1. StoryPrompt Section: Asking Questions that Bring Stories Alive

Why Story Arcs Matter

Every culture, every family, and every person carries stories. What makes a story memorable — whether it's told around a kitchen table or in a movie theatre — is the shape it takes. This shape is called a story arc.

Joseph Campbell, who studied myths from all over the world, called this arc the **Hero's Journey**. It's the timeless rhythm of a person leaving what they know, facing struggles, finding allies, making choices, and returning changed. We are drawn to this pattern because it reflects life itself: all of us face challenges, all of us make decisions, and all of us grow through the journey.

Think of the stories we all know:

- In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker leaves his home, faces danger, finds mentors and allies, and returns transformed into a hero.
- In Japanese culture, the folktale of **Momotarō (Peach Boy)** tells of a boy who sets out on a dangerous journey, gathers loyal companions, defeats demons, and returns home with peace and treasure for his people.
- The real life of **Miyamoto Musashi**, one of Japan's most legendary samurai, follows the same pattern: from his humble beginnings, through countless duels and hardships, to his transformation into a philosopher and teacher whose wisdom still guides people centuries later.

These stories endure not because of the facts alone, but because of the arc: **a beginning, a challenge, a turning point, and a return.**

Why This Matters for Our Family and Our Community Stories

When we capture stories from our families, we are doing the same thing. We are giving voice to the heroes in our own lineage — parents, grandparents, and ancestors who endured challenges, made choices, and created a better life for those who came after.

For the Nikkei community, this storytelling has a special power:

- It preserves the struggles and triumphs of generations past.
- It connects us to our families and cultural roots.
- It helps others outside the community understand our journey — not as something "different," but as something deeply human and relatable.

Imagine, for example, a Nikkei family's story of being uprooted during internment:

- Beginning: A child living an ordinary life on the coast, suddenly told they must leave their home.
- Challenge: Their family faces loss, injustice, and uncertainty in the camps.
- Turning Point: With resilience, they work together, learn new skills, and hold on to traditions.
- Return/Legacy: Years later, they rebuild their lives, and their children grow up carrying both the scars and the wisdom of that experience.

This is a Hero's Journey — just like Luke Skywalker, just like Momotarō, just like Musashi.

The Power of Shared Humanity

When we tell our family stories through this arc, we do more than preserve history. We tap into something bigger: our shared humanity. People from any culture can hear these stories and feel the same emotions — struggle, hope, love, triumph.

And when we listen to each other's stories, we begin to see that we are more similar than we are different.

That's the gift of this process. These stories not only connect your family to its heritage, but they also connect all of us to the greater human story.

Finding the Stories

Stories don't just come from facts or dates — they need gentle prompts and space to unfold. The Smithsonian Oral History and Folklife Interviewing Guides emphasize that there is no single set of questions that fits every family or community. Lists of prompts are best used as guideposts: they spark memories, but it's up to the storyteller to choose where to go.

Tips for drawing out stories:

- Start simple with names, places, and family basics. Build comfort before going deeper.
- Think in themes like childhood, migration, community life, celebrations, or lessons learned.
- Use memory joggers such as photos, heirlooms, or recipes to unlock rich details.
- Invite sensory memories — ask what something looked, smelled, or felt like.
- Leave space for surprises — often the most powerful stories emerge when you follow a tangent with curiosity.

You'll find in the following sections both structured question sets and flexible tools — like prompt cards, the Hero's Journey Quick Pick, and the Troubleshooting guide — to help bring these memories alive.

They come from questions that spark memories, emotions, and meaning. This section gives you a set of prompts — from simple openers to deeper follow-up questions — that help create a story arc: setting, challenge, decision, and triumph.

Use these like gentle invitations. You don't need to ask them all — choose what feels natural. And remember, the most important part is to listen with curiosity.

Here are a few other communities guides to get inspiration from.

https://densho.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Densho-Guide-to-Conducting-Oral-History-Interviews.pdf

https://www.historylink.org/Content/education/downloads/Densho_Student_Guide_to_Oral_Histories.pdf

https://selfevidentshow.com/oral-history-toolkit

1. Warm-Up Questions (Opening the Door)

These are light, fun, and easy questions to help someone relax and start talking:

- What was your favourite food growing up? Tell me about the foods you remember growing up with.
- Did you have a special place where you liked to play as a child?
- Who was someone you looked up to when you were young?
- What's a song, smell, or taste that always brings back a memory?

