MEMORIES

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO TELLING AND SHARING THE STORIES OF YOUR LIFE
MEMORIES

of ME

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO TELLING AND SHARING THE STORIES OF YOUR LIFE

LAURA HEDGECOCK

PLAIN SIGHT PUBLISHING
AN IMPRINT OF CEDAR FORT, INC.
SPRINGVILLE, UTAH
In memory of Hazel Savoy Crymes, who taught us all how to treasure life.
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INTRODUCTION

There’s a reason I’ve nominated myself as your guide as you go about recording your stories: I’ve been on the receiving end of such a legacy.

My Story

I didn’t start paying attention to my roots until after I stumbled over some of them. Now I spend a lot of my time looking for more family stories and memories.

My family tree looks nothing like the iconic oak with its rounded top and balanced, far-reaching branches. That archetype conjures images of the entire family gathered together, sharing its cooling and protective shade, drinking lemonade or other beverages while the kids climb around above. When you’re trying to trace your ancestors’ stories, though, the experience just doesn’t seem as symmetrical or accessible as the oak’s branches. *Roots* seem more applicable—hidden, fragile, tangled, and often more than just a little bit dirty.

The silhouette of my tree used to look more like a willow that lost limbs in every storm, rendered lopsided by time and nature, than the archetypal oak. I had precious little information on my father’s side, owing not the least to the fact that my grandmother was an orphan. The opposite was true of my mother’s side of the family—I had information on our ancestors going back to about 1500.

For the intact maternal side of our tree, my sister and I had two great sources of information. One was our amazing aunt Ann and her thirty-plus years of pre-Internet genealogical research. The other was our grandmother’s *Treasure Chest of Memories*, an old spiral notebook filled with a lifetime of writings—childhood memories, stories of her children as they grew, and wisdom she had gathered along the way—my inspiration for this guide.

As she approached the end of her battle with cancer, Grandma decided to pass her *Treasure Chest of Memories* on to her children and grandchildren.
My mother, the best one at deciphering grandma’s handwriting, painstakingly transcribed Grandma’s scrawl and presented each of her siblings and every grandchild with a folder of typed writings—our own copy of Grandma’s *Treasure Chest of Memories*.

A treasure it is! Grandma died in 1983, the year I graduated from college. I was not able to enjoy a woman-to-woman relationship with her in life, but through her memories, I connect with her again and again throughout the different phases of my life.

My sister and I came to value Grandma’s memories and stories even more after our parents died in an automobile accident in 1998. In the face of our loss, our grandmother’s memories of our mother allowed us a semblance of continued connection to her. Grandma’s *Treasure Chest of Memories* proved to be a source of great comfort.

In 2006, my family tree morphed into something more closely resembling the quintessential oak. The aforementioned and amazing Aunt Ann found a census reference to my paternal grandmother, who by her own account had lost her mother at age six and whose father had elected not to raise her. Astonishingly, a little bit of research revealed that my father’s mother was not the orphan child she purported to be but rather had eleven siblings. Soon I was able to make an Internet acquaintance of one of my father’s cousins that he’d never had the privilege of knowing. I could no longer view our family tree and its missing branches as a victim of the comparatively benign forces of time and weather. Our tree now seemed like an old soldier, a survivor that had weathered the storms of wanton chainsaw-bearing human forces.

I felt a strong sense of deprivation on my father’s behalf and was outraged at the family connections denied to him, an only child. My paternal grandmother’s denial of her family roots did, however, bring home the incalculable value of a family Treasure Chest. Our lack of knowledge about her and our lack of connection with her past are great losses. They stand in glaring juxtaposition to the legacy left by my maternal grandmother, whose stories connect us—her children, their spouses, and all fourteen of us cousins—not only to her, but also to each other.

Why is this loss of connection so immense? Why is the preservation of connections such a gift?

