



Storytelling



Once upon a time...

What tales of heroes, adventure, magic and happy endings those words bring back! And with them, what sweet memories of the parents, grandparents and others who told them.

In all cultures, stories have played the role of explaining the mysteries of life, recounting historical moments and illustrating common values. In some, it's still the principal means of transferring the knowledge and history of thousands of years. In cultures such as ours, where factual information saturates everyday life, telling our own story can be a way of creating connection between generations and giving meaning to the passage of time, for the benefit of both the listener and the teller.

"Tell me about what it was like when you were young," children ask. "Tell me more stories of when I was little." There are so many stories to tell... our own, and those

that others have handed down to us. Just recently, I told my granddaughter the story of her great-great-grandmother, her great-grandmother, her grandmother and her mother. She reflected that we all had many things in common. The telling of those stories not only contributed to my granddaughter's sense of belonging to a long lineage of determined women but also to my own perspective on my life and its place in family history.

This issue of *Expression* is about the benefits of recounting our life. It's also about the many simple ways of leaving a legacy while creating intimacy and building bridges between generations that have the same human need of connection and purpose.

Anne Skuba
NACA member, Manitoba





NACA

The National Advisory Council on Aging consists of up to 18 members from all parts of Canada and all walks of life. The members bring to Council a variety of experience and expertise to advise the federal Minister of Health, his/her colleagues and the public on the situation of seniors and the measures needed to respond to the aging of the Canadian population. Current NACA members are:

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**National Advisory Council
on Aging**

Postal Locator 1908A1
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 1B4

Tel.: (613) 957-1968

Fax: (613) 957-9938

E-mail: seniors@hc-sc.gc.ca

Website:

www.naca.ca

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■ A lost art?

Storytellers have played a key role in passing on information through the ages. In traditional societies, the elder members were the keepers and tellers of tales and traditions, a highly respected role. In western society, oral transmission began to lose ground with the invention of the printing press in the 1400s. In the last century, the radio and movies and then later, television, slowly replaced the tradition of telling stories. The fate of the storyteller seemed bleak. But since the 1970s, there's been a renewed interest in the cultural practice of storytelling, and there are now countless professional storytellers and even storytelling festivals.

“Every life
deserves to be
told.” [Translation]

Olivier Fillion

At the same time, the value of storytelling as a means of reconciling with our experiences and validating our life started to make inroads in the fields of psychology and personal development. For seniors, storytelling can provide a means of finding comfort and personal meaning. For younger generations, seniors' stories provide valuable grounding to their origins and family culture.

Life review, autobiography, narratives, reminiscences, oral history are all terms that describe various forms of telling one's personal story. No matter what words are used, the process is one of reflection on the past and sharing it with others.

■ The unexpected gift

The interpretation we make of any of life's events is based on what concerns and issues we were dealing with at the time. By revisiting the past, we have an opportunity to re-interpret events and in doing so, gain new understanding and insight. Reminiscing may also allow us to relive pleasurable experiences that have been long forgotten. Recounting our story can therefore be seen as a form of



therapy, a way to resolve emotional conflict and find new meaning and satisfaction about the life lived.

That is exactly what happened to **Richard Stone**, author of *The Healing Art of Storytelling*. While recounting the story of a childhood Christmas, he unexpectedly recalled a rare act of affection from his usually distant father. That small recollection, while not the focus of the story, provided an opportunity for healing and mending his relationship with his father.¹

Storytelling is at once a gift of closure and disclosure. From this perspective, the telling of one's story can actually promote healthy and successful aging as it exercises the mind and helps to create a feeling of life satisfaction, inner peace and connection.

How people view their lives as they age can also provide important insights into how individuals themselves view the aging process, and opens the way to appreciate the "ordinary wisdom" that everyday life has to offer. According to **William Randall** and **Gary Kenyon**, professors of gerontology at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, other disciplines associated with the study of aging (psychology, sociology, biology, etc.) tend to provide an outside view of the aging process whereas a biographical perspective of aging provides an inside view of the life and development of individuals. In the words of Randall and

Kenyon, "Memories of our life as a child, of the ups and downs of our career, our marriage, our family; recollections of past achievements and disappointments, of happy times and tragic times; dreams of where our life might lead us still... *our* story is what we have. In a sense, it is *all* we have."²

■ The value of connection

Telling one's story also provides great benefit to others. Sharing stories about the past provides the gift of understanding: about the person telling the story; about family history; and about the past in general. In Aboriginal cultures, elders play a central role in conserving knowledge through the generations, as well as in interpreting the lessons found within traditional teachings. To this day, their stories contribute valuable insights into family and community life. We need to restore the role of the storyteller in the rest of Canadian society. Too many times,



¹ Stone, Richard. *The Healing Art of Storytelling: A Sacred Journey of Personal Discovery*. Hyperion, New York: 1996.

² Randall, William, J. and Gary M. Kenyon. *Ordinary Wisdom: Biographical Aging and the Journey of Life*. Praeger Publishing, Westport, Connecticut: 2001.



opportunities to learn about our family or community history are gone and family members find themselves saying about older relatives “I wish I’d known them better”.

