

Life Stories; Elders who create a personal record of the past find satisfaction in gathering the words and pictures of days gone by, while their stories enrich the lives of later generations. [FINAL Edition]

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In 1994 five sisters ranging in age from 75 to 90 gathered for the first time in years. Seizing this rare moment, Ann Landry Lombardi, a daughter of one of the women, set up a camcorder, turned on a tape recorder and asked them simple questions about the past.

What unfolded was pure joy. "They would tell a funny story and start laughing, then the children would laugh and the grandchildren-- on the tape I could barely hear what was being said for all the laughter," says Lombardi. "The party lasted six hours. It's like they were being released from being old women and returning to their younger selves. The children had to pull the aunts apart and take them home."

After the party, Lombardi conducted additional interviews and incorporated the stories along with family photos into a loose-leaf scrapbook, which she presented to her mother the following year, a few months before she died at age 90.

"People back then didn't talk about or write down their histories because they assumed everyone knew it," says Lombardi, who grew up in Millinocket, Maine, and now lives in Upper Marlboro, where she continues to research and record her family's history. "There was a lot of caring and involvement and humor, but nobody talked about any of it." Today, only two of the sisters are still living. "Now, I always tell people: Write it down. Write it down."

In the past, it seems, people either kept their stories to themselves or delivered them orally. Surely, in the days before television and PlayStation, people talked and listened more. Now we're playing catch-up. According to gerontologists and psychologists, baby boomers and their parents are in a bit of a panic, scrambling to make sense of lives they largely missed as the events unfolded. Suddenly we want to know how everyone feels--and felt--about miscarriages,

war buddies and dead siblings, dancing the Lindy (the first time around), dieting in the '70s and dishing out bread and butter sandwiches during the Depression to strangers who tapped lightly on the back screen door.

Also, we're getting old. "More and more people are going to be taking care of the chronically ill or experiencing death and facing their own mortality," says Jon Radulovic, communications director at the Hospice Foundation of America. "How we die--and lived--is becoming a topic at the breakfast table." Enrollment in memoir- writing classes has increased significantly in recent years. Hundreds of Web sites are devoted to genealogy. People are clamoring for advice on preserving the stories they're just now uncovering.

"Conservatively speaking, the market is booming," says Stacie Berger, publicity manager at Writer's Digest Books, which publishes dozens of how-to guidebooks and several magazines for tracing genealogies and writing memoirs and family histories. The Hospice Foundation publishes "A Guide for Recalling and Telling Your Life Story," complete with blank, lined pages, that asks simple questions to help trigger memory, such as, "What was your marriage like for you? How did it change over the years?"

In a process called "life review," hospice workers, bereavement counselors and psychologists frequently use writing exercises to help people come to terms with the end. "It allows a person to make sense of her life and to develop a consistent narrative," says Kenneth Doka, a professor of gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in New York.

Validation

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson studied people as they faced their own mortality and found a deep need to make sense of one's life. Those who wrote down their story achieved what Erikson called "ego integrity," a state of peace. "The person can look at what's been written and say, 'I've done what I could. I've done well,' " says Doka.

Kirk Polking, author of "Writing Family Histories and Memoirs" (Betterway Books, 1995), says that writing, rather than telling stories around the fireplace, allows for more depth and honesty, especially in terms of feelings. "One woman I interviewed who had written her story said she'd always told her kids what had happened, but she realized, while writing, that she'd never told them how she felt about any of it. And it became a gift to herself, and to her family."

Lillian LaRosa, 91, began writing her life story by hand 20 years ago. She wrote 15 or so chapters. Then she stopped. Family obligations and other duties took precedence. Two years ago, after open heart surgery, she enrolled in a college writing course, picked up the memoir again, and this time she finished. The book, "In My Own Words," was printed and bound professionally (one of her daughters works for a publisher) and begins with the daily life of Sicilian immigrants in 1920s New York--including mopping up water that ran from the bottom of the kitchen ice box, bathing in a galvanized tub and simmering spicy meats in a thick red sauce all day for Sunday's feast.

