

## Relative Truths

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### I

“The lines in a face tell a story; the lines in a face sing a song. The lines are a keepsake of moments gone by, choices we’ve made, right or wrong. And we earn our lines from our stories. We earn our lines from our songs. Trace the pattern and the story unwinds. Who we are is in the lines left behind.”

I am reminded of the words of this song by Julie Shannon as I sit here beside my mother-in-law in the hospital. She is facing yet another surgery on an arm that was broken, set with pins and then broken again when she stumbled and fell on it. She does not remember that she does not have such good balance any more or that she is not supposed to use that arm. You see she is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s and it is easy to forget.

I remember when I first met her. She had such a sharp mind, a ready smile, and an eagerness to talk. It is rather difficult to make sense of what she says now as she tends to repeat the same things over and over. Every so often though you can catch a glimmer of what she used to be like as her eyes light up, and the lines crisscrossing her face seem to dance in merriment to mostly forgotten tunes. There are so many things I would like to know about the family, so many stories I wish I had asked for before it was too late. If only I had had the foresight to start earlier. If only...

I seem to recall having been down this road once before, in the not so distant past. Just four years ago my own mother passed away. At the time I was flooded with memories of the things we had done, the times we had shared, both good and bad, the laughter, the tears, and the stories. We were family. On reflection however, I wish now that I had asked her to tell me more tales about her life growing up on a farm with seven brothers, her days as a school teacher, her courtship, marriage and the subsequent birth of my siblings and myself. What was it like for her, being a pastor’s wife? Was it difficult having Grandma live with us after Grandpa died? How did she and Dad feel when I told her I was going all the way across the world to live in Japan? I vaguely remember hearing a few of those stories but I did not bother writing them down. That is the sad thing about getting older; the memory just does not seem to be as keen as it once was!

Many seem to think the stories we hear at home should not be called “storytelling.”

“That’s just talk,” they say. It is not just any kind of talk, though. Sometimes it is that sweet, slow, meandering kind that does not seem to be headed anywhere and does not even care if it gets there. Other times the words just tumble all over themselves in the mad rush to get out. Whichever the case, it is a very natural part of our lives.

Storytelling is something we do every day as we all gather around the dinner table. Children regale us with stories of the day’s adventures. “Mom, guess what happened to Billy today at lunch? Somebody told a joke just as he took a drink of milk and he started laughing so hard the milk came out his nose! Boy, was that ever funny! And then you know what happened? Everyone at our table started trying to do the same thing ’cause it looked so funny when Billy did it.” And Mom laughingly replies, “That reminds me. Did I ever tell you about the time *chocolate* came out *my* nose?” Each child jumps in with a story of their own, trying to top the one before, and the room begins to pulsate with the glow and warmth of the laughter generated, the camaraderie shared. Parents too, may divulge little tidbits from their day at the office or at home and the day draws to a close as we gently lull the children to sleep with more stories. Gifts of the heart they have been called.

In this paper I wish to look at storytelling from the family point of view; why I think it is important to try and establish a family storytelling tradition, show you some ideas of how to start, and then take a brief look at some of my own family traditions.

## II

Before we embark on an exploration of family storytelling, it might be a good idea to take a look at what constitutes a family. We can always go to the dictionary for a definition of the word, or we can consult the “experts”, but somehow these methods always seem so cold and detached to me. A far more natural thing to do, I think, is to ask people directly. So I put out a request by e-mail to several of my extended family members. However, due to time constraints or computer glitches or whatever, I was not able to get many replies, so I decided to tap into a more captive audience--my students. One of their homework assignments was to write on the topic, “What family means to me.” Following are a few of their comments.

“For me, my family is peace of mind. I am most relaxed with my family.”

“My family is my emotional mainstay. If I lost my family, I think I don’t live.”

“My family is indispensable to me and I trust them completely.”

“The family is quiet space for me.”

“Family is who you blame for all wrong things that happened that day and they still love you.”

“I live at home with my mother and my father and my little brother. But there’s no communication in my family. We are 4 people who live in a house. It’s not really family at all, because a family should mean sharing and talking about everything.”

The American family has undergone quite a radical change in the past few decades. What was once considered the traditional family--two parents, a father who is the breadwinner and a mother who stays home to raise her two or three children--is on the wane. Single-parent families, blended families (those made up of a couple and their children with children from previous marriages), unmarried couples with or without children and homosexual couples with or without children have become increasingly more common. Many people would argue that some of these arrangements are not “true” families, so what is it that constitutes a “family”? What values should families be striving for?

