

## *Introduction*

### THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF STORIES: SCHOLARSHIP, SELF-KNOWLEDGE, CULTURAL TRANSMISSION, PUBLIC SERVICE, AND THE SACRED

The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff was one of the finest anthropological and public storytellers of her generation. When she died in January 1985, just shy of her fiftieth birthday, Myerhoff left a large body of unfinished work, based primarily on her final ethnographic fieldwork in the Jewish community in the Fairfax section of Los Angeles. During the last several years of her life, Myerhoff gave many public presentations based on this research. These presentations, which achieved legendary status among those who heard them, were a complex mixture of performance, ethical and spiritual commentary, and scholarly discourse, adjusted according to audience. New York actor and director Arthur Strimmling shaped them into a dramatic piece called *Tales from Fairfax* which he performed for several years. In the subtitle of her notes for these appearances, Myerhoff underlined her major theme: “*Growing Souls through Stories.*”<sup>1</sup> She loved to quote Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav:

*The word moves a bit of air and this the next  
Until it reaches the one who receives it  
And he receives his soul therein  
And therein is awakened.*<sup>2</sup>

Originally, Myerhoff envisioned a book from the Fairfax study similar to *Number Our Days* (1978), her popular ethnographic book on the elderly Jewish immigrant community in Venice, California. The subjects of *Number Our Days* were a living remnant of the vanished community of Eastern European Jewry. Most of them had immigrated early in the twentieth century to the east coast of the United States, where they worked and raised their chil-

dren before moving to California in their later years. The Fairfax neighborhood, on the other hand, contained a younger and more varied Jewish population of survivors, refusniks, and older immigrants and their children. The neighborhood had been stabilized by a strong contingent of Lubavitchers who had arrived from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to carry on the fervent Jewish tradition of Hasidism.

Until now, news of Myerhoff's Fairfax work has been carried primarily on the airwaves of oral tradition, on videotapes of the film *In Her Own Time*, and on audiotapes of her presentations. *Stories as Equipment for Living* crystallizes her final work and makes it available to a broad reading public.

Myerhoff did not live to articulate and clarify the multiple strands of scholarship, art, self-knowledge, public service, cultural transmission, and spirituality embedded in her late work, but she would not have wanted her readers to view *Stories as Equipment for Living* as only an unfinished work of anthropological scholarship. It is rather a compromise between various intentions, a collaboration between the living and the dead, in which the editors and I have labored to carry out Myerhoff's expressed wishes within the constraints of academic publishing. As such it reflects our understanding of the complex ideas, needs, and desires of a much-loved figure: a female anthropologist at mid-life, a nonobservant Jew, a spiritual seeker, and a storyteller.

In her final fieldwork, Myerhoff played the role of participant-observer in a community transmitting forms of traditional Judaism from which she was only two generations removed but that had already become virtually foreign to her.

Born and raised in Cleveland, into an assimilated, middle-class Jewish family, Barbara Myerhoff earned an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles (1958), a master's degree in human development from the University of Chicago (1963), and a PhD in anthropology from UCLA (1968). Her dissertation research, based on fieldwork in Mexico, was published as *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (1974);<sup>3</sup> nominated for a National Book Award in 1975, this book established her scholarly reputation. In the early 1960s she also served as a social worker with the elderly in Los Angeles—an experience that profoundly influenced what was to become her major ethnographic work.

