
Stories to Live By:
The Role of Older Adults
in Transmitting Ethnic Heritage*

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IN A THOUGHTFUL AND ELEGANTLY WRITTEN INQUIRY INTO THE American national character and into the American's search for tradition and meaning in life, Robert N. Bellah and his collaborators (1985) in *Habits of the Heart*, distinguish between "community" and "lifestyle enclave." Community describes a group of people dependent on each other who share in decision-making and participate in certain practices, rituals that bind them through history into a "community of memory," practices of commitment which bind them to others, and which look to both the past and the future.

"Communities of memory" do not forget their past but are involved in retelling their story in narratives that offer examples of the men and women who have embodied the meaning of the community. They delve into the stories of collective histories and exemplary personalities that constitute an important part of the tradition, central to a "community of memory." The stories are not all about successes and achievements but include stories of suffering, pain and failure. They are stories that present a linkage to the past while they turn to the future as communities of hope. "Communities of memory" are ethnic, racial and religious communities, each with its own heroes and heroines, its own story. Families can be communities remembering their past, telling the children the stories of parents' and grandparents' lives and sustaining hope for the future, though without the context of a larger community. That sense of community is hard to maintain. Thus, where history and hope

*In memory of my parents.

are forgotten and community means only the gathering of the similar, community degenerates into what has been referred to as "lifestyle enclave." The temptation for such transformation is endemic in American society, though the transition is rarely complete.¹

"Lifestyle enclave," on the other hand, is a group of people who share "some aspects of private life" but there is no interdependence, no shared history, nothing but the "narcissism of similarity." There are people who have freed themselves from ethnic and religious boundaries. In contrast to the "community of memory," an inclusive whole, the authors speak of "lifestyle enclave" as fundamentally segmental. It involves a segment of each individual for the concern is private life, especially leisure and consumption patterns as expressions of social status. "Lifestyle enclaves" are, in addition, segmented socially including only those with a common lifestyle. The "lifestyle enclave" is based on individualism, a choice that largely frees the individual from traditional and ethnic boundaries, rationality, and achievement, values on which American society is based. "Lifestyle enclaves" find new ways that determine one's own identity. They encourage breaking from the past, defining one's self, and choice of the groups with which one may wish to identify. Ethnicity loses its distinctive social context although it may at times be retained symbolically. Thus, the ethnic story is part of "community," the "lifestyle enclave" has no shared history, and as a result no ethnic story.²

In his autobiographical essay, *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez³ eloquently speaks of the movement between environments, American social success, and the pain of isolation from his roots, the "silence," "the hunger of memory," "the middle class pastoral." Although he contends that the rewards of Americanization and middle class status are worth the emotional costs, he would have been happier about his public success if he had "not sometimes recalled what it had been like earlier when my family had conveyed its intimacy through a set of conveniently private sounds."⁴

Within the above framework, this paper addresses the ethnic story from the perspective of an ethnic subcommunity, the Greek-American subcommunity. It is the story of my own ethnic heritage, the story of others of the Greek-American subcommunity, life stories providing the essence of what began as a collective identity, an identity in search of survival in ethnic communities and is gradually becoming a story of

¹ Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart—Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 153-54.

² Ibid. pp. 71-84.

³ (New York, 1982).

⁴ Ibid. p. 25.

personal identities, a blending of a "community" and a "lifestyle enclave," the shifting progressively in the direction of the latter.

The story of Greek-Americans is a story of generations, stories of the old migrants and their traditional value system, recent migrants whose stories reflect social change in the country of origin, a new set of historical circumstances, and native-born generations whose ways of interpreting the traditional value system are different and within the context of the dominant American culture. It is a "community of memory" of old migrants transplanted from their villages to seek their fortune in the land of opportunity, help the remaining family, and return to their country of birth. It is the life story of the old migrants, the founders of churches, organizations, schools, community centers, and an elaborate community structure, in time supported also by the succeeding native-born generations in their attempt to achieve bicultural accommodation. It is in addition the story of recent migrants, a new generation of Greeks, whose world view has been affected by the rapidity of social change and whose frame of reference is modern Greece. Their ethnic story differs from that of the old migrants and the early native-born generations subjected, as they were, to strict adherence to traditional norms. Recent migrants varied in their motivation for migration and had had different arrival and settlement experiences. Their move to the New World was met with opportunities offered by flourishing Greek-American communities, shaped and reshaped as they were by the old migrant and native-born generations, an amalgam of old world types, acculturated, and to varying degrees assimilated types. Thus, the story we are about to tell is a story of diversity of ethnic identification retentiveness, a story influenced by personal and historical circumstances which have an impact not only on the sources of ethnic identification but measurably on the strength of such identification, and the intensity of the desire of its transmission. It is a story of continuities and discontinuities.

