

LIFE MAPPING EXERCISE

by Michael S. Chen

adapted from J. Robert Clinton, Steve Miller, Myles Lorenzen, and Nathan Shattuck



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INTRODUCTION

Story has long been the primary conveyor of history, and has given meaning and shaped the values of every culture in the world. Whether we are aware of it or not, this has been very true in each of our lives—thus the value of laying it out and looking for the patterns and themes that have formed us.

This exercise is meant to be shared in communities that are seeking to provide an intimate and safe place to behold how God is working, both in our suffering and in our great joy. The very act of sharing these stories in community can be healing, life-giving, and redemptive, bringing to light what was once darkness.

Life mapping can be adapted to fit many contexts, but issues of confidence and privacy should be discussed and acknowledged by those leading it.

WHY PREPARE AND TELL YOUR STORY?

- We all make sense of our lives through story. All of life is experienced as a story, and we are shaped by the stories we live, whether we take the time to understand them or not. That's why God gave us the Bible in a story format. Stories powerfully engage the heart, emotion, and imagination, not just the mind.
- Sharing stories can illuminate brokenness and draw us toward true repentance. Facing our deepest hurts and disappointments in life can lead to the "poverty of spirit" that is the foundation of all true change. We can face our pains, forgive those who have hurt us, grieve over sin, and repent of our self-centered attempts to use this pain as an excuse to not love God and others well.
- Life mapping can help clarify vision and calling. God was laying a sovereign foundation in our lives even before we knew Him personally. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are "His workmanship—His poem or work of art." He has a plan for our lives, a unique calling that He wants us to fulfill. Reflecting prayerfully on our lives helps us to discern threads in the tapestry of our unique design.

GOAL OF OUR TIME TOGETHER

The goal of this time is to create a document that captures salient events in our lives in order to identify and interpret God's activity in our lives. As we reflect on our pasts and our stories, we should gain a stronger understanding of the things that have shaped us and the way we live in light of them. The shape of our sin and brokenness is often a clue to our healing, redemption, and vocation.

What this time is *not* designed to do:

- Identify your next job
- Discern spiritual gifting (although reflection may make patterns more apparent to you)
- Tell you if, when, and whom to marry or whether to have children

PRAYER

O God, you are a God of memory and you call us your great work of art. Help, and make the disjointed events in our lives coherent. Would you be generous with your Spirit so we are able to look into our own memories and pasts, and examine how they have shaped us? Would you protect us from shame, fear, and pride so that we can see with clear eyes who You have made us to be? In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE LIFE MAPPING EXERCISE

1. (20 minutes) Take a stack of Post-it notes of one color, and on each one, write down one THING that represents something very significant in your life. Don't write details—just a noun (person, place, or thing). Err on the side of writing several Post-it notes. Initially, what might you share about yourself to a friendly stranger on a long plane ride?

Examples:

- People
- Places (i.e., geographic locations, houses lived in, etc.)
- Events (even include some that took place before you were born that significantly shaped the emotional, relational environment you were born into)
- Education, jobs, ministries, hobbies, interests
- Your body or health as an experience of discovery, or even perhaps shame
- Successes: what has delighted you the most in your life?
- Failures: what has disappointed you the most in your life?

On these next two, think of those things you have done, as well as those things that have happened to you or around you:

- Joys: what people, places, or events in your life have been most positive and/or make you the most proud or happy when you recall them?
- Sorrows: what have been your deepest hurts and disappointments?

2. (10 minutes) Arrange the Post-it notes in a logical sequence in the columns of the big sheet provided for you. Most people arrange their notes in chronological order from left to right, some use columns by segments in school or life stages, or different addresses or cities they lived in, etc. You can place the notes in whatever order or segment that feels most natural for arranging your story.

3. Choose a new color and transfer to a new Post-it the words that represent challenge, difficulty, or trial in your life.

4. Organize your Post-its into four to seven “chapter” columns.

5. Use a new color Post-it and name the chapters across the top of the big sheet.

6. (15 minutes) Try to identify “deep beliefs” that were formed as a result of each chapter in your life, paying particular attention to challenging events and relationships. These deep beliefs could be indicative of a season of brokenness, or perhaps of great hope. What did you believe about God? What did you believe about yourself? Deep beliefs are most often caught (by watching other people, especially our parents) and come through painful experiences, especially at early ages when we are most impressionable. Hence, believers can be living lives that violate their sincerely held beliefs and convictions because they have never confronted and disarmed the power of their more personal, deep beliefs.

Pay special attention to the values forged in the crucible of the painful events. When painful things happen, it is very human to believe a lie (“It must have been my fault that my childhood abuser did that to me.”) or to make a “vow” (“That hurt so much, I will never allow that to happen again!”). These lies and vows become unconscious but powerful guides to our behavior, becoming the often unexamined Deep Beliefs about ourselves, others, life, God, relationships, etc.

7. Try to identify themes for each chapter with respect to what God was revealing to you during those times. Look back over your emerging timeline for patterns or themes. Ask God to reveal to you now, as you are “retrospectively curious” in looking at your life so far, what He was establishing in your life even before you came to know Him. What patterns do you see in the personal inclinations, pivotal decisions, unique opportunities, and transforming experiences of your history? What was God uniquely preparing you for, even in painful experiences? Remember, God doesn’t waste experiences in our lives. In short, what has God “called” you to in your life?

SOME THOUGHTS ON TELLING YOUR STORY

Think of a “pearl necklace” analogy as you outline your story.

- **The basic chronology of your story is like the string of a pearl necklace—the string is essential to tying things together, but it’s not the heart of the matter.** It’s easy to fall into excessive focus on the chronology or “logistical” details and you don’t ever get around to the pearls—those significant shaping moments or patterns that you experienced and reacted to by protecting yourself from rejection or abandonment, adapting who you were to get the most attention or acceptance you could, or surrendered to God in despair of being able to make it work yourself.

- **The pearls of the necklace are those significant/momentous times:** important times when core lessons and beliefs were learned, when you encountered God afresh, painful experiences when crucial vows or key decisions were probably made. These are those parts of your story that shed insight as to who you really are. These are the pieces of your story that reveal the calling that God has for your life and the barriers to faith that you’ll need to trust God to overcome if you are to become who you really are and fulfill His unique reason for creating you.

Remember, you are doing this in Grace—so don’t compare yourself to anyone else.

- There is no right or wrong way to tell your story.
- You have total freedom to be only as transparent and vulnerable as you feel comfortable being.
- At the same time, challenge yourself to step out of your comfort zone.
- Don’t compare yourself to others. You have to be true to who God has made you to be. This is your story you are telling, not someone else’s.
- Try to have fun preparing and telling your story. Don’t worry about making it perfect or having to impress anyone else.

WRAP UP & PRAY

- Express gratitude for those sharing and the precious stories God has given each of us.
- Acknowledge that we are all a mess and a work in progress! God's unmeasurable love is for his children.
- Be assured that we hold these stories as sacred and in confidence for those who have asked for things to remain private.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit's continued work and illumination.

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