Ultimately, what matters most in life are our connections to our family and loved ones. When a life ends, display boards at the viewing or wake never reflect the departed’s financial status or executive
accomplishments. Instead, they display photos of that person in the places they loved, doing the things that they loved, and with the people they loved. Behind each photo is a story that still has meaning to loved ones and connects them to the life that so recently ended.

These connections are the marrow of our lives, sustaining and nourishing us from within. This life-giving marrow of stories and memories should be shared and passed on so that we can fortify our connections to each other and springboard conversations in the here and now. They also allow us to continue to connect, teach, support, and console after we’re gone.

I admit I’m biased. I’ve seen the connections forged and lives touched, and I know the doability of creating a personal Treasure Chest. This guide not only provides an outline for you to construct legacy of written memories to be treasured, but it should also motivate, challenge, encourage, and cajole you as you create a treasure of incalculable value for your loved ones. It’s written in honor of my grandmother Hazel Savoy Crymes, who gave me the gift of her Treasure Chest of Memories.

You can’t always fill in the missing branches on your family tree, but you can make the branches that are there accessible to your loved ones. Through your memories, your family tree can become the beloved shade tree in the middle of the yard under which the adults sit and on which the kids climb. You can even add a tire swing and maybe little boards up the trunk to make it easier to climb.

Creating Your Own Legacy

Creating a legacy sounds hard, but you’re probably already doing it. With every mention of a memory—in a letter, post, tweet, or in person—we’re forming a legacy. A Treasure Chest is simply a mechanism for collecting, preserving, and sharing the stories of our pasts, our personalities, and our affection for our loved ones.

Writing about your memories doesn’t have to be an arduous task. Today’s technology makes it easier than ever to share memories, but
navigating the options, choosing which memories to write about, figuring out how to format and share them, and contending with that nagging self-doubt every writer experiences can be intimidating. That’s where *Memories of Me* comes in. This guide will help you figure out exactly what kind of Treasure Chest you’d like to create, what you want to put in it, how often you want to fill it, and to what extent you want to share its contents. In-depth brainstorming worksheets, writing exercises, and examples accompany each starter topic to stimulate your recall and foster your creativity. Though I discourage perfectionism, I’ve included just enough writing advice to make sure you’re satisfied with your final product. You don’t need to have award-winning writing, scrapbooking, or photography skills. You just need to have a desire to connect with your loved ones.

*How to Use This Guide*

If you want to get the most out of this book, you need to read and write. Obviously, I want you to read the whole book, but I hope you don’t do it all at once. Put it down often. Experiment as you go. Read a section, then use the worksheets or exercises and start writing. This book is meant to be a companion and a guide—one that’s more interested in seeing you enjoy your journey than it is in making sure you get every footfall right or even seeing that you stay on the path I might have chosen. It’s your journey, so you get to beat your own trail. Like a good companion, this book will give encouragement from time to time, keep an eye out for dangerous pitfalls, and remind you to take in the scenic overlooks.

Printable copies of the worksheets throughout this book can be found at [link]. These PDF versions, which provide space for your responses, are available for readers’ personal use. You can also use a dedicated notebook so you can easily revisit your thoughts.

You’ll also find examples of my writing and illustrations throughout this book. They are the results of my own journey compiling a Treasure Chest, which is my primary motivation to nominate myself as your guide. They do not purport to be the absolute model of journalistic or literary excellence (or anything close to that), but they serve to show you how doable the journey is.

Though I’ve started out on the path before you, I’m no Sherpa. I can’t “carry” everything you need to record your memories. You don’t have to be a Sherpa either, however. As you embark on your adventure of writing,
try not to get frustrated. Like life itself, it’s the journey, or, in this case, the process of remembering and writing, that matters more than any one destination, how long you travel, or what roads you take. Be sure you take the time to enjoy each stop, focusing on the connections you are forging with your past and your loved ones as you write. As you keep your loved ones in mind—and write about the people, places, and things you love—you will fully enjoy the process, improve your writing, and avoid the roadblocks (and writer’s blocks) along the way.
Part 1

Getting Started
Bringing your collection of memories and stories to life involves more than confronting that ever-intimidating blank screen or page. It involves figuring out what treasures you possess and which ones you’re going to pack in your Chest. How methodical you are as you embark on this adventure of establishing a legacy of memories will depend on your personality. If you’re like me and have little propensity for forethought and planning, you’ll want to dig right in, figuring out your mistakes and regrouping along the way.