In contrast to traditional societies where tradition is central and one does not have to ask what the function of the elders might be, it is not easy in a society like ours to generalize about the role of the elderly in ethnic heritage transmission, the meaning of ethnic heritage, and the desire for its perpetuity. In traditional societies continuity is assured by custom. In such settings, there exist tightly knit patterns of culture that are shared by all. They are supported by common past, shared lifestyles, frequent face-to-face interaction, neighborliness, and geographic proximity. The stories of the elders are not a matter of personal reminiscences but collective memories. Our society does not easily provide the support systems for the story tellers. This is not to say that ethnic traditions are broken and no one is there to listen to the story

of the elders. We have ample examples pointing to the maintenance of ethnic subcultures. The issue to address, however, is how does the ethnic story emerge in an ethnic subcommunity as one moves along the generational continuum? How and to what degree is ethnic heritage transmitted? What role do the elders play in ethnic heritage transmission? What are the forces contributing to the transformation of ethnic traditions, and to the change of "communities" to "lifestyle enclaves"?

Heritage is anything transmitted from one generation to another by social transmission of the elements of a particular culture, its customs, and traditions. Transmission is a dynamic process which includes integration, shaping and reshaping, transformation and change. The process may be a preceiving, a thinking, a feeling or an acting. Tradition is the vehicle through which learning something of the mores and stock of knowledge of the ancestors is achieved. It applies to elements of culture so transmitted, and emphasizes the notions of continuity, stability, and venerability, continuity being the inescapable experiential product of a kind of process which ties ideas, beliefs, and events of one period to those of the next. Culture functions as a synthesis of stability and change. Cultural continuity entails contact with and access to a coherent and relatively stable body of values, ideas, and symbols. It is both a process and an experience. The overt part of the culture is to be found in the actual behavior of an ethnic group, its customs, its organizations, its institutions.⁵

My interest in cultural transmission dates back to the time of a study I conducted which focused on the American-Greek subculture, its processes of continuity. It was a horizontal study of three generations, the old and recent migrant generation and the second and third native-born generations. The study explored subcultural continuity in terms of factors in the current setting, such as family and kin, church adherence, endogamy, ethnic language preservation, community organizational involvement, friendships and information networks, contact with the country of origin, as well as regional factors and urban versus rural residence differences. In a way, this was a pilgrimage for me, a special way of placing my growing experiences in a particular perspective. It brought me closer to my own ethnic story. Subcultural continuity and ethnic identification, in this study, emerged as a continuum ranging from the highly unacculturated "old world" types, "the approaching strangers" whose adherence to the ethnic story meant survival in an alien environment, to the acculturated and assimilated individuals who more often than not identified in various degrees with the subcommunity of their ethnic origin, the latter providing the means of social location in an amorphous society, ethnic identity increasingly and progressively

⁵ Marshall Sahlins *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), p. 153.

assuming a personal-biographical tone.⁶ The subculture reflected elements of "community" and "lifestyle enclave."

Of extreme interest was the retention of Greek values, transformed in varying degrees, even in the third generation, the bicultural accommodation of some, the marginality and detachment of others, the underlying national pride, and sentimental attachment. The Greek-American subculture emerged with its in-group, out-group, and peripheral components giving rise to a new brand of Hellenism in America, far removed from the Hellenism of the old migrant and that of the recent migrant, but a blend of the values of the dominant culture, the American-Greek subculture and modern Greece. The subcommunity emerged with its diversity of constituencies, constituencies with varying definitions of Greekness depending on frames of references and sources of ethnic identity.⁷ The ethnic stories to live by had different meanings depending on the constituency. The ethnic story had changed and at times was unrecognizable. Despite the variability of frame of reference, however, with regard to defining Greekness, the desire for continuity was overwhelmingly present, and abundantly reflected in the study.

But what are the processes of ethnic continuity, ethnic heritage survival, and what is the meaning of the desirability of such continuity? How important does it become with the passage of time and advancing years? What particular functions may or may not be assumed in later life? For example, are obligations of care and respect on the part of younger people for their elders more rigorously adhered to among groups where high levels of continuity are the rule? Is it possible to balance excessive change in the cultural sphere by the maintenance of stability in the area of interpersonal relations, continuity of ties to the country of origin and to a personally significant place, culture, and strength?

