Communicating Truth

by Beth Watson Foulk (www.genealogydecoded.com)

I'm not talking about falsehoods, misstatements, inaccuracies, or plain old lies in this article. I have no doubt that every speaker does his or her best to present the facts in a true and honest manner.

When I talk about "communicating truth," I mean something deeper. As genealogy speakers, we're storytellers. And most often the stories we tell are about deceased people we may have never known and certainly our audience will not have known. We share stories about their lives, their trials and triumphs, and their hopes and dreams in a historical context that we may not be able to personally relate to. I haven't experienced the horror of war, the trial of transatlantic migration, or the destitution of poverty. So how do you tell a story truthfully about someone you've never met who lived in a time not your own and experienced something you have not experienced?

Hummm ...

What can happen, and I confess I have done, is relate the facts as I know them. My ancestor lived here, moved here, had these children, and died here. The story has about as much life and color as a black and white transparency. Not surprisingly my audience responds with as much interest as if I've read the dictionary to them.

May I propose an alternative approach?

While telling the story of the ancestor who moved across the country in a covered wagon, remember how hard it was for *you* to move to the new house with three young children in tow and the hassle it was to get the dog kenneled, the gas hooked up, find the toilet paper, and keep from screaming at the kindly new neighbor who wanted to chat for an hour while the moving truck's clock was ticking. That's a story you know because you lived it. The emotions you felt were probably not unlike those of the subject of your story. So when you tell the historic tale, it will come to life as your personal truth imbues the ancestor's story.

You've told the story of your great-grandmother who lost three children at birth one hundred times to an audience that stared back at you with blank faces. It's tragic! You want to shake them into understanding. Next time tell the same story and think about someone you know who lost a child at any age. What were they experiencing—grief, anger, frustration, despair? How long did it take them to start functioning again? Did it change their personalities? Don't share the modern story, just keep it in mind as you tell the historic story. Watch the reaction of the audience.

By layering your own emotional truth behind or underneath a historic story, you add a whole new dimension to the experience not only for yourself but also for your audience. There's no dramatic interpretation necessary. Indeed, don't try, it will seem forced. Just let the memories flow through your mind's eye as you tell the story. Your voice will naturally do the rest of the work.

One of the high arts of storytelling is conveying the emotion—truthful emotion—behind the narrative. It's not an easy skill to master, especially when working with historic figures whose lives are seemingly so different and remote. However, if given an opportunity to let the truth come through, the story will blossom and the audience will reward you with true emotion of their own.

This article originally appeared in the May 2013 issue of *Speak!*, volume 22, number 2, page 6