Enthusiasm and momentum are good things, especially in writing, and I certainly don’t want to slow you down if you’re on a roll. On the other hand, spending a little time contemplating your motivations for preserving memories can facilitate your writing and help you make decisions as the structure of your Treasure Chest evolves. It can also prevent frustration. Consider the following:

**What Do You Want to Preserve?**

Paradoxically, in this case, answering the *what* can help you articulate the *why*.

Your motivation might be as simple as the urge to preserve the past for yourself and others. It’s a great service to future generations, and the process of remembering brings enjoyment, regrounds us, and connects us to our past. There’s honor in that alone, but there are also secondary benefits. By recording memories, you’ll leave a part of yourself behind for your readers. They will view the past through the filter of your writing and, by extension, will have a glimpse into your life and a connection with you. They won’t simply learn what happened to you; they’ll learn to *know* you. Your stories will preserve your family history and your place in it for future generations.

There may be more to it, however, than the simple yet noble sharing
of past events. If you’re more creative, you may want to incorporate your artistic side into your Treasure Chest, enriching your narrations with your personal style or literary artfulness. You can also include your artwork (or scans or photos of it), scrapbook layouts, and the like. You can also accomplish this through the way you choose to package your Treasure Chest, which you can read more about in “Recording Your Stories: Choose Your Medium Well.”

Consider going beyond a simple glimpse into the past. Use your writing as a vehicle to connect with others on a much more personal level. Even if you are not normally a heart-on-your-sleeve person, think carefully about leaving a legacy to a larger part of yourself—your feelings and reflections. Those who love you will appreciate not only knowing what happened in your past but knowing how you felt about it then and how you feel about it now. This openness can cement the connections of a shared past or ancestry and can spark meaningful conversations and understanding among your loved ones.

My grandmother did this in her Treasure Chest. I’m sure it was difficult for her to reveal her frailty in writing. However, because of her willingness to write about and share her moments of loss, grief, and doubt, I feel a deep bond with her. Only you, however, can decide how much of yourself you will ultimately reveal to others.

Of course, that begs another question.

**Who Is It for?**

You might be writing for yourself. There’s nothing selfish about this. You don’t have to feel compelled to share your memories to be motivated to preserve them. You might want to preserve your stories while memory serves or while health still permits you to write and enjoy them. You might write to work through your feelings about your past to reconnect yourself with your roots, process your grief at the loss of a loved one, or simply for the joy of writing.

Many of us do find that our enjoyment of remembering multiplies as memories are shared, motivating us to share our writing or even write for others. The resulting dialogues deepen our connections to those who read them. As we share, we often find that others reciprocate our sharing, enhancing our memories with memories of their own.

Chronic, debilitating, or terminal illnesses can also be catalysts for preserving memories. It’s not only for themselves that these patients feel
driven to document the past before it is lost to them; it’s their legacy for
their loved ones too. Especially for those who find that their illness pre-
vents them from actively taking a part in the lives of family and friends,
writing can affirm that they were there in spirit—cheering on kids, wiping
tears, crossing fingers, and swelling with pride. Years later, through their
writing, they can be there to teach, comfort, and encourage.

Sharing the past can bring understanding to fragmented families, kindle
meaningful conversations, and lead to insights that otherwise might never
take place. It can open lines of communications that connect loved ones to
their common heritage. For this reason, family historians don’t just leave
names and dates on pedigree charts; they enhance their ancestry sheets with
narrations of events from long ago, a great service both to far-removed family
members and generations to come. They don’t just document where ancestors
came from, they document who those ancestors were.

