

Excerpted from: *Snapshots from the Heart*

If you want to learn about a loved one who's gone, I have several suggestions:

1. When you're talking with someone, tape record it or make notes at the time. Type up your experience soon afterward. You will remember more in the process. Memories disappear, regardless of how powerfully vivid they seem at the time. You think you'll remember. You won't. Don't forget to write the name and contact information of the person you spoke with. Record it directly on your meticulous notes.
2. Cultivate a streak of very dark humor. This grim exercise might help: If you have a guest book of people who showed up at the funeral, you can use the book to find people to interview.
3. Never go anywhere without pen and paper. You never know whom or what you will find.
4. Ask family members for stories. Don't omit distant cousins.
5. Ask everyone: his friends, his co-workers, people in his military service, members of any clubs he belonged to, people he shared hobbies with, his doctor, dentist, barber, dry cleaner, the guys he coached Little League with. Don't expect too much from his rabbi or minister. If any person in any organization he belonged to says no, then ask to speak to a supervisor. If that fails, write the head honcho.
6. Ask everyone you speak with for referrals to other people. Get phone numbers. Follow up. "Seymour, the dry cleaner, suggested I call you. . . ."
7. Even if he would have been ninety this year, there will be people who remember him from his childhood who haven't seen him since then. (It sounds strange, but it's true.) If you can contact alumni coordinators at places where he went to school, they may put a free advertisement in the alumni bulletin. They often have address lists of alumni. They may not give you the lists, but if you're gracious and polite, they will agree to forward letters to people you want to contact. Enclose stamped envelopes for them to forward. They will like you better. (You can get the names of people to contact from old copies of yearbooks and school newspapers archived at the school. The alumni coordinator doesn't need to know where you got them.)

8. This is the general query letter I used. It was extraordinarily effective. You're welcome to use any part of it you'd like.

I was referred to you by _____. (He/she says "Hello.") I have been talking — by phone or in person — and corresponding with people who knew my dad _____ [*your dad's name here*] over the past year to get a better sense of who he was and what his life was like. (He died in 1975 of cancer, when I was twelve.) [*Use the pertinent information to your particular guy here, of course.*] If you have anything you'd like to add to my small collection of anecdotes and memories, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

I can be reached at any of the below addresses, by email, phone mail, or "snail" mail.

Thanks very much for your time.

Warmest regards,

9. Never give up. One guy I wanted to talk with didn't respond to my letter, or to the messages I left at his home and his work. Finally I called his sister, and she made him call me. It was a good conversation. When you finally reach the person you want to speak with, be gracious and don't mention how hard it was to reach them.
10. Know when it's time to give up. After I queried every member of his high school graduating class, I was invited to their fiftieth reunion. My gut said no. I didn't go. I had done enough research.
11. If you're not ready, you're not ready. To paraphrase someone else: Everything has a season, a time, and a purpose. It took me twenty years to be ready to start asking serious questions about Dad. And it worked out fine. Be patient with yourself.
12. If you want to make a book out of what you find, remember that a book is a set of written or printed sheets bound together into a volume. No mystique. That's it. You can make one at home. Use your own handwriting. Glue in pictures.
13. There's a difference between mourning a loved one and writing a book. Be careful that you study yourself to make sure you understand which you're doing. This way you can finish writing the book, and know that your mourning takes its own time. Don't have unrealistic expectations. If you miss him, your doing a project may help you, but it cannot provide what should have been.

14. A book doesn't have to be professionally typeset. You can learn how to use a good computer typesetting program, or hire your neighbor's teenager to do it. In doing so, you're doing a good deed: if not for this job, the teenager would use the time to play video games.
15. A book does not have to be professionally printed at a book printer. You can make copies of a beautiful book using a high-quality copier at your local copy place. They often have a choice of bindings too.
16. Don't scrimp on making a beautiful book. Once it's written, before it's in a final version, get feedback from people you trust. Get help from friends who can skillfully edit and proofread. Check facts with people who gave them to you. Even if you're going to print it at the photocopy shop, use nice paper. Typeset it beautifully. Simple = Beautiful.
17. Give yourself time. It takes months, sometimes years to collect stories, organize them, and then write them up well.
18. Don't give yourself too much time. Start today. You'll be glad you did. None of Dad's friends are getting younger. It's hard to finally discover Dad's first crush, only to find out she died a few weeks before.
19. Do a little something every day. Make a phone call. Type up some notes. It adds up . . . to a book.
20. Don't forget to interview yourself. You are the point of view, the narrative glue that makes this project stick together. Start by writing "I remember . . ." and keep your hand moving across the page for five or ten minutes a day. Include specific feelings, and the stories that accompany them.

Good luck.

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