

Angels In Our Closets

David W. Gurney

"All-Americans." Is that what we are, or have we forgotten some of the cultural 'angels' in our closets? When we bring out of storage those special decorations passed down in the family for Christmas, when we prepare those special family recipes, when we renew family ties in the special way that certain events are remembered or celebrated, do we reflect on the cultural nature of these things which we do so naturally? In our behavior we retain many of the attributes brought by our ancestors from all areas of the world.

How we react daily to personal and social situations may depend upon a cultural influence which came from a person in our family long forgotten. For a country representing such a diversity of cultural attributes and heritage, it behooves us to reflect on the cultural elements which are a fundamental part of our nature, even though we may not always recognize the source. If we Americans could identify and, by recognizing them, revalidate the contributions of other cultures which are fundamental to our daily lives, we would light a humanistic glow in the global community of which we are a part. "We are part of you," we would be telling the rest of the world from which so many of our ancestors came. "We accept ourselves as new, original, human beings and accept that you helped make us by the pioneering spirit which brought your sons and daughters to these shores."

What importance does this have for social education? Social Studies students and teachers have a unique opportunity to share in the "greening of our culture." An activity which could develop considerable awareness about the cultural make-up of the school community is described below. I call it, "Angels in our Closets."

Here's how it works: the idea is to collect cultural memorabilia or vignettes about students' own families. Episodes of daily living, special occasions, and crises, can be analyzed for the hidden influence of a cultural "angel," an influence which we normally might label "foreign." A questionnaire is given later that will help students focus on activities or ways of doing things in their families which could be a result of a "foreign" culture represented by an ancestor and passed down from generation to generation. While you're thinking about it, jot down a couple of things which come to mind. Mentally explore your own attic or closet for artifacts which represent a different culture which have been important for certain occasions in your family's life. If you trace the origin of the artifact, you may find a "foreigner" who brought it in your family!

As these memorabilia are discovered, they can be examined for the potential cultural influence in family backgrounds from foreign settlers. A bulletin board could be designed with time lines showing the dates of arrival of the ancestors, and a map on which a line could be drawn back to the country of their origin. As the cultural facets are identified, they can be compared and contrasted.

Another use of these cultural facts could be a local version of the late "Bicentennial Minutes." Instead of events from the nation's history, the information would be the basis for short descriptions on the school public address system which reveal the role a certain student's ancestors played in our history. An example "Bicentennial Minute" might sound like this: "One hundred and fifty years ago, my great, great, grandmother came to this country from France and settled in (City, State). She married (name of ancestor) and, today, in my family the following things have passed down from the French culture she brought with her: (relate family activity). My first name is French and so was my grandmother's name. Also, I speak French." There are many publications which are always looking for extra copy of local interest, for example, commercial and social newsletters. Newspaper editors may also be encouraged to develop some of the cultural memorabilia into a

feature article, as well as printing frequent descriptions of the 'angels' which are discovered by amateur detectives.

Questionnaire: CALLING ALL ANGELS

Culture can be defined as patterned behavior embodying the human being's way of adjusting to his environment in terms of the thoughts, ideals, values, habits and speech which reflect both community and individualistic norms of behavior. We can use this definition as a context for examining cultural behavior and memorabilia in order to discover patterns which are reflections of foreign cultural traits brought to this country by our ancestors. The questionnaire is a way of getting students started on examining their local behavior and memorabilia in order to discover some cultural "angels." It is hoped that you and your students will have a greater sense of belonging with other people in a global community with whom we really share more similarities than differences! Perhaps gaining a realization of the actual cultural traits that students share with "foreigners" will help them gain a sensitivity to the mutual interdependence which touches us all on our spaceship, Earth.

Directions

Answer YES or NO to the questions concerning family customs according to the categories of behavior listed. Read the analysis and directions for further cultural detective work which may be indicated by the answers.

