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My Family Folklore: Functionary Mechanisms

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According to Jan Brunvand in The Study of American Folklore, "the United States is the world's greatest meeting ground of foreign folklores and an ideal arena for observing the survival of old traditions and the assimilation of new ones."(p.47) Many of these adaptations occur through marriage or the creation of a new family, which on the North American continent has often involved people from very different backgrounds. Even after generations of diffusion and the creation of "American" traditions, groups or families strive to maintain their individuality -- their diversity.

Since no two individuals have exactly the same background, "the survival of old traditions and the assimilation of new ones" occurs every time a new family begins. Each new family adapts the incoming folklore, in order to develop a folklore suitable for its needs. Thus, many of the folklores within a family are simply functional mechanisms.

For instance, my parents had similar yet different backgrounds, thus when they married they had to adjust their existing folklore.

My parents were born only three years apart in Oklahoma towns not more than 30 miles away from each other. They were reared in the same "oil boom" town -- Shidler, Oklahoma. They attended the same school all the way through high school, knew each other's families, and had mutual friendships. Even though their two families were living there because of the prosperity of the oil boom, my father's family -- the Badleys was different from my mother's family, the Andersons.

Both sides of the Badleys had been mainly in Oklahoma for a few generations. Whereas, my maternal grandfather, born in Oklahoma, had went to Illinois to lay pipeline, where he married my grandmother. They eventually moved back to Oklahoma seeking employment, along with much of her family.

The Badleys had six children; the Andersons had three. This difference related to the farming tradition that existed within the Badley family. Even though my paternal grandfather owned a construction business at this time, the family still maintained a small ranch. The Andersons lived in town; my maternal grandfather was a welder for the oil companies.

The most significant difference between the families of my parents, as far as what eventually affected my individual folklore, was the authority that existed within the home. George Badley, my grandfather, was domineering during my father's childhood and most of mine. My grandmother, Dorothy Badley, always did as he asked in public, only discussing matters with him behind closed doors. My grandfather George was always the disciplinarian.

In contrast, my grandmother, Faith Anderson, was the one who always disciplined her children; my grandfather found most discipline unnecessary. Faith Anderson has always stated her mind often with great zeal. Wayne Anderson's easygoing personality gave Faith more authority in the family, during my mother's childhood, than Dorothy Badley ever had in my father's family.

In 1968, when my parents got married they brought with them two conflicting sets of role models. My father thought he should control the household. My mother thought at the very least she should have equal say. This conflict was instrumental in the unique folklore that developed within my family.

Of course, there were other factors which originated folklore

traditions within my family. The main other one being economic hardship in my early childhood. Often, there were several factors at work in the creation of folklore. Whatever the origin of folklore, it was always designed as a mechanism to make my family function.

During my earliest childhood, my father tried to dominate my mother, much in the same way his father had done his mother. She allowed him to dominate in some areas. For instance, my mother supported my father's efforts to attend college and veterinarian school. In order to fulfill the need she had for control, my mother began to totally involve herself with rearing my brother, Michael, and me. With my dad in school, there was barely enough money for our needs. Thus, my mother's main source of entertainment was her children and taking her children to her mother's. These frequent visits to Grandma's led to the development of the folk speech, that became significant in my life.

My brother and I both had speech problems that later required therapy in grade school, but some of the things we said incorrectly became part of our family folklore. For example, I was watching Mickey Mouse and thought that "Mickey Mouse" would make an excellent

nickname for my brother. However, when I went to call him "Mickey Mouse" it came out as "Moot Mouse."

The adults, of course, all thought this was very cute. Being very young, I interpreted their fascination as positive reinforcement, which led me to call my brother "Moot Mouse," then just "Moot" to this day. My brother has expressed his dislike for this nickname, since we've grown up so I try to call him Michael.

One of Michael's mis-sayings became a frequent folktale mainly told by my grandma Faith for family entertainment. My brother somehow injured his finger, and went to Grandma to report it by saying "My dinger door." Grandma thought he was using an euphemism for his penis, and the adults thought it was very funny. Again my brother found this unsettling, when he became a teenager he denied the incident had occurred. He claimed that Grandma had made up the whole thing.

Folk naming occurred more frequently on my dad's side of the family than on my mother's. Grandpa George thought everyone should have two names, his/her given one and the one that related to him/her in a more direct way. He gave out these names to all his

grandchildren, and then the other adults would also use these names to refer to the children. For instance, he named me Smokey because at the time I was the only grandchild with dark hair. He named one cousin Tricksie because she reminded him of a horse he used to have that was somewhat of a trickster.

This was all quite confusing to me as a child, especially since he gave my brother the nickname Louie, which, in all, gave my brother three different names. I thought my cousins' nicknames were their names for many years. This naming process later became one of the factors that separated the two sides of family in my mind, since my mother's side didn't have any such process. As an adult, I began to evaluate what my grandpa had done. I began to see that what he did related strongly to the Native American tradition of an animal or a person earning the name it is given.

After my dad finished veterinarian school, we moved to Arkansas so that he could get a better job. In 1974, I was becoming old enough to see the differences between my parents; and my mother later told me that some of them were becoming frustrating for her. My mother's solution was continually to tell Michael and me that her

family was different from our father's family. Most of the time she just tried to separate the two traditions; seldom did she concede to adopt the Badley's way.

