

Telling Their Life Stories, Older Adults Find Peace in Looking Back

By SUSAN B. GARLAND DEC. 9, 2016



Isabella Bick started writing stories about her life about seven years ago as part of a program called Guided Autobiography. Some of her stories involve the pain of being a refugee when she was a young girl. Credit Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

ISABELLA S. BICK'S parents, both Jewish physicians, never talked about the past after the family moved from Fascist Italy to the United States in 1939. She was 8 at the time and quickly learned it was best to keep her feelings of loss and loneliness to herself.

Her silence ended — and those emotions broke free — when Ms. Bick, now 84 and a psychotherapist living in Sharon, Conn., began writing bits and pieces of her life story a few years ago. In one vignette, she describes the trauma of moving with her parents and younger brother into a cramped apartment with her father's Russian family in Troy, N.Y.

Her parents dealt with their grief by refusing to speak Italian at home or to reminisce about their life in Europe. So young Isabella did not tell them about the schoolmates who taunted her or the teacher who shouted at her. She was determined “to invent an American little girl” as quickly as possible, reading poems aloud each night until she lost her accent.

In bed, though, she slept with the brown lambskin coat that she had worn on the ocean voyage to America. Ms. Bick writes that she had “endowed Coat with very special magical qualities” and that she dreamed of returning to her home in Tuscany and her beloved nanny. “With Coat close to me, I felt I could hide my Italian self, not yet totally lost, and not yet reveal my still unformed American self — I could hold on precariously to both — for a little while longer.”

Like many older people who write their life stories, Ms. Bick found some peace in looking back. “Writing is painful because it brings back memories,” she said in a recent interview. But when she began writing, Ms. Bick said, she recognized “that there was this joyous little girl” whom she could finally “reclaim.” And she described “an awe that I survived some of the things I went through.”

Ms. Bick, who has three children and three grandchildren, considers her stories a gift to future generations — and to past ones. “I am keeping my parents and grandparents alive,” she said. “And, as an egotist, I am keeping myself alive. I am remembered.”

Whether they are writing full-blown memoirs or more modest sketches or vignettes, many older people like Ms. Bick are telling their life stories. Some are taking life-story writing classes at local colleges, libraries and adult learning centers, while others are hiring “personal historians” to record oral histories or to produce videos that combine interviews, home movies and family photos. Some opt to write a “legacy letter,” which imparts values to the next generations. New websites enable families to create digital personal histories that can be preserved for their descendants.



This photograph of the family of Isabella Bick’s mother was taken in Kalisz, Poland. Those who remained in Poland were later killed in the Holocaust. Credit Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

Ms. Bick took a course called [Guided Autobiography](#), in which a trained instructor draws out students’ memories and helps them channel their thoughts and recollections into essays. Most guided autobiography classes are taught in person, but Ms. Bick joined five other participants and the instructor on a special interactive website to write and share stories over 10 weekly sessions. They could see one another in little windows on the screen as they explored life themes like family, money and spirituality.

Cheryl Svensson, who is the director of the Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies and who taught Ms. Bick’s class, said she had trained more than 300 instructors worldwide.

Pat McNees, who conducts guided autobiography classes in person in Bethesda, Md., said getting feedback from a supportive group “gives you a perspective on your life.” For example, Ms. McNees said, someone whose family struggled with money problems but spent lots of time together may come out with a “positive take on life” when listening to another participant who had a lonely childhood because the father was always at work.

Research by many gerontologists — including James E. Birren, who created the discipline of guided autobiography — has found that reminiscing can improve the confidence of older adults. By recalling how they overcame past struggles, they are better able to confront new challenges, doctors say, and they may be able to forgive themselves for their mistakes. Moreover, a life review can help with grieving, research has found.

Armed with this knowledge, many [nursing homes](#) and assisted living facilities are offering storytelling programs. Bonita Heilman has conducted about 20 story groups — in which three or four residents meet for five or six sessions — at the Harbor, an assisted-living center in Norwood Young America, Minn. Ms. Heilman, the center’s life enrichment coordinator, uses a program called [Life Reflection Story](#), developed by Celebrations of Life, a company in Minneapolis.

Ms. Heilman will ask questions on topics like childhood and parents. She then compiles each resident’s life story, and family photographs, into a bound book of about 30 pages.

Most Harbor residents were farmers. “They tell stories about when they were productive citizens working toward the greater good,” Ms. Heilman said. “Remembering gives them self-esteem at a time when they can no longer do the things they once could do.”



Isabella Bick with her mother, Taula Bick, in a photograph taken in Milan around 1934. The Bick family later fled Italy for the United States. Credit Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

One resident, Sylvia Kuenzel, 88, said she “had fun listening to the stories” of the other two residents in her group. Mrs. Kuenzel said she got a real lift when she thought for the first time in years about her favorite childhood Christmas gift: a pair of white ankle boots.

In her story book, Mrs. Kuenzel writes that her “saddest childhood memory” was when her father’s grocery store fell on hard times and her parents had to sell their two-story home in the small farming town of

Lafayette, Minn. Her parents and their seven children moved into two bedrooms behind the store. Looking back at her parents' difficult lives, Mrs. Kuenzel said in a recent interview, "I think I appreciate them more than I did at the time."

Mrs. Kuenzel gave up her job as a nurse when she married a farmer, Dennis, who died in 2013. She described farming as round-the-clock work. But writing her story, she said, helped her see that she had dealt well with the hardships and created a good life for her four children. "I made it, so I guess I was O.K.," Mrs. Kuenzel said. She also "realized what is most important" — and it was a comfort to share those lessons with her children, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Among those lessons: the importance of focusing on the positive, hard work and treating people right.

Storytelling also can benefit terminally ill patients by addressing their need to feel that life has purpose. One end-of-life treatment is called [Dignity Therapy](#), which was developed by [Dr. Harvey Max Chochinov](#), a professor of psychiatry at the University of Manitoba. During a 30- to 60-minute audiotaped session, a therapist will ask patients questions about their most important accomplishments, the experiences that made them feel most alive and their hopes for loved ones. Patients can give the transcribed interview to friends and family.

Lori P. Montross-Thomas, a psychologist in the La Jolla community in San Diego, who was trained as a dignity therapist by Dr. Chochinov, said she recalled one man who had talked about an arduous hike with friends. After bad weather set in that day, he told her, he walked ahead to the base camp. He remembered the joy on his friends' faces when he greeted them with hot chocolate. These patients "may have lost the ability to be in physical control, but when they share that kind of story, their body goes back there," said Dr. Montross-Thomas, an assistant professor at the University of California, San Diego. "And they get to share the stories of their strengths with loved ones."

In several studies of dignity therapy, patients reported an increased sense of purpose and meaning. A study of family members of patients who had died said the transcripts consoled them while they grieved.

Hearing a parent's story may be as important to the adult child as it is to the older person telling it. Bill Erwin, 69, who lives in Durham, N.C., interviewed his father, using a tape recorder, many years ago. He said he cherished the story about how his grandfather peddled pianos from the back of his truck to rural households in Hope, Ark., during the Depression. "That's how he made enough sales to keep the lights on at his music store," Mr. Erwin said.

It is a story of resourcefulness that Mr. Erwin is passing on to his two sons. He says he regrets not collecting more stories from his parents, and he wants to ensure his sons don't have similar regrets — so now he is writing his own life story vignettes. And Mr. Erwin, a retired communications executive, has started a new business: creating personal-history videos for other families.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/09/your-money/telling-their-life-stories-older-adults-find-peace-in-looking-back.html?emc=eta1&link=google>