



# Bridging the Generation Gap through Storytelling

| *Understanding the differences between generations and trying to bridge the gap.*

## Introduction

Mr. I is an elderly man living with his wife of forty years and his two grown sons. He is blind and feeble, almost completely dependent on his sons and wife for daily care. Recently a conflict about who will inherit Mr. I's estate has put additional stress on the family. Mr. I is reluctant to make a will, and the situation is complicated by the fact that the sons are very different from one another in both personalities and interests. They have been rivals for their father's approval all their lives.

Recently, Mr. I asked his oldest son to prepare some venison stew for him. While his son was out hunting, his wife dressed his youngest son in rough clothing like his brother and sent him to his father with stew. As Mr. I ate, the son lied to him about his identity and asked Mr. I to make his will and settle the estate. Mr. I agreed and gave his word. It was only later he found out about the betrayal; now he feels bound to give his estate to his younger son. Mr. I has signed his will, and his younger son has left home after learning of his brother's anger and desire to hurt him.

Mr. I was born when his parents were very old. From his earliest years his parents told him the special nature of his birth and what it meant. They told him that he was a child of God's promise. He was meant to be the father of a great nation of people. God promises that the generations that came after Mr. I would receive blessings of land and a covenant relationship with God that would last forever. It was the blessing he most wanted to pass into the hands of his sons.

After many years of separation, Mr. I's sons reconciled and were both with him when he died.

Although this story is about a family who lived a long time ago, the issues it raises are still familiar to families today. Adult children and aging parents still face chal-



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lenges in their relationships. The dynamics of relating to each other over the years still interfere with communication and make the relationships confusing and stressful. Aging parents value the tangible and intangible things they want to pass on to their children and the generations after them, and they are frustrated when their adult children do not seem to value these things in the same way. Gaps in communication are a reality that both aging parents and adult children address as they try to bridge the differences between them.

This story lacks some twenty-first-century particularities, but in many ways it reflects truths reaching back into the history of humankind. It is the purpose of this study to use the story of this one family to look at the relationships between today's aging parents and adult children, to learn about current social theories about generations, and to consider the role of storytelling in family communication.

Data gathered by the Pew Research Center tells us that, like the family of Mr. I, 16 percent of American households now contain at least two generations. One in five persons twenty-five to thirty-four years old and the

same percentage of those over sixty-five now live in multigenerational households.<sup>1</sup>

Other research by Pew revealed that “Most boomers have children to worry about, and most have at least one living parent. . . . Also, some baby boomers . . . find themselves in a ‘sandwich’ phase of life—supporting children or aging parents, or sometimes both. A 2005 Pew Research Center survey found that half of all boomers were raising one or more young children and/or providing primary financial support to one or more adult children. . . . An additional two-in-ten were providing some financial assistance to a parent.”<sup>2</sup>

## Generation Theory

One of the ways to bridge the generation gap is to understand the differences in perspectives that exist between generations. These differences may not simply stem from individual characteristics but may be rooted in the events and experience of the generation into which they were born.

The familiar term “boomers” burst in the American consciousness with the publication in 1991 of Neil Howe and William Strauss’s book, *Generations: The History of America’s Future 1584–2069*. Their social theory about generations changed our language about generations and gave us some new understandings about the tensions that exist between generations.

From Howe and Strauss come the terms Traditionalists (born between 1925 and 1942), Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960), Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981), and Millennials (born between 1982 and 1998). The most recent generation, Generation Z, born between 1999 and 2019, are now children.

Howe and Strauss propose that the history of America is made up of a succession of generational biographies, beginning in 1584 and moving through each generation up to those being born today. Their theory maintains that each generation belongs to one of four types and that these types of generations repeat themselves through the decades in a fixed pattern. Each cycle is about ninety years long and is divided into “turnings” that themselves are about twenty-two years long. Those born and raised during certain “turnings” share similar cultural and social experiences that lead to distinct generational characteristics and perspectives.

