

More Than A Picnic: African American Family Reunions

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Title of Paper

I could have called the title of this paper by other names. I could have used the titles “Reconnecting,” or “Reviving the Legacy,” or “Finding the Rest of Me,” - because that is what family reunions are all about. I chose “More Than A Picnic” because I want to talk about why family reunions are important.

Family Reunions

This summer, thousands of African Americans piled into cars, filed into trains, hopped on planes, traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles to be a part of their family. Black families participate in reunions in what I believe are numbers and percentages and with a consistency to which no other group can make claim. For a long while it had the characteristic of a movement as each year, more and more families held their first reunion.

The Research

I was curious about what was happening. I began this study as a result of an observation at my own family reunion over twenty years ago. There had been discussion of having a family reunion for many years, inspired by my uncle’s research on our family’s history. But we were scattered and it took many years to bring it about. We held workshops asking a variety of questions; such as what did it mean to be a Black family? Does our family background affect our everyday life? Who are we, where are we headed as a family? The conversations around these topics were very interesting but what I noted was the feeling of unity that came from them, and the positive impact that they had on the young men in the family who were the largest group there since a lot of young males were in the family. I wondered if other families who held reunions reaped such benefits.

I conducted in-depth interviews and was a participant observer at a number of family reunions. In the summer of 1986, I attended 14 three-day reunions going north to Boston and south to South Carolina. Like the reunion participants themselves, I hopped planes, climbed on buses and filed onto trains. As a result, I also had a chance to interview people going to and coming from their reunions. My tape recorder, always in sight, was constantly running. In addition, families have sent me all kinds of material allowing for a content analysis, and I have used a questionnaire with many families whom I have not met.

Initially, people were surprised that I would be interested in what they were doing because they were “just having a family reunion.” However, I had worked with families for many years using a strengths perspective and had taught a course at Brandeis University on the subject of the Black family. I felt that there must be something very important about a reunion. I asked a lot of questions. I realized there were many good things happening that those families had not consciously planned for, but rather were doing intuitively, and in that regard, they were instinctively carrying out an old tradition.

The Tradition of Extended Families

What was that tradition? It is the love of family. Although Africa is a vast and diverse continent, one similarity at the center of the African tradition was the family, which was also the religious, economic, and political unit encompassing a wide circle of extended kinship. For Black people, slavery in this country disrupted this most essential structure, since slavery allowed for no legal marriage, no legal family, and no legal control over the children. Nevertheless, even during slavery, women took care of children not their own, and many slaves protected each other in spite of tribal and language differences. And as soon as slavery ended, women and men went about trying to put the family back together. The stories of former slaves trying to locate their families is inspiring, to say the least. And many of these stories are told at reunions.

And so Black people became like other families. They reconnected, engaged in legal marriages, raised children like others and did all the things that were like the white families around them. The system was different from what they had come from in Africa, but they were in a new world. The former slaves faced, of course, the worst kind of discrimination and racism when they were freed, but they managed to raise families. They did a superb job, when one looks all that they had to face and have since faced as African Americans.

That African Americans survived at all is glorious, but much of the survival is due to the fact that they helped each other, that they took care of each other, that they extended themselves not only to blood relatives but also to others. The extended family was crucial. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, and unrelated individuals who were considered part of the family all were in the neighborhood and gave moral, psychological and financial support. Raising others' children became a natural phenomenon in African-American life. Caring for others within the family structure and community was not only a value carried over from the African legacy, but also a reaction to discrimination and the fact that many social and human services were not offered to the black community.

However, family structures in America, regardless of race and ethnicity and for a variety of reasons, have changed. In the process, the role of the extended family has diminished. But for Black Americans it was a greater loss than for other groups because it had been such a tradition and had played such an important role in survival. Speaker after speaker at African American events expresses this sentiment no matter what the topic. The feeling can also be heard on Black oriented radio talk shows as people tell the stories of those other than their parents who provided nurturing during childhood. They talk about people who carried familial ties but were not blood relatives.

