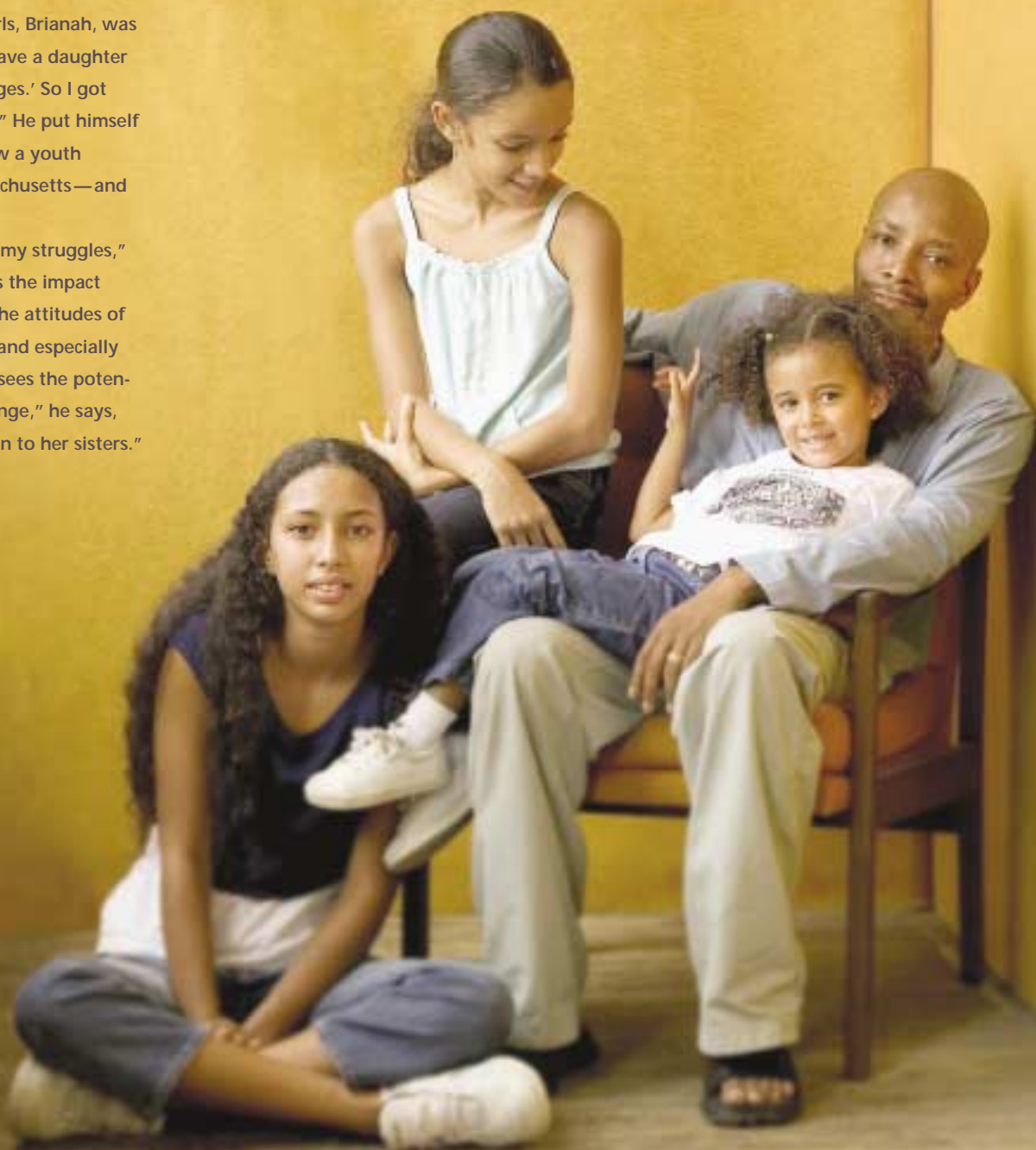


Cautionary Tales

Dan Edwards has no wealth of family lore to pass down to his children, so instead he gets deeply personal with his stories. Edwards was adopted at an early age, and by 13 he was on his own ("I bounced around various couches") and was finding trouble with gangs and violence. "I was a menace to my neighborhood," he says. "But I renounced that."

The transformation came when the first of Edwards's three girls, Brianah, was born. "I thought, 'Now I have a daughter here; I have to make changes.' So I got on a more righteous path." He put himself through college and is now a youth program director in Massachusetts—and a devoted family man.