During the late 1960s, Myerhoff became interested in the topic of eth-

nicity and aging, due in part to a large grant obtained by James Birren, director of the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California, where she had joined the faculty of anthropology. Her first thought was to study older Chicanos, a subject that flowed logically from her earlier fieldwork. But when the Chicanos she approached repeatedly asked why she did not study her own people, Myerhoff turned to a small, impoverished community of elderly immigrant Jews in Venice California.<sup>4</sup>

The resulting book, *Number Our Days* (1978), transformed Myerhoff into a kind of Jewish Margaret Mead.<sup>5</sup> The Sunday *New York Times* even praised it as a wisdom book. Reviewer Charles Silberman began with the words of Socrates: “Our conversation is not about something casual, but about the way to live.” He continued, “Every now and then a book comes along that contributes to that conversation.” Silberman saw *Number Our Days* as a perfect antidote to the alleged narcissism and self-preoccupation of the 1970s. “In showing us the cultural alchemy by which these men and women convert poverty, infirmity and neglect into lives filled with meaning and celebration, [Myerhoff] teaches us more ‘about the proper way to live’ than all the self-help books combined.”<sup>6</sup> After the film version of *Number Our Days* received the Academy Award for the Best Short Subject Documentary, Barbara Myerhoff emerged as a highly sought-after academic celebrity.

Although she served as professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Southern California between 1976 and 1980, Myerhoff was more than the quintessential academic. She was a thinker who recognized that ideas must be tested and refined beyond the walls of academe. A quest for transforming experiences, for self-clarification runs through all her work, gradually becoming more explicit. She was attracted to certain genres of cultural action: the hunt, the voyage, the search, the quest, the pilgrimage—as she understood them through the work of her lifelong friend and mentor, Victor Turner.<sup>7</sup> Myerhoff knew that she could not fully understand these cultural forms without participating in them and reflecting on her own participation.

While working on *Number Our Days*, Myerhoff pondered her decision to study elderly Jewish immigrants: “. . . I sat on the benches outside the [Israel Levin Senior Adult] Center and thought about how strange it was to be back in the neighborhood where sixteen years before I had lived and for a time been a social worker with elderly citizens on public relief. . . . I had made

no conscious decision to explore my roots or clarify the meanings of my origins." As the Venice study moved forward, she kept asking herself, "Was it anthropology or a personal quest?"<sup>8</sup>

Separated from her biological father at an early age, Barbara Myerhoff's life seems to have been characterized by a longing she could never fully satisfy.<sup>9</sup> She had a strong need for the intensification of experience, a wish to be healed and uplifted, and to find a sense of completion. In storytelling, she found her calling. Readers of *Stories as Equipment for Living* will readily feel her "keen intellect, her deep interest in and commitment to the study of storytelling, of human beings as tellers of stories, [and] what those stories do to us and for us."<sup>10</sup> Myerhoff offered warmth and intellect to her students, colleagues, and friends. "She added clean-burning fuel to the fire of anyone she was close to," Marc Kaminsky says. "She made the larger life possible for those she touched. She sought it, created it."<sup>11</sup>

Myerhoff's radiance moved audiences and readers to feel deeply connected to her. "She could, in a public setting, communicate incredible ideas and a lot of information, while seeming to establish a relationship with you," says Deena Metzger.<sup>12</sup> When she listened (as a friend, ethnographer, teacher, or colleague) people felt enlivened and appreciated. "Barbara drew stories out of people in ways that I have rarely seen," says Marc Kaminsky. ". . . She loved being the listener to the tale, and she very much wanted to touch the deep part of the other."<sup>13</sup>

After the Venice study Myerhoff turned her attention to Fairfax, a primarily Jewish immigrant community composed of some 21,000 people of all ages living in a five-square mile area of Los Angeles. The ambitious scope of this study emerges from grant proposals presented to the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1982 and 1984. The first proposal involved a large collaborative effort that included Vikram Jayanti, Vimala Jayanti, Barbara Getzoff, and various assistants and community service organizations. This proposal aimed to study "the Fairfax community through participant-observation, censuses, interviews, life-history interviews and oral history classes, genealogies and family histories, case studies of crises, micro-histories of neighborhood, sub-communities and formal organizations, and visual documentation." Its major innovation was to involve volunteers in the study of their own neighborhoods and themselves. The second proposal was for a film, to be called "The Culture of Fairfax," directed by Jeremy Paul Kagan,

narrated by Isaac Bashevis Singer, and produced by the Center for Visual Anthropology that Myerhoff had established in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Southern California.<sup>14</sup>

Myerhoff's later work was profoundly influenced by two friends: the poet and writer Deena Metzger, and Naomi Newman, director of the Traveling Jewish Theatre. Her friendship with Deena had grown steadily from the time they met in their early twenties, the day after Deena moved to California in 1957. They remained intimates through the breakup of their respective marriages, traveling and celebrating holidays together. Myerhoff took a writing course from Deena in the early 1970s through the Women's Building, a nonacademic institution of higher learning devoted to feminism and social change through the arts.

