

The Family Project

Your step by step guide to making your family story interesting – by working with *living relatives*, instead of long-dead ancestors



With John-Paul Flintoff and Harriet Green

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Transcript of Video 1

Core Elements of a Powerful Family Story

Hi, welcome to the family project.

If you're like most people and you feel the pain of your family being scattered geographically, not having enough time for each other, and not feeling connected, ...then you are in the right place.

In these videos I'll be sharing ideas about how you can do something very simple to take the best of your family story and turn it into a creative project.

And do that in a way that creates connection while are doing it...

...and afterwards.

I'm John-Paul Flintoff, I'm a writer, a performer and a journalist, and I've been writing and telling stories and helping other people to tell stories about families for years.

As well as that, I happen to be married to Harriet Green, who for ten years has edited the incredibly successful Family section on the Guardian newspaper.

And together we have combined our skills and interests in this area to write a book, The Family Project.

It's no exaggeration to say that between us we have helped literally thousands of people to tell and share their family stories with millions of people.

If you want to be one of the people we help, please keep listening.

The goal of this workshop is to show how you can take one small element of your family story – just one little thing – and you can turn it into an “heirloom”.

But there's a secret to how you do that. You can't just take one photograph and expect everyone to love it...

...or tell one epic story and expect people to read it, because I'm afraid they probably won't.

I've heard from too many people who have uploaded lovingly tagged collections of photos to Facebook, and hoped that their whole family would be delighted, and nobody really cared less.

So there's a secret, a way that you can take one thing, and make it very special, and then share it in a way that people will love it.

And that's what I'm here to show you.

So what does it even mean to “share” or create your family story?

The moment I say those words, you are probably thinking, but it's enormous! It's huge! My family story is my whole life, and it's the whole life of all my family...

...and you're probably thinking, “Where do I start!”

Also, maybe: “There are some places I don't want to go.”

And, “I'll do it another time...”

So there are lots of reasons why we don't get on with doing this.

And that's why we feel disconnected.

So I want to give you some simple ways to think about this.

A weird thing about the way that we live now is that many of us have *so much* content, so much data, that we lose sight of it all. How do you know what to focus on?

That's why it's important to choose one or two special things, and make them into your “heirloom” project.

It's probably going to be something you do together, for a reason that I'll come to in a moment.

And if you make it into a special thing, and you do it together, you will have two wonderful outcomes.

One, you'll have the special “thing”, in a box, or whatever.

Two, and this is not to be overlooked, you'll have the wonderful experience of doing it with your family.

And that needn't take very long.

And it's quite a bonding thing. A connecting thing.

And how good it is, to have a few of those moments, at a time of digital distraction, when we're all scattered. How many times do we actually get connected?

So to do a project like this gives you the opportunity to be connected.

Some years ago, I went to Austria with Harriet, and our daughter.

And one day, we were in this beautiful place – a lake, surrounded by birch trees and mountains. Very enclosed, a cosy secret world.

We hired a boat, went out on the lake. I got in the water, can't remember if anybody else did, had a little swim, got back on the boat and rowed back to the cafe, in a building where the boats were kept.

And sat down at the table, where for some reason I had this idea.

I got my phone out and suggested we all interview each other about what we did that day.

And that's what we did.

We only had a minute or two each. But it was enough to make a record of a wonderful time. A great day.

And it was interesting, because we all had a slightly different take on things. After I'd spoken, they didn't want to say the same things.

Everybody comes up with a slightly different version of what's important.

And later on I would rediscover the recording. I'd say, “Oh, I've got this thing on my phone!”

And we'd play it together and listen and it would be quite funny because our daughter got older and her voice changed. She sounded very little in the audio.

And our points of view changed.

We remembered things and thought, “Oh, I thought I said that! But no, you said that.”

So we all had a stake in this. We were all quite interested. We were all

reflecting on something.

And it's important to notice that we were all doing it together.

