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FAMILY STORIES : THE TIE THAT BINDS

*Professor Rives Collins**

Have you ever done something so ridiculous that you knew right away you were destined to enter the annals of family lore? I have. It was just this spring, Easter morning to be exact. As the family was sprucing up for church, I told them all about the great hymns we would sing. "Your grandparents loved these old hymns," I extolled, "Your great grandparents loved them, too." So there we were in church. Trumpets had been brought in special; the organist pulled out all the stops and I began singing, "Hail thee festival day..." I tend to sing, well, lustily. "Blest day that art hallowed forever," I sang with Easter morning enthusiasm. And then from the corner of my eye I noticed my children - laughing. And on the other side of me my wife was stifling a grin. With a nudge she said, "It's still the introduction." And that's when I realized nobody else was singing. "Nice solo Dad," offered my daughter, dissolving into giggles. And as a family, we pretty much laughed through the rest of the hymn. We joked about in the car. And again at dinner. I can imagine that someday in the future my kids may well say to their children, "You know your grandpa, the funny one, let me tell you about the time he sang a solo in church." A family story is born.

When my dad was growing up, he would find a rectangular box under the Christmas tree for him with a card saying, "Blest be the tie that binds!" A bad pun, to be sure, for inside he would always find a necktie. I have received many such neckties from my folks, always with the same words on the card. And so too have I passed "the tie that binds" tradition on to my son. But what is it that really holds us together? Certainly, it's not the actual necktie. I don't pretend to have the complete answer, but when I ponder the tie that binds, I'm convinced that, in part, the answer lies in a family's stories.

Caitlin's Genealogy

When my daughter was born, I wanted to give her a gift - something she could keep. My mom and dad made their first grandchild a lovely dollhouse:

* Northwestern University



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working doors, flower boxes, and everything. My wife's family made her a quilt, an heirloom the moment it was finished. Somewhat at a loss, I wondered what I could make.

Storytellers in many cultures are historians; chanted genealogies are found around the world as storytellers are entrusted with the responsibility of tending a people's roots. Personally, I never much cared for "so and so begat so and so who begat so and so," ad infinitum. But my feelings changed when my daughter was born, turning my world upside-down. I wrote a storyteller's genealogy for her -- a piece that I could say at her bedside when she was small, and that I could use to teach her about her family when she grows older. The format is simple. Each phrase begins with "You are..." A few examples include:

You are the great, great granddaughter of a woman who relished the language of Shakespeare, and who stood up to those who would censor the bawdy parts.

And you are the great granddaughter of an officer in the United States Cavalry, who could ride standing up on two galloping horses at once.

And you are the great granddaughter of an orphan, who stood 4 feet 11 inches tall and raised 10 children.

And you are the granddaughter of a woman who makes friends of complete and total strangers, and who keeps friends all of her life.

And you are the granddaughter of a most unlikely Ph.D., who has chosen to align himself with David against Goliath.

And you are the daughter of a woman who has appeared in the dreams of children and who loves you with every breath.

And you are the daughter of a man who is a keeper of stories, and who loves you with his every breath.

These are sample passages from Caitlin's genealogy. It opens and finishes with a framing phrase that offers circularity and closure. The tone is poetic rather than factual, and each phrase has a story behind it. It has been a gift that has stayed with us.

I have shared Caitlin's genealogy with groups of all ages as a catalyst to help them find their own family stories. After reciting the piece I wrote for her, I invite listeners to create "I am..." statements about themselves and the people around them. Variations are possible in this era of families that come



in many shapes and sizes. "I am: the best friend of; the stepdaughter of; the brother of; the cousin of..." I invite them to write these down, thinking poetically like storytellers rather than just including the facts. The group is then invited to come together for a circle-telling of their work. One player starts off by offering one of her phrases, beginning with the words, "I am the..." After her phrase she adds, "And..." which invites the next player to continue with one of his "I am" phrases. This continues around the circle until everyone has had an opportunity to contribute. My students have really enjoyed this, creating such gems as :

"I am the granddaughter of a woman who believed that babies come from people's knees."