In the study of the Greek-American subculture mentioned, the values of respect and obligation towards the aging parents were strong. The unmistakable influence of parents and grandparents was revealed in interviews, and ethnicity in its most traditional and external manifestations seemed to be often linked to grandparenting. It was grandparents that more often than not told the ethnic story to the native-born. My own ethnic story underscores this. I remember vividly my parents' later years. My parents lived with me, and almost daily in their napping time, they would enjoy sharing reminiscences. I can hear their conversations even today (both my parents are now dead). Often, as I would be working on the floor below and with their door open, I could hear repetitions

⁶ Chrysie M. Costantakos, *The American-Greek Subculture: Processes of Continuity* (New York, 1980).

of their early history, the significant influences of their early upbringing, their relationships with their parents, their siblings, their relatives, most of whom had stayed behind, the stories of their later childhood, the heroes and the heroines of their early existence, some of whom I had never met. The vivid descriptions of their characteristics rendered them alive and present, and I can still imagine their everyday lives, their village celebrations, the festivities, the rituals, the events of tragedy and sorrow. Much was said about the trip to America, the agony of separation, the settlement, the adjustment. In their stories, they seemed to attempt to make sense of what had happened to them. Stories of friends and acquaintances projected the elderly as separated by a cultural gap from their more Americanized children, and my parents would point regretfully to those cultural discontinuities. There was the personal element of wish, especially on the part of my father that we had returned to Greece as this was their plan when they decided to repatriate. This was the second American pilgrimage for my parents. The longing for the "patrida," the country of origin, was omnipresent. In fact, my father made a ritual, the yearly pilgrimage to Greece in his later years. He seemed to become rejuvenated and return with greater vigor and zest for life. In the last years, he would either persuade my often reluctant mother to accompany him or would arrange to take one or two of his grandchildren for company and for what one would guess a sense of security, as there was progressive weakening of strengths.

My parents were superb family genealogists and could draw a clear picture of the family tree. Their stories of reminiscing were spontaneous, at times with the limited audience of their children and grandchildren. Other times it was a sharing between the two of them. The stories seemed to serve several functions. They were memories and reliving of pleasant associations and events. There was entertainment and positive experiences of warmth and kinship. Sometimes the stories were purposeful and educational. They were attempts to teach their children and grandchildren, and to transmit the values of a culture they cherished and wanted to see preserved and perpetuated. The stories were a confirmation of their lives, a validation of themselves, their customs, symbols, and rituals, the stories they lived by. They seemed to help them rework the past so they could understand the present. They were a linkage of the past, the present, and the future, the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. When alone, my parents would repeat the same stories with the same emphasis and even phraseology. They never seemed to get tired of their audiences. When at times they would be reminded by the audience of their children and grandchildren that we knew the story, they would pause for a moment and continue the story anyway. Many of the stories of my parents related to major life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths. They dealt a lot on child rearing

practices and cultural values. Their stories carried a lot of overt and covert messages stressing the importance of family, church, ethnic language preservation, and institutional networking, all in support of efforts and desire to sustain and maintain the culture. The messages were clear as to the significance of filial responsibility and family honor.

Births and child rearing were a major focus of my parents' stories, usually relating to family relatives and friends. Family honor has always been very important to Greeks, and in my parents' stories those who broke the rules were dishonoring their entire family. They would frequently refer to characters in their stories as not having "philotimo," and would regretfully make references to young Greek-Americans who did not even know the word. Rooted in Greek tradition has been the concept of "philotimo" (love of honor) which was for a Greek his *raison d'être*, the core of the Greek personality.

Attempting to make sense of what was happening to them and to those family members and compatriots they knew, they would resort to stories of friends and acquaintances. Many of the stories projected the elderly as separated by a cultural gap from their more Americanized children, and my parents would sadly point to a variety of cultural discontinuities and transformations of the value orientation described in the stories they lived by. The aged in my parents' stories seemed to be the product of a number of definitive ruptures, first migration from their country of origin, their place of birth, and in addition separation from the culture that socialized and nurtured them into adulthood; partial or complete alienation within their present cultural environment and to varying degrees concomitant severance or loosening of all important intergenerational ties. There was the conflict of Americanization and ethnic loyalty tied to attempts of transmission of the ethnic story in the best way they saw possible. But how about cultural transmission? Is it continuous? Is it desirable? Is it possible? Is the ethnic story by necessity fragmented and diversified? Is ethnic heritage a convenient tag, a validation of self, a sentimental attachment, or a social location in an amorphous society?

