



Recording life stories



Jan Green

Jan has a background in counselling and caring. She lives in Hampshire, is an active member of Romsey Abbey, a National Trust volunteer and enjoys spending time with family and friends. Names in this article have been changed to provide anonymity.

'Ordinary humdrum life. Is there such a thing? Wherever you go, wherever you look, there is interest. Little events that provoke new thoughts; nothing earth-shattering, just small encouragements to share at the day's beginning. Something someone says or does, or a 'happenstance' that catches the imagination. All it takes is the ability to stay awake and aware, to tune in, and listen. We can all do that.' (Eddie Askew)

I love to read historical novels. I revel in the detail, the clothes, the food, schooldays, the buildings, the forms of transport. I know that some people groan at the amount of detail in Dickens but to me there is nothing better than curling up with a good story and I think his are some of the best.

I have discovered a hobby that is even more fascinating than any book that I could read. I help people to record their memories, their life stories. It allows me to meet new people, listen to their stories, to share their memories to laugh and sometimes cry with them. We may sing and even sit quietly as the thoughts go deeper than words can express. It's such a privilege to be welcomed into another person's private world. Everyone has a story, we all have a past. We have loved and lost, succeeded and failed. We all have people who have been important to us over the years. Good times and bad, we are all part of history and each tale is worth recording.

Eddie Askew wrote, 'Wherever you go, wherever you look, there is interest', and this is what I have found to be true. Each life story has a limitless hoard of memories, mostly small but certainly important.

In 1999 I visited Canada to attend a reunion of my father's side of the family for the first time. As an only child whose parents had both died by the time I was thirty, I had very little information to add to the family history that was compiled about the generation including my father. I didn't know why he had not joined the rest of the family when they emigrated to Canada in 1926. I didn't know where he had met my mother. And when I stood at the family grave of my grandparents, in a small churchyard deep in the Prairies, I realised that I knew next to nothing about them either. Why, oh why, had I not asked those questions when I could find out the answers? Well, of course, I was young and busy, too interested in my own life.

For several years I worked for the Stroke Association supporting people left with dysphasia after a stroke. The frustration of losing the ability to communicate is life-shattering and left me with a new understanding of how important is the need to communicate with one another. I remember sitting with a lady whose speech had been affected and, during the numerous meetings I had with her, discovered slowly that she had taken a degree in archaeology after retiring and had helped Tim Smit to excavate the 'Lost Gardens of Helligan'. What a pleasure it was to see her face as she realised that I had understood and discovered this part of her past that she was so proud of.

Having a background in counselling has given me the skills to listen. That experience taught me that sometimes it takes time and patience to hear the whole story.

Listen

'Let the wise listen'.

(Proverbs 1.5)

An 85-year-old lady (referring to the other people in her block of flats in London) said to me one day, 'they only see me as an old lady, not as a person'. Olive had graduated in 1950, long before most women had the opportunity of attending university. She studied Maths and Physics, very unusual subjects for a woman in her day. Before this, Olive had taken her A-levels in the boys' school because the girls' school didn't offer these subjects. Her husband had left her with two children to bring up alone and she eventually became a headmistress. What a pioneering and challenging life story. But to the passer-by she was just an old lady. Do we recognise the jewels of history that are lost because we don't have time to ask simple questions and to listen?

To tell someone your life-story you have to trust them. I don't bombard the person with questions but spend the first few meetings getting to know them and building a relationship of trust, laying down some basic ground rules, including confidentiality. Memories that are shared may be happy but they may be sad, they may be uncomfortable. I think it's really important to allow these memories to surface because it can be really healing and liberating to speak these things out loud. However, we always agree how much I will write down and how much will be recorded in the story. It's important to me that a person tells the story they want to tell, that they share their memories in their own way. This is not my story to tell, I don't own it. Neither do I correct it, if the history doesn't seem to fit, so be it. If a family member disagrees with the memory that can be awkward. However, usually it's agreed not to record anything that may be too controversial!

Time

Give me time for people. Because when I can open the door to them you'll be able to step in too. And that's where the difference starts and the joy.

(Eddie Askew)

Over the years I have had an increasing awareness of the importance of the small things in life. Of the chance encounters, the kind word, the smile. How those little happenings can make all the difference to our lives. For me that is where I see God at work and that is where I feel my mission lay. I have been so fortunate to have the time and opportunity to be with folk who are unable to socialise in the normal way, either through age or infirmity. Some of my storytellers have a faith that they can verbalise and some have not. That is what makes this particular journey so exciting, finding God in unexpected places. I do believe that, if we ask God to fill us with his Spirit, he will be with us each day in whatever we do and whoever we meet. We can leave the rest to him.

Much of the Bible is about the life stories of individuals and families. That is one of the reasons why it fascinates us and holds our attention. Most are normal people with

hopes, fears, good things and challenges in their lives just like us.

Memories

'God gave us memories that we might have roses in December.'

(JM Barrie)

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What helps us to remember those memories hidden deep in our minds? Taking our dog for a walk after the recent floods I noticed a strangely familiar smell. After the water had receded a thin layer of mud had been left over a local field. Straight away I had a flashback to when I was seven years old staying with my grandmother and tramping over the fields on the banks of the River Severn. As the tide goes out it leaves miles of mud, which I had completely forgotten about until I smelt this very similar smell. Something as simple as a sprig of lavender, rosemary, lily of the valley, wood shavings, oil of cloves, or even some newly exposed mud, can transport a person back in time.

