Great-Grandma's Recipes for Success
The Importance of Family Storytelling

BY JENNA GUENTHER, MANAGING DIRECTOR, WEALTH STRATEGY
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I often catch myself daydreaming about how my children’s lives are radically different from the lives of their great-grandparents. My children live in a comfortable home with electricity, running water, hand-held games, online shopping and a convection microwave. In comparison, less than 100 years ago their maternal great-grandparents grew up in Southern Africa, where they told stories by candlelight, washed in small basins and ate what they grew in their gardens and raised in their barns. Around the same time, their paternal great-grandparents were growing up in somewhat similar conditions in Germany and Japan and also on a Chickasaw Reservation in the United States.

In today’s fast-paced world of technology, frozen dinners and long hot showers, how frequently do we stop to reflect on the hardships our predecessors endured as human kind continued its quest for more comfortable living conditions? How often do we tell our children and grandchildren about the relatives that came before us: their names, where they lived, what they were like, and what we learned from them? What about the family business: how did it start and has it always thrived and provided well for the family? And let’s not forget about the family’s core values, beliefs and traditions: what are they and how do we relate to them? Unfortunately, such information is often lost as generations are added to family trees, especially when families are spread apart and don’t regularly see each other face-to-face.

Is there an easy way to prevent your family from inadvertently losing its family history, traditions and values? Many experts believe the answer lies in storytelling. Storytelling is simple, it’s easily accessible and it encourages personal sharing among generations so that family lessons, traditions and values are passed on. Jackie Merrill, Board Chair of Spellbinders®, recently shared with me why she believes storytelling is so effective: “Many families have built storytime into their gatherings and holiday celebrations. That way all generations have a chance both to listen and to tell. People remember stories in part because they have to use their imaginations to create the pictures that go with the storytellers’ words. Tellers and listeners make eye contact throughout the story and that is very rich indeed.”

1 Jacqueline Merrill, Personal Interview, November 5, 2012.

Spellbinders®, one of several organizations created around storytelling, is a non-profit founded as an intergenerational program dedicated to restoring the art of oral storytelling to its traditional place in our culture. It trains and certifies volunteer storytellers, not “readers”, and places them in classrooms.
Experts agree that a family’s story is an important asset. “Although tangible assets are important, there is an even greater, often unrecognized, intangible asset: the family’s story – the story that tells where the family has been, who it is today, and what it can be. It is, after all, the family’s story that is its True Wealth.”

What, exactly, is a family’s True Wealth? “A family’s TRUE WEALTH is its human capital. Only when a family manages its TRUE WEALTH profitably will it overcome the Shirtsleeves-to-Shirtsleeves proverb which describes the overwhelming likelihood that a family business will not survive past the third generation. In fact, as Romar Carl highlighted in Who’s Your Granddaddy?, research shows that about 30% of family owned businesses survive into the second generation, 12% into the third and only about 3% into the fourth or beyond.

“Family stories are the glue that binds together individual family members. Every family I know that is successfully preserving its wealth sets aside time at its family gatherings for the sharing of its unique history.”

What, exactly, is the human capital that equates to a family’s True Wealth? Partners in Personal History, a collaborative company that captures and records families’ histories and stories, believes it’s comprised of:

- Values and traditions
- Morals and ethics
- Knowledge and wisdom
- Family and (if applicable) business histories
- Struggles and strengths
- Pride and lessons learned
- Guidance and coping skills
- Loyalty and belonging
- Building, strengthening and sustaining relationships
- Love, hope and inspiration
- Everlasting legacy

Put another way, human capital is the unique value that each member brings to the family, during his or her life and long after death. Telling stories and sharing successes and failures is an effective way to bestow these elements of human capital on younger generations. Stories provide a means for elders to share ingredients that, when combined, result in “recipes for success” that can be passed on for many generations.

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Donald Davis, a well-known American storyteller and author, believes that stories offer three invaluable gifts to younger generations:

1. A better understanding of who we are and the forces that shape the values we’re trying to pass on to them.
2. An opportunity for them to explore who they are and how they want to form their own journey.
3. The tools to continue passing on the family’s legacy.6

For example, stories about how the family patriarch protected his little brother from the town bully, how his mother blazed the trail by becoming the first working woman in their small town and how his sister triumphed over a physical disability and went on to break a school swimming record all demonstrate that hard work pays off. Ultimately, stories like these pass along values that create a common bond and encourage younger family members to want to continue to build on the family’s human capital. In turn, stories improve the family’s odds of preserving the family’s financial capital for many generations to come.

