

Essay by Geoff Goldberg

# Heritage is Ineffable

Heritage is ineffable.

Ever present, it hides well. It remains elusive. Neither gas, liquid, or solid, it can't be seen with a flashlight, but requires an act of thoughtful reflection to be found. In fact, it needs more than that, it needs consciousness. Heritage is about something remembered, sought after, and considered.

Merely being aware of heritage is not enough. It demands to be considered, for it needs to be properly framed, again requiring intelligence. The considered work or object of heritage has to be placed in context, located in place and in time, and even more critically, in relationship to others. A context has to be constructed.

And yet the reconstructed context, while necessary, is still not enough. Finding the past, making it fresh and new, is not correct. Such an approach, even if only fabricated in the imagination, may be conceptually admirable, but remains inadequate. Instead, what is needed is something rather peculiar, a thoughtful merging of a distant past, reconstructed and combined with a lacking present. The situation has to be clear and evident but missing some key aspect.

And what might be missing? Difficult to state. For no matter how described, heritage, legacy, fore-bearers, and precedents are tough sledding in our world. Our country has its origins deeply rooted in flight and remains uncomfortable with its past. We have a love of the newly created, and admire new opportunities above all else. Balancing our past with our present remains a delicate act of gymnastics.

Nevertheless, some enjoy gardening. Plants and nature remain, not for our pleasure or purposes, but to serve some other goals. Some of us have tended our gardens without an interest in profit or purpose, but rather because they exist and are worthy of nurturing on their own terms. We do this, although perhaps not every day, for the simple reason that beauty outside ourselves is enjoyable. Let there be no mistake—a successful garden needs tending, it is a garden we care for, but it is also a place that lives outside of us.

And so it is with legacy. More obscure than precedent, and more difficult than heritage, legacy is a quality of the past that is maintained and transmitted forward in time. This raises a different version of the well-known *tree-in-the-forest* question, “Does legacy exist if we ignore it?”

The answer is frustratingly both yes and no, leaving each individual to find a way through this dilemma. Ignored legacy can re-emerge, generations later, and be rediscovered and renewed. However, the opposite is also true: legacy forgotten too long can disappear, never to be heard from again.

If legacy exists outside of the self, why is it that it can only be transmitted and recovered by ourselves? Is it ours, to do with as we wish? Or does it answer to some other authority or purpose? One might wonder about the need for such philosophical ponderings, but might the opposite be true, that many of our difficulties with our past stem from legacy's most difficult definition?

Legacy is absent tactility. Its presence remains difficult to place, and it is confounding in origins and transmission. Nevertheless some continue to enjoy this curiosity and value it. Some appreciate legacy for its role in framing history, as legacy provides context for questions of the day through its embrasure of the past. For many of us, it is one voice among others, helping us understand our relationship to things in the world and also to understand ourselves.

Imagine a world without legacy: such a world would be without a past, without history. It would operate outside of time and without place. It would be a world of self, rooted in hubris, without larger understandings. The tangled and knotted threads of legacy tell a different story, that the trails of our fore-bearers had purpose and deserve recollection. To forget the past is to abandon our place in the present and would portend poorly for the future.

Legacy as considered here does not have the romantic aura of a beautiful history, fondly remembered and nicely packaged. The concept here is one of a more complete picture, with the errors of our past as fully represented as the best we have done. We are a whole and our past contains both good and bad.

The larger picture is thus full of complexity. We are charged with conflicting duties and responsibilities. It is not hard to see the desirability of a road less fraught with these complications. Yet profound simplicity, the only one worth having, is not achieved that way, but rather by struggling with uncomfortable and incomprehensible aspects of our past. Only with a firm grip on these challenges can substantive contributions be made.

Such an unflinching appraisal of both past and present allows for a proper synthesis, necessary to address our uncertain future. Acceptance allows us to create anew and thus reinforces this, our most essential poetic act.

Casa del Fascio by  
Giuseppe Terragni,  
Como, Italy, c 1933  
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