

## How to Find and Develop a Family Story

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Family stories are all around us. They are like hidden gems just waiting to be discovered. Family stories reside in people, places and things, and once we start to look for them, the journey can be particularly satisfying.

There are many ways to uncover and share a family story, and an Internet search will reveal many articles and books\* devoted to this subject.

To get you started, I'd like to explore just one part of this process of finding and developing a family story from the things we collect and often place on display in our homes.

I sincerely hope what I share here will provide you with the first step on the rich and rewarding path of collecting and preserving your family stories for generations to come.

### **Observe**

As you walk through your home, pay attention to the pictures and knick-knacks you enjoy. Ask yourself, why are these particular objects here? Sometimes these things have been in place for so long that we don't even think about them. If not on display, our pictures and collections are probably stored somewhere in boxes or drawers. Take the time to look for them and think about what they represent personally, or why they might have importance for someone else in the household. As you examine each object, be aware that every item represents a story, and there's a good chance that the story will be worth pursuing.

### **Question and Listen**

Don't be timid about interviewing yourself and others. A good interviewer asks questions and waits for an answer. The key here is to listen deeply, allowing as much time as needed for quiet moments of thought. Do not rush in with a new question until you are satisfied that the question has been completely explored. It is not unusual for one question to lead to another, or for a question to provide information leading to another story. These moments are often where the best family stories can be found, so be ready to go along with this spontaneous thought process.

### **Record**

Write down or record in a retrievable fashion what you have learned, so you can start the process of developing a story worth sharing. By this, I mean a story that is more complete than a simple anecdote and one that contains a clear beginning, middle and satisfying end. This is where the fun begins, because a memory is just that, a memory. It does not always arrive complete with vivid descriptions and other details to bring it to life. It may be necessary to do some research about the time and place, or talk to other family members who might have more information to make the story better.

## **Create**

Once you have lived with the story for a while, identify its primary focus: the reason someone will find the story of interest. (For example: Is the focus to remember the kindness of someone, or recall a moment of importance during the process of growing up?)

You get to decide how you want to tell the story. Do you want to tell it in the first, second or third person? Does dialogue fit into your way of telling? If you are naturally an expressive talker, you may want to consider adding drama or movement as you create the story.

## **Remember**

Some people prefer to write a story outline, others record the text on their computer, some use a storyboard or keep notes on an index card, and other storytellers are content to keep the story in their head. You know what works best for you.

## **Tell**

This is the best part about exploring and developing a family story. When you are ready to tell a family story, you need to determine if it is meant for family ears only, or if it can be shared with others. Many funny or poignant family stories touch the heart and provide lessons about life that are universally understood and appreciated. Best of all, these stories will take on a polish over time as you adjust the telling to how your listeners respond.

**\*One of the best books I have found about uncovering family stories is “Telling Your Own Stories” by Donald Davis. August House (1993) ISBN 0-87483-235-7**

*NOTE: This is an update of an article I wrote for Storyteller.net in 2009.*