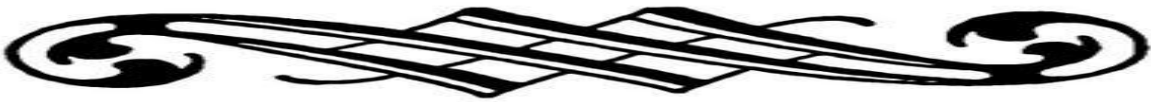


Personal History Questions and Resources



“When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost.”

Frederick Buechner

Karen Ray – Personal Historian

Remembering the Time

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Las Cruces, NM 88007

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Why Create a Personal History?

Family members often commission life stories or video tributes to celebrate a life or as a tribute to someone who has died or is dying. As personal historians, we see in eyes wet with tears of pride and gratitude how special this gift can be. Whether you create a personal history yourself, hire someone to help you, or arrange to help a loved one, we hope you will experience first-hand how satisfying the process of life review can be and how priceless a legacy for the family and later generations. Contribute to history! Tell your life story or that of someone in your family.

There are many, many reasons to create a personal history.

- Celebrate your life - and share your life experiences with others
- Preserve important family stories and memories
- Gain insight into yourself and the struggles, choices, and forces that shaped your life
- Find direction for the rest of your life
- Share your wisdom and the lessons you've learned
- Heal - especially if your life has been marked by pain or tragedy
- Put names and stories with those old family photos
- Bring life to the family tree
- Connect the generations
- Bear witness to events that affected many
- Set the record straight - to tell your side of the story
- Give back to the community
- As a gift from one generation to the next
- Your life story may be your most important legacy

Tips Before You Get Started

Before you start work on your personal history, you can make more efficient use of interview time by making notes before the interview. Whether you are being interviewed, or you are interviewing relatives, think about the answers to these basic questions. Assume that “you” is you (if you are writing on your own) or your subject (if you are interviewing someone else).

- What is the purpose of this project? What do you hope to accomplish?
- What is the purpose of this interview? Who will hear or see it? Who will have access to the unedited interview?
- Who is your intended audience? Family? Friends? Historians? Researchers? The public? Will the stories based on the interview be published, made available to a select few, or kept private? Does the narrator want the material (or parts of it) kept confidential?
- Above all, what story do you want to tell. Do you plan to cover the whole life or to emphasize parts of it (such as the war years)?
- What is the overall story about your family’s journey - challenges, endurance, and triumphs. What parts of that story are most important? What parts don’t most people know about? What parts do you prefer to ignore?
- If you have trouble getting going, or think you don’t have much to say, it often helps to start by talking about old family photographs (of relatives from earlier generations and of you and your immediate family at various life stages). Photos can magically elicit memories (including memories of stories you’ve heard all your life). Get old photos out and sort them roughly into chronological order, so you can go through them, identifying who the people were and what was happening in the photos. (Record the answers; you’ll be glad later you did!) In captions, you want to convey briefly the story behind each photo - for example: “Uncle Vern was courting Aunt Pauline when this photo was taken.”
- What do you remember about your parents and grandparents? How did they meet? List their children and grandchildren. Do you know where they lived, their education, careers, military service, beliefs, talents and abilities, illnesses, and major life events? Create a timeline of family events; you may be surprised at what a complete timeline will reveal about family history and dynamics.

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- Which family members' lives do you want to talk about? Why are they important? What were the major events in their lives? Do you have documents or clippings about them or know where they can be found?
- Create a timeline of significant events in your life. Include the basics (birth, childhood, education, training, career highlights, love, marriage, children, and special interests). More important, highlight the turning points and special events that helped shape your life. What were your proudest moments, your toughest challenges, your greatest frustrations, your fondest memories? How were you affected by where you lived at various stages of your life - and by whether you stayed in one place or moved. Jot down brief notes about stories that convey those life highlights - stories to tell during interviews.
- Which world events and social and cultural changes affected your life (and how) and which people (famous or otherwise) influenced your life choices. How did involvement in politics, military life, or religion affect your life? How have your feelings, beliefs, and values changed over the years? What are the main messages (including lessons learned) that you want to leave the next generation?

