

## PERSONAL JOURNAL.

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COURTESY OF THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; GARY FAMILY; JENNIE KELLY

In the 2003 movie 'Big Fish,' left, a son tries to sort out truth from fiction in his father's life.

other kind of disaster.

"My pattern was to get drunk and get seduced. I'd sleep with a guy and then get attached to him," she wrote in her memoir, "The Greatest Good." Finally, she faced up to her addiction to alcohol and sought help from Alcoholics Anonymous. Her last alcoholic drink, she wrote, was on Oct. 30, 1989.

One way to save your memories is to annotate favorite photos with the stories behind them.

If written by someone else after her death, Dr. Coady's life story might have noted in passing that during her travels she met Henry Kissinger, Fidel Castro and Mother Teresa. Because Dr. Coady wrote her own story, we know more. Mr. Kissinger mixed her a gin and tonic. Mother Teresa held her hand while they conversed. Mr. Castro kissed her on the cheek; his beard was surprisingly soft. Her first-person account is detailed and inspiring in ways no one else could match.

For life-story tellers, there is a bonus. Writing or recording those stories often makes people feel better about themselves and might even improve their health, according to some researchers who study the way people explain their experiences.

Some people have little or no interest in the past, including their own. If you have tried telling your tale and find it brings only sorrow, there is no need to persist.

Many of us, however, want to cheat death by leaving a mark, however faint. We tend to believe the proverb that people die twice: the first time when their heart stops beating, the second when someone speaks their name, or thinks of them, for the last time.

It isn't just about you, though. Your stories could be the best gift you ever give to your friends and family.

Even if no one reads or listens to your tale, you haven't wasted your time. Reviewing your life—what you're trying to do, why and how it is panning out—might give you the inspiration to mend some of your ways. It isn't too late to improve the narrative.

James R. Hagerly is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal. This essay is adapted from his new book, "Yours Truly: An Obituary Writer's Guide to Telling Your Story," from Kensington's Citadel Press.

## Start Saving Your Life Stories

Write down the hows and whys of triumphs, failures, adventures to preserve them for the ages

By JAMES R. HAGERLY

"DEATH STEALS EVERYTHING except our stories," wrote the poet Jim Harrison. If we aren't careful, death can steal those, too.

When it comes to money and real estate, most of us make careful arrangements for what will happen after we die. Why not take equal care of our stories, which can't be retrieved once lost?

Think of the stories you've heard your partner or parents tell a thousand times. They are precious. When someone dies, we need those stories—not in a vague, half-remembered, secondhand form but in the original version, with all the plot twists, nuances and personal storytelling quirks. Your own words and insights are more illuminating than others' eulogies and tributes.

Preserve your stories now, while the memories are vivid. The best stories show not just what you have done but why and how. Starting points include how you got on a career path; what you are trying to do with your life and how it is working out; your biggest triumphs and failures, and what you have learned from them. Also worthwhile: the oddest, funniest, most wonderful and awful things that have happened to you.

"Putting things into words helps to organize them in your mind," says James W. Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin. "Every now and then, we all need to stand back and take stock and think: What am I doing, where am I going, and is this the life I want?"

You could write a memoir or your own obituary—highly rec-

ommend it—but that isn't necessary. It is good enough to write a rough draft of your best stories or record them.

One way to save a memory is to write a letter or an email to a friend and save a copy. Another is to annotate your favorite photos with the stories behind them. For those who need prompts, software such as Storyworth or MemLife provides a template with questions and the option to create a book.

For those who hate to write, voice recording works. Be sure to make a transcript, though, and add notes explaining anything that might be unclear to readers decades from now. Michael K. Reilly, who died in 2021 at the age of 88, prospered in the coal industry but was never going to be famous. He didn't even have a Wikipedia page. Still, Mr. Reilly believed his grandchildren might like to know a few things about his life. In retirement, he finally wrote down his memories.

He called his booklet "A Wonderful Life" and had a printer run off copies for a few dozen family members. The organization and graphics were amateurish, but Mr. Reilly wasn't trying to dazzle anyone.

