Jack Rushford

Heather Julien

English 101

Linear Essay

3-5-2013

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPH: “Hybrid Lifestyle”

 I decided to center my auto-ethnography on my upbringing as half Jewish and half Catholic. My dad is Catholic and my mom is Jewish. Technically speaking, I am fully Jewish, because my mother is Jewish and, in tradition Jewish upbringing, I would take my mother’s religion. I was bar-mitzvahed and I do go to synagogue, but I have elements of both religions that make up my character and values today. In my auto-ethnography, I analyzed many different aspects of religion as a whole, that I could juxtapose Catholicism and Judaism with. I chose values, holidays, artifacts and interviews to give my viewers a good idea of what it is like to have aspects of both religions combined together. I absolutely love both religions and would not want to change anything if I could do it all over again.

The first topic I chose to analyze was the artifact analysis. The artifact analysis is the section of the auto-ethnography where I took some artifact (photograph, book, etc.) to breakdown and see what its significance in the larger picture is. In my case, my two artifacts were the Torah (the most sacred Jewish text) and the classic Christmas stocking. Artifacts are very useful because they can be very small, yet can tell some big part of you because they represent so much more than what first meets the eye. In my case, the Christmas stocking can represent family traditions and specific memories of Christmas day, not just a colorful bag that holds candy and other treats. The Torah is not just a scroll; it is the written values that Judaism was based on thousands of years ago.

The Torah is composed of five different books and they tell the story of the history of the Jews, beginning with the word “beresheet”, meaning beginning, and covering the entire creation of the world by god, and ending with the book of Deuteronomy. The Torah is especially important to me because I was bar-mitzvahed with it. This means that I had to read a certain Torah portion in order to become a bar-mitzvah, or an official "man" in the Jewish culture. My Torah portion had to do with the story of Jacob's ladder to heaven, and I still remember it today. I had to do my entire portion in Hebrew along with the prayers that go along with the reading of the Torah, the opening of the arc, and the closing of the Torah. The Torah was also used in this photo, although it is not pictured, during my cousin, Jake's, bar-mitzvah in Israel this summer. The Torah is used during almost every event at the synagogue and is used on every single High Holiday ceremony. The Torah is very delicate, detailed, and holy. Every time I see the holy scroll, it reminds me where I came from and who I am today. I know that every member of my mom’s side of the family had to read the same exact scroll that I had to during their respective bar/bat-mitzvahs and there are even some members that haven’t been bar/bat-mitzvahed yet. I am looking forward to their ceremonies and to watch their transitions into adulthood.

The artifact I chose to analyze for my Catholic side is the classic Christmas stocking. Our family, every year around Christmas time, pins up five personalized stockings. There is one for each family member and one for my dog, Bodie. The stockings get filled, not only with teeth-rotting candies, but also gift cards and other little gifts that are very personal and important. I love this part of Christmas because I never know what I am going to get, but somehow every single year I always love whats inside my stocking. I also love filling other family members stockings and watching them open them up on Christmas morning because they are always happily surprised. The stocking not only represents a small, fun, and exciting gift, but also represents the closeness of family and the personalities of each individual family member. Everyone knows so much about each other that we are able to personalize and surprise each other with these small gifts and yet they are so much fun to open because I know my mom, dad and sister went out of their way to make it the best stocking possible. Stocking represent the family bond during the holiday and nothing makes me happier then to share all of the excitement with everyone.

The next three pages on my website were all direct interviews with people that I thought could help to relay the importance of both religions to my viewers. I chose my dad, my mom and my roommate, which happened to be pretty convenient. I chose my dad because he grew up Catholic and his entire family (with 9 brothers and sisters) are all dedicated to the Catholic religion. He attended church, he went to mass, and he said grace before every dinner. My dad has all the Catholic values instilled in him and he passed them down to me.

