Middle-Aged White Lady Lost in the Blues

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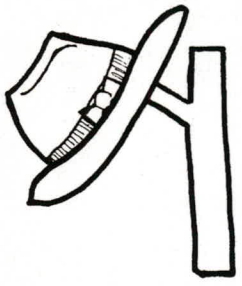
A critical life experience that shaped the author as a gerontological social worker was a friendship in her early adult years with an elderly, first generation bluesman. This chosen friendship with an elderly person much different from herself, at a time when she was forming her adult identity, had a profound effect on her understanding of late life and of intergenerational and interracial interactions. It also left the author with a lifelong love of the blues.

Like most gerontologists, I could tell you stories of the beloved older people in my childhood: the grandmother whose unconditional love saved my mental health, the church ladies with whom I spent the night in case they had a medical emergency, and the various ethnic nursing homes our choir serenaded. But I want to tell you a different story, a story about a friendship with an elderly bluesman during my college years that had a profound impact on my views as a fledgling adult seeking my path in life. That relationship shaped my understanding of late life, the importance of intergenerational interactions, the need for interracial dialogue, and many other central issues that led me towards a career in social work and gerontology. As a bonus, it left me with a lifelong, abiding love for the blues.

A Critical Intergenerational Encounter

In 1967, I was a sophomore at the University of Texas at Austin. It was a complex, difficult, and exhilarating time to be young. My friends and I were in the habit of stopping at the Chuck Wagon, the food concession in the student union, on our way to class for coffee and to see whether anything more educational than our courses was going on that day. The focus, form, and control of education was being actively questioned and redefined. Students felt it their prerogative to decide which lessons were most needed at the moment: Anthropology 101, a teach-in on the war in Vietnam, or a spring day in the park.

One memorable morning, as I spotted my friends and sat down groggily with my first cup of coffee, I looked across the table to see a dignified, wizened, elderly black man. By way of introduction, my friend said simply but with great respect, "Rosemary, this is Mance Lipscomb." I did not yet fully understand who this new person was, but something in the situation caught my attention at a deep level. I knew that this was someone I very much wanted and needed to know; I knew that I had just stumbled upon an important opportunity for learning. I did not make it to class that day.



Over the rest of that day (and many more days and nights to come), I learned that Mance Lipscomb was a first-generation bluesman from Nacogdoches, deep in the East Texas piney woods. He was a self-taught guitarist, who could not explain why it had been natural for him to pluck the strings of his instrument rather than strum them. With no access to musical innovations, he discovered his own equivalents, such as using a pocket knife as a capo to depress the strings of his guitar, raising the pitch and creating a unique vibrato. He had been a popular and sought after musician within his own community for most of his life. He retired from his work as a sharecropper and, eventually, as a musician as well, sensing that the world had moved on and his time and music were of the past, the story of many talented men and women of his generation.

But, meanwhile, the larger world of which he knew next to nothing was changing in more positive ways, and a new generation of largely white, urban audiences emerged who were hungry for this music that was in danger of

being lost. Mance was one of the bluesmen whom the Lomaxes tracked down, recorded, and enticed back into performing. As he was led through the college circuit, he discovered a new set of "grandchildren" who were interested in not just his music, but also his life and his wisdom. It was a match that well met the needs of both generations.

Things I Learned from Mance

Over the next several years, Mance came to Austin frequently to play at the Vulcan Gas Company, the local hippy rock concert venue. After his shows, we sat up late into the night at a friend's house while he told his tales nonstop to the adoring, motley crew of white kids who had adopted him as a mentor. (At 19, I could never stay awake as long as he could at 70.) He spoke of the mindless tedium of work in the cotton fields and the focus on music that relieved his boredom. He drew pictures with words of a rich life of family, friends, and weekend social gatherings. Although his stage patter was full of jokes about drinking to excess, he admitted to us that he was a lifelong non-drinker, studiously avoiding following the path of his abusive alcoholic father. He filled in the gaps in our knowledge of our own history in ways our own grandparents could not or would not. Here are some of the things Mance told us:

• He was 65 years old before he ever stepped through the front door of a white person's house. (My mother told me that, as a child, she was confused by her mother's insistence that black neighbors must come to her back door.)

• He grew up at the turn of the century when the grandchildren of slaves were working the same fields as their grandparents, now for a dollar a day. (I remember as a small child seeing people, all black, bent over double in the cotton fields. Perhaps I saw Mance.)

