

## Guided Autobiography

Revised 1997

The purpose of this exercise is to sample certain key events in your life. We will be asking you to construct your own autobiography -- the story of your life as you understand it, past, present, and anticipated future. However, the autobiography will be highly selective. We will be asking you to focus on 8 particular "episodes" or "scenes" in your life story and to describe each of these in some detail. Therefore, you will not have the opportunity to tell your entire story, to relate the many different events, characters, happenings, and themes that would doubtlessly go into a full-length autobiography -- as you might do if you were writing a book about yourself. In this brief written exercise a lot of important information about you and your life will be left out. Nevertheless, we believe that focusing on only 8 episodes will provide an interesting and useful perspective from which we may view your own life story.

People's lives vary tremendously, and people make sense of their lives in a tremendous variety of ways. As social scientists, we wish to collect as many different life stories as we can in order to begin the process of making sense of how people make sense of their own lives. Therefore, we are collecting and analyzing autobiographies of "normal" people from all walks of life, and we are looking for significant commonalities and significant differences in those life stories that people tell us. Essentially, we wish to catalogue people's life stories so that we may eventually learn more about how American adults make sense of their lives. We are not interested, therefore, in pathology, abnormal psychology, neurosis, and psychosis. We are not trying to figure out what is wrong with you. Nor are we aiming to pass judgment on the "goodness" of your life. Instead, we want to "read" your life story as if it were a book, seeing what kinds of characters, scenes, and themes you identify.

This life-story exercise is organized around the idea of critical events or episodes. An event or episode is a specific happening that occurs in a particular time and place. It is most helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life which stands out for some reason. Examples might be a surprise birthday party that your friends threw for you on your 18th birthday, a particular conversation with your spouse or friend in November of last year, or your reactions to learning that someone close to you died one summer day in 1986. Your last summer's vacation and a difficult week at work, by contrast, are not events because they occur over an extended period of time, even though they may be very important to you. Thus, your vacation would be more like a series of events than an event per se. We want you to concentrate on single events, rather than on a series of events or an extended period of time.

On the following pages, we will describe 8 different kinds of events. For each one, we ask that you write a description that is at least a paragraph or two in length. Think about the event carefully and then include all of the following in your written description of the event:

1. When did the event occur? (How old were you?)
2. What exactly happened in the event?
3. Who was involved in the event?
4. What were you thinking, feeling, and wanting in the event?



















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## 10. GOAL

At different points in our lives, we set different goals for the future. Goals may be short-term as when we plan to save up enough money to buy a car. And they may be long-term -- the goal of completing medical school, raising a family, becoming President of the United States. Please consider your current goals -- goals towards which you are currently striving in one way or another. Choose the single goal that is most important to you right now. Describe a specific event from your recent past in which you did something that was aimed at this goal. For instance, if your goal is to become an Olympic skater, then you might want to describe a particular practice session in which you worked hard on perfecting the routine. If your goal is to mend your relationship with your daughter, then you might want to describe a recent conversation that you had with her in which you aimed at this goal. Please be specific in your description of this particular event and of the goal. Begin your account by telling us what the goal is and why it is important to you. Then, tell us what happened in the event, when the event happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and what the event may say about you and your personality.

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Thank you for your cooperation.