

FAMILY HISTORY PROJECT RECIPE:



Encouraging the Reluctant Storyteller

A recipe to give even the most reluctant storytellers the confidence to relax and share the stories that matter.

May 16, 2024, by Bridget Badoe McQuick

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OVERVIEW: The Power of Stories

| *"Stories are a communal currency of humanity" - [Tahir Shar](#)*

Stories are the oldest form of communication. They're like gifts we exchange as a way to convey ideas. They are multifaceted, enriching our lives, connecting us, and shaping how we see the world.

We all are storytellers, and our stories communicate values. Our stories, legends, fables, and allegories are like footprints. They chronicle our collective human experience, teach lessons, convey memories, and capture locations. Think of...

- Our everyday conversations.
- News stories we hear.
- Global voices on social media, in documentary films, magazines, photographs, and private texts.
- Stories we share and collect from our communities, groups, families, and co-workers.

Think about all of them. Slowly, and one at a time.

Seven Reasons Why We Need Stories

1. **Connection and empathy:** Stories allow us to connect with others more deeply.
2. **Entertainment and escape:** Let's not forget the joy of being entertained! Stories offer an escape from daily life. They allow us to immerse ourselves in exciting adventures, romance, mystery, or humour. They provide a mental break and a chance to recharge.
3. **Exploration and imagination:** Stories transport us to different worlds, both real and imaginary. They encourage us to explore new perspectives, question assumptions, and imagine possibilities beyond our immediate reality. They fuel innovation and curiosity.
4. **Identity and self-reflection:** Personal narratives shape our sense of self. We learn about our identity by reflecting on our experiences and the stories we tell ourselves. Stories, whether autobiographies, family legends, or fictional tales, contribute to our self-awareness.
5. **Preserving culture and history:** Stories create a repository for cultural heritage and historical knowledge. They pass down traditions, customs, and wisdom from generation to generation.
6. **Social commentary and critique:** Many stories serve as mirrors to society. They highlight social issues, challenge norms, provoke thought, advocate for change, and inspire action.
7. **Universal themes:** Certain themes recur across cultures and periods. In countless stories, love, loss, friendship, betrayal, and heroism are universal concepts. These themes resonate because they touch the core of human experience.

Being a reluctant storyteller

There is a universal need for us to have our stories told. The problem is that many things can block people from telling a story: It may ...

- Involve life events that are too painful or still need processing.
- Trigger feelings of shame or humiliation
- Inspire feelings of judgment and being labeled weird or crazy
- Leave someone afraid of
 - rejection or ridicule
 - losing control
 - appearing vulnerable

- Cause some to feel unworthy of sharing. Beautiful and meaningful experiences are lost to others.
- Expose a personal lens individuals may not be ready to share. Deeply personal, inarticulate, or exquisitely poignant views can be lost.
- Reveal divergent cultural expectations with attitudes or perspectives not ordinarily shared outside the home.

For most individuals, these issues boil down to three perspectives that make them reluctant storytellers:

1. “My life is boring. I haven’t lived an exciting life, and I have little to say.”
2. “My life has been challenging, and I don’t think you can understand.”
3. “I have no time.”

Approach

1. Encourage people to tell their story by letting them know you want to hear it.
2. Help them get started with the story, then keep them going.
3. Finally, create a way to capture the story they tell.

Process

I. Create an Invitation to Share

Show an attitude of genuine interest in the person and their story. Words that show a sincere interest in the person will encourage them to open up and share their story with you.

Allow curiosity to lead. Continuously talk about the stories you find, ask who is willing to share, and mention the stories you collect. Look for stories in everyday conversations that could lead to further exploration.

Open Invitations are like sowing seeds. You can’t be sure where they will germinate, but when they do, you’ve created an opportunity to bear the fruit of stories. Encourage people to feel comfortable sharing stories one nugget at a time.

People want to be known, but they must first feel safe. Many will remain unknown rather than face their fears, rejection, or embarrassment.

Some people wait for someone to invite them to share, so always send invitations. An invitation can be as simple as a few words: “I would love to hear more” or “Would you be willing to tell us about...”

Create a safe and welcoming environment for storytelling. Then, listen, engage, and connect. Always be on the lookout for stories—even in unexpected places.