Then, of course, there are the photographs. Please don't throw away photos if their owner is still alive. One gentleman, whose life story I was recording, had a fairly swift move away from his last home into a nursing home. The family had rallied around and sorted everything out. Unfortunately, a whole cupboard of photos were lost. Just one photograph can generate a whole afternoon's conversation. All those long forgotten relatives, holidays, pets, people and the clothes we used to wear, and thought we looked so good in at the time!

Maybe the most evocative of all is music, somehow we remember the tunes that were played when we were teenagers and the words often come floating back. Just to have the appropriate music in the background can be wonderfully helpful in triggering memories.

This might seem an obvious comment but the way we ask questions can make a big difference to how someone responds. If I ask 'where did you go to school?' I may just get a one or two word answer. If I ask a more open question, 'what do you remember about your school days?', it usually provokes more thought and a more considered attempt to recall days long ago. I also share my own past in a limited way, as it sometimes jogs a memory and makes for a much more normal conversation.

Memory is a child walking along a seashore. You can never tell what small pebble it will pick up and store away among its treasured things.

(Pearce Harris)

I can often remember the most inconsequential things, like the dress that I was wearing when I fell over and grazed my knee when the road had been resurfaced. I think I was ten! So it is with my storytellers, I write

everything down and then try to put some order into my notes later on in the process.

It is important to make the point that we all reminisce the whole time. It's certainly not an activity solely for the elderly. My four-year-old grandson loves to visit Mottisfont, our local National Trust property in Hampshire. He often says things like, 'Do you remember when I fell over and grazed my knee', or 'I went paddling

we need time to dream, time to remember, and time to reach the infinite – time to be

in that stream.' Our normal conversations are full of sharing our experiences of yesterday. But along with age can come a series of factors that mean our social world becomes much smaller and communication more limited. Those conversations that we had every day become questions and answers, 'Are you alright?' 'Can I give you a lift?' 'Would you like a cup of tea?' Loneliness can creep up slowly.

Do you remember the Olympic games in 2012 or Andy Murray winning Wimbledon last year? Do you remember the day Princess Diana died or, for that matter, JF Kennedy? Do you remember sitting with a dozen other people watching the Coronation on a small television, the only one in the street? Sometimes the 'big' events can trigger other memories of that time.

Jack, another of my storytellers remembered 1935 quite well. He was a Sunday-school teacher in the East End of London and was standing outside the church with all the children when Oswald Mosely passed by in a carriage. Mosely's band of followers were all in black shirts. One of the stewards told him to take the children inside in case of trouble. Later that day there were riots in the East End.

This same gentleman, who was born in 1911, also recalled Armistice Day at the end of the First World War in 1918. He lived in Bridport, Dorset, and climbed the hill with crowds of people, where they waved flags and sang patriotic songs.

Record everything

'Our most treasured family heirlooms are our sweet family memories.'
(unknown)

Michael Oke has written a very helpful book entitled *Write Your Own Life Story: How to Unlock Your Memories and Create a Lasting Personal Record for Family and Friends* (published by Marks & Spencer in 2004). One question he asks is 'What would you want to know if your grandmother wrote a book?' The answer he suggests is 'everything'. Michael has written many biographies, he also lectures and runs workshops in the subject.

That word 'everything' is the important thing to remember when helping someone to record their memories. To the family any information is interesting.

Life is so busy now and time is at a premium. But not only that, the shame is that often we only begin to be interested in knowing about the past when we have time to think about it and that is often too late to ask questions.

During the search for information about my own family I found that one of my great aunts had been a Mormon. On their website, we found the copy of her funeral service at which several people had given eulogies. These provided unexpected information about the sort of person she was – caring and loving. It gave a brief description of her life and was such a precious piece of family history. That is what I hope to pass on to the family of each person who allows me to share their personal history.

I was asked recently to speak at the funeral of Ted, whose life story I had spent some weeks recording. I was so delighted: obviously the information in the book, though not earth shattering meant so much to the whole family. He was a local man and had lots of memories and photographs. For example, his father had camped with Baden Powell in the earliest days of the Boy Scout movement and Ted had supported the Scouts all his life. He had a wonderful sense of humour as well as a very good memory and I think we both enjoyed our meetings equally.

Once it has been agreed that we have completed the life story, I present it in a variety of ways. Some people have a large number of photos and not so much to say, while others have many stories and remember lots of detail. The accounts may be typed and simply put together in a spring file, others printed, depending on what seems appropriate at the time for the individual and their family. I always leave space to add stories that may be remembered at a later date.

Conclusion

'We need time to dream, time to remember, and time to reach the infinite – time to be.'
(Gladys Taber)

'Time to remember'. I feel that I have been really blessed in having both the time and opportunity to spend time with people helping them to remember their life stories. I hope that I have been able to share my passion and maybe even encourage you to consider this as a worthwhile use of your time. I don't approach each venture as a professional. I'm simply a Christian who wants to make a small difference in individual lives. I hope to bring enjoyment and to give an affirming experience to the person that I'm listening to, valuing their life both past and present.