No matter what the composition, strong families have certain things in common, I believe. They are built out of powerful, long-term commitments, promises, and obligations to one another. They are built on a set of common goals and values, which for many Americans are Judeo-Christian values, and they are built on a foundation of deep and abiding love, honor and trust. There is a delightful, old Korean folk tale that helps to illustrate some of these points that I would like to share with you.

### Two Brothers

In times gone by there lived two brothers who were very fond of each other. Their father had died years before and together they took care of their widowed mother. When she died, the two brothers divided everything evenly.

Together the two brothers worked diligently in their fields from sunup to sundown. Every autumn they had the largest harvest in the valley.

One autumn evening, after they had sacked and divided the rice harvest, the older brother thought, “Brother has lots of expenses since he just got married a few months ago. I think I will put a sack of rice in his storehouse and not tell him. If I offered it to him, I’m sure he would never accept it.” So, late that night, he put a sack of rice on his A-frame carrier and took it to his brother’s storehouse.

The next day, while tidying up his own storehouse, the older brother discovered that he had the same number of sacks of rice as the day before. “That’s odd,” he

said, shaking his head, "I'm sure I took a sack of rice to Brother's house last night." He counted his sacks again. "Well," he said, scratching the back of his head, "I'll just take him another one tonight."

So, late that night, he carried a sack of rice to his brother's house. The next morning, he was again surprised to find he had the same number of sacks as before. He shook his head over and over and decided he would take his brother another sack that night.

After a late dinner he put the rice on his A-frame and set out for his brother's house. It was a full moon and he could see the path quite clearly. Ahead he saw a man carrying something bulky.

"Why, Brother!" they both called out at the same time. The two brothers put down their sacks and laughed long and hard. They both understood the mystery behind their unchanging number of sacks of rice. The younger brother thought his older brother needed the rice because he had a larger family.

### III

We are now ready to take a closer look at the actual bare bones of family storytelling. Subconsciously we are repeating family stories almost continuously. They are our points of reference in almost every situation. For me, walking by a theater and smelling the heady aroma of popcorn I am transported back to Sunday afternoons in my childhood. After falling asleep on the sofa while watching some sporting event on t.v., my father would leisurely stroll out to the kitchen around 5:00, take out the old and battered aluminum popcorn popper and proceed to make Sunday "dinner." It became a tradition in our household; popcorn and apples every Sunday night. Such a simple thing like the smell of popcorn brings me back my father.

I walk by the window of a flower shop, where I catch a glimpse of a lily-of-the-valley nestled among many other plants and I am instantly reminded of my grandmother. Oh, how she loved flowers and particularly that one! The memories start to flow. A sight, a sound, a gesture, a feeling on the skin can all set an unexpected memory in motion. By recording family history, we are doing what comes naturally. We are using memory as reference and resource.

D.G. Fulford, in her book "One Memory at a Time" recounts the story of a woman, an engineering professor at a university she once met, who had lost most of her possessions in a

flood. All of her files containing years of research, data, and knowledge were gone. So were her clothing, her dishes, her pictures, everything. Her biggest heartbreak, however, was the loss of her family history. Her late mother had collected anecdotes over the years; she herself writing some, while other family members added others. The stories grew to two hundred and fifty pages. This engineer had kept her sentimental possession in a drawer in her nightstand so it would be beside her while she slept.

Her mother had died a few years before the flood and all the aunts and uncles had also passed away. Their stories were in the nightstand, though, still a family. Well, the flood took the nightstand with the rest of her possessions and she was devastated. She prayed that she could have her mother's handwriting back and her prayers were answered. More than a month after the flood, a rancher found the nightstand drawer stuck in his barbwire fence six miles downstream. In the drawer were the stories that her mother had written. Her mother's handwriting was soaked, but still intact. Our stories can survive us. Our stories can survive anything. Our families will live forever in our stories.

