

Life Story Center

OLLI National Resource Center

Birth and Family of Origin

It can be very important in really knowing ourselves to know the circumstances of our family of origin. Our parents and ancestors have a great deal to do with who we become.

The more we know about what was going on around us at the time of our birth, the more we will know about who we have become.

- What was going on in your family, your community, and the world at the time of your birth?
- Were you ever told anything unusual about your birth?
- Are there any family stories told about you as a baby?
- What do you remember most about your parents, grandparents, or other family members?
- How would you describe their qualities, attributes, or characteristics?
 - What do you think you inherited from them?
 - What feelings come up when you recall your parents or grandparents?
 - What is your earliest memory?

Cultural Settings and Traditions

After our genetic makeup, perhaps the strongest influence on us is our cultural heritage, our family's beliefs, traditions, and customs. We all have some cultural background that is either actively or passively passed on to us as children.

We also get direct or indirect messages from our family that may have their origin in our cultural frame of reference. Culture can be the source of both healthy and unhealthy viewpoints and patterns that we pick up and carry out in our lives.

- What is the ethnic or cultural background of your parents?
- Did any family members immigrate to this country?
- Was there a noticeable cultural "flavor" to the home you grew up in?
- What are your most important cultural, ethnic, or religious influences?
- What family celebrations, traditions, or rituals were important in your life?
- Was your family different from other families in your neighborhood?

- What did you learn from your parents or grandparents that still has meaning for you today?
- What traditions, values, wisdom, or life lessons have guided your life and its direction?
- Was religion important in your family?
 - Is religion important to you now?
- What other cultural influences are still important to you today?

Social Factors

As the sphere of influence upon us widens, new elements from our community, social structure, and mass culture have a greater impact on us. Our added experience in the social world can either stimulate, deter, or deprive us of our growth. Experience becomes the meaning-maker in our lives. Our own experience of the world around us can also have a major impact on who we become.

- Did you feel nurtured, supported, or encouraged, as a child?
- Did you get along with your family members?
 - Brothers?
 - Sisters?
- What were some of your struggles as a child?
- What would you pick out as the most significant event in your life up to age 12?
- Do you think you had a happy childhood?
- What childhood friendships were most important to you?
- What was (is) being a teenager like?
- What pressures did you feel as a teenager, and where did they come from?
- What did you do for fun, or entertainment?
- What was the most trouble you were ever in as a teenager?
- What was the most significant event in your teenage years?
- What was your first experience leaving home like?
- What special people have you known in your life?
- Who shaped and influenced your life the most?
- Who are the heroes and heroines, guides and helpers in your life?
- What social pressures have you experienced as an adult?
- Were you in the military?
 - What was this experience like?
- Is a sense of community important to you?

Education

Most of us get some kind of education at home, whether we are aware of it as such or not. We all get some amount of education in our community schools and beyond. The

informal as well as the formal settings in we receive an education become the matrices for many of our most important experiences in life. And for all of us, education continues in some form throughout our lives.

- What is your first memory of attending school?
- What were your early school years like?
- Did you have a favorite teacher in any of your educational experiences?
- What are your best memories of school?
 - Your worst?
- What accomplishments in school are you most proud of?
- How far did you go with your formal education?
- What do you remember most about college?
- What was the most important book you ever read?
- What has been your most important lesson in life, outside of the classroom?
- What is your view of the role of education in a person's life?

Love and Work

The two characteristics of a mature adult are said to be the ability to love and to work. Exploring who we are at our essence begins the task of becoming independent; after that, in love and work, we realize our interdependency with others. These are the themes we carry with us throughout the rest of our lives, though the forms and shapes may change as we do.

- Do you remember your first date?
 - Your first kiss?
- What was the most difficult thing about dating for you?
- Are you married?
 - How would you describe your courtship?
 - What was it about her/him that made you fall in love?
 - Is there anything else about your marriage you would like to add?
- What does intimacy mean to you?
- Do you have children?
 - What are they like?
 - What values or lessons do you try to impart to them?
- Did you have any dreams or ambitions as a child? Or in high school?
- What were your hopes and dreams as you entered adulthood?
- What events or experiences helped you understand adult responsibilities?
- How did you end up in the type of work you do/did?
- Is/was your work satisfying to you?
- What is most important to you in your work?
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Historical Events and Periods

Each of us is born into a particular historical moment. Each moment in history has its place and purpose. One of our purposes may be to understand the time in which we live, how historical events have shaped our world, our lives, and how we (all of us) shape the major events that occur during our lives.

