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Deborah J. Weitzenkamp

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, deb.weitzenkamp@unl.edu

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Family Journals

Deborah J. Weitzenkamp, Assistant Extension Educator

Whether you are writing a journal or are helping an elderly relative write, this NebGuide will provide tips on how to make that process work.

Have you ever wished that you could read about the lives of your grandmother or grandfather? Where did they live? What were their lives like? How did they meet their spouse? What were the major turning points in their life? A family journal can answer those questions for generations to come.

A family journal provides descendants with a firsthand account of family members' lives, but the benefits begin long before the journal is read.

Research indicates that individuals who pursue reminiscence work, such as writing a journal or verbally sharing personal history, are more likely to implement change in their own lives. Through reflection, they are able to understand who they are in the present and how they are shaped by their past experiences. Research also indicates that elderly participants are more likely to achieve a sense of life satisfaction, reduce signs of depression, and reconnect with their social networks.

When beginning the journaling process it is important to understand that everyone's life is a series of unique events. Everyone has a story to tell, each story being as unique as a snowflake.

For those concerned that their story is not unique, consider this:

- Reviewing your own life can help you understand it better.
- You can pass on family stories and/or your own story to family members.
- You can leave a historical account.

- You can experience the pleasure of reminiscing.
- You can experience the pleasure of writing.
- You can give an honest account of your life.
- You can improve your quality of life.

How to Get Started

Each and every one of us today is a sum of our experiences. We all have made decisions that have been turns in the path of our life story. We do, however, have some common conceptual starting points.

Begin by writing down some important dates. These include significant dates like birth dates, marriage dates, dates children were born and so forth.

Your journal becomes much more interesting when you start to fill in the stories surrounding these dates. At this stage of writing it is not important to worry about spelling and grammar. Focus on giving an in-depth description of the event. For example, you could simply give the date that your first child was born, or you could talk about the anticipation of your first child, how you decided upon a name, what it was like to hold your baby, and other things you remember from that time. Telling the *family story* instead of just reporting a date helps the reader really understand the story and helps the writer achieve a sense of identity and purpose.

Here are a few of the life story turns that you may choose to include in your family journal:

Early years:

- How did you spend your days as a child?
- What was your favorite subject in school? Least favorite?
- What was your first pet's name?

- What was something you did that you never told your parents about?
- Tell about a day off from school.
- Describe the house where you grew up.
- Where did you go to school? What was the school like? How did you get there?
- What game did you like to play with your brother/sisters? What were the rules?
- What is your full name? How did your parents decide upon your name?
- Did you have chores when you were a child? What were they?

Childhood family and relatives:

- When you were a child, how did your family celebrate Christmas?
- When you were a child, how did your family celebrate the Fourth of July?
- When you were a child, what room did most of the family discussion occur?
- Did one of your family members/friends have an unusual saying, catch phrase or manner of speaking? What was it?
- What were some of the strengths of your family members?
- What were some of the challenges faced by family members?
- Tell a family story that you have heard from an earlier generation.
- How did your parents meet?
- What is a traditional family recipe or food? What was included in the recipe? And who always made it? Why?
- What did your parents do for a living?
- Who was your favorite uncle or aunt. Why?
- Describe a family reunion.

Adult years and vocations:

- Who was the most influential person in your life? How did you meet them?
- What was your first job? (who did you work for, and what were you doing) How much were you paid?
- How did you decide on your career?

Marriage and descendant family:

- How did you meet the “love of your life”?
- Describe the day your child or grandchild was born.

- Think about one of your younger children or grandchildren. If you could write them a letter to be delivered to them in 15 years, what would you tell them?
- Describe a family reunion.
- When and where did you go on your first date?
- What global event impacted your family? How was your family impacted?
- Where did you go on vacation? Who went with you? What did you do when you were there?
- What is your most memorable experience as a parent?

Community activities:

- What community activities have you helped with? Why did you get involved? Who were the people you worked with?

Military service:

- Who in your family served in the military? What did they do? Where did they serve? Do you know any of the friends that served with them, and where their friends were from?

Friends:

- Looking over your life to date, who has been your best friend?
- Who was your best friend in school? Why were you friends?

Big events:

- Describe a weather related incident (thunderstorm, blizzard, flood)
- What is the first birthday party you can remember? Whose birthday party was it? What made it memorable?

Making the Process Easier

Following are a few suggestions to help you with the journaling process:

- Write in small sketches of 5 to 10 minutes on a specific topic.
- Engage family members in the process.
- Join a life story or memoir writing group.
- Tell the stories of how you participated in world history.

- Write your “*ethical will*” (values and beliefs that you would like to pass on to your family).
- Ask someone in your family to help.

The process of writing and sharing your family journal can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. Remember though it’s a process and you don’t have to write it overnight. Take your time, enjoy the process, and you will learn more about yourself and your family.

Resources

To read more about journaling, look for the following at your local library or on the Internet.

Birren, J., and Cochran, K. (2001). *Telling the stories of life through guided autobiography groups*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

Collins, C. (2005). Autobiography Workshop: Personal Narrative as a Wellness Tool For the Elderly. *Journal of Extension*, Retrieved December 28, 2006, from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005august/iw1.shtml>

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