

THE FELLOWS' FORUM

MY INTERGENERATIONAL SELF

My mother's family has lived on or near the same piece of land in Henry County, Georgia, since 1825. At eighty-one, my mother, Marcella Bryans Elliott Mote, is the living repository of eight generations of family wisdom and lore, a legacy she is actively handing down to me. In her role as reigning matriarch of our clan, she teaches us genealogy by story and family tree, by furniture and recipe.

In our extended family, the “intergenerational sense of self”—as identified and delineated by my MARIAL colleagues who work on the Family Narratives Project (see *Families That Work*, spring 2006)—is actively cultivated. And it's fair to say that an intergenerational sense of self is enacted in our family through a variety of practices that connect the past and the present, the living and the dead.

Nowhere do these practices and this intergenerational sense of self come together more powerfully than in the week we spend together each year during Shingleroof Camp Meeting in Henry County. As MARIAL director Bradd Shore's research on Salem Camp Meeting in nearby Newton County concludes, camp meetings are remarkable “theaters of family memory” (see his coauthored MARIAL Working Paper 011-02 at www.marial.emory.edu).

As I sit next to my mom on the porch of our tent (read: cabin) during camp meeting, we rock and talk. She walks me and my siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews through five generations by recalling what furniture on the porch belonged to whom and when and where: “This was Grandmother Dove's rocker; that high-backed one was Grandpa Joe's. These chairs sat on the porch of their house till shortly before it burned down in 1969.”

We do the same kind of generational run-down through what we term genealogy by recipe: “This is Grandma Elliott's recipe for buttermilk icing; she died in 1935 and was ninety-two years old. Buttermilk icing tastes so much like burnt caramel icing most people can't tell the difference.”

As I sit on my forebears' furniture, eat food made according to recipes they handed down, listen to and tell stories about them, and learn their full names by heart, it is abundantly clear that those who are dead are far from gone. Some are praised as pioneers and heroes; others are taken as cautionary

In his book *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith writes that memory is “a complex and deceptive experience” that seems to be about the past when, in fact, it is at least as much about the present. If Smith is right, it gives new meaning to the phrase “living memory.” My intergenerational self lives the past into the present and on into the future through our collective family practices.

Back on the porch at Shingleroof, a distant relation inquired of my mother, “Marcella, who will remember all this when you can't?” My mom smiles, looks at me knowingly,



Donna Mote (right) and her mother, Marcella Bryans Elliott Mote

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tales. Our family is prolific; it is difficult to count up all our kinfolk. Yet many, many of those who have gone before are remembered, memorialized, and venerated in some fashion.

The more fully I sense the depth and breadth of my intergenerational self, the better able I am to live in the midst of the creative tension between being autonomous and being connected. Rather than feeling the weight of my family history as a burden, I identify it as an anchor that grounds me. Knowing where I come from and knowing lots about those from whom I come affords me a better view of where I myself might go.

and says, “These younger ones are learning. Donna remembers some things now that I've forgotten.” I reply, “I'm one of her apprentices” and proceed to tell this relation exactly how I am kin to her. “See,” says my mom, “they'll keep it going.” And in these words, I receive yet another benediction upon the living memory that is my intergenerational self. ■

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