

Memoirist of Ordinary, Yet Extraordinary Elders

By Mary O'Brien Tyrrell

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I just have an ordinary life. Do you really think anyone would be interested in my story?" My elderly clients usually can't imagine why their adult children have hired me to help them write their memoirs. So then I have my opening to ask, "What would you give to have your own grandparents' life stories recorded in books illustrated with photos, letters, and other precious family documents?" The usual response to my inquiry is a wide grin along with a quiet nod. Then the two of us begin a journey of meandering conversations about their life and the vignettes they would like to share with others.

After fifteen years in gerontology research and program development, I took the big leap to start a home business in helping elders pass on stories within their families. Two compelling factors led to this decision. My inspiration came from working with Native Americans to develop a prototype educational intervention. To understand more about the Anishinabe and Lakota tribes, I volunteered to serve food at feasts held for their elders. I was in awe of the respect-filled atmosphere where silence was highly valued. No one spoke while an elder shared a story; no younger person ate until the elders had been served; and even in our cold and icy Minnesota

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winters with all the inherent difficulties for transportation, the feast was consistently provided every month.

The second factor was my increasing knowledge of computers as a means to preserve information. Instead of using my computer to document numbers about elders, I decided I would rather honor them by documenting their remembrances. In our American culture, it is usually only famous people who have books written about their life story. But every older person's story is worthwhile. If an elder could have a high-quality book written about his or her life story, it could be passed on within the family from one generation to the next.

Back in 1993, a 52-year-old friend in the terminal stages of breast cancer agreed to be my first client. When we were about three quarters through her life review, she exclaimed, "Because you're asking me all these questions, it's like a dam breaking open. I now realize (that) I've had a very wonderful life!" She had had her troubles, including two divorces, and had faced difficulties as a single parent raising her child, but seeing the entire panorama of her life in the written word, she felt it was a positive story. She died shortly after the book was completed. And now her daughter tells me that on Mother's

Day, her own birthday, and other important holidays, she takes her mother's book to sit quietly in contemplation, "talking" to her mother—and hearing her mother "talk" to her.

My second client was a retired Wisconsin dairy farmer. About seventy-five people attended his 91st birthday and book-signing party. His five sons and their families gathered in the yard beside the big red barn at the homestead. We guests had all enjoyed a potluck dinner and birthday cake. The guest of honor was seated under a canopy in a wheelchair behind a table, which held a pen in a fancy holder alongside several brown-paper-wrapped packages that contained fifty copies of his memoir. One of the family members gave a short speech, and then the wrappers were removed, revealing black hardcover books with gold-leaf lettering. The farmer lifted the long pen from its holder with his giant hands (which had milked many a cow in bygone days). He carefully signed a book and then called each grandchild and great-grandchild to the table to receive a copy of the life story. He was about halfway done when he looked me square in the eyes and said, "This is the best day of my life." That was it. I heard him and have been writing elders' life stories ever since.

I've helped more than 170 people write and publish their stories. My clients have included physicians, a psychologist, homemakers, nurses, secretaries, farmers, waiters, a chemist, entrepreneurs, missionaries, a banker, mechanics, former prisoners of war, and Holocaust survivors, among many more. I have traveled all over the United States and into Canada recording these stories.

Payment for the service hasn't been a problem. Some families struggle to gather the funds while others simply write out a check. Often, even months after paying my fee, family members will send me thank-you notes and referrals. Many just want a life story recorded. For others, special occasions like birthdays or anniversaries provide the impetus. People without children often initiate the process themselves, sometimes at the urging of friends, nieces, and nephews.

After the book has been published and distributed, I often receive what is now a familiar response from the relatives or friends of the client: "There are stories in there I never before

heard!" Though such a statement could mean several things, I've come to the conclusion that it simply means we Americans are not practiced at communicating our stories. Like the oral tradition in the Native American culture, where silence validates that the legacy is being received by the younger generation, the written word has a similar impact in our mainstream American culture. One of my favorite anecdotes is from a family with five children who were living in Arizona during the 1930s, thousands of miles away from their relatives in the Northeast. The family had moved to the arid climate because the mother suffered from tuberculosis. The parents died within about three months of each other, when the oldest child was about 14 and the youngest, about 5. The children were taken back to the Northeast by an uncle with whom they were unfamiliar and raised collectively by both maternal and paternal relatives. Many years later, when the siblings were in their 80s and 90s, two of the five died. I was quickly called to record the recollections of the remaining siblings, so their story would not be lost. Amazingly, I learned that a week before her death from tuberculosis, their mother had written a letter to the five children telling them to maintain a strong bond and carry on the family legacy of values. Over the years, they had done exactly that, but none had ever shared the letter with the younger generation until we talked about it within the context of the memoir. Their mother's beautifully penned ethical will became the opening of the story and is now discussed at almost every family get-together. Apparently the death of their parents had been so traumatic that the letter was not discussed over the ensuing years and without the project of writing the memoir, might have been overlooked forever.

