

Who am I? Who are you?

I am Valeri Ann Hovland, wife, mother, caregiver. 50-year-old Professional Unpaid Actress and Semi-Retired Office Assistant to a local Business Woman. Dancer. Theater Lover. Brocs Supporter. Crazy Cat Lady. 2nd Banana to my Resident Chicken Farmer and all-around Smart-Alec. Wait? Is that the way I want to be remembered? Is that the way I want to identify?

When I was pregnant with my son, Inna asked me “how are you going to raise him?” Raise him? I guess to be a good person. “No” she said, “What tradition or heritage will you raise him in?” You see Inna was my supervisor who was from Estonia. She escaped the USSR Invasion of her country by buying her family’s passage to Italy with her gold jewelry. She is Jewish, speaks Estonian, Russian, German, Finnish, Hebrew, a little Italian oh and English. She has family all over the world, and if you ask her, she proudly says she’s Estonian!

I said I guess he will be a Generic White Kid, since that is what I’ve always called myself “Generic White Girl”. She said, “White” isn’t a heritage. It is defining yourself in contrast to others. Where are your people FROM?” California? She laughed. No. Where are they REALLY from? I think she wanted to know if my family had any deep connection to a foreign land.

Not really... Well, my Dad’s mom’s last name was Beck. Like Beck’s Beer Beck. She was a very distant cousin, too distant to claim any Beer Money. Does that make my heritage German, even though I don’t “do” anything German? But what about the complicated family relationship status I have with my dad’s memory? Do I want or need to claim his heritage?

My mom’s extended family is from Spadre Arkansas. They were the Clarks. The Clarks had so many kids, they renamed the city Clarksville! And then when so many of the elder Clark Brother’s went west during the Dust Bowl, they had to rename the city... Little Rock. So does that make me Southern by way of her extended family? My mom’s dad was in the Navy, so they moved a lot, and she grew up in Hawaii, Connecticut, Georgia, and San Diego. So, what did that make her? Make me?

I don’t feel a deep sense of belonging or history to any one place. Having family or having kids really puts a magnifying glass on how I should define myself.

So back to the Heritage that my son is raised in. What happens when you find yourself feeling disconnected from your heritage, or perhaps you feel like you don’t have much of one to begin with?

In our faith, we embrace a wide diversity of backgrounds and beliefs. Some of us come from long-standing traditions, while others may have chosen a different path. Regardless of where we stand, we all have the capacity to create and cultivate our own heritage, even when it feels like we don’t have one.

However, as we embark on this journey of self-discovery and heritage-building, we must be cautious about cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation involves borrowing or mimicking elements of another culture without understanding, respect, or permission. It's important to approach the exploration of different cultures with sensitivity and respect.

First and foremost, it's essential to acknowledge that heritage is not limited to the past. It's not solely about the customs and practices of our ancestors. Heritage can be a living, breathing concept, shaped by our values, experiences, and the legacy we want to leave behind. So, how can we have heritage when it feels elusive?

Here are some considerations as we navigate this path of the Choose Your Own Adventure Book of creating your own heritage which I have titled: *Creating Your Own Heritage: A Deep Dive into Identity, Culture, and Legacy*

Prologue: Heritage, traditionally defined, encompasses the collective history, culture, and traditions that are passed down through generations. It is the tapestry that forms our identities, connecting us to our ancestors and the shared experiences that define who we are. However, the concept of creating your own heritage challenges these traditional notions, presenting a compelling exploration of how individuals and communities can forge new legacies in an ever-changing world. In this comprehensive examination, we will delve into the profound significance of heritage, the intricate elements that constitute it, the evolution of heritage in a globalized society, and the creative processes by which individuals and communities can create their own heritage.

The Significance of Heritage is an integral part of human existence, serving as a bridge between the past, present, and future. Through heritage, we connect with our roots and honor the traditions, values, and customs that have been preserved and transmitted through time. Heritage is the embodiment of our history, culture, and collective memory. It defines us, informs our choices, and helps us understand where we come from.

