

Reminiscences

This activity is modeled on a similar activity of the same name created by Nancy Brothers at the Morton Grove Public Library.

Purpose

Long before disposable toothbrushes or plastic shopping bags, people had a very different relationship to nature and its resources. From canning vegetables, to camping, to building wells, our ancestors have a long history of living in harmony with the environment. Much of this vital knowledge is still alive in our senior citizens, among our parents, grandparents, and great grand parents. Yet if they die without passing on these skills and stories, then we will lose some of the greatest environmental wisdom we have.

This activity brings together senior citizens to share stories from their past, to tell tales about their communities and practices and the historical ways that they have cooperated with nature. The activity uses a variety of household or other daily life objects to spur discussion. Like Passing the Baton, the goal of the activity is to encourage innovative thinking about how to learn from the past to create greener lifestyles and communities today. It is a powerful way to reclaim environmentally-friendly traditions, practices that comprise a critical component of our communities' diverse heritage.

Group Size and Time Needed

15-20 participants, about 90 minutes

Space Needed

A room that is large enough to seat all participants in one circle, with a table to display objects in the middle of the circle.

Materials Needed

- Facilitators provide all the objects used in this activity. Bring 6-10 objects used in daily life from past decades, such as but not limited to: wooden clothes pin, washboard, iron that heats up by stove, books, wooden spoon, chicken/hambone for soup, fabric scrap (used to patch clothing), quilt, rag rug, old toys, umbrellas/ rain gear, laundry basket, knitting needles. Include other objects that reflect the community's particular history, such as a hard hat or safety goggles in an industrial or post-industrial area.
- Table tents for people to write their names on.
- Big post-it pad and markers.
- Microphone and digital recorder if you want to record the stories. It is especially important to capture stories from senior citizens about older life ways, and you may want to archive them in your local library or use them on a website or in presentations or exhibits.

Facilitation Needs

The facilitator should have experience working with senior citizens (and youth if you do an intergenerational activity that includes them—see this option below) and be comfortable encouraging participation from all members of the group, while graciously managing the sharing of the more vocal participants.

Note Taker and Photographer

- Someone who can take good notes throughout the activity. This will be important for later on when you are ready to identify common themes or issues that came out of the stories that you heard.
- If you plan to do any kind of demonstration or exhibit of your work, whether online or in your local library, it is a good idea to arrange for a photographer to document this event. S/he should take photos of participants posing with the objects that they refer to in their stories.

Instructions

As participants arrive, have them write their names on a table tent. Then ask them to visit the objects on display and identify a few that prompt memories. Have the object viewing carry over into the first 5-10 minutes of the start of the activity. When everyone is seated, welcome them, explain the purpose of the activity, and ask them to introduce themselves, sharing their name, where they grew up, and where they live now. Review the objects again and ask them to close their eyes and think of a story or memory, about themselves or others, directly or indirectly related to one of the objects. Prompt them to think back to a particular time—when they were XX age or when they had young families or were just starting out on their own or when they were children. Then ask them to open their eyes and ask for a volunteer to share her/his story. Continue asking people to share their stories until everyone has had a turn or time is up.

In between stories:

- Keep up the momentum by turning the group's attention to some of the lesserdiscussed objects and asking who has stories related to those objects.
- Highlight themes that are emerging, such as repairing items that were damaged (e.g., darning socks), playing with neighbors in the streets, etc., and ask if anyone else has stories related to those themes. Write these themes down on the big post-it papers.
- Also listen for issues that may come up that are indirectly related to the environment, such as the sense of community that people had when they did more activities outside (from hanging clothes on a clothesline to walking with neighbors to church).
- Encourage participants to compare their past memories with their experiences today. What is similar and what has changed?

Make it Intergenerational:

“My grandma used it, my mom gave it away, and then I bought it.”

This activity would also lend itself nicely to an intergenerational group of participants, especially because so many past practices are now coming back in vogue (e.g., knitting). The activity can be facilitated as described above. The only changes you have to make are...

- Bring objects that juxtapose each other to facilitate comparing between generations, such as: a record and an iPod; glass jars and Ziploc bags; a clothes line, dryer sheets, and a dryer ball; vinegar, baking soda, and modern cleaning supplies; a mop and a Swiffer.
- Ask participants to think of stories or memories from their past, instead of specifying a particular age or time. Leave the last 10-15 minutes to sum up some of the key themes you recognized and ask what recommendations the participants have for taking better care of the environment and their communities today by re-inventing some of their generation’s past practices.

This tool is available online for download at:

<http://fieldmuseum.org/explore/department/ecco/downloads>

If you have any questions, concerns, or requests for hard copies of the tools, please contact Jennifer Hirsch at jhirsch@fieldmuseum.org.