Before the Stories Go Quiet

On collecting the inheritance your elders are still carrying.



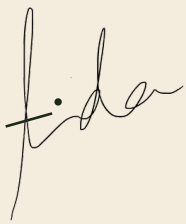
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Assalamu'alaikum, my dearest Champs

This guide comes from a session that our Champ, Aliah Mazli, author of 'Tokki, Apa Khabar?' (*Tokki, how are you?*), led. Aliah spent seven years sitting with her grandfather, Tokki, who is 94 this year, collecting his stories before they went quiet.

This guide not only highlights Tokki's story, beautiful and inspiring, as it is. I also wanted to highlight the adab Aliah carried and the questions she asked, because those are what we can carry into our own elders' living rooms.

So take your time with these pages, and then take them to someone you love. I pray it brings you closer to the ones who came before you, while they are still here to tell you their stories. Ameen.



First, meet tokki.

Gems from Tokki

Tokki is Aliah's grandfather. He turned 94 this year. He was a schoolteacher for 35 years and never stopped teaching: after retiring, he and Tok, his wife of almost 70 years, taught Qur'an to the children and elders of their village. The two of them became 8 children, 45 grandchildren (Aliah's one of them!) and 33 great-grandchildren. What Aliah kept returning to was this: Tokki rarely instructed anyone. He did the thing, and the family followed.

1 Tokki stood up first.

When prayer was near, he never called out for everyone to get ready. He would say it was almost time, stand, and take his wudhu'. The house followed, laid out the mats, and waited until everyone could pray in jemaah. He drove himself to the mosque until he was 92 or 93. Now, on days he is unwell, he still asks for at least one makmum behind him.

2 Tokki always accompanies.

Aliah once arrived after lunch and ate alone in the kitchen. She heard footsteps. It was Tokki. "It's okay, I will accompany you." He didn't talk. He sat until she finished, and they went up together. At his table there are no gadgets, and the family talks for hours.

3 Tokki is always in Zikir

Ask Tokki a question and he goes quiet for a minute or two before he answers. If he doesn't know, he says, "I'm sorry, I don't know." *If you don't have anything nice to say, remain silent and do zikir instead.*

7 Years.
1 Mantra.

Aliah started because of a loss. Both her maternal grandparents had passed away with stories she could no longer pass on. And for Tok, it was already too late: a stroke ten years ago had taken much of her memory.

Tokki was 87 when she began. Each visit was a four-hour journey, and each sitting ran one to three hours, which drained him. She had one year of visits before COVID. After that it was calls, texts and voice notes, with long waits in between.

She transcribed more than ten hours of recordings by herself, while working, studying for her Master's, raising her children and going through two operations. She rewrote the manuscript many times. Did she think about giving up? "Yes, many times."

Aliah's Mantra to Keep Going:

"Tokki is getting older. It's either I go first or he goes first."

This year, at 94, Tokki held the book and signed it.

Everyone should keep a journal and write your life down. Or you would never know how far you've come.

-Tokki

The Adab

Aliah shared seven things she held on to for seven years, to make sure the story stayed Tokki's and never became hers.

1 PERMISSION COMES FIRST

Aliah asked before every step, down to the cover. And when Tokki said “this part, do not put”, it stayed out. With eight children, he did not want one spoken of more than another. Much of those ten hours is still with her, in secret.

FOR US Ask before you press record. Ask again before anything goes into the family group chat. What they ask you to keep, you keep.

2 INTENTION

Whenever Aliah lost focus, she went back to why she started: that it be hasanah for him and of benefit to others.

FOR US Before each visit, ask yourself who this is for. If the answer is “for them, and for those after us”, Bismillah!

3 QUESTIONS PREPARED WITH CARE

Tokki is Aliah’s own grandfather, and still she would not ask casually. Remembering costs him energy, so the question has to do some of the work.

FOR US Write your questions before you go. Some examples can be found in the later pages of this guide.

4 THEY READ IT BEFORE ANYONE ELSE

Tokki took three months to read the full manuscript. Only when he said, “Alhamdulillah, you may proceed,” did the editing begin.

FOR US Read back what you wrote, or play back what you recorded. Let them correct you. Their “yes” comes before anyone else sees it.

5 ASK FOR THEIR DUAS

Aliah asked for his du'as continuously, from the first visit to the night of our session.

FOR US Ask your elder to make du'a for what you are doing, and for you. It makes them a partner in the work.

6 UPDATE THEM AT EVERY STAGE

Aliah told Tokki what was happening at each step, "because he is the story."

FOR US Don't collect and disappear. Tell them what you have done with what they gave you, and who has heard it.

7 ALWAYS PUT THEM FIRST

Tokki's wishes, his energy and his dignity came before the book.

FOR US Watch their energy and stop when they tire. Go in person if you can. If a memory will not come, leave it and come back another day.



How to Ask

Aliah pointed out that we can live our whole lives beside our grandparents, aunts and uncles and still only ever ask: how are you, what are you doing now? Her own first questions did not work either. She had to redo many of them, and Tokki told her why.

> *"Aliah, it's not that I cannot tell you. I need you to dig deeper and ask me deeper questions, so that I can fork out the memories."*

10 questions that opened Tokki

01

What was your nature when you were young? Your personality: were you an active, shy or mischievous boy?

Aliah asked this to meet the person he was before he was Tokki, because that character built who he is today. A gentle one to begin with.

02

What are some of your childhood memories that you still cherish and remember?

Aliah said this sounds vague on its own. Follow it with an age, a place or a situation they might remember, and the memories start to come.

03

Do you still remember your late father and mother's daily routines, and the activities they liked to do in their pastime?

Take one parent at a time. "What did your mother do first, every morning?"

04

Do you still remember your late father and mother's features? The shape of their faces, the hands, the eyes, the noses, the lips, the skin, the voices.

These are people you may never have seen a photograph of. Write down every detail they give you.

05

You always practise eating together for meals. Do you still remember the memories or stories shared at the table while enjoying food with your loved ones?

Swap the first line for something your elder always does. “You always…” and then your question.

06

Both of your parents, your siblings and two grandchildren passed away at different stages of your life. How do you take in the pain of losing someone so dear, while embracing the grief instead of fighting it?

Name the loss gently and by name. Go slowly. It is fine to leave this for a later visit.

07

You loved teaching and education so much that you still share knowledge at the age of 94. What makes you keep on doing so without thinking of it as a burden, but pure joy?

What has your elder done faithfully for decades? Cooking for everyone, the garden, the surau. Ask what kept it joyful.

08

What are the du'as that you always prayed, to have this big family of yours that grows with love and tight family kinship?

Ask for the exact words. Write them down, and start making them yourself.

09

You have lived almost a century, masha-Allah! What are the routines you keep close to you to maintain a healthy mind, heart and your relationship with Allah, family and the community?

Ask what a normal day looked like at 30, at 50, and now.

10

You have eight children with different personalities and attitudes. How do you keep them in check and nurture them to have strong sibling bonds with each other?

Ask about whatever you are in the middle of now: marriage, raising children, work.

What if you don't have a Tokki?

Then be the one who starts.

Tokki's message to us that night was that everyone is a teacher: first to yourself, then to your family, your friends and your community.

Aliah's book began with two people. One willing to tell the story, and one willing to listen. You can be either one.

Now, it's your turn!

THIS WEEK

- Choose one elder.
- Choose two questions from this guide and make them theirs.
- Ask their permission, then sit with them and listen.