Follow-up: *"Can you tell me about a time that memory really came alive for you?"*

2. Family and Community Roots

These questions connect to heritage and belonging:

- What was life like in your family home?
- Describe the layout of the home as you walk in the front door.
- How did your parents or grandparents shape who you are?
- What traditions did your family keep alive?
- Was there a time when you felt especially proud of your family or community?

Follow-up: *"How do you see those traditions or values showing up in your life today?"*

3. Challenge and Resilience

Every family has faced struggles — these are often the most powerful stories.

- What was one of the hardest times you or your family went through?
- How did you get through it? Who helped you most?
- Was there ever a moment you thought you might give up, but didn't?
- How did those challenges change you or your family?

Follow-up: *"Looking back, what did that experience teach you about yourself?"*

4. Migration, Identity, and Belonging (Nikkei-specific prompts)

Many Nikkei families have stories of moving, rebuilding, and finding identity.

- What do you know about your family's journey to Canada (or another place)?
- What was life like during the time of internment or after the war?
- How did your family rebuild their lives and community?
- Have you ever felt torn between two cultures, and how did you navigate that?

Follow-up: *"What do you want younger generations to understand about that experience?"*

5. Triumphs and Celebrations

Balance the challenges with moments of joy and achievement.

- What is something you are most proud of?
- Was there a time you surprised yourself by what you could do?
- Can you share a story of a celebration, festival, or gathering that stands out?
- Who in your family or community inspired you most with their courage or kindness?

Follow-up: *"How does that moment continue to inspire you today?"*

6. Wisdom and Legacy

Stories often hold lessons. These questions help uncover them:

- What advice would you give to your younger self?
- What do you most want your children or grandchildren to know about you?
- What do you think people should never forget about our history?
- If you could leave one message for future generations, what would it be?

Follow-up: *"Why is that message important to you?"*

7. Story Arc Guide (Simple Flow)

If you want to shape a full story, here's a gentle arc you can guide someone through:

- Setting: "Can you paint the picture of where this story begins?"
- Challenge: "What was happening that made this time difficult or important?"
- Decision: "What choice did you or your family have to make?"
- Triumph/Outcome: "How did things turn out in the end?"
- Reflection: "What do you think this story teaches us today?"

Tip: Don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes the most powerful answers come after a pause.

Tools in This Section

- StorySeeds — a large bank of prompts, organized by theme.
- Hero's Journey Quick Pick — a simple 6-step path to shape any memory into a full story.
- Troubleshooting Guide — quick tips for when conversations get stuck.
- Prompt Sheets — downloadable, printable sheets you can carry into an interview.

StorySeeds: A Big List of Questions to Spark Memories

Hero's Journey Quick Pick Cheat Sheet

Use this when you want to help someone share a story that has real shape, meaning, and impact. You don't have to follow it word-for-word — just use it as a guide.

Step 1: Spark a Memory

Begin by inviting them to remember something specific.

- "Can you tell me about a time in your life that really stands out?"
- "What's a story your family tells over and over again?"
- "Was there ever a time when life suddenly changed for you or your family?"
- "Do you remember a moment that tested you — or made you proud?"

These are broad but **memory-anchored** questions. They'll surface a moment or fragment you can work with.

Step 2: Find the Challenge

Once they start sharing, lean into the challenge or tension.

- "What made that moment hard, important, or different?"
- "How did you feel when that was happening?"
- "What was at stake for you or your family?"

Step 3: Discover the Turning Point

Look for the decision or shift.

- "What did you (or your family) decide to do?"
- "Was there a moment you thought about giving up — or chose to keep going?"
- "What changed that helped you move forward?"

Step 4: Bring in Allies and Support

Every journey has helpers.

- "Who helped you through this time?"
- "Did anyone surprise you with their kindness or courage?"
- "Was there a piece of advice or support that stayed with you?"

Step 5: Draw Out the Outcome

Move toward the resolution.

- "What happened in the end?"
- "How were things different afterward?"
- "What do you remember most about that time now?"

Step 6: Anchor the Meaning

Finish by helping them reflect.

- "What did that experience teach you?"
- "What lesson do you want your children or grandchildren to learn from this?"
- "How did that moment shape the person you became?"

Pro Tip: Listen for "story signals."

- Emotional words (*scared, proud, ashamed, relieved*) → follow up with "Tell me more about that feeling."
- Phrases like *"That's when everything changed"* → zoom in and ask what changed.
- Mentions of people (*my grandmother always…*) → ask why that person mattered so much.

