

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACT OF GIFT-GIVING AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE
FOLKLORE OF MY FAMILY

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The tradition of gift-giving in my family is an example of folk culture which functions on multiple levels and involves a number of folklore genres. This tradition combines aspects of all three categories of folk culture: customary, oral, and material. Gift-giving in our family serves as an example of the customary category of folklore, which is supported by oral tradition and manifests itself in a material fashion. In addition, our gift-giving tradition incorporates, or is supported by genres which include, legend (personal anecdote), joke, proverbial sayings, gaming, and ritual. Furthermore, this practice functions in a multiplicity of ways both for the giver and recipient.

I will define the family unit to include our immediate family: my mother, Gretchen Fanslow, age 70; father, Arthur Fanslow, age 75; brother Craig Fanslow, age 41; and myself, Robin Fanslow, age 30. However, for the purposes of analysis and explanation I will, in some instances, extend this definition to include maternal grandparents, my brother's household (my brother, his wife, and two daughters), and my own household (myself and my partner).

We grew up on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio. Both maternal and paternal branches of the family have lived in the Cleveland-area for three generations.

Our family did not participate in a large, extended family structure. My mother is an only child, and my father had little contact with his own family. To further qualify the relationships, my brother left home 20 years ago to join the army so his activities within the family have been limited by this circumstance.

Both of my parents experienced the Great Depression and World War II, these experiences served to shape their world-view, particularly their attitudes toward waste and economy. Furthermore, both my mother's and my father's family were members of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church.

My family's ethnic heritage is German and English. My father is a third generation descendant of German immigrants, while my mother's family came from both Germany and England. The effect of this ethnic background has been more subtle than overt since no conscious effort is made to maintain old world language or traditions.

Socio-economically, our family is lower middle-class, or working-class. For 35 years my father worked as a railroad track supervisor at Republic Steel in Cleveland, Ohio. To supplement the family income my mother worked intermittently as a children's librarian both in the Cleveland Public Library system and in the Lutheran elementary school system in the Cleveland area.

Regardless of the occasion, whether Mother's Day, Christmas or individual birthdays, my family's gift-giving activity is marked by certain characteristics. Primary among these is the giving of numerous small gifts as opposed to one large/expensive item.

The oral tradition which supports this activity serves to explain both its point of origin as well as the length of time this practice has been in effect. The story is told by my mother of an occasion on which her grandmother was given the gift of a piece of furniture by her own children, who had all contributed to its purchase. My great-grandmother was greatly dismayed to be the recipient of such an object. She much preferred an array of smaller presents which, she felt, were more fun.

My mother always qualifies her grandmother's preference by reminding us that when her grandmother was a child the family was very poor and Christmas presents were a luxury. My great-grandmother received a lump of coal, courtesy of her older brothers, more often than a legitimate gift and, to her, even an orange was a treasure. The implication of this story is that my great-grandmother, in an attempt to compensate for a lack experienced in her childhood developed a preference for a perceived "wealth" of gifts rather than a single object regardless of its monetary value.

Thus, the origin of this multiple gift-giving practice can be traced to a specific incident in family history which is kept alive through oral circulation. Reasons for continuing the multiple gift-giving practice, however, are more diverse than this single episode might illustrate. As demonstrated by the story, one reason for its continuance is that it provides a link with the past, serving to remind us of a time, although outside our individual experience, of scarcity for which we still compensate by honoring the wishes of a long-deceased relative. In this way the practice serves both as a

tribute to my great-grandmother and as an act of gratitude that our family no longer suffers such extreme privation.

Two other reasons for its continuance serve to complement and reinforce it. The first stems from my parents' shared experience of growing up during the depression--my father was 12 years of age in 1929, and my mother 7. This has contributed to their adherence to a "waste not, want not" philosophy. The second reason originates from more pragmatic, socio-economically motivated concerns. The money was simply not available to spend on high-priced items. It would have been considered wasteful and extravagant to give something too large or expensive to any one person, rather such purchases were made for the benefit of the whole family.

Finally, a reason less subtle and more dear to the hearts of all concerned, it is simply more fun, as my great-grandmother would have been quick to point out, to receive "a lot of little junk". The "fun factor" cannot be underestimated since it is likely to be the primary reason that our gift-giving tradition has continued in the same form over such a long period of time.

The material aspect of this tradition is manifested in the mode of presentation, the gift-wrap. Seldom is new wrapping paper used to wrap gifts given within the family circle. The wrap aspect also involves an oral genre. It is a widely held family joke, in both my brother's household and my own, that when one receives a gift from my mother the proper procedure is to open it very carefully, so that she can re-use the wrapping paper. When her grandchildren--my brother's daughters--were very young this was a particular source of

consternation for my nieces since my mother would become irritated if they tore the wrapping paper. This experience mirrored that of my brother and myself as children, so for us, the joke functions as a subtle form of rebellion against a set of values which, although we have adopted them ourselves as adults, seemed unnecessarily oppressive as we were growing up.

