

Chapter 12

Your Family Legacy

I was a young adult when I lost the last of my grandparents, so I know a bit about them. I know nothing about my great-grandparents except their names, and if I hadn't asked my parents what their names were while writing this book, I wouldn't have known their names, either. And I know absolutely nothing about their parents or generations before them. What were their lives like? What did they do for a living? How long did they live? How did they fall in love? What was happening in the world around them? What were their passions, their interests, their challenges? How would they have wanted to be remembered?

Wouldn't it be nice for future generations to know about you and what your life was like? Maybe you've had an exciting life, maybe not. But the details you may deem to be too mundane to share with future generations may just be full of incidental details they find fascinating!

You may have heard the expression, "It's all about the dash." This refers to the dates on your tombstone with the hyphen separating your year of birth and your year of death. The hyphen (i.e. the dash), refers to everything that happened in your life between the two dates. I don't know about you, but I'd like my life to be remembered as more than a date-dash-date in a footnote of history (Jerrold E. Slutzky [1952 – 20??]).

At the time of writing this book, my father just celebrated his 100th birthday and is the last surviving member of his entire generation on his side of my family, which is an enormous family. When he's gone, all his knowledge of our ancestors, our family's history, and family stories will go with him, lost forever.

So, we've been collecting as many of those memories as possible to keep them in perpetuity. One of my personal favorites was him describing his very first job, which would have been sometime in the early 1930s. His job was dipping bananas in chocolate before they were frozen, for which he would be paid \$1.00 per day, plus all the frozen bananas he could eat! And boy, did he eat a lot of them!

He says, to this day, he can't even **look** at a frozen banana!!!

He also told us the story of his mother, my grandmother, taking a ship from Russia to America by herself at the age of 16, not knowing a single word of English. She got off the boat and immediately started learning English by pointing at things and asking people, "*Vas is das?*" ("What is that?") And when my father went away to war, rather than rely on others to write letters for her to her son, she went to school in her 40s to learn how to read and write to him by herself in English!

And then there was the time he was stationed with the army on Kodiak Island in Alaska and was on maneuvers. Thinking he was capturing a member of the enemy rustling in the deep grass, he threw down his rifle, yelled "Gotcha!" and grabbed the perpetrator, only to discover he had grabbed a handful of fur belonging to a young Kodiak bear! He grinned broadly as he admitted he was very thankful that the bear went running off in one direction, while he ran off in the opposite direction!

My mother, now 96, has her share of family stories, too, such as her mother warning her to stop being so picky about whom she wanted as a husband. After all, she was 21 years old! Did she want to be an old maid?

Everyone has fond memories of their lives and those of their parents, grandparents, and if they are lucky, other ancestors. And whether it is a matter of creating a family tree, or just writing down a narrative history of the family, wouldn't it be a wonderful legacy to share with future generations?

I can barely imagine my parents' lives as children, before television, air conditioning, and air travel. And it is even harder to comprehend the lives of my grandparents, when families had 8 to 12 children, no indoor plumbing, automobiles, or electricity.

I'd like to think some future generations will find it interesting that I can remember when a first-class postage stamp cost four cents and is now 49 cents. My father said he remembers when gasoline cost seven cents a gallon, while I remember when a gallon of gasoline cost 33 cents. If I wanted to borrow the car to go out on a date, my father would insist I fill half the tank, which cost about \$2.00. In 2017, gasoline is currently \$2.25 per gallon (although a couple years ago, it had spiked up to \$4.50 per gallon.) Growing up, we had three channels on television (ABC, NBC, CBS), and later a public channel, and eventually, a Spanish-language channel was added.

McDonald's (and fast-food restaurants in general) was a brand-new concept, and you could buy a hamburger for a dime, French fries for 12 cents, and a milkshake for 20 cents. If we'd only had the foresight to buy 100 shares of McDonald's stock (I believe 100 shares cost about \$1,200), Walmart stock, or later, Apple stock, we'd be mega-millionaires now.

When I first became an attorney in 1977, my law office had no computers, cloud storage, Internet, smartphones, fax machines, or even plain paper copy machines. They didn't exist yet. Copy machines were loaded with a huge roll of paper, which self-cut to the desired legal or letter length. A red stripe in the paper was the warning that you were running out of paper.

It cost over a thousand dollars to buy an IBM Selectric® typewriter with what was then a high-tech moveable typeball, and your choice of fonts was limited to either pica or elite. Your secretary, not known yet as a personal assistant, would type on legal size paper (8-1/2" x 14"). If extra copies were needed, onion skin paper was used with carbon paper in between each sheet of paper, because if a mistake was made, there was no auto-correct feature or spell-check function; you had to erase the mistake on each and every copy and re-type it. "White-out" liquid was a brand-new invention and was hailed a "miracle" that saved secretaries countless hours of time correcting typing errors.

I anticipate that future generations will probably be astounded that we had a mere 1,000 channels to watch on television, that we used carbon-based gasoline instead of nuclear fusion to power our old-fashioned automobiles, that we used antique smartphones instead of mental telepathy to communicate one another, that we needed airplanes to fly instead of anti-gravity belts, and took ships to transport us to a far-off Caribbean vacation, rather than taking a spaceship shuttle through a wormhole to the new Club Med on far-away galaxies!