These signals are like treasure markers. Follow them and you'll find the heart of the story.

Troubleshooting: When Conversations Get Stuck

Sometimes, storytellers may give short answers, drift off-topic, or struggle to share. That's normal. Here are some tips:

1. If they give one-word answers

- Try asking for a specific memory:
    - "Can you tell me about a time when that really happened?"
    - "What did it look like, sound like, or smell like?"
- Use sensory prompts:
    - "What do you remember seeing or hearing most clearly?"
    - "If you close your eyes, what detail comes back first?"

2. If they wander off-topic

- Gently bring them back with curiosity, not correction:
    - "That's a wonderful story. Can I ask how it connects to the time you were talking about earlier?"
    - "That reminds me of something you mentioned before — can you tell me more about that?"

3. If they seem stuck or unsure what to share

- Offer them choices:
    - "Would you rather tell me about your childhood, or about your work life?"
    - "Do you want to share a story of a challenge or a celebration?"
- Try contrast prompts:
    - "What was the happiest time you remember? What about the hardest?"
    - "Who made you feel safe? Who challenged you most?"

4. Finding the gems

As you listen, look for:

- Emotional words ("I was scared… relieved… proud…") → follow up with: *"Can you tell me more about that feeling?"*
- Turning points ("That's when everything changed…") → follow up with: *"What made it change? What happened next?"*
- Relationships ("My grandmother always…") → follow up with: *"What do you think made her so important in your life?"*

Tip: Think of yourself as a treasure-hunter. The goal is not to collect every detail, but to notice the golden moments — the emotions, the turning points, the lessons — and invite the storyteller to expand on them.

This way, even a hesitant or talkative storyteller can still land on a memorable, meaningful Hero's Journey story.

1. Warm-Up Questions (Opening the Door)

Gentle, playful questions to help someone relax and begin sharing.

- What was your favourite food growing up?
- Did you have a favourite toy or game as a child?
- Who was your best friend when you were little?
- What was your favourite subject in school?
- Was there a chore you hated doing as a kid?
- Did you ever get into mischief? Can you tell me about it?
- What was your favourite place to play?
- Did you have a pet? Tell me about them.
- What was your favourite holiday or celebration?
- Did you have a favourite teacher? What made them special?
- What song reminds you of your childhood?
- Was there a meal your parents or grandparents always made?
- What was your favourite season of the year, and why?
- Did you have a bedtime story or family tradition you loved?
- Can you remember a funny moment that still makes you laugh?
- Did you have a nickname growing up?
- What was the first movie you remember seeing?
- Did you ever have a secret hiding place?
- What made you feel safe as a child?

- Did you ever imagine what you wanted to be when you grew up?
- What was the first trip or adventure you remember taking?
- Did you ever collect anything (stamps, cards, toys)?
- What clothes did you love to wear?
- Did you ever have a favourite book or comic?
- What's one memory of joy or laughter from your childhood?
- What is your earliest childhood memory, and how old do you think you were?
- Can you describe your childhood home in detail?
- Did you ever have an imaginary friend or a favourite stuffed animal?
- How did you learn to ride a bike (or scooter), and who taught you?
- Were there any local parks or playgrounds that were important in your childhood?
- What was your proudest achievement in school?
- Did you ever have a school uniform? How did you feel about it?
- Did you ever experience a school tradition (sports day, cultural day, etc.) that you loved?
- Did you play Japanese games (like kendama or marbles) or Canadian ones, or both?
- What Japanese or Canadian holidays do you remember most clearly as a child?
- Did you grow up speaking Japanese, English, or both at home?

2. Family and Community Roots

These invite stories about belonging, heritage, and the people who shaped you.

- What was life like in your family home?
- How did your parents or grandparents meet?
- What traditions were most important in your household?
- Did you have a family recipe that has been passed down?
- What was mealtime like in your family?
- Who was the storyteller in your family?
- What role did faith, religion, or spirituality play in your home?
- Did your family speak more than one language?
- What do you remember about your grandparents?
- Did your family ever gather with other Nikkei families? What was that like?
- Was there someone in your family who kept the community together?
- Did you celebrate Japanese festivals or Canadian holidays, or both?
- Was there an elder who influenced you deeply?
- What values did your parents or grandparents emphasize most?
- How did your family express love and care for one another?
- What did your family do for fun?
- Did you feel more connected to your Japanese side or Canadian side — or both?
- What role did neighbors and community play in your life?
- Did you ever feel different from the children around you? How so?

