

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Story of the Major Branching Points of Your Life

Branching points are the turning points in your life - the events, experiences, or insights that shaped your life and its directions. They may have been big events such as marriage, war, moving to a new city, or retirement. Or they may have been small events that had big outcomes, like reading a book or going on a hike.

What have been the branching points in your life? What events caused the turning points? Which ones put a stamp on your life that you carried forward? Some events are positive in their effects and others negative. Think of your life as a branching tree. New branches form, others may drop off for lack of sun or nourishment. Some flourish and bear fruit, others don't. Or think of your life as a river winding its way to the sea. Where did it begin, widen and narrow, twist and turn, and add branches as it flowed? What caused it to change its course, storms, floods or droughts?

Sensitizing questions: (The questions are guides to prime or stimulate your memories and your thoughts about your life. The questions are not intended to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows on your past. Each life is unique and the priming questions don't have the same value to all persons.)

1. What was the earliest branching point in your life? What happened and why was it important? How old were you at the time?
2. Who influenced your life in a major way? Which people were involved with you at the branching points, e.g., family, friends, teachers, doctors, lawyers and others?
3. Were there any important happenings in your environment, natural or man made crises that changed the direction of your life? Tornadoes and fires destroy homes, floods and automobile accidents leave changed lives behind them, did any affect you?
4. Were there any lucky events in your life that had positive outcomes on the directions it took such as winning a lottery, getting a new job, or falling in love?
5. Were there any bad events that influenced your life that caused it to branch such as divorces, deaths, or illnesses?
6. Did your ethnic, religious, or cultural background or your social or financial statuses have an influence on the branching points of your life? Has your background been an advantage or disadvantage to you?
7. Did your family move their home when you were young and in school that had a big impact on you? Did you ever change schools that had an important impact on your life?
8. Did changing jobs have lasting positive or negative effects on the flow of your life?
9. What branching points were you responsible for in contrast to outside influences?
10. Have there been any branching points in your life about which you changed your views over time? For example, events you were angry about then and contented about now?
11. Do you think of the flow of your life is typical of most people's lives, or is it unusual? In what ways is it unusual?

Guided Autobiography

The History of Your Major Life Work or Career

Our life's work includes the activities that have occupied most of our time, energy and/or concerns. It can take many forms. The history of our life's work may include work as a parent, spouse, or homemaker. It can be the history of a career or lifetime job. Also, it can be a lifetime of service in religion, community work, or politics. Some people devote their lives to art or literature. We may have several careers or life's work activities in sequence or at the same time. What has been the pattern or the sequence of your life's work?

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1. How did you get into your major life's work? Did you seem destined to follow it or did you stumble into it? Did other persons urge you to pursue this work or was chance a factor? Did any childhood interests or experiences influence your path?
2. When did you develop the goals of your life? How much choice did you have?
3. What events or persons influenced your path?
4. Were family models important in the life's work you chose? What persons influenced you the most?
5. What role did being a man or woman play in your choices about your life's work?
6. Has your life's work been one continuous path, or have there been changes and discontinuities? Have there been peaks and valleys?
7. Were you provided many options, or did you have only one or two prospects?
8. Are you satisfied with your life's work? Is there anything you would like to change? What personal strengths or weaknesses have you brought to your life's work?
9. If you have had more than one work life, which has been most important to you?
10. What have you liked most and least about your life's work?
11. How did the place where you grew up and the times in which you lived influence your choices and the way in which you think about your life's work?
12. If you were to live your life over again, would you choose the same or a different life's work? On the basis of your experience, what would you say about work to a young person just starting out in adult life?

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The History of Your Spiritual Life and Values

Our spiritual histories include experiences with people, nature, and religion that have contributed to the development of our philosophies of life and that part of us that cannot be defined in purely physical terms. The history of our spiritual lives and values need not be confined to experiences in church or in organized religion, although for some persons, those experiences may play an important part. What is the history of your quest for values, truth, and meaning in life? What people, experiences, readings, and inspirations have guided you in your spiritual journey?

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1. Do you remember having a spiritual experience when you were growing up that gave you a feeling of belonging and being special in the universe or a feeling of rejection and loneliness? What was it like?
2. As a child what kind of instruction and ideas were you given of a spiritual, religious, or philosophical nature? Did your family discuss such things?
3. Did you have an early image of God? Where did it come from? What was it like?
4. Were you ever challenged to take a stand on religion, state your faith, or defend your values?
5. Did your family or outside influences have greater impact on shaping your values and beliefs? What persons had most the influence on your ideas?
6. When you first left home for a long time, did that change your outlook on life, values, or personal philosophy?
7. What books made a spiritual or moral impression on you?
8. What have been your relationships with organized religion? How important have they been in your outlook and the way you have lived your life? Did you ever break with a church you belonged to? If so, how did the break evolve?
9. Did you ever have a spiritual or religious experience that had an important impact on the way you lived your life? Did you ever have any experiences of deep faith, conviction, or peace?
10. What friends, mentors, or role models have helped you on your spiritual path?
11. How would you describe your spiritual quest at this time? What have you learned, and what are you struggling to understand?

Guided Autobiography

The Role of Money in Your Life

Money is an important factor in most lives and can have both obvious and subtle influences on the way we live. Money can touch many aspects of our lives, including family life, where we live, education, health, relationships with others, and self-esteem. The history of how we have dealt with money and our ideas about money are important aspects of our life stories. Our attitudes toward money have been shaped by many influences, both positive and negative.