“[My mother] offers all of us the perspective of time and let’s us know through the very fact that she is there that all the obstacles we are facing will someday be resolved; everything will eventually pass.”7

Consider this incredibly powerful story about family values and how telling stories from one generation to the next can speak volumes about what a family treasures:

One day a father and his rich family took his young son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose to show him how poor people can be. They spent a day and a night on the farm of a very poor family. When they got back from their trip the father asked his son, “How was the trip?”

“Very good, Dad!”

“Did you see how poor people can be?” the father asked.

“Yeah!”

“And what did you learn?”

The son answered, “I saw that we have a dog at home, and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of the garden, they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lamps in the garden, they have the stars. Our patio reaches to the front yard, they have a whole horizon.”

When the little boy was finishing, his father was speechless.

His son added, “Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are!”8

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6 Donald Davis, Telling Your Own Stories, 1993.
7 Catherine Scales Johnson, Spellbinders®, Storytelling Tips and Tidbits, September 2012.
8 Anonymous, Perspectives
What an amazing example of how family members can learn values from each other, regardless of their ages! While attempting to teach his son to be appreciative of his family’s riches, the father was the one who gained insight: a family’s wealth is made up of so much more than its financial resources.

“Your legacy—and your values—are more powerfully conveyed by telling personal stories than through legal documents.”

My children never got the opportunity to meet any of their eight great-grandparents but I hope they grow to love and treasure them just as much as I do. How? Through stories, traditions and, of course, delicious food! Before my children were born, my mother-in-law gave my husband and me a gift I will always treasure: a binder full of her favorite family recipes. Here’s what the first page says:

This book contains more than just the recipes written on these pages. It contains the ingredients that will lead to memories of the smells and tastes of growing up. I have always experienced so much pride and joy in watching my children enjoy my cooking and have always felt that it was my gift to you [as the meals] were always prepared with love.

I hope each time that you use one of these recipes, you think of Dad and me, and remember the times we were together, cooking in the kitchen, and spending time as a family….Remember, a family get together, even if it’s just for a dinner, can make the best memories. And, as our family grows, it just gets better. Add your own recipes and remember to take the time to create memories with each other and with your children. I hope to do the same for your children as well…. - Mom

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve paged through the binder and marveled at how indicative it is of my children’s heritage: meatloaf and green bean casserole; sukiyaki and wonton soup; Chickasaw Fry Bread and pashofa; and the South African recipes I’ve added including melkert and lamb potjiekos. I also marvel at how often our dinner conversations are focused on the food we’re eating, where it came from and how our family has grown and prospered over the years. I can only imagine how many cultures will be represented in our recipe binder when it falls into the hands of my great-grandchildren!

How will you share and preserve your family stories, traditions, relationships and values? A number of formats can be used including, but certainly not limited to: in-person sharing; recipe binders; hand-drawn family trees with personal notes; and even heirloom books, videos or other recordings put together with the help of a professional historian or storytelling company. In the end, the fact that you took the time to record and share your stories is a lot more important than the format used to preserve them.

“You already have all of the ‘story’ content in your family, and minimal leadership from a family member can bring many stories out to be shared.” Be the family member who makes

6 Donald Davis, Telling Your Own Stories, 1993.
9 Thayer Willis, Awaken the Gift of Storytelling in Your Family, The Navigator, Fall 2009.
it happen! The next time your family gets together, ask each person to share a story about someone who is no longer with you or that adds color and flavor to the values, visions and traditions that exist in your family today.

Story Sparks to Remember Your Grandparents

Have you spoken to your children and grandchildren about your own grandparents? If not, use these sparks to do so:

• When you were visiting, how did your grandmother generally spend her day? If she had free time, what activity did she like to do by herself? What activity did she like to do with you? Paint the scene by bringing in all five of the senses.
• What was your favorite place you ever went with your grandfather? What did you do? How did it make you feel? Paint the scene by bringing in all five of the senses.
• When you were little, did any elders share tales with you? How did it make you feel? Where were you? Can you retell any of them?¹⁰

“A story is like a star; it is born in the past, illuminates the present, and will shine in the future.” – J.R. Carroll

Ascent Private Capital Management can assist you and/or your family in your endeavor to capture your stories by either guiding you through the process or helping you select an outside storytelling professional. Please reach out to your Ascent contact for more information on how to get started.

¹⁰ Catherine Scales Johnson, Spellbinders® Storytelling Tips and Tidbits, October 2012.

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