From my mother's point of view, this act of recycling is an outgrowth of both her Depression-era upbringing and her religious beliefs. This outlook, that wastefulness is a sin, is one that has been transmitted to us orally through the use of such proverbial phrases as "waste not, want not" and "make do or do without". Transmission has also taken place through informal demonstration as illustrated by acts, such as this one, of recycling gift wrap.

Another example of the material culture of gift-giving in our family tradition is the "treasure ball". This tradition originated with my mother and has been employed on many gift-giving occasions. A "treasure ball" consists of numerous trinkets wound in paper strips, usually tissue or crepe paper. Although generally taking the shape of a sphere, hence the name, the form can be adapted to suit either the occasion or the creative whim of the maker/giver. Thus, variants include the "treasure egg" at Easter, and the "treasure ornament" at Christmas.

Also characteristic of the "treasure ball" is the manner in which the items are inserted, usually in ascending order from the most mundane to the most highly prized. As the recipient unwinds the paper, the objects appear one at a time culminating in the final and

most exciting item. In this way, an air of suspense and excitement is created which elevates the un-wrapping process to the status of a game. It is largely for this reason that we have always prized the ephemeral "treasure balls" more highly than other more substantial gifts presented in a straightforward manner.

As a symbol, the "treasure ball" functions to confer upon the recipient an aura of "special-ness" when given within the family. Due to the labor-intensive nature of its creation it was more frequently given on occasions when only one person was receiving gifts, such as a birthday, as opposed to holidays when all family members would be participating in the gift-giving activities. On the rare occasion that the "treasure ball" has been given to someone outside the immediate family, it has served as a gesture of acceptance into the group. To illustrate this point, my mother presented my current partner with a "treasure ball" last Christmas thereby symbolically conferring upon him "insider" status in performance of just such a gesture. Unfortunately, the symbolism of this act is not readily apparent to persons exoteric to the family-group, and must either be interpreted for her or him by an insider or remain "unread" by the intended recipient, thus blunting its potency as a communicative symbol.

Another example of gift-giving in a game-like context is that of the "treasure hunt". In this mode of performance the recipient was led to her or his gift, the "treasure", by a series of written clues hidden around the house or yard. Again, the element of suspense--as each clue was discovered and unravelled leading to the next and,

ultimately, to the prize--elevated the gift-giving activity to the higher status of ritualized game. This practice did not necessarily adhere to the "many-is-better-than-one" principle, although there were instances in which each clue was accompanied by a small gift.

Generally, this format was employed outside the typical holiday- or birthday-settings, occurring less frequently and more spontaneously. Often, it served a compensatory function in conjunction with any incident which might be perceived as particularly unpleasant in a child's life, such as a trip to the doctor for a shot. Finally, as implied above, the recipient was most often a child.

As with most families, our gift-giving usually occurs within the larger context of a holiday celebration. On those occasions when it is performed as a reciprocal activity, certain unwritten customary rules apply. As previously mentioned, recycled wrapping paper is used with family members, while new paper is reserved for gifts to outsiders. Furthermore the membership status of both giver and recipient dictates the circumstances under which the transaction may take place: gifts are exchanged with outsiders at a time other than that during which gifts are exchanged with insiders. For example, during the Christmas season gifts to persons outside of the immediate family are presented at any time deemed most convenient by those concerned; gifts to the closest friends or current "significant others" are, when possible, presented on Christmas Eve; and, gifts to members of the immediate family are exchanged on Christmas morning. In this way, transactions taking place between insiders are performed in a family-only setting. This exclusionary characteristic functions

as a line of demarcation which, by emphasizing the insider/outsider dichotomy strengthens group identification.

Having considered the act of gift-giving as an example of family folklore which functions on multiple levels, I would like to conclude by recapitulating those functions. Gift-giving as a traditional activity in our family is not only transmitted orally and by customary example, but is itself a vehicle for transmission. Through the acts enumerated above we transmit values such as conservation of both material and economic resources. A respect for family roots and appreciation for our high standard of living -- in comparison with that of our forebearers -- is also instilled in us through this process.

In addition, gifts frequently act as communicative symbols which are employed to confer unique status on either family insiders or outsiders. Timing of the presentation can also communicate information regarding an individual's status in relation to the family-group. Furthermore, gift-giving can serve a compensatory function, as an act with the intention of "making it up to" someone.

Finally, the all-important "fun factor" must be recognized, whether as a game in itself or as an activity within a larger celebration, the entertainment function as it serves both giver and recipient is of great importance in our gift-giving activities.

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