100 questions to ask your parents

Ten sessions, ten questions each, in the order that works

Ten good questions, asked well, fill ninety minutes. These hundred are written for a parent who grew up in India, East Africa or the Gulf and may have raised you somewhere else. The house first, the hard years late, the photographs last. Tick each one off as you go.

Six rules for asking

1/ Ask for a day, never a decade

"What was your childhood like?" gets you "It was fine, we were happy." Ask "What did you eat before school?" and you get the kitchen, the stove, the sister who burnt the rotis, and the fight about it. A book is made of days.

2/ One question. Then silence.

Count to seven in your head before you speak again. Your mother is walking back to 1968, and it takes a moment to get there. The second half of every good answer arrives after the pause you wanted to fill.

3/ Never correct

He will say 1971 and you will know it was 1973. Write it down and check it later. The moment you correct a date, he starts performing for an examiner, and you have lost the afternoon.

4/ Ask in the language the memory lives in

If she grew up in Gujarati, the kitchen is in Gujarati. Ask there. Translate later. A parent answering in their third language gives you the press release.

5/ Easy before hard

Houses, food and school come first. Money, marriage and death come after the fourth session, when the recorder has become furniture. Nobody tells a stranger with a list about the year the shop closed. By session seven you are no longer that stranger.

6/ Give them the red pen

Say it in the first five minutes. "Anything you want out of the book stays out." Parents who hold the veto tell you more, because telling you is no longer the same as telling everyone.

Session one. The house

Start with walls and food. No parent is nervous about a kitchen.

- ☐ Walk me through the house you grew up in, from the front door. What did you see first?
- ☐ Who slept where? How many of you were in that house?
- ☐ What did you eat before school, and who cooked it?

- [ ] What did the street sound like at six in the morning?
- [ ] Where did the water come from? Was there a tap, a well, a tanker, a queue?
- [ ] What was the one object in that house nobody was allowed to touch?
- [ ] Which festival was the big one in your house? Take me through that day from the morning.
- [ ] What did your family do on a summer afternoon, when it was too hot to go out?
- [ ] Who were the neighbours? Which one did your mother not speak to, and why?
- [ ] When did you last see that house? Who lives there now?

Session two. The people before them

This is the session with a clock on it. Your parent is the last person alive who can name the faces in the oldest photographs.

- [ ] What did you call your grandparents? What were their real names?
- [ ] Where did your father's family come from, before the town you grew up in? Which village, which district?
- [ ] Did the family move in 1947? Who decided, who came, who stayed? What did they carry?
- [ ] If they did not move in 1947, when did the family first leave home? For Bombay, for Nairobi, for the Gulf?
- [ ] What work did your grandfather do? What did the family think of that work?
- [ ] What was your mother like before she was your mother? What did she want to be?
- [ ] Tell me one story your father told again and again.
- [ ] Which relative was never discussed? You can tell me and we can keep it out of the book.

- [ ] What did your parents fight about?
- [ ] What is one thing your mother cooked that nobody has made right since?

Session three. School and friends

People over fifty remember their teens and twenties in more detail than any other years. Psychologists call it the reminiscence bump, and the guide names the study. Spend time here. You will get more per minute than anywhere else.

- [ ] How did you get to school? Walk me through the route.
- [ ] Which teacher do you still remember? What did they say to you?
- [ ] What language was school in, and what language was home in? When did English arrive?
- [ ] Who was your closest friend at fifteen? Where is that friend now?
- [ ] What did you do that your parents never found out about?
- [ ] What was the first film you saw in a hall? Who took you?
- [ ] Which songs were on the radio the year you finished school?
- [ ] What did you want to become? Who talked you into it, or out of it?
- [ ] How was the decision about college made? Who paid, and what did it cost the family?
- [ ] Tell me about the day the results came.

Session four. First job, first money

- [ ] How did you get your first job? Who knew whom?
- [ ] What was your first salary, to the rupee? What did you do with the first one?

- [ ] Describe your first day at work. What did you wear?
- [ ] Where did you live when you first left home? Who shared the room?
- [ ] What did you eat in those years, and what did it cost?
- [ ] How did you speak to your family then? Letters, a trunk call, the neighbour's phone?
- [ ] What was the first big thing you bought with your own money? A scooter, a watch, a fridge? How long did you wait for it?
- [ ] Who was the first boss you respected? Who was the first one you did not?
- [ ] When did you first send money home? How much, and what was it for?
- [ ] What did you believe about money at twenty-five that you do not believe now?

Session five. The marriage

If both parents are alive, ask each of them these alone. You will get two weddings. Both are true. Put both in the book.