Wouldn't it have been wonderful for your great-great grandparents to have taken the initiative to describe what their lives had been like? What their hopes, dreams, likes, and dislikes had been? Stories of how they met their loved ones?

I remember many stories that my parents shared with me about their lives, but I can probably only speak for about 10 minutes about my grandparents' stories. And as I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I didn't even know the names of my great-grandparents before writing this book, let alone any insights as to what their lives were like or my ancestors before them.

Think about it: We are a direct link between all our ancestors that have come before us since the beginning of the human race to all future generations until the end of our bloodline, possibly even until the end of the human race!

Wouldn't it be nice to share at least a few snippets of your family history and your favorite memories with those future generations?

There are many ways to accomplish this, the most basic of which is to start a diary, writing down a description of your current life, and commenting on what you are doing, who you have seen recently, and as the memories of your early life or family stories come to you, writing them down, too.

Since many people aren't fast typists or writers, using a word-to-text computer program such as Nuance Dragon® NaturallySpeaking can be of great help to you. You simply tell the stories out loud, and as you speak, the program converts your words to text. The accuracy of these programs has improved greatly over the years, but be sure to review what you have said to make sure the transcription is correct.

Similarly, you can simply start telling your memories or family stories, and record them as audio or video files. Future generations will be able to hear your own stories, told by you, in your own voice.

How about an interview type of recording? Put together a list of questions to jog memories, and record the stories as the memories start flowing. A section in the attached questionnaire has a list of questions to get you started on creating your own family legacy.

This year, during holidays and family events, I intend to go around the dinner table and ask everyone to tell at least one favorite family memory or story.

What about taking out a family photo album and, starting on the first page, telling the story about the pictures? It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, so each picture should trigger a memory that can be transposed to paper. Talk about the people in the picture, the approximate date it was taken, what was the occasion, what was happening behind the scenes not shown in the picture, what you were feeling, what was happening in your life at the time the moment was captured on film. You've kept the picture because at one point in time, it was a moment that was important enough for you to snap a picture and put it into a memory album.

How often have you looked at your parents' photo albums and had no idea who was in the pictures or why they were an important memory to your parents? If you don't tell the story behind each picture, that particular story (or at least your personal slant on the events in the picture) will be lost.

Or, you can hire a professional videographer to prepare a legacy video for you. The videographer will usually provide you with a list of questions that you will be asked during a several-hour interview. They will create a video of the entire interview and scan in favorite family pictures, certificates, and other memorabilia. They will then edit everything down to a reasonable-length legacy video that can be made immediately available to your family, or saved to be given to family members at a future date, perhaps after your passing.

Whether you decide to use a video, audio, or written format, here are some of the topics that may jog some fond memories that future generations may find of interest:

1. Your family history, going as far back in time as you know
2. Your early childhood and upbringing
3. Your adolescent and early adulthood years
4. Your educational history (what schools you attended; what degrees and honors; what you learned about yourself)
5. Your work history (jobs, titles, awards, honors, what were you paid, who were your bosses, who were your mentors, who were your work friends, what you learned from these experiences)
6. Your proudest family moments
7. Your favorite life memories
8. Your favorite inspirational and quotes that were meaningful to you
9. Your heroes and inspirational individuals, and how they inspired you
10. Your proudest career and civic accomplishments and involvements

11. Your special personal achievements, awards, offices held
12. Life lessons learned that you want to share with others
13. Your life motto
14. How would you like friends, family, and future generations to remember you
15. Special thoughts you would like to share with your family.

You can share fun personal memories, such as telling the story of how you met your spouse, and the circumstances leading up to the proposal of marriage and wedding.

Or, you can share painful personal events that may have shaped your life, such as going to war, having a debilitating disease, learning impediment, or losing a loved one at an early age.

In addition, you can talk about your favorites, such as:

1. Your favorite books
2. Your favorite movies
3. Your favorite jokes
4. Your favorite stories
5. Your favorite recipes
6. Your favorite teachers in school
7. Your favorite friends growing up
8. Your favorite pictures and the stories behind them
9. Your favorite *tchotchkes* (Yiddish for “keepsakes kept on shelves”) and the stories behind them; and
10. Pretty much anything else you think future generations may find interesting, funny, or memorable

Start the legacy by writing down or otherwise sharing all the family stories you can remember, before they are gone forever. Talk about your parents, grandparents, and relatives. Encourage other family members to share their memories, too. And then do the same about your life and your children, and encourage them to keep adding to it as circumstances warrant.

If you have favorite photographs, consider including them in your family legacy and telling future generations who the people are in the pictures, and the stories behind the pictures. Bring the pictures to life with your rendition of the tale.

And, of course, make a point of sharing your final words of love to those who are in your heart. If this was your last moment alive, what would you have wanted to say to each person you love, telling them about what they have meant to you and how they have impacted your life? What a wonderful legacy of love!

Take some time and start writing those letters now. Keep them readily available so they can be found when you are gone. As future life events inspire you, on the same letter, add appropriate new thoughts and comments, dating each entry as a point of reference.

