A GIFT GUIDE

THE GIFT OF PRESENCE

Conversations that become a time capsule

also known as

A present for birthdays, for Christmas, or for no reason at all ·

72 questions for the people you love ·

A record of how we change, and what stays the same

Tim Ruth

timruth.uk

PRESENTS AND PRESENCE

A present is often what we give in place of our presence.

We put real care into choosing gifts. But many of them stand in for something else: a parcel that says "I think of you" to someone we rarely see and seldom really talk to.

This is a gift of the real thing. It costs nothing. Instead it asks for the two most valuable things we have: our time and our attention. It's a series of conversations, built around a set of simple questions, between you and someone you love.

A GIFT FOR ANY DAY

BIRTHDAYS

Make the call on the day, or give it as a promise in a card.

CHRISTMAS

A present that costs nothing and is remembered for a lifetime.

NO REASON AT ALL

Because you love someone and want to know them better.

It works between an aunt, uncle, grandparent, godparent or guide parent, or family friend and a child in their life. It works just as well the other way round: let the children ask their grandparents.

A TIME CAPSULE OF VOICES

THE HEART OF THE GIFT

RECORD THE CONVERSATION. ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS AGAIN IN THREE YEARS. THEN AGAIN.

Play the recordings back one after another and you'll hear a person grow: how much changes, and what stays the same. A voice brings someone back whole in a way a photograph can't.

7	10	13	16	19
FIRST CALL	THREE YEARS ON	SIX YEARS ON	NINE YEARS ON	AND BEYOND

Three years is long enough that the questions feel fresh and the old answers are forgotten. Use the same questions in the same order each time, so you can hear the difference. And if anyone would rather not be recorded, just talk. The conversation is the gift.

HOW IT WORKS

A resource, not a rulebook.

1 CHOOSE YOUR PERSON

One asker, one person answering: an aunt or uncle, a godparent or guide parent, a grandparent, a friend. Children, teenagers, parents and grandparents all have something to say. A grandparent's answers are often the ones a family most wishes it had recorded.

2 BOOK ONE CALL

Start with one. A single conversation is already a wonderful gift. If you both enjoy it, you can spread the questions over anything from one to four sessions, weekly, fortnightly or monthly, whatever suits. They're laid out as three conversations, but there are no hard and fast rules. Carry on while you're having fun; if the energy isn't flowing, stop and pick it up another time.

3 PRESS RECORD, VOICE ONLY

Many phones can now record a call. You can also use Zoom or a similar app with the cameras off, or run a voice recorder on a second phone beside you. Keep it to voice: we talk differently when we aren't watching our own face looking back at us. It's less distracting and far more intimate. Start by saying the date, then: "We're going to record this. At the end, you can tell me if you're happy for anyone else to hear it, and who."

4 ASK, THEN LISTEN

Ask in order. Start each call with "How are you today?" The only follow-ups you need are "Tell me more" and "Why?" Don't correct, judge or fix.

5 CLOSE THE CAPSULE

At the end, ask: "Who would you like to be able to hear this?" Wait until the end, because no one knows beforehand where a conversation will go. Respect the answer. Keep a copy, and give one to the person who answered. It's theirs.

6 COME BACK IN THREE YEARS

Same questions, same order. Then listen to both recordings together.

A FEW WORDS OF CARE

SKIP OR STOP

Some answers will be tender. The asker can skip any question and end any call.

LISTEN; DON'T FIX

If something hard comes up, say thank you and move on. Talk it over with a parent afterwards.

SAFETY COMES FIRST

With young children, anything that suggests a child isn't safe goes to a parent. Discretion covers everything else.

EXPECT THE TRUTH

Out of the mouths of babes. Parents may hear things they'd rather not. That is part of the gift too.

CONVERSATION ONE

EVERYDAY LIFE

Who you are, what you do, what you love

A for children B for adults, from about 18. Where a question has two versions, pick the one that fits.

1 Who are you?

2 How old are you?

3 How are you today?

4 What do you love doing?

5 What don't you like doing?

6 Do you have a favourite time of day?

7 Tell me about a place you love.

8 What are you good at?

9 What are you proud of?

10 What do you find hard?

11 What are you learning?

12 What could you teach someone?

13 A What do you get to decide?
B What are you deciding at the moment?

14 Do you like going to bed?

15 Do you ever feel bored?

16 What animal would you be?

17 What would you do with a million pounds?

18 Who do you know who loves their work?

19 A Why do grown-ups work?
B What is work for?

20 What's your earliest memory?

21 What have you changed your mind about?

22 Where would you like to go?

23 What do you dream about at night?

24 When are you happiest?

BEFORE YOU STOP RECORDING

Who would you like to be able to hear this?

CONVERSATION TWO

PEOPLE AND FEELINGS

Friends, family, and the weather inside

25 Do you have a best friend?

26 How did you become friends?

27 What do your friends like about you?

28 Who or what makes you laugh?

29 Who looks after you?

30 Who do you look after?

31 A Who gives you hugs?
B Who do you feel close to?

32 What is your mum like?

33 What is your dad like?

34 What does your mum always say? And your dad?

35 How do you know someone loves you?

36 Who understands you?

37 Who can you tell anything to?

38 Who do you miss?

39 When do you get cross?

40 How do you say sorry?

41 How do you calm down?

42 Where do you go when you're upset?

43 What are you scared of?

44 Do you ever worry about anything?

45 Do you ever feel lonely?

46 How do you feel when you're alone?

47 Where do you feel safe?

48 Where do you feel at home?

> BEFORE YOU STOP RECORDING
>
> Who would you like to be able to hear this?

CONVERSATION THREE

GROWING UP AND THE BIG QUESTIONS

Who you're becoming, and what it's all for

49 When do you feel free?

50 When do you feel brave?

51 When do you feel small?

52 When do you feel important?

53 When do you feel grown-up?

54 When will you be grown up?

55 Who would you like to be like?

56 What will you do the way your parents do?

57 What will you do differently?

58 What kind of parent would you be?

59 What do you dream of doing?

60 Where do dreams come from?

61 How do you think?

62 Why do people fight?

63 Why do people cry?

64 Why do people lie?

65 Why do people love each other?

66 How do you know something is true?

67 What do you find beautiful?

68 Why are we here?

69 Where do people go when they die?

70 What would you change?

71 What do you wish for?

72 What would you like to say to yourself when you hear this?

BEFORE YOU STOP RECORDING

Who would you like to be able to hear this?

TIME CAPSULE RECORD

Keep this page with the recordings.

DATE	NAME	AGE	ASKED BY	WHO MAY LISTEN

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

These questions began with recordings of my own children, and a brother confined to bed who loves his nieces and nephews. As a funeral celebrant, I sit with families to gather the story of someone who has died, and too often they knew remarkably little about the person they had lost. We live alongside each other for decades and rarely ask.

Every question is short, because the fewer words a question has, the more room there is for an answer. I avoided favourites and superlatives, which ask people to rank rather than remember. Beneath the questions sits the list of universal human needs from Marshall B. Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*: listen to the answers and you'll hear how well those needs are being met.

For years our family has loved **The School of Life**'s boxes of 100 Questions, especially the family edition. Several questions here began as ones we first met there, rewritten into this simpler form. Find them at shop.theschooloflife.com.

> PASS IT ON
>
> This guide is free to share. Send it to anyone who might love it, or point them to **timruth.uk/presence**.