Forging Family Bonds Through Storytelling

By David C. Dollahite, Ph.D.

Storytelling is a very important and a very neglected part of family life. Storytelling is a vital part of family life that we should be more actively involved with, but we tend to be overwhelmed with other, more passive, forms of entertainment, such as television, the Internet, video games, and radio. There are many ways to weave storytelling in your own family, especially as parents tell stories to children and older children tell stories to younger children.

The Old Testament speaks of “Elijah the prophet,” and Malachi writes that “he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:5-6). There are, no doubt, many layers of meaning to this scripture, but I believe it says, in part, something profoundly important about turning the hearts of family members to one another—about the importance of children knowing their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and as many other generations as they can know.

I have both thought about and studied what causes the hearts within a family to turn toward each other, and I’ve come to the conclusion that one of the most powerful forces is the telling of stories within our families. And I believe that developing a tradition of storytelling as an intentional part of a family’s daily, weekly, and monthly family activities will help touch and turn parents’ hearts to their children and the children’s hearts toward the parents.

What is family storytelling?

Family storytelling is as simple as family members telling stories to one another. There are many narratives from myths, tall tales, or other literature. Most people know and tell these existing stories, or they may read them in books. Sharing these stories is fine, but it is also beneficial to tell your children stories that mean something to you personally. Children love to hear their parents tell stories about themselves, especially about when they were young since this helps children feel closer to their bigger, older parent.

Family storytelling also grows out of the growing worldwide interest in genealogy and family history. Some people do not realize that an important part of genealogy is sharing and preserving the memories of family members who are living, as well as the histories of our ancestors. In every extended family, there seems to be at least one person who is concerned with genealogical work, while the rest of the family members usually go about doing their own thing. We need, instead, to have each living family member share their stories with other living family members. That is one of the keys to ensuring that a family isn’t just a bunch of people living in the same house, sharing the same
food, and having conversations mainly about mundane things. If you keep a personal history already, then you have a wealth of information that you can impart to your children.

There is an old Hasidic Jewish saying that states, "Give people a fact, and you enlighten their minds; tell them a story, and you touch their souls." To have an enlightened mind is a good thing, but it is also good to have an enlightened soul. "Turning hearts" through storytelling creates a sense of oneness and connection between family members and generations that is quite different than parents and children who simply feel they are related by blood and the fact that they live under the same roof. Instead, they become connected by a love that grows out of knowing and understanding each other and feeling committed to each other.

Why is storytelling important?
Most people feel quite close to their mothers. On the other hand, many people have a bit of ambivalence toward their fathers and may not feel as close to them. This may be because the father is away a lot or he works long hours. It may also be that he just doesn't share much of himself, because many men do not verbalize their feelings or connect emotionally to their kids as much as their kids would like them to. When I ask students to share a story showing the connection they feel with their mothers, it is sometimes difficult for them to identify a particular experience because the connection is often ongoing and seamless. When I ask students to share the same kind of story about their fathers, most can identify a story about a time when they felt especially connected to their fathers. Often, the story centers around an illness or accident the student or their father has had.

When I was teaching at the University of North Carolina, I asked students to tell me a story of when they felt close to their fathers. A young woman in my class named Megan remembered that experience as a time when her father went the extra mile and sacrificed and in some ways put his life at risk to do something he knew was important to her.

Each year for her birthday, Megan's father came to her grammar school for lunch. He would bring Megan and her friends ice cream sandwiches, and they would put candles in them and then sing "Happy Birthday." He did this in grades 1 through 5 and this became a very important tradition for Megan. When Megan was in the sixth grade, she was especially looking forward to her father coming, assuming it would be the last time he did this. Just a couple of days before her birthday, Megan
came home from school and found a note on the refrigerator. It was from her mother, who explained that her father had had another heart attack, that he was going to be okay, but that he was going to have to be in the hospital for several days. Megan, of course, was grateful her father was alive, but she also realized he wouldn’t be there for her birthday. When she woke up on the morning of her birthday with her father still in the hospital she did not want to get out of bed, let alone go to school. But her mother told her she needed to go, so she did, but she spent the entire morning dreading lunchtime. When the lunch bell finally rang, Megan stayed behind in her classroom while everyone else ran off to lunch. Eventually, she made it down the hall to the lunchroom, and there, sitting in a wheelchair with an I.V. in his arm, was her father. She ran over to him, saying, “Daddy, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here!” Grinning, Megan’s father said, “It’s your birthday, isn’t it? I wouldn’t be anywhere in the world but here with you.”

