

Baskets full of memories: Rediscovering personal archives of story

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I was inclined to assume that memories fade with the passage of time, until they finally disappear altogether. But I found this is not true. Some remain intact in the archives of the mind – dusty from disuse, perhaps, but still there – ready to be relived in full detail if the mind's owner tries to summon them forth.

-- Laura Ingalls Wilder

It has been said that Laura Ingalls Wilder was 60 years old before she wrote her first “Little House” book at the urging of her adult daughter. She said she wrote the series because it helped her keep those she loved and the things she loved alive. It was her belief that our memories become clearer the more we use them, that each time we close our eyes and go back in time to a memory, we enable ourselves to go back further.

Ruby was my grandma. Years ago she had given me the quilt and asked me to store it when she moved to a retirement village. It had been lovingly been stored for years before I received it, and I simply followed tradition and kept it stored for the 20 years I had owned it, never taking it out of its packaging. It was obvious that it had never been used or laundered. The fabrics and the pattern of the quilt dated its creation to the early 1900s. It had never occurred to me to ask why it hadn't been used.

When I “rediscovered” the quilt in my storage room, I asked everyone I knew about it, but no one could tell me anything. I decided to go to Ruby, now 90, and ask her personally. Her children assured me she would never remember. They could not have been more wrong.

Ruby was already blind. When I placed the quilt in her lap she ran her fingers along the stitches and patches. She held the quilt to her nose. Then I asked her to tell me what she was thinking about. She shared an extraordinary story most of the family had never heard.

Back in 1916, her mother had suffered from breast cancer. She'd had radical surgery and was sent home to recover. Living with them at the time was Ruby's aged grandmother, who had driven her own oxcart into the Salt Lake Valley of Utah back in 1847. She was blind and 82 in an era when the average life

expectancy was 57. Ruby had dropped out of Grade 9 to take care of these two women. The three of them had made the quilt together during that time. Upon close inspection of the quilt, and armed with the knowledge of Ruby's story, an observant person can pick out three different stitching styles. Ruby's mother had eventually recovered. Her grandma has moved on to be cared for by another, and Ruby had returned to school and finally graduated at the age of 20. But that time with those precious women had become so special to Ruby that she had never felt she could use the quilt.

When I asked her why she had never told us the reason the quilt had been saved for all those years, she said she had gotten so used to storing the quilt that she'd also gotten used to storing the memory. The quilt, a single tangible item, had triggered a flood of memories that had not been shared before. It became the catalyst that caused many more stories to resurface and be shared.

My experience with Ruby is what led me to create the memory basket exercise. After experiencing the powerful impact the quilt had on Grandma and her memories, I started looking at everything with my newly aware, memory-seeking eyes. I wondered how many other memories she had stored away, and I wondered if I was doing the same thing. I discovered how easily memories could be triggered by the simplest of items when one takes the time to spend a few moments with an object. Whenever some little knick-knack or junk-drawer oddity triggered a memory for me, I tossed it into a basket. In no time at all I had baskets full of memories. I was amazed by what this simple exercise had done for me. I was remembering and sharing experiences I hadn't thought of in years. So was my grandmother. I tried the exercise out in a workshop. The result was so affirming it became a fixed tradition.

THE MEMORY BASKET EXERCISE

The memory basket exercise is an effective way to tap into the power of storytelling and open the doors of communication. This exercise works because many of the senses are called into use. As participants look, touch, and smell the various items in the basket, memories are triggered and stories are shared, often stories that have not been shared for years.

Step One: Group Discussion

The discussion leader comes prepared with baskets full of odd and assorted items. It seems just about anything will trigger a memory for somebody. Antiques and thrift store collectibles are excellent things to put in the baskets. So is any old object you may have lying around: tools, beauty accessories, recipes, keys, old postcards, letters, hankies, spices, medicine bottles, hats, gloves, toys, books, etc. If it has been around for some time, throw it in the basket – it will trigger a memory for somebody. There is no generation gap in this exercise. It works with youth as well as senior citizens. It is especially fun to do it in a multi-generational setting and hear the different memories triggered by the same items. Using this exercise, I've heard some pretty amazing stories that haven't been told in decades. I've also heard some recent memories that hadn't been shared before.

Simply pass the baskets around and give participants are not able to write, go directly into the sharing. Honor the person sharing with genuine interest and appreciation.

Step Two: The Daily Challenge

Remember – ANYTHING can trigger a memory!

After participants have experienced success with this memory-triggering exercise, challenge them to a daily commitment to continue the process. Start with 10 minutes a day: 5 minutes to daydream and remember; 5 minutes to write or record.

1. Daydream!
2. Select any item lying around and let it trigger a memory.
3. Let the memory lead. Listen to your heart. Look with memory-seeking eyes.
4. Write it down, or if that is difficult, record it on a tape recorder.
5. Read your writings once a week.
6. Are there more memories triggered?

7. Write or record those memories as well.

Step Three: Follow Up

Remember, shared experiences always trigger memory. Bring the group members together again to touch base with each other and share their memory harvest. Encourage them to share their memory harvest with others as well, especially with family and friends. The harvest will trigger another crop of memories as well as create a deeper bond for the participants.