Then one day I upgraded my phone and I hadn't backed it up and I lost that bit of audio.

Disaster!

I was thinking about this, not long ago, and I thought, if somebody came to me and said, hey, I've got your audio, how much would you pay for it?

I would pay a lot of money for that thing!

In my mind, now, it's become incredibly valuable. Unique. Because I've lost it, I know how valuable it was.

It's almost, in my mind, become like an heirloom.

And it's just a story. A story that we made up.

Not “The Whole Story Of Our Family”. Just a tiny thing we did.

A friend of mine has lost his father, and he told me this story the other day.

It's a sad story. But it's a useful reminder of something, and I'm sharing it in that spirit.

I hope you'll understand the value in it.

When his father was alive, his brother – the son – showed his father some old family movies.

And the father was sitting and watching, and going, “Oh, yeah, that's when we did that thing with Auntie so-and-so...”

And the son said, “Dad, shhh! Let's just watch the film.” So his father kept quiet.

And what they realised subsequently was, what a shame!

What if, instead of telling his father to be quiet, they'd recorded him talking about the film.

You'd have the audio, *with the video*.

You could even, like, film the father watching – from the side. So there's a double quality. Watching the video on its own is quite interesting, but with the commentary it's way more interesting.

In fact, bear with me on this...

If you *just* watched the father, and you didn't even see the film of Auntie so-and-so...

If you just watched the father and you can see the animation and excitement in his face – *that's* what we care about.

That's what we care about.

*

These two people are very important to me. They're a big part of my life now. But they're not my blood relations.

And at the time the photo was taken, I didn't know them.

I could tell you lots of things about these two people but you don't really care.

I'm not going to try to make you care. I just want you to notice that you're looking at two strangers, and they don't mean anything to you.

But in a moment I'm going to show you something that might slightly change your feeling.

Here it is.

(Shows photo, with six seconds of people laughing.)

What do you think, is it starting to make sense now?

What I'm hoping that you'll get from this is – and it's such a tiny thing, but if you think about it it's amazing – by recording that laughter I made it possible for me to laugh again every time I watch it.

And I want to pop out and see those two people now, and show it to them...

So what we've got is an artefact, a Thing, which is more valuable because it's not just a photo but it has the layer of recorded laughter on top. So it's more valuable than it was before.

It becomes a kind of an heirloom.

And it's also a moment of connection, which has been captured, because we're all sitting there laughing – so we remember the moment of connection – and it's an opportunity to go out and get MORE connection, because I want to go out and show them this video.

So there's a kind of permanent in-built value in there that comes from creating this project.

And I want that for you. I want it for everyone. And you see how little effort this takes.

So you can forget nostalgia. This is about creating new experiences *right now*.

Now, the secret to what you have just seen is actually the reason why the BBC's programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* is so successful.

I want to be really clear that there's nothing secret about this. Because it's there in plain view. But it's something that many people don't notice.

And without this, if you try to share your family project with your own family, let alone the “whole wide world”, you may not get much interest.

And in the next video I'm going to show you exactly what that secret is.

But now I want to know a bit more about you.

What would be possible if you were able to create some kind of heirloom family project with story, or pictures, or audio – or all of those things.

What small project might you start, to create a family heirloom for your own family?

Meet John-Paul and Harriet

We're the creators of The Family Project.



We've got a family project of our own (she's 14 years old, and we think she's absolutely wonderful).

If you don't read The Guardian, or The Sunday Times, or The Financial Times, you might have missed the stories we've published in those papers over the last 20-plus years.

You might not have come across the Guardian's Family section, which Harriet edited for 10 years.

(Editor's note: John-Paul wanted to call it "The Guardian's legendary Family section", but Harriet wasn't having it. This is our compromise.)

In that time, she helped thousands of people to maximise the impact of their family stories, by looking at the structure, and injecting emotional impact.

