

person being interviewed has exhausted a topic. You should not feel bound by the questions at all; they are here only if you need them. Some people may require only a green light—a listening ear—to begin and carry their life story to its completion. Others may need periodic questions to keep their story going. It is often the case that the fewer questions you ask in a life story interview, the better.

You should go over all the questions here first, and familiarize yourself with them.⁵ Then think of the person you have chosen to interview and decide how you want to adapt some of the questions suggested here to fit this person. Some questions may not apply at all; in other cases, you may have to add some of your own questions that you know should be asked of your person. Having a presorted list of questions to take to the interview, but being able to adapt to your situation and person, is the key here.

Preliminary Opening Exercises

As a way of assisting the person you are interviewing to think about their life story in advance, you could ask them for a brief life summary before the interview actually takes place. This can be a helpful way to begin the process with a focus, regardless of the age or experience of the person being interviewed. Other approaches you can use to help them prepare ahead of time would include:

1. Drawing a timeline of their life that highlights and identifies the key events year by year.
2. Drawing a collage of their life on newsprint or poster paper that represents in some creative fashion the important events, experiences, and feelings in words, symbols, and images.

This type of beginning may be helpful to those people who have lived a long, full, or complex life, and who need to recall the major threads in their life before launching into a story of their life. Other people can begin at the beginning and recall everything as they go along.

Birth and Family of Origin

One thing that makes each of us special is the particular circumstances we are born into. The genes we acquire from each parent have a lot to do with this. Who our parents are have a great deal to do with who we become. Our genetic makeup at birth has more to do with how we react to the specific world around us than we might think. It can be very important in our really knowing ourselves to know the circumstances of our family of origin. 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. It might be that what

we bring to the situation we are born into has more to do with determining how we adapt to things around us than do the things themselves. Here are some questions that might help us understand some of these things.

- 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?
- Do you remember anything about your first year of life?
- What characteristics do you remember most about your grandparents?
 - What do you like most and least about them?
- How would you describe your parents?
 - Your mother's personality, and emotional qualities?
 - Your father's?
 - What are some of the best and worst things about them?
 - What do you think you inherited from them?
 - What feelings come up when you recall your parents?
- What is your earliest memory?

Cultural Setting and Traditions

Perhaps the next strongest influence on us after genetic makeup is our cultural heritage. This will be stronger for some than others, but we all have some cultural background that is either actively or passively passed on to us as children. In some families, cultural traditions are more central to daily life than in others. This is also where our family's beliefs, values, and religious customs usually originate. 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 healthy as well as unhealthy viewpoints and patterns we adopt and carry out in our lives.

- What is the ethnic or cultural background of your parents?
- Were there any stories of family members or ancestors who emigrated to this country?
- Was there a noticeable cultural "flavor" to the home you grew up in?
- What was growing up in your house, or neighborhood, like?
 - What was the feeling of this cultural setting for you?
- What are some early memories of cultural influences?
- What family or cultural celebrations, traditions, or rituals were important in your life?
- Was your family different from other families in your neighborhood?
- What cultural values were passed on to you, and by whom?
 - What beliefs or ideals do you think your parents tried to teach you?
- What was your first experience with death?
 - What was that like for you?
- Was religion important in your family?
 - How would you describe the religious atmosphere in your home?
 - Did you attend religious services as a child, as a youth?

What was that like for you?
 Was religion important to you as a child, as a youth?
 Were there any religious ceremonies that you observed?
 Is religion important to you now?
 What cultural influences are still important to you today?
 How much of a factor in your life do you feel your cultural background has been?

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. We begin to experience things from a wider radius that are not only new but also confusing and even in conflict with what we have been given at home. Our added experience in the social world can either stimulate, deter, or deprive us of our growth. Experience is the meaning-maker in our lives. However we face life—either directly, sideways, or with our back to it—is how we are shaped by life. Our experience of the world around us is what changes us.

Did you feel nurtured as a child?
 Were you encouraged to try new things, or did you feel held back?
 What do you remember most about growing up with, or without, brothers and sisters?
 Did you get along with your family members?
 Did your parents spend enough time with you?
 What did you do with them?
 What were some of your struggles as a child?
 What was the saddest time for you?
 How was discipline handled in your family?
 What would you pick out as the most significant event in your life up to age twelve?
 Did you make friends easily?
 What childhood or teenage friendships were most important to you?
 What pressures did you feel as a teenager, and where did they come from?
 Did you tend to go in for fads, or new styles?
 Were you athletic?
 What clubs, groups, or organizations did you join?
 Did you enjoy being alone, or was that too boring?
 What did you do for fun, or entertainment?
 Was social class important in your life?
 What was the most trouble you were ever in as a teenager?
 What was the most significant event of your teenage years?
 What was being a teenager like? The best part? The worst part?
 What was your first experience of 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?
 Who most helped you develop your current understanding of yourself?
 What social pressures have you experienced as an adult?

