

Three Important Reasons to Capture Your Story

by Mary Anne Benedetto



During a vacation in Hawaii a few years ago, I stood on the memorial in Pearl Harbor where so many died on Dec. 7, 1941. I recalled that my own dad had been stationed there at Schofield Barracks. He experienced that horrific event in Pearl Harbor from Hickam Field and survived, but I had no knowledge of his personal account of that occurrence. I now have limitless questions to ask him, but it's too late to find out exactly what he could recall and how he felt about those experiences since he passed away six years ago. I departed Hawaii with a determination to influence people to obtain their family stories and produce a document to pass along to loved ones. I am on a mission to start a memoir epidemic of "lifewriting"—writing about life.

Three good reasons to begin lifewriting are:

1. Interviewing or conferring with key members of your family about

their recollection of family history can create a closer bond and clearer understanding of relationships. I recommend that life story writers emphasize events, experiences and feelings about those occurrences rather than simply stating a list of genealogy, facts and dates. Talking with relatives to gain their perspective on family events can be fascinating and enjoyable if handled in a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere.

2. Seize the opportunity to tell it your way. From relaying the stories that your grandparents and parents have told you about your family to sharing your own accomplishments as well as disappointments, future generations of your family will appreciate having a document that gives them insight about the person who walked in your shoes. As I was interviewing my own mother, asking very specific questions about her parents, she replied: "They never really talked to us very much. We were just there." Don't be a remote, obscure figure to your loved ones. Sharing your stories allows them insight into the real you and gives you the opportunity to impact them by passing along valuable life lessons.

3. Start the family memoir tradition in your own family. Our lives are a montage of events—from the consciously planned to those into which we have blindly stumbled. Writing about those events gives us perspective and may inspire our

loved ones to carry on the writing tradition that we have initiated.

While many people are under the misguided assumption that their stories are boring, we don't have to be celebrities to tell a life story that would be interesting to someone. Each person has a unique story with individual twists and turns, and every single person has a worthy story to tell. Perhaps they simply need assistance in triggering those pertinent memories in order to document them.

The process could begin with a journal. Writing about today may unearth some of yesterday's memories. If available, journals, diaries, letters and photographs are a gold mine of material to help you recall significant occasions. Listening to old favorite music or watching an all-time favorite movie can also conjure up abundant recollections.

Completing a family writing project requires commitment and effort. The good news is that it does not have to be overwhelming if dissected into building segments that will encourage the creation of a finished product. In this economy, we wonder how much money will remain to pass along to our heirs; however, our stories are priceless and the only cost is paper, ink and our time.

While some folks cringe at the very idea of writing, there is hope for them as well. A personal historian can interview and record them and/or their loved ones and create a manuscript of their stories for the entire family to appreciate. It is a gift of incalculable value.

Resolve to start a program to capture your history today. Take the first step by locating a local lifewriting class, engaging a lifewriting coach, or simply creating a list of memories that you would like to use as a basis for writing your stories. Some day your family will thank you as they read and re-read the cherished documents of a permanent written legacy that you have produced for them.

For more information, visit aWritersPresence.com or PersonalHistorians.org or call Mary Anne Benedetto at (843) 215-4676. See resource guide page 46.