Story Corps

GREAT QUESTIONS LIST

These questions are merely suggestions for getting a good conversation going. We encourage you to use the ones you like and to come up with your own. This list is in no particular order. You may choose one of the categories below, or scroll through and read them all. For a printer friendly version of this list, please click on the printer icon at the bottom right-hand corner of this page.

Great questions for anyone

- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who was the most important person in your life? Can you tell me about him or her?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did that person teach you?
- Who has been the kindest to you in your life?
- What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?
- What is your earliest memory?
- Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to me?
- What are you proudest of in your life?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- How has your life been different than what you'd imagined?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What does your future hold?
- Is there any message that you'd like to leave for your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, or for future generations yet to come?
- Is there anything that you've never told me but want to tell me now?
- Is there something about me that you've always wanted to know but have never asked?

Friends or Colleagues

- If you could interview anyone from your life living or dead, but not a celebrity, who would it be and why?
- What is your first memory of me?
- Was there a time when you didn't like me?
- What makes us such good friends?
- How would you describe me? How would you describe yourself?
- Where will we be in 10 years? 20 years?
- Do you think we'll ever lose touch with each other?
- Is there anything that you've always wanted to tell me but haven't?

Grandparents

- Where did you grow up?
- What was your childhood like?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- How did you and grandma/grandpa meet?
- What was my mom/dad like growing up?
- Do you remember any songs that you used to sing to her/him? Can you sing them now?

- Was she/he well-behaved?
- What is the worst thing she/he ever did?
- What were your parents like?
- What were your grandparents like?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- Are you proud of me?

Raising children

- When did you first find out that you'd be a parent? How did you feel?
- Can you describe the moment when you saw your child for the first time?
- How has being a parent changed you?
- What are your dreams for your children?
- Do you remember when your last child left home for good?
- Do you have any favorite stories about your kids?

Parents

- Do you remember what was going through your head when you first saw me?
- How did you choose my name?
- What was I like as a baby? As a young child?
- Do you remember any of the songs you used to sing to me? Can you sing them now?
- What were my siblings like?
What were the hardest moments you had when I was growing up?
- If you could do everything again, would you raise me differently?
- What advice would you give me about raising my own kids?
- What are your dreams for me?
- How did you meet mom/dad?
- Are you proud of me?

Growing up

- When and where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- What was it like?
- Who were your parents?
- What were your parents like?
- How was your relationship with your parents?
- Did you get into trouble? What was the worst thing you did?
- Do you have any siblings? What were they like growing up?
- What did you look like?
- How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you happy?
- What is your best memory of childhood? Worst?
- Did you have a nickname? How'd you get it?
- Who were your best friends? What were they like?
- How would you describe a perfect day when you were young?
- What did you think your life would be like when you were older?
- Do you have any favorite stories from your childhood?

School

- Did you enjoy school?
- What kind of student were you?
- What would you do for fun?
- How would your classmates remember you?
- Are you still friends with anyone from that time in your life?
- What are your best memories of grade school/high school/college/graduate school? Worst memories?
- Was there a teacher or teachers who had a particularly strong influence on your life? Tell me about them.
- Do you have any favorite stories from school?

Love & Relationships

- Do you have a love of your life?
- When did you first fall in love?
- Can you tell me about your first kiss?
- What was your first serious relationship?
- Do you believe in love at first sight?
- Do you ever think about previous lovers?
- What lessons have you learned from your relationships?

Marriage & Partnerships

- How did you meet your husband/wife?
- How did you know he/she was “the one”?
- How did you propose?
- What were the best times? The most difficult times?
- Did you ever think of getting divorced?
- Did you ever get divorced? Can you tell me about it?
- What advice do you have for young couples?
- Do you have any favorite stories from your marriage or about your husband/wife?

Working

- What do you do for a living?
- Tell me about how you got into your line of work.
- Do you like your job?
- What did you think you were going to be when you grew up?
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- What lessons has your work life taught you?
- If you could do anything now, what would you do? Why?
- Do you plan on retiring? If so, when? How do you feel about it?
- Do you have any favorite stories from your work life?

Religion

- Can you tell me about your religious beliefs/spiritual beliefs? What is your religion?
- Have you experienced any miracles?