In their book, *Black Extended Families* (1978), Joanne and Elmer Martin detail many of the reasons for the deterioration of the extended family and the loss of kinship ties even when families live in the same city.¹ They note the impact of urbanization and government programs on extended family functions. Case studies of migration of people from rural areas to urban areas such as the book *Sea Island to City* (1969) by Clyde Kiser, chronicle the diminishing of the social control function of the extended family.²

But families are now reconnecting. And in so doing, African Americans are making a real contribution. The revival of the extended family through the reunions was a finding of my study, i.e. not an insight that I started out with. And after my initial research I began to refer to the reunions as a catalyst for change.

Importance of Reunions

I use the term “reunion” here to refer to three-day or longer events when families gather, usually in hotels or some other facility, and have a set program. The former one day picnic has grown to a much larger event which usually moves from location to location so that no one family has to do all the work each year. There are an increasing variety of activities.

Participant Quotes

People who attend reunions have this to say about why they are important:

You get to know your family. Many times you don't get to see family members and members of the family we didn't even know we had. It's such a joy and inspiration to me to meet my family members.

Maybe it can help us learn who we are and how we can help ourselves better.

From the very young to the very old, they come from far and wide. The reunion gives them a chance to get together and feed one another both physically and emotionally.

Reunion Background Information

How Reunions Get Started

Reunions often start at funerals. African Americans often attend funerals even if they've not had contact with the deceased person in years. Family members are so pleased to see each other, but this is difficult under the circumstances. They talk about getting together for a happy occasion. Someone agrees to organize, and the reunion starts.

Sometimes property brings families together. Families learn that they are heirs, and in trying to settle the legal problems, find other relatives they did not know existed.

We must take the influence of Alex Haley's book *Roots* into account. While only a few families actually mention the book as the reason for organizing their family reunions, somewhere in conversation, Haley's inspiration is mentioned.

Who Comes to the Reunion?

Reunions may be small or large. A reunion may have as few as 50 people, or as many as 1,000. The network of relatives is even larger than the extended family of old.

One sees diversity among individual families that make up the larger collective. For instance, they are diverse in occupation and income levels. Most reunions are diverse economically. They may include a variety of religious beliefs. They mention Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, non-denominational, African-centered and agnostic. Men and women divorced from each other may be at the reunion because of their attachment to their in-laws. The former spouse may be married again and present with the newer spouse, but that does not keep away the first wife or husband. Good friends who have no blood or marital relationship, but are like kin, are

present.

The sick and disabled are also present. Many testimonies are given at the reunion from people who come to the reunion although they are quite ill. Boyfriends and girlfriends are present. Adopted and stepchildren are as accepted as biological children. In-laws are treated like regular family. Non-black members (generally spouses) are included.

Descendants of plantation owners have become some of the newest participants at reunions. As families begin to trace their roots to the plantations of their ancestors, they find descendants of the slave master and invite them to a reunion.

Black Men

It is expected that women will be involved in organizing and implementing the reunion. In fact, with the assumptions made about the Black matriarchal family, there is even an assumption that the females do everything. The involvement of Black men in the reunion gives a decidedly different picture from what we have heard as the black matriarchal family. Men are extremely active at reunions. Here, also, one clearly sees the egalitarian aspects of husband-wife interactions that Robert Hill discusses in his book, *The Strength of Black Families (1971)*.³

Organization & Structure

Most reunions follow a particular format. Friday night is informal with getting to know you exercises and hospitality. Saturday is chock filled with a variety of activities and Saturday night is a banquet with more activities. Sunday is worship service and departure. If it is a holiday weekend more activities may be squeezed in, or time on the family's own may be planned.

What Does The Reunion Transmit?

The reunion does important things or has the potential to do them.

Values

Social control and passing on social values have been a major function of the extended family. The promotion of values, particularly to young people is a key aspect of reunions. Speakers at the banquet (which is by now another tradition of the reunion) will talk about what it means to be a family, what it means to be a good parent. They discuss what it means to have cooperation in the family, the necessity of going to school to check up on the children, what it is to be thoughtful and supportive-what makes family. Unity, love, and support are key words used by participants and in themes.

Values, though, are not only talked about. They can also be demonstrated. When families recognize their graduates at the reunion, they are saying "we value education and achievement." When families recognize the elders, and many do, they are showing respect. In the family, the elders played a special role in transmitting values. Now that families are scattered, the reunion offers a special opportunity for them to do so.