Have you seen the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*? Tom Hanks plays a father whose wife has passed away. He later falls in love with Meg Ryan, with the help of his rather precocious son, but the part of that movie that speaks directly to what we are discussing here is a scene in which the little boy, frightened and worried, admits that he is beginning to forget his mother. The father asks him if he remembers how she could peel an apple in one long, curly strip. The whole apple. And with that, a look comes over the little boy's face. It is as if his beloved, deceased mother has stepped through his bedroom door one more time. This is family history. These are the details that keep our loved ones with us; the peeling of apples, the smell of popcorn.

There seems to be a renewed interest in America these days in finding out about one's ancestors, and creating one's family tree. You can buy computer software that will allow you to do this very neatly and with a minimum of fuss. Just plug in the names and dates in the squares and you are done. This is a very geometric way of presenting the family, however. It has always reminded me of those sentences that we used to diagram so long ago in school; you know, the main lines containing the nouns and verbs with the other parts of speech branching off from them. Telling stories will help to put faces and actions and personalities to those names in the squares. It will bring them to life and make them so much more interesting.

My maternal grandfather was William. William's square connects with Magdalena (Lena)'s. Now Lena I know because she lived with my family, even before I was born and until I graduated from high school. William however, was just a name until I came across some excerpts from a tribute to him written by his youngest son, my uncle Eddie. It was

entitled "I Remember Papa." Following are some of those excerpts.

Our father was a bit old-fashioned--he didn't smoke, drink, chew, dip snuff or smoke pot! For many years the children called him Papa or Pa because he thought "Dad" was not quite respectful. He loved to play games like checkers, Rook, Carrom, horseshoes or baseball. Like most of us, he also liked to win, and often indulged in a whoop and a holler if his team pulled through in a squeaker.

I remember him as one who loved and helped his fellow man. When cattle drives came through on a dry year--and we did not know when our well would run dry--Dad still would not turn them away. When our preacher's salary was inadequate to live on, he and Mother shared their farm produce generously and consistently. When someone needed a summer job, he often provided it even though he could scarcely afford to pay the wages and prospects for a crop were bleak.

I remember Pa as one who was well-read and tried to carry out his responsibilities of citizenship. We always had newspapers and periodicals to read and discussed politics and government at home. Because he shared Woodrow Wilson's dream of a world government and a world where men would go to war no more, he broke a lifetime tradition and voted Democratic.

Through these "stories" I begin to understand a little about the grandpa who died before I was born and I feel like I have found the missing puzzle pieces. Now I can put a personality to the face in the pictures, the name on the family tree. He has finally come to life for me.

#### IV

We could spend hours discussing all the things that can stop you from starting your family history project, but that would not be very productive. Anything can stop you. These stoppers are not mere excuses either. They are real. There is not enough time, you say. There is no one around I can ask for the stories. I am not a decent writer. My stories are not interesting enough to tell and surely no one would want to listen anyway. It is just too huge a project. I have no idea where to begin.

Books about writing will tell you to begin by beginning; sit yourself down and put something on the paper, anything. Make the first mark, own the page. This may work for some but I would like to suggest instead that you wait a bit. Start by reading. Bob Greene

and D.G. Fulford have written a guidebook for putting together personal histories entitled, "To Our Children's Children; Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come." It is filled with questions on a wide range of topics; questions that are designed to stimulate your thinking, to induce the memories to flow. They will help you recall the times you have been through, the people you have known and the places you have gone. The authors suggest that you need not go in any specific order or even to answer all of the questions. Some of them will not apply to you and some you may find just too silly to even think about. Choose a section and read over the questions. If they do not appeal to you at that time, choose another section. Sit back and let them "...percolate awhile. This is not procrastinating, it is marinating. The stories await backstage, practicing their lines, getting better. When you take off the lid, they fly out so fast it can be startling..."<sup>1</sup>

Just to give you an idea of what the questions are like, I have chosen a few from several different categories and ones that I particularly enjoyed reminiscing about.

"Did you play with your cousins?"

"Was there much music in your house? Do you remember it being a quiet house or one filled with noise?"

"Did you collect anything? Bugs, baseball cards, marbles, china figurines?"

"How did you get to school? Did you walk?"

"What was your first-grade teacher's name? What was she like? How about your second-grade teacher? Your third-grade teacher?"

"What Christmas decorations did you put up every year?"

"What are your campfire treats?"

"Did you and your schoolmates exchange Valentines in elementary school? Did you make them yourselves?"

"What was your favorite song in high school?"

"What movies have you wanted to see more than once?"

"Do you remember your first kiss?"

