

THE NAVIGATOR

Charting your Course for a Purposeful Life
Volume VI, Number 3
Fall, 2009

Awaken the Gift of Storytelling in your Family

Who can resist an engaging story? We all focus our attention when the speaker begins a story. We immediately start picturing the people, places and details, and wonder where we're going. This is true whether the storyteller is a professional, an elderly auntie or a child. And if the story is well told, we enter into it with abandon and find ourselves there.

Stories from a family's own history convey the family values and priorities. These stories can humanize the storyteller and the characters, and shed light on difficult personality traits. They can build rapport, establish credibility, challenge, provide information and entertain. Stories told and retold also build a sense of belonging to the clan.

Sometimes the most appropriate use of stories within families is to crack open doors that have been shut for years. For example, while facilitating a family meeting, I heard a mom tell her two adult sons stories of the overwhelming insecurity she had lived with all her life and about how this insecurity had developed in her childhood. For many years before we met, her sons had criticized her for being too sensitive and wanting too much attention from them. She had raised them as a divorced mom, and though she was wealthy, she was lacking many other kinds of resources, such as trust and confidence. Wanting to give her boys as normal a life as possible, she had always kept her struggles private. But as she finally described these struggles on this day, I saw her sons' critical attitudes dissolve. They both replaced their criticism with compassion, and the impasses between them and their mother opened. It is easy to enrich a family with their own stories, because the vast majority of family members *want* to hear. The challenge is in getting family members to open up and share their stories.

There are many reasons people don't tell their stories. Sometimes it is pride, sometimes they think others wouldn't be interested, sometimes their stories are just buried under the crushing weight of present relationships. At this time in our history, when many wealthy families are very focused on their financial reports, and not feeling expansive enough to work on improving their family psychology, storytelling is a simple, available, accessible way to bring the family closer. 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.

Sometimes family members will tell you they don't have any stories. Don't let them get away with this! They do have stories, they might just need some time to come up with one to offer. Be gracious and offer time, ask a few questions to help them focus or to find a direction, but don't take 'no' for an answer!



The Navigator is a quarterly newsletter for all who have an interest in wealth. The rich really are different, but not in the ways most people think. Many envy the wealthy and presume they have no problems, but in fact, they face unique psychological challenges. Thayer Willis, LCSW, wealth counselor, speaker and author of *Navigating the Dark Side of Wealth: A Life guide for Inheritors*, helps her clients develop the meaningful lives we all treasure.

Stories can help the listeners understand the storyteller or other family members, and sharing stories can build rapport. When someone is telling a story, we usually want to step in and understand why. Why this story, what made it important to the storyteller? As we begin to understand this, we empathize. Credibility is often a benefit for the storyteller. Family members may see for the first time how and what motivated him/her to make the choices revealed in the story or choices in life after the story.

Sometimes a story provides a challenge. Usually this takes the form of something you don't agree with. Perhaps you were there and would tell the story differently. Perhaps the storyteller is presenting different values and priorities than are widely accepted in the family. In these instances, family members can learn something new and look at life from a different point of view. Perhaps another family member's story is even an unintentional challenge for you to take the high road.

In the case of a wealthy family, where business and financial success were created a generation or two or even seven or eight generations ago, it is vitally important to tell the story of how that success happened, with as much detail as is known. This is family glue and will help preserve values, relationships and financial wealth. In fact, without an understanding of the history of the family wealth, young family members are at high risk for losing it.

Last but certainly not least, many stories are entertaining. Never underestimate the value of entertainment. When family members laugh and have a good time together, it creates the glue that holds family members together. The technical term used by professionals is bonding.

Often there is an appropriate time for storytelling, usually after the financial business is finished. Overall, it is a simple way to bring the family together. Your stories will enrich your family and remind everyone of the purpose of this family. Since you are the one reading this, you can stretch and lead by example. Tell your story first to inspire others to tell theirs. The ground rules are simple: be respectful, remember that each person's story is true for them (even if you were there and your *knowledge* of what happened is different), don't interrupt, encourage everyone to take a turn at telling a story relevant to family history – including the youngest family members. It can be helpful for the speaker to hold a "talking stick" when telling their story. No judgment or disagreement is allowed. In fact comments are not even necessary. It is often best to let family members experience the story quietly, especially if there is any chance that a negative comment might be made.

With all of the emphasis on the financials lately, telling the family stories can provide human warmth and remind everyone that there is more to their family than the balance sheet shows. Are you ready to move beyond the usual points in your family meetings and retreats? Are you ready to connect in a much deeper way that you have before? If so, tell a family story and ask to hear another.

© 2009 Thayer Cheatham Willis. All Rights Reserved

