

ENGAGING THE POWER OF STORY

Impacting Others through Sharing Your Life Story

Your life story is important. Your personal narrative is a part of God's larger narrative. Who you are and what God has done in your life matters in God's community. "Life Story" will help you reflect, discern and discover more of God's unique handiwork in your life. It will allow you to understand your identity and gifting as you have developed and matured in Christ.

As a result of telling your story, stronger connections and a deeper experience of community with others will emerge. Trust and authenticity will materialize as you begin to appreciate one another and the body of Christ more. You will become a better member of the body of Christ and gain confirmation about your gifting.

"...the need to tell and hear stories is second only to nourishment, even before love and shelter...the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives."

Reynolds Price,
A Palpable God

TIPS FOR REFLECTING ON, PROCESSING, WRITING AND TELLING YOUR STORY:

Identify formative experiences, places, characters and phases of your life.

Note: Your Life Story is not your testimony, it is the story of formative experiences that God has brought into your life. It is not just the facts of your story, but, a record of experiences that God used to form you. "Formative experiences" are experiences that impacted you strongly. As a result of such an experience, you were changed in some way. The critical question is: what was God doing during this experience or time in your life?

What memories come to mind about events and people in your past and present? How have these people influenced your life and helped to shape your attitudes, beliefs, values and habits. What themes emerge from your story? What role did God play at different times and how did these events affect your view of God? What were the rewards and consequences? What did you learn about yourself, your needs or God?

"Stories are verbal acts of hospitality."

Eugene Peterson
Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places

"The most effective leaders are those who are in touch with their leadership stories. . . . The story itself shapes our attitudes, actions, and reactions. When we know our stories, we know ourselves. Stories, however, are equally important because they allow other people to know us. Stories create real, human connections by allowing others to get inside our minds and our lives. With their human protagonists, dramas, and climaxes, they engage listeners on an emotional and intuitive level that is rarely touched by the purely rational argument."

Noel M. Tichy with Eli Cohen.

The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level

STEPS IN DEVELOPING YOUR STORY:

I. CONSIDER these five H's

- Your **Heritage**: family of origin, background, geography
- Your **Heroes**: key relationships, characters in your life
- Your **High Points**: home, school, community, career
- Your **Hard Times**: difficulties, stresses, health, disappointments, losses
- Notice the **Hand of God**: How and where was God working in every stage of your life?

“I had always felt life first as a story; and if there is a story there is a story teller.”
G. K. Chesterson

II. ORGANIZE your story by stages or age divisions: What happened in various segments of your life?

Example: Ages 1-10, 11-22, 23-30, 30-40, 40-50, 60-

III. Use THEMES or an ACROSTIC:

- Allowing a theme or themes to surface out of reflecting on the “5 H's”
example:
 “Looking for a Father;” or
 “Energy Channeled Under Pressure;” or
 “Leading a Team Toward a Goal In the Face of Resistance”
- Organizing with an acrostic:
example: Boston, Blessed, Baseball, Birgit, Boys, Books, Bright, Bible

“... to follow the track of a single person's story may take me to the edge where I find God. A sighting of the deity is worth the quest”
Dan Allender
To Be Told

IV. NOTE:

1. See sample sheets for help in analyzing your story and graphically depicting your story.
2. Objects to illustrate your story can be used, esp. a family photo or photo album.
3. Referring to your journal and “memorial stones” can jog your memory.
4. Prior to telling you story you may wish to indicate how you would like others to respond: wait to the end to ask questions, ask questions as you speak or write a note, etc.

V. ADDITIONAL HELP:

Suggested reading:

- *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* (Kregel, 2008), edited by Paul Pettit, Chapter 10. “Life Story and Spiritual Formation” gives specific examples, benefits of and illustrations on life story p. 217.
- *Charting a Bold Course* (Moody Press, 2003), Andy Seidel has ample material for developing your life story in several different formats.
- *To Be Told* (WaterBrook Press, 2005), Dan Allender presents an excellent process for developing your life story and helpful insights into understanding your story.

“What quickens my pulse now...is mainly the search through where I have been, for some hint as to who I am becoming or failing to become that I delve into what used to be...I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived or will live, as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys... what I propose to do now is to try listening to my life as a whole...for whatever meaning of God there may be in it to hear...”
Frederick Buechner
The Sacred Journey, 6.