The ultimate motivation for sharing is the feeling that you get when you
realize your writing has moved or brought joy to someone else. There’s noth-
ing quite like that. However, when it comes to motivation, there often isn’t
just one answer, much less a right answer. We’re motivated by a combination
of factors, and our answers may change from time to time as well. My answer
might not be yours.

Excogitating (mentally chewing on) these points will help you assem-
ble your Treasure Chest. They will help you know your audience and thus
facilitate your writing, and they can also help you make decisions as the
final shape and format of your Treasure Chest emerges. Though you may
not be sure of the answers, contemplating what they might be will help you
determine how much of your more vulnerable side you are willing to share
as you put your memories to paper.

Once you have a broad idea of how you would like to go forward, do
it. Your decisions are not final at this point, and you can always fine-tune
or readjust later. Don’t allow planning to curb your creativity.
RECORDING YOUR STORIES: CHOOSE YOUR MEDIUM WELL

Deciding what your Treasure Chest will look like entails making decisions about the format and medium you’re going to use to write, preserve, and present your memories. Once again, there is no right answer or perfect formula, and your decisions are not engraved in stone. To do it well, you simply have to do what is right for you and what works for you.

There are at least three good options. As you go through them and weigh the pros and cons of each, also give thought to which will fit best into your lifestyle and which is the best match for your personality and proclivities. Just because something is a good idea doesn’t necessarily mean that it is a good idea for you.

Handwritten Journal

If you love the feel of pen and paper, there is no need to go high tech. Find a notebook or attractive journal and just get started. Handwritten words are becoming more and more of a treasure. In fact, the handwriting of a loved one can evoke strong emotions and facilitate connections. Perhaps that’s why so many of us prefer receiving a handwritten letter or card over an email. If you write legibly, your family will almost certainly enjoy and even treasure seeing your hand.

This is a lesson my family learned the hard way. My grandmother’s handwriting was illegible. In fact, her handwriting—the term handwriting itself is perhaps generous—was self-taught and looked more like a toddler’s imitation of cursive. If not for my mother’s ability to decipher it and her determination to record my grandmother’s writings for the rest of us, Grandma’s whole Treasure Chest might have been lost to us. Though my mother typed Grandma’s memories, she annotated many in her own hand.
Somehow, my mother’s handwriting embodies her personality. When I look at it, my heart inevitably experiences a tug.

Author Chris Gayomali makes some convincing arguments that “handwriting may be a lost art, but it’s still an invaluable skill.”¹ Not only do some famous and not-so-famous writers love the slowness and intentionality of handwriting, some experts argue that it increases focus and recall.²

**Digital (Computer) Archiving**

Your comfort level with computer and Internet technology will have a strong correlation with your choice to go digital or not. For many, the decision is a no-brainer, but if you’re not sure, ask yourself some basic questions: Do you find word-processing programs to be your most efficient way of putting words to paper? Do you like the convenience of editing, sorting, cutting, and pasting? Do you find paperless files easier to organize? Do you have a readily available (and working) laptop, tablet, or desktop computer? (This one can be a deal breaker.)

If your answers were more along the lines of “Perish the thought!” or if the questions themselves filled you with distaste, don’t feel like you have to force yourself to use media with which you are uncomfortable. These are simply options. Whether you experiment or not is up to you. You’ll write best when you’re comfortable with your tools.

If you answered “Yes” the above questions—or even most of them—digital media is probably for you. You can write at will, edit later, and insert and resize images. Working on your PC, tablet, or laptop does not preclude leaving behind an actual ink-on-paper book for others. There are many reasonably priced programs and websites for self-publishing your project.

Not a good typist? Particularly if you finger-peck or find typing laborious, voice-recognition technology is worth considering. This technology has made great advances in recent years, making the dictation of stories a realistic option. A variety of software packages on the market allow your speech to generate text in your word-processing program, which then provides you with the same ease of editing and formatting your final product.

There’s another advantage to using your PC, laptop, or tablet: if you later decide to put your memories on a blog, you can simply cut and paste your entries into the blogging program of your choice.

