

ONE FAMILY'S FOLKLORE:

A Brief Analysis of Worldview
through Genres in Folklore

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My immediate family consists of my mother, Bridget Fitzgerald, age 47, two brothers, Andy Cook, age 22, and Josh Cook, age 20, and me, Annamary Fitzgerald, age 24. Our family worldview stems from two major influences: my family's identity as a single parent household and my mother's extended family and its identity as German and Irish immigrants. A single parent and an immigrant are pioneers who strike out into new territory socially, economically and politically and find themselves vulnerable and interdependent on others in a similar situation. Both the parent and the immigrant adapt elements of family customs and beliefs to anchor their new lives in the familiar and embrace a faith that one can receive help only if one asks and works hard. It is the self-perception of being liminal, being a pioneer, that has had the greatest influence on our family folklore.

My family's spiritual beliefs have always been tied to the Catholic Church. These beliefs embody and exemplify the dichotomy between religious obedience and secular faith and are evident in many family stories. One story is about my great-grandfather John Schulte, a Catholic who built churches and prisons in Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota at the turn of the century; he was ex-communicated from the church for being a Freemason. He used his secular skills to serve the church and then the church denied him its community because of his affiliation with a non-religious fraternity. This tale has been

passed through the family both as a warning about what happens when one defies authority and also as a badge of courage illustrating that one can survive exile from the familiar.

A religious legend from my grandmother, Marion Schulte Fitzgerald's, generation reinforces this family dynamic. Marion's brother Bernard had been arrested with a gunshot wound in his leg and the police were transporting him to prison by train. He had developed gangrene and was dying of infection when the family heard the news. Marion's sister Helen had one daughter, Audrey, who was six or seven at the time, and Helen ordered her to say a novena for Bernard before school. On the ninth day of the novena, Audrey look looked up at the statue of the Virgin Mary as she prayed and saw it crying. Family lore says that at the exact moment Audrey witness this miracle, Bernard's fever broke and he healed completely within two days. This is another example that reinforces the family's belief that terrible things happen to those defiant of authority, but one is expected to survive the consequences with courage.

This legend addresses other elements of folklore consistent with my family's worldview. The most significant is the religious proverb that God will grant the request of those who pray with sincere faith and diligence. This legend also exemplifies the gender role expectations: women maintain the faith and accomplish dramatic change through the grace of a supernatural power. Men wander apart from society, challenge

authority, and become more powerful as they struggle against the expectations of those around them and are given extra chances through the women's intercession on their behalf. In a broader context, there are boys and mothers, or even Christs and Virgin Marys. The women maintain order and continuity for the family and promote the dependence of others as their main sense of power, and the men openly challenge everything in their world except the power of the women, and then attempt to break free of that, too.

The novena evokes the powerful number three found in the cultural heritage of the Catholic church and of Europe. The nine day prayer ritual symbolically compounds the magic of three by three. Three signifies the power of the Trinity associated with christian beliefs, as well as reinforcing the folk belief that good (or bad) things, such as luck or death, come in threes.

Another example of the power of numbers perceived in my mother's extended family is how it names daughters. At least three generations have passed with a daughter being the seventh child, having a daughter as the seventh child, and each being named after the great-grandmother. In my own generation, my mother refused to have seven children and changed the tradition; now the first daughter receives the great-grandmother's name. Seven is a traditionally powerful number in the German and Irish tradition because it is comprised of three, which is symbolic of God, and four, which is symbolic of mortals, and once united are

in perfect unity (Lawrence, 1968). However, being the first, whether daughter or son, carries an equally magical and political influence in the German and Irish beliefs. Thus, by changing the tradition defining to whom the name was granted, my mother didn't compromise the potency of the naming practice.

Naming in general is significant in my family, particularly with family pets. My family believes that as pets choose their owners, a name chooses the pet. A pet is not named until everyone in the family agrees that a particular name is the most appropriate for the animal. Friends of my family gave us a dog they found abandon and had named Muffin. Everyone in my family agreed that "Muffin just didn't seem right for her." After two weeks of having a dog with no name and days of trying find one that fit, my family agreed she was really an Odessa. The dog responded immediately to this new title, reinforcing the family's decision.

Family pets have had a dominate role in stories expressing how family members communicate and interact as well as in binding the family together in its ethnic heritage. One family legend pairs the Fitzgerald family lineage with a particular coat of arms featuring a monkey with a collar around its waist. The story illustrates the claim that a King Fitzgerald in Ireland was given a pet monkey as a gift. One night, the castle caught on fire and the monkey tried and tried to wake the King, all to no avail. In desperation, the monkey urinated in the King's face, waking him

and saving his life. After this event, the King changed the family's crest to a chained monkey.

