

Digging Out Family Stories — start learning and telling the stories of your life

by Mark Binder

You know what stories to read to your youngsters. As PJ Library subscribers, you get a new book every month. That's wonderful and fine.

But what stories don't you tell them?

A number of years ago, I had the good fortune to interview both of my father's parents. I recorded the conversations and later on we had them transcribed. I learned more about my grandparents in two hours than I had in the decades before that.

A few years after that, I conducted a similar interview with my mother and father.

Again, I learned to love my parents on a different level.

Do you tell your children how you were married? Or when you first met your partner? Do you tell them how you got interested in your job? Or what your home was like when you were a youngster?

Chances are you don't. Chances are, your parents didn't tell you much and you're likely to pass along this unfortunate habit to your children.

There are plenty of reasons that we don't share our own personal stories. Business, laziness and embarrassment are high up on the list of excuses. There are also plenty of reasons that we don't know our family's stories. (See above, and add in fear of upsetting someone.)

There is, however, a simple solution.

Start telling the stories of your life. Start asking your parents and grandparents to share their stories.

But wait, you say, that's impossible. How do you even begin?

Let's start with the premise that your loved ones are still alive. If they are, then you can talk with them. (If they're not, you can take these steps and use them to ask anyone who knew them about your relatives. You'll be surprised how much you can learn.)

Twelve Steps for Interviewing Your Family

- 1) Buy or borrow a digital recording device. You can find these online, at electronics stores and office supply stores. (If you're really cheap or broke, you can always return the device to the stores after you've used it...) Don't worry too much about recording quality. Make sure you have enough memory to record for at least an hour, preferably two. Practice with this device. Make sure you know how it works before you run your interview. Test it out. Figure out how to get the recording off the device.
- 2) Schedule the time and date with your family members. Be sure that you'll have at least two hours together. Even if you don't use the whole time, it's good to have the space. DON'T interview just one parent and not the other. You don't have to do a marathon, but make sure they all know that they're all going to have their say.
- 3) Make a list of questions. Make a huge and long list, but don't get attached to it. In other words, you won't get to ask every question on your list. The objective is to hear stories, and stories don't necessarily answer questions, but they can be inspired by them.

Categories of questions include:

- a. Where did you grow up? What did your parents do?
- b. What kinds of food did you eat?
- c. Do you remember any smells from when you were a child? (Smell is a powerful memory activator)
- d. How did you meet Mom/Dad?
- e. Did you ever fight in a war? What was that like? (Be cautious with this one.)
- f. What was the hardest time of your life?
- g. What was the easiest time of your life?
- 4) Ask your children to contribute questions to the list
- 5) Remind everyone in advance that you're going to do the interview. If they try to back out, reschedule
- 6) On the day of the interview make sure that the house is neat, the chores are done and put on a pot of tea or coffee. Have water and snacks available.
- 7) Test your recording device again in the location you are doing the interviews. Make sure you have extra batteries or it's plugged in. **MAKE SURE IT'S RECORDING.** Listen to it. (You will want to kill yourself if you blow this.)
- 8) Let the recording device run. Don't look at it. Just ignore it and write notes on your paper. After about 10 minutes it will become invisible. Look in their eyes, not at the recorder. The longer it runs, the better it gets.
- 9) Ask your questions, but listen for stories. Follow the threads of the conversation rather than sticking with your list.
- 10) Don't get discouraged if they get stuck. Ask about other people in their lives. Ask about details. Listen to the silence. Ask how they felt.
- 11) When you have finished, be sure to press stop on the recorder. Digital devices may erase if you let their batteries die before pressing stop. Later on you can make copies for your relatives and share it with your children.
- 12) Thank them and give them a hug. No matter what you got on the audio recording, the time you spent with your family was worth it. Be sure to tell these stories, and add them to the stories you tell your children.



Mark Binder is an award-winning writer and storyteller. His collection, "The Bed Time Story Book" has sold more than 60,000 copies. "A Hanukkah Present" was the finalist for the National Jewish Book Award for Family Literature. His novel "The Brothers Schlemiel" has just been published by JPS. His latest book is "It Ate My Sister (and other family stories)"

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