



Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

I've heard that
story a million
times before;
what's in it
for me?

by Kari Berit

I remember sitting at my sister's kitchen table with my maternal Grandma Gladys. I had brought along a tape recorder and asked if she would retell some of the stories she had told me through the years.

"Why do you want to record these stories?" she asked.

"So I don't forget—and so others can hear about your wild adventures," I told her.

If you knew my grandmother in her later years, you'd never suspect that she'd had a wild side. As I was growing up, Grandma Gladys never seemed to want to plan anything because she might get a headache. But as the

tape recorder ran on, I discovered there was so much more to her.

For one thing, she'd engaged in "illegal activities." In her day, it was against the policy of many businesses for married women to work. She liked her job at the bank so much, she lied about being married to keep it. She finally had to quit when she got pregnant with my mom.

When she was going with Grandpa Floyd, they used to take the overnight train from Minneapolis to Chicago with another couple to go dancing all Saturday night. They'd return late Sunday and stumble into work Monday morning with very little sleep, but wonderful memories.

Grandma Gladys had had a wild spirit. We didn't often see it in her later years. But we heard it through her stories. As she told me of daring adventures, and taking risks, and the joy that came from those times, her face lit up. In her stories, she was still full of life and energy—not the grandma we had come to know.

What a gift to pass on to me. I saw a different side of her and learned the value of taking risks and having fun in life.

Memories you want

Like Grandma Gladys, our parents will die. Before they do, we have an opportunity to preserve their voices, and their values, through the stories they can tell us. But this time, listen to these stories in the context of what's in it for you, both as a caregiver and as an adult child.

I can't count the times I've talked to someone struggling with providing care to an aging parent and heard this common lament: "There's just nothing for us to talk about." Idle chit-chat only takes you so far. The tough issues are often hard to dig into. In between, there doesn't seem to be anything to fill the hours constructively.

Capturing and preserving stories can provide those gap-fillers. Stories engage both the teller and the listener, awakening old memories and creating new ones. They reveal the values and beliefs that have permeated our parents' lives, and very likely conditioned our own. They open the door to more substantive conversations.

And they give us one last chance to hang onto pieces of our family heritage—pieces that very possibly will be lost forever when



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CONVERSATION STARTERS...

- Hey, Mom and Dad, tell me a out...
- books you've enjoyed
- building something
- cartoon favorites
- child-raising stories
- Christmas stories
- close-call stories
- Cold War stories
- courtship stories
- difficulty stories
- dream stories
- entrepreneurial stories
- escape stories
- family stories (generations past)
- farm stories
- favorite places
- food stories
- happy stories
- hard times
- immigration stories
- meeting each other
- miracle stories
- music that moved you
- neighbor stories
- pet/animal stories
- picnic stories
- prank stories
- religious/spiritual stories
- school stories
- sports stories
- standing firm stories
- train stories
- trespassing stories
- UFO stories
- war stories
- work stories

our parents die. If you're at all interested in retracing family roots, your parents' stories can contribute rich and wide-ranging details, adding more personal dimensions to the basics of genealogy even as they provide clues of new places to look.

Don't fight your parents when they launch into yet another telling of a familiar story. Don't check your watch, hoping to discover you have someplace else to go. Think selfishly: *There's something here for you.* Encourage your parents to revisit the stories that paint the canvas of their lives. Better yet,

work with them to preserve those stories. The result can be a priceless resource that you'll find deeply rewarding for years to come—compensation for the time and energy you're devoting now as a caregiver.

Kari Berit (www.KariBerit.com) is the author of The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent (2007: Attainment Company). She helps seniors and their adult children create effective dialogue around things that matter.

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