Life Story Process

I. GOD'S PROCESS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- A. God uses our life experiences to mold and form us. Not all experiences have the same impact; some are so powerful that they tend to “form” us. That is they impact our lives in some kind of lasting way that changes us. It may be very powerful individual experiences that change us dramatically, or a series of connected experiences that, little by little, change us over the course of months or years. Whichever the case, be sure to focus on those experiences that were formative in your life.
- B. One way to identify formative experiences is through the fact that God gives you developmental experiences in five primary areas:¹

1. HERITAGE:

Heritage is the combined influences from our past that God has used to write our stories, to mold us, and to bring us where we are today. It includes family influences, geography, natural gifting, genetics, and temperament. It all makes up our identity. Examples of heritage could be the influence that an absent or alcoholic parent had on a person or how God used a particular athletic gifting in a formative way.

Ask yourself some questions that may help clarify this extensive area of life:

- How have my parents, primary caregivers, or siblings significantly influenced my life? What was my early family life like?
- What was the general atmosphere in my home growing up, and how has that affected me?
- What was the major source of my self-esteem as a child?
- What were my peer relationships like during my school-age years?
- What is my basic temperament (How do I generally handle life)?
- What impact has my ethnicity and culture had on me? How has God used all of this?

2. HEROES:

Heroes are those people whom God has used to play a part in shaping our character or influencing our direction. Perhaps there was a coach or teacher who was a great fan and whose encouragement created a desire to excel in a particular area. Some possible examples of heroes:

parent/caregiver/relative	teacher	neighbor
famous figure	mentor	historical role model
church or other spiritual leader	relative	sibling
coach	friend	

“My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days that were ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Psalm 139:15-16 NIV

¹ Note: this material is adapted from *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008. Paul Pettit, ed., and “*Spiritual Formation: Exploring Identity and Community*.” The latter book was written by the Spiritual Formation staff in the Department of Spiritual Formation and Leadership and the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Questions:

- a. Which people have played a key role in influencing me for good? How have they done so?
- b. What have those people imparted to me that I am grateful for?

3. HIGH POINTS:

High times are those periods in our lives that were especially meaningful in a positive way. An example might be a time when a particular talent was applauded by others and a decision was made to pursue that talent further in life.

Questions:

- a. What have I done that I am personally proud of, or what accomplishments have been recognized by others?
- b. At what points in my life did I feel particularly good about myself or seemed happiest?
- c. What contributed to this? How has God used it to mold me up to this point in my life?
- d. What were the best times of my life? Why?

4. HARD TIMES:

Hard times are those relationships or seasons in our lives that were particularly difficult or painful. An example might be a childhood move from one school to another that was hard and caused us to build up some defensive walls that have been difficult to break down ever since. Perhaps there's been a relationship split that has not been restored.

“God is a redeemer. The pain of our story is waiting to be redeemed.”
Dr. Steve Macchia

Questions:

- a. What has been tough in life? How has that been formative to me?
- b. Are there incidents that have happened to me that are difficult to talk about with others? What are they?
- c. What have been the worst times for me? Why? What have I endured? What has been (or is now) painful?

5. HAND OF GOD:

There are the times when God revealed His sovereignty and grace in our lives in a special way. Maybe at a particular time of need God sent just the right person with just the right perspective that enabled us to keep moving ahead in faith. Or perhaps His Word came “alive” to us at a critical point.

Questions:

- a. When have I seen God's sovereignty and grace uniquely evident in my Life Story?
- b. What are some specific events that would illustrate this unique work in my life?
- c. How has God used His Word as a part of writing my story?

“God reinterprets our story in light of His story.”
Barry Jones

6. THEMES:

The theme answers the question “What is this story about?” Who am I?

What about God am I most uniquely suited to reveal to others?

Identifying themes will help you effectively evaluate and articulate your story.

It will help you listen to your life. How is the meaning of my life best lived out?

As you think of how various events, people, and lessons relate, you will discover the themes of your life story.

Questions:

- a. How do the different parts of your life story relate to each other?
- b. What common experiences do you notice in different segments of your life story?
- c. Where do you see repetition of similar experiences in your story?
- d. Do you see a similar meaning attached to different experiences in your story?
- e. Consider this statement: “I either understand my story or the flesh will use it as fuel.”
Do you agree with this comment from Dr. Steve Shores, author of, *Minding Your Emotions*?