When I asked my dad to just give me a little rundown/summary on what his most memorable experiences were growing up Catholic, he said that "my parents both very involved with the church so that had major influence. We attended mass every Sunday and followed traditions around the major holidays: Christmas & Easter. My dad was the choir director and the boys (your uncles) sang in the choir."
He also added that "the other parishioners (everyone else who belonged to our church) became our community - see them every week - lots of shared experiences with things like Confirmation etc." When I asked him about the values associated with growing up Catholic, he added, "There was lots of care and empathy towards others - consideration.  Thinking about how things are for someone other than you.  Takes some practice but we learned by example from our parents". I asked him about his view of Jewish values in comparison to his values learned through Christianity and he said, "I enjoy the opportunity to experience both - being Jewish much more cultural to me and lots of important traditions.  Bar-mitzvhah is one of my favorites.  Totally agree with "rights of passage” this is one of the most important and you can definitely see it manifested". He then started to ramble about his upbringing, and I wasn't even asking him questions "We moved to Vermont when I was 12 - pretty impactful on religion because we left the community behind in VA and had to start over in Vermont. It wasn't the same and my parents didn't connect as well and as a result we also were less engaged". When I asked my dad what he got out of religion, he said that he retained a "sense of community. I would try to do the right things:  Treat your neighbor like you'd want to be treated, Don't lie, Don't cheat, Don't steal, Don't kill anyone." A little blunt, but he meant what he said. He of course moved on to talking about the Santa program, which is covered under some other pages, "I started the Santa program when I was 26 before I was married or had kids.  Always loved Christmas.  More the magic of it than the "birth of Jesus" part.  It definitely stemmed from my own experiences learned from my parents giving around that time. I am now 27 years into it and it's still one of the best days of the year for me.  Love the idea of helping make the kids and their parents and teachers feel special and cared for.” That was about the end of the interview, I thanked him for taking his time to talk about everything and I actually learned a lot of interesting things about him. My dad’s interview was much more revealing than I had anticipated. He gave me many great points (I thought he would just ramble about the Santa Program) and I didn’t really know about his whole transition from being very religious, to becoming less religious when he moved to Maryland.