II. Prepare with Conversations, Rapport, and Research

How much you prepare will depend on the kind of storytelling you anticipate. For example, careful preparation for oral history interviews can make a meaningful difference in both enthusiasm and the quality of shared stories.

Conversations

My preparation involves having a few informal conversations with the storyteller before any special event. This varies depending on the relationship and how reluctant they are. If we are close and reasonably ready, preparatory conversations are geared around getting them excited and thinking about stories they may like to share. If I'm interviewing someone who isn't as close or very reticent, I try to use this time to build rapport and trust.

Building rapport and trust

This is where I demonstrate a genuine interest in the other person and a desire to go deeper in our one-on-one relationship. I create a welcoming and nonjudgmental atmosphere where we can feel comfortable expressing ourselves.

Research

An appreciation of historical context can be constructive as well. For example, I like to learn about historical events during my subjects' lifetime. Other topics like popular music, films, and events can help develop an appreciation for context. Timeless references to great playwrights, poets, and artists can be helpful, too. (Consider keeping references to William Shakespeare, A.A. Milne, or Georgia O'Keeffe handy, for example.)

Patience is essential, and it pays to be patient. I've learned that the stories that tumble at the start are usually light or superficial. If I stick around and work on the relationship, the stories shared may be deep and nuanced.

III. Create a Safe Space

The first and foremost requirement for others to share their stories is to cater to their psychological safety. Trust and empathy play a significant role in letting the other person open up. Hearing someone's story—a part of their life and heart—is sacred. Letting a person know that you are a safe person who can be trusted to "carry" or "keep" their story is an essential first step to encouraging them to open up.

Create a supportive environment and structure

Establishing ground rules that emphasise confidentiality, respect, and active listening can help create a safe, supportive, and comfortable environment for sharing. Providing a structured framework or guiding prompts can also help reluctant storytellers organise their thoughts and feel more confident in sharing their stories.

Provide choice and control

Offering tellers the option to share their stories voluntarily, without pressure, allows them to choose the format or medium they feel most comfortable sharing their stories (e.g., verbal storytelling, written narratives, or visual art). This lets them know that if there is a question they are uncomfortable answering or a subject they don't want to discuss, they know they have the option not to talk about it.

Normalising vulnerability

Acknowledge the experience of feeling vulnerable or hesitant about sharing personal stories. Share personal anecdotes or experiences of vulnerability to demonstrate empathy and solidarity with reluctant storytellers. Lead by example by being prepared to share something personal yourself to show you can be vulnerable, demonstrating vulnerability as a strength and empowering others to do the same.

Community gatherings

Creating a safe space for storytelling during one-on-one sessions is essential; interestingly, this strategy can work in a group session, too. In the community stories, the hidden personal and family stories will emerge.

In this case, the space can be defined by physical symbols, like a special object the storyteller holds or a custom-decorated chair they sit in while telling the story. There is nothing magical about an object, but it physically signals to others in the audience that this space is vital and the conversation is set to begin.

IV. Find the Story Hook

Some people need help organizing their stories. This step is particularly useful for people who don't know where to start or think they have nothing interesting to say.

Help others create a story library by helping them build a story landscape of their lives using topics that they feel comfortable talking about.

- **Childhood** – where you were born/grew up/school experiences
- **Family** - birth, adopted, in-laws the different dynamics in parents' family
- **Travel & migration** – dynamics and influences for moving around. Travel for pleasure, visiting family, visiting back home/ moving to a new town, city, or country. Important places
- **Career** – from first job to whole career journey, choices that were made, business owner
- **Religion** – faith, family influence, church/institution, beliefs, spirituality.
- **Relationships** – friendships/dating/marriage/life partner
- **Children** – being a parent/not being a parent/ being an auntie/uncle/grandparents

- **Significant life events** – changes and/or trauma
- **Hobbies & interests** – Food/Music/Sports/Genealogy any unique interests
- **People/influence** – who or what has influenced and had a significant impact
- **Universal themes** – love, loss, etc

V. Offer a Starting Point

Sometimes, a storyteller needs a light nudge to unlock a memory. Let their passions pry open the door with a question about sport, stamps, or any interest that sparks them. This can be especially useful for those who feel their lives are boring.

