

# My Life in Paragraphs

FIND AND TELL YOUR STORIES

by APRIL BELL



## Praise for My Life in Paragraphs

“What a gift this beautiful book will be to the people lucky enough to read and act on it.” —*Bernadette Jiwa, bestselling author of Story Driven*

“As a creative director, I learned early on brands that allow their audiences to feel safe, heard, intelligent and worthy are the ones people love most. April’s approach does all of this and her book is a great starting point for people to tell their stories with pride and grace.” —*Jon Soto, creative director*

“Wow! What a beautiful and practically useful book. It is written in such a clear and accessible way, I can imagine using the prompts and process and came away with motivation to explore my personal stories and those of others too.” —*Laurie Senter, educator*

“As a scientist, I’ve spent my life seeing stories in data; this process has taught me to recognize the power in every individual human story.” —*Dr. Ann Blake, environmental scientist, changemaker, and memoirist*

“What April crafted guides you deeper and deeper and deeper into the story until you’re face to face with the actual values you hold most dear. And that’s the moment when you realize, ‘Oh, I see why this works!’” —*Dan Senter, spiritual leader*

“You know how sometimes what happens in your life, you never really look at what you learned from it? The questions prompted me to really see what I learned, what my values were, and how I grew.” —*Carolyn Goto, workshop participant*

“Hearing story examples of what’s been important to other people helped me go further in my own thinking about what I want to pass on.” —*Steve Alparone, workshop participant*

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# **My Life in Paragraphs**

**FIND AND TELL YOUR STORIES**

by APRIL BELL

*For Elizabeth, whose wisdom and  
example made this book possible; and  
for Carli, my eternal champion of  
authentic self-expression.*

# Sample Story Prompts

 **Earth:** Grounding + Values

**Tell of a time you felt you  
truly belonged.**

 **Air:** Hopes + Dreams

**Who or what has been a source of  
hope for you in your life?**





 **Fire:** Passions + Motivations

**What have you learned  
the hard way?**



 **Water:** Emotions

**Tell of a time you experienced  
your own courage.**

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**“Stories carry the seeds of  
our humanity. They help us,  
teach us, heal us. And they  
connect us to each other  
and to ourselves.”**

—Mary Oliver



# Prelude



I'M LYING IN a hammock in the High Sierra. It's a lazy mid-afternoon. I can feel the warm summer air on my skin. The scent of a nearby Sequoia envelopes me. As I bask in serene quiet, I become aware of the wind rushing through the treetops. I tune in as the sound ebbs and flows, the trees telling their collective story—a story of community and connection. My experience is peaceful, comforting, and pure. My hammock drifts from side to side. I feel at home.

I'm moved to ponder my place within our greater human family. I have become the listener and the guide—I am the one to capture your story and help you find its place in our collective human story. I have always seen the value and importance of being a story catcher, and now I too must become a storyteller.

As we find the courage to share our stories from the depths of our own hearts, we orchestrate our collective symphony, just like those majestic trees.

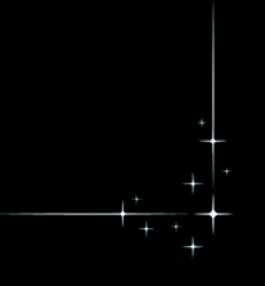

What's your story?

—*April Bell - Summer 2022*



***“To be fully alive, we must be  
willing to tell our own story,  
to be vulnerable and honest  
about who we are and what  
we’ve experienced.”***

—Mark Nepo



# Intention

**I**NDEAVOR TO inspire and assist you in telling your personal stories. In the beginning of this book, I tell a few stories of my own, including how I discovered and developed the “My Life in Paragraphs” process. In Part Two of this book, you will find storytelling tips and tricks, along with the format I use to assist individuals and groups in finding and telling their personal values-based stories.



My hope is that you enjoy this voyage of self-discovery. My wish is that you cultivate deeper connections by taking turns sharing and listening to each other’s tales. In the realm of legacy, it is the stories we tell about our learning experiences, our hopes and dreams, and how we define our values that illustrate who we truly are.



Part One:

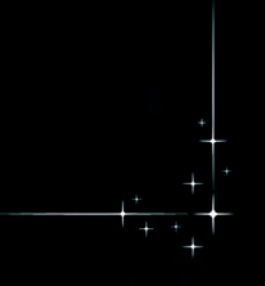

# Personal Storytelling





**“Instructions for living a life:  
Pay attention. Be astonished.  
Tell about it.”**

—Mary Oliver



## The Reluctant Storyteller

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL fall day, and I'm standing on the porch of Elizabeth's house in the Oakland Hills. With a warm, friendly smile and an excited hello, Peter, her son, swings the front door wide open, inviting me in. I'm there to film his mom telling her life story.