- [ ] How did the proposal come? Who brought it, and what did they say about the other family?
- [ ] When did you first see each other? What did you think, in that minute?
- [ ] Were you asked? What would have happened if you had said no?
- [ ] If you chose each other, who did you have to convince, and how long did it take?
- [ ] Take me through the wedding day from when you woke up.
- [ ] What was discussed about money between the two families? You decide if this goes in the book.
- [ ] Describe the first home you shared. What was in the kitchen?

- [ ] What did you learn about each other in the first year that surprised you?
- [ ] What was your first big fight about?
- [ ] What did your mother-in-law teach you, on purpose or by accident?

Session six. The move

Every family has one. Village to city, Lahore to Delhi, Kampala to Leicester, Kerala to Dubai, Pune to New Jersey. Find the move and ask about the week of it.

- [ ] When was leaving first discussed? Who raised it?
- [ ] What did you pack? What did you leave with whom?
- [ ] Tell me about the day you left. Who came to the station or the airport?
- [ ] What was the first night in the new place like? Where did you sleep?
- [ ] What was the first thing that confused you there? The food, the accent, the cold, the silence?
- [ ] Who helped you in the first month? How did you find them?
- [ ] What did a phone call home cost, and what did you say in three minutes?
- [ ] When did the new place first feel like yours? What happened that day?
- [ ] Did anybody make you feel you did not belong? What did you do?
- [ ] Did you plan to go back? When did you stop planning?

Session seven. Work and the bad year

By now the recorder is furniture. This is the session where the real book arrives.

- [ ] What is the work you are proudest of? Take me to the day it came together.

- [ ] Tell me about the worst year. When did you know it was going wrong?
- [ ] Who did you tell, and who did you hide it from?
- [ ] Did you ever borrow money you were afraid you could not return? From whom?
- [ ] Who cheated you? You can leave the name out.
- [ ] Who backed you when there was no reason to?
- [ ] What risk did you not take? Do you think about it?
- [ ] How did the big events land on your work? The Emergency, 1991, a riot, a crash, a visa rule?
- [ ] What did work cost the family? What did you miss?
- [ ] What was the day you knew you had made it through?

Session eight. You, from their side

This is the session your own children will read first.

- [ ] How did you find out I was coming? Who did you tell first?
- [ ] Tell me about the day I was born, from your side of the room.
- [ ] Who named me? What were the other names on the list?
- [ ] What were you most afraid of in my first year?
- [ ] What did you decide to do differently from your own parents? Did you manage it?
- [ ] What language did you decide to raise us in, and was it a decision?
- [ ] When did I worry you most?

- [ ] What did you want to give us that you did not have?
- [ ] What did you give up for us that you have never mentioned?
- [ ] When did you first see me as an adult?

Session nine. Loss and what held

Ask permission before this one. "I want to ask about the hard years. We can stop any time and nothing goes in without your yes." Then ask, and do not rescue them from the silence.

- [ ] Who is the first person you lost? How old were you?
- [ ] Tell me about the day your father died. Where were you when you heard?
- [ ] And your mother?
- [ ] Was there an illness that changed the family? What did those months look like?
- [ ] What did you pray for in those years? Did you pray?
- [ ] What has your faith been, and how has it changed since you were twenty?
- [ ] Who carried you through? Did they ever know it?
- [ ] Is there someone you did not make peace with?
- [ ] What is the hardest thing you have had to forgive?
- [ ] What do you wish somebody had asked you back then?

Session ten. Looking back, and the photographs

Bring the albums and the shoebox. Put every photograph on the table and keep the recorder on. Names first, stories second.

- [ ] Who is this? And this? Say the full names, and how each person is related to me.

- [ ] Where was this taken, and what year? What happened just before the photograph?
- [ ] Which photograph here would you save from a fire?
- [ ] Which day of your life would you live again, start to finish?
- [ ] What are you proudest of that has nothing to do with work or us?
- [ ] What do you know now that you would tell yourself at thirty?
- [ ] What do you still want to do?
- [ ] What should the grandchildren know about where this family comes from?
- [ ] What did I not ask that I should have?
- [ ] How do you want the book to end?

Eight follow-ups that work everywhere

The list gets you into the room. These keep you there. I use them more than any prepared question.

- [ ] What happened next?
- [ ] Who else was there?
- [ ] What did it look like? What did it smell like?
- [ ] What did he say, in his words?
- [ ] How old were you then?
- [ ] What did that cost, in those days?
- [ ] What did you feel, that evening, when it was over?
- [ ] Say more about that.

After the last session

Ten sessions of ninety minutes is fifteen hours of tape. That is a book's worth, and it is also where most families stop. Back up each session the same day, in two places, with the date and session number in the file name. The full guide to the second half is at sgwashere.com/gift-your-parents-a-book/how-to-write-your-parents-life-story/

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