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Remarkable Results

Geraldine was 71. She sat in my class and looked cynical as the basket of assorted items worked its way down the row to her. It was obvious she didn't think there was anything in the basket that would affect her. When the basket came to her, she grabbed the swimming goggles and passed the basket on quickly. She told me later that she had thought she should share some silly swimming memory and be done with it. But when she took a moment to truly look at the goggles, she was stunned to discover they had triggered a memory. She remembered a summer day in her youth when she and her friends had been swimming in a canal. The day had turned tragic when one of them went under and didn't come back up. The body was never found. Geraldine's 40-year-old daughter was in the workshop as well. She was stunned by the story and asked her mother why she had never told her that before, because it would have helped her to understand why her mother had always been so adamant that her daughter should never swim in canals when she was little. Geraldine responded that she had not remembered that day for years and years. The goggles had triggered the memory. The daughter said the memory had filled in a gap for her and helped her more fully understand the woman who raised her.

Chad was well into his 50s when he came to my workshop. The workshop was presented out of doors, and frankly he looked like he would have been more comfortable slipping into the woods behind us than looking through a basket of anything. But he stuck it out and rummaged around the basket. As soon as he came across the rusted, old, claw trap in the bottom of the

basket, he smiled. When it was his turn to tell his memory, he told of a day in his childhood when he and his father had been setting claw traps to catch the raccoons and possums that were stealing from their farm. Later in the afternoon, they went to check the traps and discovered a fully mature golden eagle with one of its feet held tight. Their eyes at the absolute helplessness and fear they saw in its eyes. He told of watching his father speak softly and soothingly to the magnificent bird, all while inching toward the trap. Then he watched in stunned silence as his father released the bird from the trap. The eagle soared high above their heads and hovered above them, nearly out of sight, for a moment. Then it swooped down and flew a slow low-flying circle around their heads as if to say thank-you, and then flew away for good. Chad's eyes grew moist with the memory. He told us he and his father went home that day and got rid of all the claw traps. I asked Chad when he had last thought of that day and whether he had ever told his children that story. He said he hadn't thought of that day for years and promised to go home and tell his children.

Connie was a young mother in her late 20s when she attended the workshop. She selected an early 50s style woman's blue dress hat out of the basket. I was a little uneasy when she picked out the hat because I saw a scowl pass over her face and a tear trickle down her cheek. She brushed it away almost angrily, then started writing feverishly. I reminded myself that not every memory is filled with joy, nor should it be. My responsibility as the exercise leader was to listen and guide Connie to a place of peace, if need be, after she had shared her memory. I braced myself for what was to come. The hat reminded Connie of her grandmother. She had always held a deep-seated resentment of her grandmother and worked actively not to remember her because most of her memories were of her grandmother being drunk. When she was drunk she was mean. Connie's most powerful memory was of being locked in a car with her sister outside a bar while her grandma got smashed inside the bar. Connie told us she had vowed never to tell her children about her grandmother. Yet when Connie picked up the hat, it had triggered a memory one sun-filled afternoon her grandmother had taken Connie and her sister to the park. They'd laughed and played, and her grandma hadn't had a single drink. Connie said this triggered memory had reminded her she had actually

loved her grandma. She said the memory had filled her with light. She told us this was going to be the memory onto which she would hold. Her grandma was gone and she certainly couldn't alter the past, and she could never understand what demons drove her to be the way she was, but she could honor her grandma best by sharing that sunny memory and the joy of that day with her children.

Memories begin to flow

Connie's experience is not unique. I have never had a workshop participant share a dark memory and leave it there. Each time an object has triggered a memory, it has led to a positive recollection. My observation has been that the memories triggered first are usually moments of joy or discovery, sweetness or nostalgia, triumph or success. Naturally, group leaders need to be sensitive and prepared for the fact that not every memory is a pleasant one. We need to be in a healthy position emotionally ourselves to orchestrate this exercise. Yet, with that being said, we need not fear. Memories can become great wellsprings of healing and understanding when we allow them to guide us in this simple way.

Time and again I have seen this process happen. Whether a shell takes a person back to the first day he smelled the ocean, or a pink foam curler reminds someone of a sleepover or her first date, the thrill of discovery of a long-forgotten moment in our lives is the same. Each rediscovered memory opens the floodgates for more memory. Each shared memory opens a conduit for successful communication. Each moment of a successful communication leads to deeper human ties.

Ruby remembered

On September 22, 2000, my Grandma Ruby passed away. She asked me to speak at her funeral. Her main desire was that I tell her stories, of which others might not be aware. This was not a simple task. She had shared her life with 6 children, 21 grandchildren, 79 great-grandchildren, and 25 great-great-grandchildren. I went back to the baskets, and now every item triggered a memory of Grandma and a story she had shared with me. I shared those stories at her funeral. When the funeral was over, the response I heard most often was "I never knew any of that; thank you so much for taking the time to listen and share."

Storyteller and writer Ed Okanowicz once said, “Nothing is sadder than to reflect on the recent death of an older relative or friend and realize the number of experiences that were also buried inside that bronze casket.” Because of my experiences with Ruby, and those baskets full of memories, we closed the lid on her casket, but we did not close the lid on her memories. Her stories will continue to be told and cherished, and we will keep her with us through those stories. ℓℓℓ