

Stories as Equipment for Living

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Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff

With an Introduction by Thomas Cole

EDITED BY MARC KAMINSKY AND MARK WEISS
IN COLLABORATION WITH DEENA METZGER

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In memory of Dr. Maury P. Leibovitz

FOREWORD

For anyone who is familiar with Barbara Myerhoff's writings on gerontology, secular ritual, life history and enthralled by the way she stitched together ethnography—moving back and forth between life history, interview and ethnology—her death before the completion of a draft of the Fairfax study is a loss of incalculable proportions. A friend of hers once spoke about Myerhoff's struggle to create a truly urban ethnography, her response to what's been famously referred to by Anthony Leeds as the failure to create an anthropology “of the city,” not just “in the city.”¹ The concern piqued my curiosity. Fairfax—ground zero, so to speak, of the fieldwork for *Stories as Equipment for Living*—isn't the proverbial anthropological village. Nor is it an urban village like the Venice of *Number Our Days*. As a remnant of an immigrant working-class past that still casts its shadow on American Jewish culture and politics, the Venice community's peculiar blend of Judaism, Socialism, and Zionism is a living testament to the Jewish place in a much broader struggle for justice and human dignity. The discrepancy between the innocence of bygone powerlessness and the very comfortable situation and sometimes smugness of a broad swath of American Jewry today contributes much, I think, to the deeply affectionate way we respond to representations such as Myerhoff's.

But Fairfax is something else entirely. Almost gone from the narrative is the labor movement.² Gone, too, is a community with deep and enduring roots over time. Appearances aside (we cannot help but look at people clothed in traditional garb as having been there forever), this is a new community whose connection to the urban fabric is veneer-like. This is a community of lifestyle—not the kind we normally think of in that way, but nonetheless a community of people who gravitate to a place through shared mores and values and not necessarily through enduring links of kinship and turf. Moreover, Myerhoff's material captures a moment in American Jewish

life that might best be described as a return of the culturally repressed. Highlighted among them are Jews of the Old World who appear to us as if modernity had passed them by and have come as harbingers of a future strangely resonant with the distant past. In truth these harbingers are quite modern. Their “tradition” wasn’t handed to them; it was appropriated as a conscious act of self-traditionalization. How traditional could someone have been growing up in the Soviet Union? While post-war American Orthodoxy is an ever evolving form of Jewish observance undoubtedly influenced by a kind of monasticism emanating from extended yeshiva education made possible through the welfare state both here and in Israel.³ So what looks traditional isn’t all that traditional and those who abide by its precepts and restrictions live, so to speak, in an Old World of choice.

What holds them there? What secrets do they know? What stories do they tell? Some of these people, and Myerhoff’s curiosity about them, were already apparent in her Venice study *Number Our Days*, which, despite that book’s manifest secularity, here and there has a distinct sensitivity to the religious sensibility. This should not be surprising given Myerhoff’s earlier work and training in Turnerian anthropology. But whatever was latent in *Number Our Days* emerges fully dressed and in a strikingly unapologetic fashion in *Stories as Equipment for Living*. Although intended as a piece of urban anthropology, it is ultimately even less “of the city” than *Number Our Days*, and given the Old World, or even better put, Other World orientation of the narratives, it is less, too, “in the city.” Indeed, this is very much a book about no place at all. Myerhoff cites Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav about how words move air until someone receives it and, along with it, a soul newly awakened. These are stories that have been traveling through space and time. This book is about the inner life. About stories that guide us, maybe even disorient us, but ultimately stories that concern us if we let them, if we resist the temptation to say as the wicked child of the Haggadah, “What mean these customs in which you engage, which the Lord commanded **you** to observe?”

Those of us who knew about this project have long been curious about the material. Some heard Myerhoff’s talks on storytelling and many more saw the film that examined the anthropologist’s connection to her Hasidic informants and their concern during the final days of her life. But even with the new material that this book provides, there remain unanswered questions: How would she have culled and shaped the data into a narrative? What voice

would she have used? Where would all this have gone as a work whose theoretical weight would extend beyond the confines of a Jewish readership? Having the material in its present form—some of it already finely crafted but much of it still raw—brings us as readers into a unique relationship with the anthropologist: we have no choice other than to co-author. As Thomas Cole does in his excellent introduction, we are all free to talk with Myerhoff as she did with the deceased Shmuel in *Number Our Days* and to read the material in an active and highly imaginative way. To assist us in doing so, we fortunately have a number of leads: Myerhoff's writings in which she took some surprising liberties normally associated with the realm of fiction;⁴ the films in which she appeared on camera, which, give us a sense of her personality; and, of course, the *talks* in this volume, which tell us much about the very elegant intellectual direction the book was taking.

Reading *Stories as Equipment for Living* is an invitation into the ethnographer's studio. It's a chance to get first crack at the raw material—the narrative fragments, the ethnographer's thoughts and even some of the theory that would eventually have come together in a monograph. It's also a chance to learn how a masterful ethnographer can mine the most commonplace of American Jewish ceremonies to say something profound about the culture of the home “where the heart of ethnicity is kept alive” and where those who do the ritual commit to redoing it year after year despite everyone's misgivings about the success of the performance. “Ritual,” as Myerhoff argues, “has the power to generate its own need to be redone” (“Ritual and Storytelling: A Passover Tale”). Myerhoff's ability to mine the commonplace reminds me of Walter Benjamin's distinction of the storyteller as trading seaman and the storyteller as resident tiller of the soil. Myerhoff was both, skillfully intertwining knowledge of faraway places with the lore of the past that is the common possession of natives of a place.⁵

I read this book as a posthumous gift made possible through an act of transgression by the dead. Such a reading makes a good deal of sense here because the work itself straddles the lines that demarcate presumably discrete domains of experience—the Old World and the New, older secularists and younger traditionalists, patriarchs and feminists. Like any good ethnography, it induces us to cross over, to experience worlds that may not be familiar (or, in some cases, seem familiar and are unfairly disregarded by us). But Myerhoff pushes us a little further because, if we follow her lead, we're not to con-

cern ourselves with where we end up. It's an approach that evolved from an anthropology of the streets, an offshoot of sorts of the political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. But the approach is less one of advocacy on behalf of subalterns than a quest with no practical outcome. Quite remarkably, given where Myerhoff started from, the key problematic for her is how to understand the continuing hold that Jewish life has for many people after more than a century and a half of modernization and attendant acculturation. At the same time, it's an encounter with Jewish life that is well-grounded in an anthropological sensibility—opening up rather than shutting down, inviting in rather than excluding.

There is a certain irony to Barbara Myerhoff's forays into the world of Jewish ethnography. *Number Our Days* is about a community of elderly people who, she believed, offered a glimpse into her own future (which is why she could write about them so empathically).⁶ She had been given the opportunity to experience vicariously—and admirably, given what she produced—all the joys and tribulations of advanced age. These were experiences, as we all know, that fate itself would deny her. There is irony, too, in *Stories as Equipment for Living*. Not only does the word *living* ring odd for a book whose author never lived to see the finished product, but her untimely death leaves a mark in a way that those untouched by it cannot fathom.

I use the word ironically, with some trepidation. Anyone past a certain age must know how much death and dying frame our lives, lending a narrative structure even to the most banal existences and often enough constituting the most compelling part of life itself. Stories about lives are also stories about deaths, for learning how to deal with the end of life—like anything else we love—motivates us to listen actively, to enter into other people's stories as if their experiences were our own or, at least, very close to us, because, as Benjamin suggests, "this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate."⁷

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Center for Jewish Studies, University of Florida, Gainesville

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