brows. You liked to mock your own failures, your unbending moral compass. I want my history to be the story of you with me now—in the ever-morphing, impossible now—where my brilliant father explains calmly why people are so hateful. Where I tell you, a ghost I'll always love, how hard it is to remember.

You would hold my hand. We'd look at the lawn sign together. You'd snort a laugh.

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I had already voted in late October, dropping my mail-in ballot into a box at the Cambridge Water Works. My eighteen-year-old son, voting in his first presidential election, had gone with me, both of us doing our civic duty on a balmy fall morning. Sunlight had glittered on Fresh Pond Reservoir behind a chain-link fence. During the primaries, I'd seen Senator Elizabeth Warren walking there with her dog, Bailey, trailed by Secret Service agents.

But on Election Day, I woke up wishing I could vote in person. I wanted the physical ritual of stepping into the booth, carefully filling in the right circles with a black felt-tip marker.

Since 2004, my ritual had included going up to New Hampshire to knock on doors and get out the vote, something my father enjoyed vicariously. Neither of my parents had survived to see the 2016 election, however, let alone one held during a pandemic and with a sitting president threatening to invalidate mail-in ballots. Fortunately, I didn't have to describe my last door-knocking travail in New Hampshire to my father. In early 2020, I'd trudged down icy exurban roads for the Warren campaign, trying to convince registered Democrats and Independents to vote. I had a script for Warren, but soon I was begging the few people I saw to vote for anybody. *Really, your vote matters.* Too many people said, *Forget it. I hate them all.*

This walk on Election Day was a distraction, but I needed a goal: I would return a library book while observing a few Cambridge polling places, starting with my own. It seemed better than texting raw nerves at equally nervous friends. By 10 a.m., I'd received a link for joining mailing lists to find out about protests. Another friend asked me to report on what I saw ("Let us know what you see. I'm chewing gum with a vengeance and I never chew gum.") Earlier, a text pinged with a link to the *Atlantic* article "Protests Won't Be Enough to Stop a Coup."

If I'd voted in person, it would have been at the Holy Trinity Armenian Church at the intersection of Brattle and Sparks Streets. As I followed the "VOTE HERE" sandwich signs, I discovered the polling place was set up in the gym—the auditorium where years before I'd sat through performances with kids and teenage teachers in the Arts All Day program. My son had attended the camp for several summers during elementary school.

I entered the shadowed vestibule, which gave me a better view of the well-lit gym. A young poll worker in a mask, small and dark-haired, invited me inside. I asked if it was okay for me to look around, just for a second. *I already voted, but I would have voted here.*

She was gracious. Of course, she said, and I studied the uncrowded gym. A rank of curtained booths had been arranged on one side, the tables with workers on the other. Five or six of the same red-upholstered chairs from those long-ago kid performances, their oval backs trimmed with gold paint, had been spaced in a socially distanced curve. They were empty. I remembered how uncomfortable those chairs had been.

"I miss not voting in person," I said. "It seems quiet here."

She nodded. I asked if it was busier before, and she said there'd been a small rush in the morning. *Before work, right.* More nods. An assumption of polite smiles behind our masks.

It looked like more poll workers than voters. I saw nobody in the booths, but two older women appeared to be checking out at the table. Another woman with a cane, pear-shaped and probably close to eighty, drifted toward us. When she reached the doorway, she sat down heavily in a chair stationed there. Decked in a blue paper mask, she glanced between us.

"If there's money involved, I collect it," she said loudly.

I laughed, figuring maybe she was another poll worker or a church regular. "What money have you collected this morning?"

Silence.

The woman looked straight ahead and sighed. I couldn't read the lower part of her face behind the mask. Maybe she hadn't heard my question or didn't know how to answer, but melancholy seemed to stiffen her features. I'd seen that look on my father's face toward the end.

A pall descended. The three of us were together in the entryway, yet separate, and I said a fast good-bye. I wasn't sure what I'd tipped off emotionally. On any other day I might have pushed to find out who the old woman was, to get both their names, asking whether they belonged to the church or had been assigned to work there.

