

COMPANION RESOURCE

THE STORY COLLECTOR

Questions to Ask While You Still Can

There are things we know about the people closest to us - and things we only think we know.

We know where our parents grew up, but perhaps not what they did on Saturday mornings. We know what our grandparents did for a living, but not whether they liked the work. We know the recipes someone made every Christmas, but perhaps not who taught them to make them.

The smallest questions can lead to the best stories.

You don't have to conduct a formal interview or work your way through every question. Choose one that interests you and see where the conversation goes.

When you hear something you've never heard before, don't rush to the next question. Say: "Tell me more about that."

CHILDHOOD

Where did you grow up, and what did home feel like?

What is one of your earliest memories?

What did you do for fun when no adults were organizing it for you?

Who got you into the most trouble?

What did you get in trouble for?

What did your family eat regularly that you rarely - or never - eat now?

Was there something your mother, father, grandparent or another relative always made that you wish you could have again?

What did your family do particularly well?

What was your family terrible at?

What did you believe as a child that turned out not to be true?

THE PEOPLE WHO SHAPED YOU

Who made you feel particularly loved when you were young?

Who taught you something you still use today?

Who believed in you before you believed in yourself?

Was there an adult outside your immediate family who had an important influence on you?

Who could make you laugh harder than anyone else?

Is there someone you wish you could speak with one more time?

What would you ask them?

SCHOOL, WORK & FINDING YOUR WAY

What were you like in school?

What subject came easily to you?

Which one definitely did not?

What was your first job?

What did you buy with your first paycheck?

Did you ever have a job you hated?

What job, project or accomplishment made you particularly proud?

Was there something you accomplished that other people may not have realized was difficult for you?

Did your career turn out the way you expected?

If not, what changed the direction?

LOVE & RELATIONSHIPS

Who was your first crush?

How did you meet the person who became most important to you?

What do you remember about your first date?

When did you know the relationship was serious?

What makes a relationship last?

Who are your oldest friends, and how did you meet them?

Is there a friendship you lost that you still think about?

Who showed up for you when you really needed someone?

THE DETOURS

Some of the best stories begin when life doesn't go according to plan.

What decision changed your life more than you expected?

Was there an opportunity you almost missed?

Did something that seemed like a disaster at the time eventually lead somewhere important?

Did you ever take a risk that surprised people?

Did you ever walk away from something because staying would have required compromising something you believed?

What mistake taught you the most?

What happened in your life almost entirely by accident?

THE LITTLE THINGS

This section may seem less important. It isn't.

How do you take your coffee or tea?

What food could you happily eat every week?

What food will you absolutely not eat?

What is always in your refrigerator or pantry?

What do you order when you go to your favorite restaurant?

What is something you own far too many of?

What is always in your purse, pocket, desk, car, garage or nightstand?

What television show or movie can you watch over and over?

What song immediately takes you somewhere else?

What smell reminds you of home?

What is something you're surprisingly particular about?

What little luxury do you hate to give up?

YOUR QUIRKS

What do people tease you about?

What are you very good at?

What are you hilariously bad at?

What do you do in a way that you are convinced is the right way?

What habit of yours would your family recognize immediately?

What phrase do you say so often that other people imitate you?

What is something about you that seems completely contradictory?

KINDNESS & CHARACTER

Who have you helped without expecting anything in return?

What kindness did someone once show you that you've never forgotten?

When have you been braver than you thought you could be?

What have you forgiven?

What have you had to forgive yourself for?

What value have you tried hardest to live by?

When have you chosen what you believed was right even though it cost you something?

FAMILY STORIES

What story about our family gets told over and over?

Which family story do you suspect has been exaggerated?

Is there a family story you've always wondered whether anyone ever verified?

Who was the character in the family?

Who was the peacemaker?

Who was most likely to surprise everyone?

What family tradition should never disappear?

What family tradition could probably disappear without anyone being terribly upset?

Is there a recipe, object, photograph, piece of jewelry, tool, letter or other possession with a story we should know?

WHAT PEOPLE MAY NOT KNOW

What are you proud of that people rarely ask about?

Is there something you once dreamed of doing but never did?

What would surprise people who think they know you well?

Have you ever quietly helped someone without telling the rest of the family?

Is there something you've kept because of the memory attached to it rather than its value?

Is there a story you've always meant to tell us?

LOOKING BACK

What period of your life would you happily live again for one day?

What period are you perfectly happy never to repeat?

What became more important to you as you got older?

What became less important?

What do you understand now that you wish you'd understood at twenty?

What are you glad you said yes to?

What are you glad you said no to?

What are you most grateful for that happened to you?

AND LOOKING FORWARD

What are you still looking forward to?

Where would you still like to go?

What would you still like to learn?

Is there someone you'd like to reconnect with?

What would you still like to change about your life?

What story haven't you finished yet?

BEFORE YOU PUT THIS AWAY

Don't worry about completing every question.

One unexpected answer may be worth more than twenty completed blanks.

Write down the stories. Record the conversation - with permission. Label the photographs. Ask who the people are. Find out why that old object has been kept for fifty years. Ask the follow-up question.

And when someone tells a familiar family story, resist the temptation to say: "I already know that one." Instead, ask something you don't know.

- "What happened next?"
- "How did you feel?"
- "Who else was there?"
- "Why did you do that?"
- "Did Grandma know?"

That is often where the story you haven't heard begins.

Someday, having the story may matter far more than you can imagine today.