"Who were the big crushes in your life? What movie star did you have a crush on? What real person?"

"Do you remember telling your husband that you were pregnant? Was it a surprise, or a long-planned-for event? Do you remember telling your parents?"

"What was the best day of your life?"

"How did you meet the friend you're most comfortable with now? How did you meet the couple you're most comfortable with now?"

"Did you have loved ones in Vietnam? Did they all come back?"

“What would your dream house be?”

“What was the most beautiful hotel room you ever stayed in?”

“Who taught you to drive? What was that like? Were you intimidated?”

“Was there one moment in your life that changed everything for you?”

Some people like to write their memories down, while others like to talk them into a tape recorder. Choose which is more comfortable for you. Do not rush. You are not working on a dead-line. The most important thing to keep in mind is that this is meant to be a pleasure to do, not a task to be completed.

Maybe you have never considered that the stories from your life are important. Be assured, however, that they will be cherished far beyond anything money could buy. Far into the future, your family will read your words or listen to your voice and be grateful that you took the time to put together this wonderful gift for them.

## V

As I mentioned in the introduction, my mother came from a rather large family. She had five older brothers and two younger ones. She was the only girl. Each one of these eight people had an average of three children themselves. This second generation, of which I am a part, have also married and had children, and some of those children have had children and on and on. Our family tree is quite extensive! There are two main traditions in this great family that I wish to talk about here. One is reunions, and the other is a family newsletter.

For as long as I can remember we have had periodic reunions; the first few being held in South Dakota, where Grandpa William and Grandma Lena lived for many years. My mother and her two younger brothers were also born there and four of her older brothers continued to live there after marriage. The early reunions do not stand out so clearly in my mind as I was just a child. What I remember most was playing with a “whole passel of cousins” I hadn’t seen for a long time. There was always something to do for the kids and the grownups usually sat around and talked for hours on end, swapping stories and recalling days past.

In my memory it was in 1991 that we started a slightly new tradition. It was decided that we would have these “big” reunions once every five years, with little mini reunions in between. For the five-year reunions a planning committee is chosen, a site is decided upon and all arrangements made during that five-year period before the next one. It is usually held in a state park or similar facility that can accomodate large groups. It runs for three to four days, with plenty of planned activities such as boating, hiking, golf, and

swimming, along with side trips to nearby attractions like a zoo or space center. Breakfasts and lunches are on our own but the evening meals are usually catered. The last evening is a sit-down dinner and talent show, with the festivities coming to a beautiful close with a worship service and memorial service for all those who have passed on since the last reunion. This latter activity I think is the true highlight for all as this family has been built upon a deep and abiding faith in God. We are an extremely close family.

The past two reunions have seen quite large numbers attending with 131 in 1995 in Colorado and over 120 in 2000 in Alabama. With so many people it is virtually impossible to remember who everyone is. Nature too, has a rather underhanded way of making it difficult to identify someone after five years, as hairlines recede and middles expand, so we have name tags identifying who we are and which part of the family we belong to. T-shirts that have been especially designed for that particular reunion are also available for purchase as a nice memento. (See the appendix for a picture)

For the spouses of these descendents of William and Lena it could be a quite daunting affair to be thrown in with so many unfamiliar faces and names and yet I have never seen one shy away or not be willing to attend. Each new "outlaw" is welcomed with open arms, a ready smile and a story about this beautiful family that they have now become members of. Everyone eagerly awaits the next reunion. My mother's youngest brother Eddie is the only one left of the first generation and as he turns 83 this year, he begins to wonder if he will be around for the next reunion. We all sincerely hope he is, but if the good Lord calls him home to be with his brothers and sister who have gone before him his stories will still be alive. He is not just a name on a square.

The first generation of the family instigated this next tradition that I wish to talk about. In the days when it first started, it was called the Round Robin letters. It would begin with one of my mother's brothers who would write a letter of news about his family and put it in an envelope to pass on to the next brother, who would do the same and so on around the group until all the letters arrived back at the starting point. The original letter would be taken out and a new letter added. Since everyone was scattered over such a large area, this was a great way to keep in touch, at least on a fairly regular basis. It usually took about a month for the letters to make it all the way around. At some point the Round Robin letters became the IF letters, or Immediate Family letters, when the second generation started filling in after a parent had died or had become too infirm to continue writing.

