

# Telling the Story of Our Growing Up

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“And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?”

Yann Martel  
*Life of Pi*

Telling the story of our growing up experience is a key part of our adult development and maturation (McGoldrick, 1995). In telling this story, Feiler (2013) emphasizes the importance of establishing a “strong family narrative” about the ups and downs of family life. Moreover, Bowen (1978) stresses that the examination of this family of origin history should be an integral part of every person's differentiation as an adult. This article addresses many of the central issues and challenges involved in telling this story.

## Memory's Plasticity

A vital element of telling our family story is accessing our memories about our growing up experience. However, accessing these autobiographical memories is not about gaining access to the permanent recordings in our heads; instead, it is more akin to finding our way into the changing kaleidoscope of recollections about our childhood and adolescent experiences. As modern neuroscience informs us, memory is not a static recording of history, but an ongoing rewrite of past experiences that are continually being reshaped by the personal meanings we assign them. Lewis, Amini, and Lamon (2000) remind us that “memory is not a thing... memory is not only mutable, but the nature of our brain's storage mechanism dictates what memories must change over time” (p. 103).

We generally have two kinds of memories: explicit and implicit. Explicit memory involves the conscious recollection of past experiences and information, whereas implicit memory entails the retrieval of previous experiences and information that take place outside of conscious awareness. When confronted with repeated kinds of experience, our brains unconsciously assign meanings to them that become part of our implicit memory. Moreover, when we experience anomalies and cognitive dissonance, our brains unconsciously rewrite history so that this information makes sense and can be more easily retained (Gottman, 2011). This same unconscious consolidation holds true for the story we tell ourselves about our family history and family relationships. In short, telling the story of our growing up is very much a work in progress.

## True Fiction

As honest as we might be with ourselves, the best that we can achieve is what Williamson (1991) refers to as a “true fiction” account of our growing experience. This means that we must be able to find our own truth, but also must be able to let go of the certitude that we possess it for other family members. The limitations of our ability to

recall the “truth” of our growing up history does not mean that the truth isn’t important or that we don’t have to be honest with ourselves. Researching our family histories and being open to the opinions of other family members are critical factors in constructing a meaningful family history. However, the bottom line is that we need to construct a story that ultimately has to ring true to us, while at the same time enables us to know that we don’t have a monopoly on the truth—especially when it comes to experiences of other family members.

### **Narrative Coherence**

While it is important to acknowledge the constructed nature of our family story, it is just as important that we are able to put together a coherent narrative about this story. Researcher Mary Main (1991) developed a family history research tool called the “Adult Attachment Interview” in which she scored how people told their childhood stories and the extent to which their stories were traumatic. She found that people who were able to tell coherent stories about their childhoods were very different types of parents than people who had the same amount of childhood trauma but who had not resolved it. The unresolved parents were anxious, preoccupied, dismissing, or otherwise disorganized in their account of their childhoods and had infants who were insecurely attached as well. In contrast, the people who had resolved their childhood trauma, and could tell a coherent story about it without becoming emotionally flooded, had infants who were securely attached. As she predicted, the securely attached children generally did much better throughout their lives than the insecurely attached children (Gottman, 2011).

### **Zeigarnik Effect**

Not only does the way in which we tell our family story have significant implications for the quality of our lives and the lives of our children, it also has a major impact on the ways in which the Zeigarnik effect plays out in our lives. Simply put, the Zeigarnik effect states that we have better recall for events that we have not completely processed (Gottman, 2011). More specifically, researchers have found that there is an average of 90% better recall for unfinished events than for events that have been completed. As Gottman (2011) points out, this effect doesn’t just apply to facts, but also relates to the negative emotional events that are stored in our memories. He emphasizes that if we dismiss and avoid processing negative emotional events in our family relationships, we are much more likely to be preoccupied with them. However, if we fully process them, we are much more likely to let them go. In other words, when we are done with a negative experience in our growing up history, it occupies a less significant part of our family story and, as a result, takes up much less space in our consciousness.

### **Unfinished Business**

In telling our story, it is important to address the relationship difficulties in our family of origin. Finding some measure of acceptance and forgiveness in these relationships, particularly with parents, can make significant differences in our health and well-being.

Research studies have consistently shown that problematic family of origin relationships are associated with adult children's impaired functioning. For example, Schwartz and Russek (as cited in Gottman, 2011) conducted a study of the Harvard classes of 1952 and 1954 in which these students were asked whether their relationship to their parents was (1) very close, (2) warm and friendly, (3) tolerant, or (4) strained and cold. Thirty-five years later medical records were collected on the now middle-aged subjects. The results indicated that 91% of the participants who did not have a warm relationship with their mothers were diagnosed with a serious medical disease in midlife, compared to only 45% who indicated they did have a warm relationship with their mothers. Effects for fathers were cumulative, such that for those subjects who did not have warm and close relationship with their parents, 100% of them were diagnosed with a serious medical disease in midlife, compared to only 47% who rated both parents high in warmth and closeness.

The implications of these and other studies with similar findings indicate that the quality of our relationship with our parents has a direct bearing on our health and well-being as adult children. However, because we do not choose our parents and do not always like what we get, we cannot—despite our best efforts—always be close to them. While we cannot always be close, the more central implication of these findings is that our health and well-being is inextricably linked to our capacity to stay connected to these key family members. Moreover, a critical part of maintaining this connection is tied to our capacity to develop a family of origin narrative that incorporates the importance and redeeming qualities of these family relationships.

## Summary

Telling the story of our growing up experience is a crucial part of our meaning making and development as adults. The more we understand that this story is solely ours to tell, the more we can embrace the notion that it need only be a personal reflection of what past events and relationships are important to us. However, because of the adverse ramifications of the Zeigarnik effect, we also need to address the unfinished business in our family history that may have thus far eluded us. By addressing these unresolved family conflicts, it does not mean we must necessarily coax ourselves into liking those family members we do not like; but it does require that we be able to recognize some redemptive qualities in these family members and, if possible, make concerted efforts to establish a modicum of connection with them. While the emotional cost for addressing the unfinished business in family relationships—particularly parental relationships—can sometimes be high, it is typically much lower than the price we invariably pay when we let them fester.

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