

“The Importance of Storytelling as We Age”

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The older I get, the more important I believe it is to share the stories of our lives with future generations, rather than keeping them buried inside our psyches. Storytelling is important because stories influence, inspire, and instruct. They can teach about cultures, influences, history, philosophy, and moral ethics. Good storytelling involves psychology, human emotions, and interests. It also offers a sense of perspective. Its purpose is to unite human beings and convey recollections of the human element. Regardless of our culture, stories bring us together and bridge the gaps between us. Stories are also tools for learning and exchanging ideas.

Because I'd been a writer from a young age, my written storytelling skills were more developed than my verbal ones. In my 40s, I started taking some trips to Hawaii and became drawn to the Hawaiian tradition of *Ka'ao*, or sharing wisdom through the art of storytelling. Kahunas teach and instruct in the form of story, which provides a vehicle for understanding life and relationships. The story becomes a form of philosophy, and the ceremonies, rituals, and art of storytelling remain inherent in the Hawaiian culture.

While spending time with my elder kahuna during these sojourns to Hawaii, my oral storytelling skills quickly improved. I learned that it's important to remember to put on your “story hat” —to embody the feeling of a story when you're telling it. It's about walking your listener through the landscape of your story as if they were present with you in the experience. Perhaps

subconsciously I continue to yearn and feed my childhood craving for stories, which is one of the many reasons I'm drawn to the Hawaiian culture.

I am the only child of immigrant parents and thus, a first-generation American, raised in the 1950s and 1960s. Possibly because English was not their native language, my parents were not great storytellers. They communicated fine in English, but never voluntarily shared stories with me about their life in Europe. My sense reflecting backward was they guarded their stories, but in reality, I think they believed that their stories wouldn't interest to me. Thus, I found myself gravitating to friends and family members who were good storytellers.

Many of our strengths, preferences, and comfort zones often revert back to the patterns of our childhoods. At an early age, I developed the love for both reading and writing and I suppose I can credit my Viennese mother for this. My mother was a strong believer in both education and learning. She was an avid reader and read a few books at a time. On her bedside table she kept them open lying face down one on top of the another. As soon as I could walk, she drove me to my first trip to the local library where I borrowed as many books as I could carry.

There must have been something about my young self that craved stories about people and how they navigated their lives. At the library, my favorite section was biographies . I also loved hearing other people—such as teachers and friends—tell stories, and this might be one of the reasons I grew up to be a great listener.

Even though I read and listened to the stories of others, I really wanted to know more about my parents' life in Europe. When I asked them questions about their experiences, they would often provide one-word responses. This must have been frustrating for a future storyteller.

My parents worked long and hard hours running a small general store in Brooklyn, New York. They returned home late and dinners were often rushed. Conversations were either non-existent or superficial: "what did you have for lunch" or "what was your favorite subject at school today" were common.

Until I met the man who would later become my husband, I thought that those types of dinners were the norm. The first time I had dinner with my then-boyfriend's family at their home north of Toronto, I had the shock of my young adult years when the family remained seated at their dinner table for more than 90 minutes. They were also Eastern European immigrants who had survived world wars, and his parents loved sharing stories as the four kids under 18 listened attentively.

As I watched this family engaged in conversation, I wondered why my family was not like that. I preferred this way of being and their dinner table further implanted my gift for listening. In addition to a delicious meal prepared by my boyfriend's mother, full of love and wholesome ingredients, his father would open the discussion either sharing a news story or a story about something that happened during the day at his plant nursery.

Even though my father-in-law's native tongue was Hungarian, he became an avid reader of English newspapers and books since arriving in Canada—in addition to watching a great deal of television—so he expressed himself very well in English. In reality, I couldn't get enough of his stories.

Thankfully, my husband inherited this storytelling gene and did really well sharing stories with our children about his life and the life of his parents. While my storytelling skills were mainly captured on the pages of my essays and memoirs, over the years, I've been practicing my verbal storytelling skills.

And I'm glad I have because now, as a grandmother of six, every time I have the opportunity to share stories with my grandchildren about my past that they could relate to. Recently I began making them some foods characteristic of my childhood and heritage, which trigger me to share more stories. They are still quite young—all seven years of age and younger—and I look forward to many more years of storytelling to bridge the years as I age.