



# Are we Remembering?

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*You may not be able to give your children the same experiences that forged your character, but you can tell them stories about the values that the generations who came before them believed in, and fought for, and all too often, died to safeguard.*

**T**hey move slowly now. Eyes dim with age, joints worn from years of work, brows creased and furrowed. They speak, more often than not, in measured and deliberate cadence, as if each word is a weight heavy upon the tongue. They know there aren't many words left to them, and they spend each one carefully, knowing the storehouse will not be replenished for much longer.

Still, in eyes that have seen seventy, eighty or more years of triumph and sorrow, hope and anguish, birth and death, something else shines. Something powerful. Something so strong and so vital that it overshadows the arthritis, the stooped shoulders and the uncertain gait. Something that will impoverish us as individuals, weaken us as families, and even imperil us as a nation if we do not recognize it, learn from it, and pass it to our children.

That 'something' is memory. Memories of lives lived fully. Of plans made, hopes born, losses endured. Memories of love and war, of personal struggle and achievement. Memories that offer lessons no textbook can convey. They are, in many important ways, our great national treasure, and our most important bulwark against the enemies of our hard-won way of life.

They reside in the minds of our fathers, mothers and grandparents. All our lives we have heard bits and pieces of their stories, but more often than not, we only got the *Cliff Notes* condensed version of the book, not the full adventure. How much we would benefit if they found a way to tell us, and we found a way to listen. A pastor once told me that the most common remark he hears at funerals is some variation of, "I wish I had asked him about the time he..." or, "You know, she never told me how she was able to get through ...."

Do you listen? Do you know your father's complete story? Perhaps you know your grandmother's? How about your great-grandparent's? Do you know about the trials they faced, or the roads they walked? Do you know how they were raised? What they learned from their own parents? Can you connect the dots between the choices they made in life and the values by which they lived? Have they *intentionally* shared with you what they believe are the greatest lessons they have learned? And if they haven't, have you made an effort to discover these stories for yourself and to pass them on to your children?

## *Their legacy, our lessons*

The historical legacy of a given generation is usually described in terms of the tangible products they invented or constructed. By this standard, our parents and grandparents stand shoulder to shoulder with the giants of history. From freeways and rocket ships to skyscrapers and supercomputers, they have been the greatest innovators and builders the world has ever known.

A better, more honest way to size up their legacy is to look at the times in which they lived and to ask how they faced up to the challenges that history dropped into their laps. Those of us under the age of 70 will one day be judged by how we dealt with our own wars and social movements, the environment and 9/11. That verdict lies years in the future.

The verdict is in on the generation who weathered and eventually triumphed over the greatest economic depression in American history, who shouldered the great task of defeating Hitler in Europe, and Japan in the Pacific, and then went on to build America into the greatest economic, industrial and agricultural powerhouse the world has ever known.

They have been called the 'greatest generation' by pundits and historians, but they would be the first to dismiss such an appellation. They take no stock in such plaudits, and in any event, they know the stories of other generations that risked and achieved even more than they did, in particular the one that secured America's freedom from England in the Revolutionary War. So, don't pin this descriptive label on their collective lapels. Hubris is not their way. Their way has always been marked by a quiet, uniquely American brand of determination. A sense of obligation and of duty to the nation which gave them freedom and opportunity unlike any the world had ever known. The sense that they were part of a community of people and ideas worth fighting for, and, if necessary, worth dying for.

Whiners they were not. The blame game, so much in vogue with politicians, activists, educators and 'generation me' people these days, had no place in their lexicon. They were



doers, not observers. They pitched in. They did not wait to be asked or have to be forced to do what was right or necessary. They grabbed shovels and axes and welding gear, and did whatever had to be done to build a nation out of the calamities of the Great Depression and the horrors of world war. They streamed by the millions across the globe to fight totalitarian evil because the danger was real, and liberty was worth any sacrifice they might be called upon to make.

