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Cover story

A Golden Inheritance: How to Start a Family Journal

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

Imagine if you had a thick notebook full of family stories, letters and memorable moments your parents had written as you grew up. Right now you are probably feeling some sadness that you don't. Don't let this fleeting time slip away without capturing the stories of your life as a family.

Stories Behind the Photos

The scrapbooking craze has initiated a swell of pictorial storytelling, which is a wonderful start. Granted, some scrapbookers add journal pages, creating a beautifully complete archive of family life. But if you don't incorporate a journal, what happens when you are no longer there to tell the stories behind the photos? And for those of us who feel overwhelmed by the vast – and often expensive – world of scrapbooking, the family journal offers a simple and satisfying alternative.

Overcome Writer's (or "Non-writer's") Block

You don't need to be a "writer" to keep a family journal. Write as you speak; it doesn't need to be polished to come from your heart.

Sidebar: How to "Find" Time

Approx. 70 words

Keep your journal with you during TV time; spend the commercials writing.

Take a few minutes from household chores to note a few ideas, at least to get your thoughts flowing on paper.

When running errands take a few in-between minutes to write in the car- or treat yourself to quiet time in a coffee shop.

Incorporate it into your lunchtime routine- reserve the last 5 or ten minutes for writing.

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One sure way to let the words flow is to look at photographs and allow the memories to spill through your pen. Another is to observe your kids (don't announce what you're doing) and simply take notes. Think of your journal as a time capsule: what are they doing/saying/eating/wearing?

Remind yourself that you are watching your children grow up and the moments that make you laugh and cry are gone in a heartbeat. But they don't have to be if you can regularly capture a few of them in words, gradually evolving into a record of daily life as a family – the milestones, the sweet, funny and sad moments that create your family history. And just like life, your journal doesn't need to be "perfect" to be worthwhile.

Food for thought: Beauty is in the Details

If you feel intimidated because you think you don't have anything all that exciting to write about, remember, in 30 years it will be lots of fun to reminisce over the "mundane" details of life. Here are a few ideas to get your pen moving:

- What are some of your kids' favorite books right now?
- Who are their good friends?
- What games do they enjoy? How do they spend their free time?
- Describe a few of their recent accomplishments/milestones in school or at home.
- Have you bought a new car/television/camera/phone lately? Describe it, including the cost- today's technical details will be amusing when your children are grown up. (Remember how different these items were when you were a child?)
- Describe your pets, you child's last birthday party, fond memories of a family trip, or a vacation gone awry.

Words of Wisdom

The journal is also a perfect way to pass on lessons you have learned and what you have found to be most important in your life. A few thoughts:

- How have you struggled in life and what blessings have emerged from those hard times?
- How have you been affected by world/historical events and how have they influenced your view of life?
- What have you learned from your parents and grandparents?
- What have you learned from your spouse?
- Is there anything you've always wanted to tell your child, but haven't?
- Write a letter to each of your children telling them what you admire about them.
- What has been most surprising/wonderful/difficult about being a parent?

Sidebar: More Writing Prompts

Approx. 80 words

Describe each of your children as they are today.

Look at a photo of them at a younger age- what do you remember about them from that time?

What makes each sibling unique from the others?

How do you think your children would describe you?

Is there anything you've always wanted to tell them, but haven't?

What has been most surprising/wonderful/difficult about being a parent?

What do you hope your children have learned from you?

What have you learned from them?

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- What do you hope your children have learned from you?
- What have you learned from them?

The Gift of Your Perspective

Not only will each page eventually tell your children more about themselves, they will also receive the gift of your own voice, through your words. No one else has your perspective. Your children will begin to see you in a way they otherwise couldn't have because writing creates a space to say things we might not ever say face to face. Keeping a family journal allows a level of communication that usually is not possible during the daily activities that keep us all so busy.

Journaling is a way to slow down and reflect on what really matters. What would you like to remember forever? When you allow yourself to ask this question, all the little annoyances of the day fade away and the meaningful moments remain. You have an opportunity today that will not come again; you have the chance to capture today's "forever moment" with clarity. With time, the forever moments of today will be largely forgotten. Of course we remember good times and sad times, but the fog of time tends to blur the details.

Your Journal Awaits You

From a simple three-ring binder to an elegant hardbound book, your family journal can take any form you wish. Another option is to post your entries online (be sure to keep a hard copy in a binder as well), allowing faraway family and friends to enjoy a slice of your life.

Each member of the family can contribute to the journal in their own way. Encourage your spouse and children to participate, whether they write about a favorite memory or draw a picture. Why not start a Family Journal

Night with the aim of adding a few pages? Once a week read a past entry aloud- your kids will be encouraged to contribute more when they experience the sweet feeling of shared nostalgia.

Sidebar: Journal Excerpt

Approx. 250 words

From our family journal, by my husband John:

January 9, 2004

Grandma Barbara (Baba) and Grandpa Bill returned from Big Bear with a special treat- an ice chest full of snow! It was the first real snow Roy or Leo had ever handled. We threw some snowballs at each other in the front yard and then built a little snowperson. We used some bark for eyes and gave her a lovely golden rose as a hat.

February 23, 2004

It started raining and the kids wanted to go out. Leo made a beeline for the muddiest part of the yard, under the bedroom eaves and stood watching the waterfall. Roy explained to Leo that it was raining, but Leo knew what was going on. "Water coming down!" Leo exclaimed, blinking up into the sky as raindrops splattered his face. "Water! Coming down!"

And this recent entry, by me:

January 23, 2007

Looking at this photo of Roy holding Leo shortly after Leo was born, I remember Roy's remarkable ability, at age 2, to welcome his baby brother. As I was wheeled down the hallway with my brand new son on my lap, Roy was waiting there with my parents. My mom told me that as soon as Roy saw his little bundle of a baby brother he said, "There's our Leo." Over the past four years they have emerged as best buddies- and sometimes, of course, best rivals- and Roy has always had a sense of Leo as an individual, rather than just his "baby brother."

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Don't be discouraged if your kids are "too cool" for the family journal. Keep the invitation open to add pages and reassure them that they don't have to read anything aloud. And if they never add anything, take responsibility for being the family historian on your own. There will come a time- even if it's ten years later- that your children will treasure the journal.

Time Well Spent

If you can carve out ten to twenty minutes to write in your family journal each week (or daily!), you will create a priceless heirloom for your family. You might be thinking, "I'm on the go all day long; ten to twenty minutes just to sit and write is a luxury I don't have." But consider this: at the end of the day, what would be more satisfying to you? "Today I accomplished every errand on my to-do list, I finished all the laundry, did the dusting, and read about other people's lives in the newspaper while I ate lunch. And I'm so happy I watched TV before I went to bed." Or, "Today, at some point in the middle of my busy day I spent ten minutes (maybe even twenty!) writing about a special moment from today, something funny my child said- something that touched my heart."

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Ondine Brooks Kuraoka is a freelance writer from San Diego. She is grateful that her husband John has been maintaining their online family journal since 1998. Details of their lives, mundane and otherwise, may be found at www.kuraoka.org under Weekly Journal. Her website is www.sandiegofreelancewriter.com.