As a teenager, Mr. Reilly took his grandmother's car for a joy

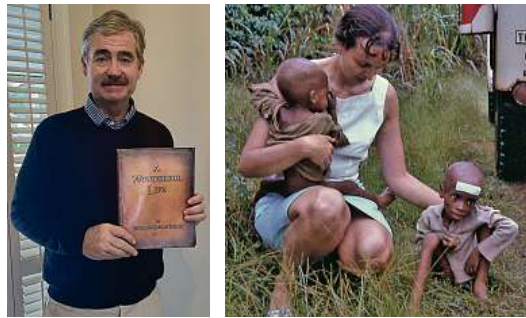
ride one night, stole some gasoline and ended up in jail briefly. A few years later, after Maralyn Lyman began dating him, she was shocked when he "gave her up for penance" during the Advent season. Somehow the romance survived. They married in 1958.

One of his sons, Mark Reilly, cherishes the booklet partly for its lack of polish and pretense. "It's a real story about a real life," he says.

One caution: Revealing too much about certain topics could hurt or offend loved ones. Life-story writers need to think carefully about what to leave out. Mort Crim, a retired television news anchor, wondered how his children would react to a

mention of long-past marital problems when he wrote his story a few years ago. He asked for their guidance, and they urged him to be frank. My advice is to admit mistakes without incriminating others.

David Coady also told her story, and thank goodness for that because no one else could have done it nearly so well. Dr. Coady, who died in 2018 at the age of 80, was a physician trained at Columbia University and Harvard. She spent more than two decades shuttling from "one human disaster to another," as she put it, providing medical care in Africa, Asia and Central America. Meanwhile, her private life was turning into an-



Mark Reilly treasures the booklet in which his late father, Michael K. Reilly, wrote down his memories. David Coady, shown in Biafra, wrote a colorful, honest account of her life before she died at age 80.

MY RIDE | A.J. BAIME

## Rolling in a Style Crafted for VIPs

Joe Molina, 67, the retired founder and president of PR firm JMPR Public Relations living in Carmel, Ind., on his 1997 Toyota Century V12, as told to A.J. Baime.

THE TOYOTA CENTURY is like the unicorn of cars. People have heard of it. But they've never seen one, and those who know what it is can't believe their eyes. The model made its debut in 1967 on the 100th birthday of Toyota's founder, thus its name. My specific Century's generation was the first Japanese production car ever built with a V-12 engine.

The fact that I own one (I have owned three Centuries, actually) is ironic. My father loved Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars, and, as a kid, I became obsessed with Rolls and Bentley. I spent 43 years working in public relations in the luxury and collector car business, and, for years, I worked with Rolls-Royce and Bentley. The Toyota Century is like the Rolls and Bentley of Japanese cars. What I love is all the stories of the craftsmanship that went into the

The back seat has a massage unit and a fold-down writing desk. The Century is the first Japanese production car with a V-12 engine.

Century, and all the care that was put into making it such a unique experience for its owner.

For years, I had been buying Japanese cars from my good friend Gary Duncan of Duncan Imports & Classics, in Virginia. This car came out of nowhere. I was looking at another of his cars and one morning he sent me an email with a photo. It was a shocker! This Century's condition was beautiful. It only had 27,000 miles. I bought it for about \$30,000 nearly four months ago.



Toyota built the Century for the Japanese market, for a VIP or CEO owner. The car has sills flush with the floor. That way, I have been told, you don't drag a ceremonial kimono

if you're getting in or out. The chauffeur is meant to sit in the right front seat (in Japan, cars are right-hand drive) and the VIP owner sits diagonally, in back. That seat has a built-in

Joe Molina owns a Toyota Century, the Bentley of Japanese cars.

ottoman, a massage unit that you can speed up or calm down, and motorized curtains.

There is a little strap inside and, at first, I could not figure out what that was for. I found out that it is for a shoe horn, for when the VIP takes off his shoes and wishes to put them back on. (Naturally, I went out and found the nicest wooden shoe horn I could.) The other back seat is where the VIP's assistant sits. The assistant's seat features a beautiful fold-down writing desk for taking notes, and a 1990s-era dictation machine.

The finish of everything is so carefully done. I have been told that the craftsmen who put this car together had special tools made specifically for them, from measurements of their hands. I have been told that the finish of the outside of the car is so polished that, when the VIP gets out, he can check that his hair and tie are in proper shape by seeing his reflection in the rear roof pillar. A small forest was harvested for the wood inside the car, and the carpeting has flower images woven into them.

All of the controls are in Japanese, and when I start it, a female voice speaks in Japanese. I have translation books, but I still have not figured out what this voice is telling me.

What do I do with this car? My wife likes me to drive her to the mall, and friends want me to drive us all to dinner. The car is the quietest I have ever driven—just spookily quiet. I am hoping that, someday, I will get to sit in the back seat.



ARNA POWELL; DUNCAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; (2)