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|---|--|------------|-----------|
| A. Name | | <u>YES</u> | <u>NO</u> |
| 1. Do you know where the family name originated? | | YES | NO |
| 2. Does the family name derive from an industry, trade, craft etc. (Miller, Taylor, etc.)? | | YES | NO |
| 3. Are any surnames of your living relatives "foreign" names? | | YES | NO |
| B. Family | | | |
| 1. Can you identify specific family members who are descendants of a person from another country? | | YES | NO |
| 2. Are there relatives who are natives of and living in another country? | | YES | NO |
| 3. Are there any traditional family businesses? | | YES | NO |
| 4. Do any of your relatives belong to a religion associated in name with a foreign country? | | YES | NO |
| 5. Do members of your family follow certain customs? | | YES | NO |
| 6. Do any family members belong to a club representing people of foreign origin (German-American, Italian-American, Hispanic Club, etc.)? | | YES | NO |
| 7. Do any family members speak a foreign language? | | YES | NO |
| C. Special Occasions | | | |
| 1. At special celebrations, do family members follow customs passed down through many generations? | | YES | NO |
| 2. Do family members follow certain traditions when crises arise (serious sickness or accidents, and death?) | | YES | NO |
| 3. On special occasions, such as marriage and the birth of a child and anniversaries, are special traditional customs observed which are peculiar to your family? | | YES | NO |
| 4. Do family members celebrate holidays different from those celebrated by most of their neighbors? | | YES | NO |
| 5. Is any foreign music usually played on special occasions in your family? | | YES | NO |
| 6. Do family members take part in celebrations by clubs representing other national origins? | | YES | NO |

C. Special Occasions

7. Do family members use traditional decorations originating with ancestors? YES NO

D. Customs

1. Do family members have special ways of welcoming visitors to their homes? YES NO
2. Is there a traditional way of leaving or going to another person's house? YES NO
3. Are there special rules of dress or customary clothes to be worn? YES NO
4. Are there special rules of behavior which are family-style-accepted standards which have been passed down? YES NO
5. Are there any foreign language expressions regularly used by family members regarding certain customs or behaviors? YES NO
6. Is there some customary family wisdom which has passed down through generations? YES NO

E. The Home

1. Are homes furnished (furniture and arrangement) according to certain traditional styles? YES NO
2. Are there family antiques which are from another country? YES NO
3. Do family styles of dress reflect specific family (or traditional) customs? YES NO

F. The Community - similar questions can be derived, if desired, relative to:

1. Nationalities
2. Religions
3. Language differences and usage
4. Differences in customs
5. Special occasions and celebrations
 - a. marriage, birth, death, etc.
 - b. holidays
 - c. foods, meals, beverages
 - d. decorations
 - e. occupations
 - f. songs, art forms, dress
 - g. social situations and formulas of achievement
 - h. special vocabulary
6. Other community facets
 - a. community relations with foreign relatives and foreign events
 - b. architectural styles
 - c. political activities
 - d. famous people
 - e. products used, imports

CULTURAL ANALYSIS:

A. Name

Did you answer YES to any of the questions about family origins? One of the quickest ways to establish a contact with potential foreign influences is through identification of the old world origin of a family name. Many names have not changed much, either. A name reflecting an occupation may, also, be derived from an ancestor's trade.

B. Family

Questions 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 provide good clues about the ethnic influences in your family. If you answered YES to any of these, you should be able to put

B. Family cont.

together quite a few aspects of "foreign" culture which are regular parts of your family's life. YES to questions 3 and 5 should start you digging into the sources of these customs (who was the first to start them; was the person a descendant of someone from another country? If so, there is the cultural "angel" still influencing your behavior!)

C. Special Occasions

Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 reflect culture-loaded behavior. YES to almost any of these should send you back to older relatives who might remember how the traditions got started and who can give you names of the originators. It's very likely that there is a foreign influence, a cultural "angel" still affecting your life.

D. Customs

YES answers to these questions are indicators of ethnic influences from the past, in the same ways that traditions or special occasions are. Digging for the sources of certain behaviors that you have noticed in family customs is more difficult than tracing a recipe back to its origin because we like to think that each of us has a unique code of values, morals and sense of judgment. You will be surprised to see what influences have passed down from your ancestors, even to the rules for dating, dress codes, and various aspects of social behavior!

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