Asking questions about the past (in the case of younger generations) or initiating storytelling (in the case of seniors) should be part of everyday life. People often find it hard to probe their relatives because they’re afraid this may be seen as a reminder of their mortality. But

speaking of the past doesn’t mean there’s no future. According to

James Birren, director of the Institute for Advanced Study at the Andrus Gerontology Center,

University of Southern California, recalling the past can even help provide direction for the future since it’s easier to know where you’re going if you know where you’ve been.³

It’s important to pass on your story, your past, your knowledge, your wisdom. It provides a sense of history, identity and continuity and creates a legacy for those close to you. Your family *does* want to hear about the “good old days”.

■ Triggering memory

If your memory falters or blocks get in the way of remembering, you may benefit from

“The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.”

Winston Churchill

guided autobiography, a method of recalling the past through a group-facilitated process.⁴ Each participant tells his or her story out loud to other members of the group. The encouragement offered by the group helps to draw stories. In addition, by giving positive feedback, group members provide a validation of each other’s life experience. Guided autobiography groups have the added benefit of providing participants with opportunities for social interaction and the development of new relationships.

If you want to try triggering your memories on your own, specific questions can be useful for uncovering memories. In her book, *Legacy: A Step by Step Guide to*

Writing Personal History, **Linda Spence** provides direction on how to tell your life story by organizing a series of questions according to life stages⁵: childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, marriage... But it’s important to remember that the story of one’s past is more than simply a chronology of dates and facts. While these things are the backdrop to all stories, it’s the spaces in between that provide the texture of our life stories.

Richard Stone suggests yet other areas of enquiry that could trigger long-forgotten memories: the senses (smells, tastes, sounds of the past); favourite objects, special gifts

³ James E. Birren. From "The Best of All Stories" in *Psychology Today*, May 1987.

⁴ Birren, James, E. and Donna E. Deutchman. *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life*. The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland: 1991.

⁵ Spence, Linda. *Legacy: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Personal History*. Swallow Press, Athens, Ohio: 1997.



received; regrets (childhood mistakes); secrets (adolescent crushes, foolish pranks); early accomplishments; places (childhood home, favourite park); people (teachers, special friends); emotions (love, anger, fear, joy, kindness); historical events (Great Depression, World War II, D-Day, life before public health care).¹

■ A gift to remember...

While there are all kinds of ways of telling a story, more and more seniors consider writing an auto-biography – the written account of one’s youth, the meeting and marrying of one’s mate, the arrival of the children and anecdotes about each, the stories of pets lost, picnics ruined, and parties memorable. Some are written longhand, others typed and photocopied, and still others, printed and bound by professionals. Some take the form of notes, anecdotes and other reminiscences in the margins of the family photo album. No matter in what words or format, such an account will be treasured for generations to come.

You may think you have nothing interesting to recount, or that only “literary types” can pass down their memories. Think again. Letters, videos, interviews, scrapbooks, personal

websites, mementos, family treasures bequeathed, taped messages, songs recorded or simply sung... there are countless ways of leaving a legacy that everyone will cherish. Here are some examples:

- Yvette chose to create a booklet of old family recipes. She wrote each one longhand on a sheet of paper, which she illustrated at top with a small sketch. First came the instructions on how to prepare the dish; then, at the bottom of each page, she explained how long the.....→

Questions to jog your memory

- What are your earliest memories?
- Where did you live during your childhood and who lived with you?
- Who were your childhood heroes?
- What were the dances of your day and which did you like?
- What was the most trouble you found yourself in as a teenager?
- What do you remember about the preparations for your wedding day?
- How did your family feel about your marriage choice?
- How did you choose your children’s names?
- What were your early surprises about parenthood?
- What are your memories of the significant happenings in your life during (pick a time)?
- How were you involved in your community?
- How is your life different today from how you thought it would be?
- What are some of the best parts of being your age today? Challenges?
- What are some of the surprises about this phase of your life?

[Linda Spence]

MEMORIES



Interview with Grandma Betty about the "Good Old Days."

By Oona Eager.

In my four-score years I have lived through many momentous events including the Depression, WW II, the atomic crisis, the advent of television, the Space Race, and the computer revolution. Yet nothing to my old mind is more memorable than the development of Rural Electrification on the Canadian Prairies.

Picture my home province of Alberta before 1940. It was breathtakingly beautiful but heart-breakingly lonely, especially for farm wives who were isolated in their mile-wide homesteads and often left alone while their husbands had to seek jobs in distant mines or forests. In the long dark winters, women and youngsters struggled without amenities except a woodpile and a can of kerosene. I grew up hating the very smell of "coal oil" and resenting the meagre yellow light by which I studied to advance my education.

By a miracle, in the 40's we received power! Our farm, being adjacent to a local electrical company's line, became part of an experimental deal - we were lit up. What joy for my mother who smiled as she ironed with her wonderful electric iron. We children ran around playing with the switches, and father planned what appliances he needed most. The great yard light which brightens every farm yard now would come later. Farms are still far apart on the prairies but they are not isolated, thanks to telecommunication, and winters have never been so long, dark, and cold since Rural Electrification.