If there was another factor at work, such as finances, my mom would go along with Dad's way of doing things. For instance, when we had lived in Oklahoma my mom's family gave Michael and me birthday parties. However, the last birthday party I had as a child was at age six, when we had just moved to Arkansas. After this party, my dad said "We don't have the money for such foolishness." My mother explained "Your dad didn't have birthday parties so you really don't need one," when Michael and I would ask why all our friends got to have one.

It became more difficult to explain as we got older, so my mother added more to the explanation. For instance, she gave the excuses that Michael's birthday was too close to Christmas, and my birthday was in the summer so none of my friends would be able to come. My mother did insist that Dad and she give me a sixteenth birthday party because this was the custom in her family. Her family would not have understood not making a big deal out of such an important event.

This party was one of the few occasions that my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins traveled to Little Rock. Other events of such significance were Easter, my graduation, and my wedding.

While living in Arkansas, we traveled to Oklahoma twice a year -- once in the summer without my dad and once around Christmas, usually with my dad. These trips became the customary for my family.

Michael and I always played games, while traveling, that involved identifying cars or their plates, as well as naming games -- name brands of cigarettes, name types of soda. I always sang out of tune "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" with incorrect lyrics, which gained me much criticism on several occasions. My mother, appalled by my singing voice, would sing religious songs and popular songs from her childhood as she drove. This often led her to tell stories about her childhood family singing groups.

After about 9 years, I began to realize that we spent more time visiting the Andersons than the Badleys. My mother became outraged when she visited my dad's family because his dad and brothers always ordered around the women. She also didn't like the fact that the women ate in the living room with the children. Too busy serving the

men, Grandma Dorothy never was able to sit down at the same time.

We even spent more time at the Anderson's on Christmas trips when my dad was with us. My mother always told my dad that his family didn't celebrate the holidays to get him to stay at her parents longer. Her family did celebrate completely differently. There were always several feasts at various relatives' houses that you didn't really know. The ten great aunts tried to outdo each other's baking. There were always some unique food sculptures. That's what they were really, since everyone just looked at them. Attempting to eat one of the green-dyed popcorn sculptures, strange jelly molds, or enormous ginger-bread houses could result in a broken tooth, since many sat out for two or three days.

Mom's side of the family has other customs associated with Christmas. Great Aunt Hauntie gives all the children silver dollars; another great aunt gives the same Avon gift to the females and another to the males; and one gives a fruit cake to each family. Grandma Faith doesn't put tags on the presents under the tree to keep the grandchildren from peeking.

My cousins on my mother's side of the family and I often found

the adults' activities boring and developed some of our own. Our favorite was dress-up; which involved not only costumes but sets that we constructed out of chairs, boards, material, and barrels. Occasionally, we acted out our finished "play" for the adults. These dramas were usually unrelated to Christmas. However, there were a couple of times we recited the Christmas story and sang carols.

We usually traveled to the Badleys on Christmas Day after discovering Santa had figured out that we were at Grandma's. My mom was wrong about the Badleys. They celebrated in a very different way. Everyone came to my grandparent's instead of going from house to house. My grandma Dorothy prepared a very traditional meal: turkey, stuffing, giblet gravy, sweet potatoes, green beans, and various pies. After eating we would all go to the living room and find seats; then Grandpa would hand out gifts. The gifts here were always items like nuts, homemade canned goods, and fruit.

The uniqueness about the handing out of gifts was that my grandpa told tales about past events. These stories usually related to hardships of the past and how lucky we were. After grandpa finished being the center of attention, my aunts and uncles told stories.

Later in the afternoon or evening of Christmas Day, Uncle Perry would turn on the television, Aunt Yvonne and Uncle Joe Jimmy would make popcorn. If we started watching a football game, the men and boys would act out their favorite plays in the middle of the living room. If professional wrestling was on television, each uncle and cousin had his favorite characters, such as the "Junk Yard Dog" and "Hacksaw" to act out. But my favorite living room drama was when my dad and uncles would do the "Lolly Pop Kids" from the "Wizard of Oz," my favorite movie. The "Wizard of Oz" didn't have to be on the television for them to act out the scene.

As I grew up, my mother was always using folklore to explain everything, from why we shouldn't open the door for strangers to why I should be the one doing the dishes in my family. She often used some common urban legends to control our behavior. She seemed to believe all the stories about children being kidnapped from the mall, especially after my little sister was born in 1981. The stories about razor blades in apples, poisoned cookies, and "LSD" filled candy during Halloween were her most acted upon. They led her to oversee our trick-or-treating and to search our candy. On the other

hand, Michael and I caught on to this use of folklore and told my mother everything we would find out about Coke, since we had determined from listening to our dad that she drank too many.

However, she concentrated most of her energy on trying to bridge the gaps that existed between my dad's folklore and her own. These mechanisms that make up my family folklore seem to have failed in many ways, since my parents' marriage ended in divorce a three years ago. They have both remarried. My dad and his new family make a big deal out of birthdays. In other words, I now think of much of my family's folklore as cruelty to my brother and to me. For instance, my brother has good reason to find our folkspeech unsettling, since it originates as adults finding humor in the mistakes of children.

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