

DRAWING OUT THE HEART THROUGH A LIFE STORY

By Garrett Higbee (Adapted from Redemption by Mike Wilkerson)

How to get someone to tell their life story in **30 minutes or less!**

I strongly suggest you write out your own story first. You will quickly realize it is more like a “Reader’s Digest” or “Clift Notes” version of the real thing. But that is enough for you to get a great picture of who you are talking to.

We’re asking someone to spend 30 minutes telling us some of the **most significant** events, relationships, and patterns in their life that will give us a window into where God has them at this point in their walk.

You’re not trying to hear everything there is to know up front. You need to let them know they did not get where they are in a day and you need to go back to their early childhood to fully appreciate how they got where they are and became who they are today...the good, the bad and the ugly.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Start with the first 18 years of life. We often start with the first twelve years and then transition to teenage years because these are important stages that each have their own developmental issues (e.g. mastery of life skills, and parent relationships in early years and identity, affiliation, and autonomy in teen years). These family of origin years are formative and could be considered the years that shaped us the most. You will want to answer the questions the next section below for each “Chapter” of their life story.

Basically the breakdown of chapters goes by developmental stages such as follows: 0-18, 19-25, 25-30, 30-35, etc. up to where you are at today.

Telling about the past merely serves the purpose of filling out the context which helps you to understand how heart themes were shaped and where they might need to reconcile relationships or get “unstuck from the past. It is important to emphasize that the past is not determinative but can be a part of helping them to put off old patterns and habits as well as forgive and biblically putting the past in its place.

WHAT TO INCLUDE?

Their story is not really about “all the facts of one’s personal history” – where they grew up, how much money their parents made, having been born on “cold and stormy night, etc. Those are facts about their past that **may or may not** be relevant to the **meaning** of their past. We are looking for meaningful and impacting facts. Facts that shaped their worldview. You will want to help the person pick up on themes that are relevant to them today.

So, for each period in their lives, as outlined above, they'll want to think about:

People – who shaped or influenced you both +/-?

People – who shaped or influenced you both +/-

Position – where did your family get identity, what did others see or say about your family growing up?

Patterns – heart themes show up in behavioral and attitude (anger, withdrawal, impulsiveness, fear), especially under stress...when they were “squeezed” what came out?

Problems – what has been hard, traumatic, how did you/are you dealing with it?

Passion – what gets you up in the morning, where you get your identity, your significance?

Priorities – what do you value most or what is most important to you and why? Are their priorities consistent with what they say they value most?

Perspective – what was your worldview growing up...view of God, self, and others? How has it changed and why?

For example, you find out their parents were divorced, no doubt a significant event in their life. But if it was in the first 5 years it may not be as significant. Does it provide some context for a *current struggle*? *If not, do not spend too much time there*. On the other hand, if their divorce has been a shaping influence that leads up to where they are today, explore the emotions and thoughts that accompanied that time in their life more.

Get the idea? It is helpful to trace the heart themes by looking at presenting problems that are current today and seeing what might have shaped or influenced them most from the past.

In my (Garrett's) story, for example, the fact that I grew up in the home where my dad died when I was 7 is significant because the fact was a significant shaping influence that bears out throughout my story. The fact that I developed a strong self-reliance and yet a compassion for my mom's suffering might just be part of why I do what I do today 😊.

For someone else, the fact that their father left them might have left a deeper wound because of the rejection. They may have patterns of playing it safe or being distant in relationships to avoid rejection in the future. That has significance in how they look at themselves, God and others... essentially their worldview.

Again, help them to choose only facts that are relevant...pretend that you are holding a remote control and can fast forward or slow their story down depending on how important you think this section of the story is (with their permission).

What if I don't see the connections yet?

Maybe you're not sure how the story fits together. That's OK. It's a process and you might need to take your notes home. You might have them write out certain parts of their story or the whole thing. You can then make your own notes and circle key themes after the conversation. You will want to share this with them after prayer and check out your ideas to see who they fit. This can be a turning point in the counseling as they see how much you listened and care. **As you share your insights and as they see how their past has shaped their view of God, themselves and others many times they understand they begin to see with new eyes. They see for the first time they have a distorted view that is not consistent with their identity in Christ...that is a huge pivot point in counseling!**

Common Shaping Influences.

Here are some events that can have profound shaping influences on us.

- Extended family history (e.g. alcoholism, abuse, adultery, fights, pride, may go way back)
- Parents relationship to each other
- Their relationship to either of their parents
- Relationships with siblings
- Moments of intense trauma (physical, emotional, financial, etc.)
- Moving to a new city, home, school, etc.
- Harm, abuse, betrayal done to them once or many times
- Leaving home and moving out on their own
- Patterns of habitual sin
- Conversion to follow Jesus Christ
- Physical ailment, injury, defect
- Patterns of social pain, suffering, conflict, trial
- Times of great blessing (emotional, physical, spiritual, etc.)

Don't always expect some trauma event or a life defining moment to come out!

Often, the most shaping influences in our lives are suffering of various kinds. So, if they have experienced abuse, harm, betrayal, or severe suffering in their past **that is a shaping influence**, you will want them to share it. It may not come out right away or it may just not be there.

So, don't try to dig for something to label as "abuse." They may not have significant trauma or pain themes in their life that we need to hear about. It may also be true that they are testing you before disclosing such personal history.

Don't make them feel like they have to make stuff up from their past in an attempt to "explain" the present. You are drawing them not leading the witness here. Remember we're all born sinful.

Our past tends to shape the ways we react to sin and the particular strongholds we have but those with less colorful pasts can still be very caught up in significant sin patterns. Speculative explanations won't help and may only distract you from getting to core issues in their heart.

Some Questions to Guide You're Sharing

Optionally, you may use some of the following questions to guide your sharing. In addition to these, consider asking them to journal through the early chapters of their life and reflect on some of these questions after you meet.¹ Feel free to come up with your own questions or only use the ones that would help you most.

1. What are your deepest disappointments?
2. Has anyone ever wounded, abused, or hurt you?
3. How do you deal being sinned against?
4. What lies about yourself have you come to believe?
5. What battles do you face that you brought into your own life (like sinful habits)?
6. What do you want most deeply?
7. What or who do you most love, or most hate?
8. When do you get the most sad and depressed? When do you get hopeless?
9. What do you get the most excited about? What brings you the greatest pleasure?
10. What do you especially want to avoid?
11. What do you think you need to be happy?
12. What do you see as your rights? What do you feel entitled to?
13. Who must you please? Whose opinion of you counts? From whom do you desire approval and fear rejection?
14. Whose value system do you measure yourself against?
15. Whose love and approval do you need most now?
16. Where do you find refuge, safety, comfort, escape, pleasure, security?
17. What or who do you trust?
18. How do you spend your time? What are your priorities?
19. What do you want to get out of life? What payoff do you seek out of the things you do?
What do you get out of that doing that?
20. How do you define who you are?

¹ The list of questions is shaped by David Powlison's *X-Ray Questions* which appear in the book *How People Change* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp, Chapter 10 (New Growth Press).