*Important Note about Digital Storage:* To protect yourself against loss from accidental deletion or hard drive crashes, you should *absolutely* make
Recording Your Stories: Choose Your Medium Well

yourself backup copies as you work. You can use CDs, an external hard drive, or an Internet-based storage system like Dropbox or Google Drive.

Blogging

If you’re computer and Internet savvy and would like to share your memories in real time, a blog might be the best option. Because a Treasure Chest is episodic in nature, it lends itself easily to blogging. Blogs offer the capability of inserting not only images but audio and video files as well, enabling you to include old film clips or recorded interviews with relatives. Blog platforms also allow increased organizational flexibility with their tagging systems. Unlike traditional file folders (manila or digital), these do not require you to choose a single keyword under which you’ll store an entry. A single post can have numerous tags at once, such as memories, children, family, faith, and humor, enabling you to categorize a narrative in a number of ways and help readers navigate their way through your writings.

Many free and easy-to-use blog programs are available over the Internet with preset appearance and layout themes (see Recommended Resources for more information). You have the option to make your blog private so that only your family (or whomever else you have issued a password to) has access, or you can share posts with the world at large (or at least the part of the world that reads blogs). Family members can comment on your memories as you go and augment them with their own memories, versions, or their own blog entries. In turn, you and other blog readers can respond to their comments, which can result in some lively conversations. Readers can also subscribe to receive email notifications of new posts. However, you don’t have to share anything until you’re ready. You can store your posts as drafts until you are ready to reveal them to others.

You don’t have to make a decision at the outset on whether you’re going to store your writings on your own computer or create and store them online. You can always upload your word processor files to your favorite blog site when you’ve finished editing. This way, you have a copy of all your Treasure Chest entries on your own hard drive, where you can enjoy the ease of formatting and spellchecking in your office program. You can consider blogging as your project progresses and make your decision later.

As in the previous section, there is no right or wrong answer here. As you work, you can adapt and change, but it does help to consider your options as you begin. You simply have to find what is most comfortable for you.

2. Ibid.
The very doggedness of time’s forward march that inspires writers to preserve memories in the first place is often the largest obstacle they encounter as they start writing. Time seems especially elusive when it comes to those projects that are floating around in our brains as mere good intentions. The good news is that we can all carve out time to write. As a longtime and accomplished procrastinator, I can attest to this.

So how do you stop procrastinating? How do you make time to write? As this doesn’t come naturally to me, I had to do some research. Reviewing what various authors wrote about transforming writing from procrastination to a passion, I came upon almost unanimous advice: make writing a habit.

It’s that simple. It’s that hard.

Wanting to write and intending to write are not enough. Writing, like playing an instrument, gets easier and sounds better the more you practice. Likewise, the more you find time to practice, the more enjoyable it will be to play. Good habits rarely spring to life on their own; they are the results of discipline and desire. The desire part can come fairly easily. The discipline might need a game plan. Several points seem standard across writing advice sources. Not surprisingly, they are the ones that I personally found most helpful.

**Make Writing a Priority**

Consciously or unconsciously, we prioritize our daily tasks. We have things that absolutely have to be done, things that we mean to do, and things that would be nice to get done. Even among the things that we absolutely have to do, we prioritize. To keep writing on your radar, you need to decide how often you want to write and create a realistic schedule for writing. If it’s not to fall in between the cracks, that schedule has to be a priority.

Luckily, once you’ve established a routine, it becomes much easier to
stick to it. You don’t have to categorize your writing as a world-will-end-if-I-don’t-do-this priority, but it should be pretty high on the list. Some people find it helpful to enter it on their calendar or calendar app, giving it an increased aura of legitimacy.

**Pick a Time to Write**

Choose when to write based on your personal biorhythms, work habits, preferences, and life situation. Ideally, it should be a time of day when you are the most creative or productive as well as a time that you can realistically work. If there is a part of your day that kids, work, neighbors, or other things tend to intrude on, take the likelihood of that interruption into account when you set your goals. Don’t delude yourself about your temperament and proclivities either. If you’re not a morning person, don’t deceive yourself into thinking that you’ll get up early to write. Likewise, if late afternoon is the time of day that most of the fires flare up, plan to write in the morning.

