



# ORIGINS: WHAT'S YOUR STORY

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I attended a memorial service for one of my clients. People shared their stories about him; of his youth, his success, the wonderful father and husband he was. At the end, there was a beautiful video compilation of pictures set to music documenting his life from birth to present day.

As I sat quietly, listening, watching, and reflecting, I had an “a-ha” moment. In my work with families, I emphasize the importance of celebrating their family history. I find opportunities and encourage the telling of stories because everyone has a story to tell; stories of experience, lessons learned, and life defining moments. However, in that instant, I realized although I had served this client for several years, I never knew his story. I was learning things about him that I wish I had known during his lifetime. I wish I had asked more questions.

Stories are the fabric that weaves together the past, present, and future; linking one generation to another. Family stories are essential for effective families. Sharing stories can be mutually beneficial for the one telling the stories and the one receiving them; and can result in improving and strengthening family relationships.

According to Charles W. Collier, family stories can provide a sense of family's uniqueness, allow future generations to connect with the source of the family's financial wealth, as well as help the family to deal with losses and transitions.<sup>1</sup> From his own experience of interviewing his father, Charles was able to gain insights into his own relationships with family, work, and social life. He states, “Hearing family stories from my father has helped me to appreciate my background and to see how I am different from him and other family members. These insights allow me to make more conscious choices concerning who I want to be.” Family stories have the ability to provide younger generations a sense of identity and instill in them a sense of pride in their family history. They learn about their origins, including why they hold certain beliefs and why they might think a certain way. They discover their values and gain a better understanding of the older generation's hopes for future generations.

<sup>1</sup> “Wealth in Families”, Charles W. Collier



All the while, telling stories can have a positive impact on the physical and psychological health of the storyteller. In sharing stories of childhood memories, accomplishments, relationships, and major life events, the storyteller completes a life review. In “*Unlocking the Communication Code of Seniors*”, David L. Solie states that “this great retrospective gathers the raw material that will answer the primary legacy questions seniors face at the end of life: What’s the meaning of my life?; How did I make a difference?; What are my last instructions?; Will I be remembered?”<sup>2</sup> Research shows that reminiscing about family history has had the positive effect of improving self-esteem and enhancing feelings of control and mastery over life. Furthermore, researchers have seen improvements in cognition, depression and behavioral functioning in seniors that tell their stories.<sup>3</sup>

Take the time to ask the right questions and really listen to the stories of the past, and the stories that have helped to mold who you are today. Preserve and pass on those stories. Then, think, “What is my story?” And share it with the ones you love.

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<sup>2</sup> “Unlocking the Communication Code”, David L. Solie

<sup>3</sup> “The Benefits of Putting Family History in Writing”, Agingcare.com

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