Most of the credit goes to the writers, obviously, and the incredible stories they have to tell. But Harriet did a bit to help.

Stories so powerful, and human, can have an enormous impact.

You've probably seen that on Facebook, where stories can get lots of Likes, and Shares...

Well, one story Harriet published was a mother's memorial to her daughter. In less than a week, it got more than two million page views. It was shared 166,000 times. Yes, one hundred and sixty-six thousand.

Other articles turned into books, and award-winning movies.

One film to come out of Guardian Family was Philomena, starring Judi Dench and Steve Coogan. You may have heard of it, or even seen it.

But we want to be clear about one thing.

Philomena was not ABOUT somebody famous, or well connected.

It was about a *seemingly ordinary person with an extraordinary story*.

And here's another thing. There are millions of extraordinary family stories out there.

Perhaps yours is one of them.

What about John-Paul?

You might not have seen his feature stories in other leading English-language papers and magazines. Attended any of his performances, to audiences of as many as 5,000 people at once. He's spoken on four continents, but you may have missed him.

You might not have been on any of the residential retreats he's run for authors.

And you might not have come across any of his own books (five of them, published in 16 languages).

Why should you know any of this?

But there's one book we'd like to mention. Because we wrote it together. If we hadn't done that, you wouldn't be reading this.

The Family Project contains creative exercises to help anybody get started on telling their family story. You don't need lots of experience.

It's published in (among several other languages) Polish, Brazilian and Chinese. Hurrah!

But we're not telling you this so you buy it. Not at all. (Though obviously you're welcome to do so.)

Because in the next videos, we'll be sharing some of the ideas contained in the book - completely free.

We passionately believe in getting families to tell stories together, which is why we've created this free workshop.

Exercises to get started at once

- I. Share your experience of time spent together
(like our recording in Austria)

If you are comfortable using a phone, record very short interviews with each other (no more than two minutes each).

Talk about what you have been doing together for the last hour / day / shared holiday.

Keep the focus on that shared time together.

By all means list the things you've done, but as much as possible try to add a sense of how you feel about it.

Be strictly honest about this. Don't try to pretend to feel something you don't. It will be much more interesting to see the tiny differences later, when you listen again.

If you can't bear the sound of your voice, you can do the exercise on paper. But it's much better to have audio too.

To go with this recording or written exercise, choose just ONE image. It can be a photo, or a drawing – up to you. (And you can do more than one! We're trying to keep this simple.)

2. Go through ONE photo album, or home movie, and record yourselves talking or laughing (or crying!) about it

Combine the original photos or film with your recording - as John-Paul did by recording his five second film showing a still image with recorded laughter.

Don't miss the next videos

In the next one, we'll be sharing the “secret” that makes the BBC programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* so compelling.

It's not really a secret, because it's in plain view – but it's something that many people don't notice.

And when you see what it is, you'll get even more ideas about how to make your own family story utterly compelling.

And you won't need to bury yourself away in dusty archives researching long-dead ancestors you had never previously heard of.

Because you'll see that all the stories you can possibly need are available from the people still with you.

In the video after that, we'll share (among other things) how you can capture those family stories in a way that keeps everybody happy.

(We know how much many people worry about asking relatives for their stories.)

To be sure you don't miss those videos, save our email to your address book: jp@flintoff.org

Spam filters are very powerful these days, and we don't want you to miss out.

In fact, there's one other thing you can do to “train” your email, so we don't end up in your junk folder.

Send us an email now.

If you're reading this on a screen, you can do that by clicking on John-Paul's email address (here: jp@flintoff.org).

It might feel odd, but we really want to hear from you.

Tell us ONE thing you might do *right now* with the information we've given you in this free video and downloadable worksheet.

One tiny step you will take to start turning your family story into an heirloom.

We don't always reply (to save your time as much as our own) but we read everything.

Till next time!

John-Paul and Harriet

Go ahead, hit reply now: jp@flintoff.org