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1. What role did money play in your family? Was money scarce or plentiful? How did your family's financial situation compare to that of other people you knew? Did your family think of itself as being well-off or poor?
2. What were you taught about money? Who gave you most of your ideas about money?
3. Did money have any relationship to affection and love in your family?
4. What was the first time you earned any money? How did it influence your later ideas?
5. In your life, how important has it been to make money?
6. How much do you think about money or worry about it?
7. What have been your best successes with money, your worst mistakes? Are you a good or poor manager of money?
8. Have you ever had to borrow money? How did you feel about it? Have other people helped you when you needed money?
9. Does money have any relation to your self-regard or self-esteem?
10. Do you regard yourself as generous or stingy? Do you give money away? How do you feel about it? Were there any spendthrifts or misers in your family?
11. What has money come to mean to you - power, position, comfort, security, or something else?

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The History of Your Experiences with or Ideas about Death

Death can affect our lives in many ways. As children, we may have experienced the loss of a pet. Later, we may have lost parents, grandparents, a spouse, child, brother, sister, or a close friend. The death of a national hero may have affected us profoundly. The circumstances of deaths and our age at the time they occurred can have long-lasting influences. How have your experiences with death affected your life and your personal philosophy?

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1. What did you feel about death as a child? Did you lose an animal that was like a member of the family? What did you think when your pet died?
2. How was death talked about and treated in your family? Did it frighten you?
3. How were family funerals and memorial services held? When did you go to your first funeral? What did you think about it, and how did you react?
4. Did any wartime deaths affect you? If so, what were their circumstances?
5. Have you ever been responsible for anyone's death? How did you feel about it then and now?
6. Have you had any close calls with death, such as an illness or accident?
7. Do any deceased persons, such as a parent, spouse, or friend, continue to have an effect on your life?
8. Have you been closely involved with anyone's death? How have you grieved? How do you feel about it—guilty, resentful, angry, or peaceful? Were some deaths welcomed?
9. What was the most significant death you experienced? How did it change your life?
10. Did the death of some well-known person (e.g., Gandhi, John or Robert Kennedy, or Martin Luther King Jr.) have an effect on you?
11. How have your ideas about death evolved? What kind of death would you like to have? Is death a friend for you or is it to be fought, dreaded, or accepted?
12. If you could talk with someone who has died, what would you say or ask?

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

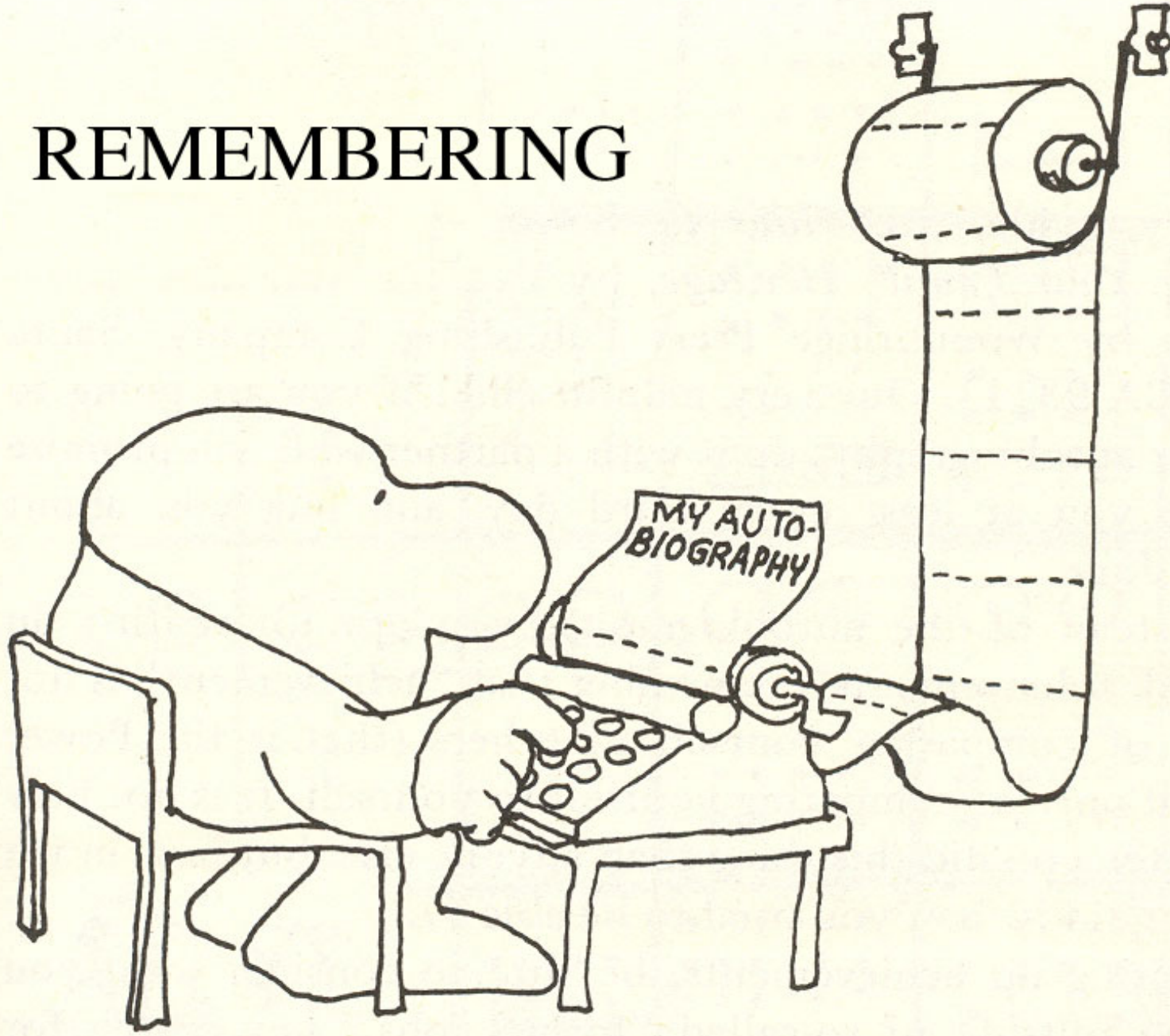
The History of Your Gender Identity

Our ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man evolve and come from many sources, such as family members, friends, reading, and our experiences in life. The history of our development, including our identities as boys or girls, men or women, is an important aspect of our personal histories.