I could write this off as life in 2020, everyone isolated, standing apart and wary even when in the same space. Yet that deceptively sparkling day reminded me of other vanished things—my little boy, warbling off-key in the same auditorium—Cal State Hayward, where my father taught for decades, now renamed Cal State East Bay—my bipolar mother, who would have been about the same age as the old woman if she were alive, who'd been prone to fits of rage and hilarity, streaking like a giant meteor across my sky only to burn a hole in the earth.

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In the 1970s, my mother converted everything she observed in the Bay Area swirl of politics and music into large canvases crammed with people. Their faces and bodies were hyperreal, limned with the heavy outlines of Alice Neel, a painter she admired. Mom called her own paintings "people pictures," basing them on photos from *Time* magazine or memory. They often included my father and me and my brother or one of her Italian relatives back east, although never her own father, who'd refused to come to their wedding. My grandfather—*the don*, as Dad referred to him sardonically—hadn't approved of the penniless academic.

Being Sicilian was her code for anything that went emotionally haywire. So was being an artist. Her people would be standing on a BART platform, back when the Bay Area Rapid Transit system was still new. Or a crowd would spill down a hill that was eternally spring green, nuns and skinny guys in cardigans hanging out with Frida Kahlo or the *Mona Lisa*. Mom's people might have been waiting for a decades-old band to play, like local favorites Tower of Power or the Pointer Sisters. They might have been displaced by fires or earthquakes.

Some of the paintings now hang in my Cambridge home, her people staring at viewers in both defiance and pain. I could be analytical, in the way my father taught me, calling them a form of history. Except he was the one who titled her paintings, his words like koans. He was a poet at heart, even before retiring and writing poetry himself, and it's hard to separate the art from my mother—her supercharged colors, flowers with petals like tongues, monkeys and tigers that look human. They're a portrait of her internal turmoil. They're a reminder, too, of what happens when turmoil ignites in a crowd. When everyone feels trapped and wants out.

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Hooper-Lee-Nichols is "the second oldest house in Cambridge and one of the oldest houses in New England," says the Historical Society's website. In many past rambles down Brattle Street, before COVID-19, I had seen Society ladies of a certain age in the garden, especially on summer weekends, chatting about local history. I'd often noted the oval blue historical marker on the quaint picket fence, my eye always caught by my own surname.

I grew up in a working-class California suburb that seems as far from New England as Mars. Still, I'm among the privileged few here, we mostly white academics and professionals who own condos or triple-deckers, not to mention the outright rich in their leafy mansions. We put up Black Lives Matter signs and plant our delphiniums or have the gardeners do it.

At least the "Nichols" part of the house name—George Nichols—graduated from the Harvard Divinity School in 1828, decades after slavery was legally abolished in Massachusetts in 1783. (It took longer in practice; the Society website scrupulously notes that "a person was sold at public auction in 1793.") George Nichols went on to buy Harvard University Press and later the university bookstore. Fitting for me, another Cambridge writer and editor.

When my parents visited us here in the early 2000s, I don't remember pointing out this house. But before Parkinson's confined his shaky steps, Dad loved to walk around our neighborhood. Sometimes I'd go with him, pushing the baby in a stroller, but I think he preferred rambling on his own. He'd stop in the used bookstore in Huron Village, pick up a tuna sandwich at the old Fresh Pond Spa. It had seemed to him the height of civilized convenience.

George Nichols, huh? A Harvard man who bought the university press? Well, honey, he must *be related to us. Come to think of it, I remember your grandmother talking about him after she worked in the laundry all day. She'd say, "We weren't always poor, you know. Don't believe that guff about the farm in South Dakota. Mamma told me about her Great-Uncle George in America, how we'd be rich like him. We could be anybody we wanted to be."*

Not that my father ever said this or mentioned George Nichols, but I can picture his dark eyebrows wagging at the joke. Dad grew up in a poor Denver neighborhood that's since been knocked down for a light-rail station. No way a blue-blooded New Englander was kin to us. My grandmother—his mother—was a Norwegian immigrant, Methodist, *not* one of those fancy Lutherans. She legally changed her married name to Nichols from Nicholson after her second divorce. She remade herself and her descendants, rubbing away what she couldn't tolerate.