They came home from war and built families and communities. They marched out of the chaos and destruction of war into the order and construction of a new America in just two generations. That is a story worth telling, worth hearing, and worth remembering. Much of what we call wisdom, they simply call remembrance.

#### *What matters*

Will we remember their stories and the values, honor and character traits it took for them to endure the great depression, a world at war, and to build the greatest country in history? If we don't, it won't be from lack of available brain capacity. Researchers report that our ability to remember dates, figures, names, addresses and other rote information is almost limitless. Neurologists say the brain is engineered to remember what matters, in direct proportion to how powerful our emotional connection is to a specific person, place or event. Our subconscious minds actually recall all the thousands of pesky facts we are swamped by each day, but, the good news is that our brains have a built-in filter that 'hides' most of that clutter until we really need to access it. (Unless it's recalling where we put the car keys!)

Here's a practical illustration of this point: can you name the last three winners of 'Best Picture of the Year?' (I can't.) Now, how about recalling three people who were there for you when you went through tough times. (Those I can name!) Let's try another: name any person who won a Noble or Pulitzer Prize while you were in high school. Give up? On the other hand, it's a sure bet that you can name several teachers, coaches or religious leaders who had a tremendous influence on you during those years.

Most people can immediately recall the tiniest details, feelings and 'experience' around the 'significant' memory questions. It doesn't matter that the memories may be decades old, often far older than the memories associated with questions about prize-winning movies or last year's Super Bowl. We recall the people who have made a difference in our lives because they mattered. They mattered then, and they matter now.

This distinction about what we remember, and what truly matters to us, is no small issue. When we recognize the connection between what we know, what we remember and what it is that truly matters, we have some very powerful tools. With them, we can improve the quality and direction of our own lives, enhance the lives of those we love, and increase the significance of what we do in both our personal and our work lives. On a larger scale, getting to the heart of what we remember and what matters may also hold the key to transforming our families, our communities, and even our world. All that, just through the simple, intentional act of remembering.





*Your family's future depends on remembrance of things past*

On a practical level, there is a relationship between intentional remembering and the health and unity of your family now, and into the future. Heritage Institute advisors like myself have counseled thousands of families over the years. We have seen most every condition and circumstance that can bless-or befall- a family. We have seen united, highly functional families working together in common cause and we have seen families so torn with strife and anger that the darkest daytime soap opera would be afraid to tackle their story.

No matter their financial status (which is never a determinant of family harmony!), united families share some things in common. One attribute we have observed in strong families is they have a keen sense of family history, a respect for the contributions made by their forbearers, and an appreciation for the values and character traits by which their immediate ancestors lived.

In these families, the act of remembering is intentional and conscious. Grandparents share the stories of their lives, their struggles, their successes and their failures. Why does wealthy grandmother still drive across town to save a nickel on a can of peaches? Because she survived the depression, and the memory of poverty is burned into her soul. Why is dad so dead-set against alcohol? Because his best boyhood friend was killed by a drunk driver. In these families, clearly expressed values drive the important decisions made by the parents and grandparents.

In dysfunctional families, stories about family history are often kept from the children. The lives of the saints and sinners (who, let's be honest, we all have) in the family tree are a mystery to them, and, as far as they know, grandma and granddad have always been rich. The past is an embarrassment to their parents; only the well-heeled present matters. The well being of individual family members takes a back seat to the cultivation and retention of their wealth, and if there is a conflict between values and valuables, money most often wins the argument.

*Family Memory is a Valuable Asset*

Is there is a proven relationship between the overall health (emotional, physical, spiritual, financial, etc.) of a family, and the extent to which that family consciously and intentionally remembers, cherishes and communicates the stories of those who came before them? We are not aware of any scientific studies published on the subject. (Though the most famous scientist in history, Albert Einstein, did say "*The secret to happiness is a short memory.*" Not true, as it

happens, but still funny.) Still, there is one fact which offers some tantalizing clues to this question. Recent studies, and our own experience, show that 65% of inheritances are completely spent by the generation that receives them. By the end of the following generation, that number rises to 90%. An old proverb says, "*rags to riches to rags in three generations.*" What factors, do you suppose, do the ten percent of families who avoid this inheritance time bomb, share in common?

