

**Excerpt from *Soul Notes: A Guide to Eldering Through Reflection, Story and Meaning*
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Designing Your Map

Life Mapping allows you to see coherence and to translate experience into pattern. Once you sense your landscape, begin sketching its contours.

Prepare your canvas or blank paper

Think of your map as a Memory Field. Each cartographer chooses their scale. You can map decades, chapters, or themes.

Divide your map into four or five broad life terrains, for example: childhood, adolescence, midlife, later life. This gives a spatial metaphor for time. It's not rigid like a timeline but more like a topographical map. Think of these life terrains as landscapes rather than boxes — open and interconnected.

Recall your landmarks.

Identify key memories, thresholds, or experiences that shaped who you are. These are the “landmarks” of your inner world. Choose a few defining memories per decade or life chapter, rather than trying to capture everything. Use the reflective prompts that follow this section to identify chosen and significant life memories.

Prioritize moments.

Start with three to five landmarks per section that truly shaped who you are. Choose themes (e.g., resilience, love, learning) and then pick key moments that embody them

Consider balancing memories so there are moments of descent alongside those of ascent to keep the journey honest, mapping both light and density. Think of the turning points or thresholds related to each landmark.

Choose and draw your images.

Each entry begins with an image or sketch. Draw a picture that represents the event in your life you are remembering. Then think about what the experience *felt like*. The drawing expresses the feeling.

Choose the corresponding symbol.

Use a symbol from the map legend — circles, lines, spirals, bridges, waves - to represent each moment or theme you include. Using a symbol creates structure for the map and brings the life story into visible form. It also shows how continuity can stretch across multiple life phases.

The symbol records the pattern and keeps the map readable, however they are not a replacement for the imagery

Connect your terrain.

Draw lines, rivers, or paths between related memories. Use dotted and solid lines to connect the non-obvious connections and consider choosing different colors for the lines to denote a range of meanings.

Use symbolic layering - For example, a mountain with a winding road to symbolize both the challenge and the resilience that grew from it.

Add feeling with color.

Use shading, color, or texture to convey emotion, energy, or significance. If color is used to denote feeling, create a color meaning explanation in your map legend and journal

Reflect and record.

Keep a companion journal. Each time you place a symbol on your map, record it. Keep reflections short—just enough to recall the feeling and meaning. Write a brief note for each symbol you add. Let the words and image together tell the story.

Journal Chart

Symbol	Episode Title	Life Period	Reflection (1–3 sentences)
circle	Leaving home	Late teens	Off to college

Example of an Arc - Mapping a Life Passage- (Marriage)

Here is how a single life passage (marriage) might unfold across quadrants using simple geometric symbols. It is an example of how continuity within a theme may stretch across multiple life phases.

Young Adulthood – Engagement: Two parallel lines converging; small bridge connecting two terrains (Bridge) — Crossing into partnership, new union.

Adulthood – Marriage: Circle enclosing two small squares; strong straight line between them (Circle + Line) — Stability, shared foundation.

Midlife – Children: Smaller circles or squares branching from main line (Circle / Square) — New cycles, growth from roots.

Later Adulthood – Divorce or Widowhood: Broken bridge, river diverging into two paths, or wave line moving apart (Broken Line + Wave) — Change, loss, emotional release, reorientation.

Later Adulthood / Horizon – Singleness or Renewal: New spiral or star near the boundary of the map (Spiral + Star) Integration, new self-understanding, illumination.

Symbol Legend

Foundations

- Square – Stability, grounding, foundations
- Triangle – Thresholds, turning points, challenges
- Circle – Cycles, return, wholeness

Flow

- Wave – Emotions, flow, release
- Straight Line – Connection, continuity
- Broken Line – Pauses, deserts, waiting, emptiness
- Bridge – Transition, reconciliation, crossing
- Wind Lines – Change of course, unseen movement, intuition

Transformation

- Flame – Passion, renewal
- Cave – Introspection, descent, inner reflection
- Spiral – Growth, recurring patterns, unfolding

Illumination

- Star – Illumination, insight, orientation

When you create your a legend for your map, add color explanations (red for intense, green for happy, etc.)

Terrain and Life Phase Reflection Prompts

1. Terrains - Developmental Arcs or Stages of life

Key Points

- Every life is a landscape with distinct terrains.
- Terrains are the major periods that shaped your story.
- Story is not just about events. but crossings between terrains.

Mapping Activity

- Draw or label your life terrains (childhood valley, adolescent river, adult mountain, etc.).
- Note transitions or thresholds and where one landscape flows into another

Reflection Prompts

- A door you opened in childhood.
- A river that carried you in adolescence

2. Currents Between Stories-Integration & Relating

Key Points

- Every crossing involves others.
- Relationships act as bridges or rivers — they carry, block, or merge.
- Integration is seeing your own story as part of a larger human story.

Mapping Activity

- Trace relational connections on your map: people who carried, joined, or redirected your path.
- Notice where your current joined another's — or where you had to rebuild a bridge.

Reflection Prompts

- A companion who helped you cross.
- A current that merged with another's.

3. Motifs - Recurring Themes

Key Points

- Themes return like musical refrains.
- Recurrence adds coherence and depth.
- Patterns reveal meaning across time.

Mapping Activity

- Circle or color recurring motifs on your map.
- What patterns, roles, or emotions keep returning?

Reflection Prompts

- A bridge you found yourself rebuilding.
- A pattern that revealed its wisdom only later.

4. Descent - Difficult Periods

Key Points

- Struggle deepens story, identity reforms through difficulty.
- Meaning is often revealed in hindsight.

Mapping Activity

- Use shading or symbols for illness, loss, or rupture points.
- Mark where you descended, note what emerged beyond.

Reflection Prompts

- A threshold of suffering you crossed.
- A summit that demanded more than you knew you had.

5. Ascent — Moments of Light and Expansion

Key Points

- Ascent is the echo of descent — renewal after contraction.
- Joy widens perspective; gratitude roots it.
- These moments remind us of what wholeness feels like

Mapping Activity

- Mark breakthroughs, creative flow, connection, or awe experiences or moments
- Note what lifted you — a person, insight, grace, timing. Draw radiating lines or spirals to show how joy rippled outward.

Reflection Prompts

- A moment when laughter or love opened your view.
- A success or celebration that revealed deeper meaning.
- A time when beauty, not effort, carried you forward.
- When gratitude changed the tone of your whole map.

6. Wholeness - The Work of Acceptance

Key Points

- Acceptance is not resignation but transformation.
- Resistance marks the edge of change.
- We accept what we cannot change

Mapping Activity

- Add symbols or colors for moments of acceptance, peace, or integration.
- Where you have found peace in what once felt impossible

Reflection Prompts

- A mountain you resisted climbing.
- A cave where you hid until you were ready.
- A moment when surrender became strength

Preserving the Map for Legacy

Your map is both art and testimony. Consider how you want to preserve or share it.

- Photograph or scan the map
- Create a “Story Map Booklet” paired with a short-written reflection
- Frame the Map
- Recreate the map digitally (using simple design software or even a hired illustrator)
- Add an Audio/Storytelling Layer
- Share the map in a family circle, telling the stories behind a few chosen landmarks