I’d like you to think for a moment about your reactions to the first part of this article—before I shared the story about Megan and her father. Then compare that to your reaction to this story. If you are like most people, your reaction to the story was quite different than your reaction to the “ideas” I had been sharing about storytelling. You probably perked up just a little when I indicated I was going to share a story, and you probably paid a little more attention to what was being said. Megan’s illustration of family closeness put some flesh on what was initially just me giving you my opinion. It probably prompted you to use more than just your intellect to understand; you used your emotions as well.

The story also may have been motivating. Someone hearing this story might think “Hmmm, I could do something like that for my kids,” or “I can see why developing a pattern like that could be really important to my kids.” Especially men who did not have a strong father figure in their lives may feel some extra motivation to be a good father, and they may also come away from it with a concrete idea they could use in their own lives. A story sinks in, and we remember it. I have told this story about the young woman and her father many times to many groups of people, and I can’t help but feel emotional whenever I tell it and I know that others are also experiencing strong emotion for various reasons. Stories can have the effect of helping us remember an idea, a feeling, or a principle far better than if it is simply presented as an abstract concept.

Families and stories are very much intertwined. From birth to death, we are surrounded and nurtured by family members and the stories they tell. Your parents may tell you stories that parallel your own experiences, or your older siblings may have told you stories about when they were your age. The relationships we have with people are largely influenced by our shared experiences, which are most often and most effectively shared through stories. Once a family goes on a vacation or has an experience like a fire in the kitchen, that event becomes part of the family’s canon of stories, and it gets retold again and again. When children beg for a bedtime story, they are not just trying to avoid the inevitable, they are demonstrating, to borrow from the words of Jesus, that they do not live by bread alone. In addition to the food and shelter parents provide, children need the emotional, relational sustenance they get from the stories in the family’s own unique anthology of stories.
Why is storytelling so powerful?

If you’re not convinced that stories are powerful, consider how many of us spend the majority of our leisure time. We watch television, where, if we think at all actively, we can figure out how a story likely will end three minutes into the show. Or we skip reading our classroom assignments in favor of reading a novel. Yet because we like and need stories so much, we will continue watching even dumb shows or reading a novel even when we have more important things to do. If even silly or predictable stories keep busy adults glued to them, think how powerful are good stories told by people we love. Think of what we really want to hear when we talk with our friends about their most recent date or adventure—we want to hear “a good story.”

Much of storytelling today is a seamless part of day-to-day life, compared to life in the “old days,” when people would spend the day working and then gather as a family in the evenings to tell stories. There were even those bards who would travel from village to village telling stories, a tradition that has been replaced in our modern times by much more readily available—and yet far more passive—forms of entertainment. We still have stories, but we are now largely unconnected to them since they are told by professionals we do not know and who do not know or care about us. Thus, we don’t talk to each other enough and forge the strong emotional connections that sharing stories and experiences provide.

The stories our children crave are about life as it is lived. They have surprise twists, heroes, and action. Stories capture the essence of life. They often involve a change of heart. They give the best examples we have of how to change and why to change.

If you are at all reluctant about sharing your stories with your children, think about the greatest teachers you know or speakers you have heard. Your joy in their words probably comes, in large part, from their excellent storytelling. You, as a listener, remember stories more than you remember abstract ideas. This phenomenon has been documented. Most people remember a simple story better than they remember a theoretical abstraction of a great philosophy.

What kinds of stories should be told in families?

The stories we tell can be about anything. They can be fairytales, myths, or tall tales. They can be about Cinderella or the Three Bears. These are universal stories, and children love hearing them from their parents, especially if parents make the story their own by using different voices, gestures, motions, acting out the story, or other creative approaches. For example, it is one thing to tell your three-year-old the story of Jonah and the Whale and another thing to “swallow” them up in your arms and then “vomit” them out onto the beach at Nineveh (the floor or a couch) at that point in the story. Finding ways to tell familiar stories in new and creative ways is important to help your children have those stories come alive and stay alive to them.

We can also make up stories. Like many, I make up stories and tell my children stories where they are the heroes and heroines. The names in the stories are either the exact names or names similar to theirs and the characters in the stories do brave,
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honest, kind, creative, and fun things. Making up stories where the children are the heroes can not only be very entertaining for them, but they can be inspirational as well. Another thing you can do is a round-robin activity, where one person starts the story and then stops and points to another family member who continues the story. If you have children who can really get involved in this, they can be very creative—and you can have a lot more fun as a family than you can with a story that comes from a store.

Your children want to hear stories about when you were young, about experiences you had in school when you were their age, about how you and your spouse met, and about other significant—or even non-significant—events in your life. While parents should tell stories about themselves, they can also tell stories about their ancestors. Your children should know about grandma’s experience in immigrating to the United States, and about the character traits of their predecessors.

