

How To Approach Your Relatives for Their Stories

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1. Saving family stories
 - a. Class at Portland State about diverse cultures of Portland where I learned how the Jewish community got the oral histories of all the Jewish people who moved into Portland about 1912.
 - b. Example of Grandfather John Tschida who wanted his stories saved and I was in the right spot to do it
 - c. Enjoyed the experience so much I took classes at PSU on how to create a business doing this and joined Association of Personal Historians, which was created about the same time. I went to their first national convention which was held here in Portland in 2004.
 - d. Example of Great-grandfather Emil Schacht – with no written records
2. How much energy and time do you want to devote to the project
 - a. Do you want the stories of everyone in genealogy line that your elder knows?
 - b. Do you want a detailed chronology of the elder you will be talking with?
 - c. Do you want to get names on all the family pictures and the story that goes with each picture?
 - d. Do you want to have this elder share a few stories and lots of wisdom that they can share about living?
3. Where to begin
 - a. What do you want to create – a binder with individual stories? A manuscript weaving the stories together? A scrapbook or self-published picture book with a small paragraph next to each picture?
 - b. Think about how you can make this comfortable for the elder
 - i. Is this a person who likes to tell stories and you just have to nudge them to get started?
 - ii. Are they distant from you so corresponding by emails or letters would be comfortable?
 - iii. Can they handle Zoom technology so you can record the conversation and transcribe later?
 - iv. What is their energy level to engage in this project?
 1. Do you want to make it brief, get the critical information and stop?
 2. Do you think this will add quality and purpose for their life so you want to go in small portions to create one big result?
 - c. Take time to reflect on what your priorities are to discuss with this elder
 - i. List of 100
 - ii. Set a timer for 15 minutes and start listing all the questions you'd like to get answered. Just keep writing as ideas come to mind.
 - iii. After you make the initial list, organize the subjects in a logical progression.
4. Meet with the elder and get their feedback on the options and make an agreement that works for them
 - a. Do they have stories that they want to be prioritized?
 - b. I recommend meeting them for one hour sessions to keep the energy up
 - c. When the product is done they have final decision on red-lining anything they decide they don't want to share after thinking it over.
5. Important techniques in asking questions
 - a. Ask open ended questions so they can easily expand the information they give you.
 - b. Don't get uncomfortable with quiet time while they're thinking. This can bring up emotions and challenging memories that will take time for them to process. Some quiet time may bring back memories they haven't thought about for a long time. You may get some real gems of stories.
 - c. Try to ask questions in a logical order so they don't get frustrated with the process.
 - d. Give them time to completely cover a particular topic. Be careful not to jump to the next question too quickly.

- e. You may find that when you go back the next time they will want to expand on questions they were previously asked. Take the time to make sure they feel they've shared all they want to about the last time you met before starting with new questions at this meeting.
 - f. If they don't want to talk about a difficult period don't push it. Try to shift the context by asking how did the family rally together during that difficult period? What personal strengths did people share with others during that difficult time. Sometimes the event isn't the whole story, but rather, how a person grew through the experience.
 - g. Thank them for their efforts as you go through the process. Tell them how good they're doing. People feel very vulnerable and are concerned they will be judged. Be compassionate and say that if they don't want to talk about a particular time or event, then move on to the next question.
6. Questions

Books by other authors:

To Our Children's Children -- Bob Greene

Legacy -- Linda Spence

Keeping Family Stories Alive -- Vera Rosenbluth who gives not only questions but an overview of the life-story writing process

Making Questions Work: A Guide to What and How to Ask for Facilitators, Consultants, Managers, Coaches, and Educators - - Dorothy Strachan

Connie's Books Available on Amazon:

Capturing Your Life Stories, a workbook for the right-handed writer

Capturing Your Life Stories, a workbook for the left-handed writer

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GREAT QUESTIONS FOR ANYONE

- Who has been the most important person in your life? Can you tell me about him or her?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- 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?
- What is your favorite memory of me?
- Are there any funny stories your family tells about you that come to mind?
- Are there any funny stories or memories or characters from your life that you want to tell me about?
- What are you proudest of?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- If you could hold on to one memory from your life forever, what would that be?
- 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?
- What are your hopes for what the future holds for me? For my children?
- If this was to be our very last conversation, is there anything you'd want to say to me
- For your great great grandchildren listening to this years from now: is there any wisdom you'd want to pass on to them? What would you want them to know?
- 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?

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?

