

Stereotypes of Death

Donna Chirico (November 04, 2013)



An extraordinary circumstance that reveals the myth making is death. It is the clashing cymbals of who we are in the eyes of the world. It is also a time when the cultural stereotypes we choose seep through the diverse manifestations of self.



People create stories about themselves out of which a personal narrative is formed. Simultaneous to this, the ethnic communities that inform our stories are creating stories. When repeated often enough these become ethnic stereotypes.

In recent months, I have been thinking about the way the stories of our ethnic communities become stereotypes that we consciously or unconsciously make part of the personal narrative. It is often through the stereotypes we have made our own that the roots of ethnic identity are revealed. We cannot help expressing the stereotypes. When others see the manifestations of these stereotypes in lived experience, the stereotypes become further established: consider the the drunken Irishman or the Chinese math whiz. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as “earned reputation,” but we could easily say “earned identity” because we contribute to perpetuating the stereotypes.

I have also been pondering the relationship between the identity we so carefully craft for the world to see versus the identity that is perceived and understood by others. We present an intricately woven tapestry of patterns, textures and colors, yet others only see, or only choose to see, perhaps the cloth in its entirety or only the blue square or the red triangle. It is often true too that we create different selves for different cliques. If one is really good at this, a compartmentalization occurs and without an extraordinary circumstance, our friends and colleagues are none the wiser.

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The primary way to gain insight into how we are seen is in the way we are remembered after death, in the eulogies rendered. But, it is seen too in how others fall back on aspects of their ethnic stereotypes to commiserate with the bereaved. Recently, this was highlighted by a death in the family. The mourners came laden with gifts in what almost sounds like an ethnic joke. First, the Jewish side of the family brought the grocery bags of bagels, cream cheese and rugelach. Then, the WASP-y friends from Old Greenwich brought the brie, Bordeaux and French macaroons in a wicker basket festooned with a neutrally colored ribbon. Next the Irish neighbors handed off the blended Scotch and mass card. Finally, the Italian family sent their son with a pot of cavatelli, tray of eggplant parmesan, loaf of bread and jar of sauce all wrapped in checkered kitchen towels to keep everything warm.



My thought was that while others bring comfort, the Italians bring dinner – how comforting.

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