My mom was my next interviewee. I already had heard about growing up Jewish in a pretty intolerant Silver Spring, Maryland. I had interviewed my grandpa a few years ago for a similar project and he had given me all the background I needed. So for this interview, I just asked my mom to skip over the whole childhood anti-sematic part because not only does it not really cover the topic I am addressing, I also just know all of the details already. My mom is way more detailed that my dad so I just asked her to give me a quick run down on her Jewish upbringing and she just started, "I don't know if I grew up with an intentional Jewish upbringing.  Don't get me wrong, we celebrated most major holidays and my parents were both first generation and my immigrant grandparents had been raised with orthodox families.  My memories of early family gatherings were focused on the Jewish holidays. Unlike my grandparents, my parents were not students of The Torah and in lieu of being steeped in religious ritual we celebrated the traditions and customs of the holidays.  Those times were sacred---families just got together regardless of kid's schedules, or parent's work schedules.  Everything was set-aside for the holidays.  And somewhere along the way, I felt a true affinity with my Jewish identity." When I asked her some more questions about more pressing issues, she wasn't afraid to tackle them, "I heard countless stories around the Seder table about my grandparent's experiences of persecution in Russia and the other grandparent's family Holocaust stories.  My grandmother lost her mother, father, a sister and two brothers.  A younger sister posed as a nun in a convent and the nuns hid her 3-year-old daughter.  My uncle and his son served in the resistance and their family was lost for some time after the war. Who know what stuck with me but I'm certain all these things combined left an imprint on me.  My dad was also an only child and as he got older, he became the glue of his very large extended family.  We had cousins in every city across the states.  We (or he and my mom) went to every bar/bat mitzvah, wedding and funeral.  They made "staying connected" a priority." This is what I was talking about when you read my "Jewish Values" slide. Family comes top priority in Jewish culture and remaining close to them not only geographically, but also for special holidays, is important.” Mom then elaborated on my upbringing and deciding to raise me Jewish, "When we were thinking of starting a family, my Jewish roots kicked in. Having experienced how much tradition kept families connected, I knew that I wanted our children to share my traditions and upbringing and wanted to pass this on to them.  My husband agreed and we also wrapped his traditions in with mine." She then elaborated on the impact having a kid has on her religion, her roots and her beliefs, "Having children probably gives you much more focus on your roots.  You want to pass something on to them --you want them to identify with your past, where you came from.  I felt my family had a rich past of survival and connectedness.  I wanted my kids to share in that.  So we made a point to honor the holidays and celebrate with family and friend's families." A part I haven't covered yet, but that my mom elaborated on, was the impact of Sunday school: "The kids went to Sunday school but we also celebrated Christmas (we just didn't celebrate the religious significance). Then when my daughter was nearing her bat mitzvah, I realized I didn't have much religious education to pass on nor share.  So at the age of 44, I joined a group of women and we studied for a year and became b'nai mitzvah. Judaism became more than just shared values, and traditions, I now had a broader perspective and understanding and I could more intimately experience my daughter's special milestone." My mom had a much closer relationship to Judaism than my dad did to Christianity. She feels now more close to her religion than ever, and my dad is hardly involved with the Church. The bat-mitzvah she had probably was the main cause for this strengthening of her relationship with her religion and I am proud of her for accomplishing that feat. One thing that is important to point out in this interview is the part where she discusses the stories around the Seder table. I think the whole oppression part of Judaism, including the Holocaust, leads to this strong sense of family. Catholicism doesn’t have this oppression or hardship and I think, as a result, Jews stress staying connected strongly to their family because they know, at some points in the past, they did not have this luxury.

My final interviewee was Josh Foreman, who is my roommate and a personal friend from back home. I wanted my third interviewee to be a person my age, who grew up either Catholic or Jewish, but not a combination, so that I could juxtapose his experiences with mine and weigh the pros and cons. One of my favorite questions was “what did get out of your Bar-mitzvah?” Josh answered with: "I mean, it is supposed to be this "transition" to man-hood in the Jewish religion, but I did not feel any different after the ceremony than before. It was really cool to read from a real torah and have the Rabbi sitting next to you while all of your family, in town or out of town, were there to watch this historic ceremony." Another important question to me was when I asked Josh to rate the importance of the Jewish holidays to me. Josh said that they were "really, not that important to me. I really didn't buy into certain aspects of the religion. But that was just me, I am very skeptical of religion as a whole. If it was Islam, Christianity, or Judaism it would not have mattered. I’m just not that into the religious holidays. However, it was great getting together as a community and seeing all of your school friends, family members that you do not normally see and even kids you used to go to school with that you have been meaning to call." Josh’s interview was a really good perspective of one side of the picture. Josh has no Catholic roots in his family and it was interesting to see that family has a very important role in the religion, even if the actual ceremonies weren’t that important to him.

The next two pages on my website were value comparisons for both religions. The first value comparison was analysis of the Jewish values in my life that have been instilled in me by my mother and the rest of the Jewish community in my life.

There are many key values that are inscribed in the Torah. One of the main values that is taught and practiced is Tzedakah. Tzedakah in English means "justice" and the box pictured above is called a Tzedakah box, in which coins or dollars are placed for various charities. Most Jews belong to some sort of a synagogue, whether it be a Reform, Conservative or even an Orthodox temple. All practice Tzedakah by holding various events throughout the year in which the entire community descends upon a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, Salvation Army or some type of food shelter to help out the surrounding community in need. It is really nice to get together as a whole and help out the people who are more in need than. Another big value is "love thy neighbor as yourself". This is almost identical to the "golden rule" that we are taught in preschool, or "treat everyone that way you want to be treated". This value is very important for dinners; visits with family and holidays when you are around the people you love and care about. You are supposed to treat others with respect and not be egotistical or selfish. The final value that is important to me is keeping religion in the family genes. Jewish parents encourage their children to marry a Jewish husband or wife because they care so much about the family and keeping the family together. Parents know that religion can help keep a family's bond strong, especially through holiday dinners and other gatherings. If the entire family is Jewish and going to temple together, then the bond will be stronger and everyone will spend more time with each other.