One story I often tell is about my father. He was a police officer for 17 years in our hometown during a time when there were a lot of problems with drugs, riots, and violence. And, somehow, our town was a kind of Mecca for these problems. I knew, as a boy, that he was out dealing with the “bad guys” and putting his life in danger, but one night that reality came home in a very powerful way. I was 12, and my best friend was over, having dinner with my family. Our house was on a busy street, and it was not uncommon to hear a car backfire. And, sure enough, while we were eating we heard what sounded like a car backfiring. But then we heard someone scream, “Help, I’ve been hit! I’ve been hit! Please help me!” Before my friend and I even realized someone had been shot, my father, who wasn’t on duty, ran into his bedroom, grabbed his gun, and ran out the door.

Of course, my friend and I thought this was really cool, so we ran to the front window to watch my dad go after the bad guys. My mom, however, had a different reaction, and she pulled us away from the window, pulled down the shade, locked the front door, and made us go into the back of the house. And then she just sat there and literally shook and shivered until my dad came home. That’s the first time I really realized
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that my dad was a hero. But I also realized, for the first time, what my mom had to live with every day, as her husband went off each day and put his life in danger.

My father now lives with us, and my telling this story helps my children appreciate the old guy who sits by them at the dinner table and gives them candy in a very different way than they would without that story. Now they think, “Wow, Papa was a real hero.” It is one way I turn the hearts of my children to my father.

We should also tell stories from family’s ethnic, national, or cultural background. I often tell my children about their great grandfather Iver from Norway, who had a very exciting life. He escaped death numerous times; in fact, he came into the port of Birmingham about two weeks after the Titanic set sail, and was hired as a merchant marine on the next major ship to set sail from that port.

After he immigrated to the United States, he worked as a logger in Minnesota and lived in a small cabin in the woods. Each day, he would go home for lunch, and one of his coworkers started coming over everyday as well, which disturbed Grandpa Iver because he was, by nature, a private person. He wanted his coworker to stop coming, but he was uncomfortable with confronting the man directly, so he had to use his wits. So the next time this man came over, Grandpa Iver took the plates off the table after they had finished lunch, put them on the floor, and allowed his dog to lick them clean. Grandpa Iver then put the plates back into the cupboard, and the man never came back for lunch. My kids love this story and it helps turn their hearts to their great grandfather who they never knew personally.

We should also share stories that grow out of our religious beliefs and our faith. These stories may come from the Bible or other books we hold sacred, or they may come from our own experiences. If you believe in Jesus Christ, then you should talk about him more often than just during Christmastime. If we want to perpetuate our faith among are children, we need to share these sacred stories so that they will understand why we subscribe to a particular set of religious tenets. Our children deserve to hear
more than once the story of how we came to know, believe in, and accept our most deeply cherished spiritual principles.

Now, a word of caution. Do not tell stories at the expense of other family members. It affects a family member if he or she becomes the brunt of unkind—even if humorous—family stories. As a parent, if you notice that one of your children is the target of hurtful stories, encourage your children to aim the stories in a new direction. You are the only one who can tell embarrassing stories about yourself. No one else should be able to do so, if it causes hurt feelings.

When is the best time to tell a story?
When is the best time to tell family stories? Anytime, all the time. Have this be an important activity that they will remember when they are older. Consider these possibilities:

- At dinnertime: We have a tradition that when someone comes for dinner, we have to earn our dessert by sometime during the meal each person telling a story. In many families during a meal, one person or two tend to dominate the conversation, so this is a way to get all of the family members and the guests involved in the conversation. My family also likes to talk about dreams during meals. My children frequently ask me to tell them about my dreams because I have all kinds of crazy adventures when I am asleep and I love to ask my kids about their dreams as a window on their inner experience. Find creative ways to prolong meal-time since it is one of the best times to share stories in a relaxed atmosphere.

- At bedtime: Kids are very receptive at bedtime. They are relaxed. They have had dinner. They are feeling comfortable and warm. What you tell them will stick with them. Don’t spend this time telling them just about the Three Bears. Tell them the things of your soul and the stories that you most want them to remember and sink into their souls.

- In the car: Most families have travel routines or games they play. You can also make stories, especially traveling stories, part of your time in the car. You can even have stories on tape. Nowadays, the television has ended up in many of our cars, and while that can help the time pass on a long trip, we need to do in the car what we do in our homes: as often as possible turn off the TV and tell each other stories.

- While working: When you are working together side-by-side it is a great time to talk about when you were young. Telling stories can actually make the task less tedious for all involved. Your family may actually look forward to work if they know they are going to get to hear mom and dad tell good stories.

Conclusion
As families, we all have challenges. These challenges are meaningful. Families also have experiences to share and others to overcome. How appropriate that we forge together a reconciliation of our present lives and our past. If we will tell stories, our love for one another will grow stronger, our family identity will run deeper, and our faith tradition will extend through generations. We can only gain from more actively engaging in the storytelling craft. I hope that we will.

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