Then about seven or eight years ago the custom developed into quite a production. It is now a spiral-bound newsletter that is published three times a year at a very low subscription cost. It is filled with letters from many different family members detailing what they

have been doing, color photos, birth announcements, and the ever-present stories. (See appendix for picture) One of my first cousins has taken on the arduous task of collecting, collating, printing and mailing out this impressive newsletter. He is our third editor after his sister and another cousin before that. The title for this paper is taken from the title of that newsletter. There was a contest to decide on the name and "The Relative Truth" was chosen. Although I subscribe to a number of different publications, this is the only one that I devour from cover to cover as soon as it arrives in the mailbox. It is from my family and that I believe says it all.

## VI

In an essay on the importance of story, the noted psychologist and author James Hillman comments, "I have tried to show in my work how adult and child have come to be set against each other; childhood tends to mean wonder, imagination, creative spontaneity, while adulthood (tends to mean) the loss of these perspectives. So, the first task, as I see it, is re-storying the adult...in order to restore the imagination to the primary place in consciousness in each of us, regardless of age." (In Moore, "Creating a Family Storytelling Tradition," page 18.)

Let your imagination flow, recall the stories of your life and share them with the ones you love, your family. Let this be your gift of the heart.

I would like to leave you with one last story. It comes to us from the Seneca Indian people, who lived in what is now upstate New York. It tells of a time at the dawn of human history, when the very first story was told.

### The Story Stone

Long ago, there lived a small boy among the Seneca people. He lived in a village at the edge of a great forest with his mother and father and his younger sister. And life was good for them. The men hunted for animals in the forest and hunted for fish in the streams. The women gathered healing herbs and grew corn, beans, and squash. The land provided everything they needed. But they weren't quite human yet. Because, you see, they didn't have any stories.

Long winter nights they would sit up by the fire, staring into the flames, and after they had said everything they wanted to say, there was nothing else to speak about, so they simply rolled over and went to sleep. You can imagine how boring that was.

Then one day, in the spring, the boy was out hunting birds with his bow and arrow. He was getting to be a pretty good shot, and whenever he brought home a few birds at the end of the day, his parents praised him, and he felt good for being able to help out.

Then one day, while he was out hunting birds, he had a strange experience. He had shot a few birds and had come into a clearing in the forest. In the center of the clearing sat a large, rounded boulder. The boy sat down on the boulder to rest, laying his birds on top of the stone.

As the boy was sitting there, a voice right near him said, "Would you like to hear a story?"

The boy sprang up and looked around. He expected to see a man nearby. For it was a man's voice that had spoken, the voice of a very old man, full of gravel and wind. But there was no man near.

Then the voice said again, "Would you like to hear a story?"

The boy glanced around. Still he couldn't see anyone.

The voice said again, "Would you like me to tell you a story?"

It was then that the boy realized the voice was coming from the stone. He ran a few steps away, leaving his birds on top of the boulder.

"Leave me these birds and I will tell you a story," the voice of the stone offered.

The boy looked into the gray surface of the stone and thought he could make out the features of an old man.

"Who are you?" the boy asked, frightened. "And what are these things you're going to tell me? What are stories?"

"They are things that happened long ago. I am a Story Stone. I have been here for a long time, and I remember everything I have seen. Now that the humans are going to live here, it is time to pass a little of what we have learned along to them."

The boy was torn at first; part of him wanted to run, leaving his birds behind. But another part of him was curious. And there was something about the voice of the stone, something deep and rumbling, that fascinated him.

"You may have the birds," the boy said at last. "Now tell me one of these stories."

The stone began, "Long ago, in the far-off times, when the world was first made..." and went on to tell how the world had been created and how the land had been formed and how the stars were set in the sky--all things the boy had wondered about. He had not known who to ask about these things, though.

The boy sat down in the meadow by the stone and listened the whole day, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

The boy would have sat there all day and all night too, listening to those stories, which answered questions he hadn't even thought about. But at last, as the sun was dipping down, that stone said, "That is enough for now. You come back tomorrow and I'll tell you some more stories."

The boy left the birds on the rock and hurried home in the twilight. When his mother saw that he had been gone all day and hadn't brought back any birds, she said, "What were you doing out there?"

The boy answered as boys usually answer that question: "Oh, nothing."

That night, the mother called her daughter aside and said, "Listen, your brother is doing something out in the woods all day. I want you to follow him tomorrow and find out what he does out there."

