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Lopez Island
Hospice & Home Support
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All services are free.

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The Power of Sharing Family Stories

By Elizabeth Landrum, Ph.D.

I treasure the words a 96 year old man once said: "In the end, it all comes down to the stories you can tell." In stories live our most significant human connections, our ways of understanding ourselves, family histories, and even our values. Because stories connect the past and present to the future, cultures have always reinforced societal norms through storytelling. Narratives provide the most memorable, repeatable ways of understanding our place in the scheme of things.

Family stories bear close witness to an individual's personal experiences, giving us access to their uniqueness, to their simple truths, to what, and how, they endured. Hearing the stories of our families helps us develop understanding, compassion, and empathy for our elders, and for ourselves. It is the stories that bind us.

It's not the facts of one's life but the anecdotes contained within that life that communicate what's noticed. Whether dramatic or mundane, they are somehow telling, and worth retelling. Have you wondered about the true-life stories of people named in your genealogy search? Have you appreciated someone telling you a story about a deceased loved one? Have you treasured old letters, recordings, writings, or pictures? Repeated anecdotes heard over the family table? Regretted not asking some detail before it was too late?

When you have questions about a loved one, the answers could be just a phone call away, but that won't always be the case. The only way to guard against being left without answers is to ask those questions now. It is never too early. Ask them of your aging and younger relatives, and even ask them of yourself.

Sharing stories benefits the storyteller and the listener.

A great deal of evidence supports the notion that sharing stories is beneficial for seniors. Writing or reminiscing about their lives offers new perspectives and ways of understanding their histories. As Lopez Island Hospice & Home Support volunteers and other caregivers can attest, elders value reflecting over their life events and choices, reviewing the unique life they've led, its significance and meanings. They almost always appreciate the presence of an interested listener. For the very elderly, a chance to tell their story is powerful medicine that has been shown

to improve mental, emotional, and even physical, functioning.

Sharing stories is a gift that truly benefits all, and keeps giving. I am fortunate to own several family videotapes, including one of my father and his siblings, then in their late 80s, reminiscing during a visit to their hometown where stories flowed easily, a legacy for generations. For family members, these conversations can build and strengthen relationships. My grandmother believed she had accomplished little in her life, yet when she understood that her grandchildren wanted to hear her stories, she gained a different sense of meaning, and then enjoyed writing a book of family stories we continue to re-read. You might find that a person's unique handwriting, wording or voiceprint offers a special kind of access to their essence when they are no longer present.

There are many ways to capture, share and preserve stories.

The most obvious way to obtain stories is by having conversations, yet people often don't know where to begin. While there are no rules, there are several helpful avenues. Common advice is to start with an open-ended question or a topic that is of interest to you, then

simply have a conversation, allowing the person to take it wherever they want. Listen gently, asking questions for clarification and interest. Prompts, like a particular time, event or place, and pictures or music, can be helpful in stimulating memories. You might want to record as you talk, perhaps over a period of time.

Ways of recording have become easier, and there are hundreds of apps, websites, and digital tools that can help you question, preserve, and/or tell your story your own way. For example, "Storycorps" has produced countless projects, including "The Great Thanksgiving Listen," which encourages people to ask their elders about their lives. You can access lists of helpful questions on their website and on another site called "52stories." A different way to pass down guiding principles, memories, values, and wishes for your family's future is called the "ethical will." Practical suggestions for writing an ethical will are easily accessed online, where you can also find suggestions for recording voices on a phone or computer and organizing stories, as well as other people's experiences.

Stories make us who we are. They should not be lost. As Joan Borysenko said, "Harvest the meaning of life and pass it down to the next generation through stories."

*To be a
person is to
have a story
to tell.*

~ Isak Dinesen