

Professional insight

Dealing with those everyday issues

By Doug McCarthy

THE GIFT OF STORYTELLING

I once heard a story about a western anthropologist living in an African village when the first television was introduced. The villagers dropped everything and gathered around the television day and night. After a while they began to drift away, returning to their usual entertainment, the local storyteller.

The anthropologist asked, “Why have you stopped watching television?”

A villager replied, “It is not as interesting as our own storyteller.”

“But television knows more stories than your village storyteller,” said the anthropologist.

“Maybe,” replied the villager. “But the storyteller knows me!”

I was blessed with many excellent teachers during my school days. The most memorable for me was a grade six teacher who taught us many lessons about life and developing character by telling stories, lessons that I remember to this day.

A well-told story that makes a point or teaches a value is a gift from the storyteller to the listeners. It is a wonderful meeting place because a story provides a gentle entry to the minds and hearts of the listeners. Storytelling is also a powerful and dynamic form of communication that reaches out and touches on a personal level. The human voice, the vocal expression and the comfort of proximity help listeners remember the story, its storyteller and the point being made.

Telling and listening to stories is an innate part of all human cultures that has survived the ages. We all enjoy telling stories. After a winter storm, for example, I am impressed by the wealth of stories people have to share and others like to hear. So storytelling, even in this age of multiple communication devices, can still endure. In fact, some occasions provide an atmosphere for stories to be shared, like camping trips, or holidays such as Christmas, or if you happen to be in a digital-free zone.

When I was a boy, I considered myself lucky to have come from a family of raconteurs. Family gatherings provided opportunities to listen to our family storytellers. What was interesting is that folks enjoyed hearing some stories over and over again like a favourite piece of music. As time went on this family tradition began to fade away, that is until my father's funeral. After the service we gathered at my father's house for a reception. It was my sister who started telling stories about our father. Everyone had something to share and stories were told long into the night. The television was on in the family room, but no one was watching. Of course, television knew more stories than we did, but television didn't know my dad.