"I am the fiancé of a man who once drove halfway across the country in his lemon of a car because he heard the sadness in my voice."

"I am the child of parent's who love me so much that they waited at the airport until way past midnight for the plane that brought me from Korea."

"I am the grandchild of an ex-nun who once slid down a banister with a flask of gin in her garter."

Many follow-up activities are possible. One classroom was decorated by life-size tracings of students filled with "I am" statements. Family stories have grown in tribute to the characters and places mentioned poetically in the genealogy. Children, college students, families, and senior citizens alike who have shared their storyteller's genealogies have discovered a paradox. We are each of us unique, yet we have so much in common. Our stories are ours alone and yet they are shared by many. There has never been anybody just like me, and I am the same as those who have gone before.

The Best Present I Ever Received

And so it came to pass that I arrived at one of those dreaded milestone birthdays. Big party. Lots of friends and family. Lots of laughter at my expense and helpful gifts designed to ease my transition into the land of Geritol and Depends. And then my children took me by the hand and proclaimed, "Dad, our present for you is on TV." We marched into the family room, a video cassette was popped into the machine, and there on the screen appeared my two grinning children. "Happy Birthday Dad," they cried with gap-toothed



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grins, "These are your stories!" Along with their godmother, they had been in cahoots with my family. They had interviewed my parents and friends and brothers and gathered stories from my childhood. Then they had recorded them with a video camera, and here we were at the birthday celebration watching the tape. "Dad, this is the story of the time you jumped off the roof with an umbrella thinking you were Mary Poppins!" "Dad, this is the time you got in trouble for eating the ruffle off your teacher's pillow!" "Dad, this is the story of you being a pretend opera star in the second grade!" We laughed and laughed as we watched the tape, and brushed away a tear as the children ended with a genealogy that they had made for me. Best present I ever received. It's a gift that has stayed with us.

This year I shared the videotape with my college students. One student had a particularly strong response to it. I'll let Colleen Caul, a senior at Northwestern University, tell her story in her own words.

Colleen's Story -- Grandpa's 80th Birthday

"My Grandpa's 80th birthday was February 10th of this year. I wanted to do something very special for him, especially because I was not going to be able to be there for his birthday... This storytelling class and the video that Rives' kids created for his birthday inspired me to offer my Grandpa his very own stories for his 80th birthday. After all, stories are love gifts. Because my Grandpa's eyesight is failing, I did not want to videotape the stories, nor did I want to write them down. I decided the best way to offer my Grandpa his stories was to record my voice telling the stories on a CD.

The first thing I did was e-mail my family members (all sixteen of them) and asked them to tell me their favorite story about Grandpa. The enthusiastic response I received throughout the following month was intoxicating! I really should not have been surprised. My Irish family loves to talk and to tell old stories! Although I had only requested one story, most of my family members had about five or six stories that they came up with. In fact, one night, I was on instant messenger with my aunt Nancy, until about 12:30 am, talking about old family stories. It really was an exciting process for me, because not only did I hear our standard family stories, but I was also told a number of stories that I had never even heard before.



As I was crafting all of the different stories, I felt a profound sense of where I came from. I realized how much history I share with my family members. I have always been very close to my family, but through hearing and talking about all of the different stories, and by the very act of recording them, I came to the deep realization of how lucky I am. I ended the CD with a poem I wrote for my Grandpa, using Rives' "You are..." format. I am so grateful to my family; I am who I am today because of them.

On the night of my Grandpa's birthday party, my family was going to play the CD for my grandpa. Afterwards, my Grandpa called me up, but he could barely speak. He was all choked up. He thanked me for the gift and told me how much he loved it, and how much he loved me. I felt such a sense of pride, hearing how happy I had made him on his 80th birthday. I responded by saying to him, Grandpa, you have done so much for all of us. I just wanted to do something special for you, because I love you very much.

