

2016 RootsTech Thursday Keynote: Bruce Feiler

Notes with some transcription

- RootsTech is like the superbowl of storytelling and I'm honored to be a part of it.
- This is a story I've never really told before about how I came to be a person who talked so much about family stories.
 - I wasn't always a storyteller
 - I wasn't a child prodigy genealogist
 - Yet it's become such a big part of my life
 - Born in Savannah, Georgia; part of the fifth generation of Jews from the American south; relatives fought on both sides of the "war of northern aggression."
 - Southern tradition, Jewish tradition - two storytelling traditions bubbling up inside of me
 - My family took a trip west to SLC when I was 12
 - Streets were wide enough for carriage with 2 horses to make a u turn.
 - Tabernacle choir
 - Went down into the basement of the research facility and began to do family history, but even then I wasn't the one who latched on to family history as a passion - because I was the second son. The first son gets all the responsibilities and the second son who gets all the privileges. My older brother became the family history person and even then I didn't know that it would be my life's calling.
 - In leaving the south and going to a new place, I learned the most about myself. I moved to Japan in 1986. Homestead mother put Liver Pie in front of me. I suffered through it only to find out the next morning that breakfast is cold leftovers from the night before. Got up and wrote a letter home - "you would not believe what happened to me today!" Continued to write these kinds of letters home.
 - Grandmother xeroxed them and passed them around to neighbors in Savannah, Georgia and when came home, strangers were telling me, "I loved your letters!"
 - Realized that maybe storytelling is the right thing for me. I travelled around the world and wrote books about my experiences. Cambridge, Oxford, Israel, etc.
 - I spent time as a clown in a circus and could tell stories all day about that.
 - I went to visit a friend in Jerusalem.
 - Someone pointed out the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. What if I "join the bible, as if it were the circus, and seek to become a part of it?" I traveled through the desert looking for all the important spots and read the Bible as I went.

- My favorite place of all my spiritual pilgrimages was the southern Sinai at a monastery where Moses saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God.
- There was a fire extinguisher near the burning bush. It was a rare raspberry bramble, they moved it to expand the church. Can you imagine if you were on the committee to decide if they should move the burning bush?
- Point of story: you can't understand the biblical story without understanding the desert.
- The greatest breakthroughs occur during the worst of times, when they are in the wilderness.
- What I want to say to you storytellers: don't just tell the wonderful moments of your family, delve into the most difficult moments. We are all connected to this story. I realized: this was my family story!
- I am working on a book about the love story of Adam and Eve called *The First Love Story*. I went to Israel to research.
- When I was in Israel, I met an archaeologist who said there were 20 million stories in the ancient world, and maybe 2 dozen made it into the Bible. Think about how good those have to be.
- The campfire test: would your stories survive the campfire test? Do they have the emotion, the passion, the pain in order to endure?
- I'm writing a book about Moses. The Mormon story echoes the Israelites' story. I was the walking guy with all my books had to do with walking.
- I took a blood test, the walking guy is facing that story: I had a wonderful life and everything was great, when I found out I had cancer - not a benign tumor in his leg.
- Two days later I woke with an idea: reach out to men from all parts of my life and ask if they could be part of my children's life. They could be my voice, the council of dads.
- What happened to me in this moment of pain - I wanted to record who I was, write down what had happened to me, and tell my story.
- During the next exhausting year of chemo, surgery, I set out to write my story.
 - I interviewed men about lessons that they would want to give from my life to my children.
 - Interviewed my father, learned about life of grandfather, and other father figures that I hadn't known.
 - What I learned - the second thing to bring forward and leave with you today: when you talk to people about family history, you often hear: it's too difficult, I don't have time, the courthouse burned down, records got wet, I don't have money to go back to where I came from, I can't get the whole thing.
 - Both of my grandfathers were dead. One of my grandfathers left behind audio cassettes which I transcribed; one collected epitaphs - died

suddenly and this was all he left behind - but it was something for me to tug at.

- The point is - As a storyteller speaking to storytellers: you don't need the whole picture! Sometimes the best way to tell a big story is to tell a small story and to tell it in depth and to tell it in a way that you can find passion in and somebody else can find passion and connection through your passion.
- Something else happened to me during this time of chemo, surgery, and 2 years on crutches: I applied my desire to know, my energy and enthusiasm and research to my own family.
 - I've spent the last 7-8 years doing this. I write a monthly column in the NY times about families, I wrote a book about happy families called "The Secrets of Happy Families."
 - What is the secret sauce that holds families together anymore? What is it that happy families do and what can I learn from them that I can do?
 - My list that high functioning families do all the time:
 - Adapt all the time
 - Go out and play
 - Fight smart
 - The one secret ingredient: they talk a lot. Not just the difficult conversations. They talk about what it means to be part of a family.
- I want you to look at family history in a different way. Upend some of your expectations.
- 3 big things you can do on a daily basis, to talk about what it means to be part of a family, and deepen the passionate engagement [of family history] that you're already involved in.
 - 1. Write a family mission statement
 - Jim Collins said that high functioning groups of any kind have 2 things in common. They stimulate progress/change/adapt but also preserve the core. He recommended that we go through this process of writing a family mission statement.
 - You all are committed to family history - if I went to the people in your family and said - what values are most important to you? Could they tell you? Are we so involved in the facts and figures of family history that we fail to draw out a theme?
 - My wife would say that of all the dozens of ideas that we tried, this was in the top three most meaningful ideas that we did. We did the equivalent of a "corporate retreat" - we put on pajamas, and made popcorn from scratch which burned the first time around, then asked questions:
 - What do you like best about our family?
 - What do you miss when you're gone from our family?
 - When others come over, what do you show them?

