

Stories Our Parents and Grandparents (and Maybe Even Great-Grandparents) Told Us

Duane Roen, duane.roen@asu.edu

If we are fortunate, our parents and grandparents told us lots of stories about their lives and the lives of others. If we are very fortunate, our great-grandparents told us stories. Some of those stories may have focused on ordinary daily life (e.g., work, school, cooking and eating) or unexpected surprises (e.g. accidents, severe weather). Some of those stories may have focused on how bigger events in the world affected them—e.g., the Great Depression, World War II. We will share some of those stories in conversation and writing.

Some Quotations about Family Stories

1. “Evidence suggests that the more children know about their family history, the less anxiety, less depression and higher self-esteem they exhibit.”—Natalie Merrill, researcher in psychology
2. “The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.”—Bruce Feiler, writer
3. “Unlike stories from books, family stories are always free and completely portable. You don’t even need to have the lights on to share with your child a story about your day, about their day, about your childhood or their grandma’s.”—Elaine Reese, New Zealand author
4. “The best loved stories are not from books or films, but those from our own families.”—Jane McGarvey
5. “If you don’t recount your family history, it will be lost. Honor your own stories and tell them too. The tales may not seem very important, but they are what binds families and makes each of us who we are.”—Madeleine L’Engle, author
6. “This packrat has learned that what the next generation will value most is not what we owned, but the evidence of who we were and the tales of how we loved. In the end, it’s the family stories that are worth the storage.”—Ellen Goodman, American journalist

Questions for Conversation and Writing

1. What stories about *daily life* did your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents share with you when you were younger?
2. What stories about *extraordinary experiences* did your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents share with you?
3. What are some of your favorite stories that your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents shared with you?
4. What are some stories that your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents especially liked to tell?
5. What are some stories that other family members (e.g., uncles, aunts) especially liked to tell?
6. Which of the aforementioned stories have made the most lasting impression on you?

7. What has made some of these stories especially memorable?
8. What do you think you have gained from hearing these stories?
9. Which family members were fond of embellishing stories?
10. In what ways did they embellish the stories?
11. Which of the aforementioned stories do you most enjoy retelling?
12. What stories have you enjoyed telling to children in your family? Why do you tell them?

Some Resources

Rachel Coleman. "How Family Stories Shape Our Identities." FamilySearch Blog, 25 July 2017.
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/how-family-stories-shape-our-identities>

Lara N. Dotson-Renta. "The Family Stories We Share, and What They Mean to Our Children." *The Washington Post*, 22 November, 2019.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/11/22/family-stories-we-share-what-they-mean-our-children/>

Bruce, Feiler. "The Stories That Bind Us." *The New York Times*, 15 March, 2013.
<https://www.familyninjas.com/articles/family-stories>

Tanya Lindquist. "The Power of Family Stories." Family Ninjas.
<https://www.familyninjas.com/articles/family-stories>

Sue Shellenbarger. "The Secret Benefits of Retelling Family Stories: Children Learn about Family History and Identity Through Stories Told by Older Generations." *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 November 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-secret-benefits-of-retelling-family-stories-11573468201>

"Family Stories and Myths: Functions of Family Stories and Myths."
<https://family.jrank.org/pages/589/Family-Stories-Myths-Functions-Family-Stories-Myths.html>