

## Our stories tell us who we are

### Steve Otto

Our Stories Tell Us Who We Are. This was the theme of the Seattle National Storytelling Conference, and it holds a special place in my heart. I do not have a long family history of telling stories. My grandfather was in on the 1889 Oklahoma Land Run. He took his team and wagon into Indian territorand settled down by the Canadian River near Norman. My mother would never tell me the stories of her years growing up in a sod dugout on the plains of Oklahoma. Those were not good times, and “you don’t tell about bad times,” she’d say.

I never heard about the Depression and how my folks raised a baby daughter with dad out of a job, and the joy when he finally started working in the stockyards. I never knew what they had to go through. I never understood why I had to work from the time I was nine years old and save every penny I earned. I never knew why it was just expected of me to go to college.

I didn’t know these things until my mother died. I had all her papers unopened in boxes in my basement for three years after her death. One day I decided to clean them up and found that Mom had diaries. She had written down the things that had happened to her and her family. From those diaries, I found the powerful, loving woman, wife, and mother that she really was. If only I had heard her stories! I decided that this should not happen to others. That was the start of my “obsession” with teaching seniors how to tell their own stories and at the same time take those generations of personal stories that are stored in the musty cobwebs of the inner mind and share them with new generations.

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His wife had made him come. John just sat there. All during the first session of my “Telling Your Own Stories” class for senior citizens, he just sat there, arms crossed and barely acknowledging anything. The class was to encourage seniors to go into elementary school classrooms and tell students their stories of growing up in a time so different from today. I wanted to have the kids realize that this powerful generation had accomplished so much without a lot of the perks that are considered necessities today.

At break time, I went to the back of the room with a Coke and gave it to John. I sat down and began talking about my own upbringing and finally asked, “Hey, tell me a story about something that happened in your life.”

“Don’t have any stories!” was his reply. “I’ve lived here all my life and nothing exciting ever happened.”

I finally asked, “Were you ever in the service?”

“Yeah, I was in the Navy. |

“Boy, if you were in the Navy, I know you have some stories . . . “

That was when it happened. The eyes were the first clue; they suddenly brightened and you could almost see wheels turning. He looked at me with a funny expression and said, “You know, come to think of it . . . I was on a heavy cruiser the day Pearl Harbor was attacked.”

Not an exciting thing had ever happened to him! He had never told the story because no one had ever asked. The story began to flow, along with a few tears. I quickly realized that the story was way too long to be told in a single sitting, so we took it and broke it down into three separate stories, with an ending for the first two that left

the audience in suspense till the next installment. John was already assigned to a Grade 5 class to assist the teacher in photocopying and refilling books, so I suggested that he take his story to his class to tell. He took his medals and Purple Heart the next day.

At the next session of our storytelling class, John was the first one in the room (it was easy for him because he was about three feet off the ground).

“You wouldn’t believe it . . . They listened to my story!”

“Of course they did. It was a wonderful story.”

“No, you don’t understand . . . They’re really great kids. They REALLY LISTENED!”

And all of a sudden, this thing called a generation gap was bridged by communication, by story.

What effect a simple little thing like listening to each other can have! John opened up and became a leader in the program. His wife commented on how wonderful it was to have “excited, really excited, about doing something! He used to just sit in the chair and watch that damn TV!”

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Old people don’t get crabby. Crabby people get old. Have you ever looked at the senior adults who are stimulated by using their minds? Most of them are healthier than their peers. They are more positive in their relationships with others. They are not depressed. Dr. Rex Ellis says, “I truly believe that the power of storytelling is the one best hope we have to improve the communities we live in and the people we love. I have seen people with different backgrounds talk to each other for the first time. I have seen fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters who seldom speak to each other start laughing, reminiscing, and reconnecting because of storytelling. I have seen bridges built with storytelling, as listeners and tellers unite in ways that are more potent than a town meeting and more

healing than a therapy session. It is pretty hard to hate someone whose story you know.”

Look at Willard Scott’s “100 Year Olds,” oriented and alert centenarians featured during Scott’s weather forecast on popular morning television show in the U.S., and you see individuals who live by the motto “Getting Older is Inevitable . . . Growing up is Optional!” Our minds control the physical side of our everyday environment, and just as we exercise to keep our minds in positive way to keep them alert. Teaching storytelling techniques is a positive step towards creating a healthy environment for our seniors.

When looking for the methodology to teach seniors to tell their own stories, I went back to my youth and began to figure out ways to enable individuals to visualize the events of their own past. I wanted to have them feel the story so that they were telling the experience not from their head, but from their heart. The final key was a workshop with storyteller Donald Davis, who had me up in front of an audience, leading me back to my grandmother’s kitchen. I was suddenly smelling the Sunday dinner. It was roast with potatoes and carrots. I could feel the hear from the ld coal stove. I could feel the warmth of Grandmother and the gardenia smell of toilet water as she held me close. I could even smell the outhouse out back. IT WORKED! I developed the “Remember When” list of questions that can take the mind back to a time that may have been forgotten. These questions are not about life-changing events., but the small, seemingly everyday happenings that helped us learn life’s lessons.