- What was the most profound spiritual moment of your life?
- Do you believe in God?
- Do you believe in the after-life? What do you think it will be like?
- When you meet God, what do you want to say to Him?

Serious Illness

- Can you tell me about your illness?
- Do you think about dying? Are you scared?
- How do you imagine your death?
- Do you believe in an after-life?
- Do you regret anything?
- Do you look at your life differently now than before you were diagnosed?
- Do you have any last wishes?
- If you were to give advice to me or my children, or even children to come in our family, what would it be?
- What have you learned from life? The most important things?
- Has this illness changed you? What have you learned?
- How do you want to be remembered?

Family heritage

- What is your ethnic background?
- Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from?
- Have you ever been there? What was that experience like?
- What traditions have been passed down in your family?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- What are the classic family stories? Jokes? Songs?

War

- Were you in the military?
- Did you go to war? What was it like?
- How did war change you?
- During your service, can you recall times when you were afraid?
- What are your strongest memories from your time in the military?
- What lessons did you learn from this time in your life?

Remembering a loved one

- What was your relationship to _____?
- Tell me about _____.
- What is your first memory of _____?
- What is your best memory of _____?
- What is your most vivid memory of _____?
- What did _____ mean to you?
- Are you comfortable/ can you talk about _____'s death? How did _____ die?
- What has been the hardest thing about losing _____?
- What would you ask _____ if _____ were here today?

- What do you miss most about _____?
- How do you think _____ would want to be remembered?
- Can you talk about the biggest obstacles _____ overcame in life?
- Was there anything you and _____ disagreed about, fought over, or experienced some conflict around?
- What about _____ makes you smile?
- What was your relationship like?
- What did _____ look like?
- Did you have any favorite jokes _____ used to tell?
- Do you have any stories you want to share about _____?
- What were _____'s hopes and dreams for the future?
- Is there something about _____ that you think no one else knows?
- How are you different now than you were before you lost _____?
- What is the image of _____ that persists?
- Do you have any traditions to honor _____?
- What has helped you the most in your grief?
- What are the hardest times?

More Questions to Ponder for Your Personal History

What do you think are the 3 most important things in life?
What are your favorite books and television shows?
What do you think the world will look like in 2100?
Who is/was your favorite relative?
Who was your best friend in high school?
How old were you when you learned to drive? To cook?
What has been your best decision in life so far?
What has been your worst decision in life so far?
What is the nicest thing someone has done for you?
What was the most serious loss of your life? How did you handle that?
List 10 things that make you laugh.
What is your favorite joke?

Questions to Get You Started on Your Personal History!

Where did you live when you were in grade school?
Who was your first grade teacher?
Who was your favorite teacher? Why?
Did you have a pet?
What was your childhood address?
Where did you go to school?
Who was your fourth grade teacher?
Can you name all of your teachers and describe them?
How did your family celebrate holidays?
What are your favorite books? Your favorite quotes?
What did your family eat for dinner?
Where did your family eat dinner?
If you did not have television, what did you do?
How old were you when your family purchased a television?
Who was your best friend in grade school? Are you still in contact?
What was your favorite game?
Did you go swimming? Where?
Did you participate in sports? Which ones?
Who was your best friend in high school? Are you still in contact?
Did you have a bicycle? How old were you when you learned to ride it?
What was your first car?

You probably think your adult children know all of these things about you. Ask them. I would imagine that they do not, and I think that is going to be a surprise to you.

Resources

Websites

Association of Personal Historians, www.personalhistorians.org

Story Corps, www.storycorps.org

Ancestry.com

The Heart and Craft of Life Writing: Tips, guidelines and observations for all facets of life writing,
www.heartandcraft.blogspot.com

Books

Shimmering Images: A handy Little Guide to Writing Memoir, Lisa Dale Norton

Recording Your Family History, William Fletcher

My Words are Gonna Linger, The Art of Personal History, Edited by Paula Stallings Yost and Pat McNees

Writing Down the Bones, Natalie Goldberg

Writing Your Life: An Easy-to-Follow Guide to Writing an Autobiography, Mary Borg

Articles

Suite101.com/article/who-can-write-a-memoir-a98745

Voices.yahoo.com/get-past-guilt-write-memoir-35129.html

www.good-sam.com/index.php/resources/.../legacies_for_future_generations/