"All right, Mother," the girl said.

The next day, the boy set out for the woods, eager to hear more stories. His sister followed him, being careful to keep back in the trees so he would not know she was there. She brought along her berry-picking basket so that she would have an excuse for being in the woods. She picked a few berries and dropped them in the basket just for show.

The girl watched as the boy shot two birds, then took them to a rounded boulder in the center of a clearing. She watched as her brother did a strange thing: he carefully laid the birds on top of the rock, then he sat down on the grass nearby and stayed sitting there for a long time. His sister wondered: What was he doing? Was this some special way of hunting? Was he setting a trap for some animal?

Peering through the bushes, she strained to see his face and noticed that he was listening very hard to something.

Carefully she slipped forward and then she heard it too--it was the voice of an old man, speaking in a way that she had never heard before. But she couldn't see anyone in the clearing except her brother. The girl was curious, and, since she was a straightforward kind of person, she walked right up to her brother and asked, "Who is that talking?" As soon as she spoke, the voice fell silent.

The boy spun around.

"Who is doing that talking?" she asked him again.

The boy knew it was no use trying to fool his sister. "It's the Story Stone," he said. "Give it some berries and it will tell you a story."

"A story?" the girl asked. "What's a story?"

"Give it your berries and you'll find out," the boy said.

The girl was curious, so she scooped up a handful of berries from her basket and carefully placed them on top of the rock. Then she sat in the grass beside her brother.

"Welcome, sister," the stone said. "I was just telling your brother the story of how the deer got its antlers." And the Story Stone went on and told that story and another and another, told stories through the whole morning and afternoon, as the two children sat spell-bound in the sunlit meadow.

At last the sun was dipping down, and the Story Stone said, "It's enough for one day. Come back tomorrow, and I'll tell you more."

The children walked home silently, thinking of the stories they had heard.

When their mother saw them coming back from the woods with only a few berries and maybe one bird to show for their day's work, she called the sister aside. "What was he doing out there?" the mother asked.

The girl just smiled. "Oh, nothing," she said.

That night, when the children went to sleep, they had wondrous dreams and began to see the things they had heard in the stories, dancing and singing. Their mother saw them smiling in their sleep. When her husband came in from hunting that night, she spoke to him quietly: "Our children are doing something out in the woods," she said. "I don't think it's bad, but it's something. Will you follow them tomorrow and find out what it is?" The husband agreed.

The next morning the boy and girl set out for the woods early, eager to hear more stories. Their father set out too, following them, taking along his fishing line so he would have an excuse to be in the woods. The boy shot a few birds, the girl picked some berries, and the man, just to look busy, caught a few fish.

The boy and girl came to the clearing where the Story Stone sat in the morning sun and carefully placed their gifts of food on the stone. The girl remarked that the food they placed the day before was gone.

"That's the way it is," the boy explained. "I think the stone sends his messengers the squirrels and the ants to carry the food away for him."

When the children had seated themselves, they heard the deep, comforting voice of the stone speaking, saying to them, "Welcome, children. Today I will tell you the story of how the first humans came to earth and how they learned to live here..." And the stone began to speak.

Meanwhile, the father had been watching his children from the edge of the clearing. He saw his children sitting very still. And when he crept closer, he heard the voice, but he couldn't figure out where it was coming from. When he saw that his children were not in danger, he decided to wait patiently and see if he could figure it out. At last he understood that the children were listening to a voice coming from the stone. He was overcome with wonder.

The man stood up and walked into the clearing. As soon as he approached, the stone stopped speaking.

"What is this you have discovered?" the father asked.

The children laughed. "It's a Story Stone, Father. Give it one of your fish and it will tell

you a story.”

The man wrinkled his brow. “A story? What’s that?”

“Give it your fish,” the sister said, “ and you’ll find out!”

The man did as his daughter had told him, then sat down on the grass between his children.

The Story Stone spoke, its deep voice filling the meadow. “Welcome. It’s a lucky man who comes to this place with his children. I was just telling them the story of how Rabbit taught the humans to make fire.” And the Story Stone told tales the rest of the day as the father and his children sat, wide-eyed, listening together.

As the sun was dipping down, the stone said, “It is enough. Come back tomorrow, and I’ll tell you more.”