Values are also demonstrated by the way people talk to each other and by the love and concern that are shown. Memorial services and religious services, which are almost a must at African-American reunions, further the transmission of values. And often, members of the family who have attained a prominent status realize they can make a difference and will consciously try to set a tone of morality that they feel is important.

Identity

An important aspect of reunions is that it gives the opportunity to strengthen identity. Importance of identity and how it leads to self-esteem cannot be overestimated. Every family seems to have a colorful background, and it is one that instills pride. As one hears the achievements of whomever the family has been able to trace its roots to, the stories provide a testimony to the struggles, the indomitable courage, and the remarkable resilience of Black people. The Wood family ended the story of one of its ancestors by saying –“Such was the life of our earliest ancestor- a man who in a strange world and in even a stranger time was able to make a place of respectability for himself and for his family.”

Further, the family realizes that there are those in the family who are now carrying out the heritage, and that this should be captured for later generations. Thus documentation of the activities of present family members is also collected.

My favorite story about identity came from a gang member in California. He went to his family reunion and after hearing about his ancestors and seeing the impressive achievements of members of his own family he decided he could no longer be in a gang.

Just so people do not get tired of hearing about their history, at the Family Reunion Institute’s annual conference we suggest different ways of telling family history. Telling the story can be accomplished a myriad of ways including plays, quilts, story telling, fashion shows, and slides

Love, Concern, and Belonging

The love and caring that exists in the family is pervasive at the reunion. People greet each other with a great deal of joy. A child may latch onto someone else other than his or her parents. Someone extends love to a young person in the family with whom perhaps the father or mother is disgusted. Some who are older talk about what it was like when they were young. All of these are functions and roles that the extended family has always played.

Even closely knit families have “heartaches and headaches” and the chance to unburden, and at the same time reach out to someone else who may need help, offers the opportunity to be given to and to be the giver.

Over and over, one hears that “you feel better just by being with your family.” Family members hope that the love and caring that is displayed between the family members will help to deter youngsters from going into drugs, alcohol, and

crime.

Communications

Love, concern, and support are furthered by communication. As a result of meeting over the years, birthday cards or other messages to members of the family are being sent that might not have been prior to the reunion. And who knows how that love and support that has been extended to someone may help him or her.

With e-mail, family members are now getting to know each other. They would never sit down and write a letter by snail mail, but somehow the e-mail seems easy. But the furthering of relationships may occur by telephone or cell phone, for sometimes conversations need to be really personal and private. Family members can also correspond via the family web site, and announcements of accomplishments no longer have to wait until the reunion. Nurturing and affection is promoted through the increased communication.

Newsletters have blossomed, and it is as if families are in competition with each other as to who can produce the most impressive one.

Role Models

The reunion offers an opportunity to display the talent in the family and to develop real and useful role models. Instead of those far away sport figures, young people come upon persons in their own family who they can admire. My favorite story is the one in which I overheard two young men who were admiring their uncle. He was a businessman in the South. I thought they were admiring him for that. But when I asked them, they were admiring his patience with his children. Since his wife was one of the organizers for the reunion, she was very busy and he took care of the children. And they wondered if they could ever be a father like he is.

Education

Many families have a tour, and while it is a part of the fun of doing something with the family, it is also a way of educating. For instance, families who host in the South may include certain activities like barbecuing a pig or visiting the family or slave cemetery that they think Northern youngsters may not see much of. Northern families will think of things to do that they think their Southern counterparts may not have as much opportunity to see. As one family member said, "Family members exchange information and regardless of the walk of life they're in they get knowledge. They talk about what's going on in different parts of the country. They gain positions on certain issues."

Some families have workshops to discuss certain issues. And I've been encouraging other families to do workshops. They can organize workshops to deal with problems in the family. Perhaps families can do workshops on drugs, education,

teenage pregnancies, etc. These have the value of talking about problems without targeting an individual. Or they also show the talent in the family, because family members lead the workshops.

The elders in the family have an opportunity to help younger people learn from their experiences. Some reunions dedicate the reunions to the elders. The family hears about how the elders endured, what they did to keep the family together, and their life. This can be very inspiring. And younger people have a chance to help the elders understand the differences in life-styles.