- We came up with a meaningful list. We are not tourists, we are travelers. We help others to fly. I don't like dilemmas, I like solutions.
- One of my kids got into a spat at school and my wife and I were called into the principal's office. We brought the children into our office and my wife wasn't sure what to do. This list, our family mission statement was on the wall. She said to my daughter and said, what from our family mission statement applies to this? Daughter looked at the list and said, "We bring people together."
- One thing we learn from positive psychology is that if you want to make yourself a better person: you have to identify what the psychologists call, "your best possible self."
- What this does is identify our best possible family self. Who do we want to be as a family? We drawn the lessons from our family and identified them for all of us to live up to.
- To make family history a daily occurrence, you can create a family mission statement.
- 2. Storytelling Games in your family
 - Autobiography night. Beginning at age 5, children can tell stories about who they are but they need to practice.
 - Researchers looked at American families vs. Asian families. Asian families, when telling stories about their day, were focusing on discipline, order, and structure. American families were asking more elaborative questions and focused on stories.
 - 3 years later, they looked at the children and Asian children were more focused on order; children from western culture were more focused on story and who they are.
 - Why does this matter? Research has shown that if you have a test the next day and you tell a story the night before emphasizing that you have done this in the past and you have done well, it will increase your chances of doing well the next day.
 - Storytelling, as a way of building confidence, going back into your own history, can boost your performance going forward.
 - We know that when you're travelling with your family, if you tell stories as you're travelling, if you go through a museum and are constantly telling, this is what we're seeing, if at the end of the family travel experience you tell a story, you can actually embed the positive, resilient narrative that you want to create.
 - Not that every trip will create those positive memories, but you have to actually practice and embed those memories.
 - At the end of every trip we write a short poem about what we did to try to capture those memories in their minds so they can remember and refer back to them later.

- Use pictures. For engaging young people, millennials and teens - young people are using pictures for storytelling.
 - We know now because of cell phones that more pictures are taken every day than in the first century of photography.
 - Young people are using pictures for storytelling and that's the way to engage them because they have their [phone] camera with them at all times.
- 3. Tell your family history.
 - This is my most popular article.
 - Researchers at Emory, psychologist Marshall P. Duke and Robyn Fivush gave children a series of tests, first in summer 2001 with 4 dozen families
 - Asked children questions about if they know where their grandparents were born, if an aunt had a sickness that they overcame, where your parents went to high school, etc.
 - The children who knew more about their family history, they compared the results with a battery of psychological tests - it was the number 1 predictor of the children's emotional resilience and happiness. They had the belief that they could affect the world around them.
 - "These children had a sense that they were part of an intergenerational self. A narrative that goes back deep in time. When they have difficulties, they know that someone in their family also went through difficulties."
 - What about adopted children? Marshall Duke has 1 adopted; He said it has nothing to do with biology, but talking about what it means to be part of your family.
 - At the end of the study came 9/11, they tested these children again and the children who knew the most, were best able to bounce back from that national trauma.
 - 3 narratives in families:
 - Ascending Narrative: we had nothing, we worked hard, now we have it all
 - Descending Narrative: we had a lot, then the war came, and we lost it all
 - Oscillating Narrative: Grandfather was first to go to school, became vice president of a bank, then his house burned down. His son had a successful life, and his wife got breast cancer.
 - "The children who understand that they come from an oscillating narrative know that when they hit hardships, and they will hit hardships, they know that they can get through them, that they can push through, not because of what they saw in a movie or a book; because of people in their own family.
- What I've been trying to say to you today is essentially three things:
 - 1. Take your story and ground it in the oldest stories that have ever been told. Go back. Connect your story to your community, to your faith, to your school,

company, country, to whatever it is. Connect your story to the oldest stories ever told.

- 2. Find a way to make sure that these stories are not just something that are living inside the computers but are everyday.
- 3. Don't just keep it to yourself, share it with those around you. Do it at the dinner table, at the carpool, when you're taking a walk, when you're folding the laundry. Make family history a part of your every day.
 - It's harder than you think. Our instinct is to protect our children and our family: we don't want them to know that we've had pain or that there's been suffering in our families. We have to get over those instincts. We have to fling open our cupboard doors and in an age appropriate way, share with them the difficulties that we and our family members have survived.
- Request of all of you:
 - 6 months after my book the secrets of happy families was published, my father was losing his confidence in life b/c of his parkinson's disease. I am the family storytelling person so I engaged in this process where every week I sent him a question for two years and I helped him tell the story of his own life and go through his life and find meaning.
 - We went through the joyful occasions and the painful ones and we produced a book of his life stories. He had never written anything longer than a memo in his life.
 - This process was incredibly enriching. It's part of something that I've heard from people all over the world, as I've talked more and more about families.
 - So I am going to write a book about this experience of writing a book of family history with my father.
 - I'd like to invite you to tell me your stories. I'm easy to get ahold of. Twitter, author page on Facebook, BruceFeiler.com. Tell me what you have found and help me tell this story of how we can help older people in their lives make family history part of their daily life.
- May you find a way to connect your family story with the oldest stories ever told.
- May you find a way to not just talk about the green and bountiful moments, but about the moments in exile, in desert, in pain.
- "Find a way to take your passion for family history and pass it on to subsequent generations and especially to our children who need it in order to believe that they can have a life of passion that they can control with dignity, happiness, and togetherness."
- "Every now and then, find a friend, take a walk, and share a story."