Why Should We Share Our Stories?

Directions:

1. Carefully **read** the article “The Importance of Telling Our Stories” by Rachel Freed to get a general idea of what the text is about.

2. **Reread** and **mark** the text, using a pencil.
   - **Number** the paragraphs in the text. HINT: There are 21 paragraphs (the numbered list at the end will count as one paragraph and the final sentence will be the last paragraph)
   - **Circle** key terms (a key term could be a word which is repeated, defined by the author, used to explain or represent an idea, or a central idea or concept)
   - **Underline** claims stated in the text (a claim is a statement that one person believes to be true, but another person could argue against).
   - **Write** notes in the margins. You can visualize, summarize, clarify, connect, respond, or question.

3. With a Group, **discuss** your thoughts about the article. **Share** what you underlined as claims and decide if they are claims or not. **Adjust** your notes and markings as needed, based on ideas from classmates.

4. **Answer** the following questions:
   
   a. How does this article connect to the essential question: why should we share our stories?

   
   b. What is the main claim the author is making?

   
   c. Why is this claim important or useful for us?

   
   d. How does this article help us better understand our work on this project?

The Importance of Telling Our Stories
By Rachel Freed

From a legacy perspective, we tell our stories for ourselves and as a gift to future generations. How does telling our stories benefit us? We need to know and express our own stories. Difficulties arise not because we have a story, perhaps a very sad or painful story, but because we become attached to our stories and make them an essential part of our very selves.

Telling our stories is not an end in itself, but an attempt to release ourselves from them, to evolve and grow beyond them. We tell our stories to transform ourselves; to learn about our history and tell our experiences to transcend them; to use our stories to make a difference in our world; to broaden our perspective to see further than normal; to act beyond a story that may have imprisoned or enslaved us; to live more of our spiritual and earthly potential.

Joan Borysenko said, "We cannot wish old feelings away nor do spiritual exercises for overcoming them until we have woven a healing story that transforms our previous life's experience and gives meaning to whatever pain we have endured."

How does telling our stories benefit future generations? Stories connect the past and present to the future. Our stories and our learning from them honors and respects our ancestors and us. They can awaken future generations to their potential. They model a way to use their stories to release themselves as they connect to their history and to our values.

A story from my journey: The first morning after arriving in Tunis, Oct. 1, 2010, I and my two sister travelers ventured deep into the Tunis Medina (an ancient walled city) to visit the home where I lived some 44 years ago. (At the time, my then-husband and I were New Peace Corps volunteers, and we "inherited" this palace of a 19th-century minister of the bey of Tunis from Peace Corps architects who'd lived there during their service.)

In our first week in Tunisia, during September 1966, we made our way, with great naïveté and some trepidation, into the hills of the romantic blue and white Mediterranean coastal town, Sidi Bou Said, to negotiate a lease for this house with its owner, a shrewd old patriarch, Sidi Bahri. We were served tea, our new language skills were tested, and the rent was agreed upon -- exactly what the old man asked for.

The house, traditionally built, was completely invisible from the street except for its tall, arched doorway and decorative door. Its rooms were designed on three sides of an interior courtyard. Its arched plaster ceilings, lavishly sculpted in plaster (like the Alhambra in Granada), was hung with ornate crystal chandeliers, and the lower halves of the interior walls were encrusted with tiles set in colorful geometric patterns.

Its 30-square-foot, marble-paved courtyard had its own well; its walls were tile-decorated and its windows to the interior rooms protected and ornamented in painted metal grill work. This was a space made for entertaining and displaying its ancient Muslim architectural tradition!
Our first "reception" was a coffee and croissant breakfast for 80 to 100 people on Thanksgiving morning of 1966. Peace Corps volunteers from Massachusetts and California and those working in Tunis were invited along with the American Ambassador and other American officials to meet and greet young Senator Ted Kennedy and John Tunney, the boxer's son and House of Representatives member, as they traveled North Africa.

Back from memory to my 2010 journey: A taxi deposited us on Bab Souika. We walked a short distance on rue des Arcs and turned onto my narrow, unpaved street, rue Ben Mustapha. I found the huge door at #14 and entered its dark corridor that led to our door. My heart was racing, my long-anticipated visit laced with fears that the house had been left uncared for and had fallen to ruin, that no one would be at home to answer the door, that my long-forgotten language skills would not be persuasive enough for us to be allowed in, or that the house in reality would not be as I remembered it.

It felt strange for there to be so much light at the end of the dark corridor I remembered. I reached its end and turned right to knock on the door, but there was no door, just a gaping opening -- the light was not from my fondly remembered courtyard. There was nothing there!

What had been was in 2010 an open field filled with three-foot-high weeds, some plastic bottles and other trash. The outer walls were somewhat intact surrounding this weedy lot and on them were markings where outer wall arches had once been. Not a tile, not a remnant of plaster sculpture, not a piece of marble. There were no remains.

I stood amidst the weeds, stunned, paralyzed into complete silence and disbelief. My memory held all these years, my beloved Ben Mustapha home of beauty and place of welcome to so many, was gone. Collapsing into the arms of my fellow volunteer, friend and traveler, I wept.

Still trying to integrate the loss, grateful for the few pictures from 44 years ago, grateful for the memories yet in my heart and head, I write.

When I returned home, my closest friend listened to my story. She said it reminded her of what concentration camp survivors must have experienced when they returned home after World War II to find their old reality gone, just a memory. This jolted me to begin to put my experience into perspective. My heart opened beyond myself. I felt compassion as I considered the many millions over centuries who have lost their homes and way of life because of wars and catastrophes as recent as those in Darfur, in the Gulf after Katrina, in Port-au-Prince after the earthquake, from tsunamis and floods all over the planet.

I still feel my personal disappointment, but it now seems small -- 14 rue Ben Mustapha was my home of the past. There are other traditional homes still in existence. I have a home, and I can preserve and share my memories by writing. My life is not significantly changed by this loss.

And what have I gained by sharing my story? The ability to see beyond it. To notice that I'm not the only one who experiences disappointment and loss. I feel deeper compassion for those sustaining great losses. My respect for human resiliency has grown, as has my commitment to
help people who must start over completely after devastating loss: rebuilding lives, homes, and hope.

In "The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning," Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham said:

Release ... is experienced rather than "gotten," received rather than attained. And so it does not work to tell one's story in order to "attain" release; yet Release does emerge from the practice of telling one's story ... The deeper release ... is of our attachment to the chains that bind us.

You have many stories and perhaps one powerful story that you think best defines you and your life, so here are some suggestions for action:

1. Write one of those stories. Take time to describe it vividly, with all its sensations and feelings. Take time to recall and express your thoughts about it.
2. Let the story sit for a day or a few days.
3. Go back to it, reread it, embellish it if more has come, and then write about your experience writing it and reading it after time.
4. Be alert for ways you can extricate yourself from it in order to learn from it and free yourself going forward.
5. Use the story and what you learned to write a legacy letter to someone you care about who may enjoy and benefit from it in the future.

May your stories enliven memories: may writing them free your from their bondage.

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Rachael Freed has published several works including "Women's Lives, Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations" and "Heartmates: A Guide for the Spouse and Family of the Heart Patient." She is currently working on "Harvesting the Wisdom of Our Lives: An Inter-generational Legacy Guide for Seniors and Their Families." A Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality and Healing, Rachael is a clinical social worker, adult educator and legacy consultant. Her home is in Minneapolis, Minn.