Appeal to the senses with different activities that can help bring the past to life. Like the bite of a delicious cookie, aromas, images, sounds, and textures can bring memories to life. Consider fixing a family recipe, playing favorite music, or fingering through a suitcase of old clothes. Reading poetry or a passage from a favourite book, watching old films or TV programs.

VI. Collect the Story

Sometimes, life gets in the way. Competing demands may mean that any plans for getting the quiet moment to collect the story may fail. You may have to get creative, as it is better to record something than nothing.

Throughout the story-collecting process, think about:

- **Offering encouragement and validation** by emphasising their bravery and the value of their unique perspectives and experiences. Use affirming language and gestures to express appreciation for their willingness to share and validate the importance of their stories.
- **Providing positive feedback and reinforcement** by highlighting strengths, insights, and moments of courage in their storytelling. Focus on the storytelling process rather than the outcome, emphasising the value of self-expression and personal growth.
- **Celebrating their courage and resilience** by acknowledging their bravery and the significance of their contributions.

VII. Ask Thoughtful Questions

Vary the type of questions you ask, going from abstract and general to more concrete and specific, but ensure they are open questions. Open questions are simply those that don't have simple answers and instead open the door to conversations.

Take the time to stop and reflect before asking a question. Consider...

- Is this an 'open' or 'closed' question?
- Will this question open a door and invite them into the conversation?

Different personalities may need more or less prodding and encouragement to open up and share their story. Read the person and ask questions.

When talking to some people, asking them questions as they walk through their story may be helpful. For example, "What happened then?" or "What happened next?" This will invite them to continue telling their narratives at places where they may get "stuck" and don't know where to go.

However, for those who share their stories without hesitation, let the storyteller lead. Listen and take cues from the subject. These kinds of people tend to speak in paragraphs, your questions may derail their train of thought and frustrate them. Wait for pauses.

Feel free to ask for more. A person's first answer is rarely the whole story. Respond to your teller's answer with follow-up questions. After you ask someone a question, listen carefully to the answer. Then, offer a follow-up question. Sometimes a simple, 'Really?' or 'Tell me more?' can generate another story.

VIII. Listen Well

The most important thing we can do to encourage our tellers to open up and tell their stories is to show them you are interested in what they say.

In essence, to listen.

Active listening is a "gift" of attention. It involves listening so profoundly that our body language and facial expressions convey our attention. To give your storyteller your full attention, maintain eye contact, and respond empathetically to their words and emotions. Engage by reflecting on what you've heard, paraphrasing key points, and asking clarifying questions to demonstrate understanding and support. This shows your interest in them and their story.

Listening also means practicing the skill of not interrupting.

Something powerful and freeing happens when your story is finally "heard" by a caring and empathetic listener. You see them as someone who truly cares about you and what your story means to you. A true listener isn't just feeding their curiosity. Feeling heard will invite people to share more and will open the door to further and deeper conversations.

Last Words

"Through the art of storytelling, we can preserve our heritage, educate future generations, and inspire change" - Philipp Humm

The power of sharing a personal story is well documented. We all love hearing stories. Stories add vibrancy to the human experience and help us feel connected to the world around us.

We all have stories to tell!


Sometimes, we have fun adventures in our daily lives, and other times, we have challenging stories that unfold throughout our lives.

Some stories are more accessible than others. Some people tell their stories naturally, and others must be encouraged to share. Anyone will start sharing wonderful stories if approached with curiosity and an open heart.

A worthwhile story awaits inside every reluctant storyteller. They're just waiting for you to get them talking.

Project Recipe

This recipe is different from many of our projects here at Projectkin because it lays out a very general approach to the interaction between storytellers and their audience. We've tried to use this document to capture the process and guide you. Like becoming a good host or coach, a little guidance can be helpful in combination with intuition and experience.

| PROJECT RECIPE | |
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| TITLE | Encouraging the Reluctant Storyteller |
| TYPE | Live storytelling experience, or an ongoing process of capturing a story into several forms. |
| TIME (est.) | A single event or an ongoing process. |
| TOOLS & MATERIALS | Does not require any special tools. |
| PREPARATION | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create an invitation to share 2. Prepare with conversations, rapport, and research 3. Create a safe space 4. Find the story hook 5. Offer a starting point 6. Collect the story 7. Ask thoughtful questions 8. Listen well |
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