Myerhoff was a voracious reader of fiction—the “lie” that tells a truth that can't be told in any other way—and considered herself a writer. As early as *Number Our Days*, she began crossing disciplinary boundaries by integrating literary craft and dramatization explicitly into her work.<sup>15</sup> Myerhoff spent a great deal of time with Naomi Newman at the Traveling Jewish Theatre, watching the group develop new theater pieces. As she collected stories from Fairfax, she began speaking in various venues not as an anthropologist but as a storyteller—a direction in her work strengthened by collaboration with actor/director Arthur Stimmiling at New York University and the Brookdale Center on Aging in New York. In the last five years of her life, Myerhoff was clearly moving away from purely academic, anthropological scholarship toward creative writing, performance, and spiritually edifying storytelling—which (like her ethnographic fieldwork) depended on a reciprocal relationship between teller and audience.

In June 1984, shortly after the end of her marriage, Myerhoff was told that she had lung cancer and would live at most another six months.<sup>16</sup> She had originally intended to use her Fairfax materials produce a film, a scholarly monograph, and a book of tales, modeled after Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*. Yet even before Myerhoff knew that she was dying, the scholarly anthropological work had begun to evolve toward a book of tales. In the last seven months of her life, Myerhoff mobilized friends and colleagues, who worked out a system of triage to rescue the essential Fairfax materials to continue her work.

Lynn Littman, who had produced and directed the film version of

*Number Our Days*, agreed to take over direction of the Fairfax film with Vikram Jayanti's participation, on the condition that Myerhoff, her illness, and her dying move to the center of the film. The poignancy and coherence of the resulting work, *In Her Own Time: The Final Fieldwork of Barbara Myerhoff*, revolve around Myerhoff's experience as an ambivalent initiate into Fairfax's Hasidic community, whose members wrap their arms around her, try to help her recover and begin to teach her religious practices, and a sacred literature and language with which she was unfamiliar.<sup>17</sup> The final on-screen interview was filmed two weeks before Myerhoff died.

*In Her Own Time* moves between two frames: Myerhoff's struggle to survive, aided by the Fairfax Hasidic community; and her identity as an anthropologist. Ever since her first book, *Peyote Hunt*, Barbara had challenged conventional ethnographic work, reflexively inserting her own participation into the text.<sup>18</sup> Superb anthropologist that she was, Myerhoff studied herself through the lens of her engagement with the Fairfax community, utilizing all the ruthless and compassionate intelligence that she brought to every subject. "I have known about anthropology as a way of life," said her colleague Paul Bohannon, weeping upon seeing the film, "but I have never known it before as a way of dying."<sup>19</sup>

Although a thousand pages of research materials were collected, Myerhoff was not able even to begin a rigorous, scholarly analysis of the Fairfax data. She entrusted the decisions about editing and publishing to her executor, Deena Metzger and to her friend and colleague Marc Kaminsky. In the last week of her life, Marc flew out to Los Angeles, went through twenty-seven boxes of relevant papers, mapped the basic contents, and brought back a set of essential scholarly essays in humanistic gerontology that appeared posthumously as *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*. Myerhoff also gave Kaminsky authority over a twenty-six-page typescript of notes and stories, which she referred to as "Tales from Fairfax" and used as the basis for many of her public appearances. Myerhoff made one specific request of Kaminsky: to edit and publish a book that would include "Tales from Fairfax" and her summative "Talks" on the nature of storytelling.