As we look at ethnicity from the perspective of the three generations of Greek Americans, we are struck by its complexity. It is hard to find a shared identity and a collective conscience. As a result, the Greek-American experience must be placed in a broad and situationally specific social context. The context varies both in terms of structural boundaries and functions. There has been no singular American experience to which all Greeks participated collectively, and Greeks in the United States have not been a homogeneous group. Their destiny has to a great extent been shaped by economic, historical, demographic, ecological, and generational considerations.

The Greek-American subcommunity projects constituencies of

varying degrees of attachment to the ethnic story. The concept of ethnic identity remains fluid and assumes different shadings among individuals within a generation, and from generation to generation. Not only does generational status play an important role, but other intervening variables such as education, social class, occupation, marital status, intermarriage, church and community activity, contact with the Old Country, just to mention a few such influences.

Ethnicity for some is defined in terms of family, primary group ties, tradition, language and religion, this being more the case with the migrant groups. For others, ethnicity is defined more in terms of secondary relations, and externals such as ritualistic religion, music, dance, and Greek cuisine, the latter more evident among the native-born generations. Between the two polarities stands a variety of definitions of Greekness presenting an accommodation between the ethnic experience and location within the social structure of America. One may venture to say that what emerges is a unique type of Greekness favored and adaptable to the American environment, an "American Greekness," we may say.

Looking at generations, one may ascertain continuities and discontinuities of immigrant ethnic heritage, and a simultaneous appearance of new forms of ethnic consciousness, progressively influenced by the American ethos of upward mobility and success, non-ethnic and secular experiences. Ethnic language preservation diminishes with each succeeding generation and there is increasing identification with being American with the younger native-born generations. There is substantive increase in and out of the group marriage and loosening in family and community cohesiveness.

How precisely can we draw the line between "community" and "lifestyle enclave"? Greek-Americans as indeed other groups seek belongingness and generate the social and psychological energy necessary to maintain or to recreate a meaningful sense of connectedness. My parents' stories gave me the feeling that their frequent reminiscing exchanges became a dominant theme especially in their later and more leisurely years. They were stories of their experiences, and represented a vital link to their past, their sense of being, their self-identity. Their reminiscences and their stories to my children, consciously or unconsciously, provided the links between generations, the vehicles of desired cultural transmission. After all, they had more to remember than their children, the younger generation. They also had more time to delve into the ethnic story. The recapitulation of their life experiences was more than a listing of events. It was more the opportunity to re-experience and reevaluate, in a way reorder perceptions, actions, and relationships, and to facilitate their interconnection, and purposefulness. It is possible that they saw themselves as the links between generations,

as teachers, socializing agents, carriers of both traditions and personal experiences, and, as such, repositories of a kind of history.

Old age and aging exist in a matrix of cultural forms and one's ethnicity can be viewed as a resource, the continuity of which is desirable. It is a resource in the strengthening of ego identity and continuity of self. Older people can be keepers of tradition. They know about many unrecorded events that have taken place over the years in their families, their neighborhoods, communities, workplaces and the country at large. "In late life" writes Butler and Lewis "people have a particularly vivid imagination and memory for the past and can recall with sudden and remarkable clarity early life events . . . One may become more capable of mutuality with a comfortable acceptance of the life cycle, the universe, and the generations."⁸ The story of the Greek-American subcommunity, the way I got to know it points to a desire for continuity, but it is hard to evaluate the meaning attached to such continuity by the diverse constituencies of such subcommunity. It is hard to determine the stories that all constituencies live by and the elements which might explain the consistency of "community" or the "lifestyle enclave." It is also hard to point to a consistency in the role of the elderly in ethnic heritage transmission.

It would seem from the perspective of the Greek-American subcommunity that the ethnic story assumes different significance with the passage of time, different historical periods and with each succeeding generation. Unquestionably, collective identity is progressively being replaced by private personal identities, and the "community of memories" becomes gradually a blending of "community" and "lifestyle enclave" in favor of the latter. Although desire for continuity is present, the subculture is characterized by inconsistencies, ambivalence, diffusion, and elements of discontinuity. Aging and transmission of heritage assumes different forms and meanings from individual to individual and generation to generation. The ethnic identification is there and there exists an elaborate organizational structure to support it, but the ethnic story is fragmented. It has become a role rather than a living experience.

Can the reminiscing of the elderly be compensatory for losses in heritage transmission? I suppose my message is that it can. The possibility of balancing excessive change in the cultural sphere by the maintenance and strengthening of interpersonal relations may very well be possible. Life history is a powerful tool for the achievement of such a goal.

⁸ Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Lewis, *Aging and Mental Health* (St. Louis, 1973), pp. 43-44.