The children and their father rose and walked quietly back to the village. “We must share this great thing with your mother,” the man said. And the children agreed.

That night after the children were asleep, the mother said, “Did you find out? What were they doing out there?”

The man smiled. “Yes, I found out and you were right. It isn’t something bad, but it is something. They found a stone that tells stories.”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t understand. What’s this thing you call a story?”

The man grinned. “Come with us tomorrow and you’ll find out.”

The next morning the whole family set out for the meadow, each bringing a small gift for the stone. The boy brought a bird, the girl brought some berries, the father brought a fish, and the mother, still unsure of what she was expected to do, brought along some corn she had grown.

When they arrived at the Story Stone, they placed their gifts on top of the rock and sat in the meadow. As the sun came up, the stone began to speak.

“Welcome. You are the first family in all creation to sit together and hear stories. It is a happy day for me. I will now tell you stories about how the humans came to know the animals and the plants...” And the stone told stories all that day, as the family sat in the meadow, listening and dreaming along with the stone.

The boy thought that it was the best of all the days of storytelling he had heard. It delighted him to see his mother and father smiling and to see his sister’s rapt attention when the Story Stone spoke.

At last, the sun dipped down and the forest began to darken. The stone finished its last story. Then the stone spoke to the family, saying, “This is a great day. But it is also a sad day for me. I have waited a long, long time to tell you these stories, and I have enjoyed telling them to you very much. But now my stories are ended, and I won’t speak anymore.”

The boy felt a stab of pain go through his heart.

“But that can’t be!” he said. “Now that we have come to enjoy these stories, we don’t want to be without them.”

“You won’t be without them,” the stone answered, “because now *you* are the storytellers, and it will be your task to tell the stories to others, just as I have to you. Some of the people who will hear your stories will remember every part, and the stories will appear in their dreams, just as they have in yours. They will be the storytellers, and you should treat them well. Always give them a gift when they tell a story, just as you have done for me. Some of the people will only remember parts of the stories, and some of the people will forget the stories altogether. I think this is just how it will be. But if you keep the storytelling alive, you will never lose the stories I have told you.

“Farewell. I will remember these four days we have spent together for thousands and thousands of years.” Then the stone was silent.

The family walked home together in the twilight. When they got home, they built a huge fire and invited everyone in the village to come and sit with them at night. They told the other families about their adventure and their neighbors nodded their heads.

One old woman rose and said, “What you have told us is very interesting. But there is one thing I don’t understand. What is this thing the stone gave you? This thing called a story?”

The boy laughed. “Give me a bit of that delicious corn bread you make, and I will show you!”

The woman gladly handed over a piece of the bread. The boy stood before the assembled village and began to speak, letting the images the stone had placed in his mind speak through him. He told the very first story the stone had told him on the first day they had met, about how the world had come to be. The people sat, listening and smiling and dreaming, as if they were one person. Then the boy went on and told the other stories he had learned. Late that night, the people carried their sleeping children home and as they fell into sleep, the village was filled with dreams.

In the nights that followed, each person in the boy’s family took a turn, telling the stories the stone had given him or her. And it was just as the stone had said: Some people remembered the stories very well, and they told the stories to others. And some people forgot the stories. That, too, was just as the stone had said it would be.

Today, many of the old stories have been forgotten. That is true. But nothing is really lost. Some people say that the time has come for the stones to speak to us again, to tell us their stories, if we will only listen.

