

DON'T LET THE SINGING STOP

By Mary Patricia Voell

In 1964 a family tradition was born. My father, Norman and I wrote and sang a rendition of *Hello Dolly* substituting the name of our newly wedded family member – Paula. Five decades later, each family wedding incorporates a multi-generational back-up ensemble singing and swaying to another leaf on the family tree.

My father loved to sing, adding his high tenor harmony any time he could. Although a number's guy by day, singing was his muse. A hearty raconteur. In one way or another, all eight of us received a bit of his storytelling gene.

Aunt Pat left hints that it was time to gather her story. She'd quip, "I'm not going to be around forever. You need to capture them – before it's too late. You need to write them down before I'm gone from this earth, before I can no longer share them because I've forgotten or my dementia has stolen them from me." Aunt Pat knew what I call: 'From memory filled to memories lost.'

She knew what the writer Studs Terkel reminds us of "our responsibility to gather and preserve those lives beyond names, dates and places. If we don't preserve what they did, what they thought or felt, how history may have impacted their life, what they witnessed, their stories will die when they do." All of a sudden your loved one becomes an ancestor with just a name on a stone.

Over the years working with individuals across a wide range of generations, storyteller profiles, story gathering techniques, players and dynamics have emerged in the process.

WHY WE TELL OUR STORIES

David Weitzman in *My Backyard History Book* reminds us that "our history is not only lost to memory, but lost in translation, lost in crossing oceans, lost in moving from town to town or house to house, lost in fire, lost to time, lost when family members go their separate ways," and I add, lost in youth, lost in arrogance, and lost in the busyness of life.

Aging generations know the dilemma. Younger generations are busy living life, as they should be.

As we reach toward our later chapters some feel the pull of leaving one era, straddling another. At a certain age we grasp the value of reaching back, sharing lessons, understandings gained, insights, experiences, witnessing history, acquiring wisdom.

Stories show us how we fit into the great tapestry of life. Like a river, stories reveal who came before us, and who will come after us - that we each have a place and a part.

Many cultures teach us that one's wholeness is only complete when we acknowledge and listen to the spirits of our ancestors. In a scene from the movie *Amistad*, Hounsou speaks: "We won't be going in there alone. I met my ancestors. I will call into the past, far back to the beginning of time, and beg them to come and help me at the judgment. I will reach back and draw them into me, and they must come, for at this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all."

We tell our stories:

- **To uncover lost worlds.** One client thought that her great-grandfather was an only child, only to find out that Cornelius had two siblings. Another storyteller found that once he shared the stories that he always told, more stories came to light, like peeling away the layers.
- **For the wisdom and respect for a life well lived.** It has long been said that our greatest desire, greater even than the desire for happiness is the hope that, in the end, our lives meant something. Czech President, writer and philosopher, Vaclav Havel among others, reminds us that this need is integral to our wellbeing. We weave mini-stories into the circadian rhythm of our day. The desire for meaning can be the impulse of life.
- **For the healing of self.** I've seldom considered myself a diary writer even though my now fading notebooks were attempts to become one. Presently, I'm rereading and transcribing them into my own memoir so whoever looks into my Mary Poppins-like life doesn't have to page through my youthful meanderings. This row-boat exercise, the 'looking back to move forward' has been a frightening venture as I relearn my past, find decisions that might not have been the best, see faces in photos or reread names, which honestly I don't recall, and revisit moments that were filled with great love. Peace fills the hole in my heart, so maybe the Socratic exercise of re-examining my life makes it all worthwhile.
- **For the healing of relationships.** We are a social species wired to interact. Is this the lesson that social media in all its present and future forms are here to teach us? We know the power that a hug holds, that acts of kindness and words of forgiveness and encouragement create - no matter how many miles between us or barriers we erect. Our lives and stories overlap. The African word, Ubuntu – "I am who I am because of who you are!" says it best.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HEALING OF STORYTELLING

It's in the telling. Anthropologists note that storytelling could have persisted in human culture because it promoted social cohesion among groups and served as a valuable method to pass knowledge onto future generations.

It's in the repetition. Daddy, tell me that story again. The repetition is how we learn. Nick, a Legacies client is truly a man of many stories who fascinates family and friends with a book of often repeated and never-ending yarns. Older adults find similar comfort in the familiar.

It's in the timing. Joseph Bruchac in *The Storytelling Seasons* teaches us that certain stories are told at certain times. He quotes Lenore Kesshig-Tobias: "Traditional stories were told at night time or the winter. Others were told only in ceremonies. The timing of the story was just as important as the telling."

It's in the freeing, the releasing, the letting go. "There is no greater agony than carrying around an untold story within yourself," writes Maya Angelou. The moments of gratitude filled with genuine tears and hugs that emerge once the narrator's stories are preserved is witness to the impact and healing power of telling stories.