Metzger and Kaminsky later asked Mark Weiss—a poet, scholar, and editor who had been a colleague of Kaminsky's at the Brookdale Center on Aging—to collaborate as the principal editor of "Tales from Fairfax." Here

as elsewhere, all decisions were made collaboratively by the editors, with my assistance as the book moved into the stages of assembly, submission, review and publication. After extensive archival research, Weiss discovered additional evidentiary and interview materials, which are included in this book under the part titled "Field Notes." With great dedication and countless hours of labor in the Myerhoff Archives, Weiss meticulously winnowed the primary source materials presented in this book.

In an unpublished essay, Weiss noted Myerhoff's habits of working in the field and later reshaping these materials for performance and publication. When interviewing informants, Myerhoff did not use a tape recorder.<sup>20</sup> Instead, she took hand-written notes and later gave them a narrative form in dictation. Later versions of these stories gradually transformed them from an anthropologist's field notes into moral and religious "Tales from Fairfax."

*Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff* is a hybrid, a composite of storytelling and scholarship, edited as faithfully as possible according to Myerhoff's own understanding of ethnographic narrative and her emerging identity as a spiritual teacher and Jewish storyteller. It consists of three parts: 1 "Talks on Storytelling;" 2 "Tales from Fairfax;" and 3 "Field Notes." "Talks on Storytelling" consists of three presentations. Although these were given at conferences, seminars, and public lectures, Myerhoff spoke informally, dialogically, and improvisationally. "Tales from Fairfax" consists of eight morally edifying tales, drawn from interviews conducted in Fairfax, which Myerhoff performed as a storyteller. "Field Notes" consists of thirteen sets of notes dictated after interviews. These field notes are rare and invaluable documents for students of anthropology, because they record Myerhoff's thoughts immediately after interviews, which can then be compared to the versions she later worked up into "Tales."<sup>21</sup>

The editors and I believe that this book almost uniquely charts an anthropologist's process from collection to near publication (Malinowski's journal is the only other example that comes to mind).<sup>22</sup> This book may therefore become a key text for the teaching of fieldwork and the understanding of anthropology as a process involving the interaction of subject and observer. The tale told by the subject is necessarily different from the tale told by the observer. Reading the earlier field notes side by side with the tales, readers will notice changes in rhetoric and in matters of fact. These changes are noted in the notes to the tales. The changes always move in the same

direction: intensifying and heightening the stories until, as Mark Weiss puts it, they “endow [Myerhoff’s] subjects with an almost shamanic force.”<sup>23</sup>

I want to reiterate here that Myerhoff was working in experimental ways that she did not live to clarify. She was working simultaneously from multiple perspectives: as anthropological scholar, storyteller, spiritual teacher, and personal seeker. To read Myerhoff’s work from any single perspective is to miss Myerhoff’s intention and to lose some of the beauty as well as the seminal ambiguity of this pioneering work.

“Talks on Storytelling,” consists of three talks or presentations: “Stories as Equipment for Living,” “Telling One’s Story,” and “Ritual and Storytelling: A Passover Tale.” The lead essay, “Stories as Equipment for Living,” (a title borrowed from the literary critic Kenneth Burke)<sup>24</sup> represents the culmination of a lifetime of thought about how stories serve as vehicles of cultural meaning and individual soul making. It is the distillation of talks about storytelling that Myerhoff gave to audiences of scholars, clinical social workers, and older people in senior centers during the last year and a half of her life. Myerhoff understood stories both as carriers of culture and as unique, mysterious, individual organisms. Stories have lineages, they have histories and futures, they carry culture, they bestow meaning, and they construct the world. At the same time, every story carries its own mystery and is always unfolding through an innate, yet indeterminate, process of development.<sup>25</sup> As Myerhoff learned from Rabbi Nachman, a story lives a long time in the air, waiting to be received, internalized, and retold by someone whose soul is thereby enlarged.