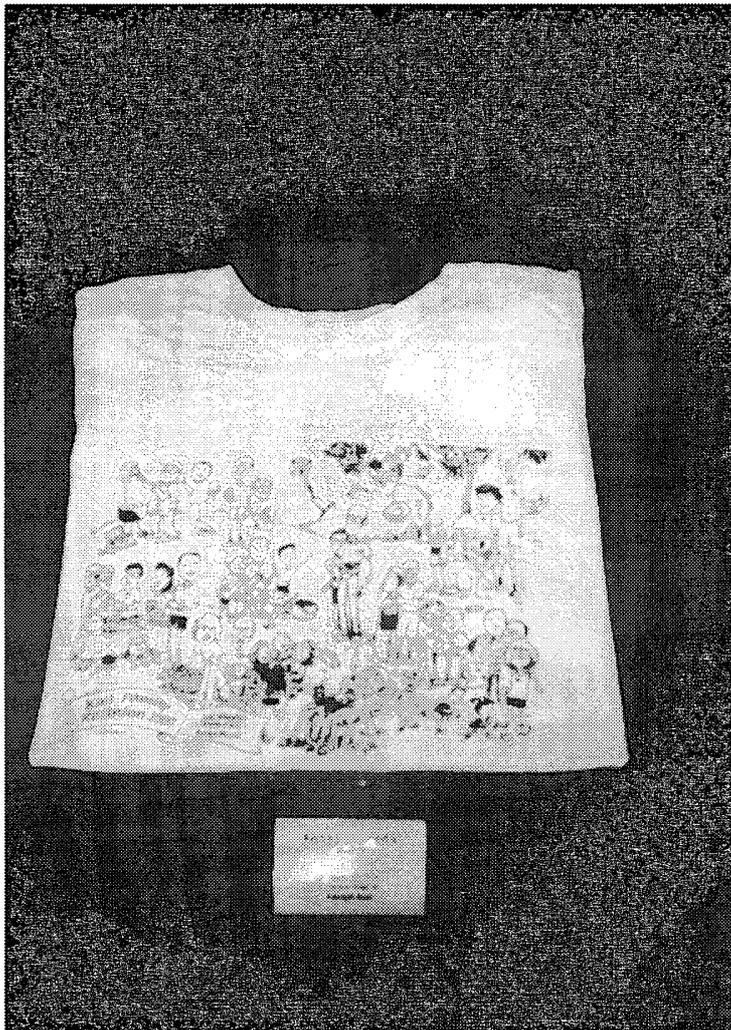
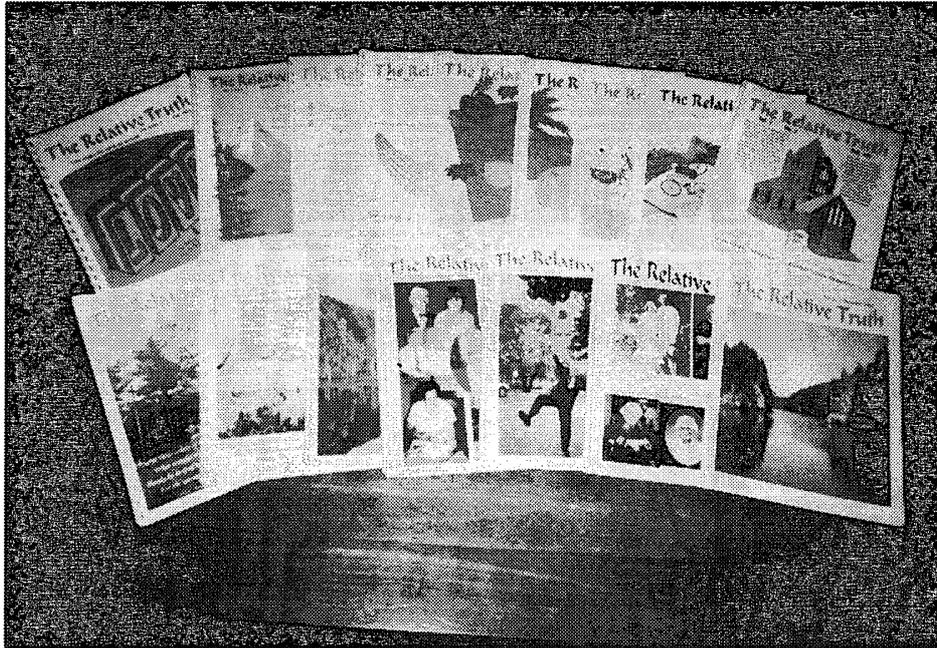
So let us open our ears and our hearts and hear what the stones are saying to us, calling us to remember, calling us back to the very first day when the very first stories were told.<sup>2</sup>

And these are relative truths.

Notes

1. D. G. Fulford, *One Memory at a Time*. (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2000), 81.
2. Robin Moore, *Creating a Family Storytelling Tradition Awakening the Hidden Storyteller*. (Little Rock, Arkansas: August House, 1991), 126-132.

Appendix



### References

- Fulford, D. G. *One Memory at a Time; Inspiration & Advice for Writing Your Family Story*. New York, New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- Greene, Bob and D. G. Fulford. *To Our Children's Children; Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come*. New York, New York: Doubleday, 1993.
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