Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Ethics and Folklore

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JMJ

This past October, shortly after I boarded the first of several planes that would take me to Quebec, the gentleman in the seat next to me, a pheasant hunter from Michigan, asked me where I was headed. When I told him, he seemed a bit surprised and inquired as to why I'd be going there. I responded that I was attending a joint meeting of the American Folklore Society and the Folklore Studies Association of Canada. An awkward silence ensued. Then, suddenly, he asked, a bit too brightly, "Fiddler?" Now I was the one momentarily stunned into silence as I pondered what the appropriate response to his comment ought to be. On the Roof, perhaps? Then it dawned on me that I was experiencing a moment so common in the experience of folklorists that it could almost qualify for its very own tale type designation. Something like "The Folklorist Explains the Profession." Or, more simply, "The Folklorist Sighs." "No, " I replied. "I don't play the fiddle, though some folklorists do." Before I could launch into an explanation of what folklore is and what folklorists do, however, the flight attendant began a lengthy announcement, and the moment was lost.

In truth, though, it takes more than a mere moment to explain why I am a folklorist or what folklore is. Let me begin with the former, as some of you who know me as a professor in the English department may be a bit confused as to why I'm even referring to myself as a folklorist. Though my graduate degrees are all in English, my doctoral field was American Literature 1830-1930 with Folklore and Literature as an

Allied Field, my dissertation director was a folklorist, and my dissertation concerned Willa Cather's use of folk narratives in three of her novels. Since then, I've published articles or reviews in the journals *Southern Folklore, Western Folklore,* and *The Journal of American Folklore,* presented papers and/or chaired panels at all but one of the last eighteen American Folklore Society conferences, and served on folklore panels at meetings of the Mid-American American Studies Association and the Midwestern Modern Language Association. Still, even with all of that, I was reluctant to call myself a folklorist, because I hadn't earned a degree from a university with an official folklore department, until a number of years ago when the respected folklorist Jack Santino told me, "Debbie, we all consider you a folklorist. I don't know why you can't call yourself one." And, in truth, since the current South Dakota State folklorist is a part-time freelancer who lives in Idaho, so far as I know, I'm the only one in the state who could even begin to make that claim.

Having addressed how I qualify as a folklorist, let me move on to what folklore is. I wish I could offer you a simple definition. Actually, if you consulted the American Folklore Society's official website (www.afsnet.org, if anyone cares to take a look), you'd see not one definition, but seven. That's not terribly surprising, given that if you asked ten folklorists what folklore is, you'd probably get ten slightly different answers. Still, all of those responses would likely include three key characteristics. Folklore, they would tell you is traditional; that is, it is practiced in essentially the same way over a particular period of time. It is collective; that is, it is practiced by groups of at least two or more people who have at least one essential trait, interest, or belief in common. Finally, it is transmitted either orally, as in the case of such forms of folklore as folk narratives,

jokes, and songs or through customary example, as in the case of foodways, folk art, traditions, customs, rituals, folk architecture and many other types of folklore too numerous to mention. Folklore is, in other words, a big, marvelously unwieldy field perfect for those who don't focus well. Believe me. I know. Only as a folklorist could I have turned such diverse interests as figure skating, dogs, the television show *Northern Exposure,* and De Smet's Laura Ingalls Wilder pageant into fodder for academic research.

I must admit, however, that folklore and ethics is not a subject I had explored at any great length prior to Rich Bowman asking me to be part of this series. Thus, as one whose research habits were once described as "pathological" by her very own dissertation director--I chose to view that as a compliment--I wasn't about to depend solely upon my own opinions. I went looking for answers. Unfortunately, the American Folklore Society itself wasn't terribly helpful. Its official statement on ethics and the profession runs three pages but begins with the warning that it shouldn't be taken as the final word on the subject (*Statement)*. A fairly basic article on the subject, "Ethics and the Student Fieldworker," geared toward the beginning folklorist, was similarly inconclusive. Of its sixty-four sentences, thirty seven of them are questions for which the remaining sentences provide no answers--and yes, I counted; remember, I'm pathological (Smidchens and Walls 11-13). Of the sources I did peruse, William Hugh Jansen's "Ethics and the Folklorist" offered perhaps the best and certainly the most concise opinion. According to Jansen, for a folklorist, ethics involve a responsibility to the discipline, to those who serve as sources or informants, and to the folklorist's intended audience (534). Presuming the discipline refers to those who practice it as

well as the field itself, Jansen's definition emphasizes what every other reference I consulted did: people--the people who practice folklore, the people who study folklore, and the people who read the work of those who study it.

