The Top 10 Questions Future Generations Will Ask About You

By Linda Sattgast

If you could talk to a relative who is no longer living, what questions would you ask? What would you be curious about? And what would help you understand your family history better?

Someday the tables will be turned, and it will be your descendants who are wondering about you. What was life like for you? Where did you grow up, and how did you meet your spouse? What were your secret dreams and actual accomplishments?

Everyone has a story to tell, and you are no exception. Your life is important, especially to those in your direct family line. It’s your history, and because you’re still living, you have a chance to write it yourself.

If the thought of writing your story seems daunting, let me help by giving you the 10 most important questions you can answer for future generations. Whether you simply write them down in a journal or create an elaborate scrapbook is up to you, but the important thing is to do it—the sooner the better. Your great-great-granddaughter will thank you someday.

1. What Were The Main Events Of Your Life?

Your descendants may not think to ask this question exactly as it’s put here, but when they look at your photo someday and wonder about you, they will want to know the major details of your life.

Think of it as the support beams that hold up the house. Without the basics, your descendants wouldn’t have the context for the rest of what you would want them to know about you.
My father-in-law wrote his own obituary many years before he passed away. It was one of the few times he wrote anything down. When my husband spoke at his father’s funeral, he didn’t have to scramble to remember the main details of his father’s life. It was all written out for him: where his father was born, where he went to college, where he lived, who his siblings were, etc.

Photos simply aren’t enough. A collection of old photos might bring a rush of memories to the surface for your immediate family members, who experienced the events with you, but your children may have trouble remembering exactly when something happened. As each generation becomes more distant from the actual event, the less knowledge they’ll have about it.

A good way to present the major events of your life is to use a timeline. It can be as simple as a date or approximate year and the name of the event itself. You could also add a location or address, or other short comment. Such a timeline would be a gift to future generations who inherit your photos and memorabilia.

Any event you want to remember—or that you feel should be remembered by your descendants—can be recorded on your timeline. World events, weddings, moving to a new home, and even small personal victories that enrich your life are all important components of your timeline.

If you think of your life as a book, your timeline would be the Table of Contents. No matter how you organize (or fail to organize) your journal or scrapbook, it helps give order to the madness within!

2. Where Did You Live?

Try this: Sit down and attempt to sketch out a quick floor plan of your last home. It’s surprising how elusive those details can be when a little time has passed. If you don’t chronicle the places you’ve lived, the details will blur together with time.

For example, I wish there were more pictures of the interior of my grandparent’s home. About the only photo they took was of the first refrigerator their children bought for them in the 1940’s. That, in itself, tells a story.

Whether you grew up on the family farm or in a landscaped suburban neighborhood, when you and your
descendants look back in history, your first home will always be a point of interest. As you chronicle, you’ll want to include all those other humble abodes you’ve lived in over the years, such as your first apartment with the shag carpeting, beaded doorway, and chronic state of disarray. The same goes for your first “real” home. Preserving those memories of futon sofas and end tables made from packing crates will make you realize how your life has changed over the years.

You undoubtedly already have many pictures of your house in your scrapbook. It’s in the background as you and your sister embrace and smile at the camera. A picture of the dogs playing with a Nerf ball affords a great view of the backyard. But you can be more intentional about recording your home’s personality.

I often reach for my camera after a room has been freshly cleaned and the light is shining through the windows “just so.” Take pictures that show the kitchen you designed to its best advantage, or snap a photo of the family gathered around the fireplace to capture the sense of warmth and security in your living room. And don’t forget pictures of your home’s exterior and the lawn, especially if you are a gardener!

When you place these photos in a scrapbook, write down the address of your home along with your fond memories.

And about that sketch of your home’s floor plan... why not do it now of your current home, while you’re still living there? It doesn’t have to be fancy. Pencil in the rooms and what they are used for. If your scrapbook is digital, scan your drawing.

Someday, you and your descendants will be glad you took the time to do it.

3. What Were Your Family Traditions and Sayings?

When my son and daughter were around 9 and 12 years old, they turned their respective rooms into sovereign countries that required a stamped “passport” for entrance. They also “minted” money so they could buy things from each other.

My daughter named her paper bill a “Shillbene.” To this day we say “It isn’t worth a Shillbene!” and “I don’t give a Shillbene!”

Every family has its traditions and inside family jokes, proverbs, and sayings. This is the sort of intimate detail that reveals who you really are, your sense of
humor, and what you valued. I’ll wager that it might easily become the favorite part of your scrapbook or journal for your children and their descendants.

Why do you eat black-eyed peas on the first day of January?

What was the “Family Blessing” at mealtimes?

