

In Grief and in Joy...Telling Your Story

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People are hungry for stories. It's part of our very being. Storytelling is a form of history, of immortality too. It goes from one generation to another. —Studs Terkel

Recently, I attended the funeral of my uncle, though I found myself making excuses for dismissing my obligation to go. When I read his obituary in the newspaper, I didn't plan to go to the funeral because I hadn't seen my cousins in about thirty years (they all lived out of town and so did my uncle.) I wouldn't recognize them, nor would they recognize me!

In the end, I decided that I needed to attend. Even though none of my cousins recognized me, just the mention of my name and whose daughter I was brought forth the dawn of recognition and removed all the barriers that time had imposed. We chuckled over the fact that we all had "aged a little bit" and noted the strong family resemblance that couldn't be denied.

Funerals and weddings may be described as a time when extended families get together for a mini-reunion. In our busy lives, we've distanced ourselves from family ties and seldom make an effort to connect, other than an occasional Christmas card or email. But when a funeral or wedding event draws family home, it can be a time of reuniting with our past and a time to catch a glimpse of our future.

Siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles gather to honor the event. But, the reason for coming often has even stronger significance than the ceremonial gathering. It's a time to tell the stories, in grief and in joy, of days gone by, and the experiences that brought us to this point in our lives. Stories are the interesting portals of life. When told individually, they are just stories, but when woven with the threads of everyone's memories combined, they speak volumes about the family legacy.

At my uncle's visitation, cousins quickly grouped together, put names to the faces in frayed picture albums and synchronized the forgotten faces of the generations that gave us our roots. We greedily searched for a glance of fond memories and good times, anything that symbolized we were once more closely bound than we are today. We reminisced about family, now deceased, and mentally calculated the vintage of the house or car in the picture, or the time and the place where the candid photo was taken. And, after sharing the stories, we hugged each other and laughed once again. Hours later, each returned to his or her life and wondered what the next occasion might be that would bring us together. For those brief few hours in time, we were family reuniting as if it were decades earlier.

Telling stories is an important part of healing grief. In our *Wings*© grief education series, we strongly emphasize story preparation that gives the griever control of whatever details and emotions he or she is willing to reveal. We all know the feeling of being "surprised" when someone asks blunt questions about our loved one's death or says something that empties our emotional deposit of tears.

Plan your story and know what you want to say before you begin. It's human nature to want to share the stories of life (and death) with someone who will listen, but initially you may have a difficult time blurted out even the "short" version of your loved one's death. Prepare yourself to tell just enough to answer immediate questions. Nothing more is expected. Over time, you will feel more comfortable telling the details to trusted family and friends. If necessary, practice telling your story, because you will be asked time and time again—both at the funeral and in the months that follow. Take every opportunity to tell your story because repetition makes it easier and ultimately, that is what helps heal the pain.

Your story should answer basic questions, and it can be told through pictures and items as well as words. Here are some of the things I have learned over the years of telling Chad's story.

Plan your response to sensitive questions.

Your story should answer: "What happened? How did he die?" This can be a short or long answer, whatever is most comfortable for you. It will likely vary depending upon who is asking the question. When death is natural or anticipated, we may find it easier to tell the story. There may be some relief that suffering is over or that the life was well-lived. (But this doesn't negate our need to grieve.) When a death was sudden or unexpected, the griever may be very emotional about the details. Some people may be curious and pry for more information than you are willing to share, so plan to prevent a defensive reaction to innocent comments that seem insensitive. People sometimes speak without thinking how their remark may sound—and we react.

When our son, Chad died as a result of suicide, I was very sensitive to this social taboo. I shuddered when someone asked me what happened, wishing I didn't have to answer. When I wasn't comfortable, I subtly dismissed the question and volunteered "other" information. People usually don't press for details when you do that. Know what makes you uncomfortable and plan your story so you can minimize touching your emotional reservoir, even if it means not responding to some questions asked or giving very brief details.

Reveal the passions and strengths of the person who died.

Your story should answer: "What was he like?" Stories celebrate the life of the person who died; and sometimes, "things" tell the most obvious story. Reveal your loved one's passion about what was important to him. Perhaps it was golf, woodworking, music, gardening, a job, needlework, volunteer work or being a sports fan—whatever it was that reminds you of him. Bringing memorabilia of these special times to the funeral gives visitors and family a glimpse of the phases of life and fill in the gaps where words fall short. For some, the years have passed with little contact, and it's a comforting feeling to see what gave the deceased meaning and purpose.

Validate Relationships.

Your story should answer: "Our relationship was..." or, "He talked about the time when you..." Describe your relationship: "We were very close. I'll miss him. He was my best friend." Or validate his relationship with others. Everyone likes to know their relationship with the deceased was recognized, even if in a small way. Posting pictures of family and friends with the person who died tells its own story and creates joyful conversation at a visitation. But family can also validate relationships by commenting to an individual that

their loved one spoke of him or her in a positive way. Relating a story you know about connects your listener with the deceased. Friends and family will often respond with a similar story.

Never underestimate how far-reaching relationships extend. When my dad died at age seventy-nine, we thought his circle of friends was quite small. We were astounded when dozens and dozens of people came to the visitation. Some had met him through the pool league (billiards), others through his bartending job. People in their twenties through their eighties came to acknowledge their relationship with my dad.

Encourage Imagination.

Your story should answer: "I remember the time when..." Everyone feels comfortable over a good chuckle or an adventurous story. Tell humorous accounts of human blunders or reveal stories of risks taken, accomplishments made and forgotten dreams. When you tell your story, find ways to excite the listener's imagination so that he or she can visualize exactly what you are saying. We live vicariously through the stories of others.

Some of your best stories will come from people who came to pay their respects and share a memory with you. The evening of Chad's visitation, my husband picked up a photo that was among our son's belongings from an Army National Guard training in Utah a few months earlier. Chad appeared in the photo with three officers, but we didn't know the story that went with the photo. When the officers who came to his funeral saw the photo, they finished the amusing story behind the mischievous grin that Chad wore. This story has been an important part of our memories since that day and reminds us that everybody loves a story and the stories of life are priceless.

Pause, reflect, and connect .

Your story should answer: "So, what is the connection?" We all try to make connections with other people that make us feel good. We want to relate to the challenges, frustrations and ups and downs of life. We want to bank these stories in our memory of people met, places visited, things learned and experiences had. We connect with joy (wedding, births, celebrations) and we connect with sorrow (loss, defeat, illness, hard times). We may react with a lump in the throat, a tear in the eye or a hearty laugh from deep within. We are spiritual beings having human experiences—trying to make sense out of life and death. We are creating our own story of life.

Your story can make a soul connection. It's also the moment that allows you to slow your racing heart, regain your composure and give honor to someone special. Stories are about remembering. Our son died thirteen years ago, and his story continues to evolve. In my book, I have a tribute that says, "Because I loved him I remember. Because I remember, he will never die."

Your story is a gift. When you tell it, you disclose your love and the soul connection you have with the person who died. Nothing is more sacred or more respected than the memory that lingers. Stories, whether you are telling them or hearing them from someone else are the windows to the heart. The hope that emerges redefines you. You are who you are, partly because of your relationship with the person who died. The stories of a life lived can enrich and bless you, and the lives of those still living.

Connect with your inner psyche; breathe deeply; relax. This is your moment, your time to tell the story, in grief and in joy. Each becomes a part of your journal of life.

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