My mother's family claimed this story must be true and had a pet monkey to identify themselves with the Fitzgeralds in the legend. My uncle, Mike, was the oldest in his family and responsible for the monkey, who was also named Mike. One Easter Sunday, Mike, the monkey, ran outside and up a tree as the family was preparing to walk to church. Because the monkey was Uncle Mike's responsibility, he climbed up the tree after it. As Uncle Mike got closer, the monkey climbed higher, until it was dangerous for both to go any further. As Uncle Mike reached up, the monkey urinated in Uncle Mike's eye, temporarily blinding him. The monkey then ran down the tree and back into the house, and Uncle Mike went to the hospital instead of Mass.

These two family stories are always told in tandem as amusing anecdotes. The juxtaposition of the two monkeys and their behavior toward their owners elicits a "can't win for losing" chuckle as the storyteller makes the point that only a Fitzgerald would have a monkey urinate in their eye. These anecdotes also emphasizes the use of scatological humor in the family, and the belief that people are all subject to the same risks in life regardless of their social standing.

When I was a child, my grandmother, Marion Fitzgerald, frequently used scatological words and phrases in her conversational language around my brothers and me. My mother

tried to explain that she didn't use those words and didn't want her children to do so. In exasperation, she coined the family proverb, "If you're going to use toilet talk, you'll have to stand in the bathroom." As we have gotten older the proverb has changed in its usage and intent. This proverb is now said in mild mockery of the futile attempt to modify our behavior.

Some of the distinct verbal expressions typical in my family include "a week from Thursday" to define when something in the future would come to pass and "a month of Sundays" to describe how long it takes to accomplish a task. This form of exaggeration is consistent with the sarcastic humor evident among my family members. My family uses sarcasm to judge another by how quickly he or she understands that a witticism has been made, with the quicker meaning the smarter the person is perceived, to emphasis a point, and to belittle or humiliate another in anger. The use of sarcastic humor by my family is another example of the liminal identity of family members and serves as a form of self-preservation to keep others at arms length to avoid becoming emotionally vulnerable.

My family enjoys telling jokes and riddles. However, they frequently cannot remember them for a long period of time or anticipate the humor of the punchline before the joke or riddle has been complete and begins laughing. One conundrum that has endured is: "What do you get when you throw a grenade into a French kitchen? --Linoleum Blownapart." It has maintained

lasting appeal because it can be told in any company, has a crafty word play, and entertains the teller regardless if people understand it. Additionally, the joke has become a trademark of my mother's because it is the only one she claims to be able to recall and perform at will.

Much of my immediate family identity has been shaped by growing up in a rural logging and farming community. This reflects my extended family's identity as pioneers and has given me some environmentally oriented folklore. One such belief is that if one gets lost in the mountains, look for which side of the tree moss is growing on and assume it is north. Another is that if Mt. Rainier appears to be wearing a skirt of cloud cover, one should prepare for cold, and if the mountain appears to wear a hat of clouds, one should expect rain. There is also the belief that if it is a particularly hot, dry summer, then the winter will be exceptionally bitter, and that a hot strong wind will bring drizzly rain for days. Many of these beliefs prove to be infrequently consistent at best, but they do empower the believer and form a perceived relationship with the environment.

Many of the local legends (cult worship in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, the swift currents in the Nisqually River and irrigation canals, the particular viciousness of an old bull, the screams of cougars in the mountains at night, poisonous mushrooms, the local Mafia family, and Sasquatch) were used to control the behavior of young people through fear of dire

consequences and to create a local identity unique to any of the surrounding communities. The town's physical location was isolated, and the inhabitants kept it emotionally isolated by promoting an "Us/Them" disdain in its jokes, stories and anecdotes about different churches, areas of the community, number of generations still living in town, the relationships with the military base and Indian reservation that encompassed the town and any number of family disputes. For my family, this experience of moving into the community with no previous ties once again enforced the pioneering identity of a people breaking new ground in a new place, with new social rules, new political ideals, and different values.

Every generation of my family has moved out and away from its parents' homeplace, creating new individual identities and the expectation that the next generation will do the same. The folklore defines and supports the skills necessary to successfully adapt in a frontier setting, whether it be literal or figurative. It also creates a framework in which to place oneself in time and relation to others who have a similar familial reference. Folklore, in many cases, is the only family unity expressed among a group of people separated by distance, national boundaries, socio-economic affluence, education, and profession, who all share the same lineage.

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