When we think of Heritage we naturally gravitate toward Cultural Traditions. These encompass rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and customs unique to a specific community or group. They offer a tangible connection to the past and a sense of continuity.

We also heard from Susie, earlier this month, that Heritage also encompasses Paintings, sculptures, literature, and artifacts. These are integral components of heritage, serving as visual and tangible representations of culture. Our Language is our heritage not only as a medium of communication but also a carrier of cultural identity and heritage. The words we use and the expressions we employ are deeply intertwined with our heritage. Stories are how we bind the past to the present with the oral tradition held so deeply in many cultures.

In our interconnected world, cultures blend and influence one another. As people move across borders they bring their heritage with them. This globalization can lead to the emergence of new,

hybrid cultures that defy traditional definitions of heritage. When these cultures merge, individuals and communities have the opportunity to shape their own unique heritage.

And as societies evolve, values and beliefs also change, as we learned from Grace. New generations may prioritize different aspects of their heritage and reinterpret them in accordance with their evolving perspectives. This adaptability and willingness to embrace change are central to the concept of creating your own heritage.

The Role of Personal Identity in creating your own heritage is closely intertwined with a personal sense of self worth. Your heritage, as traditionally defined, is one of the core components that shape who you are. However, it can also be a reflection of who you aspire to become. When crafting a unique heritage, individuals often engage in a profound process of self-discovery and self-definition. This process allows for the integration of diverse cultural, intellectual, and emotional influences into one's identity. Identity is a multifaceted concept, influenced by various factors such as your unique life experiences, both positive and challenging. These contribute to the formation of your identity. Your other experiences may include travel, education, relationships, and work that further fill in the character or YOU that we are writing in this book.

Your cultural background plays a significant role in shaping this character. It can encompass the customs, traditions, and values that have been passed down through generations. Aspirations and values guide your choices and decisions and reflect what you hold dear and what you aim to achieve. When you don't know or don't want to own your background it can leave a sense of disconnectedness from yourself and communities you could be part of.

The Process of Forging a New Heritage involves a creative and introspective journey. This process empowers individuals to take ownership of their cultural identity and embrace change. It is a deeply personal and, at times, and can be a communal endeavor.

Chapter One of your new Heritage Book: Reflect to create your own heritage. You must begin with reflection. Consider your background, personal experiences, and the elements of heritage that resonate with you. Explore the traditions and values that you hold dear and consider how they have shaped your identity. This introspection provides a strong foundation for the creative process that follows. Start by exploring your family history and lineage, if you can. This process can be enlightening and might reveal unexpected connections to your past or things that you may not want to bring forward to the next generation.

Chapter 2: Cultural Exploration--Embrace diverse cultural experiences. Learn about other cultures, their traditions, and their histories. Cultural exploration not only broadens your horizons but also offers inspiration and a broader perspective. By understanding other cultures, you gain the insight needed to adapt and integrate elements that resonate with you into your own heritage. However before incorporating elements from another culture into your own heritage,

take the time to learn about the significance and history of those practices. Seek guidance from people within that culture to gain a deeper understanding. Use your platform to uplift their stories and experiences. If you draw inspiration from another culture, acknowledge its origins and the people who have preserved these traditions and amplify the voices and contributions of marginalized communities.

Chapter 3: Innovation--Heritage is not a fixed concept. It can evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Embrace innovation by merging different cultural elements, creating new traditions, and contributing to the development of a unique heritage. This innovation can take many forms, from creating new cultural events to blending different aspects of your heritage into a coherent whole. But also recognize that some aspects of a culture may be sacred or private. Be respectful of boundaries and avoid appropriating anything that is not meant to be shared.