"I tell my daughters of my struggles," says Edwards. And he sees the impact of his cautionary tales in the attitudes of Baylee, 3; Kwestchan, 11; and especially 13-year-old Brianah. "She sees the potential in herself to make change," he says, "and to pass that notion on to her sisters."



tell me our story

Relating your family history is a clever way to pass along
life lessons to your child. BY PHIL CATALFO

I heard the story almost 40 years ago, but it rings in my mind as though it were just last night. Recounted under grave circumstances—a gathering of the extended family following my beloved grandfather’s sudden death—it nevertheless provoked helpless laughter in my parents and the other adults seated around our kitchen table. The tale concerned my mother’s Uncle Frank, revealing his character in a nutshell and demonstrating that among the severe, hardworking Sicilian immigrants of our clan, at least one lovable scoundrel had leavened the collective gestalt.

It seems that one day when Uncle Frank was a young man, he was strolling along in our Brooklyn neighborhood when he happened upon a large sign that apparently had fallen from its bracket above a storefront. After making sure no one was watching, he threw himself on the sidewalk beside the sign and began to writhe and scream as though the Chrysler Building had landed on him. The business owner rushed out and, in the manner of the day, negotiated a cash restitution for Uncle Frank’s “injuries.” I’m pretty sure this windfall was invested at a nearby racetrack. ►►

Through family stories, we learn what traits abound in our gene pool and, by extension, in the larger human family of which we are members.

As one of my uncles told the tale, I was transfixed by the brazenness of Frank's behavior, and also by the story's ability to transform a time of heartbreak into riotous mirth, if only for a few minutes. This and countless other stories told around the kitchen table during my childhood showed me that a family, even when composed of motley personalities, can be pulled together, especially in times of tragedy. My sense of belonging to a chaotic but loving tribe deepened.

Thanks to the power of these ancestral tales, I've been an unabashed teller of stories ever since I was old enough to get a reaction. When I became a parent, I basked in the "responsibility" of story time, regaling my kids with the vibrant details of their relatives' escapades or making up whimsical stories on the spot. I always knew I was providing good entertainment, but I've learned that there was a lot more to this family history for my kids. One day my son Peter interviewed me for a term paper, and I told him about our family's move from New York to San Diego when I was 11 years old—about how exciting the cross-country drive was for me, about what my life had been like in our tightly knit Italian ghetto in Brooklyn, and how shockingly different it was on the West Coast. When I read my son's report, I realized he had gained insight not just about where I grew up but about where he came from. "I learned that my father used to be a normal kid just like me," Peter wrote, "and I found a new respect for my old man."

Through family stories, we learn what traits abound in our gene pool and, by extension, in the larger human family of which we are members. And when these stories are transmitted orally, the act of hearing them connects us to a tradition stretching back to the earliest human communities: sitting around campfires telling tales of individuals real and imagined, feats historical and mythical, instilling wonder and understanding and a sense of one's place in the world. "The family stories we tell and hear," says Jennifer Jacobson, a professional storyteller and mother of two, "define who we are and how we act by putting us in a constellation of our relatives."

Besides cultivating in a child an awareness of family identity—who we are—family stories also help develop an understanding of and a commitment to ►

Telling Good Stories

(regardless of your flair or memory)

If you're intimidated by the very thought of telling your kids a story, take heart. Storyteller Jennifer Jacobson, who leads workshops for parents who feel they lack the artfulness gene (or something), offers this advice:

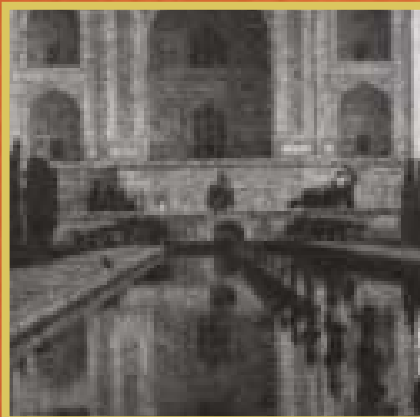
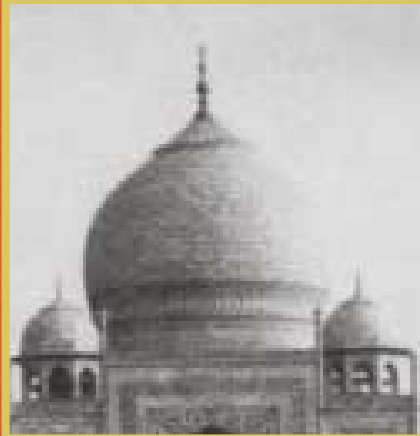
Know Your Audience. Who is this kid you're telling the story to? What does she like? What issues is she dealing with? Tailor your story accordingly.

Reflect on Your Own Life. Kids love to hear about adults' childhoods, especially "firsts"—the first time you went to preschool, the first time you rode a bike. "Such stories make the grown-up into the child, which creates a tremendous moment of empathy between parent and child," says Jacobson.

Tell Them About Themselves. Kids love to hear *their* stories: The Day You Were Born; How You Got Your Name; A Funny Thing You Did; and so on.

