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LIFE & ARTS

A Parent Talk, Before It's Too Late

Adult children often don't know what shaped their parents' lives—and wait too long to ask. That's starting to change.

By Clare Ansberry

For years, Sarah Smith wanted to know more about her mom's relationship with her own mother. "I'd like to know why my mother felt unloved," says Ms. Smith, a stay-at-home mom in Dallas. "And what was said that made her feel insecure and less confident."

Ms. Smith, 45, didn't press. Now, she's unlikely to ever know. Her 74-year-old mother has early-onset Alzheimer's and lives in a memory care unit.

As significant as parents are in life, their adult children often don't know what shaped them and what they were like before they became mom and dad. They may be curious about their parents' background and choices, but don't think to ask questions or know how to begin. They are busy with raising their families and jobs or live hundreds of miles away. Other topics—children, school, work—can seem more pressing.

Parents themselves aren't always forthcoming, telling only the happy stories and filtering out painful ones. Some don't think their lives are all that interesting.

Yet today, for some people, that is starting to change. There's a growing interest in understanding our parents' lives. Part of it is generational: Younger people are more transparent and used to telling the story of their own lives, often online for many to see, and expect it from others.

"I think younger people find it difficult to understand parents and grandparents who haven't documented in the way they are doing," says Rutger Bruining, 41, CEO of StoryTerrace, a company that helps people create their own biography books. "Kids want an answer to everything."

A growing interest in ancestry and the rise in home DNA kits leaves people wanting to know more of their family stories, while greater awareness of dementia makes capturing them soon all the more urgent.

New technology makes it easier, too. StoryCorps, a nonprofit oral history project, has a free app that provides suggested questions, and directions on recording, saving and sharing a conversation with a family member. There are many journaling apps, too.

About a third of Americans admire what their parents have achieved but don't know how they did it, according to a recent survey of 990 adults by StoryTerrace, which pairs ghostwriters with people who want to document their lives in a book. One in five don't know anything about their parents before they became parents, and 45% learn more about their parents from discovering photos and family possessions than direct conversations with them, according to the survey, which was conducted in November.

Yet relationships with parents, regardless of how complicated, are the ones a person takes through life, says David Isay, who founded StoryCorps. It has recorded 600,000 interviews between family members or friends and archived them in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Nearly everyone, he says, talks about their parents. "Someone might be 100 years old and the first thing they talk about is their parents," he says. "It's a reminder of the primacy of that relationship." Mr. Isay interviewed his own dad and listened to the recording hours after his father died and found it comforting.

Dan Ryan was 24 when his dad died of cancer. His mom died of a heart attack two years later. "I always thought there would be more time," says Mr. Ryan, a 60-year-old executive coach for CEOs based in Franklin, Tenn. He never got around to asking them about their childhood or courtship, his mother's life on an Illinois farm, and his dad's time as a Marine in Iwo Jima.

"I'm sure he saw death on a daily basis and at a young age," says Mr. Ryan, but his dad, Robert, never

on veterans' graves. "I can only guess at what was going through his mind. I wish I knew."

emy, which he suspects made his father tremendously proud. A homesick Mr. Ryan remembers calling

to talk him out of it. After his father died four years later, Mr. Ryan's mother, Helen, told him that his fa-

he didn't say so when I called those many times to say I wanted to leave," he says. "I suspect he didn't want to intervene and that I was adult enough to make my own decision."

Knowing what he missed with his own parents, a few years ago he interviewed his in-laws and taped their conversation on his phone. "None of us think about how many more days we have." His mother-in-law died 11 months ago.

Ms. Smith, in Dallas, regrets that her mother's Alzheimer's has dimmed the chances to learn more about her past.

Her mother, Rebecca Bearden, was selective about the stories she told. "She only wanted to communicate things she wanted me to hear," says Ms. Smith. That, along with the dementia, left Ms. Smith with questions that can't be answered. Why, for example, did her mother, who was admired by others for her leadership and generosity, lack confidence? "I could compliment her all day and she would say it wasn't true," says Ms. Smith.

At one point, her mother said that she never felt fully loved by her own mother. When Ms. Smith asked her to explain why, her mother dropped it and so did Sarah, sensing her mother's reluctance. "I think she was trying to protect me. She knew how much I loved my grandmother." Her mother, she says, did grow closer to her own mother late in life.

Ms. Smith has three children and wishes she had answers for their sake. "I want to know what not to say to my children," she says.

