A Question for Myself

We've Heard Everyone Else's Story… When Will We Listen to Our Own?

Sanjay Kumar Rai

A personal journey through identity, relationships, memories and decisions, towards listening to your own story.

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Introduction

This book is not here to tell you how to live.

It offers no instructions, no prescribed way of life and no ready-made answers. It simply asks a few questions of you, and perhaps, for the first time, of you alone.

We hear stories every day. We hear about heroes and heroines, athletes, friends, teachers, parents, children and the people we look up to. We remember the places that touched us and the people who changed us.

But how often do we stop and listen to our own story?

Where are you in the story of your own life?

This book asks no commitment to answer every question. You can write down your answers, talk to someone close to you, pause over a question or leave some answers blank.

This is no test. There are no right or wrong answers here.

Read slowly. When a question touches something deep inside you, pause there.

Perhaps the most important story in your life is the one you need to hear for yourself.

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PART 01

Who Am I?

1. If someone asked you today, “Who are you?”, what would you say?
2. Do your name, work, title or social identity tell your whole story?
3. Do you see yourself the way others see you?
4. What in your life are you truly proud of?
5. Is there something you still want to say to someone?
6. Have you ever done something for yourself without wondering what people would say?
7. Have circumstances ever forced you to give up something you wanted?

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PART 02

My Ancestors, My Roots

1. Your story does not begin with you. There were people before you, with dreams, struggles, decisions and memories of their own.
2. How much do you know about at least three generations of your family?
3. Where did your grandparents or great-grandparents live?
4. Which village, town, city or region are your family's roots tied to?
5. Do you know when and why your ancestors settled there?
6. How did they earn a living? Did they farm, hold jobs, run a business, practise a traditional trade or do something else?
7. What did prosperity mean then? Land, a large house, livestock, a business, social standing or something else?
8. What gave a person status and earned them respect in society at the time?
9. What did life offer then, even with fewer modern conveniences?
10. Were neighbours simply people who lived nearby, or were they part of one another's lives?
11. Have you ever asked an elder how people helped one another in those days?
12. How did families and communities keep their ties alive?
13. Has your family ever moved from one place to another to start a different life? Why?
14. Does the next generation now live in a distant city or another country?
15. Has distance changed your relationships?
16. Are living together and staying connected two different things?
17. Are you passing your family's story on to the next generation?
18. If a child or grandchild asked, "Where did our family's story begin?", would you be able to answer?

Pause and Reflect

Ask an elder, "Where did our family's story begin?" Write down a name, a place, an occupation and a memory. What seems ordinary today may become family history tomorrow.

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PART 03

Changing Society, Changing Relationships

1. What was family life like in your parents’ generation?
2. What did living in a joint family mean to that generation?
3. Has the meaning of family changed over time?
4. Is there something about the way communities once lived that you would like to preserve today?
5. What freedom and choices has modern life given you?
6. Have relationships changed as our lives, priorities and circumstances have changed?
7. Instead of asking which era was better, can we learn something from both generations?

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PART 04

Marriage Then and Now

1. How were decisions about marriage made in your family in the past?
2. Did the two people have a chance to get to know each other before marriage?
3. How were your grandparents' marriages arranged, on either side of the family?
4. When did they first see or get to know each other?
5. Was marriage seen as a bond between two individuals, two families, or both?
6. Has marriage become more of a personal decision today?
7. What do you value about this change?
8. What aspect of earlier generations' approach to marriage is worth preserving today?
9. What aspect of marriage today might have helped earlier generations?
10. Can a single reason explain why a marriage lasted for many years?
11. Have personal freedom, equality and the ability to choose given marriage a new meaning?

Pause and Reflect

Ask yourself what is worth preserving from earlier ideas about marriage and relationships, and what should change to meet the needs of today.

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PART 05

Childhood and My First Sense of Who I Was

1. What childhood memory still makes you smile?
2. What did you want to be when you were a child?
3. Did you become what you wanted to be?
4. If you took a different path, where did it change?
5. What did someone say to you as a child that you remember to this day?
6. Did a teacher, relative or friend ever help you believe in yourself?
7. If you could meet the child you once were, what would you say?

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PART 06

My Heroes and Inspirations

1. Who is your favourite actor?
2. Who is your favourite actress?
3. Which athlete do you admire or respect most?
4. Who is your role model?
5. What about them makes an impression on you?
6. Which of their qualities would you like to cultivate in your own life?
7. Is there an ordinary or little-known person you consider a great human being?
8. You have found heroes in so many people. Have you ever paused to look for those qualities in yourself?

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PART 07

Education, Opportunity and Circumstances

1. Did your education follow the path you had dreamed of?
2. Did you get the opportunities you needed?
3. Did circumstances change the direction of your life?
4. Has comparing yourself with others ever made you feel inadequate?
5. Can a degree tell you everything a person is capable of?
6. Is there something you still want to learn?
7. If you were to learn something again from the beginning, what would it be?

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PART 08

Love and Unfinished Stories

1. Have you ever truly fallen in love?
2. Did that relationship become what you imagined it would?
3. If it took a different course, do you still think of that person?
4. Why do you think that person came into your life?
5. Does every love story have to end in marriage?
6. Can an unfinished story still be an important part of your life?
7. What did that relationship teach you about yourself?
8. Did you come to understand yourself better after losing someone?

Pause and Reflect

Some people come into our lives to stay. Some come to change us. And some help us understand what we truly want.

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PART 09

Career, Struggle and Success

1. What was your first dream about work or a career?
2. Is the work you do today what you once imagined doing?
3. Did success come early, late or in a form you never expected?
4. Have you ever felt that everyone else was getting ahead of you?
5. How much has comparing yourself with others shaped your definition of success?
6. What did your greatest failure teach you?
7. Is success just another word for wealth?
8. If you took money out of the definition, what would success mean to you?

