

TURNING HERITAGE INTO LEGACY

UU FELLOWSHIP, SHERIDAN WY

OCTOBER 1, 2023

By Susan Clinch

Last week at our pot-**luck**' Amy Andrews asked me: "Where are you from?" I must have looked confused, so she said "I mean Where did you grow up?" It turns out I pronounce potluck with a midwestern emphasis on the second syllable, whereas the native Wyoming way is to put it on the first: **pot**'luck.

Amy was asking me about a small sliver of my heritage -the part that produces little regionalisms and idioms - which is usually the case when one white person asks another white person that "where are you from?"question. When a white person asks it of a person of color it is too often weighted with the assumption that "You must be from somewhere else." We all carry our heritage around with us and on some of us it weighs more heavily than others.

So, what is Heritage? When I first began to think about this talk I thought of my own personal heritage. And given the context of a UU monthlong exploration of the concept I first thought of my spiritual heritage - Roman Catholicism. Then, of course, my cultural heritage - Irish American.

Heritage, then, is how we start to answer the question: Who am I?

But does that answer the question? Is that who I am, the sum of all that went before me?

How many of us think we know our heritage...but are dead wrong. My daughter-in-law Hesid learned the Hebrew alphabet before the Roman and was raised in a very idiosyncratic form of Judaism. But her mother was born into an Episcopalian family and her father changed his name more than once to escape his past, so Hesid doesn't even know what his real name is. Is she Jewish?

I have a new cousin that I met through a DNA test on [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). Her birth mother is my first cousin. And that first cousin wants nothing to do with the daughter she gave up so long ago. So I am the only thing that connects new cousin Pam to that part of her heritage. Pam, adopted by a lovely couple of Slavic heritage, grew up to be a noted teacher of Celtic dance. Where did that come from?

And there was a recent news story about two 68 year old Canadian men who discovered they were switched at birth - one went to a loving household, while the other endured foster care and discrimination. They found out through home DNA tests that they had been separated at birth and had been raised by each other's biological families; one of Ukrainian descent and the other French/Native American. They said the discovery prompted an avalanche of confusion and existential crisis and both say now that they wish they had never learned the truth.

David Brooks recently wrote this in a column: "I believe most of us tell a story about our lives and then come to live within that story. You can't know who you are unless you know how to tell a coherent story about yourself. You can know what to do next only if you know

what story you are a part of. ‘A man is always a teller of tales,’ the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre observed. ‘He lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.’”

So what’s going on here?

It turns out there’s more to this idea of Heritage than I knew. In my reading I learned that there are 3 types of Heritage: Cultural, Natural and Intangible.

Cultural heritage includes tangible culture such as buildings, monuments, archive materials, books, works of art, and artifacts.

Intangible heritage consists of nonphysical intellectual wealth, such as folklore, customs, beliefs, traditions, and language. **Natural heritage** includes culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity.

So when I referred to myself as Roman Catholic and Irish American I was largely talking about my Cultural Heritage. When I talk about Daughter-in-law Hesid’s Seder traditions and Cousin Pam’s Celtic Dance I’m talking about Intangible Heritage.

In The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History David Lowenthal says “Heritage, while it often constitutes and defines the most positive aspects of culture, is a malleable body of historical text subject to interpretation and easily twisted into myth. When it is appealed to on a national or ethnic level in reactions against racial, religious, or economic oppression, the result is often highly-charged political contention or conflict.”

This book is about how the rise of a manifold, crusade-like obsession with tradition and inheritance--both physical and cultural--can lead to either good or evil. It explores the pros and cons of the rhetoric and spoils of heritage--on the one hand cultural identity and unity, on the other, potential holy war. I think we will hear more about this concept of Heritage in the presentations that will follow this month. My focus is not on this larger use of Heritage, but on the personal, one-person-at-a-time experience of Heritage.

As I delved into the world of Heritage Studies (yes, that is a thing) I realized that the part I really wanted to investigate, the part that mattered, was the Intangible.

We each construct our own Sartre- like stories. Even within families our Heritage is like a series of Venn diagrams. We each incorporate a mix of the Cultural, Natural and Intangible inheritance that we receive in our own individual ways.

Once you get a handle on your heritage, whatever it is for you personally, you realize that Heritage is what you receive from the past. What do you do with it?

You live it...you use it to help chart the direction your life takes. My cultural Heritage tells me that the Fighting Irish are my team. The intangible tells me how to be a good loser. My Cultural Heritage tells me that, as a Catholic I should attend mass every Sunday (or, at the very least, on Easter) My Intangible Heritage tells me to feed the hungry and comfort the sick, that I really should turn the other cheek and that I must love my neighbor as myself.

My parents were the conduits through which I received this heritage. They took what they inherited and, whether consistent with their cultural heritage or not, developed intangible beliefs and customs which they passed on to me and my siblings. They internalized what seemed good and shed what was not. That was their Legacy.

Now it's my turn. As I live within my story I, in turn, am a conduit, to my children, my friends, my world. My Heritage will become my Legacy.

I have 4 children - 4 distinct humans with very different gene pools. I am a part of the heritage of each of them, though only two have my DNA. They are the beneficiaries of my legacy, though I hope not the only ones.

I can already see the Venn diagrams that have formed in our family; each of them taking parts of my story into their own to a greater or lesser extent. Combining my small contribution with that of their Fathers, and in two cases their mother's, mixing that in with their relationship to the landscapes that have shaped them. I truly don't care if they identify with Irish roots, Manx roots, British or Dutch; Catholic or Mormon. It's the Intangibles that matter to me.

I watch my kids form their own families and I hope that the patience they have was influenced by our practice of each reading stories *before* presents were opened on Christmas morning. I like to think that the compassion and welcome they show to strangers is in some small part a result of

the dude ranching heritage they learned from their Grandmother. And maybe the fact that our family regarded theater as almost a religion helped form the great empathy I see in each of them helped them all to be as interested in hearing another's story as they are in telling their own.

What is a life but that? Turning a heritage into a legacy...glancing at the rearview mirror of Heritage while keeping your focus on the road of Legacy ahead.

The law of conservation of energy states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed - only converted from one form of energy to another. I believe that the love and compassion and empathy that we inherit is energy - and in a secular form of transubstantiation we can bequeath it to the next generation.

Our morning music was a terrific rendition of Don't Fence Me In, a song closely tied to my family's Heritage, and in some way, I hope to yours. We are all Westerners, native or adopted, even if we've never straddled a cayuse. And the fact that Cole Porter wrote it is just plain cool. We can all take something from it. For me, it says " Let's get beyond the fences, the barriers. Let's push beyond the duality of "inside or outside"; forward or backward. Let's get to the place where we can see past the the artificial divisions; Where we can Be Here Now. Because if we live our lives with the belief that Emily Dickinson is right and forever really is composed of nows it will be easier to simply gaze at the moon until we lose our senses.

For all the great monuments we build to our culture, nothing is stronger than the Intangibles. A beloved part of my own educational Heritage is St. Exupery's Little Prince, and he knew what he was talking about when he said,

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.