Her mom's dementia gives her a greater appreciation of the importance and urgency of transparency and storytelling. She wrote a book about caregiving, "Broken Beauty: Piecing Together Lives Shattered by Early-Onset Alzheimer's," and now journals daily. "It's so easy for us to grab the phone and take notes, and journal. I do that now and it's my hope our kids will go back and look at things I've written."

Some parents feel compelled to answer unasked questions to explain themselves and why they were the parents they were. Elizabeth Jacobson, 42, knew her mother was overly protective. She remembers being dropped off at college, forgetting her coat and her mother making the four-hour round trip drive back the next day with it. "I thought, 'I don't know any parent who would do that,'" says Ms. Jacobson, who lives in Tacoma, Wash.

She never really thought about it or asked why. "I thought, 'This is just mom,'" she says.

A few years later, when she was in her mid-20s and married, she visited her parents. While there, she says her mother, Pat Wilson, revealed to her for the first time that she had been married before, had a son, and that her ex-husband had taken him when he was 3 to see Santa and never returned. She hired a private detective and after years of looking, Ms. Wilson gave up her search and tried to get on with her life. It was the early 1970s, before the internet made tracking people down easier.

Ms. Jacobson was blown away. "I sobbed the whole way home," she says. "There was so much to take in. Everything started to make sense. Why mom was so sad all the time and why she was so protective." Ms. Jacobson wishes her mother had told her earlier. "I think of all those years she must have stuffed down those feelings," she says.

Her mother and her son ultimately reunited in 2016, when his then-wife tracked Ms. Wilson down through ancestry.com and Facebook. After the reunion, Ms. Wilson decided to write a book called "Beauty for Ashes," and hired a StoryTerrace ghostwriter, to help her. It would have been too hard, she says, to write on her own.

"I wanted to explain myself. It was such a huge part of my life and affected my parenting," says Ms. Wilson, 73.

Ms. Jacobson plans on sharing the story with her own 10-year-old daughter, when her daughter is

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PARENTS

Many people want to know more about their parents, but aren't sure what to ask or how to start the conversation. StoryCorps suggests some prompts below.

- Do you remember what was going through your head when you first saw me?
- How did you choose my name?
- What was I like as a baby? As a young child?
- Do you remember any of the songs you used to sing to me? Can you sing them now?
- What were my siblings like?
- What were the hardest moments you had when I was growing up?
- If you could do everything again, would you raise me differently?
- What advice would you give me about raising my own kids?
- What are your dreams for me?
- How did you meet mom/dad?
- Are you proud of me?
- What were your parents like?
- How was your relationship with your parents?
- How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you happy?
- What was your best memory of childhood?

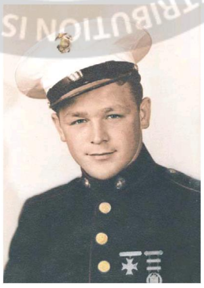
TELLING A STORY

StoryCorps is a nonprofit oral history project with mobile recording studios that allow two people to record 40-minute conversations. The free StoryCorps app lets people record and upload their interviews using their mobile device.

StoryTerrace is a biography writing service that matches people with professional ghostwriters to interview them and write their life story. Prices vary based on special requests but can range from $1,900 for 4 hours of interviews and a 55-60 page book, to $7,450 for 10 hours of interviews and a 115-125 page book.

"Finding True Connections: How to Learn and Write about a Family Member's History," by Gareth St. John Thomas, is a manual offering steps, guides and 100 questions, along with follow-up prompts, to help document a person's life story. List price $24.99.

Top, Sarah Smith, right, and her mother, who now has Alzheimer's disease. Above, Ms. Smith's mother, Rebecca Bearden, pictured during her college days.



Dan Ryan at Naval Academy in 1977 with his parents. Right, his father.

Elizabeth Jacobson, left, her daughter, Naomi, and her mother, Pat Wilson, on her mother's 70th birthday. 'We need to tell our stories,' says Ms. Jacobson.

NICOLE HAGER PHOTOGRAPHY; BEARDEN AND SMITH FAMILY; DAN RYAN (2); ROBERT WILSON

FROM TOP

talked about it. Mr. Ryan remembers visiting the cemetery with him on Memorial Day and putting flags

One undiscussed incident lingers with him. After high school, Mr. Ryan entered the U.S. Naval Acad-

home and telling his dad he wanted to leave the academy. A month later, he did. His father never tried

ther was disappointed in Mr. Ryan's decision.

"I have always wondered why

older. "I want to make sure she knows what happened," she says. "We need to tell our stories."