

How do you spell G-E-N-E-A-L-O-G-Y?

In a 2013 article in the New York Times entitled “The Stories That Bind Us,” American writer Bruce Feiler reported on research into children’s resiliency and their ability to deal with stress. The research suggested that children who know a lot about their families: “(1) tend to do better than other children when they face challenges, (2) prove to be more resilient and able to moderate the effects of stress, (3) have a stronger sense of control over their lives, (4) have higher self-esteem, (5) believe that their family functions successfully, and (6) feel that they belong to something larger than themselves.”

Why do stories help children?

From family stories children gain insights into how to deal with the situations they encounter in life. A family’s stories tend to support a “unifying narrative” or pattern. For example, family narratives might include overcoming adversity, doing what’s right, or helping other people in times of need. The healthiest narratives reinforce the sense that family members have persevered through many ups and downs as best they could with varying degrees of success.

Feiler posited that parents can improve their children’s resiliency by telling family stories to them whenever possible: at the dinner table, in the car, and so on. Tell all types of stories, from simple or humorous (our family’s worst vacation ever) to profound (Grandma’s struggle with cancer). Tell stories that reflect life’s ups and downs, but result in a positive outcome over time and show the family’s ability to overcome difficulties.

Feiler’s research further revealed that many people, when asked about the subject of genealogy, were unable to spell the word, much less define it. “Family history,” however, is a subject everyone understands. For example, only the most serious Bible scholars do not get bogged down in their Bible studies with the long and boring chapters on who begat whom. When the narratives turn to individual and family stories, however, biblical histories and spiritual principles become much simpler and easier to understand.

Indeed, Jesus often taught his disciples by telling them simple stories and parables about chickens and foxes and birds and camels or about a son who lost his way in life, but ultimately came home. Likewise, many of us today who genuinely care about our family histories care less about when and where Grandpa died or where he is buried than we do about the stories and events of Grandpa’s life like, for example, the time Grandpa’s mule jumped off the bridge into the freezing creek water in the middle of the winter. I especially love to hear the one about the neighbor’s mean old bulldog chasing after Grandma. Daddy said Grandma ran lickety-split with the dog on her heels and dove over a cow fence to get away. What a funny story! It shed a whole new light on the old gray-haired Granny I remember when I was a child.

My father was a prolific storyteller. He told us Albritton children many stories about our ancestors and relatives. Oh, what a crazy, entertaining bunch of “characters” those early Albrittons were. Papa Albritton died in 1975 and is

buried in the old Antioch cemetery in Nokomis, Florida. Very interesting! My favorite memories of Papa, however, are of those early summer evenings when I used sit on the front porch with him when I was a young boy and listen to him tell stories about the time he saw Railroad Bill, the locally famous Negro outlaw, or about his personal friendship and wrestling match with Emery Seales, who went off to prison once for shooting another man in a gunfight and who hanged my mother's dog from a tree limb at her front door.

The rest of the story? Oh yes, there is certainly more to *that* story for, in my family, one story always leads to another. I remember and love them all. These are the stories that have bound my family together through the passing generations. They transform dates, places and statistics to real-life people.

One of my favorite stories my father told me was about the time he got into a wrestling match with his first cousin, Dee Albritton, who was a big boy and something of a bully. When his cousin got him almost pinned to the ground, Daddy said he pulled out a small knife from his pocket and jabbed Dee in his fat buttocks with it. Dee ran screaming to their mutual grandfather crying, "Bud stuck me with his knife! Bud stuck me with his knife."

Having thrown the knife into the bushes to conceal his crime, Daddy pulled his britches pockets inside out to show Grandpa ,and proclaimed, "He's lying Papa. I ain't even got a knife. See!"

"Well, Son," Grandpa answered calmly, "Bud ain't even got a knife, don't you see? You must have stuck yourself on a splinter while ya'll were rolling around out there in the grass. Besides, I don't think Little Buddy would do a mean thing like that."

Many years later, as his Grandpa lay on his death bed, my father confessed his transgression to him. "Papa," he whispered into his Grandfather's ear, "I did stick Cousin Dee with my pocketknife. I lied when I told you I didn't do it."

Daddy said Grandpa just patted him on his arm, smiled, and whispered back, "Naw Buddy. You didn't do that. You are a good boy. You would never do a mean thing like that."

My father's stories have bound us together as I occasionally think about the times I lied out of a few of my own transgression. Like me, my ancestors were human and flawed, but oh how I love them and oh how much I am constantly discovering how much I am like them. These are the stories that help me to know myself. They are the stories that bind.

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