Another family found that the members of their families were in so many different arenas that they could call on them outside of the reunion. In fact one member of this family felt so strongly that she said that they did not need to go outside of the family for anything. That was not true, but she was so impressed that she felt this was the case. But they will definitely network.

Passing On Traditions

The reunion helps to pass on traditions. Families sing the Negro National Anthem. They play games that the elders knew.

Growth and Development

My favorite outcome of the family reunions is that families can truly grow through the reunion. African American Family Reunions have become institutionalized. We see structural growth and economic growth.

Structural Growth

Initially, the main goal of the reunion is to bring family together, but as time goes on, the family becomes more structured. Many families have national organizations with officers and an executive committee.

Family Clubs

Now, even relatives who live in the same town have to make an effort to see each other. But as a result of the reunion, they have formed local family clubs that meet on a monthly basis. Now many reunion families have national Boards and also local family clubs. This is one of the most important by-products of the reunion. Rotating from home to home, the local family meets once a month in fellowship and spirituality, and *the extended family comes back home*. The family, then, governs itself and calls upon the skills of its own. Roles revitalized at the national reunion are now revitalized at the local level, with families returning to the preservation of the extended family.

By-laws

Families, particularly as they become more structured have found it necessary to have by-laws. By-laws set the name of the reunion, who can be members, reunion date (e.g. the fourth Saturday of August), meeting dates, who can vote, and the types of officers. Special requirements may also be listed (e.g. there will be no political rallying). As families have established scholarship funds, the by-laws may indicate who is eligible.

Economic Growth

Scholarship Funds

Many families have developed a scholarship fund. That helps in family growth. Whereas funds used to be raised by passing the hat, they have become more formal through the use of applications in guiding the decision process. Some families try to have a fund to help those in the family that cannot afford to come to the reunion, or for the elders who must live on limited income.

Family Investment

Some families are getting into serious economical development. They are discussing what they as a family can do to help each other. Using each other, of course, is one way. Many families, after they have paid for a hotel room, wonder if there is something that they can do to use that money in a family enterprise instead. That, of course, is a hard thing to do unless there is property somewhere in the family. Some families are developing investment clubs with the goal of making enough money to set up their own lodging. Bringing the family together to cooperate to this extent is difficult, and requires tremendous effort by some. But, they recognize that people spend a lot of money coming to these reunions.

Fundraising

Some families engage in fundraising to help with funerals, births, and the like. One family has developed an endowment fund. Whenever a baby is born, each family sends \$1.00 to the treasurer and an endowment is started so that when that child goes to college, there will be money in that child's name. There are many things that families do and these are discussed in their annual meeting, or the family may set up a structured workshop at a reunion to discuss this.

Networking the Talent in the Family

One family found out that they had so many people in the trades, that they developed a resource directory. And if they need a carpenter or electrician or some other work done, they call on a family member and pay them.

Giving Back

And now families, through their reunions, are going even further. They are discussing giving to others. "Giving Back" is an old tradition among African Americans who frequently express their giving and serving through the idiom of kinship. Many give through the church. As families continue their reunions, and after they have thought about their own (e.g. the scholarship fund), they have thought about others outside the family. And so there's a family that gives to Spellman and Morehouse because the 12 children of their ancestors, a former slave, went to those colleges. There are other examples. We have included a philanthropic workshop at our annual conference for the last several years now.

Summary

So now you have the story as to why I think family reunions are important. They offer much potential. The extended family, that so many others and I experienced as a child, is being revived.

African American family reunions have become a part of the permanent fabric of this country's society. This has particular significance because individuals and families control the reunion as an institution. There is no dependence on government and little dependence on monies outside the family. The participants are willing; the goals are meaningful.

Some say the African-American family is dying. I say it lives on!

Notes

¹ Martin, Joanne M. and Martin, Elmer P. (1978) *The Black Extended Family*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.

² Vernon, Clyde (1969) *Sea Island to City: A Study of St. Helena Islanders in Harlem and Other Urban Centers*. New York. Athenaeum.

³ Hill, Robert (1971) *The Strengths of Black Families*. New York. Emerson Hall Publishers.