• He found that music made such mindless work tolerable. He and his friends tried out and refined new songs in the fields during the day, before performing them on the weekend at the local "cakewalk." There were no commercial bars for black performances (any more than there were hotels that would accommodate blacks). So the locals had to bring their own refreshments, featuring home baked cakes, to the ice house or church hall where they gathered for secular entertainment. The best cakes were given as prizes to the best dancers.

• He had lived a largely 19th-century life with no exposure to the technology taken for granted by others. When the Lomaxes first recorded him, then played it back for him, he was shocked and confused over where his voice was coming from, having never before seen a tape recorder. At his first concert appearance at Berkeley, he was similarly confused over his discovery of microphones and amplification systems.

• "Shine on Harvest Moon" is a blues ballad. When performed as such, it includes an introduction (expanded on verbally by bluesmen) that tells the story of a country boy trying to woo a young girl. The girl is shy and afraid of what might lurk in the woods at night (there being no paved roads in rural, black communities). So the boy prays for the clouds to part and the full moon to light her way and give her the courage to make it to their appointed assignation.

Such missing pieces of information were critical at a time when we were struggling to resolve our own "white liberal guilt." After all, our own ancestors had played direct roles in circumscribing and impoverishing the life of Mance and his family. And yet, Mance seemed to accept our friendship at face value; in other words, he showed no signs of holding against us the "sins of our fathers." I understood his

attitude as part of the wisdom he had attained over a long life. Mance's acceptance of me and my friends is no doubt an important source of a conclusion I eventually reached, that feeling guilty over things past that I could not change was a waste of energy. That energy was better directly towards the responsibility I clearly did have to contribute to changing my world in the present. And that understanding eventually led me to a career in social work.

Things I Now Understand

I have long said that one of the reasons I work with older people is that I am able to learn so much from them. I have learned unrecorded history from those who lived through it, and I have learned much about what it takes to survive in the long haul. (The elderly are, by definition, survivors.) Mance was the first person with whom I experienced these benefits of intergenerational relations, but it was many years before I discovered words and theories to explain the dynamics involved.

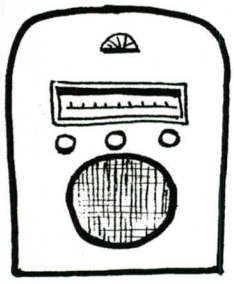
Mance was already approaching old age with a sense of integrity (Erikson, 1964), but the happenstance of finding a new audience allowed him to go back to earlier adult tasks and achieve a richer summation of his life. It was clear at the time that Mance saw his new young friends as an alternate set of grandchildren. He once told us, sadly, that his own grandchildren all listened to Motown and had no interest in his music. He had resigned himself to the fact that his music would die with him. Finding other young people who valued his music and life lessons gave him a new chance to assess the value of his lifetime and to pass on his accumulated wisdom.

Through his new intergenerational relations, Mance returned to the Keepers of the Meaning (versus Rigidity) stage identified by Vaillant in his empirical validation of Erikson's theories (Vaillant, 1977; Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). Vaillant posited that the development of wisdom and concern for the preservation of culture occurs after or late in the stage of Generativity through activities intended to "pass on the torch." In order to pass on the values that should guide the next generation, each individual has to take stock and determine what basic lessons have been learned and conclusions drawn in the course of his or her lifetime. Having done this work facilitates achieving a sense of integrity that is based on a fuller consideration of what one has accomplished. Past failures are examined and their lessons passed on as well, giving them a new, positive meaning.

This aspect of later life seems to be what Erikson also described but did not define in his last book as "grand generativity" (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnik, 1986). In exploring the reworking of earlier life stages by people in their eighties, Erikson noted that elders must express a type of generativity that goes "beyond middle age's direct responsibility for maintaining the world" (p. 74). He further notes that this grand-generativity "incorporates care for the present with concern for ... today's younger generations in their futures, for generations not yet born, and for the survival of the world as a whole" (pp. 74-75).

As Erikson demonstrated eloquently (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnik, 1986), people can and do grow and change throughout the life span, reworking earlier developmental stages as new opportunities and understandings arise. Mance spent his youth and much of adulthood as a sharecropper and musician whose environment was restricted by segregation to a small local community. Yet, his world was rich and complex, centered on family and friendship. He "retired" once within that same context, at peace with having had a life well lived and only a few regrets about issues the larger world would not allow him to address. But then the world moved on and he was invited to join a larger, more multifaceted environment full of previously denied opportunities. As he became acclimated, he increasingly took advantage of these new

possibilities, not only to have a second career, but also to become more fully the person which he was capable of becoming. He emerged from this redefinition of self with even more to pass on to future generations, and more to account for in the balance of his own life.



