

Dear Age Sage,

My kids have been encouraging me to write my autobiography. I have attempted it a few times but am having trouble getting started. Do you have any suggestions on how to attack this project?

Signed,

Lots to say, if I could just get going...

Dear Lots to Say,

Don't you love that your kids are asking you to do this? Taking the time to write your life's story will be fun for you and a gift to your family. There has been a growing interest in leaving behind more than just a stock portfolio when you die. The legacy of one's ethics, values, and life stories has become a focus for boomers, authors and spiritual guides. It can feel daunting in terms of how to begin. It is a challenging experience for most people, who have not written about their life histories, perhaps since elementary school, and whose last experience with writing was a letter of complaint to the electric company.

Two books are focused on helping people get down to the business of writing their autobiographies. I am enclosing reviews of these 2 books that can act as guides to help you navigate this project. Both can be purchased at Amazon.com, in new and used forms, or at Barnes and Noble. I hope they help.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE: DISCOVERING YOUR OWN LIFE'S WISDOM IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE, by James E. Birren & Linda Feldman. New York Simon & Schuster, 1997 (171 pgs.)

For the Birren/Feldman book, an important purpose of writing about one's life is to help one to focus on making the most of the time remaining. It is also a blessing to discover through one's writing, they propose, how much one has survived and accomplished. Creating a life story often gives people a fresh respect of their own worth. One tool used in writing a life story is a visual timeline. On a sheet of graph paper, people put the dates from their birth to the present in five year intervals (for example) and then record their birth, and the subsequent highs and lows over their lifetime across the page. This graph helps give direction to the stories. (Of course, it might be necessary to have more than one timeline, if parts of life were going up as others were going down.) Various chapters suggest questions that might prompt the telling of a life story: "What kind of family were you born into?" "When did your childhood end?" "Who were you trying to be?" "What are your ideas about love?" "What have you invested in?" and "What strategies do you have for the future?" The last section of the Birren and Feldman book has an organizing section that includes sensitizing questions that help a writer focus on his/her past life.

Stories from various people with whom Dr. Birren has worked in group sessions add luster to this helpful little book.

MEMOIRS OF THE SOUL: WRITING YOUR SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY, by Nan Phifer. Cincinnati: Walking Stick Press, 2002 (248 pgs.)

In *Memoirs of the Soul*, Nan Phifer takes the reader on a journey to discover life in a way that extends beyond the stories that we tell ourselves and others in everyday life. Based on a Jungian framework, the quest is the nature of the journey. The discovery is one of a spiritual dimension. Dreams, longings, visions, and aspirations are significant aspects of this project. Once one has discovered the vital elements of one's inner life, she proposes, one will experience spiritual growth. While the goal of personal change is evident in both books, in Phifer's book, the promise is that one will discover the most important goals of one's life, strengths and commitment to reach these goals, and a new sense of integration. According to Phifer, writing about one's spiritual life is a great adventure that facilitates open communication and an unsurpassed intimacy that may not have been available before.

Unlike Birren and Feldman's book, *Memoirs of the Soul* is not chronological, but rather proceeds from outer events to inner experiences. For Phifer, your autobiography can be visualized as "a great labyrinth in space." Using a form of free association, writers begin by responding spontaneously to prompts offered by another. This becomes a rough draft that will be filled with errors and messiness. The process of writing involves gathering ideas from photographs, documents, souvenirs, and other reminders. Orally describing a story helps organize one's written work. The book also helps writers to find the most important topics that should be included. Making lists of important people, events or places to include is suggested.

TIP:

Many people have found that writing in a group helps. Writing is easier if one is involved with others who are participating in the same challenging task.

Until next month,

The Age Sage

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