## REMEMBER WHEN?

This list can be revised and expanded to meet the cultural and age differences of the specific audiences. Making the list appropriate to the group will be pivotal to the success of your program.

The best stories are those that happened to each of us! Remember when you used to walk three miles to school . . . Uphill both ways . . . With snowdrifts over your head? . . . Barefoot . . . ?

Well, sometimes our memories are better that way. Let's go back in our memories and pick up some of those stories of events that made us what we are today.

### 1. LIVING CONDITIONS

- Did you use outdoor privies?
- Did your house have central heating?
- On what kind of stove did your mother cook?
- Did you always have electricity? What happened when you got it?
- What other things do you remember about your home?

### 2. FOOD

- What was your favourite food? Why?
- What was your least favourite food? Why? Did you have to eat it anyway?
- Do you remember any special meal? Birthday, holiday, special day?
- Where did you eat meals? Did all the family eat together?
- Did you keep your food in a refrigerator, icebox, cellar?

### 3. HEALTH CARE

- Were you sick a lot? What happened?
- Do you remember having your tonsils out?
- Did you have a favorite doctor? Did he make house calls?
- Did you or a sibling almost die? What happened?
- What drugs did you take?
- Did your parents make home remedies for you?
- Can you remember a time you got sick at a very inconvenient moment?

### 4. TRANSPORTATION

- Do you remember your first car? How much did it cost?
- How much was gas? How long did the tires last?
- Did you ever take a long trip?
- Did your car have a heater? Air conditioner?

- Do you remember learning to drive? The first time you took the car out by yourself?
- Did you ever have an accident that you didn't tell your folks about?
- If you didn't have a car, how did you get around? What did you do?
- Can you remember a trip that you would NOT want to take again?

### 5. YOUR FAMILY

- What kind of people were your parents?
- How many children were in your family?
- Did you play jokes on each other?
- Did you have responsibilities at home?
- What were some of the happy times you had?
- What was the saddest time?
- Did you do things together?
- Did you fight with your siblings?
- Do you remember something you did that you never told your parents? Did they find out?
- Can you remember a time you got in trouble for something you had already been told not to do?

### 6. ENTERTAINMENT

- What did you do for entertainment?
- Did kids in your neighborhood play Kick the Can or Hide and Seek?
- Do you remember the days of radio? Did you have a crystal set? What programs do you remember?
- Did you play cards? Dominoes? What else?
- Was going to the movies a big event?
- Did you ever get caught sneaking into a movie or event?

### 7. WHERE WERE YOU AND WHAT WERE YOU DOING?

- The day the stock market crashed?
- On V-J day?

- When the Korean War began?
- The day Kennedy was shot?
- The day the first man landed on the moon?

## 8. HOW DID YOU CELEBRATE?

- Your birthday? Did you have a cake?
- Christmas? Hanukkah?
- What presents did you get? Did you ever have a holiday or birthday where you didn't get anything, or thought you wouldn't?
- Did you celebrate any other religious or seasonal holidays?

## 9. TOYS AND THINGS

- Do you remember your favourite toy?
- When did you get your first bicycle?
- Were your toys handmade?
- Do you remember losing something special?
- What was your favourite gift?

## 10. CLOTHES

- What did you wear?
- When did you realize that clothes were "important"?
- Did you have a favourite outfit?
- How much did clothes cost?
- Did you stand in the shoe store and x-ray your feet?

## 11. COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

- When was your first date?
- Did anything funny happen?
- Do you remember your first kiss?
- Did you marry him/her?
- Can you remember the names of high school dates? What happened to them?
- What did you do on dates?
- Where did you go?
- Do you remember the marriage proposal? Who proposed?
- What happened at your wedding?
- Where did you go on your honeymoon? Did anything funny or bad happen?
- What were the hardest times during your marriage?
- What things do (did) you like best about your spouse? Least?
- Where did you live when you got married? What did you eat?

## 12. CAREERS

- What was your first job? How much did it pay? What did you do?
- What was your first full-time job? Would you do it again?
- Tell about your boss. What kind of person was he/she? Do you think that your boss was as good/bad now as you did then?
- Did you change jobs? Why?
- Did you ever have to work hard physically? Were you ever hurt on the job? What happened?

## 13. REMEMBER?

- Do you remember the time when you got locked out when you needed to be somewhere?
- Do you remember when your first impression of someone turned out to be completely wrong?
- Do you remember when you learned something from your children? Do you remember a time when you were lied to or tricked? Do you remember a time when you almost won, but not quite?

## 14. MILITARY TIME

- Did you enlist or were you drafted? Why? What service?
- Do you remember experiences of basic training or boot camp?
- Was this your first time away from home?
- Do you remember your First Sergeant, etc?
- What was your barracks like?
- Were you shipped out to go overseas? Where did you go? How did you go?
- Were you in battle? Tell about the experience. Were you afraid? Did you lose friends? How did you cope with the experience?
- Were you married at the time? What did your wife/husband do?
- If you were left at home, what did you do? Letters, jobs, children?
- In retrospect, was this good for you? What did you learn?