Tell Me a Story

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How many people have had their parents, grandparents, or older siblings read them bed-time stories like The Little Engine That Could, and Pinocchio? Most people probably have, but not me. When I was younger, I never saw my grandfather that much, but I called him once a week to talk and tell him how my week went. At the end of the conversation, he would always say, “Tell me a story.” My first response was always, “I don’t have a story to tell. Nothing happened today.” He replied, “Make one up; just tell me a story.” So I did. I remember my first few stories were short, with very little plot. But week after week, he would add to that one simple and basic sentence; he would tell me to add more characters and try to create a plot. For a five-year-old it was hard enough understanding the language, and yet my grandfather wanted me to create a whole story and explain each character. We kept this up all the way until I was thirteen, when he passed away. I remember at his funeral I did not speak, but as we were burying him, I silently told him one more “story” that I created on the spot. I learned a lot of my creativity from talking with my grandfather and I learned the basic structure of a story from him.

I remember when my grandfather was still alive and I was in seventh grade and had a writing assignment, which was a narrative. We had to tell a story about a time when we felt accomplished or had succeeded in something. I sat at my computer, blank, not understanding how to start this paper, when I decided to call my grandfather for advice. He just laughed a little and said, “Why don’t you just tell me a story?” So I did, but this time I wrote down everything I told him, and when I was done, I had written a page and a half of the paper, which for me at the time was a huge accomplishment. I ended up getting a passing grade on the assignment.

After my grandfather passed away, my mom told me he actually had known eight different languages: German, English, Romanian, Italian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, and French. It astonished me when I found out that English had not been his first language. His first language was actually German, and
he had learned English by watching movies and television, mainly cowboy shows. My mom told me that for the first couple of years he spoke like a cowboy and it wasn’t until he met his wife that he realized he was talking strangely. I was amazed that he had been able to help me out so much in English, since English wasn’t even his first language.

I am extremely fortunate to have been able to learn just a little of what my grandfather knew. I still sometimes pretend to talk to him when I am feeling writer’s block and I sit there and just “tell him a story” and it always helps me out. Even while writing this essay, when I felt my mind going blank, I would pause and “tell him a story” and it always helped. Towards the end of his life, I don’t think he knew what he was doing when he asked me to tell him a story. I think it was just a way to continue the conversation so it wouldn’t end. I would love to use this technique of reverse story telling on my kids or grandkids because I know how much it helped me with English, and I would love to help my kids the way he helped me.