I mention those who practice folklore first, those commonly referred to as sources or informants or practitioners, because they come first, or ought to, in terms of the work and ethics of folklorists. Without them, we have no way of doing our research, so without them, no one would be reading or hearing our research either. Furthermore, there is a genuine need for folklorists doing fieldwork to create community ties in order to earn the kind of trust necessary to gain legitimate access to the research situations essential to our work, though there are those who argue that folklorists may sometimes need to violate that trust in the name of research.

The first time I heard such an argument, I was sitting in a graduate school folklore course. We had been assigned a reading from James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In 1936, Agee, along with photographer Walker Evans, received funding from the WPA to research an article on tenant cotton farmers in Alabama. In the process of researching the article, which eventually became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee and Evans stayed with three farm families, living for a little less that four weeks with the family with whom they spent the most time, the Gudgers. The reading we'd been given was the fifty-six page description of the Gudger house and grounds, including the contents of trunks, bureau drawers, and closets, all of which are described in excruciating detail and with excessive pathos by Agee. What struck me then, and now, as the most revealing portions of his description are Agee's first and last sentences. He begins by stating, "No one is at home, in all this house, in all this land. It

is a long while before their return. I shall move as they would trust me not to, as I could not, were they here"(133). He also concludes with an additional recognition that he knows what he is doing might well offend the Gudgers. When he hears them approaching, he quickly abandons searching through their possessions and seats himself on their porch with his notebook open, as if eagerly awaiting their return, though he admits to himself that "it is not going to be easy to look into their eyes" (189). When the professor who had assigned the piece asked the class whether Agee had a legitimate right to behave as he did, I was astonished at the number of my classmates who replied affirmatively. Yes, of course, Agee had the right, even the duty, as a researcher to be thorough. If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have been able to tell the whole story of the Gudger family, and his conclusions about them would have been regrettably incomplete. As I listened to the dispassionate discussion politely going on all around me, two thoughts swirled through my head. The first was to be sure to make a mental list of which of my classmates would now never, ever be allowed unsupervised in my home, and the second was, "Who raised you people?"(hence the first lesson for today).[1] Eventually, I managed to join those two thoughts, and temper my initial emotional, albeit silent, response with enough logic to join the conversation. "No, " I said. "I wouldn't go through a family's personal possessions without their knowledge. If my research was incomplete as a result, I'd sooner live with that than the idea that I had violated the privacy of people who had graciously invited me into their home." I suspect some of my classmates thought I was being unbelievably naive and idealistic, but I still believe it was wrong for Agee to treat the Gudgers as he did, not only because I would be appalled if I were treated the same way--hence the second lesson[2]--but also

because I am uncomfortably aware that if the Gudgers had been a wealthy, prosperous family, as opposed to an impoverished, working class family, Agee would never have been able to behave as he did. First, he would likely never have had that kind of access to an upper class family's home. Second, if he had gone through the belongings of a rich family in that fashion and published an unauthorized account of their possessions and his emotional reactions to them, he would likely have been sued.

Fear of legal charges, however, is not the principle driving force behind how I choose to behave as a folklorist. I am acutely aware that I must act responsibly out of respect for my profession, because, given the limited number of folklorists in this country, and particularly in this region, I may be the only folklorist with whom my informants ever deal. If I treat them poorly, I damage the reputation of the entire field. Moreover, my sources are under no obligation to share their lives and their traditions with me. If I disrespect them or their folklore, I mistreat the very people who make my research possible. Finally, if I am careless in my findings or condescending in my tone or approach, I tell my audience that neither they nor my work are worthy of better.

While all that is philosophically impressive, what does it mean in terms of practical application? To me, it means that I must explain the purpose of my research thoroughly to my informants, get signed releases from them to which they can attach any addendum's they like regarding information they do not wish used in public applications of my research, and always, always remember that they are doing me a tremendous favor by assisting me in my research in what can be very personal and personable ways. For instance, I have been invited into private meetings and homes, and I've been given personal, free tours of historic and literary sites. I've even been

handed sack lunches that would feed a family of four plus five pounds of homemade double walnut divinity to make sure I wouldn't get too hungry flying from Nebraska to Illinois, not to mention the Christmas cards I still get from one source I haven't seen in almost twenty years. For me to treat such people and their stories with anything less than the kind of respect I would expect from anyone whom I had treated so warmly and so well is simply not an option. If the demands of a research project were such that they meant violating their trust, I would much rather drop the project altogether.

