

The Refrigerator, and American Ideas of “Home”.

The particular refrigerator that I am recalling in my mind now was literally plastered over with pictures of children, and with certificates and citations that marked their athletic and educational accomplishments. There were photos of family gatherings, of cousins, aunts and uncles, grandmother and grandfather. One could see that pictures considered most emotionally important to parents –the youngest son being hugged by a grandparent, a daughter riding the family dog –were placed at eye level, on the front of the fridge. Photos of distant relatives, business cards of the family insurance agent, plumber, painter and house re-modeler were placed either below eye level on the front of the fridge, or on its side in a more peripheral space. Also, the mom of the household explained to me, pictures were sometimes replaced as new and important family gatherings took place, or if children did something that merited that special “Kodak moment”. Thus a process of creating or recycling family history, of outlining degrees of familial affection, of intimacy, or of distance was spatially diagrammed on the refrigerator surface.

Other interesting items found on the refrigerator surface included a set of moral and religious maxims that, in this housewife’s words, kept her “spiritually focused”. And, there was the all-important schedule of family events and, as well, the equally important list of tasks to be completed, such as shopping or picking up children from various school or sports activities.

The anthropologist (in this case me) who first sharpened his analytical eye observing the rituals and mores of a remote Papua New Guinean tribal group began to see the refrigerator in a new light. It was an object that had been ritually marked by this middle class, midwestern family. When one enters a ritual space, like that in which an initiation or a mortuary ritual is performed, this space is usually marked off from the surrounding area by objects that have a special “alerting” quality. The object can be something ordinary, even mundane, but some modification is done to it so that its nature is altered in a symbolic sense and it comes to convey a host of special meanings.

A ritual object is used during a ritual. What was the ritual in which this refrigerator was being included? And, what meanings did this ritual express about middle class American lives? This refrigerator, and millions like it that are put to similar symbolic uses, occupied central stage in a ritual performance that had as its aim the creation of domesticity, and a feeling of home. Increasingly the refrigerator has become a sort of billboard advertisement for many strongly held values about what a home should be, what sort of emotional and moral tone should distinguish it, and how it should run.

What is the American culture of domesticity? What values go in to making it up, and how can we see these values pictured on our refrigerators? Well, to begin lets consider the issue of American mothers being responsible for the flow of household tasks. That is, one of the ways that the middle class mom judges her success as a mom and housewife is by successfully coordinating or balancing a host of household activities. Running kids to soccer practice, or little league, shopping for and preparing family meals, picking up kids from band practice, etc... All these activities must be balanced and organized if the household is to function smoothly, indeed if it is to function at all. Keeping the family

activities running smoothly is not only a mother's key responsibility but often, as my interviews reveal, a significant source of feelings of satisfaction, competence and pride. The family master schedule enshrines the values of balance and organization—helping to put order into a potentially chaotic environment, and provide the home with its particular rhythm and tone. The master schedule, placed on the fridge, revealed the kitchen and the refrigerator surface to be family command and control centers, wherein certain notions of how a home should run were displayed.

In the present age domestic life consists in organizing and balancing, not only household tasks but, more and more often, children's play activities, mother's own professional work assignments, family activities and outings. Often simply keeping up the flow of these activities requires the skill of an organizational and planning genius. To the anthropologist's eye (me again) the continual attempt to keep up this domestic flow of activity seems to have a repetitive, ritualistic quality.

The ritual of continually creating a domestic world also involves the evocation of sentiment. Many domestic acts and routines are specifically understood to be acts of emotional nurturing and caring. These accomplish what can be called an emotional "warming up of the home". By placing photos of the household's children on the front of the fridge the mom of the household was performing one of these acts of house warming. The photos were evidence of parental care, concern and affection. Other photos that I saw on the fridge, such as those of distant relatives, also had a certain teaching function. The mom told me that she would often point out pictures of these kin to her young children as she told them who they were and how they were related to the children. Bits of family history were woven into these descriptions. The refrigerator had become a sort of memory board that functioned to evoke a feeling of family.

The children's art taped at odd angles of the fridge, the certificates of their educational and athletic accomplishments----an A gotten on a spelling test, a certificate awarded for good sportsmanship on a little league team---were testament to the fact that domestic life for this family was also about the emotional nurturance and praise of children. Keeping up the flow of emotional nurturance as well as of domestic routine is an emotionally trying endeavor for many mothers that I have spoken with. And so the proliferation of homilies—pithy and uplifting sayings that express sympathy for the mother and home-maker's lot, or that have a straightforward religious message---all usually plastered on the fridge so that the household's mom can take a dose of daily comfort and counsel.

The objects placed on the fridge are expressing personal experience and sentiment, and a feeling of home. The refrigerator has ensnared traces of memory and of sentiment---memories and sentiments that define what a home is, and what domestic life consists of for many Americans.

This is not of course the whole of the story. Other American refrigerators I have seen in the course of my work reflect another definition of domesticity. In a number of more upscale homes I have been in the kitchen is not so much a place for celebrating family values and children's achievements, as a stage where one displays a sense of mastery of domestic arts, such as cooking, knowledge of different cuisines etc., and where one can exhibit an overall social ease. Here refrigerators most often have a clean surface. Often

the upscale household considers the adorned fridge to be busy and, what with all the pictures of dogs and children, and all the bracing maxims, perhaps a bit too sentimental. In this sort of household the refrigerator also serves as a ritual marker. What it marks, above all else, is its owner's taste and aesthetic judgment. The gleaming stainless steel surface and sharpness and boldness of line of the Sub Zero for instance connote a kind of mastery of a developed aesthetic vocabulary, and as well it connotes a real assertion of self. Here sharp lines and gleaming surfaces are associated with the suppression of domesticity and sentiment.

As any anthropologist worth his salt even a little bit will tell you, the seemingly most mundane material objects of a culture can tell you a good deal about what that culture is, what it values, and what some of its most central rituals and routines are all about.

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