Twelve years earlier, Peter's dad had died of cancer, and Peter's deep regret has been that he never had the chance to record his dad telling his stories in his own voice.

I enter their comfortable home and begin glancing around for a good spot to set up my video camera. Peter calls his mom over and introduces us. Just like her son, Elizabeth is very warm and welcoming. She exudes kindness. While she possesses a regal air, she is extremely down-to-earth. I like her instantly. After greeting me, she turns to face her son more directly, her warm smile dropping away from her face. In a serious tone she says, "Do we really need to do this?"

Uh-oh. My heart sinks as I step away from the two of them and quietly continue going about my setup work. I've been in this scenario before; Elizabeth is what I refer to as "the reluctant storyteller."

I can partially overhear their strained whispers as I'm making myself busy. I hear Peter say, "Mom, I want you to do it for me." At that, Elizabeth lets out an exasperated sigh and leaves the room.

A short while later I have the camera, lights, and sound all set, and Elizabeth rejoins us. Her posture is stiff, with her arms folded across her chest. She has a mildly stern look on her face. She's still resisting the whole affair, and although Peter has chosen a gentle approach, he's holding his ground. I'm aware of being sandwiched between two very strong-willed people, each determined to have their way.

The final task before showtime is to place the microphone on Elizabeth's lapel. This is a very up-close and personal activity, where we are inches apart. I'm trying to put the mic on her, and she's sort of trying to take it off at the same time. It's somewhat comical, and certainly awkward for me. All the while, she continues to offer more objections to her son:

"Why do we even need to do this? I don't have anything interesting to say. I don't even have grandchildren; I have grand-dogs . . . and it seems highly unlikely that's ever going to change."

Peter repeats himself: "Mom, I want you to do it for me and KayMaria. We want to know your story. And I want to have it recorded."



Elizabeth finally concedes, and I'm able to affix the microphone to her lapel. I am relieved when she sits in the chair I've positioned opposite my own.

Peter takes his leave as I settle in directly across from Elizabeth. Instantly, the warm, kind woman I was initially introduced to returns. She thanks me for being there, and I give her a brief overview of how our interview will unfold. I press record and ask my first question.

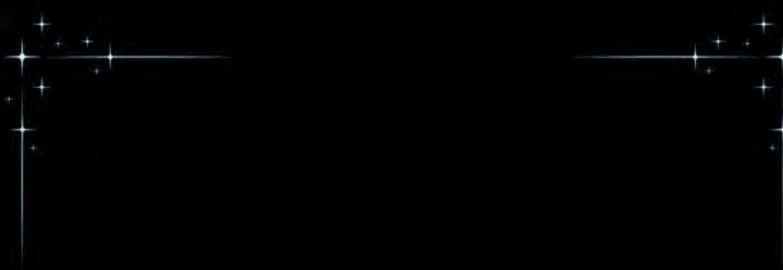
She shares incredible tales, from her mother coming to America from Greece by way of Egypt and England as a nanny, to her epic love story with Peter's dad. She gushes about their many joyful years shared raising their two children, and tears well up as she recounts the heartbreaking sorrow of her husband's early death. She reads me poetry, shares her hopes and dreams, talks about her complex relationship with her father, and speaks of all the things she holds most dear. Three hours later, Elizabeth is still talking!

When it's finally time to switch off the camera, Elizabeth is aglow and remarks on what a wonderful voyage it has been. She says she had no idea there was so much to share, nor did she realize how her life would look while witnessing it as we did during our time together.

A year or so after our interview, Elizabeth writes to me, thanking me for the experience. She shares that she has been

## My Life in Paragraphs



expanding upon the collection of stories we gathered that day by doing a practice she calls “My Life in Paragraphs.” Anytime she has a memory or a reminder from her past, she takes a little time to write a paragraph or two about it. Some of these paragraphs she sends to her children or a dear friend. Or she simply saves a cherished memory for herself.



**“The purpose of a  
storyteller is not to  
tell you how to think,  
but to give you questions  
to think upon.”**



—Brandon Sanderson





**“Stories are like  
breadcrumbs. They lead  
us where we need to go,  
and they nourish us  
along the way.”**

—Mark Nepo



## “My Life in Paragraphs” Concept

**I**N KEEPING WITH my fascination with the ethical will, I developed “My Life in Paragraphs” as a process and collection of fifty-two provocative story prompts to help you tell the stories that have given meaning and purpose to your life. The prompts are broken into four themes, with thirteen questions per theme. When you note the icon at the top of the page, it tells you which theme the prompt belongs to:



**Earth:** Grounding + Values



**Air:** Hopes + Dreams



**Fire:** Passions + Motivations



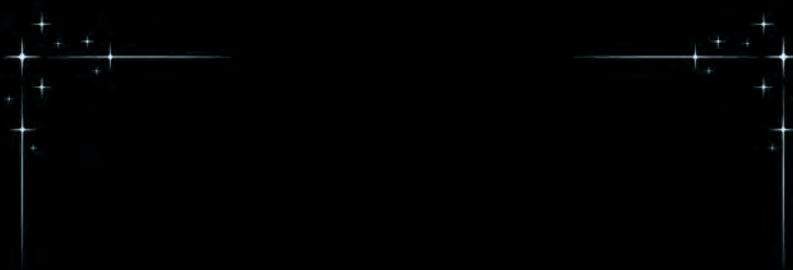
**Water:** Emotions

Many of the prompts have a follow-up question, which may help you in going a little deeper with your story.

If you choose to use the “My Life in Paragraphs” process I’ve included in the next section (page 156), be aware that it

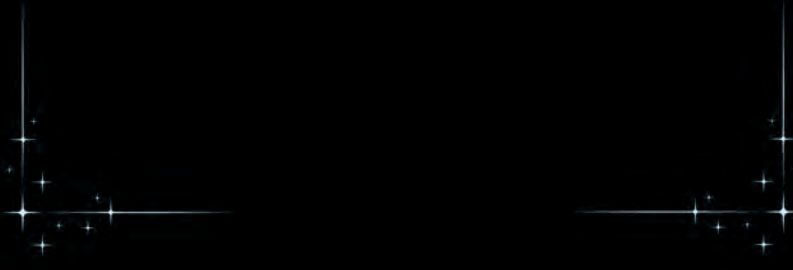
has been designed to be contemplative, so take your time and enjoy yourself. Go one step at a time, one story at a time. Before long, you'll be delighted to find you have a growing collection of meaningful stories.

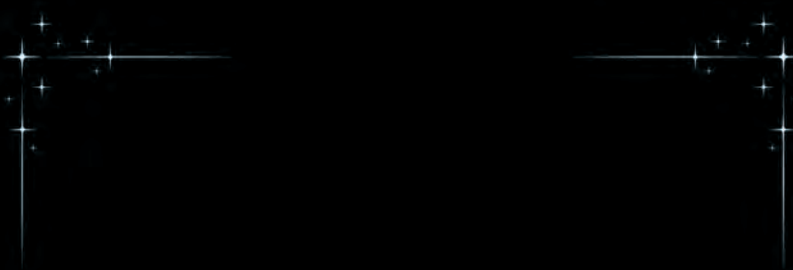
This process is most powerful when done with another person or in a small group. I've provided guidance on how to do story work with others in Part Two of this book. Hearing other people's stories and listening as they process their story ideas will help you hone in on your own. The important details you would like to craft into your stories will come to light much more easily when processing in a group or with a trusted friend.



**“Stories are a way of sharing  
our experiences, our hopes,  
our dreams, and our fears.  
They help us to connect with  
one another, to see the world  
through someone else’s eyes,  
and to learn from  
one another.”**

—Thomas King





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The “My Life in Paragraphs” process is designed for individuals who may not be particularly enthusiastic about writing but still find enjoyment in exploring, narrating, and potentially sharing their personal stories. The Story Notes section located to the left of each prompt may be utilized for creating a “beat sheet” (see page 166) or for jotting down bullet point notes about your story.

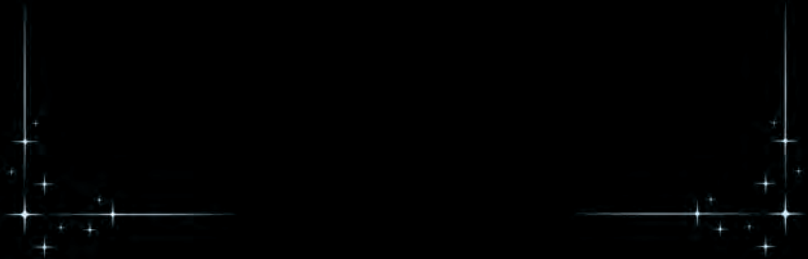
The manner in which you interact with the prompts is entirely at your discretion. I recommend flipping through the prompts and selecting one that inspires you in the moment. Alternatively, you may challenge yourself (and/or your story circle) by randomly flipping to a page and crafting tales in that manner.

It is important to remember to be gentle with yourself throughout this process. Some stories or prompts may evoke challenging memories. You may want to find professional support in coming to terms with difficult past experiences. Consider the primary goal of this book is to guide you in discovering the fun of exploring your personal stories.



Life Story Prompts

# Grounding + Values





**Tell of a time when  
you felt you truly  
belonged.**

Was it with an individual  
or a community?