The second value comparison was the same exact thing, just for my Catholic side. The Catholic values that are instilled in my from my dad and his family are almost all centered on giving, or the act of selflessness. The reason I bring this up is because of the many different actions that go on during the holidays such as secret Santa, giving money at church and working in soup kitchens. Every year I see the same actions over and over by members of the Catholic community helping out those in need, even if they are in dire straits themselves. They do it not because they feel obligated, but instead because they want to do it. The act of giving is instilled in them though the bible and the rest of their community and it is a great thing to have as a part of who you are. My dad runs a program every year called the "Santa Program" that is designed to provide a Christmas experience to underprivileged, inner city children at the D.C. day care centers. My dad dresses up as Santa, while me, my sister and our friends dress up as elves and visit these centers and give out the presents. We go buy truckloads of toys from the local Target and then wrap them all together as a family and it feels so good. Seeing those kids' faces light up makes me so happy that I have elements of both religions in my life. I am so lucky to be placed in a situation where I can help these kids-in-need have a Christmas experience that they will probably not have at home. I love the act of giving and that is a major value that my Catholic side brings close to my heart.

The last textual page of my website was a holiday analysis of Hanukkah and Christmas side by side. I analyzed the general themes and traditions that each holiday incorporates. For Hanukkah, I said that “This is one of the main holidays in the Jewish religion. Although not as "holy" or "sacred" as Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashana (New Years, Hanukkah is often juxtaposed with Christmas because they occur around the same time of the year, and both involve presents. Hanukkah is the celebration of the festival of lights and the remembering of the oil lamp that burned for 8 days when they thought they had only enough oil for 1 night at most. We light the menorah every night for 8 nights and each night is a different night of presents, normally smaller than the ones you would receive on Christmas though. Hanukkah is a time for family, food and togetherness. Hanukkah celebrates past historical events and the "miracle" of light in that lamp centuries ago.”

For Christmas, I said that, “The holiday of Christmas is probably the main holiday in the catholic religion. The Christmas holiday is also about family, like Hanukkah, but centers more on giving. Christmas celebrates the legend of Kris Cringle or Santa Clause who comes down the chimney of your house when your sleeping and delivers presents underneath your Christmas tree for you to open when you awaken. Christmas also involves Christmas mass, at the local church, stockings, decorations and other traditions. Christmas is more tradition-related and Hanukkah is more centered on the themes of family and being together with loved ones. Both holidays are equally important to me, with Christmas bringing a more comfortable, happy, family feel, and Hanukkah bringing a sense of wholesomeness to the entire extended family, not just the immediate family. “

The last page I had was just a fun video of a family giving out presents to homeless people on the street during Christmas time. This reminded me so much of the Santa program my dad ran when I saw it first. The video shows real expressions of these random people that are instantly made happier by such a simple task. It required just a little money, time, and dedication to giving to those less fortunate than you.

In conclusion, I wouldn’t trade my religious upbringing for anything. I had the unique opportunity of growing up under two different religions, two different sets of values and two different paths of tradition. I was able to become more cultured as a result and I feel that my view of the religious world is much more broad as a result of my “hybrid lifestyle”. I will never choose one religion over the other. Although I am technically Jewish, I feel almost split down the middle in terms of my devotion to Judaism versus Christianity. I feel privileged to have had the childhood and exposure to religion that I had and I look forward to the opportunities ahead of me where I can expand my view of religion and what it means to my core values.