THE PROCESS

Collecting the vignettes is simple. When an elder shows interest in writing a life story, I pay the person a visit, do an assessment, and the two of us sign a contract if we decide to work together.

After a series of home visits for interviewing, I put the narrative into a cohesive story containing the themes and nuances that have been conveyed. A few of my clients have chosen to

detail only one aspect of their life, such as growing up on a farm or the harrowing experience of being held as a prisoner of war, but most clients include happenings from their entire lifetime. Each story is, of course, unique. I write it with the client's personality in mind and use the person's figures of speech so that it is in their own voice. Some couples prefer to publish their stories together in one book. After the interviews are completed, the client receives several drafts, modifying them if desired. We include photos, certificates, newspaper articles, and other important papers according to the client's wishes. I then arrange for printing of a limited edition in book form. Most families host a book-signing party for family and friends, which often turns out to be an occasion for a family reunion.

I recommend that clients consider donating a copy to the county or state historical society, church, synagogue, or other such community venue. Wartime veterans are encouraged by federal legislation (the Veteran's History Project) to send a copy to the Library of Congress, where the book will be catalogued and stored under pristine conditions. In addition, women wartime veterans may send their stories to the Women Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

PROBLEMS

Though I have learned over the years to avoid many problems, several do recur. One is a client who chooses not to finish the memoir. There are, however, few of these, and having a contract makes it less likely.

Stories about siblings and children are touchy issues. Some parents would love to talk on and on about their children while other elders would like to tell stories about siblings. From my education and experience, I know that sibling rivalry is alive and well—even when we are well into our 90s. Two people standing side by side might view a scene differently depending upon a multitude of factors. So my rule of thumb is, stick to your own story.

While employed as a nurse in gerontology, I always had the client's medical record on which to rely for past history. But in this new role of helping elders record life stories, I have only my skills to rely on, since each time I walk in cold to a brand new situation.

Only someone trained in the workings of family dynamics can fully appreciate how families will attempt to draw the writer into family issues, including sibling rivalry, old hidden secrets, and other such potential landmines. As the client and I discuss what will be included, I am ever on guard that contents could be used as a weapon, and I alert the client to potential consequences. Knowing how, when, and where to set boundaries regarding what is told is essential. My greatest fear is that writing a memoir could become a harmful experience for families—and this is a potential risk.

The possibility always exists that life review may bring to mind traumatic events that have occurred in the past. I believe those assisting others in this type of work should have training on how to handle such situations.

On the national scene, there are about 250 members of the Association of Personal Historians (APH), which meets annually and has a very active on-line listserv. The members offer a variety of services, including interviewing, typing transcriptions, teaching memoir-writing classes, and producing films or video. Recently the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review, in cooperation with APH, has released a video, *The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story*, intended to educate the public about the presence of personal historians and to provide guidelines when a family is deciding to record their stories. The video is available for minimal cost through a non-profit organization.

A SURPRISE

During the past eight years writing and publishing memoirs, I have learned a multitude of lessons. Clients and their families provide anecdotal accounts of positive and powerful effects of having one's life story written. Some clients even say that it is a life-changing event. My second client, the farmer, died seven years after his book was published. Before he died, the family noticed that he usually carried a copy with him everywhere, reading it from time to time, and sharing it with others. He used to proudly say, "Someone wrote a book about me." At his wake, the family took an extra book, all signed it, and they placed it in the casket with him.

Ah, therein lies the surprise. It is, I believe, the epitome of Dr. Butler's original observation. The clients, ordinary yet extraordinary American elders, are the best fans of their own stories. It's the reassurance of a life well lived. ☺☻

Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, R.N., M.P.H., is president of *Memoirs, Inc.*, St. Paul, Minn.

can be ordered at 1-800-568-5357 or on-line at www.bifolkal.org.

The International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review can be found on-line at www.Reminiscence-andLifeReview.org.

The Association of Personal Historians can be found on-line at www.PersonalHistorians.org.

NOTES

Memoirs, Inc., is available on-line at www.MemoirsInc.com.

The Veteran's History Project can be found on-line at www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/ or call 1-888-371-5848.

The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story, a video,

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