I like that my last name amounts to a fabrication, something my grandmother created for herself. Yet her need to change it *is* the point—the historical fact—and I don't want to forget that she did so. I understand the allure of fabricating the past, but then I think of alternative facts, of my mother's manic conspiracy theories, of the erasure of contrary women like my grandmother from the public record. It's too tempting to ignore what really happened.

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I kept walking toward Harvard Square, passing Longfellow Park and the Cambridge Meeting House, another polling place that appeared somnolent in the noonday sun. I settled into a rhythm. The bright cold made my eyes water, but

when the sun came out from behind clouds, colors flashed like polished coins and bright scraps of rag—orange berries, red-leaved ornamental bushes, oaks caught between green and gold. The trees in Harvard Yard, tousled tops shaking from side to side, seemed more excited than the few pedestrians.

My destination was the main branch of the Cambridge Public Library. I'd taken to putting holds online for books, which I then picked up outside by standing in a socially distanced line. Now I was returning the overdue book, an errand that allowed me to visit another polling place: Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS), the public high school next door to the library.

My son had graduated from CRLS the past spring, which meant a virtual graduation on Zoom and a congratulatory sign in our front yard: "CLASS OF 2020 GRAD—**CRLS**—WE ?? OUR SENIORS." In the months since, every time I'd gone to the library to pick up books, I'd felt the loss.

In November 2020, students at CRLS were still doing all-online instruction. The high school remained closed, but on Election Day, the main entrance was open again for voting. And yet, as I approached the courtyard outside, I decided to drop off my book and not linger. I was about to swerve away when I heard music echoing.

Even with the school closed, kids sometimes gathered in the courtyard. I figured one had a boom box. But when I reached the concrete bench curve before the CRLS entrance, I found two fresh-faced white guys in their twenties, one on a keyboard, the other hefting a blue electric guitar, playing an ethereal instrumental riff over a recorded bass track. The guitar player wore a gray wool hat with a big pom-pom on top. There was a straggle of open instrument cases; a sax leaned behind them, glinting in the sun.

I sat on the concrete curve, spaced a good ten feet away from a few other people watching them. My shoulders relaxed. The music had the mellow flow of Brazilian jazz, meditative, loose. It felt good to sit in the sun, just listening. I pulled out my iPhone again to make notes, but I snapped no pictures. I didn't attempt to record a melodic run that changed every instant.

I stopped counting how many people were walking in the entrance to vote. No one had to line up and wait outside. The people who did pass were far more diverse than those at the Armenian church—a middle-aged Black woman with close-cropped hair and a down jacket; an Asian student with a furry warm hat and skinny jeans; white, gray-haired academic types. They seemed as surprised as I was to find this unexpected ripple of grace.

On a music stand in front of the keyboard was a sign that read "Play for the Vote." A few minutes later, I quizzed the young woman with the musicians about whether they were from the high school. No, she told me, they were two locals who'd met through informal jazz clubs in Cambridge and decided to do something for the election. They connected with an organization called Play for the Vote, she said, getting permission to be there on Election Day.

"Are you with them, too?" I asked.

She clutched a takeout coffee cup but seemed to smile behind her mask. I assumed she was a fellow musician who'd soon play the sax or take her place at the keyboard. But she laughed, saying she was just a friend. She spilled some coffee on the toe of her hiking boot.

"Yes, I'm with them," she said. "I just do nothing useful."

I doubted that. I recognized self-deprecation without needing to read every line of her plain but loyal face. I wondered if she was in love with one of the musicians, say, the one with the pom-pom and fancy blue guitar whom she called Marc (I've changed his name).

The guitar riffing settled into the familiar melody of "Blackbird" by the Beatles. For the first time, one of them—Marc—started to sing, but softly, tentatively. *All your life….*

An older man outside was joined by a woman from the polling place, presumably his spouse or a friend. Her shoulder-length gray hair flapped in the wind. She paused to open the top buttons of her down vest, sticking an "I Voted" sticker

on the shirt inside, protecting it.