**Turn Off Distractions**

If the phone, television, email, or radio distracts you, turn it off. I’m not quite clear on how to turn off kids, but that might also be worth a try. If you work best in quiet, find a relatively quiet place and time to work. If you’re not sure what time will work best for you, experiment with some different times of the day.

What is a distraction to one person might be just the thing to get the next person in their groove. Not everyone, for instance, works best in complete silence. If noise, particularly white noise, isn’t a distraction for you, there’s no need to turn it off. For most of us, it’s really a matter of finding the right level of noise. Many people focus better with music in the background. Some writers do well in coffee shops while others work in quiet seclusion. Once you find the conditions that work best for you, write under those conditions whenever you can.

**Set Realistic Goals**

Make realistic a mantra. Don’t set yourself up for failure by setting unreasonable goals. No one wants to keep working on a task at which he or she repeatedly fails. If you are currently working multiple jobs or working full-time and raising children, it may not be realistic to expect yourself to write one hour a day. Set a goal that you can achieve with a little discipline.
Perhaps you can only carve out time a couple of times a week. If you need to challenge yourself as your Treasure Chest develops, you can adjust your goals. Setting realistic goals will assure that you are able to enjoy success, which brings us to the topic of keeping yourself motivated.

**Reward Yourself**

Go ahead and do more than bask in the intrinsic value of a job well done. Experts recommend that you reward yourself in a tangible way. It might be sharing your writing with a friend, getting an ice-cream cone, taking a walk, or—my personal favorite—eating chocolate. The important thing is to acknowledge and celebrate your progress. Defining your rewards in advance will give you a reason to work for them, or at least an incentive to stay focused. This goes hand in hand with setting realistic goals, so be sure you set reasonable thresholds before you give yourself a pat on the back.

**Don’t Expect Unwavering Inspiration**

We start out gung-ho and full of ideas, but soon we are plowed flat by those other good intentions that are haphazardly paving our roads. So many writers’ advice columns address this that I can only assume that many would-be memoirists crash after the light of their initial inspiration burns dim. The advice gurus admonish us to keep writing and preserve our stories. Inspiration, like ideas, comes in fits and starts. There will inevitably be days when we have a lot of fits but few starts. There might even be days when we’re tempted to throw fits. When inspiration fails, we have to keep on working. (This might well be where the discipline kicks in.)

This advice is meant for professional writers, but just think how much more relevant it is for those of us that have the luxury of writing for people who love us rather than for a Pulitzer Prize. Not everything has to be spectacularly funny or poignant. Sometimes, our stories are just stories. The less-inspired memory will clean up nicely with a little editing.

I am reminded of one of my teenage son’s soccer teammates begging, “Coach! Take me out. I suck today!” The coach refused, saying, “Son, you’ve got to learn to play through it. Keep playing!” So when the words don’t seem to flow as well as you’re used to them flowing, play (or write) through it.
Keep a Notepad Handy

The brain is a quirky organ and will decide to spit out ideas at the oddest times. Sometimes our creativity outpaces our memory. My creativity definitely outpaces my organization. As a result, I have various piles of scrap paper, paper bags, church bulletins, brochures, and Post-It Notes with scribbled ideas. Avoid emulating me—when a good idea surfaces, don’t count on being able to recall it later. Keep a notepad and pencil handy and scratch yourself a reminder, or keep a page in your smartphone, tablet, or PDA for that purpose. (There will be more about this in the “Keeping Track of Ideas” section.)

As you find the time to write, you’ll also find the time to grow and, sometimes, even heal. Embrace that. Writing about your memories requires processing them to some degree, and that process of reflection can bring enjoyment and peace. An inherent satisfaction comes with putting memories on paper. That satisfaction is multiplied when others gain enjoyment or enlightenment by reading what you’ve written.