In writing the book, LaRosa symbolically and literally overcame obstacles she had encountered throughout her life as an intelligent woman stifled by a patriarchal social structure. Although she was an honors student, she was removed from school in eighth grade to concentrate on cooking, cleaning, serving and learning to rear children. "My family believed in the [Sicilian] culture," says LaRosa, from her home in Wellesley, Mass. "My whole life I wanted to be a teacher. All these years. At age 67 I got my GED."

The book has opened up many avenues for her, making LaRosa something of a teacher at last. Strangers have written for advice and to thank her for inspiration. And she visits schools, where she talks to children about writing. "I finally reached my goal," she says.

"I am now what I wanted to be 75 years ago," says LaRosa. "It's like an extension of my other life."

A Tangible Legacy

Once upon a time, family members routinely visited cemeteries to honor and to learn about their forebears. Kids asked questions about the deceased, stories unfolded, prayers were whispered. Today, many people must board planes for similar rituals, visiting graves once a year at most, and nebulous connections exist between the living and dead.

"People are not so much afraid of dying as they are afraid of being forgotten," says Doka. Writing a life story appeases these fears both for the parents and the children. "We want to make sure we get the stories right," says Doka. And sometimes getting the story right is not easy. Lombardi found that disagreements between her aunts at times got heated, though they usually ended in laughter. "At times I wanted to call my book 'Fables' and abandon the insistence on getting the right story," she says.

And in the end, maybe it is not so much the absolute truth that we seek. Rather it is the physical proof, a written document, evidence of a life--lively, flawed, joyous.

Perry Bork of Silver Spring pasted old family photos into a scrapbook and wrote lengthy narratives. "I wanted to give something special to my grandchildren," says Bork, 60.

Solving Family Mysteries

Lombardi's hobby changed her family's life. When older relatives would visit, her three kids, then in their teens, would ask questions about the past rather than disappear to their bedrooms. "Even if the kids had heard the story already, they asked about it again," says Lombardi.

On another level, the process of writing a life story can unravel family mysteries, disclose long-held secrets.

Jim Lieberman, a Washington psychiatrist, had always been intrigued by a family saying: "If the ship goes down and the Liebermans don't come back, I want Jimmy." The remark had come from a nanny named Irene who cared for Lieberman as an infant. While growing up in Milwaukee, he had heard the comment repeated with amusement by his parents, but he never knew what it meant.

In 1976, at age 42 with two kids of his own, he began to explore the mystery. In the process he talked with dozens of people, including two aunts, one of whom he hadn't talked with in years, and half a dozen strangers as he made his way through the Milwaukee phone directory searching for Irene's relatives.

The story he discovered: Lieberman, a sickly infant who suffered from severe allergies and eczema, was left behind in 1935 when his parents sailed away on a three-month visit

to their Ukrainian homeland. Irene took care of Lieberman and apparently fell in love with the baby, caring for him day and night, massaging his body with oil and putting him out in the sun--a remedy recommended at the time for his ailments. One day, she spoke the famous words to an aunt.

The story--and the process of getting there--revealed much to Lieberman and gave him a new understanding of his relationship with his mother. "I was afraid she would be offended," says Lieberman. "But her response was, 'Well, you turned out all right, didn't you?' "

"I Just Want People to Laugh"

Pat Rothacker of Fairfax has written several vignettes about her adventures as a working woman, including a stint at age 16 in 1949 at a Woolworth's "five and dime" store at 44th and Broadway in New York, where she demonstrated one of the first ballpoint pens. "I stood there making circles," she writes, "delighted by the amazement on people's faces and answering preposterous questions: 'Will this write in an airplane?' "

In the late '50s and early '60s she worked as an airline stewardess, an era when "stews" could not be married, were forced to "retire" by age 32 and had to pay for their own uniforms.