(One of the winning essays of the *Legacy Collection* Oral History Project.)

INTERVIEW

recipe had been in the family and recounted details about whose favourite dish it was and amusing stories of family life (the time Isabelle forgot to put in the eggs; the "mysterious" cookie robber, etc.) The booklet, which was reproduced

by simple photocopy, was offered as a gift to each member of her immediate family. Ten years after her passing, this excellent recipe book has been reproduced hundreds of times, and friends and family continue to enjoy the "old time" favourites and the family history behind them.

■ Another beloved grandmother wrote a very special four-page story as a gift to each grandchild when he or she turned 10. She felt that by that age, she knew well what person her grandchild was. "Once upon a time..." she wrote, and proceeded to tell a story in which she traced the portrait of a competent, caring, strong and beloved hero or heroine that matched the temperament and strengths she saw in her grandchild. In that family, the children couldn't wait to turn 10 and get "their" story from grandma! Most of these gifts were framed – a source of pride, inspiration and self-awareness for an entire lifetime.

■ Yet another novel legacy

project was the recording of lullabies by the "aunties", a group of women friends (and their daughters)





who have met regularly for 30 years. When Melanie, the first daughter of the group to have a child, worried that she hardly knew any lullabies to sing to her new daughter Regan, the whole group practiced for a month and jointly or separately (some now live far away) recorded the songs they had sung to their own children. Melanie's repertoire is now vastly improved and Regan has a CD of her very own that attests to the love of really "grand" aunts who have taken the trouble to pass down precious pieces of their past.

If you have a hard time getting started, consider audio/video taping yourself in conversation with someone else about the past. Not only is this an excellent way to get closer to a grandchild, relative or friend, but answering another person's questions sometimes helps direct your thoughts and memories. And you could always transcribe the recording later.

■ A happy ending

Recounting the past holds so many benefits for the storyteller and the listener that it's worthwhile looking into how you can make your own storytelling contribution in your family and community. We've tried to suggest innovative ways for seniors to share their experience of life. If none of these



The *Legacy Collection* oral history project was a contest established as part of the celebrations of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999. Seniors were interviewed by young people, often a relative, about significant events or personal experiences in the last century. The idea behind the contest was to create a multi-generational approach to the collection of interesting and significant remembrances, emphasizing the mutual enrichment that comes from interaction between the generations and a better understanding of seniors' stories, knowledge and reflections of their own lives. Essays can be viewed on the IYOP website: <http://iyop-aipa.ic.gc.ca/legacy/index.htm>

LEGACY

methods suit your style, why not do what they did in the "old days" – tell your story orally. Sit down with your child, grandchild or group of friends and reminisce about the past. These privileged moments will themselves become treasured memories,

while encouraging the sharing of confidences and a stronger connexion between the generations.

A return to storytelling will also contribute to re-establishing seniors in the time-honoured role of keepers of the family legends and holders of the wisdom of age. That

wisdom has always come from remembering, learning, and sharing. ■



For more information...

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The McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies. *From Me To You: Intergenerational Connections Through Storytelling*. Edited by Ellen B. Ryan, Gail M. Elliot, Sheree D. Meredith. McMaster University, Hamilton: 1999.

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Ledoux, Denis. *Turning memories into memoirs: a handbook for writing life stories*. Soleil Press, Lisbon Falls, ME: 1993.

Ray, Ruth E. *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*. University of Virginia: 2000.

Cultural Centre 50+. *A Pillow Book for the New Millennium*. Bypress Printing, Ottawa: 2000.

Online

Reminiscence - Finding meaning in memory: Information on reminiscence and bulletin board called "I Remember" to share memories. aarp.org/reminiscence

Aboriginal Elders Teachings: Educational learning and inspirational words are at the heart of the First Peoples Elders as they share their wisdom with the community. www.vcircle.com/elders/index.shtml

Getting Started in Oral Traditions Research: A manual that facilitates oral traditions research. pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/ressec/otrman.htm

Denee/Cree ElderSpeak: Tales from the Heart and Spirit: Stories illustrating important values of the Dene and Cree Nations. aboriginalcollections.ic.gc.ca/tales/About.htm

Canadian Veterans Recollect: Pays tribute to Canadian veterans in WWI and teaches about the history of the war and the experiences of those who were there. collections.ic.gc.ca/audio/welcome.htm

Generations CanConnect: A Government of Canada program that links seniors, young people and the technology of the Internet in communities across Canada. generations-canconnect.ic.gc.ca/english/index.asp



Anne Skuba brings to the National Advisory Council on Aging extensive experience as a senior health professional. She has been involved in planning, development, implementation and delivery of programs and services in occupational health and safety; health promotion and disease prevention; and healthy communities and community development. A former President of the Manitoba Public Health Association, Ms. Skuba is currently a member of the Manitoba Society of Seniors, the Seniors' Interagency Network and the Seniors' Committee for the International year of Volunteers. She holds a Bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Manitoba.