

"Whatever Gets You Through the Day"

**Worldview as Expressed by Folklore
in a Family Folk Group**

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Story book families include a mommy, a daddy, a brother, a sister, and sometimes a pet. In story books, the characters are members of a family simply because they are related. The interaction between the men and women in my family does not exist only because of relation. My family folk group includes Owen James Mair, fifty-six years old, my father and vice president of the trust office at a bank; Holly Suann Mair, forty-six, my mother and a homemaker; Christopher James Mair, nineteen, my brother and a sophomore college student; Timothy Michael Mair, seventeen, my brother and a high school senior; and me, Erica Suann Mair, twenty-one, graduate student in Folk Studies. These five people interact on a weekly basis with Viola Luciel Paulus, sixty-nine, my maternal grandmother and a retired farmer; Frank Paulus, seventy-two, my maternal grandfather and a retired farmer; Kristi Jo Gunther, forty, my mother's sister and a real estate agent; and Margaret Gertrude Mair, eighty-nine, my paternal grandmother and a retired school teacher. The folk group includes my dog, Maggie, as well. These people live in different homes, some in different cities, but they share a common bond in the union of my parents. They transmit traditional material that is oral, collective and shared over time. We exhibit our world view in each element of our folklore through our beliefs, our expression of beliefs, and our roles within our folk group. Dividing my family's folklore into oral, customary, and material elements allows for the specific world view revealed by each genre to be compared with other examples under that same heading.

ORAL FOLKLORE

My family consistently uses folk speech in our daily conversations. Most of the terms in our specialized vocabulary come from experiences we share as a group. One Thanksgiving, after we stuffed ourselves with the traditional turkey dinner, my uncle turned on the television set to see a commercial for Colonel Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken. At that moment, our full stomachs turned at the sight of the greasy fried chicken and my father yelled, "I feel like some fried chicken." From this statement comes the phrase "fried chicken" that means "I am really full" (i.e., "Boy am I fried chicken!") If someone says only the words "fried chicken" after meals, everyone present knows that the speaker ate more food than he or she needed to satisfy his or her hunger. Kotkin and

Zeitlin recognize in "...alluding to this incident at similar moments, the family members transform a shared experience into a verbal ritual appropriate on recurring occasions" (1983). Using this term draws us together because we remember a common family experience.

Terms like "pulling a Maggie," "pulling a Frank," or "pulling a Kristi" refer to specific characteristics of certain family members that are either endearing or irritating. Maggie, the family dog, turns her head to the side, while keeping her eyes on the speaker when she is being reprimanded. Thus, my mother, grandmother and I use this term when one of us is telling another something that she does not want to hear. The listener states the phrase and then mimics the dog's actions to let the speaker know that they are being heard but not heeded.

"Pulling a Frank" refers to the fact that my grandfather never uses the instructions to assemble or repair any machine. My father, mother and grandmother use the phrase most frequently because they often undertake home improvement projects together. However, they never use the term in the presence of my grandfather. Being accused of "pulling a Frank" can have a positive or a negative connotation: if you have not used the directions and have not been successful, the comment is negative. My grandfather also fixes things in ingenious ways using what tools he has on hand. In this respect, "pulling a Frank" is a compliment.

My Aunt Kristi is not aware that we use the term "Kristi" to describe a late-comer to a family event. Kristi has lived in Chicago for many years and is never on time for family functions. "Pulling a Kristi" means to show up an hour or more later than you have indicated you would arrive. Using this term allows my family to emphasize the importance of punctuality while expressing our resentment of Kristi's lateness.

Folk naming is a rich tradition of folk speech in our family. My grandmother's nickname is "Blondie" because she has been blonde throughout her life. Her parents and siblings called her "Blondie" and my grandfather and father still do. They tend to use "Blondie" when they are trying to irritate her, but she welcomes the name from her peers as a term of familiarity and friendship. My father created nicknames for my mother (The Great Momoo), Chris (Christophophopher or the Phoph, pronounced Christo-fau-fuh-fer and the Fauf), Tim (Timoth or Timatia, pronounced Tim-

uh-tie-uh), Maggie (Magoose or Maggie the Wonder Pup), and me (Rick, Rickus or Princess Margaret Rose).

