

# THE AWESOME POWER OF STORY

## BY DR. BILL WEBSTER

When I was a kid, I used to love when my mother would read us stories. How these tales captured my imagination. I would sometimes picture myself in that story, usually as the hero, of course.

But there were other more personal, real life stories that I remember as part of growing up. My grandfather fought in the First World War, and would regale us with tales of his exploits, especially the time when he was wounded. We would groan when the same old anecdotes would be repeated time and again, although I have to say I now wish I had paid more attention, or had captured him telling his story on a video or recorder. Every now and then, I ask my sister, what was it Jimmy (our affectionate name for him) used to say, and it is often with regret, all these years after his death, that we realize that much of the detail of his history has sadly been forgotten. My Dad, my uncles and other family members had their stories too, and they remain as a legacy of who these people were and what they meant to me in my life.

Now, as a grief counselor, I am given the unspeakable privilege of listening to stories. People tell me the stories of their lives and those of a loved one who has died. I am always curious to know who they were, what they were like, what they did, and what this relationship that is so sadly missed meant to the story teller.

Every person has a story. You have your own stories about parents and grandparents, family members and others. Some of them are good stories that you are proud to recall. Others may not be so memorable, but they all combine into the intricate weave that forms the pattern of life.

I have one story that I would love to share with you. It is about a very special person named Carolyn who made such a difference in my life.

I suppose you could say I met Carolyn by accident. One of the activities of my student days in London England was playing rugby for our college team. We were a pretty motley crew. We would have so much fun singing, telling jokes and laughing in the bus on the way to the game we were usually tired out before we began. It was a great escape from the pressures of studies but nobody took it too seriously.

Until one day, we were playing against a rival college and things got a little heated. Two guys were hurt in the first half of the game alone. Feelings were running high. Towards the end of the match, I vaguely remember the ball coming towards me and I caught it, but before I could run there was a tremendous impact. I can still see the grassy field rushing up towards my face at breakneck speed and as my head hit the ground with a resounding thud the lights went off. I vaguely recollect being on a stretcher carried towards an ambulance and distant voices expressing some instructions to “watch his neck”. But other than that the happenings of the next hour or so are a little hazy.

I was later told that at the instant I caught the rugby ball, I had been hit from behind by a veritable giant. It was no contest. I had gone down like a ton of bricks. Yet in spite of my opinion that this trauma had life-threatening implications, the hospital staff took a cursory glance at my x-rays and with some disdain (possibly having treated several others that very afternoon from the same battlefield) pronounced that my injuries consisted of “only a concussion”. With instructions to keep quiet for a day or so, I was dispatched to the college infirmary for the night.

It was the very next morning that the miracle occurred. A knock came to the door of my room and as it opened, in walked an angel. And what was even more amazing she was carrying a breakfast tray and seemed to be encouraging me to sit up and take nourishment. I didn't think I had ever seen anyone who looked so beautiful. This was my first meeting with Carolyn. She was, like me, a student at the college, but was, with her nursing background the volunteer on-call nurse for that weekend. As she walked into that room it was love at first sight. Concussion or no concussion, I just knew this was the woman I wanted to marry. It seemed to me that I was experiencing a revelation.

To my surprise however, Carolyn was not immediately struck with a similar revelation. As she looked at this wounded warrior of the sports field she did not think “here is the man I want to share my life with”. In fact, she thought it quite funny and perhaps somewhat silly that grown men would knock each other to the ground in a fervent and often futile attempt to gain temporary possession of an inflated pigskin. Her task was to put Humpty Dumpty's pieces back together, and she was not particularly impressed by the heroics that had caused the crack up.

I seemed to face a challenge that made my rugby foe seem like a pussy cat. But when you have fought with giants, is any challenge too great? With determination,

aided and abetted by my roommates, I embarked on the quest to win the heart of the woman I loved.

As time went on we got to know one another and became friends. It was on an Easter skiing trip to Scotland organized by the students that we fell for each other - literally. That summer we were involved with six others in a student trip to Greece and Carolyn later came home with me to meet my family who of course took to her right away. A romance was born.

Our relationship was to be tested in the next year however. While I stayed on in London to complete my degree program, Carolyn had to return to Canada and resume her nursing career. However, after writing to each other for almost a year, very shortly after my graduation, I was on a student flight to New York and from there to Toronto where Carolyn and I were reunited. After a challenging summer working in construction the great day dawned and we were married. Looking back it seemed that in a wonderful way everything had come together for us. I had married the girl of my dreams. I had graduated and had a career. We were beginning to live the life we had always hoped for. We seemed to have the world by the tail. Within a few years our first son, Andrew, would be born and exactly two years later a second son, Steve, would come along. All we had to do now it seemed was to live happily ever after. That was the plan.

Sadly, life doesn't always go according to plan. My story not only includes Carolyn's life, it also has to include the story of her death. A mere 11 years after we were married, Carolyn died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack. She was just a young woman, and we had no idea that there was any serious medical problem. When she collapsed and was taken by ambulance to the hospital, I don't think I realized how serious the situation was. Driving myself to the hospital that morning, I just assumed everything would be OK.

When I arrived at the hospital, however, the Doctor took me into a little room. There in a just 4 words he told me something that would change my life forever. "Your wife has died". It seemed unbelievable and unacceptable. It just didn't seem real. It felt like a bad dream. I thought at any minute I would wake up and realize to my relief that it wasn't really happening.

Throughout the following days, I felt like I was in a fog. People at the funeral told me I was doing well, and commended me that I seemed to be coping. They thought it was wonderful that I was "so strong". But in fact, I wasn't strong. I was numb. And the problem was that a few months after Carolyn's death, the numbness wore

off and I began to experience an explosion of emotions and uncharacteristic feelings in reaction to my loss. People by that time of course thought I should be getting over it, and kept telling me that “life must go on.” I began to realize one of the dilemmas of grief. Sometimes it is when people think you should be getting yourself together, you feel like you are falling apart. Not only did I feel like I was coming apart, I felt I wasn’t living up to people’s expectations of how well I should be doing, and that made me feel even worse.

So, when Carolyn died, I felt like I had not only lost my wife, and the mother of our children, who at the time were only 9 and 7 years of age. I also lost something else. When we were married, like most people, we had hopes and dreams of “living happily after.” While all of us know that life is never perfect, we all hope it will work out in a way that is meaningful, or that makes sense. We know that tragedies occur, but somehow that happens to OTHER people, not to us. But sometimes life doesn’t work out as we expect.

When Carolyn died I also had to try to come to terms with the grief of my unmet expectations. I struggled to believe what seemed unbelievable, and to accept what was unacceptable. It felt at that time like many of the hopes and dreams I had held of the way my life would be were shattered and broken forever. I now know that what I was experiencing was grief, and that these and many other issues were all part of the grief journey.

How I came to terms with these things is, as they say, another story, which I have told in other articles in this library.

Each one of us has a story. There is the story of the person’s LIFE as well as that of their death, and BOTH need to be told. There is the story of the association you shared, and the story of your adjustment to a new life without that needed relationship.

Grieving people need to “tell the story” because “that which cannot be put into words, cannot be put to rest.” Hopefully you can find a support group, or our ‘Let’s Talk’ chat rooms allow you to share your story with others who have experienced a significant loss. Perhaps you have a friend who is willing to LISTEN while you talk. Tell them they don’t have to worry what to say, they just need to listen. Or why not record some of your thoughts and feelings and your memories in a journal or a scrapbook.

Our bookstore is only one place where you can find resources to make this happen.