



THE STORY OF *your life*

HEATHER MILLAR WORKS AS A VOLUNTEER WITH TERMINALLY ILL PATIENTS TO RECORD THEIR MEMOIRS. HERE, SHE EXPLORES THE BENEFITS OF TELLING YOUR LIFE STORY.



It was shortly before he died that my father asked my sisters and me to fly to Tasmania to witness his memoirs.

We sat around the kitchen table for three days at his home in Hobart, looking out across the Derwent River, listening to him talk about his life growing up on the mountainous West Coast of New Zealand. We went on to have those stories transcribed, and I edited them and made up a booklet for family members.

“Difficult though it was at the time, the process ignited something in me. I went on to volunteer as a biographer, recording the stories of people who are in palliative care at the Mary Potter Hospice at the Calvary North Adelaide Hospital.

“I have witnessed firsthand the value people get from reviewing their life in this way. I have seen them light up as they relate the stories of their lives. I have seen them not wanting to stop telling their stories when time is up for the day, as if they are clinging for dear life to the thread of their humanity.

“It also seems to be a process of making sense of one’s life. Was it a good one? Did I do it well? Did I live it fully? Leaving evidence of their life behind in the form of a written or recorded story seems to solidify what they experienced somehow. They are leaving behind evidence that they existed and that perhaps their life meant something.” – Life story volunteer Heather Millar

Life stories are being recorded and shared around Australia. Gillian Ednie is a life story professional who started out recording people’s memoirs after the healthcare organisation she was working for funded an evaluation of a biography program at Eastern Palliative Care in Victoria.

“It’s such a win-win situation,” says Ednie, explaining that it gives people nearing the end of their lives the opportunity to share their story with someone who really listens – and in so doing, they feel “lighter” and more appreciative of the life they’ve had. “Their self-esteem increases,” she says, “as does their interest in sharing their stories with family and friends, who often learn things they had never known before. It gives people a lift, a chance to reconnect and to appreciate the lives they have shared while they still can.”

After the evaluation program, Ednie had a sudden thought: why wait until people are at palliative care stage? “People should be doing this a lot earlier,” she says. So she started researching life story writing as a business and went on to set up her own business, Your Biography, in 2009.

One of her recent clients is ex-broadcast journalist 82-year-old Cliff Peel. He wrote the first chapter of his

own biography but could not continue after he developed eye disease macular degeneration, so he sought Ednie's help.

"I would tell people stories from my life, and they would say 'Why don't you write a book about it?'" says Peel. "I just thought I was having an ordinary life, but people would tell me it was unusual. So that's what prompted me to start it.

"Throughout the process, I would look back and go, 'Hmm, I really have had fun' – so that's the subtitle of my book [*My Life in Broadcasting: It's Been a Lot of Fun*]. Ultimately, I learnt more about myself through the process."

The book was launched on Peel's 80th birthday in 2016. "We had a bit of a party. I thought, I'm not going to be around for my wake, so I'll have a good 80th birthday. At least I'll be able to talk to people who come along!" he says.

Ednie has worked with a number of older people on their memoirs – and some younger ones.

"I find the most interesting part of it is how people get those 'aha' moments about their own life," she says.

"People find a way to reframe things that have happened in their life that they may have put away in the cupboard for many years and not wanted to look at. So it can have therapeutic benefits, too, because people are able to process the things that they couldn't at the time.

"And they have a greater regard for themselves – to look back on their lives and say, 'Well, actually that was remarkable! I wonder how I ever did that?' They can be very impressed with their achievements, how they handled difficult times and the wisdom they have gained."

Ednie recalls a client who was 92 and not prone to thinking about the past. "I encouraged her to reflect," she says, "and by the end of the process, she told me that the process 'had given her footings' – a sense of place in the world that she hadn't had before."

Another client of Ednie's was a 52-year-old man who had suffered with depression and dyslexia. "He wanted to review the past and reset the future," says Ednie. "He'd transcended these big issues in his life, and he wanted to share his story so that others might benefit."

THE BENEFITS OF TELLING YOUR STORY

Alison Crossley is a registered psychologist who worked in the mental health sector for a decade prior to moving into life story work in 2016.

Crossley and husband Paul English record people's life stories on video.

"Paul interviewed his mother in 2015 for her 90th," says Crossley. "He put a short film together and showed it at her birthday. She died five months later, so we were able to play some snippets from the movie at her funeral, and the priest said to Paul, 'This is the first time I've had someone speak at their own funeral!' It left us with a lovely

memory of her. She made us chuckle at the funeral – she had a great sense of humour."

After that, the couple began researching the benefits of life story work and set up their own company – My Business, My Story.

"We found that there are a lot of psychological benefits in telling your story," says Crossley. "It can help validate your life and acknowledge your achievements. It can help with identity, particularly if a person is in palliative care or if they have a chronic illness where their identity is really challenged. It can be cathartic and healing; it can lift mood."

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Neuropsychologist Patricia Boyle, from the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago, conducted a study to test the theory that having "greater purpose in life" has a positive effect on mental health and brain function as we age. Associate Professor Boyle and her colleagues tracked more than 900 people with an average age of about 80 over seven years. The researchers found that people who had a high level of purpose – deriving meaning from their life experiences and having goals – were more than twice as likely to remain free from Alzheimer's and had 30% less cognitive (brain function) decline. They also found that having a purpose created greater satisfaction and happiness and better physical functioning and sleep.

"They found that people want to make a contribution," says Crossley. "They want to feel part of something that extends beyond themselves. The researchers particularly mentioned mentoring – passing one's experiences on to younger people – as a way to encourage a sense of purpose.

"As we age, we can lose a lot of flexibility in our mental health, and the idea of telling your story or reminiscing through life storytelling can help you get a stronger idea about who you are as a person and your value in the community and the world – particularly if you are telling that to a younger generation."

LOOKING BACK IS IMPORTANT

It's also good for young people to know where they come from. In another study, a team of psychologists from Emory University in Atlanta in the US measured children's resilience and found that those who knew the most about their family history were best able to handle stress and had a stronger sense of control over their lives and higher self-esteem. It's believed that these children understood they belonged to something bigger than themselves.

"This kind of reminiscing can start a dialogue and help to form a bond between the teller and the listener," says Crossley. "Storytelling engages and connects people – that's why stories are important. There's that [saying] 'facts tell, stories sell'. You can tell people facts till the cows come home, but if you tell them a story, it lives in the heart forever." 🗣️