These nicknames come from simple word play with the traditional name or television personalities. Only my father uses these names. Nicknames were a large part of his upbringing, but were never included in my mother's childhood. Our nicknames allow us to have a special relationship with our father. Because my father worked nine to five every week day, he missed many of our daily childhood experiences. Putting food on the table and money in the bank were my father's primary concerns, not childrearing. Mom never wanted us to fail, so she would help us with homework and school projects if we asked her. My father felt threatened by our closeness to Mom and he uses these nicknames to remind us, her, and himself that he is part of our family, too.

The majority of the proverbs and proverbial lore in my family result from my father's desire for attention and inclusion in family matters. Occasionally, Owen performs in a disruptive manner to get my mother's attention. Throughout Owen's education and fraternity days, he learned Tom Swifities ("Balls," said the Queen, "if I had to I could be King!"), bawdy book titles (Up the Zambeezee by Kayak and Canoe), sarcastic interrogatives ("Does a bear shit in the woods?"), proverbial comparisons ("Your eyes look like pee holes in the snow!"), and folk poetry in the form of limericks ("There once was a man from Nantucket. . ."). He is the only one in our family to perform proverbial sayings and he enjoys instant attention whenever he does.

As a child, I remember my father walking into the kitchen on the way to work, setting down his briefcase and stating with great fervor, "There once was a man from Nantucket!" Until I reached my teens, I never heard the rest of this limerick; my mother did not want me and my brothers to hear the content. She stopped Dad as soon as the first words came out of his mouth with, "Oh, Owen, stop!" He would laugh and my brothers and I joined him; we just thought it was something peculiar Dad would say. Recently, my parents realized that because my mother devoted her energy exclusively to childrearing, my father felt neglected by her and took a passive role in parenting. Limericks like this one gave my father a way to relate to his children, receive attention from his family and let my mother know that he needed her consideration, too.

My parents use the proverbial saying, "Wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up quickest," if the children are greedy or too idealistic about the world. With this, the wisher recognizes that he or she can wish forever, but wishes do not make dreams come true in reality. This statement identifies a problem in behavior and corrects the attitude without confronting the offender directly. For Roger Abrahams, the function of the proverb is "to take the edge off the shock of the disorienting experience, reimposing a sense of order, by aligning this experience with others of its class through giving it its traditional name" (1968). From Owen, the children learned the proverbial sayings described above, and they learned how to use them and other non-traditional insults, retorts, and wisecracks as "regulators of social behavior" in our family (Abrahams 1968).

The punch line of one of Owen's favorite jokes about an obnoxious parrot on a cruise ship became a widespread family retort to the phrase, "Shut up!":

On a cruise ship, there was this parrot and the parrot was not a very nice parrot and in particular he seemed to enjoy picking on the snooty guests on this liner -- passengers or whatever you want to call them, and there was one rather heavy-set matronly woman who every time she would walk by the parrot, the parrot would say, "How's your ass? How's your ass?" And she would always ignore the parrot. So later in the cruise, the ship, for some mysterious reason, either blew up or sank or whatever it was and the matron found herself floating on some debris and the parrot is kind of bobbing by in the waves and greets her in the time-honored fashion, "How's your ass? How's your ass?" And the matron says, "Oh, shut up!" And the parrot says, "Mine too, must be the salt water."

My father saw this joke as a lesson. In our family, disputes would often arise among the three teenagers themselves or between parent and child. To release some of the tension, my father would occasionally interject this punch line and those involved understood that someone was becoming self-important or self-centered. His use of this phrase gives my father control over a situation where he feels he is no longer in control. My family associates retorts like this one with specific people, and only the person who first uttered those statements uses them.

For example, when I tell the contents of a vivid dream to my family, I relate every detail. My brothers find my dreams and their details boring. Once Chris interrupted my description with, "I blinked an eye. I blinked the other eye." Whether I am talk about my dreams or my day, Chris uses this phrase to tell me that I am not functioning at his prescribed level of social interaction.