Below are some of the questions to consider:

1. Did you join a fraternity or sorority in college?
2. If you could do it over, would you join the military?
3. How has your life turned out differently than you imagined it would?
4. What is your go-to karaoke song?
5. Have you ever given or been the recipient of a random act of kindness?
6. What are some of your special talents?
7. Who was one of your first crushes? What was special about them?
8. What was your first sleepover like?
9. What was it like for you when your first child left the nest?
10. What's something you really disagreed with your parents about?
11. Who did you go to prom with?
12. What do you like most about your siblings?
13. Did you ever get in trouble at school as a child?
14. What were you like when you were 30?
15. What are some of your childhood accomplishments?
16. How did you experience Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon?
17. What are your New Year's resolutions?
18. What is your definition of love?
19. Do you have any tips on hosting a great party or dinner?
20. What was something that you believed all through childhood and were surprised to find out was false?

Help get the gears of your memory in motion with these questions

Trena Cleland is a personal historian in Eugene who helps individuals and families write life stories, compile family histories, create legacy books, and more.

She offers these topics to help get the gears of your memory in motion.

Ethnic identity, ancestry, heritage

Where did your ancestors come from? How, when and why did they emigrate to the United States?

What do you remember about your grandparents?

What were your parents like? Describe each of them.

What were some of the prevailing attitudes and beliefs in your family?

Home and family life

Describe your childhood home and neighborhood.

Who was in your household, including pets? What do you remember about your toys and games? Did you have chores?

What were some typical meals (and do you have favorite recipes)? How were holidays celebrated? Did your family go on vacations?

Education/schooling

Did you like going to grade school? Any favorite teachers?

How did you get there? What did you wear? Did you take your lunch?

When you were in high school, what was going on in the world?

Did you play sports or an instrument? As a youngster, what were your interests?

Courtship, marriage and children

At what age did you begin dating? What did people do on dates?

How did you and your spouse meet?

What did you love most about your spouse when you met? Describe your wedding, if you had one, and the early years of your relationship.

When and where were your children born? How did you choose their names?

Describe the personalities of your children. What are you proud of?

Vocations and avocations

What were some of your early jobs? Which jobs have been the best fit?

Do you have favorite hobbies?

Other memories and reflections

How has the world changed from the time you were a child?

Do you have a spiritual or religious path that is meaningful to you?

What family heirlooms do you possess?

Are there family traditions you would like to see carried on?

Visit trenacleland.com for more questions and assistance in recording your personal history.

50 questions for a family member

1. Did you have a nickname?
2. When and where were you born?
3. How did your family come to live there?
4. Were there other family members in the area? Who?
5. What was the house (apartment, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones?
6. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
7. What is your earliest childhood memory?
8. Describe the personalities of your family members.
9. What kind of games did you play growing up?
10. What was your favorite toy and why?
11. What was your favorite thing to do for fun (movies, beach, etc.)?
12. Did you have family chores? What were they? Which was your least favorite?
13. Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?
14. What was school like for you as a child? What were your best and worst subjects? Where did you attend grade school? High school? College?
15. What school activities and sports did you participate in?
16. Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
17. Who were your childhood heroes?
18. What were your favorite songs and music?
19. Did you have any pets? If so, what kind and what were their names?
20. What was your religion growing up? What church, if any, did you attend?
21. Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?
22. Who were your friends when you were growing up?

23. What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up? Did any of them personally affect your family?
24. Describe a typical family dinner. Did you all eat together as a family? Who did the cooking? What were your favorite foods?
25. How were holidays (birthdays, Christmas, etc.) celebrated in your family? Did your family have special traditions?
26. How is the world today different from what it was like when you were a child?
27. Who was the oldest relative you remember as a child? What do you remember about them?
28. What do you know about your family surname?
29. Is there a naming tradition in your family, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?
30. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors?
31. Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?
32. Have any recipes been passed down to you from family members?
33. Are there any physical characteristics that run in your family?
34. Are there any special heirlooms, photos, bibles or other memorabilia that have been passed down in your family?
35. What was the full name of your spouse? Siblings? Parents?
36. When and how did you meet your spouse? What did you do on dates?
37. What was it like when you proposed (or were proposed to)? Where and when did it happen? How did you feel?
38. Where and when did you get married?
39. What memory stands out the most from your wedding day?
40. How would you describe your spouse? What do (did) you admire most about them?
41. What do you believe is the key to a successful marriage?
42. How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?

43. Why did you choose your children's names?
44. What was your proudest moment as a parent?
45. What did your family enjoy doing together?
46. What was your profession and how did you choose it?
47. If you could have had any other profession what would it have been? Why wasn't it your first choice?
48. Of all the things you learned from your parents, which do you feel was the most valuable?
49. What accomplishments were you the most proud of?
50. What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?