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1. When did you first realize that you were a girl or a boy and that boys and girls were different? How did you feel about it?
2. What did your family tell you about being a boy or girl and how you should behave? Did your family have different rules for boys' and girls' behavior?
3. What kind of clothes did you wear when you were a child? What kind of toys and games did you play? Were any kinds of games forbidden?
4. What did your parents, teachers, and others tell you about what good girls and boys did and did not do? What were your parents' views about your gender?
5. Were you ever called a sissy, a tomboy, or a fraidy cat? Did you ever wish you were of the opposite sex?
6. When and where did you get your education about sex or the facts of life? What were your primary sources of information—a family member, school friends, reading, movies or religion?
7. How have your ideas about the ideal man or the ideal woman developed? How would you characterize yourself as a man or a woman?
8. Did you have any childhood sweethearts? How did you react to these early experiences?
9. Have you had any traumatic experiences? Are there any experiences you regret?
10. Have your ideas about appropriate gender behavior changed? What are your ideas about the ideal relationships between men and women?
11. Do you feel contemporary ideas about men, women, and sexuality have changed? If so, how do you relate to the new ideas?
12. Have your sexual experiences and identity been influenced by changes with age, health, retirement, or bereavement?

REMEMBERING



Tom Wilson 4/12
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Stories of Life

Enriching Lives and Enhancing
Mental Activity in the
Second-Half of Life

9th Annual
Promising Practices

Cheryl M. Svensson, Ph.D.



The Impersonal Age

We are all seeking to
connect in meaningful ways.



Why write your life story?

- Who knows your story?
- Making sense of one's life.
- Coming to terms with life.
- Looking back and moving forward.
- Legacy for children and grandchildren.



Benefits of writing your life story

- Increases self-understanding
- Activates the brain
- Reconnects with generations
- Prevents isolation
- New friends
- Empathy for others



Guided Autobiography

- Not: Life review, reminiscence, genealogy, or therapy.
- Content: Life themes, questions, write 2 pages.
- Process: Write, share, commitment



Research Studies

Anticipated and Actual
Evaluations of the
Components of Guided
Autobiography (2009)

James Birren, Ph.D.

Cheryl Svensson, Ph.D.

- USC Class survey N=19
- Pre-Post Test measures



Usefulness of GAB Elements

Element	Mean Rating		Diff	t	p
	Pre	Post			
Content of lectures	3.21	3.47	.26	-1.04	.309
Large class discussion	2.84	3.26	.77	-2.39	.028
Writing Stories	3.58	3.95	.68	-2.35	.030
Reading Stories	3.21	3.89	.88	-3.37	.003
Small group discussion	3.53	3.89	.60	-2.69	.015

- 4-point scale from not useful (1) to extremely useful (4);
N=19

Value of GAB Process Features

<u>Process Feature</u>	Mean Rating		<u>Diff</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>			
a. Educational stimulation	3.10	3.52	-.42	-1.19	.248
b. Focus on one topic	3.95	4.53	-.58	-2.36	.029
c. Information conveyed	3.95	4.00	-.05	-0.21	.883
d. Participation in a group	4.32	4.74	-.42	-3.02	.007
e. Leader of the group	4.39	4.67	-.28	-1.32	.205

- 5-point scale from not useful (1) to extremely useful (5);
N=19

Importance of GAB Process Features

<u>Process Feature</u>	Mean Ranking		<u>Diff</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>			
a. Sharing/learning to care	2.17	2.17	0.00	0.00	1.00
b. Facilitation by a leader	3.17	4.17	-1.00	-2.77	.013
c. Receiving feedback	3.22	3.33	-0.01	-0.27	.786
d. Reading stories	3.55	2.50	1.06	2.64	.017
e. Hearing other's stories	2.89	2.83	0.05	0.17	.867

- Ranked data from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest). Means express average ranks; N=18

Karen Fagerstrom thesis 2002

- Carol Ryff's PWB scale/pre-post test (n=45):
- Significant increases in:
- Personal Growth and
- Positive relations with others



Research

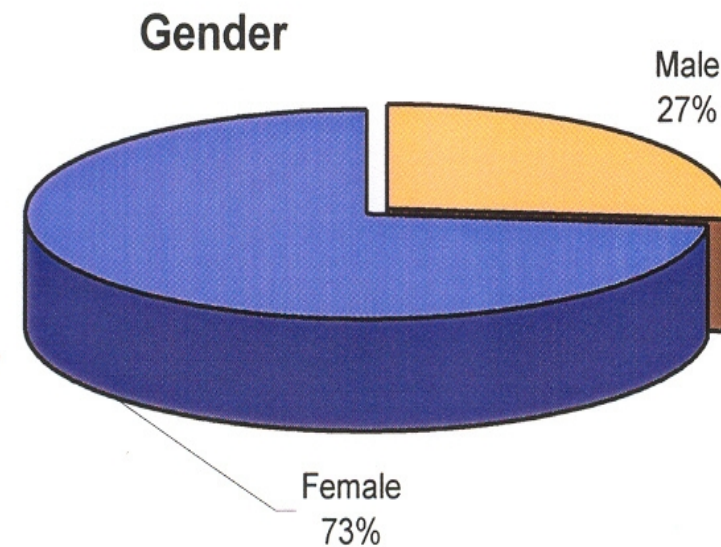
- **Two Types of Research:**
 - **Survey**
 - **Qualitative**
- **Survey (2001)**
 - **Pre and post tests of class members**
 - **140 participants (80% participation)**