Similarly, the family keeps Chris in line by reminding him of past infatuations with fads. When break dancing was popular, Chris made the statement to Tim and me that, "Breakin' will never die." Both Tim and I thought he was crazy for investing so much money in the music and the clothing when the fad would surely fade. Now, whenever Chris gets a passion for a trend and tries to argue its staying power, we remind him that "Breakin' will never die."

Our family is constantly checking and grading each other's social graces so that one member will not embarrass the others. We recognize society's views of us and comment on one another's behavior hoping to help each other function properly in society. These retorts not only allow us to confront the offender, but they remind the speaker of the social rules of conduct and thought in the Mair household.

Jokes, like the one about the parrot, are an important part of our family's communication as well. Certain family members tell jokes and others only listen because they either forget punch lines or botch plots. My father is the master joke teller in the family. In many ways, jokes are his primary resource for interacting with us. The content of the jokes my father tells is usually bawdy. Because he is willing to share these obscene stories with me, I feel more like his peer than his daughter. My parents have tried to maintain a friendship with their children. For my father, bawdy jokes allow him to share adult material with fellow adults that just happen to be his kin. For Eugene and Ernest Cooper, as for my father, "[t]he contents of jokes normally violate rules or expectations; the telling of jokes requires some risk taking by the teller to draw attention to the narrative and the narrator. Joke telling means that limits are being tested, sensitive topics are being broached, and hidden feelings are symbolically exposed" (Bronner 1984). Dad learns most of the jokes he tells from his co-workers and golf buddies. Jokes allow him to reveal his concerns about himself and others without directly expressing his feelings. During the Gulf War, my father's favorite joke, or obscene conundrum, was, "What do Saddam Hussein and panty hose have in common? They both irritate Bush." By telling this joke, my father revealed that the war troubled him without having to admit his fear.

Just as jokes symbolically express my father's anxieties, narratives reveal the desires and beliefs of the women in my family. Narratives in the form of personal experience stories and personal legends are common. I have heard courtship stories about my grandparent's wedding since I was old enough to understand marriage. Family stories do not function in my immediate family as they do for my mother and her parents. The Mair's try not to tell embarrassing stories in front of company because they know they will cause the main character, who is present, social discomfort. We save embarrassing stories about children's names for feces, diaper incidents and first words for our own family audience. The stories in this context embarrass the person while reminding them that they are part of family history and that they were not always as refined as they are now.

On the other hand, my maternal grandparents still tell embarrassing stories about their children to people outside the family. They tell one tale so often that they gave it a title, "Holly's Folly." When my mother was in high school, still too young to drink alcohol, she agreed to keep the beer cold for a party on Friday night. My grandparents always went to a fish fry on Friday's and were not home. In the middle of dinner, my grandmother looked at my grandfather and said, "Frank, something's wrong. We got to go home." Grandpa thought she was crazy but they went and when my mother heard them pull up in the drive early, she tried to find a place in her room to hide the beer. With Grandma knocking on her door, my mother slipped the beer out of the window and into the flower bed. When Mom did not immediately open the door, Grandma went outside to her window taking the beer out of her hands and locking it in the trunk of the car. After the incident, my grandparents told the story to their guests while offering them one of Holly's beers. The story functions in two ways for my grandparents: it shows that children cannot get away with deceiving them, and it reaffirms their dominant position as parent over my mother, child. In the text of "Holly's Folly," one can see an element of premonition or psychic phenomena. Telling this story may also prove to others that my family believes my grandmother is psychic. My grandmother, mother, and I circulate memorates of supernatural signs and magic amongst ourselves, close relatives and friends. The women do not share supernatural legends with the men

in the family for fear that they might not believe. All three of us have experienced dream signs or visits from the dead in dreams. I dreamed my boyfriend died a month before his death. My mother dreamed her grandmother came to bless me when I was first born. Grandma dreamed of two deaths the night I got engaged and told me about the dream the morning after I announced my engagement.

Because we each experienced a supernatural encounter, we tend to believe the others. I did not believe my own experience until my grandmother told me of similar encounters. By crystallizing our beliefs and sensitivities to the supernatural into narratives, my grandmother, mother, and I separate ourselves from non-believers and reaffirm our significance. As women, the narratives increase our ability to communicate because they are "... a distillation of experience ... They also simplify character, enabling family members to play on the roles and identities of their kin" (Kotkin and Zeitlin 1983). The "play on identity" is especially clear in our family misfortune stories.

