



Letter From a Folklorist

By Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, Ph.D.

Dear Student of Folklife,

I'm writing this letter to help you better understand what a folklorist does. When I tell people that I am a folklorist, they often look surprised and ask, "What's that?!" First, I can tell you that being a folklorist is a *lot* of fun. Perhaps after you read about how much fun I have in my work, you'll want to be a folklorist, too! Who knows?

In my work, I rely on three principles: 1) collecting folklife; 2) categorizing what I discover into "folk genres"; and 3) interpreting folklife to discover why it is significant. When I "collect folklife," I am really gathering information by talking to various people about their different cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices. Why? Because when we study a group's folklife, we learn a great deal about that group's history, culture, values, and significance.

However, these are not ordinary conversations. They are "interviews" with people whom I've identified as having something important to tell me. For an interview, I go to the interviewee's setting so that I can talk to them in their own setting, or context. And I bring along the necessary equipment—tape recorder, camera, and notebook—to document the information I collect. I record and, later, transcribe (or write down every word said) our conversation; I take pictures of the people, setting, and important items; and I take notes on important keywords and phrases. The process of documenting folklife is called "fieldwork." No, "fieldwork" does not mean planting rice or sugar cane! Fieldwork means interviewing and documenting people in their own setting about their cultural traditions.

After I "collect folklore" by interviewing people in the field, then the real work begins to make sense of everything I've discovered. One of the first things I must do is to "classify" what I've heard and seen into different folk genres. Is it material culture? Oral tradition? Custom? Belief? Music? Dance? Body communication? Sometimes classifying is very tricky because many genres overlap with each other. A particular object may be important only because of stories and customs that go with it. You might have an old tablecloth that is important to you simply because of how it was used on special holidays at your grandmother's house—because of all the stories told around that table and tablecloth. It doesn't matter if different categories overlap; it is just important to recognize what the categories are. Other folklorists have written about these different folk genres, so I will do a lot of reading and research to learn what they have to say.

The hardest part of being a folklorist is explaining the significance of what you've discovered to other people. Some questions I want to answer are these: What is the



“heart of the story”? What are the obvious and hidden meanings of this tradition? What does it mean to the interviewee? What does it mean to the person’s folk group, and to society as a whole? Why does this tradition continue?

One of my favorite projects was for a book I’ve written called *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*. For this book, I interviewed many people who live in the South, talking about their porch traditions and just what these traditions have meant to them. I got so many different responses! People told me about their storytelling memories; about their courtship rituals; about their favorite swings; about childhood games; about their relationship to their neighbors. When I was finished, one of my conclusions about the overall significance of the front porch was that the porch is an important in-between space—between indoors and outdoors—that has shaped a large part of community identities in the South.

What about your own folklife? What does it mean to you? Do you count on a birthday cake every year? A Christmas tree? A Thanksgiving turkey? A Halloween costume? If these—or other traditions—are important to you, think about *why* they’re important.

Folklorists are always interested in hearing about the folklife of others—particularly the folklife of young people. Perhaps you will decide to write about a folk group you belong to or one you have discovered during this lesson and share it with someone who doesn’t know about this group. Your teacher or librarian may be able to help you find people or groups who would like to read it.

Sincerely,

Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, Ph.D.