Were you in the military?
 What was this experience like?
 How do you use your leisure time?
 Is a sense of community important to you? Why? How?

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. For some, education can become a means to a fulfilling, and even better, life. For others, it may be just a matter of what we are supposed or have to do. However we view education, the informal as well as formal settings in which we receive an education become the matrices for many of our most important experiences in life. And for all of us, education continues throughout our entire life. This is how we continue to grow and become mature and wise. Experience, the way we understand it, and especially the way we understand our interactions with others, becomes our perpetual teacher.

What is your first memory of attending school?
 Did you enjoy school in the beginning?
 What do you remember most about elementary school?
 Did you have a favorite teacher in grade school? In junior high? In high school?
 How did these teachers influence you?
 What are your best memories of school?
 What are your worst memories of school?
 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 organizations or activities were you involved with in school? In college?
 What was the most important course you took in school or college?
 The most important book you read?
 What did you learn about yourself during these years?
 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

It was said by Freud that the two characteristics of a mature adult are the ability to love and to work. By mid adolescence, we may begin to get some sense that our life has some reason or purpose beyond being taken care of by our parents. We really need to explore who we are at our essence, so we know what we can do with our lives, and who or how we can love another person intimately. This begins the process of becoming independent so that, in love and in work, we can become interdependent with the others in our lives. These are also themes that 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?
 Did you have a steady boy/girlfriend in high school?
 When you were growing up, was it a struggle for you to match your own attitudes toward sex with those of society?
 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?
 What does intimacy mean to you?
 Do you have children?
 What are they like?
 What role do they play in your life?
 What values or lessons do you try to impart to them?
 What have been the best and worst parts about marriage?
 Is there anything else about your marriage you would like to add?
 Did you have any dreams or ambitions as a child? As an adolescent?
 Where did they come from?
 What did you want to be when you were in high school?
 Did you achieve what you wanted to, or did your ambitions change?
 What were your hopes and dreams as you entered adulthood?
 What events or experiences helped you understand and accept your adult responsibilities?
 How did you end up in the type of work you do/did?
 Has your work been satisfying to you, or has it been something you had to put your time into?
 What is important to you in your work?
 What comes the easiest in your work?
 What is most difficult about your work?
 When did you realize you had become an adult?
 Do love and work fit together for you in your life?

Historical Events and Periods

Each of us is born into a particular historical moment. Some moments in time may seem more significant or noteworthy than others, but each moment 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. Each of us has a role on both sides of this equation that makes history what it is in our lives.

- What was the most important historical event you participated in?
 Do you remember what you were doing on any of the really important days in our history? (the turn of the century; the first airplane flight; the Titanic; World War I; women's voting rights; Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic; prohibition; the stock market crash of 1929; the Depression; Pearl Harbor; the atomic bomb; the polio vaccine; the civil rights movement; President Kennedy's assassination; Viet Nam; Martin Luther King's assassination; the moon walk; Watergate; Earth Day;

- nuclear protests; the fall of the Berlin Wall; the Persian Gulf war; the end of the Cold War)
 What is the most important thing given to you by your family?
 What is the most important thing you have given to your family?
 To your community?
 Do you recall any legends, tales, or songs about people, places, or events in your community?
 What is different or unique about your community?
 Are you aware of any traditional ways that families built their buildings, prepared their food, or took care of sickness?
 What did your work contribute to the life of your community?
 What has your life contributed to the history of your community?

Retirement

Retiring from a job or career often means a brand new phase and style of life. There is usually much more time on our hands, and we either continue doing what we were doing or find something else to take the place of what we retired from. It is a time of new ventures, more leisure, and either a greater variety of activities or a quieter routine that could become boring. In any case, these years should not be left out of a life story, as they often represent a time of increased reflection.

- What was retiring from work like for you?
 Did you miss it, 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?
 Is there anything that you miss about your work?
 What is the worst part about being retired?
 What is the best part?
 Have all your children left home?
 How is it having an empty nest?
 Do you have grandchildren?
 Do you like spending time with them?
 What do you enjoy most about your grandchildren?
 What do you enjoy the least?
 What do you hope to pass on to your grandchildren?

Inner Life and Spiritual Awareness

An inner life, for some, is the essence of life. What goes on inside us is often more vital than what is happening around us. It can often be our reflections, our contemplations, and our inner thoughts that guide and direct what we do next, or even how our life is carried out. Many people feel that we carry within us a higher self that 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.