What do you mean when you say, “It was a Sattgast departure?”

Is there a joke that only your family gets?

What about that quote you always have to repeat when you’re trying to get out of town on vacation?

Jot down the ones that immediately come to mind. Others will crop up during family gatherings or around the dinner table.

Writing down these inside jokes and detailing the reason behind family traditions will show your humor and authenticity to future generations.

4. What Was Your Personal Faith or Philosophy?

Your personal faith or philosophy about life is an integral part of who you are. Though it can be difficult to document, writing about your faith can help you get to know yourself as well as pass your values along to your descendants.

To make your journal or scrapbook a window into your life, include the ways you worship and your thoughts about God and the world around you. Take the time to collect bits of poetry or religious quotations that you identify with. Writing down your own thoughts and adding it to your journal or scrapbook will make this section even more intimate.

Don’t neglect your ancestors while recording the history of your faith. Your parent’s or grandparent’s beliefs and the way they lived their lives may have played a large role in forming your own philosophy of life, so write about how your beliefs mirror or differ from theirs.

By reading your thoughts and examining the things that brought happiness and peace to your life, your descendants will know more about you than many of your peers do today.
5. What Were You Like Growing Up?

Every child has a personality and dreams for the future, which are often inextricably related to the person he or she becomes. To know something about you as a child often explains why you’ve become who you are today.

Were you precocious, shy, loud, quiet, bold, athletic, a bookworm? Don’t just describe yourself with a one or two word description. Tell a story that illustrates it.

For example, I could describe myself as “determined” and that would tell you something about me, but if I told you how I laboriously copied every bar and note of my 7th grade piano recital piece so I could take it with me when I left grade school, you would get a far better picture of my personality.

In case you’re wondering, no, we didn’t have copiers back then, and no, I’d never heard of the copyright law. (I still have that manuscript, by the way, and I even play the piece occasionally.)

What about high school? Were you a jock? A go-getter determined to stage your future for a career as a CEO? A quiet, unobtrusive, aspiring poet? Your dreams for the future during these years would tell an interesting tale as well, especially if you add why you did or did not fulfill those dreams.

As they read your journaling, your descendants may find themselves looking into a mirror of self recognition. “So that’s where I got my stubborn streak!” At that moment a bond will form between one generation and another via the words you wrote on a journal or scrapbook page.

6. What Did You Love To Do As A Kid?

This question is closely related to the previous one, but it focuses more on what you did, versus your personality and dreams.

You may want to ask your parents what they remember about your early childhood. They can tell you in great detail how you collected “valuable” rocks from the alley behind your home and wore a rubber kitchen glove as you rode around on your scooter.

Little girls perusing the pages of their great-great-grandmother’s scrapbook will be delighted to know that you enjoyed dolls and dress-up just like they do. They will also get a kick out of seeing how different your toys and hobbies were.
Your interests and activities probably reflected what you dreamed of doing someday as an adult. Did you enjoy dressing and re-dressing paper dolls to the point that you wished for a career in fashion? Were you more interested in animals? Did you grow mold in a jar underneath your bed?

With high school came new dreams and interests: Playing trumpet in the school band, hiking to the top of Mt Hood, taking up archery. And, of course, interest in the opposite sex.

Okay, so maybe you don’t want to remember every beau that came and went. But the locket your first boyfriend gave you for your birthday and pictures of you and a gangly Prince Charming on prom night are memories you won’t want to forget.

7. What Was In Style When You Were Growing Up?

This is where a picture is worth a thousand words, but sometimes a bit of journaling can add inside information that would otherwise be lost.

For example, take a look at this photo of me at my 7th grade piano recital. You can certainly see my style of hair and dress, but what you may not realize is that girls at my particular school all had “stick out slips.” These were white, starchy half-slips that made your dress poof out in glorious splendor! The poofier the skirt, the better. Never mind that the stick-out slips itched.

Your clothes, your hair, the music you listened to...all this is fascinating to future generations who can’t imagine wearing a hat and gloves to church or sporting the bouffant hairstyle of the 60’s.

Some styles and music come around again. My daughter’s “flare” jeans are almost a replica of my “bell bottom” jeans. The music of the 60’s and 70’s is now being enjoyed by a whole new generation of young people, but as one who was there “when it all started” you have a unique perspective to pass along!

Style goes beyond appearance and music. Remember that old clunker you coaxed to life every morning to cruise around town while blasting music so loud
the dashboard rattled? Pictures of you and your high school cronies piled into your car will capture some of the most exciting moments of your teenage life.

Whatever your style, it says a lot about your history, and it’s worth sharing with those who come after you.