Rothacker's memories include the ritual of stealing a bottle of Taylor New York champagne from certain flights. "Try to underpay us, will they? . . . Numerous evenings we sat around the television enjoying a meager dinner of cold airline cereal but always with a plastic glass of cold airline champagne."

Rothacker, who has had bypass surgery and a liver transplant, says she simply wants to entertain people with her writing, which she hopes to publish someday. "I like writing the stories, and I just want people to laugh," she says.

OPTIONS FOR TELLING LIFE STORIES

Now. The hard part. Where to begin?

If you're tempted to record some memories of your life, don't get discouraged by the possible size of the project. Think small. And you don't have to begin with your birth. Rather, start at significant moments that you remember well and work back or forward from there.

Life stories fall into two major categories: autobiography, which covers your whole life and adheres to strict accuracy, and the more popular and easy memoir, which focuses on a few key themes or important years, told as you remember them. Both are different from a formal family history, which usually requires genealogical research and the tracing of a family tree.

In the past decade, dozens of how-to books, computer programs and Web sites have sprouted to inspire and guide the layperson through the process.

* Old-Fashioned Writing. Most people write their life stories for personal reasons and to have them read by family members and friends.

Kirk Polking, author of a book on writing family stories, suggests starting with a simple journal. You don't need anything more complicated than a blank book. "Just sit down and write about your most joyous or most difficult years," she says. "Organize it later. Do revisions and editing later."

Two good sources for how-to books:

* Writer's Digest Books, 1507 Dana Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45207; 513-531-2690; www.writersdigest.com

* Hospice Foundation of America, 2001 S St. NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20009; 800-854-3402; www.hospicefoundation.org/virtual_html/resources/guide.htm

* Web Writing. If you're at all comfortable with using the Internet, you'll easily locate chat rooms and message boards devoted to personal stories. One of the best, the AARP Web page, www.aarp.org, includes an interactive bulletin board (www.aarp.org/discussions/). Under "Topics," click on "I Remember," where you'll find categories such as "Best Friends," "Earliest Memory" and "First Loves." Sites dedicated more to genealogy include www.familytreemagazine.com (a Writer's Digest site); www.ngsgenealogy.org (a National Geographic Society site); www.ancestry.com (a site created by MyFamily.com Inc., a private firm whose roots are in the publishing of genealogies); and www.fgs.org (produced by the Federation of Genealogical Societies).

* Computer writing/CD-ROM. Several software programs can help you through the writing process. Here's a sampling of choices:

* "My Life" lets users include words, pictures and audio/video clips to create an electronic scrapbook. Requires Windows on your computer. Available for \$69 from Life.com Inc., 27200 Agoura Rd., Calabasas Hills, CA 91301; (818-871-1000; www.life.com

* "Active Diary 3.0," another Windows-only product. Available for \$25 from WinDine Software Co., 5620 Paseo del Norte, Suite 127, Carlsbad by the Sea, CA 92008; 760-402-7787; www.windine.com

* "Memoirs2000Pro" lets you arrange family information in a tree outline and keep diaries (\$19.95). Contact Mihasoft Software Development, Dept. 2528-I, Box 1816, Issaquah, WA 98027; 877-353-7297; www.secureaction.com/memoirs/index.html

* Videotaping and tape recording. You don't have to write to tell your story, of course. There are other ways to preserve the memories of yourself and others.

* "How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies," by Bill Zimmerman (Betterway Books, 1999) includes interviewing tips, memory- triggering questions and family history sheets.

* Chicago journalist Bob Greene and his journalist sister wrote "To Our Children's Children" (Doubleday, 1993), which guides you through the interviewing process and offers tips. Rather than "attempt to sum up your life in grand, sweeping historic strokes," Greene suggests, stick to simple questions for yourself or those you are interviewing, such as, "What did the neighborhood where you grew up look like?"

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