This theory can be helpful in suggesting the distinct generational characteristics and perspectives of the two generations under consideration: the Traditionalists—now in their sixties, seventies, and eighties—and their adult children, the Baby Boomers—now in their forties and fifties. Boomers, in turn, are “sandwiched” between their Traditionalist parents and Gen X or Millennialist children. Influenced by events and by what Howe and Strauss call “saecula,” or turnings, within generations, each of the generations is very different.

**Traditionalists** are described as hardworking, loyal, respectful of authority, slow to change, possessing traditional moral values, and having a commitment to existing social institutions. They lived through a world war and are children of the Depression. Women of this generation tend to be submissive, and men tend to be stoic and reluctant to share emotions.

**Boomers**, on the other hand, were born during a period of economic prosperity and had educational and financial opportunities unavailable to their parents. As a result they are hardworking and motivated by professional accomplishments. They tend to think they have worked hard and deserve their prosperity. They believe that outdated cultural and institutional status quo needs to be confronted, and they are confident reforming society. Women went to work outside the home, and men adapted to new roles of shared household responsibilities.

**Generation Xers** were born into a very different world than previous generations. They had divorced parents and working moms; they were the original “latchkey” generation. This early independence led to qualities of resilience and adaptability. They are pragmatic and practical, reject rules, and mistrust institutions. While their grandparents stayed loyal to a company forever, Gen Xers are comfortable moving from one job to another that matches their needs in a better manner.

**Millennials** were raised during the most child-centric period in our history. Due to the high expectations and intense affirmation of their parents, they are deeply self-confident almost to the point of being “cocky.” They are optimistic and individualistic, believe that institutions are irrelevant, and take technology for granted. They form deep friendships and sometimes are closer to these friends than to family members.

Knowing and understanding generation theory can provide an opportunity for conversations across generations as aging parents and adult children test out how the generation theory applies to them.

## Telling Your Stories

While generation theory can be helpful in understanding the differences in perspectives, values, and lifestyle choices, it does not bridge the communication gap between generations as parents age and adult children seek to care for them. A second means for bridging the generation gap is related to the meaning and sense of family identity that emerges out of sharing family stories.

Family members respond according to seasoned patterns of behavior, continuing to act out conflicts and allegiances that have been in place for decades. The differences and difficulties seem vast, and as family member age these are intensified by changing roles, unfinished business, and the stress of finding common ground. The aging parent can see only his or her perspective on this time of life, and the children have difficulty communicating their outlook and point of view to their parents.

Younger generations have no idea about the events and experiences that shaped their parents' values, sense of meaning, and purpose unless parents choose to share the stories of their lives. It is frequently difficult at this stage of life to create a new language of communication to bridge the distances that can exist between generations. However, telling stories about the ordinary and extraordinary is a way to pass on meaning, build identity, and bridge troubled waters.

Psychologists Michael W. Pratt and Barbara H. Fiese have studied the role of stories in building and maintaining family bonds. They conclude, "Family stories are one way in which individuals connect across generations and create a sense of family history and identity."<sup>3</sup> Stories told within families and across generations contribute to meaning making and aid the strengthening of the sense of family.

Elie Wiesel once said, "God made . . . [humans] . . . because he loved stories."<sup>4</sup> Humans are full of stories. They overflow from us. They define us. They are the way we tell who we are and what is important to us.

Long before there were books or even written language, family groups sat around campfires and told stories.



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When it was more common than it is today for generations to live with each other, children may have grown up knowing family stories as a matter of course. They knew all about the time that Grandfather Jones shot the grizzly bear. In more recent history, families sat around the dinner table and answered the question, "How was your day?" In this way, meaning and a sense of family identity were shared and were passed down to the next generation.

## Family Storytelling

Much family storytelling has been lost in the fast-paced world in which we live. Although it may require an effort and intention, families are discovering a need and a desire to hear family stories. Many adult children report finding meaning in the stories their parents have told about their childhoods and the significant events in their lives.

These stories are the ordinary accounts of life growing up. They can be told as simple reports that begin, "When I was a boy . . ." or "I remember when . . ." When generations listen to such stories they find common roots, discover amazing unknowns, and gain a sense of thanksgiving for the lives of others.