Throughout the next week, I talked to various family members, and my aunt described how special it had been for everyone to sit around in a circle and listen to all of the stories ... how people would verbally respond in recognition as I started each story, and how they both laughed and cried as they listened to the CD. I also talked to my grandparents the week following Grandpa's party, and they told me again how much they loved the CD. They also said that after they got home from the party, they listened to the CD again and stayed up talking about all of the stories until 12:30 AM. My grandparents usually are in bed by 9:00 PM, so this was pretty late for them! They really cherished the CD and were so grateful for all of the stories. Every time I have talked to my grandparents since, (I usually talk to them once a week), they always tell me how they love to play the CD over and listen to it again, and how much they love it."

Can the Family Stories We Tell Make A Difference?

Maybe when we offer each other stories and invite each other to dream, we do important work. Can stories make a difference? Well, this is a story that comes from a far away place -- my house, with my son Ethan. I was walking past Ethan's room and I heard voices coming from behind his closed door. There he was, talking to himself. I used to talk to myself in my room; it scared



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my mother so much that she called the pediatrician.

"It's alright Marcia," reassured Dr. Bradshaw, "He has a pretend friend. It's considered healthy in some circles."

So there was Ethan making voices and I thought maybe, if I am polite, he will introduce me to his imaginary friend.

"Hey, Ethan, what are you doing?"

"I'm practicing."

"Practicing? Practicing what?"

"Well, dad, you know how tomorrow is Halloween?"

"Of course, sure I do."

"Well, dad, you know Timmy?"

I did know Timmy. Timmy had moved onto our street over the summer and this was his first year in school. Timmy is an unusual boy; educators are probably to attach a string of initials after his name. I'll just put it this way -- Timmy's rhythms are different; his journey through school will not be a simple one.

"Yeah, I know Timmy."

"Well, dad, you know how Timmy still likes Barney."

Maybe you are not aware of this rite of passage for American children. Barney is the purple dinosaur on PBS television. ("I love you, you love me...") Very young children, children who can't read, sometimes children too young to talk, like that purple dinosaur a lot. But by the time a child is old enough to ride the bus, most kids loathe that purple blobby thing as a symbol of all of the condescending grownups who won't take them seriously as growing children.

"Well, dad, you know how Timmy still likes Barney."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, dad, I am scared that Timmy's going to wear a Barney costume on the bus tomorrow. And I'm practicing. I'm practicing what I am going to say to the big kids that sit in the back of the bus when they make fun of him. I'm practicing."

I thought about Ethan all the next day at work, and I came home early to meet the bus. I watched expectantly as he climbed down off the yellow school bus.

"Hi Ethan, how was your day?"



"Ah, Dad, it was Halloween, it was great."

"I'm glad. Hey, how did everything go with Timmy?"

"Timmy? Oh, fine. He wore Superman."

"Whew," I thought. But then I asked him, "Ethan, I think it's terrific that you were ready to stand up for him. Do you two play together much?" Patiently he shook his head and explained, "Dad, I'm in second grade, he's in kindergarten." "Oh, right," I nodded. "But then, why would you do it?"

I'll never forget his answer to my question. At that moment my child became my teacher as he replied simply, "Just once dad, I wanted to see what it would feel like to do something someone in a story would do. To do something, someone in a story would do." And then he added with an impish grin, "Dad, can we go trick or treating now?"

That's a story I may well tell Ethan's children sometime in the future. Maybe someday there will be a little boy or girl who wants to know what grownup Ethan was like when he was a little boy. And I will tell them, for I believe family stories bring generations together. They serve as gifts. They remind us who we are. They help us through the troubled times. They are part of our celebrations and our grieving. They are teachers. They are glue. As my Granny Virginia would have said, "Blest be the tie that binds!"

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