“Talks on Storytelling” concludes with the brilliant piece, “Ritual and Storytelling: A Passover Tale,” which was very close to Barbara’s heart. Audiences who heard her give this talk were electrified. Mark Weiss described it as “one of the most exciting intellectual experiences of my life. Its enduring impact was the reason that I accepted without hesitation Marc Kaminsky’s request that I edit the Tales.”<sup>26</sup> Like the tales, this talk reveals that Myerhoff was attempting to link thick description (in Clifford Geertz’s phrase) of the tensions inherent in social reality to the creation of sacred and ethical narrative. More important, this essay moves from storytelling per se to storytelling and thick description embedded in the life of ritual and community. Specifically, it theorizes in a radically new way the Jewish ritual of Passover

by linking it to an interpretation of this ritual as enacted in the family of her closest friend, Deena Metzger.

As a participant for at least ten years in the Seder at the Posys' home, Myerhoff knew that she was entering more reflexively into anthropological research than ever before. She was not only studying her own people but also holding up a lens to her own image within the kinship network. She was also being faithful to Judaic religious practices, which are based as importantly in the home as in the synagogue.<sup>27</sup> "Ritual and Storytelling" reveals that the categories of "cultural transmission" and "the sacred" had become almost identical in Myerhoff's mind, the latter seeming to take precedence over the former.<sup>28</sup>

The Passover ritual in its present form has been celebrated each spring by Jews since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE). It consists of a carefully specified meal and service, during which those assembled retell the story of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery in Egypt, their desert wandering, their covenant with God at Mount Sinai, and their receiving the Ten Commandments and the Torah. As Myerhoff notes, this story is not merely retold, but performed, "so that the children have the experience of receiving and, to some degree, living through the story of their ancestors as if it happened to them. Only the 'as if' is blurred, and it does happen to them when it succeeds." Myerhoff explains that whether this ritual succeeds or not has much to do with how and to what degree the "Great Story" of the Exodus becomes intertwined with the "Little Tradition" of each individual family and group assembled.

Myerhoff brought a camera crew to record one particular four-hour Passover celebration in Deena's family. The filming of this Seder was also a way to reflect on the improvisational aspect of ritual, a process that brought Myerhoff progressively closer to her own tradition. "Ritual and Storytelling" brilliantly analyzes complex family negotiations, showing that they have a history of their own: what parts should be left out, who will read which section, what languages to use, and so on. Myerhoff demonstrates that the ritual involves a struggle between the older generation trying to tell the "Great Story" in its way and the younger generation refusing to listen, or wanting a different version, or claiming its irrelevance to their lives, then at the end identifying (or not) as one who was "at Sinai."

At the conclusion of this storytelling ritual, the participants grudgingly agree that they will do a better job the following year—as the service reads, “next year in Jerusalem.” Concluding “Ritual and Storytelling” in the voice of a wise anthropologist rather than that of an observant Jew, Myerhoff writes: “‘next year in Jerusalem’ will never come, need never come, should never come. And so it is that human beings struggle to reinvent the reason for coming together and performing the great stories that tell them who they are, why they are located in history and in the moment as they are, and what their individual lives . . . have to do with the great stories of their people.”

Myerhoff’s interest in storytelling corresponded with a broad revival of Jewish storytelling—scholarly, performative, and homiletic<sup>29</sup>—that began in the late 1970’s and expanded in the 1980’s. The conceptual problems raised by her retellings and unacknowledged editorial interventions are a matter of controversy and stimulated rich discussions among the editors<sup>30</sup>—a topic I will mention briefly below and leave to future scholarship for debate. Suffice it to suggest that Myerhoff’s work was so pioneering that not until the 1990’s did social scientists begin to develop explicitly genre-bending styles of inquiry to accord with the current intellectual landscape.<sup>31</sup>

