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PASSING THE LIGHT: HOW FAMILY STORIES SHAPE OUR LIVES

by Jan Epton Seale of McAllen

Several short stories: What do they have in common?

1) A neighbor’s grandchild came over to play in the yard. Mark is a beautiful fair child with light blue eyes and pale blond hair. When Mark fell and skinned his knee, he began to cry piteously. I went over to inspect the damage. After Mark showed me the nearly invisible wound, he stopped crying, looked up at me with those gorgeous pale blue peepers, and said, “I’m really delicate, you know.”

2) Whenever a friend combs her hair, she says her mother’s voice just at her shoulder murmurs, “You can’t make a silk purse out of sow’s ear.” My friend says she’s learned to say back, “Exactly what can be made out of sow’s ear?” Or, “But I never wanted to be a silk purse!”

3) Sara is six. At bedtime, she insists on cleaning the lint from between her toes. Her mother says, “That’s your Aunt Nancy exactly—picky, picky, picky.”

These stories illustrate the power of family stories over us, even small stories—not only narratives, but admonitions, observations, adages, comparisons, accusations, and compliments.

Russell Baker, in his award-winning autobiography Growing Up, reminisces about this force in his young life:
If my homework was done, I could sit with them and listen until ten o’clock struck. . . . I loved the sense of family warmth that radiated through those long kitchen nights of talk. . . . Usually I listened uncritically, for around that table, under the unshaded light bulb, I was receiving an education in the world and how to think about it. What I absorbed most deeply was not information but attitudes, ways of looking at the world that were to stay with me for many years.¹

We are always hungry for stories because we are trying to figure out our lives. Have others been in this or that situation? What, then, have they done about it? We are shaping ourselves as we live our lives, and we can never get too much information.

Certainly there are family stories told for pure entertainment value, but family stories in particular are inordinately useful. They teach the values, strengths, weaknesses, and expectations of those listening to them. And we pick and choose from the stories as our needs signal.

We are born bearing stories over which we have little control: how we were wanted or unwanted, how hard our birth was, what Uncle John said when he saw us. And we are added to the family lore. What we do in childhood becomes stories. All this, while we in turn begin to absorb the information presented to us that we may not even conceive of as “story,” but simply as “the way things are”—events in our neighborhood, our parents complaining about or praising at the supper table, the daily rituals of eating, sleeping, and working.

As we grow, we begin to act as filters for the stories we hear. We reflect on what we have heard, and we start to develop the ability to choose the stories we like, those we want to be part of, and to reject or simply not hear those we dislike.

A writing student of mine told a family story she had learned only recently. It was a tragic tale of how her great-grandfather had
shot and killed her great-grandmother. The woman died in the arms of her daughter, my student’s grandmother. Ginger added at the end, “My grandmother was a good writer. She wrote all this down, describing it in detail with a lot of drama. My mother gave me the papers when I was home last time.”

Ginger, the young, talented writer in my class, might choose to remember the story for the fact that she had in her veins the blood of a murderer. Or, she could take from the story the fact that she is the descendant of a writer. She too might fulfill her dream of being a writer, partly because she chooses that genetic boost.

Family stories have a descriptive and a prescriptive nature. Thus, we may conclude that 1) we are living our lives out to a large degree by the formulas of our family stories; they shape us powerfully and always will; and 2) the stories we tell, and the way we tell them, can powerfully shape those who come after us. Or, as Daniel Taylor, in *The Healing Power of Stories*, puts it, “There is an ongoing tension between living as our stories dictate as opposed to dictating the stories we live.”

The stories of our family’s background and origin act as history lessons and guides to the nature of particular families. Family origin stories serve to bind us together: “That’s the McKinneys for you;” “You can’t help it if you’re a Bernbaum;” “We Gomezes don’t do it that way.” They give us a sense of belonging, however many warts and freckles our family has, and they make sure we huddle together and move forward. In other words, family origin stories support Darwin’s notions of survival of the fittest. Did your family survive through skilled mercantilism, hardscrabble farming, a fabulous stroke of luck, or sheer grit and determination? What stories do you put forward to support one or the other of these theories?

