Armed with the Charm of Personal Stories

by Dawn Parrett Thurston

If you're like me, you probably pay as much attention to the delivery style of public speakers as you do to their content. It can be quite distracting. Since I began speaking professionally, it's a challenge to sit in the audience and absorb the information communicated without noticing how the speaker sells *herself* as well as her material. I learn new things by observing the speaker's movement and mannerisms, her expertise and eloquence, and the pizzazz of her PowerPoint.

There's another, more elusive, quality that's difficult to measure but makes the difference between merely a competent speaker and one with the ability to hold his audience in the palm of his hand. It's what I call the Charm Factor. You know what I mean, and I suspect you can easily name speakers on the genealogy circuit who have that quality.

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Some people have it in spades, seemingly without trying. For many, it's inborn. They have a natural sense of humor. They're at ease with themselves and comfortable with others. People wait in long lines to attend their lectures. Audiences warm to their personal warmth and hang on their every word.

There's another thing I've noticed in speakers armed with the Charm Factor: They tell stories, and they tell them well. They make them personal, and they make them relatable. Notice what's going on the next time you're sitting in an audience with a big grin on your face. The speaker is likely telling a story—probably one that reminds you of something you experienced.

The Power of Story

I've been a family history-writing teacher for nearly two decades. Folks who attend my classes at genealogy conferences generally have been researching their family lines for years. They've filled in the lines on their pedigree chart as much as they can. They've acquired tons of family group sheets. Now they've got a problem: no one cares. All those beautifully constructed genealogy charts make their family's eyes glaze over. They worry what will happen to all their years of research. They feel like they've failed in their attempt to build family pride and unity.

That's where I come in. No one connects with names, dates, and places, I tell them, but everyone loves a story. Stories transform names into flesh and blood people. They transform the town names into vibrant locales we can visualize. Stories bind writers and readers (or speakers and listeners) in profound ways by communicating the truths and complexity of human experience. When genealogists learn how to transform their data into stories, they will create family bonds that will continue through the generations. That's what I tell them, anyway. I suspect that's what FamilySearch.org has in mind with its new online emphasis on creating and sharing family stories.

Your Take-Away

What does all this have to do with you, a genealogy speaker? I'm glad you asked.

First off, sharing personal stories in your presentations helps you be you. It's natural to begin a lecture feeling a little stiff and jittery. We're aware of the feeling when it comes over us, and we suspect the audience does, too. Our confidence ebbs, and it's sometimes a struggle to retrieve it. If you've experienced this, you know how it feels. You may have spent hours preparing your presentation, but you didn't connect with your audience. "I wasn't on my game," you later tell your friends when they ask.

Beginning your presentation with a warm, personal story can put you on your game at the get-go. Folks in the audience will see the real you right off. You're human, just like them. They'll smile, laugh, or nod their heads, which is like catnip to a

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public speaker. The jitters fade and you're launched for success.

Personal stories also help people visualize and see the possibilities. A well-constructed PowerPoint with incisive bullet points can be an effective, efficient way to convey information. Look around your classroom and you'll see people dutifully copying each point in their notebooks. They may get what you mean, or not. If you occasionally take the opportunity to tell a well-focused personal story relating to the bullet points, you've put a human spin on the information they'll internalize and remember.

Maintaining a Balance

As we all know, a little spice can enhance a stew, but too much can irretrievably ruin it. We've all left lectures frustrated and angry because the speaker spent so much time talking about herself, we never learned anything concrete. I dislike that as much as anyone.

As with all things, balance is the key to effectiveness. Here are some guidelines I teach students who are learning to write stories. They apply equally well for telling stories:

Planning

- Map out the spots in your presentation where a story could be used to good advantage. Do you want to warm up your audience (and yourself) at the beginning? Are there places in the middle where the information becomes too heavy or complex? Do you want to send them off with a rousing, motivating story?
- Determine the point of your story and plan how you're going to reach it. Some storytellers waste time and audience patience by providing too many details or veering off on tangents.
- That said, be sure to include enough details so your listeners can visualize the situation and the people and places involved. Details are one of the most important components in effective storytelling—as novelists know. Plan your details effectively so you can get good mileage from each word.
- Be real. Refrain from being the hero of your stories. The more honest and vulnerable you appear in your stories, the more effective and likeable you'll be.
- Plan the length of your story so it doesn't dwarf other important aspects of your presentation.

Delivery

- Practice your story, over and over, so you're comfortable with the details and sequence.
- Use your body as well as your voice. Walk around, gesture.

Resources

- Watch effective storytellers and note what works for them. Garrison Keillor is one of my favorites. You can watch him tell his delightful stories about the citizens of Lake Wobegon at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzF2Jw2jZd8. You'll find other fine speakers to emulate at http://www.ted.com/talks.
- Polish your story skills with these fine books: Doug Lipman's *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play* and Akash Karia's *Public Speaking: Storytelling Techniques for Electrifying Presentations*

Finally, I recognize that not every genealogy presentation topic lends itself to a Garrison Keillor treatment. At the same time, I believe that nearly any subject can be made more interesting and every speaker more charming with the addition of some well-told personal stories. If you've ever held the audience in the palm of your hand, you know it feels fabulous, far better than any measly speaker's honorarium you'll receive on your way out the door.

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