“Story informs story. The future is meant to be written in light of the patterns of the past. We can’t predict the future, but we can read the patterns of the past to see how God has marked us for His purposes. He uses the past to open up our future. As we learn to read patterns, we gain an understanding of our calling.”

Dan Allender

To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Future

II. PUTTING YOUR LIFE STORY TOGETHER - SUGGESTIONS**A. First Run:**

1. Divide your life into significant segments.
 - a. You might determine segments based on age periods (cf. early life, teen years, young adult, middle years, etc.).
 - b. Or you may divide things based on location, where you lived for segments of your life.
 - c. Another way could be by jobs you held (early years, teen years, college years, campus ministry, starting own business, consulting, etc.)
2. Use the Life Story Forms to put together the details of your story.
(See Example 1 below)
 - a. You should have at least five or more segments.
 - b. Print out enough forms (Life Story Form 1 Worksheet.doc) to cover the number of segments in your Life Story.

- c. At this point, simply record the formative experiences in the five categories in each segment of your life.
- d. You obviously cannot include all your experiences, so focus on the ones that were the most formative, the ones that impacted you the deepest.
- e. Be as open and as vulnerable as you can be, and do not overlook early life experiences or painful experiences whenever they occur. In reality it is generally the painful experiences that impact us most deeply.

B. Second Run: Reflection
(See Example 2 below)

1. After you have completed the First Run through the segments of your life, go back through each segment and record your thoughts on what you learned in each segment. Note also the life or ministry values that you developed through the experiences of that segment.
2. Spend time in prayer and reflection on the various experiences that impacted you. Where do you see God in this experience? What was God teaching you? How did He use this experience in your life?
3. Look through your life segments to see if there are any themes that come to the surface. Do you see any repetitive types of events? Any repeated lessons?

“Stalling schemes of the flesh can thwart insight into one’s life story. Human beings have always employed an enormous variety of clever devices for running away from themselves ... we can keep ourselves so busy, fill our lives with so many diversions, stuff our heads with so much knowledge, involve ourselves with so many people and cover so much ground that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within. By middle life most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves.”

John William Gardner

Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society

III. COMMUNITY

Consider how your life story fits into and contributes toward the building of community in your sphere of influence.

- A. Remember your individual story fits into God’s larger story, the metanarrative - the overarching story of humankind. For Christians, this metanarrative is the biblical narrative of salvation history - creation, fall, redemption and finally, new creation.
- B. Since you are the only one who can live out the story God intended for you, if you do not make yourself known, what will the community miss? If you do not make yourself known, what will you miss?
- C. What about God am I most uniquely suited to reveal to others?

“We not only exchange stories, we are characters in each other’s stories, and therefore none of us can live our story alone”

Reynolds Price
A Palpable God

“We cannot separate our individual story from the story of the community even if we wanted to. After all, you are only one character even in your own story. One consequence of our connectedness should be a greater responsibility for others.”

Daniel Taylor
Tell Me A Story

IV. LEAVING A LEGACY

- A. We have been drawn into an epic that has been going on for some time. What legacy do you want to leave from within your story?
- B. What about the opportunity to be the visible presence of Christ to those you encounter motivates you? Scares you? Encourages you?
- C. How do you plan to attend to God’s voice within your story?

“Life stories make up the thread that connects the human family. It may well be that we can leave no greater legacy than the story of our life.”

Robert Atkinson
The Gift of Stories

“It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the Gospel. God writes our story not just for our own enlightenment and insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story.”