Survey Demographics

Gender

- 73% Female
- 27% Male



Survey Results

- **Pre and Post Class Attitudes**

Reasons for Taking GAB

To give to family

65% both pre & post

To know about self

pre 39% and 45% post

- Significant finding (p. 05): value of listening to other people's stories



Attitude Toward Life Questionnaire

- One significant finding:
- After GAB, participants did *Not* want to live their life over again.



Birren & Reedy Research (1980)

- Pre-Post tests showed:
- Increased self-acceptance
- Decreased anxiety/tension
- Increased energy/vigor
- Increased positive view of others
- Connectedness



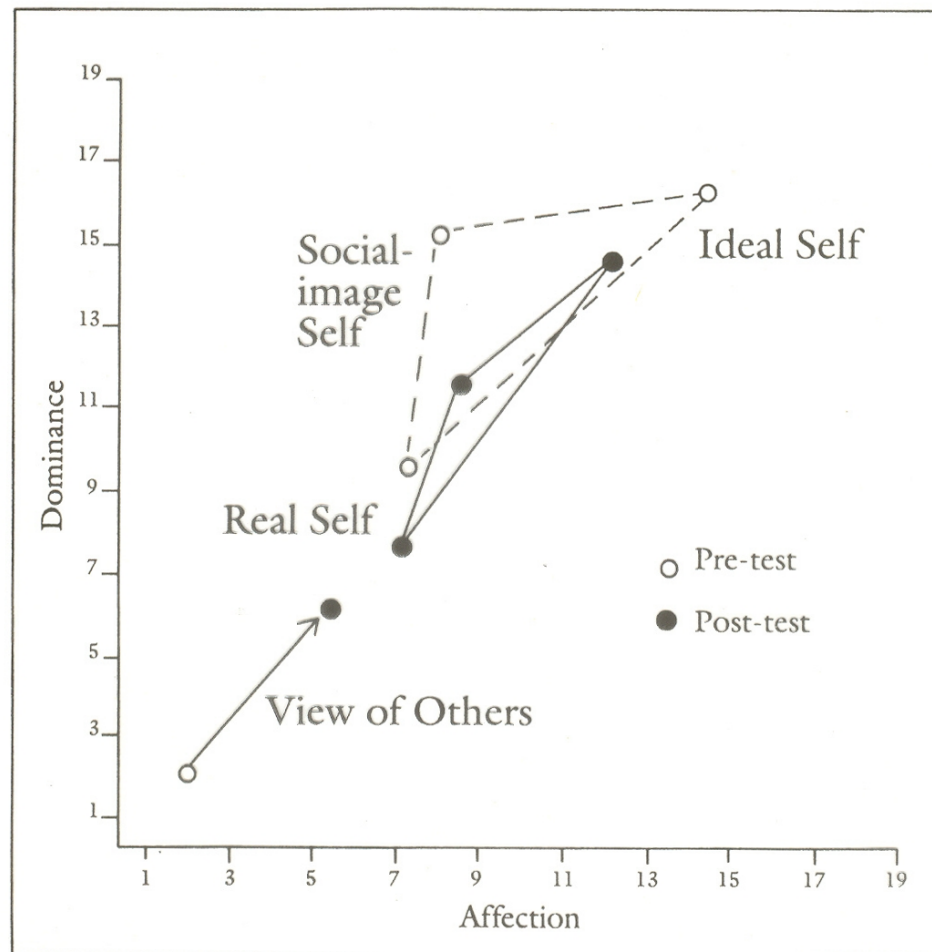


Figure 1-2. Mean scores before and after the autobiography class for the real, ideal, and social-image selves and for the view of others, as measured by the Leary Interpersonal Checklist (adapted from Reedy and Birren, 1980)

Qualitative Research

- The GAB participants say:
- “Participation in this course made me take a different look at myself. I really enjoyed the interaction of the other class members, hearing their life stories and opinions.”



GAB participants speak:

- “In the supportive environment of the small group, it became obvious that, although we came from widely varied walks of life, with beliefs that covered a wide range, we could connect in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and even affection.”