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PART 10

Money and Me

1. What does money mean to you? Necessity, security, freedom or success?
2. Has a lack of money ever kept you from pursuing a dream?
3. Have you ever made an important decision solely for financial reasons?
4. If money were no longer a worry, how would you want to spend your time?
5. Do you live mainly to earn money, or do you earn money to build the life you want to live?

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PART 11

The People Closest to Me

1. Who is your closest friend?
2. With whom can you be entirely yourself?
3. Who stood by you in a difficult time?
4. Have you lost someone close who meant a great deal to you?
5. Was there something you wanted to say to someone close but could not?
6. Have you ever realised someone’s worth too late?

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PART 12

My Parents

1. Have you ever asked your parents, “What was your own dream?”
2. What did they give up for you, or which of their wishes did they put aside?
3. Have you tried to see your parents as people with dreams and fears of their own?
4. What is one thing you are deeply grateful to them for?
5. Is there something you still want to say to them?

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PART 13

Children, Distance and Togetherness

1. If your children live far away, has distance changed your relationship?
2. If your child said, “Come and live with us,” what would your first thought be?
3. Would it be hard to leave your home and your familiar routine?
4. Would you worry about losing some of your independence if you lived with your children?
5. Does living with your children always mean depending on them?
6. What if your child is asking you to come because they need you?
7. Have you ever asked your child, “What do you want? What can I do for you?”
8. Is there a way to respect both your child’s needs and your independence?
9. Have you ever spoken openly about how you might live together or stay connected in the future?

Pause and Reflect

We taught our children to stand on their own feet. Perhaps it is time we learned how to walk alongside them.

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PART 14

One Home, Different Paths

1. Did your parents do their best to give each child much the same love and respect?
2. Did you receive much the same opportunities, education, food, clothing and basic comforts?
3. Were you brought up with much the same values and principles?
4. Why, then, can siblings grow into such different people?
5. Can people who grew up in the same home stop understanding one another?
6. Did education, work, friends, marriage, the places you lived and your experiences take you in different directions?
7. Did you grow more distant after marriage?
8. Did your spouse's or new family's views change the way you saw that earlier relationship?
9. Did disagreements grow to the point where it became hard even to talk?
10. Does disagreeing mean the relationship is over?
11. Can you respect each other even when you disagree?
12. Have you ever wondered, "How did we become so different?"
13. Have old grievances kept coming up in front of your parents?
14. As you grew older, did you realise that people raised with the same values can still have very different experiences?
15. Does respecting your parents require agreement, or can you disagree and still show respect?
16. When parents grow old and their children live far away, is the responsibility purely financial?
17. Do you set aside enough time to listen to them?
18. Do your parents sometimes end up lonely as you juggle a busy life and a family of your own?
19. After years of distance, will one of you have to take the first step?

Pause and Reflect

Am I trying to get my way, or do I want to understand this relationship? Can we disagree and still respect each other?

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PART 15

Marriage and Today’s Generation

1. Do you want to get married?
2. If so, why?
3. If you do not, why not?
4. Does your career influence your decision?
5. How important is financial independence to you?
6. Do you worry that marriage could affect your freedom?
7. Have your friends’ relationships influenced how you think about marriage?
8. Have you seen marriages that worked well?
9. Have you also seen relationships fall apart?
10. Has the experience of divorce or separation changed your view of marriage?
11. Has your parents’ relationship influenced how you understand marriage?
12. Have you ever thought, “There is something about my parents’ lives that I do not want to repeat”?
13. Do your family’s expectations differ from what you want?
14. Are you keeping away from marriage, or are you trying to avoid ending up in the wrong relationship?

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PART 16

When Life Did Not Go to Plan

1. What unexpected turn changed the direction of your life?
2. Which decision still gives you pause?
3. If you could go back, would you change it?
4. If that event had never happened, would you be the same person today?

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PART 17

Achievements, Unfulfilled Dreams and Age

1. What have you gained?
2. Which of your achievements matters most to you?
3. Is there a dream still waiting for you?
4. Do you ever feel that it is too late?
5. What is the smallest step you could take today?
6. Are you the same person you were ten years ago?
7. Have your priorities changed?
8. What has age taught you that was hard to understand when you were young?
9. If you met your younger self, what would you say?
10. If your future self could ask you one question today, what would it be?

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PART 18

When Someone You Love Is Gone

1. Whose absence do you still feel?
2. If that person were standing before you today, what would you say?
3. What did that person leave within you?
4. Did losing them change the way you look at life?

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PART 19

Now It Is My Turn

1. What do you really want?
2. What makes you happy?
3. What are you afraid of?
4. What has life taught you?
5. What have you lost?
6. What have you gained?
7. To whom are you grateful?
8. Whom would you like to ask for forgiveness?
9. Whom would you like to thank?
10. What dream have you yet to give up?
11. If your life were a book, who would be its main character?

Pause and Reflect

Write your answer in your own words. There is no model answer here.

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FINAL REFLECTION

And Now, One Last Question

And now, one last question.

Among all these stories… where is your own?

You may come away from this book with some answers still to find. Life is no exam that requires you to answer every question today.

Sometimes a single honest question is enough to make us pause and look within.

Our names, roles, relationships and titles tell only part of who we are. Each of us is a whole story in our own right.

Perhaps it is time to listen to your own story.

My story…

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A Small Invitation to Listen

Today, talk to someone you haven’t spoken openly with in a long time.

Simply ask:

“How are you, really?”

Then listen to their answer.

Let them finish. Take your time before offering advice.

Perhaps there is a page in their story that no one has ever read.

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