

Writing Your Life History

Paul David, Ph.D.

An important part of your psychological growth and development is becoming more aware of the people, events, and circumstances that have shaped your life. An effective method of facilitating more awareness about this information is writing your own life history. Williamson (1991) provides a useful framework to help you systematically explore your memories and reflections about your life.* This framework divides your life history into five broad categories: (1) growing up, (2) marriage, (3) family life, (4) career, and (5) life reflections. Respond to the pertinent questions for each of these categories. However, keep in mind that you don't have to answer all of these questions; you should only respond to the ones that are relevant to you in writing a meaningful and authentic life history.

Growing Up

This section explores your memories from early childhood through grade school, junior high, high school, all the way up to getting ready to marry.

Early Childhood

- What are some of your earliest memories about your childhood? Do you have any pre-school memories? What about kindergarten?
- Where did you live at the time? What was it like? Did you move at all during this time?
- Do you remember any childhood friends? What was the first birthday you can remember during this time?
- What was your health like? Did you have any favorite toys? Did you have any pets? What is one of the most memorable events of your early childhood?

Grade School

- Was it difficult or easy starting first grade? At grade school were you well connected in a peer group or were you an outsider? More of a leader, or a follower? Were there any special successes or traumas during grade school?
- What kind of man was your father? How would you describe your mother as a woman? Have you any memories of your parents' marriage during those years? How did your parents relate to one another? How did they handle issues of control and decision making in the home? Who exercised the most control?
- How were your father and mother as parents in those days? How did they express affection and disapproval toward each other and toward you? What do you think today about your role in the family at that time? Were you a favorite with either parent, or the least favored?

* See Donald Williamson's *The Intimacy Paradox*, 1991, Guilford Press, for a more complete presentation of this inquiry process. An abbreviated and slightly altered version of this process is presented here.

- How comfortable were your parents in their sexuality? What messages did you receive about sex and sexual behavior? How did these attitudes affect you?
- Is there anything else of importance about the grade school years?

Junior High

- Describe your home life during the junior high years. Describe your experience of school during these years. Were you well motivated at school in these years? Did you perform up to your ability? Did you have a best friend?
- How do you remember your personal relationships developing with your father, mother, brothers, and sisters? Any big problems? Who were you closest to and the most distant from in the family at that time?
- Did you do much dating? Did you have a "steady"? Was your sexual development as a teenager fairly ordinary, or unusual in any way?
- What was your biggest pleasure and your biggest worry in junior high school?

High School

- How were things between you and your parents during your junior and senior years? How were issues of discipline and control handled? Were you free to make your own decisions, choose your own friends, plan your activities? Which parent was the enforcer? Did anything dramatic happen in the lives of your siblings, or the family, in these years?
- Did your parents generally agree on things? When they didn't agree, how would they handle their differences? How would they argue? Could they satisfactorily settle their arguments?
- How about your social life at this time? Were you popular with your peer group? Did you find a good balance between your social life and school requirements? Does any one achievement stand out during this time?
- Did you have any significant love relationships during your high school years? How did they pan out? Do you know where these people are today?
- When did you start to think about your future at work or college? What were your parents' ambitions for you? Had you any ideas what you might want to do in life? Was graduation a big day?
- What do you think was your biggest psychological or emotional issue during high school?

Before Marriage

- Was college more fun or more work? What about your first real job experience after high school? Were you active religiously or politically at this time?
- What about your future partner? When and where did you first meet? What did you especially notice and respond to in the other, right from the beginning?
- Was the courtship easy and relaxed or conflicted and turbulent? As you think back today, who was that person whom you saw and fell in love with? What attracted you?
- What were the attitudes of both families to your upcoming marriage? Were both generally favorable or not? If not, how did you deal with this disappointment?

- Do you have vivid memories of the preparations for the wedding day? Is there anything that stands out about the wedding day itself? What is your memory of your spouse on the wedding day? Where did you go for the honeymoon and how was your experience?

Marriage

This section covers your relationship with your spouse, clarifying not simply the facts but discussing some of your inner thoughts and feelings about the events that constitute meaning of your marriage.

- First, how did you solve the universal struggle around control and decision making in the marriage? Every marriage takes some attitude toward how husband and wife should relate to members of the opposite sex. Did you come to any agreement about that? Was this a source of conflict?
- Did any "third party" relationship ever take on the character of "an affair"? Were there any actual affairs during the marriage?
- Was there ever any conflict of loyalties between your commitment to each other and your commitment to your parents? Were there any big loyalty conflicts involving close personal friends? Any strong differences of opinions about jobs, moves, homes, money, or political or religious beliefs?
- At some point in life every married person wonders, "How did I ever get myself into a mess like this?" When did you come closest to divorce?
- [If you divorced] What drove you apart? What do you believe you contributed or failed to contribute to the relationship that led to the divorce? Do you have any regrets about the divorce?
- [If you stayed together] What kept you together? What nurtured your marriage over the years? What were some of your most difficult times, and what are your best memories?
- [If you eventually remarried] How was your relationship with your second spouse different from the relationship with your first spouse? How was it similar? Now answer the above questions that apply to your second spouse.