Family stories can enlighten, bring family members closer to each other, and open doors for sharing values and traditions. However, older adults are not the only ones who have family stories; they belong to each generation. Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials all have stories to tell about what belonging to a particular family means to them. There are as many opportunities to listen as well as to tell when we explore family storytelling across generations.

There are a variety of ways to pass on stories from one generation to another. They can be told during a family meal, holiday celebration, or reunion; one member of the

family can suggest a theme, such as vacations, schools, or births, and invite people to share their memories. Modern technology provides multiple ways of recording stories digitally. Recorded stories can be shared by CD or DVD or posted online.

You can pull out the boxes of photos gathering dust on closet shelves and the mementos packed away for a rainy day. The simple act of identification of the people, events, and places of these photos can open the door for remembering and storytelling. Scrapbooks can be compiled using the many colorful pages and embellishments found at craft and specialty stores. Electronic scrapbooks enable families to scan photos and share related stories with family members near and far across generations.

The rising interest in genealogy springs from a common root of wanting to know family stories and history. Aging parents are not only a source of information about their own lifetimes but holders of the memories of their parents. When a parent dies, so do the stories. A trip to visit graveyards or town records can inspire the telling of stories that reach beyond the present, living generations.

## Sharing Stories of God

So much of Scripture is made up of stories—stories of the way in which God interacted with God’s people and the way in which they responded. They are the foundation of our faith. Before there were doctrines and confessions, there were stories. A third way of bridging the generation gap is to read the stories of God’s people and to talk together about what the stories say about God and reveal about the human story.

The Hebrews believed that when they told a story, they were present in the story again. For centuries, Jews have been gathering once a year to celebrate the Passover. When they tell the story of their deliverance from slavery, they hear the clatter of the Egyptian chariots and taste the unleavened bread. Christians also reenact their stories through the symbols of water, bread, and juice at baptisms and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

As Christians we are heirs to these stories of God’s faithfulness, first to the Israelites and then in the coming of Christ. These stories have been passed down to us from generation to generation. We tell them to our children and reflect on them whenever we gather for worship.

These stories of faith tell us who we are as Christ’s people. They give us identity and are a source of meaning.

One way to do this is to choose a biblical story—such as the one of Isaac and his sons, which begins this session—and retell it from the perspective of your own generation. Another approach is to consider a theme found in the story and to share what each generation finds true and meaningful about the theme.

Walter Brueggemann identifies the concept of blessing as running through the whole story of Isaac. In this story, blessing can be understood as both the physical wealth of herds and land and the divine gifts of promise and call. As an old man, Isaac is conscious of the vast generosity of God and wishes to pass on the blessings of all of God’s gifts to his oldest son according to the tradition. His birthright is not just his fields and his tents, but the promise of blessing that he inherited from his own father.

As we read this story, we can ask what the account has to say to each generation about God and create opportunities to listen across the generations. What kind of God gives blessings? What kind of God takes human failures and turns them around? What kind of God enables reconciliation? As we read this story of Mr. I and his family, we are encouraged to consider what we can discover about the God in whom we believe and celebrate the differences and the similarities. We can ask ourselves how the story is a bridge between God and us, between our story and the stories of others, and between us and other generations before and after us.

## Summary

In today’s busy and hectic world, adult children still worry about how to care for and communicate with their aging parents. The story of this gap between children and parents can be traced back into human history. Stories can still build a bridge over the gaps between all the generations, stories of families, and stories of God. As generations of a family tell stories, they can recognize their differences and celebrate their commonalities.

## About the Writer

*Nancy Ferguson is a retired Presbyterian minister who lives on the eastern shore of Virginia near Chincoteague Island. She writes educational material for congregations and resources for camps and retreats.*

## Endnotes

1. "The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household," PewResearchCenter Publications, March 18, 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1528/multi-generational-family-household>.
2. D'Vera Cohn, "Baby Boomers: The Gloomiest Generation," Pew Social & Demographic Trends Project, June 25, 2008, <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/710/baby-boomers-the-gloomiest-generation>.
3. Michael W. Pratt and Barbara H. Fiese, *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004), 2–3.
4. Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*," trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Holt, Rineholt and Winston, 1966), xii.