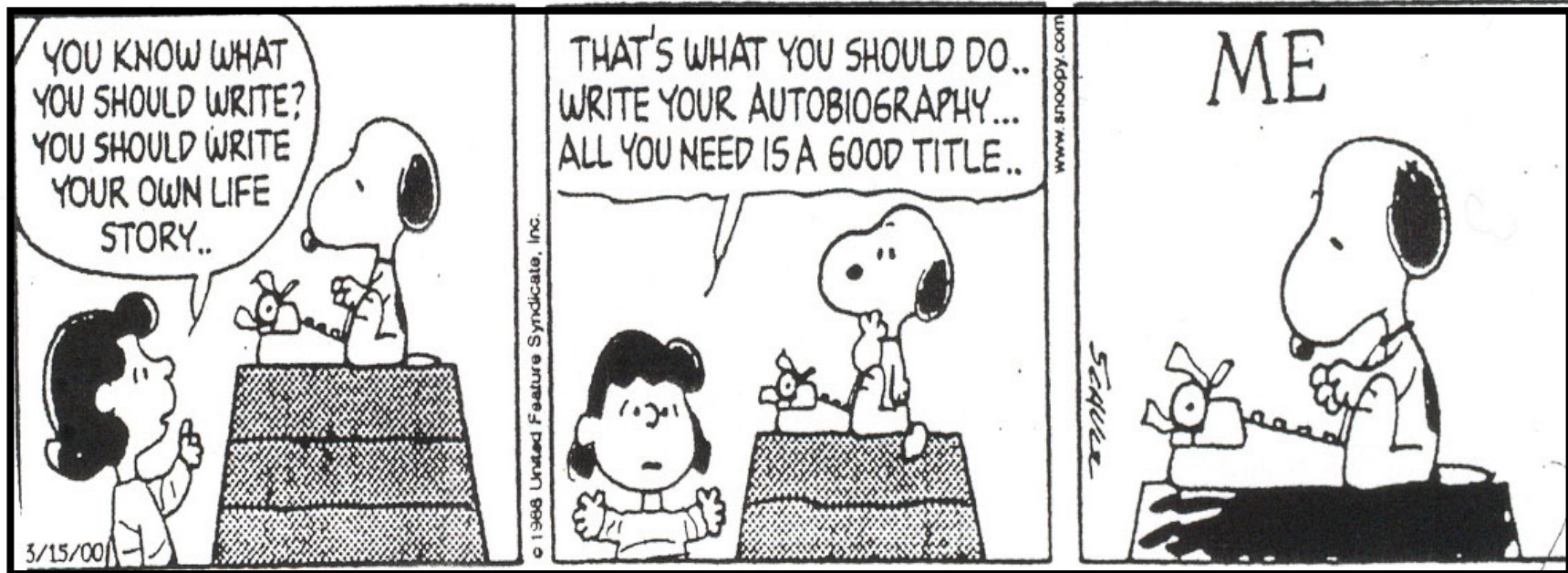


GAB participants speak:

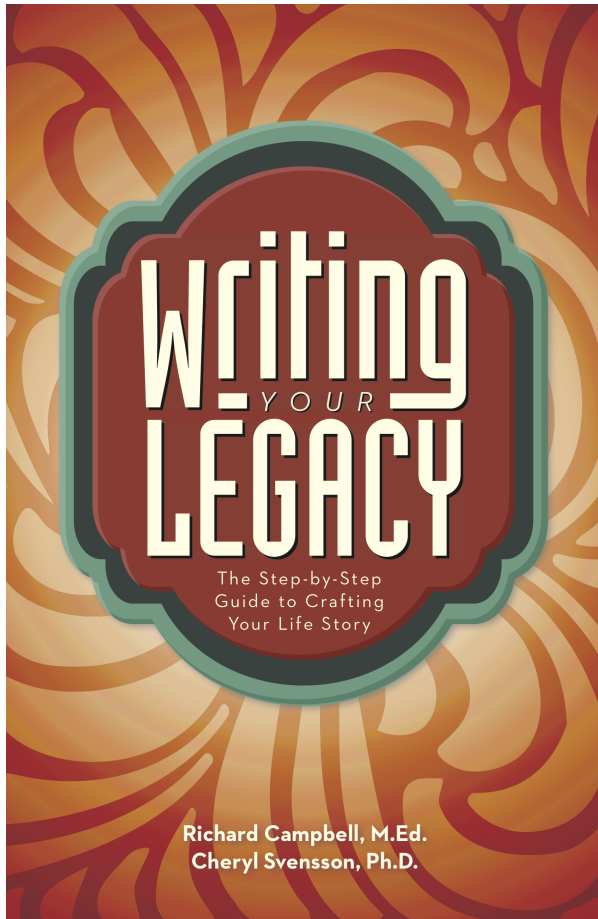
- “I came to terms with some sad events in my life, and feel more at peace about those events. This was a great experience.”



PEANUTS Classics By Charles M. Schulz



Writing Your Legacy



The Step-by-Step
Guide to Crafting
Your Life Story

Available on
Amazon May
2015.



Cheryl Svensson, Ph.D.

- Cheryl@guidedautobiography.com
- www.guidedautobiography.com
- Thank you!



GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The History of Your Health and Body

Health is an important influence in shaping our lives. Acute or chronic illnesses, whether experienced by us or another person in our lives, can lead to major changes in the way we live. Our views of our health and body have many aspects, including both the, history of our own health and physical characteristics and our feelings about them. In part, our views involve comparisons with other persons, whether we have been or are more or less healthy, strong or weak, coordinated or clumsy, attractive or unattractive. What is the history of your health and body?

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1. How was your health when you were a baby, child, and adult? Did you have any serious illnesses or accidents that changed the way you lived? In what ways?
2. What health problems have you experienced over the course of your life? How did they influence you?
3. Were you considered a well child or a sickly child? Did it make any difference to you?
4. Were you fast- or slow-developing as a child? Were you ahead or behind your peers in growth and development as an adolescent? How did this affect your image of yourself?
5. How would you describe yourself as a child, adolescent, or adult? Were you short or tall, thin or fat, poised or awkward? As a male or female, would you regard yourself as attractive or unattractive?
6. How has your body reacted to sports and exercise?
7. How has your body reacted to stress? Has this changed during your life?

What signals in your body indicate that you are under stress? Have you been exposed to high stress? If so, how have you responded to it?

8. What have you done during your life to help or hurt your health?
9. What aspects or parts of your body do you like best or least? If you could change your body in any way, how would you like it to be different?
10. What have you done to alter or improve your health and body during your life?

