

## Personal Heritage

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My personal heritage cannot be summed up in one culture. Although my Irish heritage prevails in most situations; my Icelandic genes, as well my families Pacific Islander influence play into who I am. To portion out just one section would neglect much of how I came to be. When conducting interviews with family members, and researching these different cultures; I begun to understand some of the similarities they share, as well as ideas that are conflicting.

As I said earlier, the most influential portion of my heritage is the one that dictates not only how I live but also what I look like. When I meet someone for the first time, my blue eyes, red hair, and freckles are a dead give away that I am Irish. I tend to identify with this culture most readily because it is what others identify me as. It helps me determine my ethnicity; I am white. My physical features are not the only reason why I identify with this culture. For much of my life I attended a Roman Catholic school and church. The Irish culture is well known for their relation to Catholicism. “For generations after immigration the prejudice the Irish experienced in the United States drew the bonds between their religion and their ethnicity tighter” (McGoldrick & Garcia-Perto, 2005, p. 597). Within my own family our bond between religion and our ethnicity is very close. Often when people ask what I am, my faith is one of my major identifiers; however, I do not always share that right way because it can put people on guard. On both sides of my family there are Irish traditions. Both my dad’s mother and my maternal grandfather were of Irish decent; however, my dad’s parents lived in Arizona and I did not spend much time with them. Much of my cultural learning came from my mother’s parents as they lived less then five minutes away from us. As a child I spent lots of time with them.

My parents left my decision regarding my faith up to me but growing up in a Catholic school, I felt obligated to take on those beliefs. In fifth grade I made the decision to become a member of the church. Although I have moved away from the church, the moral guides I grew up with are still very prevalent. “Irish Catholics tend to struggle harder than many other groups with their sense of sin and guilt, trying to fit into the Church’s rules and strictures. Even those who have left the Church may have intense feelings about religious issues” (McGoldrick & Garcia-Perto, 2005, p. 598). This idea of sin and guilt runs through my entire family. When I interviewed my sisters they both agreed that even though they do not believe in what the church promotes, they do have a very strong sense of right and wrong.

As I mentioned earlier my sisters are genetically only half sisters – we all share the same mother. Between all of us is an unspoken loyalty, which is a classic Irish characteristic, as is our sense of humor (McGoldrick & Garcia-Perto, 2005, p. 599). My mother, sisters, and I all are very sarcastic; we often make light of the things we find most hard to deal with. As a family system, we have experienced many hardships, finding that the best way to get through it is to laugh. There is a down side to leaving issues un-dealt with. When they finally reach the surface, there is an explosion of anger. We have had arguments so heated that they did actually come to blows. Once these occurrences are over, things calm down and we all move on – with apologies never spoken but simply implied. Even with all of this our loyalty shines through. As a family we are a clan, we stick together no matter what; with family always coming first.

The family comes first custom is part also part of the Scandinavian culture. My maternal grandmother, Sigrid, is full Icelandic as her parent migrated from Iceland to Eastern Canada and then to Marietta, Washington. She was born and raised in this county but the atmosphere she grew up in was still a traditional Icelandic home. In our family my grandmother has always

been the matriarch. My maternal grandfather, William, was the breadwinner, he always joked that she was in charge of everything else. Sigrid – better known to us, as Ami, which is Icelandic for grandmother – has been a homemaker for the majority of her life. She ran a very tight ship and is very traditional. Sigrid is skilled in cooking, as well as sewing. She has made my mother, sisters and I many outfits and costumes. My great grandmother passed down her knowledge for these things to my grandmother and as I grew up I enjoyed spending many summer days with her in which she would teach me all kinds of things. She is a wonderful loving woman who has never been afraid to tell someone the truth – even if it hurts. She is often misinterpreted to being mean but both she and her brother were raised in family where truth was valued. Due to excellent record keeping my Icelandic heritage can be traced back to the settlement of Iceland. One of the many traditional Scandinavian traits is honest (McGoldrick & Garcia-Perto, 2005, p. 642). Reading through the genealogy of my family, this trait becomes very apparent. Many of the records give a small over view of each individual's life and their major accomplishments. In some of the records this honesty is almost to the point of being blunt; for instance, Strurlu Thofdarson was described as “extremely arrogant and an unreasonable person and a great Vigamadur (fighter)” (personal communication, Carl Westman). It is interesting to see that this trait has not left the family as I too share this characteristic; however, I recognize that many people do not appreciate our frankness. So I have learned how to give a gentle but honest opinion.

Another common trait that Scandinavians share is a tendency to isolate. “Because Icelanders live on a small, sparsely populated island in the middle of the sea, therapists may expect them to require a great deal of solitude and to tend to eschew intense interactions” (McGoldrick & Garcia-Perto, 2005, p. 641). While interviewing my mother for this project she

brought up something that I found very interesting. She said that for as long as she can remember she struggled with being wanting to be alone but feared being lonely (personal communication, Karen Powers). Before this conversation, I never knew that my mother had felt this way. It is something that I know myself and my sister struggle with. It is a conflict between two ideas. The Irish in each of us fears loss and judgment but we all still feel the need for personal time. Finding a balance has been difficult for all of us but because we know that we always have each other, it helps us cope.

Each person in my family is very independent but we make a point to celebrate specific holidays together. Due to our Christian background, Christmas is the biggest one of all. A piece of our tradition has traveled from Guam to Hawaii to Bellingham and it is a fake tree that we put up almost every year. This tradition started in the 1970s when my eldest sister was a baby. On Guam you cannot have a real tree because it is too expensive and will die very quickly. This is not the only tradition that comes from the Pacific Islands. My grandfather was apart of the civil service and was stationed in Guam for many years. My mother lived there for about 21 years and then moved to Hawaii. The Island culture is very mellow. I have often wondered why my mother is late to things; she told me that it is hard for her to get over what she grew up in. Both in Guam and Hawaii, events lasted for days so showing up at a certain time was not required. Although I was born on the island of Oahu, I have never traveled back and I have never been to Guam. These cultures came to me. My sisters would spend their summers with their dad on Guam. My grandmother has many items that in her home that represent the Chamorro culture. Over the years I learn much about a culture that I never experienced. Especially after my nephew was born, my sister made a point of teaching him about his culture. Hafa Adai, is a common greeting within our home as is Aloha. I grew up eating many different foods from the islands. I remember

when I was younger I was one of the few children in my class who knew what a banana leaf tasted like. Even though I only lived in Honolulu for three months, my mother remembers the May Day before I was born. My sisters were both involved in the celebrations at their school. During this time they played traditional Hawaiian music. She said that she could feel me just moving away inside her stomach; enjoying the music.

Each of these sections of my heritage has played a role in creating who I am today. The way I feel and how I think have been directly affected by both my genetics and what cultures I experienced. With any culture there are going to be things to overcome; that make us stronger. There are also inherent things that we are blessed with. My loyalty, passion for truth and love for my family have been instilled through my heritage. By being exposed to a culture that was not necessarily genetically mine showed me how to be open to experiencing new things. As one can see picking just one of these cultures would have been too difficult because each one in its own right helped form the person I am today.

### References

McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J., & Garcia-Preto, N. (2005). *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.