When Myerhoff performed her tales and gave her talks about storytelling in the early 1980’s, she acknowledged that her work-in-progress had no obvious disciplinary home. It seemed to fall, she noted, “between folklore and literature, psychology and religion.” The stories, she wrote, had “not been edited to be smooth, to fit obvious narrative expectations, to give historical or even sociological context.” They had been “selected to portray a moment, a photograph or strip of behavior, a revelation or a sigh of relief.”<sup>32</sup>

The present book’s part titled “Field Notes” consists of thirteen interviews and narratives in their dictated and transcribed form, unaltered except for punctuation. These are the only direct interviews that have survived, with the exception of three which the editors have omitted: two brief interviews with older men from the labor movement and one interview whose publication could have done damage to a person still living.<sup>33</sup> “Field Notes”—as much diary as simple field notes—contain a record almost unique in anthropology. They reveal the inevitable interaction of the anthropologist’s private life and needs (in this instance, at a particularly difficult moment) with her perception and interpretation of the lives of her subjects. The notes are provisional and in process.

“Tales from Fairfax” consists of eight stories that have been more deliberately shaped. Myerhoff edited these into performance texts, reading them to her circle of intimates and asking if the work could stand on its own. Stepping into the role of a Jewish storyteller, she performed them, weaving in threads of personal, scholarly and spiritual commentary.

Myerhoff’s editorial interventions sometimes passed beyond the pale of anthropological scholarship; she changed her informants’ diction, and on occasion she altered simple facts, always with the intention of heightening their spiritual and emotional impact. I and the editors are aware of the controversy these practices may stir.

Readers of this book will note that two subjects (Rachel E. and Martha N.) appear to tell different versions of the same story—one in “Tales from Fairfax” and another in “Field Notes.” Rachel E. appears as an interviewee in “Field Notes” and as the teller of “A Bowl of Soup” in “Tales from Fairfax.” Likewise, Martha N. appears as an interviewee in “Field Notes” and as the teller of “You have to have *nesbome* to do this work.” Conceptually speaking, we think that there are crucial differences between what might be called the “ethnographic” and the “religious” versions, between secular representation and sacred storytelling, textual differences that become apparent with close reading, and reveal the different purposes of the two narratives.

In a letter to Deena Metzger, Marc Kaminsky argued that the vitality of these two narratives resides in their thick description of and clear-eyed encounter with distasteful realities of impoverished and frail old people. Taking the case of Martha N., Kaminsky wrote, “The ethnographic narrative reproduces waves of tension between the repulsive aspects of the elderly (their aggressiveness, greed, stealing, body odor, contempt for others) and the fragile capacity of the volunteers to care in spite of this repulsiveness—and in spite of the stinginess of the city in providing services or of the young in supporting their parents and the older generation.”

The sacred stories go beyond thick description. Myerhoff’s model in sacralizing them was Buber’s retelling of hasidic stories.<sup>34</sup> Hasidic stories were traditionally told in praise of the rebbe, to transmit and increase the hasid’s (follower’s) love and reverence, to strengthen the bonds of community and faith among European Jews in the *shtetl*. In sacralizing the narrative of Martha N., for example, Myerhoff strips away contextual details, thereby transforming her into a storytelling sage rather than a particular historical person. The

sacred tale is shaped to intensify and amplify Myerhoff's redemptive vision and to enlarge the capacity to care in the listener or reader. Mobilizing images of the good mother and of soul work, the tale participates in the life of the community and supports Martha N.'s central task: to sustain her own and her volunteers' capacity to provide love and caring attention for these disagreeable elderly individuals.<sup>35</sup>

We have included these different versions in this book because they help clarify the trajectory of Myerhoff's evolving work. The direction of revising and shaping moves from individual to collective identity; from the personal history of the teller to the figure of the storyteller as sage; from an ethnographic narrative that attempts to represent reality (with all its tensions and struggles and fragmentations of self and community) to an archetypal narrative which strengthens collective identity.

