

## Life Map

At first the following email will feel overwhelming. Don't let it be. In my opinion this might be the most important thing you do all year. That isn't an overstatement. We often do not realize the impact our family of origin and family narrative have on us. As I said on Sunday, it is felt for generations. You are feeling the effects right now of something that happened in your family over 50 years ago. Until we face that, we stay stuck or repeat the same mistakes that have been passed down.

Below is an exercise Katie and I did last year. It is called a life map. A life map is an adventure in our memory. It is not a difficult exercise to understand, but that doesn't necessarily mean it will be a simple exercise to do. You begin with an 8 by 10 sheet of paper. Place the sheet of paper horizontally and draw two horizontal lines that divide the sheet into three sections. Have one sheet for earliest memories and then one sheet for every year in school.

You are now going to attend to three critical aspects of remembering and record them in three sections.

1. On the top third write down what you remember (events). Example, I remember playing outdoors in a sandbox. Write down as many events and people in a column for a particular time span as you can remember.
2. In the middle third and below each memory record your feelings (emotions). We remember because of what we felt, so write down what you felt.
3. Below the recording of your emotions for the memories, you may now write down how you interpreted those memories (explanations).

Your internalization/self-identification is found in the unfolding of your story (specifically, in the explanations/interpretations you gave to your events and emotions).

We are attempting to explore its foundational roots and how your interpretation of your story unfolded. You may find yourself remembering as an observer. It is as if you are just looking back on your best friend in 4th grade. You feel less a participant and more an observer.

Then there are those events in which you are remembering them as if you were a participant. Perhaps the day you graduated. The second form of memory is "participant" or "field" memory because the person remembers from a place of emotional involvement.

In either case we can still process what we are remembering even if as an observer. Pay attention to recalling what you were feeling at the time.

What if you can't remember?

There are some simple things you can do to help your memory.

First, you can choose to find a listener who can help guide you in your discovery.

Second, you can call upon family members and ask them what they remember about certain times in your life. This is helpful if parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins are alive. They can be a great resource.

Third, you may also want to retrieve old family photographs. Photographs can help stir our recall by bringing to mind people, places, events, and experiences.

Fourth, memory may be stirred by visiting old places such as schools, neighborhoods, homes, churches, etc.

Fifth, in some instances genealogical work can prove helpful in connecting us to deeper emotions that may have generational linkage.

Below are some questions to help you as well.

**Questions to explore your family of origin:**

1. What was the emotional atmosphere of your home? How did this affect you?
2. What did you observe about your dad and mom's relationship? Did they feel emotionally close or distant?
3. Did either of your parents rely on you for emotional support? How much? Were either of your parents detached and uninvolved in your family? How do you think this shaped you?
4. Were you ever mistreated by verbal, physical, sexual or emotional abuse? If so, how did this affect you?
5. In your family, what were you allowed to do or not do? What were you allowed to be or not be?
6. If you had siblings, what were your relationships like with your siblings? Did you get along? Did you fight a lot? How did your sibling relationships shape you?
7. What is the deepest wound you suffered in your family of origin? How has it shaped you?

### **Questions for exploring your story in present relationships:**

1. How would you describe yourself in your closest relationships?
2. What feedback are you getting in your closest relationships?
3. What is your attitude in your closest relationships?
4. What re-occurring thoughts, feelings and behaviors are yours in your closest relationships? In your relationships with others?
5. How open are you to make yourself known?
6. What are the strategies you employ to keep yourself safe relationally?
7. What secrets are you keeping? How are they influencing who you are?
8. What habit do you presently have that is adversely affecting your relationship with those closest to you? Those who are your friends?
9. Who knows you? How well do they know you?
10. What is teaching you in your present relationships?

### **Questions for exploring the "when I was (am) alone" part of your story:**

1. When you were a child and alone, what did you tend to think? Feel? What as a child was your habitual disposition? Why do you think this was so?
2. As a child, what were the deepest feelings you tended to live with? Fear, shame, guilt, anger, jealousy, envy, joy, contentment, love, hope?
3. When you were alone as a child, what did you desire?
4. When you were alone, what was your greatest challenge? Why do you think this was so? When you were alone, what temptation frequently showed up?
5. What did you dream about as a child? What was it that nourished your soul as a child?
6. What person was most life giving to you? Why? Who scared you, hurt you most? What do you remember?
7. Did you have reoccurring dreams as a child? What were they? Did you have nightmares frequently? What was the emotion embedded in imagery of your nightmares?

8. Where is God's Spirit working in your life right now? What is he inviting you to know about yourself?
9. How much pressure did you and are you placing on yourself to be perfect? How much pressure did you and are you putting on yourself to get things done? To serve others? To be more creative? To know more? To fix more?
10. What deep emotion is driving your compulsion for more? How is this affecting you?

It is helpful to remind ourselves not to be in a hurry, but rather take this remembering of your story as an essential part of your life journey. The goal is integration of all that you have lived so you can move forward.

As you continue down this road, two books that have been incredibly helpful to Katie and me, as we have explored our stories and how they affect our lives and how to find the freedom in Jesus promised in the gospel, are [The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves](#) and [The Relational Soul: Moving from False Self to Deep Connection](#).