I would also hope to treat my audiences as well as I do my sources. Audiences, though, can sometimes seem rather illusive. They are rarely actually seen, except at conferences or in classrooms, and as a result, I fear, are often assumed to be exclusively academic in nature. For folklorists, that is a particularly dangerous assumption. What we study is directly and intimately related to the lives of people who often have little or nothing at all to do with academia and is also, logically enough, of interest to those people. I've had extremely positive responses to the field from New York rose garden enthusiasts and members of the Ohio State Bellringers Association (the AFS often shares conference and hotel space with diverse groups and you'd be surprised what you can explain in a ten flight elevator ride). Perhaps the most enthusiastic response I've ever gotten, though, came from a bellman at the Atlanta Renaissance Hotel, who spotted my enormous AFS conference badge and said delightedly, "You're one of those folklore people! I love you folks!" When I laughed, he assured me that he was serious. The day before, as he'd checked in at the end of a session to make sure the coffeepots and water carafes were still full, he'd heard the conclusion of a paper on slave narratives and recognized one of the stories to which the

speaker referred, because his grandmother had told a similar story. He deliberately took his time with his work so he could listen to the discussion following the paper and then waited to talk to the presenter after the the session concluded. “And you know, “ he told me, “he was really interested in my grandmama’s story, and he gave me a list of books I could get about slave stories, and I’m gonna go to the library and check them out. Any time you people are in Atlanta, I want you to stay here. You guys are great. I mean, you’ll talk to a brother!”

After our conversation, I entered yet another elevator, feeling inordinately proud of my professional affiliation. And then, a moment later, I felt profoundly embarrassed that I should feel that way. The bellman was as much a member of my audience as anybody registered for the conference, as much as anyone anywhere. He was potentially even an important source for someone else’s research if not my own. Why in the world should I feel proud that another folklorist had deigned to talk to him? Worse, what did the bellman’s attitude, particularly his final statement, say about the attendees of other conferences at the same hotel, some of them likely academics too? If it’s that easy, even common, for we academic types to ignore or fail to acknowledge people who aren’t professors or students or authors or publishers, are we all just going to end up talking to ourselves? And if we do, how much is lost in the process?

The best story I know about that complicated connection between the professional and personal worlds of the folklorist is, alas, not mine. It belongs to Barre Toelken, who told it as part of a plenary address at an AFS conference. Toelken did groundbreaking work on Navajo folk culture, work that would have been impossible without the help of the Yellowman family.[3] The patriarch of the family, Hugh Yellowman,

was one of Toelken's principle informants, and Toelken himself became so close to Hugh and his kin that he grew to be regarded as part of their extended family. Over the years, the many interviews Toelken conducted and recorded with Hugh Yellowman helped him secure his career and establish his reputation as a highly regarded expert on Navajo folklore. When Hugh Yellowman died, his relatives contacted Toelken and asked him to send them the many interviews he'd recorded with Yellowman over the years. The original tapes. All of them. And all the copies too. Many of his colleagues advised Toelken not to comply with the request. After all, those tapes represented years of research that could not be duplicated and such tapes were to be catalogued and preserved to validate that research. Those tapes were also potentially valuable to generations of folklorists yet to come. Possibly donating them to a university library would be appropriate; returning them to the Yellowman family and losing control of them entirely was not. But, with great regret and some misgivings, Toelken chose to pack up all those tapes and send them to the Yellowman family. He felt he could do nothing else; the Yellowman family had treated him as a relative, and he could not now pretend they had merely a professional arrangement regarding those tapes. What was recorded on them was more theirs than his anyway; they had merely entrusted the information to him for a while and now the time had come to return it.