- What the most important historical event you participated in, or lived through?
- Do you remember what you were doing on any of the really important days in our history?
- What is different or unique about your community?
- Do you recall any legends or stories about people, places, or events in your community?
- What did your work contribute to the life of your community?

Retirement

Retiring from work or a career often means a brand new phase and style of life. It usually is a time of new ventures, more leisure, and either a greater variety of activities or a quieter routine with increased reflection. These years can add a very important new perspective to one's life and should not be left out of a life story.

- What was retiring from work like for you?
- Is there anything you miss about your work, or were you glad to have it over?
- How do you feel about your life now that you are retired?
- What do you do with your time now?
- What is the best part about being retired?
 - The worst part?
- Do you have grandchildren?
 - Do you like spending time with them?
 - What do you hope to pass on to your grandchildren?

Inner Life and Spiritual Awareness

An inner life, for some, may be the essence of life. What goes on inside us is often more vital than what is happening around us. Often our inner thoughts guide and direct what we do next, or how our life is carried out. Many people feel that we carry within us a higher self that itself is guided by love, wisdom, detachment, compassion, and courage. It is important to express our understanding and experience of this part of us, as well.

- How would you describe yourself as a child?
- Did you have any deep thoughts, visions, or inner dreams, as a child or teenager?
- Did you ever have any doubts about achieving your goal in life?
- What was it like to turn 30?
 - To turn 40?
 - To turn 60?
- What are the stresses of being an adult?

- What transitions or turning points did you experience as a teenager? As an adult?
- What changes have you undergone since 40?
 - Since 50?
 - Beyond 50?
- What role does spirituality play in your life now?
- Have you ever had a “spiritual experience”?
- What is most important to you about your spiritual life?
- How do your spiritual values and beliefs affect how you live your life?
- Have you ever felt the presence of a spiritual guide within you?
 - How has this guide helped you?
- Has imagination or fantasy been a part of your life?
- Do you feel you have inner strength?
 - Where does that come from?
- How would you renew your strength, if you felt really drained?
- What values would you not want to compromise?
- Do you feel you are in control of your life?
- What single experience has given you the greatest joy?
- Do you feel at peace with yourself?
 - How did you achieve this?

Major Life Themes

It seems appropriate to bring a life story to a close by reflecting back over the whole of our lives. Taking a look at our lives as a whole will give us a better understanding of what the major themes and influences of our lives have been.

- What gifts (tangible or in intangible) are still important to you?
- What were the crucial decisions in your life?
- What has been the most important turning point in your life?
- Have there been any mistakes in your life?
- How have you overcome or learned from your difficulties?
- How do you handle disappointment?
- Are you satisfied with the life choices you have made?
- What has been the happiest time in your life?
- What was the least enjoyable time?
- What relationships in your life have been the most significant?
- How would you describe those relationships?
- Has there been a special person that has changed your life?
- What have been your greatest accomplishments?
- Are you certain of anything?
- What are some things you hope you never forget?
- Is there anything in your experience of life that gives it unity, meaning, or purpose?
- How do you feel about yourself at the age you are now?

- What is your biggest worry now?
- In what ways are you changing now?
- What has been the greatest challenge of your life so far?
- What has been the most awe-inspiring experience you ever had?
- What one sentiment or emotion makes you feel most deeply alive?
- What matters the most to you now?
- What do you wonder about now?
- What time of your life would you like to repeat?
- What was the most important thing you have had to learn by yourself?
- How would you describe yourself to yourself at this point in your life?
- Is the way you see yourself now significantly different than it was in the past?
- How would you describe your world-view?

Vision of the Future

To reflect deeply on what you really want for your own life that is yet to come can be very important, too; it can be a way of creating the ending to your story that you would be most comfortable with, and it can also put into clearer perspective what is left to do with your life before it is too late.

- When you think about the future, what makes you feel most uneasy?
- What gives you the most hope?
- Is your life fulfilled yet?
- What would you like to achieve so that your life will seem fulfilled?
- What do you see for yourself in the future?
 - In 5 years?
 - In 15 years?
 - In 25 years?
- What do you want most to experience before you die?
- How long do you believe you will live?
- How would you like to die?
- What three things would you like said about your life when you die?
- Do you have any advice or wisdom for the younger generation?

Closure

A statement or two indicating that your life story is coming to a close gives you the opportunity to add some final thoughts to what you want remembered about you.

- At this point in your life, how do you feel about yourself?
- Is there anything that we've left out of your life story?
- What would the title of your life story be?
- Do you feel you have given a fair picture of yourself?
- What are your feelings about this interview, and all that we have covered?