- What was a moment you felt proud to be part of your family or community?
- Were there times you wished you knew more about your ancestry?
- Did your family have heirlooms, photos, or keepsakes?
- What was a typical Sunday (or day off) like in your household?
- Did you ever hear stories about Japan from your parents or grandparents?
- What do you think your family's greatest strength has been across generations?
- What do you remember about your parents' lives before you came along?
- Did you and your siblings get along as children?
- How did your family handle chores, and which ones were your responsibility?
- What sayings or mottos did your parents or grandparents often repeat?
- Did your family move houses? How did that affect you?
- Were there ever family secrets or stories you learned later in life?
- What did your grandparents tell you about life in Japan or pre-internment Canada?
- Did your family gather with other Nikkei families, and what do you remember about that?
- Did your parents or grandparents keep Japanese recipes alive, and do you still cook them?
- What role did music, Japanese or Canadian, play in your home?

3. Challenge and Resilience

Moments of struggle often reveal strength, courage, and lessons.

- What was one of the hardest times your family faced?
- How did you or your family get through it?
- Did you ever feel scared about the future?
- Was there a time you thought you might give up, but didn't?
- Who supported you most during hard times?
- Did your family ever lose something important? How did you rebuild?
- Was there a time when others treated you unfairly?
- Did you ever experience bullying or discrimination?
- What was it like to start over in a new place or community?
- Was there a time when money was very tight? How did you manage?
- Did your family ever have to make a sacrifice for survival?
- Can you share a memory of a parent's or grandparent's strength?
- What gave you hope during difficult times?
- Did you ever feel alone, and how did you overcome it?
- Was there an event that changed your family forever?
- Did you ever have to work very hard as a child or teen?
- Was there a time when you surprised yourself with your own resilience?
- Did you ever find joy even in the middle of hardship?
- How did your family keep traditions alive during tough times?

- Looking back, what did those challenges teach you about life?
- Was there ever a time your community came together to help each other?
- Did your family ever face injustice or exclusion?
- What do you remember about moving into or out of the camps?
- How did you or your family adapt to loss or change?
- What advice would you give others about getting through hard times?
- What family rules seemed strict at the time but make sense now?
- What was your biggest fear or worry as a child?
- Did you ever experience a setback early in life or school, and how did you recover?
- Was there a time you had to swallow your pride for the greater good?
- How did your family cope with being relocated or losing their home?
- Did your parents ever share stories about internment or rebuilding after?
- How did your family or community support each other during hard times?

4. Migration, Identity, and Belonging (Nikkei-Specific)

- What do you know about your family's journey to Canada?
- Did your family talk about life in Japan?
- What did your parents or grandparents leave behind when they moved?
- How did they adjust to their new home?
- What was life like before, during, and after internment?
- Do you remember the first time you realized your family had a different story than others around you?
- Was there ever a moment when you felt caught between two cultures?
- How did your family keep their Japanese identity alive?
- Was there pressure to "fit in" as Canadian?
- What traditions did your family continue after moving?
- What was the first language you spoke at home?
- Did you ever feel embarrassed or proud of your heritage?
- How did your family talk about being Japanese Canadian?
- Did you ever visit Japan? What was that experience like?
- Did your parents or grandparents ever wish they had stayed in Japan?
- What do you think was the hardest part of migration for your family?
- Did you ever feel excluded because of your heritage?
- Was there a moment when you felt deeply connected to your Nikkei identity?
- How did your family rebuild their lives after internment?
- What was lost — and what was carried forward — through migration?

- Do you think your family's sacrifices are understood by others?
- Was there a story of courage passed down about survival or starting over?
- How did being Nikkei influence your education, work, or relationships?
- Do you feel more Japanese, more Canadian, or both?
- What do you most want future generations to understand about this journey?
- Did you ever experience culture shock in a new community or school?
- Did your parents ever wish they had stayed in Japan?
- What did your family bring with them when they were forced to move or migrate?
- Did you feel pressure to hide or change parts of your identity growing up?
- Have you ever made friendships or relationships across cultural divides?
- Did you ever visit Japan — what was it like to see the country your family came from?
- How did your family balance keeping Japanese traditions while fitting into Canadian society?
- What part of being Japanese Canadian makes you most proud?

5. Triumphs and Celebrations

Balancing hardship with joy, pride, and victories.