But then an interesting, even astonishing, thing happened. Gradually, one by one, packages of his tapes began arriving in Toelken's mailbox. They came with no great fanfare, no elaborate thank you notes, no particular written acknowledgment of them at all. Toelken had assumed the tapes were his possessions and that once they were sent to the Yellowman family, that they became their possessions. But apparently,

the Yellowman family did not regard them in the same way. Maybe they simply wanted to see if Toelken would be willing to send them. Maybe they never doubted that he would and had merely asked for them so they, and others, could hear Hugh Yellowman's voice again and had always assumed they would return them when they were finished. But surely they did not see them merely as research materials compiled by a folklorist from his informants. As close as Toelken was, and is, to the Yellowman family, it had not occurred to him that they did not see the tapes in the same way he did, and that may be at the center of the ethical dilemma for folklorists. Folklorists are not just professors or fieldworkers or authors; they are also, inevitably, the folk. When we separate ourselves, intentionally or unintentionally, from those we study and those who are interested in that which we study--whether they are our colleagues or our own informants or bellmen at hotels--we do a great disservice to the communities in which we conduct our research, the professional community to which we belong, and the communities, both secular and religious, in which we were raised and in which we continue to live.

Works Cited

Agee, James and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941.

Jansen, William Hugh. "Ethics and the Folklorist." *Handbook of American Folklore.* Ed. Richard Dorson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983. 533-539.

Smidchens, Guntis and Robert E. Walls. "Ethics and the Student Fieldworker." *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life.* Ed. George H. Schoemaker. Bloomington:

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A Statement of Ethics for the American Folklore Society. Online. American Folklore Society. Internet. 9 February 2008. <http://www.afsnet.org/about AFS/ethics.cfm>.

Notes

[1]Proverbs 22:6

[2]Luke 6:31

[3]For further information regarding Barre Toelken's work with the Yellowman family, see Toelken, Barre. *The Dynamics of Folklore.* Revised and Expanded Ed. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.

MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, February 25, 2008

Prelude *"Petit Prelude"* Joseph Jongen

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Prayer

Hymn *"God who Stretched the Spangled Heavens"*
ELW #771, vv. 1, 3

Scripture Proverbs 22:6
Luke 6:31

Message *"Ethics and Folklore"* Debbie Hanson, English

Closing Prayer & Benediction

Hymn *"Lord of All Hopefulness"* ELW #765

Postlude *"God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens"*
Wilbur Held

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

SERVING THE BANQUET - Campus Ministry is sponsoring a team to serve the Banquet (The local soup kitchen) on Monday, March. 10th. There are two shifts that need workers: the afternoon shift to prepare the food (2-4:30 pm) and the evening shift to serve (5:15-8 pm) There is a sign-up sheet on the Narthex table. Please consider helping with this worthwhile project!

TRAVEL TO NORWAY OR ITALY WITH AUGUSTANA COLLEGE - Augustana College is offering two exciting travel opportunities this summer for alumni and friends. Join Dr. Gary and

Rosaaen Olson, **June 10 - 21, 2008** for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience Norway in its fullest.. If you have never had the opportunity to visit Italy, you may wish to join veteran traveler and tour manager Brad Heegel and alumni director Mary Toso **May 31 - June 11, 2008** as they introduce you to the magnificent cities of Venice, Florence, Tuscany, Sorrento and the Eternal City of Rome. To bring this tour to a most memorable conclusion, you will experience The Augustana Choirs final concert performance in St. Peters Basilica. For more information, please contact the Alumni Office at Augustana soon at alumni@augie.edu .

BREAD FOR THE WORLD - We are searching for the best and brightest young advocates to become Bread for the World's Hunger Justice Leaders. We'll start by giving these 18-35 year olds an all-expense paid trip to Washington, DC on **June14-17** for training. They'll then commit to leading advocacy efforts to overcome hunger and poverty in their local communities - on their campuses or in their churches. So please, help us in our search and invite all the great candidates you know to apply today at www.bread.org/bealeader. Watch this one-minute peace <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4YzpZJrcEg> about the Hunger Justice Leaders. Rate it, then forward the video to all your friends and ask them to help spread the word about this effort. Students on Facebook can post the link on their profile.

CHAPEL CALENDAR

Wed. (27th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Ann Pederson
Fri. (29th)	Worship, 10 am - Kristin Wilcox, Sr. Spkr
Sun. (2nd)	Dist. Scholars Worship, 9 am
	Worship, 11 am - Born Anew Outreach Team
Mon. (3rd)	Worship, 10 am - Debbie Hanson: Ethics and Folklore
Tues. (4th)	Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. Joe Vogel
	Outreach Leaders Mtgs. - 5:30 - Youth, 6:00 - Worship
Wed. (5th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Mark Braun
Fri. (7th)	Worship, 10 am -Jackie Strey, Sr. Spkr.