That one gesture made me so happy I wanted to fling myself at the sky.

I wanted to fly back to fifth grade, with my parents playing “Blackbird” from *The White Album*, on the second side not long after “Martha My Dear” (even if *silly girl* in that song refers to Paul McCartney’s sheepdog, Martha). My mother would sing along goofily to “Rocky Raccoon.” My parents both loved “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da.”

On Election Day, I thanked the musicians as I left. *I was feeling melancholy today, but you made me feel better.* They nodded happily. They looked as vulnerable to praise as my son. Marc’s blue eyes opened wide, despite the glare.

“That’s so great to hear,” he said. “We just wanted to brighten everyone’s day.”

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I walked home across the other end of Harvard Yard and Cambridge Common, oddly light-hearted. I had to laugh as I stepped over the brass hoofprints in the sidewalk, which commemorate the midnight passage of William Dawes on April 18, 1775. This I remember doing with my parents, as well as visiting various stops along the Freedom Trail in Boston. As I recall, my father didn’t go with us to Paul Revere’s house. He thought it was a tourist trap.

Thanks to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, Paul Revere is the midnight rider everyone remembers, but William Dawes, not Revere, is the one who made it through to Concord to warn those farmers about the British. Cambridge Common has plenty of revolutionary monuments, and not far from the brass hoofprints, I passed another:

UNDER THIS TREE
WASHINGTON
FIRST TOOK COMMAND
OF THE
AMERICAN ARMY
JULY 3 1775

More words crafted by Longfellow, some say. I know my father visited the Longfellow mansion near the Common on Brattle Street. He would have stopped to read that monument, too. I don’t remember what he said about it, but he might have been sarcastic, even misanthropic. Dad knew his history better than most and could lash out on a dime.

Ironically, Longfellow wrote “Paul Revere’s Ride” before the Civil War, hoping to fire up northern patriotism in a mythic retelling of the American Revolution. If George Washington really had taken command of the army where the monument stands, it wasn’t under the same tree. As a Historical Society reprint about the “Washington Elm” points out, the old tree literally bit the dust in 1923. The “whole wretched ruin” got dragged down by workers attempting to trim a dead branch, wrote Samuel Francis Batchelder a few years after.

Dad would have appreciated Batchelder’s treatise from the 1920s, which questions the evidence for Washington’s appearance on Cambridge Common: “The more often it is repeated the more firmly it is believed.” Yet “[m]ost of us have no wish to examine the tradition critically,” Batchelder noted, apparently worried about asking “presumptuous—even profane” questions that contested the truth behind historical monuments.

In his last years, my father’s thoughts strayed into paranoid stories about terrorists hiding in ducts under his room at the hospital or a stalled tenure case decades before when he’d been an associate dean. Once he told me about his mother leaving him on the farm in South Dakota when she had to look for work in Denver. He’d been four or five years old, he said too flatly, telling me to write it down. I wrote down as many of his stories as I could. I don’t know if he was remembering or imagining, but the ghosts of whatever he endured remain.

Another story: on a visit in the early 1990s, my parents and I charged up a hill in Boston Common, defying a thunderstorm. That time, Dad had been searching for the Robert Gould Shaw monument, the famous sculptural plaque by Augustus Saint-Gaudens that honors Shaw’s unit of African American soldiers during the Civil War. I’d thought it

was up that hill. *If we run, we can make it.* I was wrong about the location, but with thunder cracking and booming overhead, the three of us sprinted to the top anyway, shouting about the worst place in a thunderstorm, laughing and laughing as lightning spiked the clouds.

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I have no problem tearing down false monuments or myths about the wrong heroes. No doubt I get the bitterness and need for exactitude from my father, that same fierce gleam when on the trail to uncover what actually happened or didn't. But before his death in early 2014, I watched that gleam fade. He was still capable of surveying all that unraveled around him, including my parents' modest ranch house. Eventually, they had to default on the mortgage.