Could it have something to do with family memory? The fact that these families intentionally collect and communicate the stories of their family members to each succeeding generation? That, for these families, remembering is



the strongest tool they have to educate, motivate, inspire and guide their children?

It would be hard to argue that family memory is not one critical element. It goes far beyond the timeworn admonition that 'those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it.' It may be more accurate to say that families who do not intentionally remember may lose not only their past, but their futures as well.

In the work we do with families, the conscious act of capturing and sharing important memories is the foundation for creating inheritance plans that are designed to last for generations. We do this by creating what we call "*Pre-inheritance Experiences,*" in which the next generation learns from the experiences of their parents and grandparents. These activities take place in (loosely) structured family retreats or family meetings under the guidance of skilled advisors. Here, inheritance plans are crafted that are designed to beat the ninety percent failure rate of traditional plans. They flow naturally in this process, the product of a shared, multi-generational family vision.

This can happen only if all of the generations present at the family gathering have a clear and honest understanding of their unique family history.

When grandparents and parents share their stories in these settings, amazing transformations often take place within the family. It is one thing for a grandmother to simply tell her grandchild that faith is the most important thing in her life, with no other reason or explanation. It is quite another thing for her to tell the story of what it was like to have two brothers and a husband overseas during WW II. How she had to keep working the farm alone, to

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care for her two babies, and to contribute time to scrap drives and Red Cross volunteering. All this, while living in fear that some day a War Department sedan would roll down the long, tree-lined drive with word that one of her loved ones had been killed in battle.

When she tells her granddaughter about the day the War Department car finally did come to the house, it is a story no one in the family will ever forget. An Army chaplain told her that her youngest brother had died on some far off Pacific island whose name she couldn't even pronounce. She was paralyzed with fear when he came to her door again and told her that her other brother had died. When she told the rest of the story, about the day the chaplain made the final climb up her steps to tell her that her young husband had been killed, and how it was only through the power of faith that she was able to go on, the granddaughter is transformed. The family is strengthened. The story is preserved.

#### *Telling your story*

Your family has its own stories. They are storehouses of wealth far more important than money. You can strengthen your own family, and give the generations who follow a great gift, simply by remembering and sharing. Tell your children your own story. Write it down, or make audio recordings. (They do not need to be professionally done. They just need to be complete and honest.) Gather stories from your parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. Organize them, and share them. You can also hold family meetings at which these stories are shared and discussed. Through them, your children can discover for themselves the specific values and character traits that have defined your life and the lives of those who came before you.

Most importantly, help your children understand that they have already received their real inheritance from you, just as you received your most valuable gifts from your parents while they were still alive. Appreciate that planning for the future of your money is not the same as planning for the future of your family. Money is just a tool, one that can best be used to support the inheritance of values that really matter. Children who receive the inheritance that comes through remembrance will understand soon enough that their own legacy will be a measure of who they were, not what they owned. They will understand that a family is not built with money. It is built with memory.

The poet Robert Frost said, "Every parent wishes they knew how to give their children the hardships that made them successful." You may not be able to give them the same experiences that forged your character, but you can tell them stories about the values the generations who came before them believed in, fought for, and all too often, died to safeguard.

Are we remembering? If we are not, there will be a great cost to us as a nation. From imperial Rome to mighty Britain, other nations once held the world 'superpower' title that America has enjoyed since the end of WW II. Our nation may hold onto that title, or we may be forced to watch as greatness slips from our grasp. Neither politicians or diplomats or armies can keep us great. The strength of our nation resides in one thing and one thing alone: the resolve with which we learn and apply the lessons we receive through the lives and stories of our parents and our grandparents.

Make sure you take the time to listen. And to remember.



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