Nearly every family origin story will contain a famous ancestor. My friend in the Rio Grande Valley, from eight generations of Hispanics living north of the Rio Grande, tells me he is directly descended from Cortés. In his case, he has impressive documentation to substantiate it. Students in my autobiography classes volunteer famous ancestor stories right and left. “They say we’re from
the family of Marie Antoinette.” “My great-great-great grandfather invented cricket.” “Pancho Villa had several wives you know, and who knows how many lovers; . . . I’m from one of those relationships.”

We like to claim kinship to presidents, kings and queens, notorious gangsters, inventors, and famous entertainers. My female cousins and I, when we want to claim a little wildness, like to remember that Sally Rand, the famous burlesque entertainer, was our grandmother’s second cousin.

We may smile as we think of these stories that connect our families with greatness of some sort, but the stories function usefully as well. They serve to tell our young, “You too can be great. After all, you inherited the same traits.”

Family stories are so powerful that adopted children often adopt the history of their adopted family. No matter that there is no bloodline to follow. It’s as if the spiritual and emotional bloodlines of adopted child and adopted family have been fused. Studies have shown that college students who knew their origins, or who had origins to claim, generally did better in life, were happier and more successful.

And wives often know their husbands’ family stories better than the husbands do. I have wives in my writing classes who enroll in order to tell their husbands’ family stories. This may be a natural talent of women, to be the story-keepers, the scrapbook makers, the connectors in the family. But it may also be a genetic predisposition by the mother to tie in to what is most interesting, relevant, and strong in a family whose children are at least half of that clan.

Another kind of origin story is the birthing story. What children are told about their births may powerfully influence their self-concept. Elizabeth Stone, in her book *Black Sheep & Kissing Cousins*, gives a very full discussion of the influence of birthing stories on the lives of those who are told the story of when they appeared in the world.\(^3\)
A few birth stories seem to be the defining moment in the psyche of a person’s life. Years ago, a student in an autobiography class wrote of her birth in a farmhouse on the Kansas prairie about 1930. Here is her account:

I was brought forth with instruments and handed to Grandma. “Put it aside; it won’t live.”

Grandma didn’t. She took charge of me. She stayed with us for days.

The next day Dr. Wilson drove 24 miles to see Mother and noted, “It’s still alive.”

Grandma asked for a formula.

Dr. Wilson took her aside and said, “No, No, Mrs. Hanks; it won’t be here tomorrow.”

Grandma, determined I not die of starvation, soaked bread in water, dipped a clean cloth in this water and squeezed drop after drop into my mouth.

The next day Dr. Wilson looked at me and shook his head. He gave Grandma a formula and medicine dropper. He cautioned everyone not to get their hopes up for if I did live, I probably wouldn’t be “right.”

The instruments that saved Mother had left their mark on me. My head was misshapen, an ear nearly off, one eye almost out of the socket, the lid was torn on the other one. My mouth was pulled to one side, the top lip twisted, my jaw was crushed, and I was tongue-tied and couldn’t cry. I had five deep gashes in my head. One arm was broken at the elbow.

Can you imagine the bonding between the child and the grandmother, and how the story of her birth has informed her entire life? Every writing she did in the class after this initial one
thanked God in astonishment and wonder for her existence. The grandmother, both by her actions and her sharing the story, truly passed the light.

What about family stories on the subject of love? Do you approve of falling in love at first sight, or will a love that is supposed to last forever be one that carefully grows from perhaps a modest friendship, to a deepening appreciation for the traits of the beloved? And then, does that love need a long courtship, or may the star-struck lovers immediately proceed to the justice of the peace? The stories of circumspect courting, virgins at the altar, and vows of fidelity are often now heard and viewed as merely quaint by young people today.

My maternal grandmother, with whom I was very close, gave me a great gift. She passed the light of her courtship and wedding on to me in her story of it. This story is incorporated in a longer poem I wrote about her life, a poem which continues to be warmly received, no doubt because people are reminded of their own favorite grandparent. Below is an excerpt dealing with her and my grandfather’s wedding night:

I see her great astounding Victorian body—
six-foot-tall bride with a sober hand
resting on Grandfather’s sitting-down shoulder.
The wedding—a Sunday night after revival meeting,
a trip 3 miles in a buggy home to her house,
a sister going upstairs with her
to help with a white nightgown,
wide pink satin ribbon woven down the front,
how she trembled when her sister left her
at the top of the stairs,
how she righted herself with a small smile
when Grandpa, ascending, said,
“Why Pearl, you look so pretty!”
(She wouldn’t tell me more.
He had been dead fifteen years that afternoon.)
Divorce may be treated casually in one family and seriously in another. For young people still marrying—and the Sunday social pages show that the practice has not died away by a long shot—they may reflect on their families, perhaps even the example of their parents staying together, and be genuinely dismayed by the prospects of divorcing. Others agree that weddings are kind of fun, and if “things” don’t work out, they’ll not get too uptight about “splitting the blanket,” which term, they may or may not use, depending upon their family stories. “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Susie pushing a baby carriage!” Have you heard it lately? Will the girls in your family be learning it as a jump rope chant, and as the order of love?

Importantly shaping some families are stories of fortune and money. Did Uncle Minyard make his money honestly? If he didn’t, is honesty the reason he lost it all? Why did our side of the family not enjoy the same affluence as the other? Was it plain bad luck, or bad judgment, or foolish living? When it comes to family stories, everything depends more on the uses made of them than on their plots or consequences.

Concerning politics, did your family help elect the successful and popular leaders of the community and nation? Or did your ancestors show their freedom by organizing protests or supporting unpopular candidates and causes? Was there a renegade Democrat or Republican in the family, one who was ostracized or beleaguered on family occasions?

And how do your family stories reflect attitudes toward health and illness? Have you been told so many times about your perilous childhood illnesses that even now, you hesitate to join an exercise class? Do you stay on your feet, regardless of how you feel, because your grandfather milked the cows in wintertime even though he had influenza? Do you let your child stay home from school with a stomachache, or do you remember that that was your ploy for skipping school, and thus take a tough approach to his infirmity?

Almost every family has one or two neurotic people who have made the stories of their health the focal point of their lives. Often
these people live out their lives savoring the effects of a childhood illness or accident. And their healthy siblings may not forget the parental neglect resulting from the attention the sick child received.

With its savage treatment in the past, mental illness often lingers in the shadows of family stories. Taboo stories of sanitarium treatment, nervous breakdown, shock treatment, and bizarre behavior—these narratives, if they ever surface, often come as a surprise to a family. Nevertheless, they’re important to know, in light of what has been discovered both about the hereditary nature of some of these mental disorders, and their ready detection and effective treatment through new means.

Sometimes suicide is a part of mental illness, but by no means always. Is there a family attitude toward suicide? Perhaps it is that one should not consider it under any circumstances. Or are there frequent instances of it to be pondered, with such examples not to be replicated?

What stories of anger and violence come from your family? Was anger expressed in verbal or physical abuse? Or was it by pouting, sarcasm, and coldness? Was your great-grandmother redhead and temperamental? Did you children tiptoe around, seek out private hidey-holes to avoid the wrath of your mother or father? How were family arguments solved?

These traditions will in part determine how you handle anger. If you loathed your father’s anger, you may have vowed not to be that way. If you idolized him, thinking he could do no wrong, such as did Frank McCourt in *Angela’s Ashes*, you may feel your own explosive anger is justified in adulthood.

Does your family lore contain stories of race or racism? More oppressed peoples will likely have more stories centering on race—stories that shore up the self-esteem of family members by touting the pre-eminent qualities of the race, as in the writing of Zora Neale Hurston, or by showing how family members were courageous in the face of racism.

A story about race can take whatever turn the teller desires it to take. For example, my friend Alonzo told a story about attending a
relative’s funeral in San Antonio, taking along his sister and aunt. The deceased was of mixed parentage. At the meal following the funeral, the Anglos arrived first and clustered at one table while the Hispanics, of which Alonzo, his sister and aunt were a part, took the remaining table when they arrived. The Anglos did not seek to mingle with the out-of-towner Hispanics. My friend thought nothing of it, enjoying the company of those at his table, but he reported that his sister and aunt interpreted the seating arrangement as a racial slight and discussed it all the way home.

Are men’s and women’s roles quite set in your family, or are they flexible? In one family, the script is written that by the boy’s tenth birthday, he will have gone hunting or fishing with the men. Why? “Because we’ve always done it that way.”