Before he was moved into a care home, I remember Dad in a gray sweatshirt, sitting in a favorite easy chair, backlit by the sliding-glass doors to their deck of ceramic pots and prickly pears and a lemon tree. He grimaced a smile, clearly aware he was about to offend me. In a low voice he might have raised professorially without the Parkinson's, my father described his solution for poverty in the United States: make the poor do eight-hour shifts chained to a giant wheel. They'd walk in circles that went nowhere, but at least they could generate electricity.

On Election Day 2020, so-called patriots were claiming they needed to arm themselves for the next revolution, and I wondered then if history is wasted on everyone. I still do, and not because I have amazing prescience. I won't say I sensed what was to come on that sparkling-cold November day, two months before the U.S. Capitol riot on January 6. But maybe I already knew, through my mother and her mental illness, how chaos takes over.

When the *New York Times* compiled video footage of the Capitol riot six months later, I saw the same glassy-giddy eyes in people hurling bike racks at cops or screaming, "This is our house!" It was as if one of my mother's paintings had come to life, the nun in the middle roaring through a bullhorn. Chaos is a gaping seam in the orderly surface that everyone wants to believe in, exposing how much we can't control what happens next. Windows staved in, barricades down, a mob runs straight out of the picture frame.

Dad, when you were at your lowest ebb, I think you were staring at this truth. It's an emotional truth people on both ends of the political spectrum might accept, yet even if we all share this knowledge in our bones, it goes nowhere. Chaos is the opposite of history.

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What is something you want people in the future to know about your experience?

I can tell you that my father—the amateur historian, the ultimate moralist—used to send me books about William Jennings Bryan and Martha Gellhorn and Leigh Hunt and so many other writers and politicians who fascinated him. He'd go to the little bookstore in downtown Hayward, which had been started by a former student of his. Dad would ask them to order the titles he'd picked out as Christmas or birthday gifts and then send them on to me.

Sometimes I still find his notes on lined paper stuck between the pages. In 2006, he wrote in crabbed script: *For your birthday, here's a dilly of a study in American history, and of course it's linked to me.* He went on to describe how much my grandmother idolized the populist rabble-rouser William Jennings Bryan, who ran for president as the Democratic nominee several times (the last in 1908) but never won. In the margin of this note, my father apologized for the "terrible handwriting." *Looks something like my mother's when she got old. She used to write me on little bitty pieces of paper.*

I can tell you, people in the future, to keep writing it down. My father's story isn't a waste, even if too much is unknowable to me. It's possible he gave in to fatalism, passing it down through generations of fatalists. He may have been right, but he also may have been wrong, and so history is no longer wasted on me. It's my spur to shout into the whirlwind.

I can tell you, people, I still worry about abandoning hope. You'll hear my fear, the grief I can't shake off, because the older I get, the harder it is to ignore that life changes. Parents die, and there's no one left to explain. History changes. It's the equivalent of clouds with shadowy edges forming and reforming as they race across the sky. It's the wind itself, that change, a cliché that isn't just a cliché. You don't need a pandemic or bad election or hearings about a government insurrection to feel it.

History is a living thing, not a story told by somebody else. The stories are the shadow, but you are living history *now*, as I lived it one day in 2020, when I realized I want to tell you about the people I saw, the bright light, the music, my parents. These moments. They matter.

Hear Martha read excerpts from this essay in the TW podcast episode, "Election Spotlight: Vote for Art." ***[5]***

Publishing Information

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- "Hooper-Lee-Nichols House [7]," Cambridge Historical Society (retrieved 11/24/20).
- "Brief History of the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House and Enslaved People [8]," Cambridge Historical Society (retrieved 11/24/20).
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- Longfellow House-Washington Headquarters National Historic Site [17], National Park Service.
- "Days of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol [18]" (visual investigation) by Dmitriy Khavin, Haley Willis et al., *New York Times*, June 30, 2021.
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Art Information

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Martha Nichols co-founded *Talking Writing* and is a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School. Much of her teaching craft appears in her recent book *First-Person Journalism: A Guide to Writing Personal Nonfiction with Real Impact* [23] (Routledge, 2022).

For more information, subscribe to her newsletter and website: *Martha Nichols Writer* [24].

Links:
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