Your Goals and Aspirations

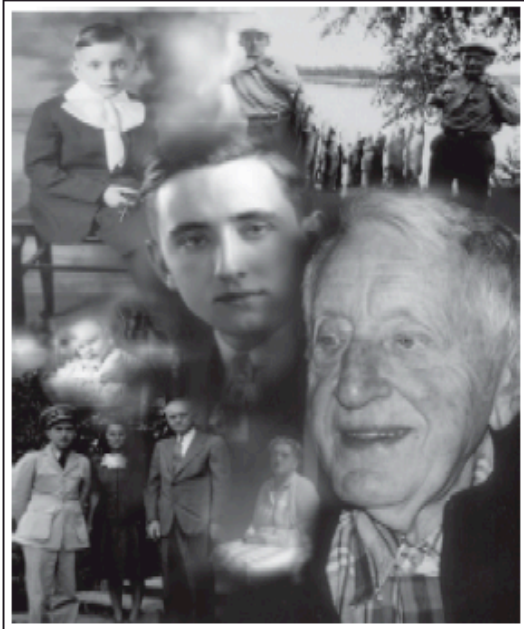
Our goals and aspirations are an important part of our life stories. An account of how we grew up and lived our life includes the goals we have had and the things we have been striving for. Our goals and aspirations form an integral part of the fabric of our lives. For some persons, goals may remain the same throughout life, but this is not necessarily true for everyone. Experience may have taught us that we should change our goals or trade in our aspirations for new ones that better fit with the realities of our lives or our changing values. What have you been working to attain or achieve in your life, and what kind of person have you tried to be?

SENSITIZING QUESTIONS

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1. When you were a child, whom did you want to be like, or what kind of person did you want to become when you grew up? Did your role models change during adolescence? In what way?
2. Where did you find your role models--in the family, movies, or other sources?
- 3- Which characteristics of your ideal self or ideal model were most important to your accomplishments, athletic ability, appearance, money, reputation, creativity, philosophy, religion, or something else?
4. In your school years, what were your goals? What did you want to accomplish?
5. How important were your teachers and education in shaping your goals? Did they lead to changes in your goals and your ideas about what you wanted to achieve in your life?
6. Have you changed your goals during your life? How? What experiences or major events influenced the changes?
7. What do you think have been the most important achievements of your life? Is there anything you feel so strongly about that you would sacrifice almost everything for it?
8. Which persons have had the most influence on what you wanted to achieve?
9. Did you ever have a period when you felt your life was meaningless?
10. Looking back over your life, would you now pursue different goals? What would they be?
11. What aspirations do you have now, and what goals do you have for your future?
12. What legacy would you like to create that would be a symbol of how you led your life? If you wrote a book about your life, what would its title be?

The Birren Autobiographical Studies Program



The Birren Autobiographical Studies Program is dedicated to enriching the lives of adults through writing, sharing, and preserving their life stories and life experiences.

The program provides opportunities for education, research and dissemination of information to professionals who are engaged in the fields of life review and aging.

www.guidedautobiography.com

Should I write my autobiography?

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Why should I write my autobiography?

Won't it be too much trouble for me to write my autobiography? Isn't just talking about my life enough?

- Family members will want to have copies.
- Friends will want to learn about how and where you grew up.
- New generations will want to know about their family roots.
- Adding up your life is a great experience.

Why should I tell my life story?

Who will want to hear my life story?

Don't you think I am too old to remember it all?

- Every life is unique, and there has never been another you.
- Sharing your life story reminds you of many things in your life.
- Your life story includes many things you have lived through.
- Looking back at your life leads to good feelings about going ahead.

What would I do with my autobiography?

- You can easily get it printed including pictures from the past.
- Sharing your story with other people leads to new friendships.
- You can encourage other people to write theirs by showing them yours.

Sign up now for a class in Guided Autobiography.

Sharpen your memories, get them organized, enjoy sharing your life story, and have your autobiography to give to family and friends.



# GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## The Story of the Major Branching Points of Your Life

Branching points are the turning points in your life - the events, experiences, or insights that shaped your life and its directions. They may have been big events such as marriage, war, moving to a new city, or retirement. Or they may have been small events that had big outcomes, like reading a book or going on a hike.

What have been the branching points in your life? What events caused the turning points? Which ones put a stamp on your life that you carried forward? Some events are positive in their effects and others negative. Think of your life as a branching tree. New branches form, others may drop off for lack of sun or nourishment. Some flourish and bear fruit, others don't. Or think of your life as a river winding its way to the sea. Where did it begin, widen and narrow, twist and turn, and add branches as it flowed? What caused it to change its course, storms, floods or droughts?

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2. What people were involved with you at the branching points, e.g., family, friends, teachers, doctors, lawyers and others?
3. Were there any important happenings in your environment, natural or manmade crises that changed the direction of your life? Tornadoes and fires destroy homes, floods and automobile accidents leave changed lives behind them, did any affect you?
4. Were there any lucky events in your life that had positive outcomes on the directions it took such as winning a lottery, getting a new job, or falling in love?
5. Were there any bad events that influenced your life that caused it to branch such as divorces, deaths, or illnesses?
6. What persons influenced the direction of your life in a major way, such as a parent or grandparent, teacher, friend, political or religious leader? What was their influence?
7. Did your family move their home when you were young and in school that had a big impact on you? Did you ever change schools that had an important effect on your life?
8. Did changing jobs have lasting positive or negative effects on the flow of your life?
9. What branching points were you responsible for in contrast to outside influences?
10. Have there been any branching points in your life about which you changed your views later such as its long ranged importance in your life or your feelings about it? Were you angry then and contented now?
11. Do you think of the flow of your life as typical of most people or is it unusual, in what ways?

# GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## The History of Your Family

Our family histories include both our families of origin (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) and the family or families of our adult lives (spouses, children, grandchildren, and in-laws). Perhaps an adopted child, a friend, or another person has been close to you and your family and has been important in your life.

What were the origins of the branches of your family? Did your family history have any impact on the directions your life took? Which family members were important in shaping your life? Some may have been important to you in positive ways and some in negative ways. Why did these family members have more impact on your life than did others?

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1. Who held the power in your family and made the major decisions? How do you know?
2. What family members have you felt closest to and which ones felt most distant? Why? Were there any family members who were or are your models in life?
3. Did you like your family and feel supported and loved?
4. Were there any family members you were afraid of?
5. What were the rules in your family about eating, cleaning up, dressing, et cetera? When you sat down to dinner, where did you sit?
6. Were there any hero figures in your family who had stories told about them?
7. Were there any odd figures in your family who were ridiculed, such as a miser or a spendthrift, a noisy or talkative person or a silent one?
8. What were the strengths and weaknesses in your family? How did they affect you?
9. Were there any events that made your family stronger or tore it apart?
10. What is the history of your family? What were its origins, and who were its major figures?
11. Did your family have a philosophy about life that was discussed and that you were expected to adopt? What were the "shoulds" and "oughts" in your family? What favorite sayings illustrate your family's philosophy of life?
12. Is there anything about your family that seems unusual to you?

# GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## A POCKETFUL OF WRITING TIPS

### 1. Use active, not passive verbs.

This keeps the action and the readers' attention moving forward.

Rick threw the ball into left field.

**Not:** The ball was thrown into left field by Rick.

### 2. Use all the senses.

The thunder boomed through the night, and static electricity in the air made the hair on our forearms stand up straight.

In Grandma's kitchen the sweet smell of fresh strawberries combined with the lingering aroma of bacon grease and coffee from breakfast.

### 3. Give each writing all the best stuff you have. When you go back to the well, miraculously, there is always more to work with, so no need to save for later.

### 4. Show; don't tell. Paint a picture with words.

Uncle Abraham was so honest he would walk five miles to return the correct change to a customer. **Not:** Uncle Abraham was honest.

### 5. Use concrete detail and avoid abstractions. The facts won't change over time. Your interpretations might.

Uncle Ed, Ma, Sissy and my brother Joe were all in the Model A, already pointed west. Dad and I brought out the last box, Grandma's china wrapped in rags and towels so they wouldn't break on the way to California. Ma wanted to hold the dishes on her own lap. So Dad handed them to her, turned and spit in the dust and climbed into the driver's seat.

**Not:** Like hundreds other families, we moved to California during the Great Depression.

### 6. Write straight to the emotional core of things.

You are writing about your childhood, the time when you found everything so intensely interesting and felt things so deeply. You are writing about your adolescence with all its roller coaster emotions, idealism and realizations, and about your continuing development as an adult. Don't be too distant. Write with care and truth and with empathy and understanding for that child, that young person, the person you are now. Try to understand what he or she was feeling. Help others to learn from that child's experience, from the experience of a human being trying to make sense of life.

Exploring your life and understanding the child that you were will give you insight and compassion. You will see the details in a different light. You may notice things you hadn't before. And when you share, you will turn on a light for others so they can see the significance of their own lives more clearly.

## AWARDS

- James E. Birren received the Fielding University *Creative Longevity and Wisdom* award in February 2013.
- James E. Birren received the *Exemplar Practice* Award at the International Reminiscence and Life Review Conference in 2005.
- NCOA presented James E. Birren the *Ollie Randall* award in 2004.
- James E. Birren was inducted into the Hall of Fame by the American Society on Aging in 2004.
- The Autobiographical Studies Program received the 2003 MindAlert Award from the American Society on Aging and the MetLife Foundation in the category, *Innovative Older Adult Learning Program*.
- James E. Birren received the *Distinguished Career Contribution* Award from the Gerontological Society of America, in Boston, November, 2002.

## PROGRAM GOALS

The Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies brings together people from diverse backgrounds. It is committed to research and enriching lives through writing and sharing the life review experience with other older adults.

## SUPPORT AND AFFILIATIONS

Archstone Foundation Grant  
The Beverly Foundation  
ASA MindAlert Award  
University of Southern California  
CSUF, Ruby Gerontology Center  
UCLA Extension  
UCLA Center on Aging  
Anonymous donors

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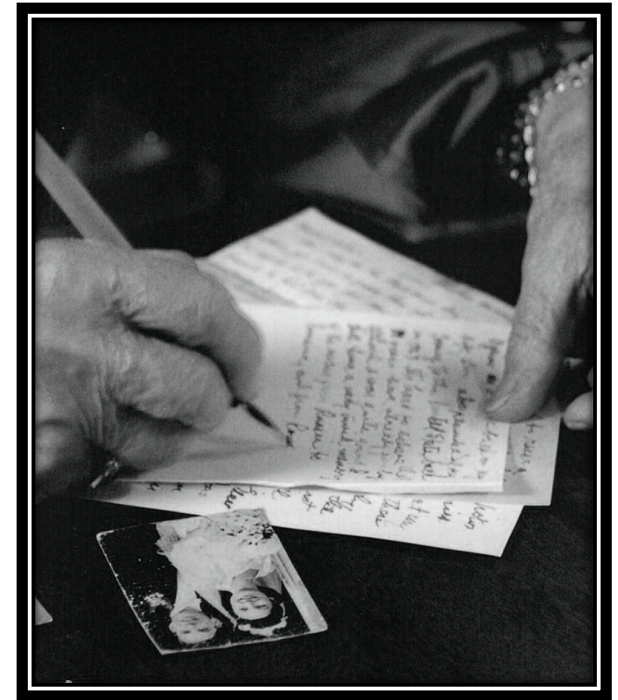
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## The Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies



The Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies is dedicated to enriching the lives of adults through writing, sharing, and preserving their life stories and life experiences.