Life Story Prompts

# Hopes + Dreams



**When you were a child,  
what did you want to  
be when you grew up?**

Are you happy or sad that it did  
or did not happen?



Life Story Prompts

# Passions + Motivations



**Tell of a time  
you overcame  
the odds.**

What moved you through  
the experience?



Life Story Prompts

# Emotions





**Tell of a time you  
felt incredibly  
happy.**

What or who caused this?



Part Two:

# Finding and Telling Your Stories



## “My Life in Paragraphs” Process

**N**OW FOR THE fun! You may like to get a journal or notebook dedicated to making your initial story notes. You don't need to be a writer to tell good stories. My focus has always been on assisting people in telling spoken-word stories. If you don't like to write, bullet points work great. Keep it simple and fun.

### **CHOOSE A PROMPT AND THEN CONSIDER:**

**VALUES:** Consider your core values and write down the top three to five values you hold that relate to this prompt. You can change or update your list at any time in the process. [See page 170 for a list of values.]

**BULLET NOTES:** What stories are you reminded of? Take a few minutes to write bullet-point notes of personal stories this prompt reminds you of.

**YOUR STORY:** Select one story from your list to work on, ideally the one you feel most inspired by.

## Storytelling Tips

FUNDAMENTALLY, A STORY is a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That's it. It's the best place to start. As noted in the next section, don't get too caught up in being perfect as a beginner. As you develop your process you may like to add some of the tips I offer here to make your stories more engaging. As with most things, the more you practice personal storytelling, the better you will become.



**KEEP IT REAL:** Endeavor to be authentic and vulnerable. I often ask people if they'd like to know the secret sauce to telling a great story. One biggie, as mentioned earlier, is vulnerability. People connect with our stories on a deeper level when we're being genuine and honest about what happened and how we felt in the moment.

Vulnerability can be a tricky thing. I don't recommend you drop that waterline if you don't feel safe doing so. I do invite you to be courageous and share your truth, as long as you feel comfortable. Often, the thing we think makes us look weak or even foolish is the very thing others see as our strength and our triumph. Go ahead and test the waters as you go along



**“Through exploring our own  
sacred stories, we shape the  
foundations which hold up  
our future generations.”**

—April Bell





## About the Author

EVER SINCE I can remember, I've loved listening to people's stories. When I was a child, my mom called me "the visitor," as I'd run off most days to visit whichever elder neighbor would have me.

That's me in the photo.

The homes on the small lane where I grew up in the San Francisco East Bay were occupied mostly by an older generation. I've always been interested in people, stories, and creativity.

In the early 1990s, I began my media career in the fast-paced, exciting, and deadline-intense world of major daily newspapering. I also obtained my degree in psychology. My newspaper career spanned thirteen years. I was in leadership, on the production-graphics side, prepress.

In 2008 I had the opportunity to reinvent my path and stepped into my current passion as a wisdom-keeper. As a young person, I never could have imagined how the foundational skills of my early adulthood would intersect; I now combine my education in psychology, my experience in leadership, and the graphics and technical skills I learned in my early career.

The daughter of an artist and a mobile tech pioneer, I am enlivened by assisting folks in creatively communicating their stories through technology. Since 2008 I've been gently guiding people to tap into the essence of who they truly are, artfully capturing that on video.

Over the years, I've honed my listening skills, as I am a natural at deeply connecting with others. I help people craft the narratives that matter most to them. My clients include families, individuals, organizations, and businesses that value the power of story.

What excites me these days is facilitating the transformative gift of personal storytelling through engaging retreats and courses. My focus is mainly spoken-word stories, so people daunted by writing love my process.

I am an innovator, recognized by The New York Times, USA Today, WIRED, and others for bringing to the masses the ethical will and legacy storytelling via an interview-style format through the co-creation of StoryCatcher® for iPhone, launched in 2013. For nearly ten years and running, our app has helped thousands capture and share their most cherished stories on video.

For fun, I enjoy riding my mountain bike, trekking in the High Sierra, and exploring the mysteries of the human spirit and condition.

Ultimately, it is our stories that connect and bind us, today and into the future. What's your story?



# Your Story Matters More Than You Know

What are your struggles and triumphs, failures and successes? Where have you been, and who have you loved deeply? This book offers fifty-two story prompts to unearth the path you've walked and the moments you've held dear. It also guides you through telling your stories, one paragraph at a time, even if you don't like to write. Explore your life with an open heart, and you'll be gifted insights—and connections with loved ones—you'll forever cherish.

“What a gift this beautiful book will be to the people lucky enough to read and act on it.”

—Bernadette Jiwa, best-selling author of *Story Driven*

April Bell is the founder of Tree of Life Legacies and co-creator of StoryCatcher for iPhone. She facilitates the transformative gift of personal storytelling through video interviews, coaching, retreats, and workshops.