Myerhoff's tales aim at strengthening the capacity to care, at deepening the emotional, ethical, and spiritual resources to bear the suffering of others. In terms of Jewish thought, these stories would be interpreted under the rabbinic injunction: *chesed v'emet*—truth in the service of lovingkindness. Whether this is an appropriate style of writing for a social scientist who had also become a celebrity is open to debate.

While Myerhoff was completing *Number Our Days* (1978), one of her primary informants died before he could answer a key question in his own words. Myerhoff called her closest friend, Deena Metzger. "She was just lamenting that Shmuel was dead," remembers Deena. "And I said, 'Well, sit down at the typewriter, call his spirit and let him tell you. Just write it as he tells you.' And she did."<sup>36</sup> This approach is shocking perhaps, but such experiences were not outside the tradition within which Myerhoff was working. She had found over the years that her integrity depended on reconciling the various realms and dimensions in which she lived and to which she owed loyalty. She not only allowed the academy to illuminate the lives of her informants; she also allowed her informants to illuminate her intellectual, professional, and inner life. In this, Myerhoff was a powerful model for accepting the sometimes different ways in which wisdom can be transmitted to us.

While I was wrestling with the final draft of this introduction, a bicycle accident in the Texas Hill Country almost took my life. During a long and painful recovery, I remembered Myerhoff's never-to-be-fulfilled prediction

that she would someday be “a little old Jewish lady.”<sup>37</sup> As publisher’s deadlines came and went, I felt increasingly immobilized and inadequate to the task. I called Deena, who gave me the same advice she had given Barbara after the death of Shmuel. I accepted this advice easily, since I was then writing and receiving regular letters to and from my long-dead father.

A few months later, resting quietly one night in my hotel room at a Gerontological Society meeting, I closed my eyes, and spoke to Barbara—and she answered. I told her that I was frightened and stuck. “You are older now than I was when I died,” she responded. “And you have seen the face of your own death. Do not be afraid. Say what you know to be true: the world of soul is real; moral and spiritual growth is the main goal and fruit of living a long life.”

I never knew Barbara Myerhoff while she was alive; but speaking to me that night, she became an angel bringing messages of divine plenty from invisible worlds. I use the word *angel* deliberately, as a traditional Jewish image that conveys the experience of a palpable energy entering my body and mind—my personal reception of Barbara’s wisdom. Angels belong to an older order of belief. They bear the mark of the imagination. They are playful and live apart from the language of scientific truth. Readers who can only see the angels of Hallmark greeting cards, or the recycling of Raphael’s *putti* in contemporary consumer culture, will miss what is at stake here—figurative language needed to convey one’s relationship to the dead and to articulate a personal reception of tradition so that it lives within oneself.<sup>38</sup>

In the Jewish tradition, angels are intermediaries between God and man. They are people (living or dead) who call on us to truly examine ourselves, to change and grow. They appear when we least expect them and tell us that the world of the spirit is real. They strengthen, inspire, judge, heal, and give hope that we can do what we need to do; they let us know that we are not alone. They provide support and encouragement for transformations we need to make but cannot accomplish on our own.<sup>39</sup> “I like your notion of me as an angel,” Barbara said in our conversation. “I think it works—even though we both know that I was far from an angel in my earthly life.”

Barbara Myerhoff is no longer with us; she did not live to complete the Fairfax project or her own journey to a “heart of wisdom” that she personally longed for. If Myerhoff were alive today, she might well be regarded as a leading “spiritual elder.”<sup>40</sup> In her absence, we must be grateful to Marc Kamin-

sky, Deena Metzger, and Mark Weiss for putting together her second and last posthumous volume. As Mark Weiss wrote to me, “What Myerhoff left us is a personal and anthropological text of extraordinary richness that we hope will inspire discussion for a long time to come.” Myerhoff inspired many audiences and readers to seek the truth and to seek the divine with all their heart, with all their mind, and with all their strength (to borrow the words of an ancient Jewish prayer). Her life and work pose an essential challenge for all of us both in and outside the academy: how is it possible to weave together the strands of scholarship, spirituality, and service in our lives?

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