

Cultural Self-Study

I am George, son of Ernest, son of Anton and Frances Skraba. Anton and Frances were young and adventurous risk-takers that came to America from Slovenia to escape The Great War. Through hard work, they built a farm in a Slovene community west of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that I was later raised on. I am also son of Bernadine, daughter of George and Berthilla Reising whose ancestors immigrated to America from Germany and France. Like many first or second generation Americans, my parents were adaptable. They continued the customs and traditions that they felt strongly about, incorporated new ones, and let the other ones fade away. This blending of cultures continues with my own family as we still take a moment to be grateful before meals. But rather than participating in religious holidays, we celebrate the seasons.

Success has taken on different meanings across the generations. For my grandparents, survival was success. After establishing themselves, they sought education for their children. Legend has it that my grandfather sacrificed two fingers for insurance money to help pay for my mother's college education. What became a mark of success for one generation became an expectation for the next. My siblings and I each have bachelor degrees and some level of post-graduate education. However, the common thread of success running through each of these generations and of the culture as a whole is the idea that it will somehow be better for the next generation. For me, this does not imply that we will have a higher

standard of living than our parents. It simply means that we will support our children and encourage them to be risk-taking, adventurous, and adaptable.

While my parents differed on religion, education, and politics, they both grew up on farms. They shared a strong connection to growing, preserving, and cooking their own food. As a child, I recall that late summer evenings involved canning tomatoes and bottling root beer. I can still see the gas stove in my parents' basement where my father would boil our fresh corn on the cob, make popcorn in the evening, or roast the holiday turkeys. Before we ate dinner together every night, we would say a prayer. Sunday meals were more special and time consuming. Usually there was a roast and perhaps dinner was at two in the afternoon rather than in the evening like it was on work nights. Holidays involved an inordinate amount time and effort in food preparation. Baking would commence the week before, chopping and dressing about a day. We dressed up for holiday meals, used the fine china, and opened a bottle of Riunite wine, of which even my siblings and I would have a small glass. These food-related customs are very important me, and so they have become a significant part of my family routine.

Fish camp is a spiritual ritual and annual migration for my family. During fish camp, when the sockeye salmon run, we transform whole salmon into smoked canned fish for the rest of the year. For us, the process starts in the spring when we reserve our days at my friend's floating house. Uncle Donnie (as we call him) provides his home, labor, and expertise in this process as public service to the community.

About two week before fish camp, we start making lists of all the things we'll need to make or bring. Who is making the banana bread? What will be for breakfast on the third morning? What should we get Uncle Donnie for a gift? What would be an improvement from the previous years? A few days before fish camp, the cooking starts. We need good food to keep up our energy at fish camp, but end up working so hard that there is not enough time or energy to cook. It is best to have the meals ready to heat and eat.

I could write pages about fish camp. I could explain the whole process, from weighing and purchasing the fish from the seiners to tightening the ring on the last jar. I could go into the details or tell stories about the tragedies that occur, like when we forgot to put water in the bottom of the pressure cooker and melted it, but fish camp isn't about that. It is about working side-by-side with people you love, whether it rains or shines. It is about being aware and connecting with nature. You have to look up from what you are doing to appreciate the swallows catching mosquitoes just off of the water and the seals that silently come by looking for scraps. Fish camp is about hard work, patience, and vigilance. Someone must sit by the pieces of salmon drying in the wind to keep the gulls and crows from stealing them and watch the pressure gauge, 90 minutes at 15 pounds. Fish camp is about being grateful.

This year, fish camp included our family of four, my wife's mother, father and stepmother, and Chris, my friend's nephew. Our goal was to put-up 30 fish in two days, which depending on the size of the fish should make 15 cases plus kippered bellies and scrapings. We arrived a day early so that we could take it a bit easier. We had to unpack, settle-in, prepare and just visit. Halibut Cove runs on its own time; things are much slower over there.

We were all feeling tired, fishy and smoky on our final night. With 18 cases of fish put aside to sustain us for the year, our favorite part of fish camp had finally arrived. I carefully pulled the sizzling smoked bellies out of a 500-degree oven and placed them on handmade platters. I delivered the bellies to family and friends who sat in a circle on Don's floating deck. We held hands as we expressed our appreciation for this process and moment. Fish camp is about being grateful for life, food, and each other.