FOREWORD

"I have two living grandparents...They are 78 and 85, and I'm only 20. Being on the same wave length as them would be almost miraculous"

-- An undergraduate

In one of our courses on aging, students - mostly young adults - hear many stories. They read from an anthology of poems, essays, and short fiction with themes relating to the aging experience. They hear also from older volunteers who help to facilitate small discussion groups on these readings. Then the students write about the stories they've read and discussed, incorporating their own personal experiences and thoughts about the meaning of growing older. What may begin as an academic exercise in a required course often becomes an intergenerational journey as these young adults call upon their grandparents for advice and guidance. Frequently, the near miracle mentioned above does happen, as communication is facilitated and relationships strengthened through shared stories.

Our research also underscores the importance of stories in the lives of older adults and their families. We have found that adults of all ages recognize a "good" story, one that is coherent and interesting. For the individual older person, telling such a story to others can be a kind of mental exercise that promotes healthy and successful aging. It sharpens perceptions of the event and enhances understanding of it. A better understanding, in turn, promotes a strong sense of the self and helps in the process of life review - putting together the stories of one's life in a positive and integrated fashion. Stories can also serve as an expression of the investment in the care of the young that older generations feel. Erik Erikson termed this "generative" investment in the nurturing and guidance of the young a kind of intergenerational gift that benefits both tellers and recipients. In our research, stories with such generative themes are especially enjoyed and preferred by younger listeners.

For families, story-telling cements intergenerational bonds. Older people, in general, have a positive view of their families and a strong commitment to their successful future. This commitment is called "intergenerational stake" by gerontologists. Helping young members understand their family's history can help facilitate caring and respectful communication. As Ellen Ryan says, when we know little about someone of another age, we may be tempted to rely on stereotypes in our interactions: for example, all teenagers are moody; all seniors grumpy. When we know more, our interactions take into account the complexity of individual lives. For each generation, the stories of another provide a glimpse at that complexity.

From our point of view as social scientists, this is an important book. We know very little about how younger and older members of a family use stories as a way to build their relationships. The stories in this volume provide some insights into this process. They demonstrate bridges of understanding, which can be shared by other families whose story-telling abilities might not be as well honed. We hope that it will encourage all families to take time for one another and create new generations of oral historians.

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