

ACROSS Generations:

A CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE TO MARGARET MEAD



The Festival this year celebrates the hundredth anniversary of Margaret Mead's birth with a concert on July 1 that highlights the transmission of culture across generations.

Margaret Mead at the 1976 Folklife Festival.
Photo © Smithsonian Institution

by Mary Catherine Bateson

When Margaret Mead wrote in *Culture and Commitment* about the new relationships between the generations that were emerging in the last decades of her life, she dedicated the book to "My father's mother and my daughter's daughter," celebrating the transmission of tradition, face to face and hand to hand, across five generations. Quoting her friend Ralph Blum in her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, she spoke of this time span as the human unit of time, "the space between a grandfather's memory of his own childhood and a grandson's knowledge of those memories as he heard about them" and could pass them on again.

The most famous anthropologist of the 20th century, she could compare the direct transmission of tradition, from one storyteller to another or from one artist to another, as she observed it among preliterate peoples, to the additional kinds of transmission we have today with writing and recorded images and sound, and value both. She was devoted to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which in its own way parallels her lifework: making sure that the wisdom of the earth's unwritten traditions, the many ways of surviving and celebrating and being human, would feed into contemporary life for all peoples, and would remain available and treasured for the lettered and cosmopolitan grandchildren of the peoples she had studied.

...[T]he continuity of all cultures depends on the living presence of at least three generations.

— *Culture and Commitment*, 1970



Three generations: Margaret Mead, Mary Catherine Bateson, and Sevanne Margaret Kassarian in 1975. Photo by Polyxane S. Cobb

Margaret Mead was born in 1901, so this year is the centennial of her birth and an appropriate time to look back and make sure that what was most important in her work has been passed on since her death in 1978. One such area was her study of cultural attitudes towards change. In the United States today the very concept of innovation is part of what is passed on: we teach our children that they can move beyond their parents and do something new with their skills. This acceptance of change has become as much a part of tradition as a good recipe or the circle games that children play.

Mead also played a key role in the transmission of the anthropological concept of "culture" from a small

Because as adults [grandparents] have lived through so much change... the change. [G]randparents can give children a special sense of sureness about they represent continuity. But now, in a changing society, this continuity in

We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn and not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment.

— *Culture and Commitment*, 1970

As an anthropologist, Mead had been trained to think in terms of the interconnection of all aspects of human life. The production of food cannot be separated from ritual and belief, and politics cannot be separated from child-rearing or art. This holistic understanding of human adaptation allowed Mead to speak out on a very wide range of issues. She affirmed the possibility of learning from other groups, above all by the knowledge she brought back from the field and the way she applied it. Thus, she insisted that human diversity is a resource, not a handicap, that all human beings have the capacity to learn from and teach each other.

community of scholars to the entire reading and listening public of this country and beyond, and was a pioneer in applying anthropological concepts and methods to Western societies. Today, while anthropologists still argue about its exact meaning, “culture” has become a household word, one that we use whenever we seek to understand the behavior and values of other communities instead of condemning them.

All human beings are very similar biologically, and their differences in belief and behavior are developed and passed on through culture. Culture includes all those aspects of life that are transmitted not through the genes but through the human activities of learning and teach-

ing. This includes dance steps and ways of making a living, tools and lullabies, ways of understanding the world and ways of distinguishing good from evil and such values as innovation, preservation, or change. An understanding of culture — with respect for human cultures in all their variations — is essential to living together at peace on this planet, combating racism, and finding the flexibility to plan for a better future.

Mary Catherine Bateson is President of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, founded by her mother Margaret Mead, and Clarence J. Robinson Professor of Anthropology and English at George Mason University.

may well be the best people to teach children about facing the unknown in the future.... As in the past, includes the future and acceptance of the unknown.

— *Margaret Mead: Some Personal Views*, 1979