Young adults, in turn, need adults older than themselves as mentors (Levinson, et al., 1978). In establishing identity as a young adult, one must discover and explore the self apart from parents and family of origin. Yet, there is still need for guidance, as multiple aspects of life are experienced for the first time in work, relationships, politics, community, and many other systems needed to sustain adulthood.

Mance, and no doubt others like him, were unique and invaluable mentors for me and many other young adults. As much as the Mance Lipscombs of the world had been restricted to segregated communities, Anglos had also been denied the choice of most normal relationships with people from cultures other than their own. Growing up in Jim Crow Texas, I did not know a black peer until college; only assimilated Latinos existed in my world; and virtually no Asians. And a "mixed marriage" was one between a Baptist and a Methodist! (I did know one Native American who took great pride in teaching children about his culture.) As fledgling adults, we were woefully ill prepared to face the environment outside our own enclaves, even while our country was bogged down in war in Southeast Asia.

Early in my career as a still-young M.S.W., I supervised a prototype information and referral service that was one of the original Administration on Aging model projects. As the program developed and expanded to include outreach, it seemed logical to me to seek out elderly paraprofessionals of like ethnicity as the seniors we needed to reach (Anglo, Black, and Latino). This was perceived as such a novel idea in the mid 1970s that it drew the attention of the state's governor. As I began to give presentations about new program outcomes achieved through the efforts of these older workers, I discovered that most professional audiences heard only half of what was being said. They understood that working or volunteering was "good for older people." But they had trouble attending to data indicating that older workers could do things younger professionals could not (such as convincing reluctant clients to come to the mental health clinic). Out of frustration, I edited a book presenting examples of the use of older workers and volunteers in a variety of mental health programs in the U.S., Canada, and Israel (McCaslin, 1983). I now understand that the potential contributions of older people were obvious to me in large part because of my own early adult friendship with an elderly mentor.

For most (but not all) people in this country, the environment is considerably more diverse today. And yet most people's childhoods will necessarily be largely restricted to their parents' social world, still too often culturally insular. An important aspect of young adult identity development must be to learn more about the people and cultures for which their early exposure has been limited, defined by not only ethnicity but also age, physical abilities, religion, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Whether through college, the workplace, travel, or other means, young adults must expose themselves to a broader range of people and lifestyles if they are to be productive adults in an increasingly global environment.

The elderly are a valuable, unique resource that we waste at our peril. The needs and abilities of younger and older generations are often more congruent than are those between parents and children (McCaslin, 1992). Wisdom that can be accrued only over time should be put to better use than is now the case.

The Blues

As a secondary but life-enriching benefit, my early friendship with Mance left me with a deep, abiding love of the blues in all its many forms. The blues speaks to the human condition and communicates across divisions of culture, age, time, and place. The same performance can touch equally the youthful pain of lost love and the mid-life fears of loss of parents (the original love object) and ultimately the loss of self (McCaslin, 1987).

The influence Mance Lipscomb had in my life came back to me after a particular mid-life experience. I had suffered a series of losses over a year and a half (death, surgery, a geographic move, divorce and more) that left me crying myself to sleep each night. Driving down an unending Los Angeles freeway, scanning radio stations, I happened on a blues piece that suddenly reduced me to tears right in the middle of traffic. I tracked it down to a recording by a contemporary Texas bluesman (Moore, 1990) and played it often as part of my "grief therapy." Blues, at its best, is played in the key where the heart breaks.

Conclusion

I might have found social work and gerontology without Mance. I did have wonderful childhood memories of grandparents and other elderly friends. I was raised in a Christian tradition of always being watchful for those who need help or simple solace. But I am certain that the formative young adult experience of a voluntarily chosen friendship with an elderly person much different than I made me a different gerontological social worker than I would have been otherwise. It left me more alert to later experiences that drew me toward this field. It left me with a more balanced view of the needs and strengths of older people. It left me with a concern for the largely untapped potential for different generations to teach and support each other. And it left me with an appreciation of the universal joys and pains that flow through and enrich the entire life cycle. I hope to always have the blues that Mance Lipscomb first opened my heart to.

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