

CULTURAL BAGGAGE

By Barbara Ehrenreich

Recently an acquaintance was telling me about the joys of rediscovering her ethnic and religious heritage. “I know exactly what my ancestors were doing 2,000 years ago,” she said, eyes gleaming with enthusiasm, “and I can do the same things now.” Then she leaned forward and inquired politely, “And what is your ethnic background, if I may ask?”

“None,” I said, that being the first word in line to get out of my mouth. Well, not “none,” I backtracked. Scottish, English, Irish—that was something, I supposed. Too much Irish to qualify as a WASP, too much English to warrant a “Kiss me, I’m Irish” button; plus there are a number of dead ends in the family tree due to adoptions, missing records, failing memories, and the like. I was blushing by this time. Did “none” mean I was rejecting my heritage out of Anglo-Celtic self-hatred?

But the truth is I was raised with “none.” We’d eaten ethnic foods in my childhood home, but these were all borrowed, like the Cornish pasties, or meat pies, my father had picked up from his fellow miners in Butte. If my mother had one rule, it was militant ecumenicism in all matter of food and experience: “Try new things,” she would say, meaning anything from sweetbreads to clams, with an emphasis on the “new.”

My mother never introduced a domestic procedure by telling me, “Grandma did it this way.” What did Grandma know, living in the days before vacuum cleaners and disposable toilet mops? In my parents’ general view, new things were better than old, and the very fact that some ritual had been performed in the past was good reason for abandoning it now. Because what was in the past, as our forebears knew it? Nothing but poverty, superstition and grief. “Think for yourself,” Dad used to say, “Always ask why.”

In fact, this may have been the ideal cultural heritage for an ethnic strain like my own—bounced as it was from the Highlands of Scotland across the sea, then across the plains to the Rockies, down into the mines, and finally spewed out into high-tech, suburban America. What better philosophy, for a race of migrants, than “Think for yourself”? What better maxim, for a people whose whole world was rudely inverted every thirty years or so, than “Try new things”?

The more tradition-minded, the newly enthusiastic celebrants of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and the Winter Solstice, will be clucking sadly as they read this. They will see little point to survival if the survivors carry no cultural freight—religion, for example, or ethnic tradition. To them I would say that skepticism, curiosity, and wide-eyed ecumenical tolerance are also a part of the human tradition, and are at least as old as such notions as “Serbian” or “Croatian,” “Scottish,” or “Jewish.” I make no claims for my personal line of progenitors except that they remained steadfastly loyal to the values that induced all of our ancestors, long, long ago, to climb down from the trees and make their way into the open savanna.

Throughout the sixties and seventies I watched one group after another stand up and proudly reclaim their roots while I just sank back ever deeper into my seat. It had begun to seem almost un-American not to have some sort of hyphen in hand, linking one to more venerable times and locales. I hoped that by marrying a man of Eastern European-Jewish descent I would acquire for my descendants the ethnic genes that my own forebears so sadly lacked. At one point I even subjected the children to a Passover feast of my own design, including a little talk about the Israelites' flight from Egypt. But the kids said, "Give us a break, Mom." The kids knew that their Jewish grandparents were secular folks who didn't observe Passover themselves.

A few weeks ago, I cleared my throat and asked my children, now grown, whether they felt any stirrings of ethnic identity which might have been insufficiently nourished at home. "None," they said, adding firmly, "and the world would be a better place if nobody else did either." My chest swelled with pride, as my mother's would have, to know that the race of "none" marches on.