8. What Historical Events Did You Experience As You Were Growing Up?

Your scrapbook or journal is all about you, your family, and the things you love, but keeping tabs on the world around you will give context to your personal observations.

I always enjoy hearing my parents tell what life was like during the “Great Depression.” My mother got an orange in her stocking every year for Christmas as a special treat. My father often walked to school without shoes. Reading about the Great Depression is one thing. Hearing how your parents coped with it is another.

Start with the major historical events that happened during your lifetime. How were you affected by them? Do you remember what you were doing when you heard that John F Kennedy was assassinated? How did you prepare for Y2K, and what did you do to celebrate a new millennium?

When he first got married, my father-in-law sold hobby toys, such as model airplanes. He made a deal with a local business to sell his toys in a section of their store, but before he moved in his merchandise, the first television was introduced. The store cancelled the hobby deal with my father-in-law so they would have room for the new televisions.

These are the fascinating details that make a life story interesting.

You don’t have to record every detail of the global state to give future readers of your scrapbook or journal a good sense of what was going on in the world, but do include the events that affected your daily life. News that you don’t think is worthwhile today may turn out to be vitally important in the long run, but don’t worry about what is or isn’t important. Simply show the world as you see it today, or, in the case of your ninth birthday, as you saw it back then.
You can group your collection of news-related anecdotes and photos together in one section of your scrapbook, or you may want to spread it throughout, much as it was spread throughout your life.

9. What Is The History Behind Family Heirlooms?

Whether a family heirloom has been passed down for generations or you are starting it on its journey, every heirloom deserves to have its history recorded.

What is the story behind the heirloom? Where and when was it acquired? Who were the previous owners? Does it have a valuable place in history? Any interesting anecdotes connected to it?

The problem with heirlooms, of course, is that within a single lifetime, almost all of the important details can get lost. Perhaps you learned the history of a diamond necklace from your grandmother before she died and passed the necklace on to you, but your own daughter won’t know anything about it, unless you tell her or write it down.

Telling your family the story of an heirloom or prized possession is good, but writing it down is better. As the saying goes, “Even a short pencil is more reliable than the longest memory.”

My mother-in-law collected antiques and often showed them at the county fair. Perhaps that was why she attached tags to many of her antiques, explaining where the piece came from.

It wasn’t until we cleaned out my husband’s childhood home that we found most of these treasures, carefully wrapped in newspaper along with the first Place ribbon Granny won at the fair. Since my mother-in-law now has Alzheimer’s, I’m grateful she wrote down this information while she could still remember it.

Attaching tags is one way to preserve the facts. Another is to take photos of the pieces and place them in your scrapbook along with the pertinent information and stories behind them.

If you don’t know the history of an heirloom, you can often uncover the truth about where it’s been and what it’s witnessed if you’re willing to dig a little. Start
by getting in touch with relatives, to see what they know about it. You may be surprised at the information you’ll uncover, and they may be surprised, in turn, to discover that the family’s treasured pocket watch is still around.

The Internet and the public library are two other resources for tracking down information about an heirloom. Search eBay.com for similar items. Finding an exact replica may even put you in touch with someone who knows more about your heirloom than you do!

10. What Was A Day In Your Life Like?

One of the most effective ways of passing along information about your life is to chronicle a typical day during a certain time period. From getting up in the morning until you fall into bed at night, all the details of your day-to-day life might tell your descendants more about how you lived and spent your time than any other kind of journaling.

“A Day in Your Life” consists of bits and pieces from all the previous categories. The home you woke up in every morning. The clothes and makeup you donned before school or work. The people you hung out with and the places you frequented. How you got around. What your family discussed over dinner at night. What you had for dinner…all the major comings and goings of your weekday existence.

The important thing about covering a day in your life is that this section can focus more on the details. When you think about the things that impacted and shaped your life, you’re thinking big! Use this project to think small and concentrate on the little things that occupied your time.

Your life story can be compared to a puzzle that is made of many pieces. This is your chance to put the pieces of your daily life together into a picture that will show future generations what it was like to be you.

One serendipity of recording a day of your life, may be finding out that things you never thought about before have greatly influenced you as a person.
Final Thoughts

Just like a time capsule you plant in the yard and imagine being unearthed years later by a post-apocalyptic society, scrapbooks and journals have the potential to say anything you want about you, your family, and the world you live in.

You may wonder whether it’s worth the bother, or you may think your history isn’t important, but it is. It’s important for you to remember where you came from and how you came to be who you are today, and it’s important for future generations who will look at your photo and wish they knew more about you.

Your history is important, and you are the best person to write it. Why not get started today?

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