

Journaling Your Life Stories: “Down on the Farm”

Jill Novak

My husband, Robert, grew up on a farm in the 1950s. He attended one of the last one-room schoolhouses in northern Illinois, and his days were filled with the kind of adventures that happen to a little boy living in a rural setting. Our children never tire of hearing “Daddy’s” farm stories—like the time an ornery boar held him prisoner in an apple tree or when he and his faithful collie jumped ship just seconds before their sled smashed into the fence at the bottom of the orchard hill. Tales like these send our kids reeling with laughter, and to this day you can still hear Anna, our youngest, beg, “Please, Daddy, tell us another story!”

I don’t think I fully appreciated the uniqueness of Robert’s childhood until we moved to a farm in 1999. A series of life-changing events brought us back home, within miles of where he grew up. Suddenly I found myself wanting to preserve our family’s “new” farm stories. Between the antics of the wildlife and the escapades of our children, I realized the importance of journaling your life stories as they happen.

Value Everyday Moments

Over the years I’ve learned that the values you place on everyday moments will be “caught” by your children. When the back door slams and they start rattling off their latest adventure, do you stop what you’re doing to make eye contact with them? Do you keep a journal nearby for writing down your husband’s funny remarks or your toddler’s enthusiastic comments? Your whole family will draw closer together as you write about your life experiences.

Whether you live on a farm or in the city, it is crucial to record your life stories while they’re fresh on your mind. Unlike my husband, who probably remembers about 30 great stories from his childhood, our family now has hundreds of farm experiences recorded in our journals.

Write from What You Know

Some of our most beloved American classics—stories like *Rascal* by Sterling North or *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls—were written from the author’s passionate love and firsthand knowledge of the subject matter. What unique, one-of-a-kind stories are you living every day?

Last spring our family became surrogate parents to an abandoned baby raccoon. We were privileged to befriend the clever little fellow we named “Coonikins,” and as we observed his shenanigans we became very attached and somewhat raccoon-like ourselves, including voice trills and slippery hand movements. Comparing notes with Sterling North’s writings, we were convinced that our raccoon was a lot naughtier than his.

Elizabeth, age 11, became his number-one mommy, feeding him daily and even letting him sleep on her bed. Still, it was hard for her to remember what “people” foods he liked the most. Thankfully, she kept a journal, and later, as we read the entries, we were amazed to see how much she had already forgotten. A children’s picture book could be written about all the food that Coonikins washed and consumed with those leathery little fingers.

Teach your children to journal in depth about the people, places, and things that touch their hearts and not to take special moments for granted. That unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience might not come again.

Recognize Your Children’s Writing Strengths and Weaknesses

Some children don’t like to write about themselves but love making up stories instead. Remind them to value everyday moments and use them in developing fictional plots. Show them how to create character sketches from people they know and scenarios that mirror their life experiences. Once they realize how much fun it is to mix their imaginations with reality, they won’t be able to go back to just making up stories in their heads. Their writing will become more believable, too—after all, truth is stranger than fiction.

Once we settled into farm life, it didn’t take me long to see a connection between my husband’s farm stories and the new ones the children were experiencing. I encouraged our oldest daughter, Claire, to write a series of stories about a fictional family, similar to ours, living during the Great Depression. *The Pebbly Brook Farm Series* was born, and almost nothing we’ve published brings me more joy—because I remember the real-life events that sparked Claire’s imagination and fueled her creativity. You, too, can use your personal experiences to write authentic fiction from fact.

Take Dictation

If you have a child who struggles with spelling and grammar or physically forming his letters, help him write his story down. Like his dad, Eric (16) is a gifted storyteller, but he could never have preserved his early stories by himself. He could tell a story with incredible detail, but getting it on paper was another matter. Once I realized that he was an auditory learner, I became his scribe for a season, helping him make the connection between his oral storytelling abilities and his newly developing writing skills. Writing instantly became a natural and enjoyable process for him.

Shortly after we discovered the joy of journaling together, he dictated a highly creative entry to me. It was an incident that had happened earlier that day when a vole jumped out of a hole and ran into the soybean field. He titled his entry “The Big Blue Bite-y Thing,” and with medieval imagery and flowing, rhythmical language, his story was transformed from a normal everyday occurrence to an extraordinary life event. Today Eric is a confident writer who loves the writing process and loves encouraging other kids to write, too. Visit his blog at www.homeschoolblogger.com/blogboy.

Preserve Family Stories

Try preserving family stories by inviting your children or spouse to write separately about the same experience. As you compare entries, your individual personalities and writing styles will become apparent. It's really fun to see how differently family members view the same event, and you'll find that more details are preserved than when you write an entry alone.

Work as a Team

One of the greatest encouragements I can give you is to team up with your family to make writing a normal part of your everyday lives. When Mom and Dad embrace writing, the children just naturally follow, and suddenly you've got a whole family of writers.

Family writing is one the greatest joys we've experienced in our homeschool journey and a gift we love to pass along. Journaling your life stories will give your children a greater awareness of everyday moments and a new gratitude for their family members, and that's something worth writing about!

Biographical Information

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Jill and Robert Novak have been married 28 years and are the grateful parents of five children. Together their family has founded Remembrance Press, publishers of The Pebbly Brook Farm Series, The Gift of Family Writing, and The Girlhood Home Companion, a magazine and keepsake treasure for girls ages 10-18. Visit their website at www.remembrancepress.com and sign up for a free newsletter or visit Jill's blog at www.homeschoolblogger.com/jillnovak to learn more about writing and drawing from life.