The program provides opportunities for education, research and dissemination of information to professionals who are engaged in the fields of life review and aging.

**The program on Autobiographical Studies** is designed to meet the needs of midlife and older persons. Courses are directed toward releasing the potentials of pre and post-retirees. Individuals explore where they have been in life, where they are, and where they would like to be. For many persons the extension of life can provide the best years in terms of new activities such as volunteering, learning, and expanding personal relationships. Participants become aware of the lives they have lived and are more confident and optimistic about facing the years ahead.

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*“It has made a difference in my outlook.  
I have found solace in looking back and  
courage to go forward.”*

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## COURSES

The courses in the Autobiographical Studies program include: Guided Autobiography (GAB), Guided Autobiography II (GAB II), e-GAB, Life Portfolio, Family History and GAB Instructor Training. The six courses are described as follows:

**Guided Autobiography (GAB)** helps individuals organize their life stories. Guided by a trained instructor, participants are led through themes and priming questions that evoke memories of events once known but filed away and seemingly forgotten. Writing and sharing life stories with others is an ideal way to find new meaning in life as the uncertainties of the past, and the contradictions, paradoxes and events of life are put into perspective. Participants feel stronger and have a growing appreciation of their lives.

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*“I gained a great deal of self understanding and  
regained memories I might never have  
otherwise appreciated.”*

**Guided Autobiography II (GAB II)** is developed for participants who have completed GAB and wish to continue writing their life stories. The purpose of GAB II is to expand upon the life themes of Guided Autobiography and to develop them into a framework for a more in-depth life story. The themes address the bigger questions in life such as: What has given my life purpose and value? Where am I going and how has my life prepared me for it? Our premise is that participants benefit by looking back into their lives, writing their life stories, and sharing them in a supportive atmosphere.

**e-GAB** offers the Guided Autobiography course in a distance learning format through the Internet. Geographic mobility reduces opportunities for telling about personal events of growing up, maturing and growing older. The e-GAB project is designed to serve the need to organize and make available one's life story by providing an online program for preparing one's autobiography.

**Life Portfolio** is designed to provide a context for individuals to review and plan their life investments. The principle goal of the course is to create a framework that enables participants to examine how they have invested themselves in the activities of life, their gains and losses, and to identify how they want to invest their lives in the future. This requires a review of how they have invested their energy, time, and concerns during their lifetime, and leads to a new plan for the future that reflects their goals and values.

**Family History** instructs and assists participants in locating, recalling and organizing the histories of their families. Participants are encouraged to look for lost family culture and traditions embedded in their histories. Students can then decide what to leave in the past, what to incorporate into the present, and what to leave for future generations.

**Online GAB Instructor Training** offers in-depth training for those who want to volunteer or earn extra income by teaching Guided Autobiography courses. The distance learning format through the Internet makes live instructor training available to individuals all over the world. Participants write and share their own two-page life stories on GAB themes throughout the training program while learning how to develop, schedule, publicize and run GAB groups within their own communities.

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*“With my GAB Instructor Training, I've been  
able to help many preserve their precious life  
stories for future generations.”*

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## CURRENT PROJECTS

- \* Film documentary on James E. Birren
- \* Teaching Guided Autobiography (DVD)
- \* Investigating impact of courses on older adults
- \* Expanding to new audiences and applications
- \* Course development
- \* Leadership training
- \* Research for a databank of autobiographies

## PUBLICATIONS

**Writing Your Legacy: The step-by-step guide to crafting your life story.** (2015) R. Campbell and C. Svensson. Writer's Digest Books.

**Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups,** (2001) J.E. Birren & K. Cochran. Johns Hopkins University Press.

**Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults,** (1991) J.E. Birren and D. Deutchman. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

**Where to Go From Here,** (1997) J. E. Birren & L. Feldman. Simon and Schuster.

*“I gained a freedom to speak my own  
truth without tempering it to please others.”*

## Guided Autobiography

### The History of Your Family

Our family histories include both our families of origin (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) and the family or families of our adult lives (spouses, children, grandchildren, and in-laws). Perhaps an adopted child, a friend, or another person has been close to you and your family and has been important in your life.

What were the origins of the branches of your family? Did your family history have any impact on the directions your life took? Which family members were important in shaping your life? Some may have been important to you in positive ways and some in negative ways. Why did these family members have more impact on your life than did others?

Sensitizing questions: *(These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows on your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.)*

1. Who held the power in your family and made the major decisions? How do you know?
2. What family members have you felt closest to and which ones felt most distant? Why? Were there any family members who were or are your models in life?
3. Did you like your family and feel supported and loved?
4. Were there any family members you were afraid of?
5. What were the rules in your family about eating, cleaning up, dressing, et cetera? When you sat down to dinner, where did you sit?
6. Were there any hero figures in your family who had stories told about them?
7. Were there any odd figures in your family who were ridiculed, such as a miser or a spendthrift, a noisy or talkative person or a silent one?
8. What were the strengths and weaknesses in your family? How did they affect you?
9. Were there any events that made your family stronger or tore it apart?
10. What is the history of your family? What were its origins, and who were its major figures?
11. Did your family have a philosophy about life that was discussed and that you were expected to adopt? What were the "shoulds" and "oughts" in your family? What favorite sayings illustrate your family's philosophy of life?
12. Is there anything about your family that seems unusual to you?