- What is something you are most proud of?
- Did you ever win an award, medal, or recognition?
- Was there a time you surprised yourself with success?
- Did you ever achieve something people thought you couldn't?
- What was your happiest childhood memory?
- Did your family celebrate birthdays, weddings, or anniversaries?
- Was there a festival or community event that meant a lot to you?
- What was the best gift you ever received?
- Was there a tradition that brought your family together in joy?
- What was your wedding like?
- Did you ever graduate or finish school against the odds?
- Did you ever start a business, craft, or project you're proud of?
- Was there a story of kindness that stands out in your life?
- What was the proudest moment of being a parent or grandparent?
- Did you ever travel somewhere that filled you with joy?
- Was there a time when your family celebrated despite hardship?
- Did you ever see someone in your family honored in public?
- What traditions made holidays or gatherings special?
- Was there a special family reunion you remember?
- What achievement do you want people to remember you for?

- Did you ever perform in music, sports, or art?
- What was your proudest work accomplishment?
- Did you ever build or create something with your hands?
- What was your proudest contribution to your community?
- How do you like to celebrate your culture today?
- Tell me about your wedding day (or how you imagined it).
- What was the birth of your children like for you?
- How did you celebrate becoming an adult (e.g., 18, 21, or another milestone)?
- Did you ever win an award or honor that was especially meaningful?
- Did you ever perform in sports, arts, or music, and how did it feel?
- What community events made you feel proud to be part of the Nikkei community?
- What Japanese or Nikkei festivals (Obon, Powell Street Festival, etc.) do you remember most vividly?
- Did your family celebrate Oshogatsu (New Year)? What traditions did you follow?
- Did you ever celebrate even during hard times in the camps or afterward?

6. Wisdom and Legacy

These help distill the meaning of the story.

- What advice would you give your younger self?
- What is the most important lesson you've learned in life?
- What do you most want your children or grandchildren to know about you?
- What do you think people should never forget about our history?
- What do you think makes life meaningful?
- Was there a saying or proverb your parents repeated often?
- What is your favourite Japanese saying or teaching?
- How do you want to be remembered?
- What has been your guiding principle in life?
- What gives you hope for the future?
- What do you think the world needs more of?
- If you could pass down one tradition, what would it be?
- Was there ever a moment of wisdom from an elder that shaped you?
- What do you wish you had done differently?
- What do you wish you had thanked someone for?
- What role has forgiveness played in your life?
- How do you define strength?
- What do you think the younger generation struggles to understand?
- What has brought you the most joy in life?
- What does being Nikkei mean to you today?
- What lesson do you think the world can learn from the Nikkei story?

- What keeps you grounded when life feels uncertain?
- What legacy did your parents or grandparents leave you?
- What legacy would you like to leave for future generations?
- What message would you like to say directly to your family now?
- What guiding principle or philosophy has helped you most?
- Have you ever changed your mind about a strongly held belief?
- How do you define "living a good life"?
- Do you believe everything happens for a reason, or do we make our own luck?
- How do you hope your children and grandchildren will carry on your values?
- What advice would you give your teenage self?
- What wisdom did your parents or grandparents pass down from their experiences in internment or migration?
- What Japanese saying or proverb carries the most meaning for you?

7. Grab Bag: Pick & Choose Questions

Here are extra questions to mix in anywhere:

- What smell always reminds you of your childhood?
- Did you ever feel like an outsider?
- What's one small act of kindness you'll never forget?
- What invention changed your life?
- Was there a time you felt truly free?
- What was your first job?
- Who was your first crush?
- What was the hardest goodbye you've ever said?
- What's the best piece of advice you ever received?
- Did you ever keep a secret you've never told before?
- What is the bravest thing you've ever done?
- Who do you wish you could thank right now?
- What's a story about laughter that always makes you smile?
- Did you ever feel connected to nature in a special way?
- What do you want people to know about your generation?
- What was the funniest mischief you ever got into as a child?
- What's the most embarrassing moment you've ever experienced?
- What was your first job, and what did you do with your first paycheck?
- What invention or change in technology changed your life?
- What was your most surprising or spontaneous life decision?
- Did you ever have a travel mishap that turned into a funny story?

- What is one story from your family that always makes everyone laugh?
- Did you ever learn a Japanese cultural tradition that others around you didn't know?

The goal isn't to ask every question — it's to find the ones that spark memory, emotion, and meaning. The pauses, the laughter, and even the tears will be part of what makes the story come alive.