

What Twain, Du Bois, and my family each lost

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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Today is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day. At 7 p.m., thousands of individuals will gently sway lit candles to remember those lost girls and boys.

The day came from one of [Ronald Reagan's last acts](#) as president. The proclamation for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month in 1988 was one of those compassion-meets-control conservative items. While drawing attention to the pains of those who have lost children, it also made sure to emphasize selected abortion as much as unplanned death: "We can and must do a much better job of encouraging adoption as an alternative to abortion," Reagan's team wrote. We must do a better job "of helping the single parents who wish to raise their babies; and of offering friendship and temporal support to the courageous women and girls who give their children the gifts of life and loving adoptive parents."

Inspired by the work of my colleague [Harold Bush](#), I want to recognize some of those American families who have lost little ones, to thank those daughters and sons for their lives, and to acknowledge what they have shown many of us.

We remember Langdon Clemens, Olivia Clemens, and Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain). Langdon, your dad taught many of us about the wonder of childhood. Your [photographed serious face](#) from the early 1870s leaves me wondering if you inspired your dad's trenchant criticisms of American imperialism. "[The War Prayer](#)" may be the best prayer written in American history. Penned decades later during the Spanish-American War (when you would have been of military age), a stranger ascended a church pulpit and asked the God of war to "help us to turn" our enemies "out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended in the wastes of their desolated lands." These sarcastic words should haunt us still. We remember you.

We remember [Burghardt Du Bois](#), Nina Du Bois, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Burghardt, although your father had received a Ph.D. from Harvard University and had taught at the University of Pennsylvania, no white doctor in Atlanta would tend to you in the spring of 1899. After your death, your father immortalized you in *The Souls of Black*

*Folk.* "[Of the Passing of the First-Born](#)" should be read by anyone who wants to understand race in the nation then and now. As a society, we did not value little black boys and girls in the 1890s. Today, it seems we have a similar problem recognizing the humanity of black teenagers. About two decades after your death, Burghardt, your father started writing essays about black Christ figures born in the United States. They preached the good news of love and forgiveness. They were crucified by sin-sick Americans. I often think that he was thinking of you. I know that I do. We remember you.

We remember Mary Garner, [Margaret Garner](#), and Robert Garner. Mary, your mother hated slavery. She knew what often happened to boys and girls who lived within its horrors, especially to girls. When she took your life in the winter of 1856, I believe it may have been an act of love. People kill other people all the time. It's not always with malice. My family knows this well. We too had to participate actively in ending a life we held so precious. Your story [inspired Toni Morrison](#), one of the greatest writers the world has known. We remember you.

We remember Elijah James Blum and Jennifer Cherry Blum. Elijah, you endured so many surgeries, and sometimes you kept your [sweet smile](#). When you threw fits as your mom poked tubes up your nose, I admired your feisty spirit. [You taught](#) me to see the Puritans' present blindness in new ways, to sense spirituality in the smallest of material objects, and to believe that children shouldn't have to bear so many burdens. I don't want to live without you, but I can't be with you right now. Your little brother loves Winnie the Pooh. We remember you.

We honor all mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, sisters and brothers, friends and acquaintances then and now. Pain tears us apart; it binds us together. Tears burn our cheeks; they soothe our hearts. Those we miss can become our missions. What they taught us, we can share. Perhaps some burdens are not meant to be laid down. By carrying them, I hold onto what matters. I don't want to ever let go . . . again.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).*