If we observe the openness of gay and lesbian identity today, perhaps we should also look at our own family stories, where homosexuals existed gamely under such genteel names as “gay bachelors,” “maiden ladies,” “old maids,” “dandies,” and “fops.” Maybe it is not that we have more homosexuals now, but that our family stories have quit hiding, either by taboo, or semantically, their normal presence in the population. What is the message of your family to the gay members of it? Are they ostracized, or appreciated for their often very valuable contributions to society?

Daniel Taylor, in *The Healing Power of Stories*, observes, “Middle age makes storytellers of us all.” While we are alive, Taylor says, we have the opportunity to be both the characters in the stories and the co-creators. Gratefully, there has been in the last thirty years or so, a revival of interest in memoirs, in writing autobiographies, and lately, in diversifying from the written page into storytelling on audio and videotapes. Now thousands of older people are recording their memoirs in some way, many at the request of their children.

Stories of the older and old have value because these folk have lived through so much. Their ways have been tried and found true. Or tried, and found wanting, with the consequences. The old are eager to tell their stories. In every age there have been remarkable stories from the old, but I think the stories of our old today are
particular interesting and needful, in part, because of the fantastic changes that have taken place during the past century, the time of their lives.

Robert Akeret, in his book *Family Tales, Family Wisdom*, suggests seven areas where elder stories are particularly worthwhile for families:

1. locating meaning and appreciating mystery of life
   (“I feel I was placed on this earth to...”)
2. understanding life forces
   (“I had no way of knowing what was ahead for me.”)
3. personal values, esp. those over an entire lifetime
   (“The orange in the toe of my Christmas stocking was the best gift of all.”)
4. dealing with life-changes: living high and low, turning points, crises
   (“We lost everything we had, including the cow and mules.”)
5. personal identity and social connectedness; self-knowledge
   (“It was at that brush arbor revival meeting that I knew...”)
6. life and death consciousness; cycle of life
   (“I have outlived all but two of my seven children.”)
7. roots and traditions, origins, customs, symbols
   (“My father always said...”)

Of these important messages about life, Taylor says that “Writers and storytellers are responsible not to poison the lives of their hearers with toxic stories. If stories have the power to enlighten and heal us, they must, by definition, have the power to mislead and harm us. Nazi Germany told itself powerful and compelling stories, but they were stories of death. If our storytellers fail us, the people perish.”

In telling stories from your past, remember that the past, as well as the future, is subject to change. Your interpretation of what happened in your life will be changing as long as you live.
From time to time, re-examine your stories. Do you see an event in a different light now? Do you have new information? Has a new meaning occurred to you? Have you had a change in attitude toward money, religion, politics, or gender definition?

A student in one of my classes wrote about a time when she and her new husband were saying goodbye to his parents when her husband had to report for active duty in WW II. At the time, the young bride and her mother-in-law were on chilly terms. As they said goodbye, the older woman’s mouth twisted into a bitter shape, and for years, the daughter-in-law assumed the facial gesture was a goodbye smirk at her. Only recently had she come to the realization that the older woman’s face was contorted in grief and love for her son who might never return.

Telling our stories and allowing others to tell theirs may heal us. Our stories connect us with others: we share and feel ourselves a part of the ancient circle around the campfire. Without our stories, we are patternless. The world needs our stories to remind them of values and choices, to explain experience, to show wonder, the power of free will, and, as Joseph Campbell put it, simply “the rapture of being alive.” We achieve a kind of balance when we tell our stories and when we receive those of others. By articulating in words the events, thoughts, actions, meditations, interpretations of our pasts, we come to understand our present, and we benefit the future of those we love.

The Kiowa writer Scott Momaday tells of being taken as a small boy by his father to visit his great-grandmother. She took Scott’s hands in hers and wept softly as she pronounced her blessing on him. Momaday writes of the incident, “That was a wonderful and beautiful thing that happened in my life. There, on that warm, distant afternoon: an old woman and a child, holding hands across the generations. There is great good in such a remembrance; I cannot imagine that it might have been lost upon me.”

So let us pass the stories of light, not the darkness of toxic stories, by telling our stories often and well. Let us trust that our
stories will fall on ears that can take them and shape them for the best use in furthering the human spirit.

Let us hold hands across the generations.

ENDNOTES:

5. Ibid., p. vii.

OTHER WORKS CONSULTED

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