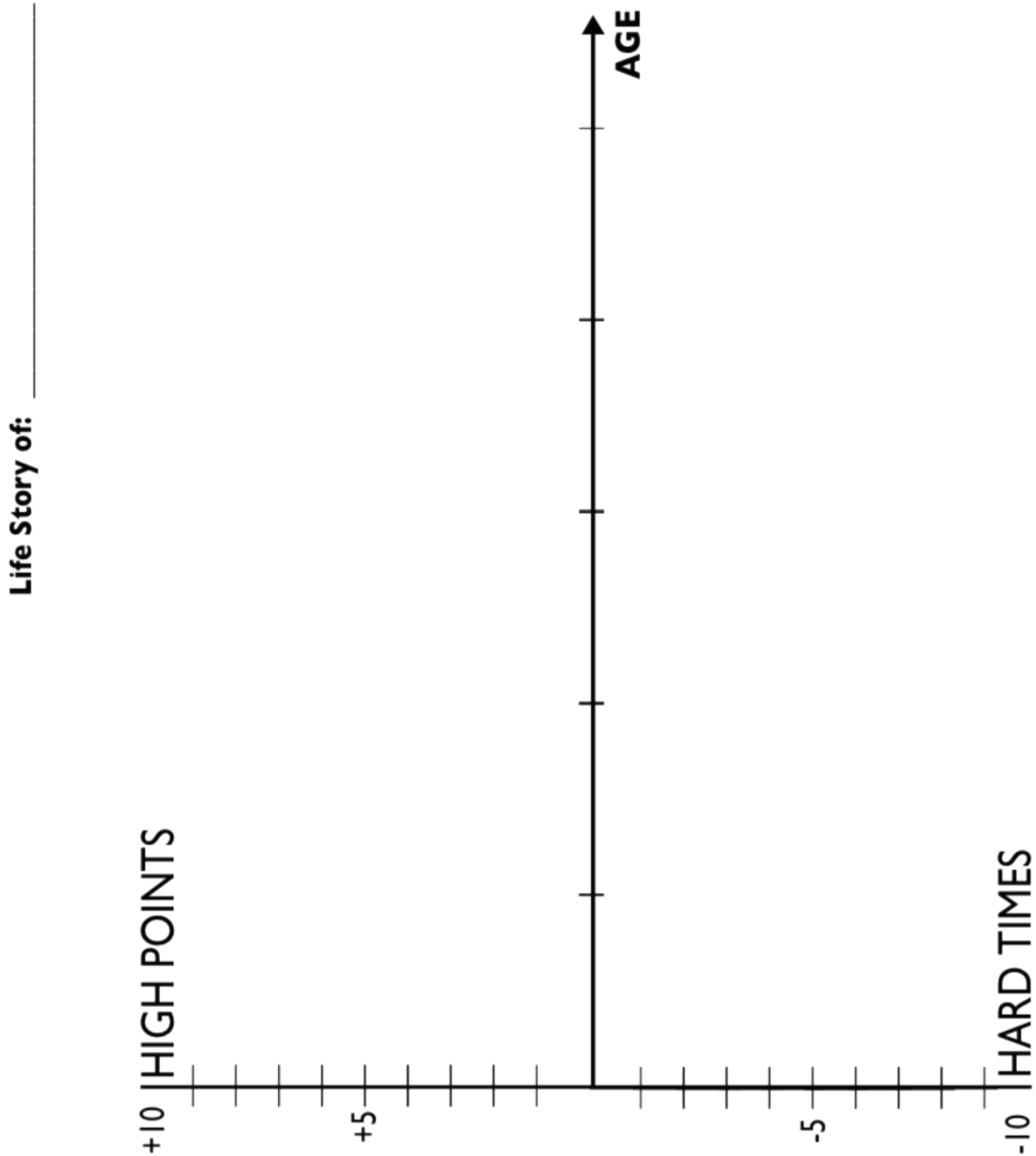
Dan Allender
To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Future

“My life story is God’s story, authored by Him. He has uniquely orchestrated and providentially created me to bring Him glory through my story. As I chart His hand in my life, I gain insight into His purpose. I am the only one who can reflect His glory through my story. Understanding and accepting my story becomes a tool of personal spiritual formation. As my story intersects your story as a part of His story, we become storytellers of God’s story and offer, in community, His story to the world. Story is a catalyst tool of God, growing the individual and building community so that they bring Him glory and offer the visible presence of Christ to a watching, needy world.”

Gail Seidel
Foundations of Spiritual Formation

NOW USE THE LIFE STORY CHART TO GRAPHICALLY DEPICT YOUR OWN STORY.

- A. Use the Life Story Form 2 Chart.doc to plot the events of your story.
- B. Note the example below: The Life Story of John Fictitious. The events are plotted above or below the horizontal scale depending upon whether they were High Points or Hard Times. Note also some themes, such as **SEARCHING FOR STABILITY** in his early years.



