

## **Finding the Smile: Asking for Help Through Story**

Who would believe that the work and the care in living with frailty, illness and nearing death could be anything like a blessing? And how in the world could there be a way to tell stories about it?

Taking care of my husband Skip at home as we lived with the debilitating effects of pancreatic cancer was not my first opportunity for family caregiving, nor has it been my last. Skip and I accomplished that monumental and simple task of taking care of each other in that time in the company of family, friends, and neighbors over what seemed like an endless period of time. Yet it was only 10 ½ weeks.

There were many blessings to be had in that company and time, and finding the stories to tell about us returns me to the laughter and joy of it. It seemed like the hardest thing I've ever done effortlessly. That is the grace I want to pass on.

As I tell stories about that time and other caregiving times in my life I invite you to see your own place in the stories I tell, and to see the stories in your own caregiving lives. When you hear my story, listen for the good lines, the curious characters, the awe-ful moments in your own lives.

My purpose is to discuss the role of storytelling in our lives as caregivers, and in the lives of our community. When we speak our stories to each other, STORY HEALS. It is the teller who seeks to learn from the story she tells.

A good story is engrossing or entertaining or captivating or all of these. It does not necessarily convey good news; it rings true, but is not necessarily factual; and it makes the audience smile in recognition or laugh because it's funny. Even when we make it up, a happy ending has several functions: it helps the teller rekindle hope and energy; it offers a way to make sense of what happened; we use it to lift our spirits and to carry us through.

The **GOAL** of storytelling about family caregiving:

1. To make your own personal story “newly vibrant” – to bring your life with your loved one into a new light, and to invite people you care about to see it with your eyes.
2. To affirm your choices, struggles, and experiences as a family caregiver.
3. To reestablish / integrate your role as a family caregiver into your larger / broader / bigger identity.

The **DECISIONS** you make as a storyteller:

1. What to tell – and what to leave out?
  - “Good storytelling has a destination: the punchline, the payoff, the point”
  - “A good story takes the shortest path, but no shorter. Detours should never be accidental, unconscious or indulgent.”
  - “We get to edit our stories, so they have punch and meaning. It’s not like it’s our real life – it’s a story, a fake life we use to learn something from our real lives.
  - “The cure for WORDINESS is not less story but **deliberate** story.”

## 2. In what order / format?

- TALL TALE or FAIRY TALE = a world where everything works out
  - A “tall tale” is a story which combines the real and the surreal
  - A “fairy tale” has a ritual “happy ending” to a standard conflict.
  
- NARRATIVE = opens; proceeds through several threatening but ultimately surmountable obstacles; closes.
  - The **orderliness** of the plot provides a structure for feeling secure.
  - **Ritual openings:** “Once upon a time, there was a ...”; “I’m here to tell you about ...” “It was a dark and stormy night ...” “Long ago, in a faraway place, there lived a ...”
  - **Ritual closings:** Linda Ellerbee: “And so it goes.”; Walter Cronkite: “And that’s the way it is.”; Folksy: “And that’s the gospel truth!” Prayerful: “Forever and ever, Amen.”
  
- SKETCH = the highlights, or lowlights; an anecdote
  - Character and a setting
  - Vivid description, dialog, and unexpected twists
  
- Describe a moment when everything changed.
  - What images come to mind of the moment when everything changed?
  -

3. For whom?

- “The value of story-telling is to correct the balance, to compound interest, to share the wealth.”
- 

The PRINCIPLES for finding the smile:

1. You have 2 minutes.
2. Don't include all the details. It's a sketch not a landscape -- a cartoon, not a portrait.
3. Know your voice, your point of view.

STORIES are good medicine: they are small doses of what matters:

- Shared (teller)
- Interpreted (listener)
- Reinterpreted (feedback)
- Changed (teller)

A Story is a story because it has a STRUCTURE (beginning, middle, and an end), and an AUDIENCE (people who care about us and are willing to listen)

The key elements of story.-telling are

STORY  
TELLER  
AUDIENCE  
TRUTH