

Legacy Building Through Life Review

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Parts of our lives will be remembered by others. What is remembered may be very different from person to person. It may be as simple as our name or eye color, a piece of jewelry passed down over generations from parent to child, or a particular recipe that is always enjoyed at family gatherings. Other things that are remembered could be quite complex, such as our beliefs, our feelings of right and wrong, or our actions either purposeful or unintentional. How we are remembered, or how parts of our lives are passed on to others, is called our legacy. For better or for worse, everyone has a legacy, and even though there are certain things about us we cannot change, we all have the ability to shape what others think about us. This fact sheet describes different types of things that make up a legacy, talks about how we can develop a meaningful legacy, and offers a variety of ways to communicate our legacy to others.

The Many Parts of Legacy

If we consider our lives in a variety of ways, we can identify things we might otherwise not have thought about as we build our legacy. What in my life is truly important to me? What is it about my life that I think is important? And what parts of my life—what is it about me—that I want to preserve and pass on?

Material legacy includes possessions and heirlooms. We all have a variety of “stuff,” but not all of it holds the same value or meaning. What are the important things that seem to represent a part of our individual history or are attached to our family history?

Legacy of values includes personal, social, and cultural ways of thinking, believing, and evaluating our world. These values shape our outlook on life and how we behave.

Biological legacy includes the family tree and the passing on of genes, traits, and health conditions. We all have a biological and health history. Some elements of this history we cannot change, such as a history of cancer or Alzheimer’s disease. Other elements, such as maintaining a healthy mind and body through diet and physical activity, are within our control.

Life Review and Legacy

Some people are able to quickly identify what they feel are the important parts of their legacy. But others may need to spend some time reflecting on their lives to determine what is truly important and worth preserving. This reflection is called “life review.” The search for legacy provides a very good way to begin a life review. Stories behind the parts of a legacy can be developed by asking some simple questions. For example, where did that old chest of drawers come from? or the simple gold pendant? What memories come to life as I look through family albums? Where did food traditions in the family originate? How has religion affected my life as a child and now as an adult? At what age and how did grandparents pass away? Not all stories will be happy or even important, but some will be important to us and those are the ones worth preserving.

Preserving and Communicating a Legacy

Legacy is, again, what other people remember about us. Reflection and life review helps to identify the sorts of things we feel are important parts of our legacy. The next step is to help others know about what we feel is important.

A life story is a way to record the parts of a legacy and is a way to communicate that legacy. Simply put, a life story is how we tell others where we came from, what we value in life, and how all the parts in our personal history come together to make us who we are.

Life story may take many forms. A basic written story is easiest and, perhaps, most popular. Pictures, drawings, postcards, menus, and programs may or may not be added to the story. The best stories, like a good book, seem to be organized in a way that readers can follow. A life story, then, might be organized according to the calendar of our life, beginning with early childhood memories and moving forward as we grow and develop and as our lives get more complex. Some people have moved around a lot over the years, so their stories might be organized more around the places of their life. Family, school, work, leisure time, or worship may all be possible ways to give our life story an organization that others will follow. The parts of our legacy become part of the story, and readers of our story will then understand why certain things are important to us and how these things have made us who we are.

Benefits of Legacy, Life Review, and Life Story

There is a story behind everyone's life. Thinking about legacy allows us to play an active role in making this story valuable to ourselves and to others. Besides the ability to take some control of our legacies, there are several real benefits that come out of reflection and developing a life story.

Legacies connect time. Legacies and life stories make us a part of history. They ensure that a part of us continues on after we are gone. They also are valuable in connecting us (and future generations) with the past. Legacies allow people to better understand where they came from or how they became the person they are.

Legacy building strengthens the human spirit. Life is full of ups and downs, personal traumas and successes, and many changes in how we feel and live. A life review may not always be a totally happy experience, but scholars and counselors have found that reflection and storytelling can promote understanding of our selves and a sense of satisfaction with life.

Legacies strengthen relationships. Communicating a legacy through a life story allows us to share experiences, ideas, values, and personal examples with others. The result of this process is that others gain a richer appreciation of who we are. The communication can enhance respect and trust and can link family members through shared experiences and heritage.

Conclusion

Finding meaning and purpose in life is part of human nature. This need inspires us to record personal accomplishments, undertakings, or even thoughts and ideas so they can live on and be remembered or valued in some way. For some, this may be achieved through inheritance; others may be remembered for a fantastic invention or physical contribution to society. Yet, for many people, their legacy will remain as wisdom, knowledge, values, and beliefs that are passed to future generations. At the heart of legacy is life story. Because life story can help explain who we are, where we've been, how we got there, where we are now, and even where and what we will be doing in the future, life story has the ability to strengthen the human spirit, connect time, and provide insight into relationships.

Resources

Family Health History Workbook and the Surgeon General Family Health History Initiative. The Surgeon General has provided a tool to help make it easier to create a portrait of your family's health. The Family Health worksheet will help you organize your family tree and provide a record to identify common diseases that may run in families. www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/genomics/fhh_wkbk.pdf or www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/

Memory Banking. Contact your local Extension Agent for more information about this life story program. Memory Banking is a 4-week program designed to increase participant's knowledge and skills to collect, document and maintain life stories and health histories. The program is valuable for promoting an active brain, quality relationships, mental healthfulness and legacy building.

University of South Maine National Life Story Center. Through recording and preserving the life stories of people of all ages and backgrounds, the National Life Story Center celebrates individual lives and strengthens community bonds by bringing people of all generations together to share life stories. <http://usm.maine.edu/olli/national/lifestorycenter/>.

References

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