Chapter 4: Community Involvement--Creating a heritage doesn't have to be a solitary endeavor. Engage with like-minded individuals who share your vision. Communities provide a platform for sharing ideas, celebrating traditions, and shaping a collective heritage. Collaborative efforts can be especially powerful in forging new cultural legacies. While sharing stories and experiences, you'll find that we all have unique heritages to celebrate.

Chapter 5: The Role of Communities. Physical and virtual connections play a crucial role in the creation of new heritage. Communities can embark on the journey of creating their own heritage collectively, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. By celebrating shared values and traditions, communities create a stronger sense of identity and purpose.

Chapter 6: Recognize that it's okay not to have a conventional heritage and not everyone will agree it should be done. Your personal journey, with all its twists and turns, is your unique heritage in the making. The concept of creating your own heritage is not without its challenges and controversies. While it offers an empowering opportunity for individuals and communities to shape their cultural identity, it also raises complex questions.

Chapter 7: Some individuals and groups may resist the idea of creating a new heritage. In more conservative or homogeneous communities, traditionalists may view this as a threat to established cultural norms and values. This journey can be isolating for some individuals or communities so addressing these challenges requires open dialogue, respect for cultural traditions, and a commitment to inclusivity and understanding. For those who choose to create their own heritage may face challenges and rejection, I offer the solution to soldier on! Creating your own heritage is not only a personal and communal endeavor but you are challenging their interpretations that diverge from the mainstream and are creating a path that you can be proud of and paving the way for others to walk on. The heritage created today can serve as a bridge between the past and the future, preserving the traditions of one's ancestors while embracing new opportunities for self-expression and cultural exploration.

By instilling a sense of pride and curiosity about their heritage, communities can pass on the value of embracing diverse identities and traditions. As a result, new generations will be

equipped with the tools to navigate an ever-evolving world, fostering tolerance, empathy, and a deeper appreciation for the richness of human culture. Mentor others and share your wisdom. Leaving a positive impact on the lives of those you touch can become a cherished part of your heritage.

Chapter 9: Remember that heritage isn't just local. It's not just you. In an era characterized by globalization and unprecedented connectivity, the concept of creating your own heritage is not limited to a single region or community. It has a global impact, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to explore their own identities and contribute to the rich tapestry of global culture. The exchange of ideas and traditions across borders enriches our collective heritage, highlighting the interconnectedness of human experiences.

As people share their unique stories of heritage creation, they inspire others to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery and cultural exploration. This global dialogue fosters understanding, acceptance, and unity, transcending geographical boundaries and traditional distinctions.

Final Chapter: The idea of creating your own heritage is a dynamic and evolving concept that challenges the boundaries of traditional heritage; it is a profound expression of the human spirit. It highlights and empowers the importance of personal identity, cultural exploration, and innovation and for individuals and communities to take control of their cultural identities, forge new traditions, and celebrate the richness of diverse perspectives. In a world where cultures constantly intersect and influence one another, this concept encourages individuals and communities to embrace the beauty of diversity and actively shape their own unique heritage.

As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, the concept of creating your own heritage serves as a guiding light, inspiring us to embrace change, respect tradition, and celebrate the ever-evolving tapestry of human culture. By doing so, we not only honor our past but also pave the way for a more inclusive, adaptable, and interconnected future.

Epilogue: So back to the Heritage my son is raised in; for my family we find that keeping our small traditions is important to building a heritage that we are proud of. When you ask us what our background is, we are likely to say HOVLAND loud and proud. As if THAT is enough of an answer. If you ask us where our family is from, each of us might stammer and say something different. Viking? Yes. German? Yes. Norwegian? Yes. American? Yes. But we are family and the heritage that we've built within us is what makes us unique.

In closing, let us celebrate the diversity of heritage within our community. Let us recognize that no matter where we come from or what we've experienced, we all have the power to create a meaningful heritage that reflects our authentic selves and the love and compassion we share with one another, while always being mindful of the cultural boundaries and respecting the richness of the traditions we encounter.

May you all find the beauty and depth of heritage in your own unique journeys. Thank you, and blessed be.