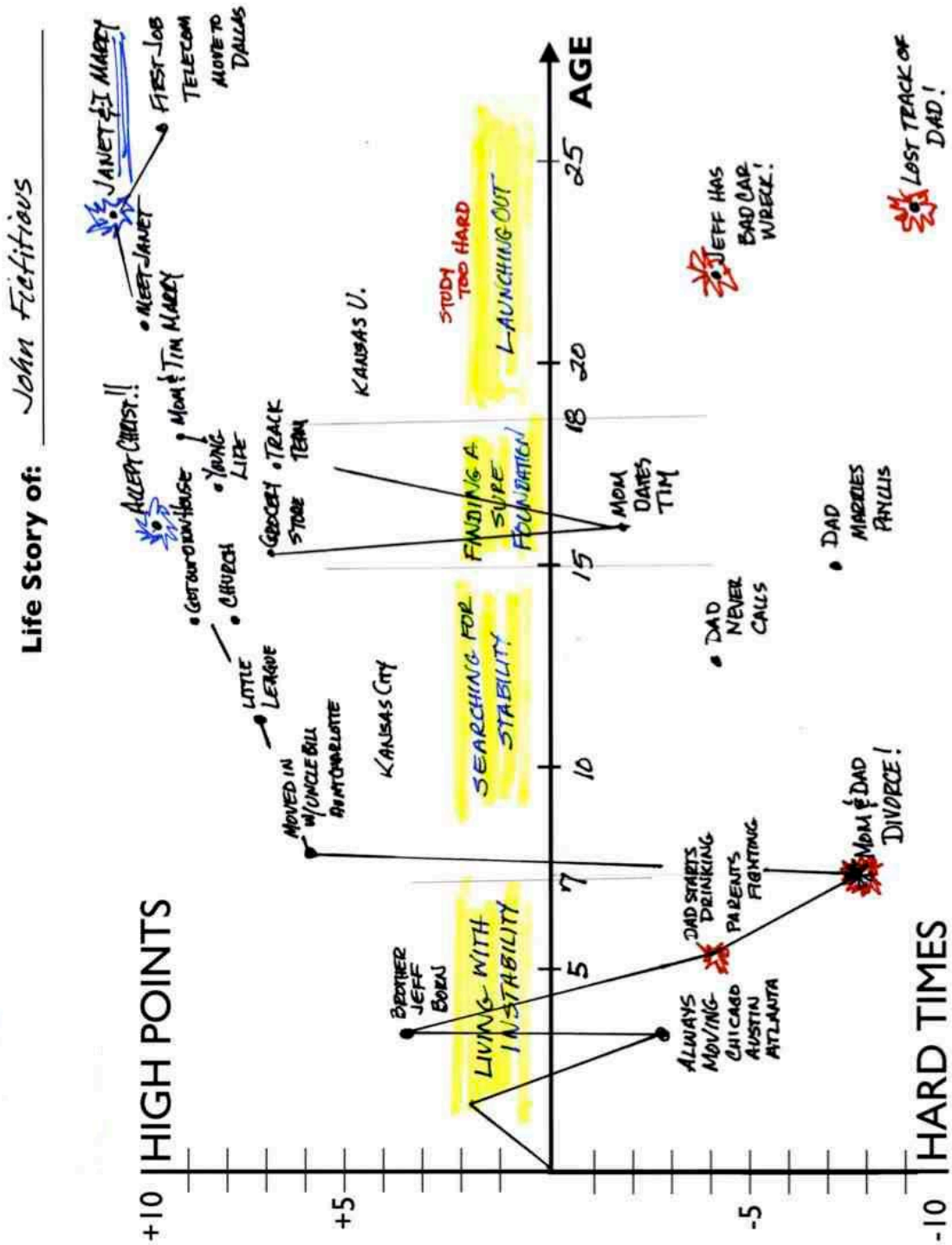


CHART EXAMPLE

A Beginning Composition with Brand New Notes 4		Discovering the Melodies 5	Practicing the Score 19	Combining Melodies for Life 24	Increasing the Harmony Balancing the Volume 50
<p>Parents Divorce</p> <p>Mother: Church, Beauty, Persevering</p> <p>Father: Self-made man, Hardworking, Alcohol</p>		<p>* Grandmother</p> <p>Aunts, Uncles - "Normal" "Front Seat"</p> <p>† SALVATION</p> <p>4th grade - "teacher in training"</p> <p>9th grade - discovering comfort and delight in leading and speaking up front</p>	<p>* ANDY - steady anchor, passion</p> <p>University of Texas</p> <p>Campus Crusade Staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vehicle for training • passion ignited for mentoring younger women 	<p>† MARRIAGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Hospitality Students: U. of Illinois Children Cadets: West Point Students: Texas A&M <p>† Leave pastorate for pastors in Eastern Europe and Russia</p> <p>Marriage of our children</p>	<p>Vienna</p> <p>Eastern Europe</p> <p>Russia</p> <p>DTS: Spiritual Formation</p> <p>DTS Students</p> <p>DTS Graduation</p> <p>Grandchildren</p>
<p>Melodies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searching for security and what is normal..... • Determination and striving toward excellence 		<p>† 16 yrs: "My all to Christ"</p>	<p>Circle of Friends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing through hospitality, networking, welcoming in • Passion ignited for leading, teaching, mentoring ever-present students • Longing for "home" - creating one in 22 places 	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Counter Melodies, minor, discordant notes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I have to hold it all together" - Super-Responsible • "I have to compensate to appear 'normal'" • "Contribution and value measured by affirmation and recognition" 					