Family Life

This section covers perceptions and memories about your family--both your family of origin and our immediate family.

- [If you have children] How many children did you want? Was there agreement or disagreement about this? Were your children planned or unplanned?
- What were the main beliefs and values that guided you in raising your children during their early years. Do you think your child-rearing practices were consistent with these beliefs and values? Have these beliefs and values now changed? If so, how have they changed?
- What were the most stressful things about being in your family? What were the most joyous? What did you like most and least about being a parent? To what extent did you feel you were a successful parent?

- Were you generally pleased with your parents' involvement and contact with your children? Were there any problems or disagreements between them about how to raise me?
- How would you characterize your experience with your parents as they got older and more infirm? How pleasant or uncomfortable was your contact with them in their last years?
- Did you have an opportunity to say all the things you wanted to say to each of your parents? Are there ways in which you see them living on in you? Are there ways in which you see them living on in your children?

Career

This section deals with your work life and your efforts to balance it with other aspects of your life.

- Are you pleased with the way you've spent your work life? Did you spend too much time at work or not enough? Did you choose your work in the first place or ever come to choose it? Would you prefer to have done something else? Were you adequately educated and prepared for your work?
- Did you have an adequate opportunity to perform and achieve at work? [If you are a stay-at-home mother] Are you pleased with your decision not to work outside the home, and not to pursue a career or profession for yourself? Have you been fully satisfied as a homemaker?
- Are you pleased with the way in which you divided your time and energy between work outside and work at home? Did the division of labor between the two work out in a satisfactory way?
- Have you any thoughts about the importance of work in your life?

Life Reflections

Looking back over your life, this section examines your views about what you have learned, what has influenced you the most, what you would have done differently, and what you feel you have left behind for others.

- Would you choose to be born again into the same family, having the same parents and the same general circumstances in life? If you were to make changes, what are the most important changes you would make in the family and the circumstances into which you were born? Would you choose to spend your life in the same way again, carrying on the very same work, living in the same places, and pursuing the same goals and values?
- Do you think, in retrospect, that your growing-up years in the home and at school properly prepared you to deal with life? Were you adequately prepared and adequately warned? As you recall it, were you in charge of your life most of the time or did you feel mostly helpless and at the mercy of circumstances, circumstances that were often unpredictable?
- In retrospect, what person(s) do you think was the most influential in helping you decide your most important life decisions about education and friends and work and love? In short, other than yourself, whom do you hold the most responsible for the way in which your life has turned out, and do you feel more appreciation or resentment for that influence?

- Do you think, looking back, that you struggled more or less than an average amount, with fear or sadness? Have you ever felt hopeless enough or discouraged enough to consider ending your own life, even briefly in passing?
- Do you think that you have been mostly a success or mostly a failure both in your personal and in your work life? What are the reasons for your answer, either way? Do you take most of the credit or responsibility for that outcome, or do you see strongly contributing or mitigating circumstances?
- What achievements first in your work and second in our personal life have given you the greatest pleasure and satisfaction?
- Do you think that your parents came to see you more as a success or as a failure in life? What were the reasons for that judgment? Did you mostly fulfill or mostly disappoint their expectations? Were they more pleased or more disappointed or more surprised by the way your life turned out?
- What have been the most significant loss experiences in your personal life? How have they affected you? How have you coped with them? How do you stand emotionally in relationship to these losses today?
- What has been the biggest single personal difficulty or challenge in your life that you believe you have mastered or at least managed well? What major crises have you survived in your life? I retrospect, what enabled you to survive them?
- Who have been the two or three closest and most intimate personal friends in your life? What have these relationships meant to you over the years? Have you been able consistently to share your inner life with these persons? Have these persons remained trustworthy throughout?
- What particular beliefs or values have sustained you throughout your lifetime and have helped you live to this day? Have these beliefs and values changed much since you were a young adult?
- Has your life been worthwhile? Do the story and the outcome of your life make sense to you? Has the effort you've made been worth it?
- As you look back and as you survey the world and your place in it, do you regard this life as fundamentally benevolent and trustworthy or does the world seem to you to be overall more malevolent and untrustworthy?
- What do you see as your most important personal legacy or contribution to the world? How do you see yourself living on in your family, especially (if appropriate) through your children? What expectation or goals, if any, do you still continue to hold for your life?