



Black sheep and the mysterious Uncle Bob

By Keith Sands

In this article, an English teacher working in Russia explains why he finds family stories interesting and talks about what makes his own family unique.

I'm an English teacher working in Russia, and for some reason I really don't like that classroom topic - Talk About Your Family. Perhaps it's because everyone studied English from the same book at school. So all the students say, "My family consists of five members. Me, my mother, my father, my brother and my dog..." And so on. As if all families are exactly the same.

It's such a shame, because our families are unique. All families have their stories, their dramas, their private jokes, nicknames and phrases. They're the place where our personalities were made. How often have you heard someone with young children complain "Oh no, I think I'm turning into my parents...?"

The other day I found myself turning into one of my grandparents. I was trying to get my daughter (1 year and 8 months old) to eat her dinner and I said "That'll make your hair curl." Now, I don't think that green vegetables give you curly hair, or even that curly hair is a great thing to have. It's just a phrase I heard from my Granddad a hundred times when I was small. It had stayed in my mind, half-forgotten, until the time I could use it myself. I wonder if he heard it from his own grandparents? How many other old-fashioned phrases like this stay inside families, when the rest of the world has forgotten them?

Shaking the family tree

Talk about your family? "Well...they're just there", we say. Our families are so ordinary to us that we even think they're boring. Not a bit of it! Families are the most exotic things on earth. If you dig enough in your own family, you're sure to come up with all the stuff you could want for a great novel. Surprising characters, dramatic or funny stories passed down for generations, or a face from the past you recognise – maybe in your own. Someone or something unique to your family. Or, as genealogists like to say, "Shake your family tree - and watch the nuts fall out."

My mother started tracing our family tree a few years ago, not expecting to get far. But, digging in old records and libraries she got back three hundred years. She turned up old stories and a few mysteries. What happened to the big family farm? Where did the family fortune go in the 1870s? More to the point – where is it now?

I'm the traveller in my family, and I like to think I got it from a great-grandfather on my Dad's side. He was an adventurous soul. My two favourite family heirlooms are a photo of him on a horse in a desert landscape (1897 in Patagonia) and a postcard home from Portugal complaining that his boat was late because of the Revolution in Lisbon. "Dreadful business, they seem to have arrested the King..." he says. If you look at your family, you open a window on the past.

History in miniature

Start someone talking about their family stories and they might never stop. You'll find the whole history of your country there, too. When my mother, still putting the family tree together, asked me for a few names from my Russian wife's family, my wife got on the phone to her own mother. Just to check a name or two. But they were still talking an hour later, and she'd filled 5 pages of A4 paper. And so I was introduced to: someone who lived through the siege of Leningrad (but forgot how to read in the process), a high official in the Communist Party, and some rich relations who used to go to Switzerland for their holidays before the Revolution. There was also a black sheep of the family (or "white crow" as they say in Russian) who left his wife and children and disappeared in the Civil War – though nobody in the family knows which side he fought on. All these people seemed impossibly exotic to me.

Who wears the trousers?

To go back to that English class then, let's get rid of the phrase "my family consists of..." and look at some more interesting ways to talk about families. English is rich in idioms to talk about family life. We've mentioned the black sheep of the family – that's someone who didn't fit in, or caused a family scandal. If you're loyal to your family, you can say blood is thicker than water or keep it in the family. If you share a talent with another family member, you can say it runs in the family. You might have your father's eyes or your mother's nose. If you're like one of your parents, you can say like father, like son or you can be a chip off the old block.

Who wears the trousers in your family? (Who's the head of your family?) You might affectionately talk about your bro, your sis or your folks (parents). Or if you like Cockney slang, what about her indoors or the missus to talk about your wife? Though both these phrases make feminists reach for their guns.

If you want to get more technical, you can discuss the benefits of the nuclear family : a small family, just parents and children living in the same house. If grandparents or other relatives live there too, then you have an extended family. In English we talk about the average nuclear family with the phrase 2.4 children.

Then there are idioms that have left the family (flown the nest) and gone on to have a life of their own. You can't teach your grandmother to suck eggs. It means you can't tell your elders anything they don't know already. But why would anyone want to suck eggs anyway? Now here's a really strange one. A Londoner is telling someone how to get a new passport. "Get four pictures taken, pick up a form in the post office, hand it in with your old passport and ...Bob's your uncle." It means "the problem is solved". But I'd love to know who the original Bob was, and why he was such a useful uncle to have.