Another Example

Andrew B. Seidel, *Charting a Bold Course*, Chicago: Moody Press. 2003.

A Sample Life Story Worksheet
(Fictitious Example)

<p>Life Divisions</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>7</p>	<p>15</p>	<p>18</p>	<p>25</p>
<p>Chapter Titles</p> <p>Brain-Storming Formative Events, Hard Times, Good Times, Impacting Family Experiences, etc.</p> <p>God's Authorship What was God doing in these situations? How did He use them in your life?</p>	<p>Early Years <i>Living With Instability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was born in Topeka Kansas, April 17, 1975 (First Child) Father was in grad school • We moved around a lot, Chicago, Austin, Atlanta. Father was changing jobs • Jeff born February 6, 1978 • Dad started drinking... a LOT; he argued w/Mom • I started school in Atlanta; teacher's pet <p>It seemed like we were always moving so I never had any friends. I looked for ways to be accepted; I loved school, was the teacher's pet because I tried to do everything right. God was letting me experience the instability so that later I could appreciate stability in Him, not in anything else.</p>	<p>Searching Years <i>Searching for Stability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOM AND DAD DIVORCE! • We moved in with Uncle Bill & Aunt Charlotte in Kansas City • Uncle Bill was my best friend; he coached my Little League team, taught me to fut! • We started going to church • Mom got good job; we got our own house! She works a lot. • Dad NEVER calls or visits <p>Dad's drinking, arguments w/Mom and divorce were very painful. My Uncle Bill and Aunt Charlotte showed real love to us. God used this to show me what love can be like. Going to church for the first time, I began to hear about God's love and had an example to understand it. I saw the consequences of my Dad's bad choices.</p>	<p>High School Years <i>Finding A Sure Foundation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dad remarries (Phyllis) • I ACCEPT CHRIST at church • I work at grocery store to help • Mom starts dating Tim; I have doubts about him; they marry; I discover he is great guy; we go to church as a family!! • I can stop working; join track team at school • In Young Life I begin to grow <p>Through church ministry I accept Christ and find a sense of stability in His love and faithfulness. Young Life helps me grow. Tim turns out to be another example of God's love to me. God's blessing allows me to stop working and enjoy school; I joined the track team and brought some guys to Young Life; one later accepted Christ</p>	<p>College & 1st Job Years <i>Launching Out</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At KU I met Janet at a Campus Crusade meeting; we start dating; break up, then get back together. • Lost track of Dad, no address • Jeff has bad car wreck; takes 6 months to recover • I make top grades but study too hard; too important to me • JANET & I MARRY • Good job w/telecom; Dallas <p>Janet is God's gift to me. I almost "blow it" because I am too into getting max grades. I still struggle with getting my significance through my performance rather than from Christ. I am growing in this, but it shows up too often. God is so faithful to give me Janet. We grow together. I am asking God to help me be a stable, growing husband and, some day, father</p>	

Life Story of: _____

Year(s)/Age	
Location/Occupation	
Heritage What geographical, ethnic, or family factors influenced you? How? Why?	
Heroes What relationships played a key factor in influencing you (positive or negative)?	
High Points What experiences have you enjoyed the most? Why? What experiences illustrate your special abilities?	
Hard Times What experiences were especially painful? Why? How did they make you feel? How did they impact your life?	
Hand of God Where did you see God especially at work in your life? What happened that could only be the work of God?	
What did I learn? What strengths or gifts are evident? What are the major things you learned through these experiences?	
Life/Ministry Values What life and ministry values has God developed in you through this stage of your life?	

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Further Reading

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