Only the women in the family tell these stories. The males do not tell them because they have no regrets, or they want others to think so. Mom's misfortune stories show a "lack of entrepreneurial spirit" and a "spurned opportunity through love or pride" (Brandes 1975). She married for the first time while she was still in college and then dropped out. Divorced two years later, she got a job in the office where my father worked and they married a year or so after. In this way, my mother reveals that she gave up an education for the man she thought she loved. Then, she gave up a career to marry the man she knew she loved and raise his children. In another tale she tells how she invented the idea for a salad bar in restaurants long before they came into being, but she simply lacked the means to take her idea to the public. The same is true for her idea of opening a Benetton clothing store in our home town. She did not act on her ideas and someone beat her to it.

As Brandes asserts, "These explanations threaten neither the positive self-image of the storyteller nor the child's favorable concept of his parents" (1975). By explaining the events of my mother's life in this way, she compensates for her lack of a college degree and her position as a

homemaker, a career not revered by society. She also illustrates her intelligence and ingenuity by inventing these plans, and she alleviates her guilt for not following through by saying someone beat her to it. I find myself telling these stories as well because I am ashamed that my mother is not a career woman like the mothers of my peers. For me, the misfortune stories do not explain our lack of wealth, but rather, my mother's choice of career. Mom's misfortune stories remind me of what I want to avoid.

Our oral folklore directs our lives in various ways. However, the customs and rituals that we recognize also affect our lives. These customs are an even more integral part of my family's folklore because they express belief, not just stories about our beliefs.

CUSTOMARY FOLKLORE

The memorates above describe experiences my grandmother, mother, and I have had with the dead. However, they do not directly express our belief that communication with the dead is possible and has occurred in our lives. Our customary folklore flatly states these beliefs. Contrary to Mody Boatright's comment that "the old dream-book lore seems to be gone," and that "people who dream of a death no longer expect a wedding, and people who dream of muddy water no longer expect a death," these three women believe strange things happen on Friday the Thirteenth; that clocks stopping, pictures falling and dreaming of a birth can predict a death; that dreaming of a death forecasts a birth or a wedding and that death comes in threes (1958). Beliefs, or superstitions for the non-believers, allow them to "assign a cause to the happening, giving it a name, and thus . . . effectively cope with the situation psychologically" (Abrahams 1968). All three of us have had to deal with death and these customs give us a sense of control over our unpredictable environment.

The desire to control one's environment is also clear in my grandparents' belief in customs concerning planting and the weather. My grandmother plants all things by the phases of the moon as described in the Farmer's Almanac. As farmers, she and my grandfather were dependent on the weather and natural environment for their well-being. Weather predictions (my grandmother believes a pain in her legs foretells rain) and beliefs about plants and plant husbandry aid them in their profession and give them a sense of participation in a cycle over which they have no control.

Superstitions reveal an environment outside the family unit where we seek to control our fate. Within the family unit, my parents controlled my fate until I was old enough to make rational decisions for myself. Rites of passage recognize this maturation and my father used bawdy material to initiate us into the world of adulthood. As stated above, my brothers and I never heard the end of the limerick "The Man from Nantucket." Similarly, we never heard the uncensored version of the song "Twas on the Good Ship Venus." When my father started to say or sing these pieces, and then let us hear the rest, we knew that we just entered a new phase of our lives. Honored to finally hear the rest of the song, I transcribed the verses into my diary. Not only did we hear a dirty song that would be taboo in certain social circles, we heard it from our parent -- a supposed symbol of all that was correct in the world. Furthermore, he had decided to let us hear the whole text and meaning that he, and more importantly my mother, thought we could handle it maturely. The music and bawdy limericks are only part of this experience. The act of initiating children to the adult world is just as important.