It's in the listening. "For a story is truly told only when someone listens." (Brucac) "If one empathically listens, listens between the lines, we are open not only to moments and memories, but to values, personalities, hopes and dreams," says Jeremy Hsu. This happens when we are able to quiet our inner dialogue long enough to hear between the layers.

It's in the connectivity, the relationships. Bev contracted with Legacies to capture and preserve Erv's stories. She writes: "We received the draft last evening. As much as a gift to Erv, it is a gift to myself, as well. To read it, is to experience him differently. It helped me see him from a different perspective and as I read I reflected on what an amazing man he is and what truly is important to him. We often take the ones we love the most for granted and forget the why behind it. It is a form of therapy! I just wanted to say thank you through the many tears of joy as I read page by page."

It's an act of writing, art, music, dance, poetry. Artistic individuals observe first-hand the interplay between the creative hemisphere of the brain and the psychophysical states of being. This body-mind connection is once again being recognized as an expression of one's mental and emotional state.

It's in the attention paid. In our work as caregivers we experience isolation and loneliness. At times, in an effort to be efficient, we promote group settings unable to give individuals the focused attention they hunger for. How can we provide the single-mindedness as Donna, a minister shared, "They loved the attention you gave them as they told, and you listened to and wrote their story".

It's in the shared joy and empathy. There is a set of areas in our brain that become active when we're in pain and when we watch someone else's pain. To empathize with another is to feel their pain literally. Our capacity for this is why stories are so absorbing. To empathize is crucial to social interaction and communal living, and to understanding stories. We can't help but connect with others, care about others, because we're hardwired to be social creatures. Barbra Streisand sang it best, "We are people who need people."

It's in the laughter and tears. Shared laughter binds people together and increases happiness and intimacy. Laughter triggers healthy physical changes in the body strengthening our immune system, boosting energy, diminishing pain, and protecting us from the damaging effects of stress. And what generates the best laughter? - Stories!

A CONTINUUM OF MEMORY

Memories Filled

Today the demarcation of aging continues to expand. For some 50 is a marker, 65 for others, 80 for others. The same is true of memory. No matter how young or old, our brain holds a lifetime of personalities and experiences. We all know others who can recall the minute details of an experience. Bringing those to the surface takes time. Some storytellers love to share while others need prompting. Some chronologically travel through their years like canoe paddles dipping into the water as it glides down a river, others jump from star to star.

Fading Memories

In a recent article, *Reminiscing fights loneliness and depression in older adults*, writer Andriana Barton reinforces the benefits of reminiscing. “The benefits of storytelling are so well documented that psychologists call it reminiscence therapy. For older adults, talking about the good old days may be one of the best defenses against loneliness and depression. And it’s drug-free. Reminiscence therapy can include sharing memories, expressing feelings about life events, recalling family history, gaining awareness of personal accomplishments and talking about how to apply positive aspects of past relationships into the present”. Therapeutic storytelling in areas such as narrative therapy, writing therapy, story medicine, and expressive therapies provide opportunities for older adults to access their roots. This connectedness vending off isolation and loneliness helps bring scattered families together either in person or using virtual technologies. Foster story time with your loved one. Encourage children to be part of the process. Involve someone from a similar generation. An adult who can relate and build stories, or remind an individual of their involvement or participation in an event or experience is an added benefit.

Today’s technologies allow us to discover individuals who share a bloodline, plus new vehicles of transporting our stories to a time unknown as they continue to evolve, thus the importance of capturing them ... before it’s too late!

Memories Lost

We are surrounded by memory-robbing, story-robbing, life-robbing iseases. Eventually a time may come when our storyteller can no longer reach back into their vault of memories. During the years when stories are accessible and flowing, is the time to be listening and gathering, capturing and preserving.

Don’t be part of the “I wish I would have ...” faction. Once we move from memory filled to memories lost is the time in the aging journey to acknowledge that we are now the story-keepers, transporters of a life’s narrative, carriers of a legacy. Don’t let the singing stop.

Mary Patricia Voell is founder and owner of Legacies, LLC | Personal, Family & Organizational Historians, whose sole mission is to help others capture and preserve their stories. Since 2001, “before it’s too late” became a mantra and inheritance to develop vehicles of storytelling and preservation as a writer, trainer, speaker, and producer using over 40 professional chapters in fundraising and development, marketing and public relations, theater and music as the tools of trade. As a personal historian, Mary’s education includes advanced degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, in Interpersonal Communication and Adult Education having taught at the Milwaukee School of Engineering and Marquette University, coursework in Life Review and Reminiscence from the University of Wisconsin-Superior, and Guided Autobiography.