



## The Art of Storytelling

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18th Mar 2013



"The common story is about one plus one equals two...but the real genuine stories are about one and one equaling three...The thing that matters most to us is that other thing, where the whole is greater than the parts - that's the three." -- Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker

Richard B. wanted his kids to understand why they were raised the way they were. Marlene S. felt a sense of fulfillment in leaving behind her family's precious archives including a 180-year old Bible that belonged to her great-grandfather and the story about how she received it. Carol M. documented a traditional Thanksgiving squash casserole and shortbread cookie recipes - served at every Thanksgiving and known as the family's ultimate comfort food by her loved ones. Michael R. understood the need to communicate his thoughts on wealth stewardship and spirituality to his successors.

In my experience meeting with individuals wishing to preserve their legacies, they inevitably begin by telling their own stories. They recount the history as it is best known to them through their reminiscences and recollections. Very quickly and with little effort, what

"falls from the tree" are the wisdom and morals, values and beliefs for which they stood - therein lies the "three" referred to in the quote above.

My own belief is that everyone (or at least, all sane people) live their lives from an authentic place: they live according to their values and what's important to them every day. The way their life manifests includes patterns of the "things that are important" to them, and their values and beliefs.

There are many cases in our experiences which demonstrate this: (names and locations are left anonymous, and a few facts changed to protect the client's identity)

We were introduced to a multi-family office of a single family comprised mainly of first and second generation wealth creators - the third generation is still in school. In the early 1950's, the patriarch and matriarch (then in their early 20's) had both come to the US from a developing country with the goal of achieving their part of the "American Dream" and to be able to send for their family members to immigrate once financially stable. They toiled hard and with their brilliant scholastic achievements, they were selected to enroll in top Ivy League universities with full scholarships, and excelled in their chosen fields. They married upon graduation with highest honors and began building family and careers.

They gained professional experience and in their 50's (in the late 1980's), they decide to leave their positions and start a firm of their own. Subsequently, a division of their company was sold in 2002 for many lifetimes' worth of liquidity and the main corporation is now a leader in their field, employing 1,400 professionals and support staff. They have successfully transitioned their business over to their two sons, and have remained as consultant and CEO.



Recently, at ages 82 and 81, they decided to tell the story of their literal rise from rags to riches. In doing so, they realized that one of the most important parts of their story was actually the history of the country where they were born. They wanted to pass on the values and culture of their country of birth to their grandchildren so they would gain an understanding of their heritage. This was one way of providing a value-added aspect (or "three") to their own life story. It provided an important context for the part of their history when they chose to leave to come to the US for greater opportunity.

In another case, a 76-year old entrepreneurial real estate tycoon, the founder and creator of great wealth for many generations, rediscovered through our interview process that in his childhood he loved playing and sculpting with clay. He reluctantly had to give it up to go to work during the Depression years. Decades later, as he reflected and told this part of his childhood story, he was inspired to set up a sculpting studio in the basement of one of his buildings where only those over age 65 can enroll at very little cost (and they have to show their I.D.!). At these facilities they can take lessons, use the tools and discover their artistic selves. He has his own studio space there and has been producing large sculptures that he places on all his properties. We realized through our interview process that in fact, in the decades of developing huge office and apartment buildings, he was "sculpting" with concrete all his life, and that he just needed to embrace clay again. The power of one plus one equals three, again at work with inspiring leadership as an elder.

It never ceases to amaze us how when we begin to work with storytelling and to capture the reflection of elders on their lives, they almost always have very little, if any, experience with the Ethical Will process. Spiritual legacies -- that unique complex of values, beliefs, insights, passions, and actions that are embedded in each person's life experiences -- are important to transfer. The articulation and identification of values, beliefs, influential mentors, and important moments all seem to emerge as morals or life lessons. This legacy of values passed across generations is most aptly acquired and remembered by those who receive them through the

telling of one's life story. The benefits of its wisdom are priceless heirlooms given from one generation to another.

Although there is nothing more entertaining than a long and detailed tale, it's also worthwhile to sometimes consider the beauty in brevity. It is possible for a short story to have tremendous impact, and a story doesn't have to be long to be powerful.

This theme of saying a lot by saying very little has in recent years been popularized by the Six Word Story concept, originally started when Ernest Hemingway was asked to write a story of no more than six words. He wrote "For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never Worn." A few years ago, SMITH Magazine challenged people to send in their memoirs of six words each. They subsequently published a bestseller called "Not Quite What I Was Planning". You already know how hard it can be to summarize your life's work in an hour or even a day. Now imagine if you had to summarize your entire memoirs in a six-word sentence, what would it be?

Words to the wise: Keep storytelling, and keep recording them!

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