The same initiation took place when my brothers and I found out, each in our own way and at different times, who Santa Claus really was. This new found knowledge not only highlighted Christmas, but opened up questions about the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy as well. This rite of passage called into question the calendar customs my family celebrated. As we learned the truth about these characters, my mother began to look for other customs that would maintain, as an adult family, our interest in celebrating together. When we were too old to continue trick-or-treating, my mother and brothers created a stuffed headless woman to sit out on our front porch and scare other children. For Easter, she would send us on treasure hunts with clues for our Easter baskets. Christmas has gone through the most drastic changes. We no longer go to church because my mother believes we are adults and should choose whether or not to attend. The Christmas Eve dinner focuses on drinking and playing games rather than the story of Jesus Christ. On Christmas morning, instead of running to see what Santa has brought, each family member rings a bell that he or she has taken to bed the night before. When we hear five bells, the family meets in the living room to open presents. My mother replaces the traditional characters of the holidays with her

creativity and her attempt to keep our family together as we grow older and our views of the holidays and religion change.

MATERIAL FOLK TRADITIONS

While material culture does exist in my family folklore, customs and narratives accompany two of these material items. The first object is a ceramic swan that my paternal grandmother gave my father for Christmas several years ago. This gift was an odd choice for her to make because my father is afraid of birds and has no use for a large pink shellacked swan. Because my father did not want to hurt her feelings, he graciously accepted, but relished the moment when he could pass the item on to someone else. Thus, the following Christmas, he gave the bird to my maternal grandmother as a gag gift. The swan traveled within the family and has been out of circulation in my immediate family for two years now. The swan not only symbolized my father's fear of birds, but also my father's distant relationship with his mother and his desire to embarrass and burden his mother-in-law with such a present.

The second item concerns the Baby Jesus in my mother's nativity scene. The small doll in the manger says much about my family's religious affiliation, and the presence of the nativity under the Christmas tree shows that my mother keeps the Christian ties to Christmas alive. As I completed my fall semester of my senior year in college, one of professors spoke of a family's practice of taking the Baby Jesus out of the manger, hiding him in the nativity scene and replacing him with a sheep. The mother had to find and replace him. I began to play this game with my mother without telling her initially. The game allowed the family in the article to express taboos about the church in a safe setting. For my mother and me, the game played a similar role subconsciously, but on the surface, it was a way for me to get her attention and be mischievous at a supposedly solemn and religious time of year.

Specific customs or narratives do not accompany the third and final element of my family's material folklore. My grandmother uses flannel material to make quilts like her mother made. She passed the skill on to me and we give the blankets away as gifts for Christmas, birthdays and baby showers. My mother attached a tag to each quilt that tells who made the quilt and explains the

name, Bankie, which my grandmother calls them. We do not need the blankets, but each member of the family, including the dog, has at least two. Quilt making is a way for my grandmother to "return to a skill or talent that [she] learned in [her] younger days. Such skills are often forgotten in the middle years of life when there are more pressing responsibilities and are remembered once again after offset of a major change such as retirement . . . such pastimes can also be a way of reflecting and interpreting one's life and perhaps more importantly, a way of sharing with the next generation a lifetime of acquired skills and experience" (Mundell and Zeitlin 1987). Just as quilting allows my grandmother to leave her mark on the world, it allows me to carry on all that she has started. Quilting for my grandmother and me is just "one of the important ways we give life meaning beyond the immediate present" (Cutting-Baker, Kotkin and Zeitlin 1982).

CONCLUSION

Through our shared experiences as a family, we comment on each other's social skills, test taboos, give advice, vie for power, learn to cope, outline values, and identify ourselves as a specific group. Our folklore allows us to subtly reveal our identity as a folk group. We believe the world is an unpredictable, uncontrollable, unexplainable, and unfair place. Through our folklore, we try to predict, control, explain, and correct the world in which we live. The oral folklore we practice reveals our desires to socially correct and identify each person in the group. Customary folklore allows the individual to identify himself or herself as a believer in some idea. Finally, our material folklore symbolizes our feelings and changing beliefs without verbal explanation to insiders. While some of our folklore functions as an assimilation aid, many of our traditions differentiate us from others. As my father always said, "You do whatever you need to do to get you through the day, and as long as you don't hurt anybody, you're O.K."; our family folklore helps us do just that.

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