TELL ME A STORY: A NON-FICTION WRITING EXERCISE

Based on the book, *Grandfather Gandhi*

*Grandfather Gandhi* is a non-fiction picture book, which presents the special bond Arun Gandhi had with his world-renown peacekeeping grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi. The story centers on Arun's struggle to live up to his famous grandfather's ideals, as well as the every day obstacles he encounters: being new to grandfather's service village, studying a new language, and feeling like he doesn't fit in. When Arun almost throws a rock on the soccer field, all eyes are on him. "*How could he--a Gandhi--be so easy to anger.*"

Using the text of *Grandfather Gandhi* as a model, we invite you to **Tell Me a Story**—a true story from your life based on a time where you sought advice/guidance from someone older—a parent, grandparent, family friend, teacher, or other important elder.

**Tips on Telling a Non-Fiction Story:**

1) **Start with the Setting:**

   - Where does the story take place? In your room? At your grandparent's house? Is it summer or winter?

   - Use specific sensory details: smells, sounds, tastes, sights, etc.

   **Examples from Grandfather Gandhi**

   - "*We arrived at Sevagram, Grandfather's service village, dusty and dirty.*"

   - "*The tin bowls and utensils we used clanged, making a funny sounding music.*"

   - "*The air was so thick and hot, to keep cool we slept under the stars.*"

   - "*I was glad that when the sky turned the deep orange of a tangerine, it was time for chores.*"

2) **Develop a Character Sketch:**

   Even though you are writing a non-fiction story you need to develop character. The main character in *Grandfather Gandhi*, aside from Arun, is grandfather. Develop a character sketch of your elder. Ask yourself the following:
• How does the elder in my story walk?
• What does their voice sound like? Is it raspy? Strong? Quiet? A whisper?
• Does my elder smell strongly of pine cones? Chewing gum? Tobacco? Perfume?
• How does spending time with my elder make me feel?
• What do the clothes your elder wears look like?

Examples from Grandfather Gandhi

• “He smelled of peanut oil.”
• “His stride was quick, and each time he raised his walking stick he asked me a question.”
• “…he wiped his spectacles on his dhoti, put them back on, and looked me in the eye.”
• “My heart swelled as big as a balloon. I had made Grandfather proud.”

3) Lesson/Conflict

In Grandfather Gandhi, Arun is struggling with his anger. He thinks he is the only one deals with anger and he’s surprised to learn his peacekeeping Grandfather also deals with this emotion. After he almost throws the rock on the soccer field, he runs to Grandfather’s hut where his grandfather shares with him the anger and electricity story.

For your story, ask yourself:

• What are you struggling with? Is it anger? Fear? Fitting in? Trying something new (riding a bike, learning to skate)?
• How does this struggle make you feel?
• Did you ask your elder for advice? How did it feel to be listened to?
• How do you feel after your elder shared words of wisdom/advice with you?
Examples from Grandfather Gandhi

- “The Gandhi name was much to live up to. I had passed my first test, but there would be others. What if I failed?”
- “… I should have known—there were more important things than me.”
- “Out came what happened on the soccer field, getting pushed, the rock, everything. When I was done, my head throbbed. Grandfather didn’t need to say it. I’d never live up to the Mahatma. I’d never be at peace.”

4) Developing Dialogue

Dialogue in non-fiction is not made up. It’s what people really said (to the best of your recollection.) Set up a time to interview your elder, whether in person, or over the phone, email, etc.

Some possible questions to ask:

- What was the advice you gave me when I was struggling with_____?
- Did you ever feel the way I felt? As a child? Even now as an adult?
- Why did you share this advice with me?
- What makes you proud of me?