

The art of storytelling

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As humans, we crave connection and there's no better way to connect with someone than by telling a story from your own life or family's history. In fact, the reason we have many historical books is due to the art of storytelling by the first-hand witnesses to events. An example from my family (Shelley's), handed down by three generations is the story of how my paternal grandfather came to Canada from Holland. The short version is: As an 18-year-old, he along with his 12 siblings and parents crossed the Atlantic in April of 1912. His father heard about the Titanic which would make its maiden voyage around that time and proceeded to buy tickets. He was a bit too late, and the ticket master said he 'could only send some of the family'; there was no room for the entire family. I imagine my grandfather would have been one of those chosen to travel on his own due to his age, but my great grandfather wanted to keep the family together, so he bought tickets on the Queen Mary (a nice upgrade from that real ship's name). That single story from our family's history has affected many decisions. For example, we took a trip with my parents, our four children and our two nephews to Cape Breton in 2005. We went to buy tickets on a whale watching tour and the ticket master gave us the option for some of the group to go out earlier and the rest to board a later boat. Without hesitation my 12-year-old nephew who was usually a quiet sort of fellow, piped up with: "we all go together, or we don't go at all!". We were all in agreement because we knew where this decision was coming from! Why is storytelling important? It is both an art and a science which has long been a tool for affecting change and creating good human connections. It can be used as a learning tool as in my example above or by teachers who aim to influence, inspire, and engage students. We often remember concepts better if there's a story to go with it. Let's consider human connection again as this is so important to mental fitness especially as we age/are more prone to isolation. There's nothing more entertaining than watching a group of people at a table in Tim Horton's. The coffee gets cold while the hearts are warmed up with all the good stories that are shared! If you're interested in sharpening your storytelling skills, some tips:

1. Know your audience: If you're telling the story to the younger generation, keep it geared to their level of understanding but with close friends you can include all the intimate details!
2. Think about the goal of your story: Are you trying to illustrate a point, teach a lesson or simply entertain with some humour?
3. Choose the right time and place: Have you ever been to a wedding or even a funeral where the family invited the guests to get up and tell a story? On one occasion we were witness to such an event that got out of control, leaving the groom's parents humiliated. "Think before you speak," is a good motto for storytelling, the written form is safer! It provides the opportunity to edit out the fluff or scandal and include a good "hook" to keep it engaging.
4. Be clear and concise: It can be boring to listen to someone go on and on about things that only matter to themselves. Our tip is to leave a bit unsaid, to draw out questions from your audience. We love it when our grandchildren are curious about something their dad did as a youngster!
5. Get personal, using the above tip of right place and time: We have all had the experience of someone preaching a lesson to us and the experience of someone telling a personal story. The latter has always had the biggest impact and creates connections between us.
6. Use body language appropriately: It sends the subliminal messages that go along with the story we're telling. The worst thing would be to have conflicting body language like frowning through a funny story.

Our life here on earth is short, even if we have the grace of living into our old age. Don't miss the opportunity to share your stories especially with the younger generation who have their whole life ahead of them.