Use Objects in the Home. Think family heirlooms: That candlestick might be the only thing Grandma brought from Russia when she emigrated. What did it mean to her? What does it mean to you and your children?

Ritualize. Rearrange the furniture. Light a candle. "Mark this as a time apart," Jacobson urges. "Change the space in a way that says, 'Now it's time for something special.' Making it special helps it last." Keep in mind, of course, that if you want kids to look forward to this family ritual, you've got to keep it fun.



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Cultural Connection

The story of a family, often emblematic of the history of its people, can be an important means of preserving a cultural identity. Alison Singh Gee and Ajay Singh of Los Angeles each offer a rich cultural heritage—Alison is Chinese, Ajay is Indian—to their 3-year-old daughter, Anais.

The couple infuse stories with the magical sensibilities of their ancestral homelands, lore that's deeply appealing to a preschooler's taste. Ajay talks of India as an exotic land where "elephants and camels and cows wander the streets." Alison injects Chinese imagery by referring to the backyard as a "dragon garden."

Perhaps most dramatic is the story about how Alison and Ajay learned she was pregnant with Anais while they were in India visiting the Taj Mahal, a monument to immortal love. They've woven that fact into their daughter's personal legend.

Family stories sometimes will be about Alison's late father's love for old books, as mother and daughter pore over photos of his childhood. This once prompted Anais to proclaim, "Your papa's in heaven with dragons and library books."





◀ Outrageous Lessons

Andrea McKillop of Michigan loves to tell tales of her Scottish grandfather to her 8-year-old daughter, Mary Margaret. During World War I, he and a buddy ran off at age 14 to join the Cameron Highlanders, lying about their ages in order to enlist. When McKillop's great-grandmother found out, she wrote to their commander, and they were promptly discharged. She met them at the train station and dragged them home by their ears through the streets of Edinburgh.

Mary Margaret has unpacked a handful of lessons from this one tale. "It's an example of what an outrageous person my grandfather was," says McKillop, "and she loves the idea that he would decide to do this on his own." When she first heard the story, at age 4, Mary Margaret was so taken aback by her ancestor's audacity that she asked her mother, "You mean he just went out of his house and went to join the army and he didn't tell his mommy?"

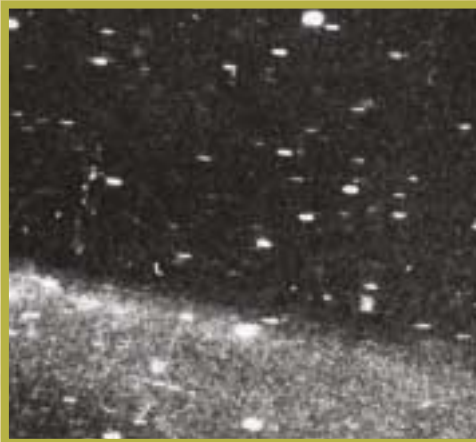
This has led Mary Margaret to a deep appreciation of independent thinking, something she recognizes in herself and takes special pride in. "When she's going off on her own path," McKillop says, "she'll say, 'I think for myself. I make my own decisions.' She has a deep sense of her own differentness."

family traditions and mores—what we do and don't do. Especially for younger children, with their acute appetite for storytelling and keen curiosity about the strange and fascinating world they have arrived in, these tales can provide an anchor in time and space and even an impetus toward a way of life. Says Jacobson, "Family stories are an important way we transmit our values."

You never know where family lore will lead. For me, the tales of rascallions and itinerant folk populating my family tree inspired a lifelong desire to visit the ancestral homeland, a longing I finally fulfilled with a pilgrimage to Sicily last year. While there I visited the town where my grandmother was born in 1905. A few months later, at her 100th birthday party, I presented her with a document certifying the official record of her birth. This piece of paper represented so much: the lives that she and her family led in the old country, the difficult voyage they undertook to start anew. It all had played out in my imagination so many times, and now it had become real: both rich lore and living heritage, part of my psychological DNA, the indispensable basis of who I am. ●



Phil Catalfo, the author of *Raising Spiritual Children in a Material World*, lives with his family in northern California, where for years his kids regularly demanded impromptu stories from him at bedtime.



Universal Truths

The stories that kids most love to hear, it seems, are ones about their own short history. Jennifer Jacobson may be an award-winning professional storyteller, but as a mom she has learned to rely on this simple but essential truth. One favorite tale details how her son Jake, 9, got his name.

When Jacobson was pregnant, she and her husband, Michael, undecided on a baby name, strolled along a lakeside dock in New England one starlit night, taking with them a list of ten names, five for boys and five for girls. They decided to utter each name and look for a “sign.” When they said “Jake,” a shooting star raced across the sky.

Jacobson told her son this story when he was 5. He immediately went off and drew a picture of the scene, saying proudly, “This is the story of my name.” To this day, Jennifer says, “He feels that he’s connected to the universe, that a star gave him his name.”