



Leaving a Personal Legacy

"Your smile lights up the room. Use it every day to make someone else's day brighter." Before she died, Sarah's mother wrote these words to her daughter. She included them in a personal letter to Sarah, which was delivered by a family friend after the memorial service. Since reading that letter, Sarah now follows her mother's advice and shares it with friends, including wisdom such as this: "No matter how many times your heart is broken, keep it open to love." Through this letter, Sarah learned more about her mother and the things that brought her joy. She feels her mother's presence still, a year after her death: "I'll be going through my day, and something from the letter will come up. It is one last piece of my mom that stays with me."

This letter from Sarah's mother, containing information about her life and her values, as well as advice and a clear message of love, is an example of what some call an "ethical will." In the Jewish tradition, an "ethical will" ("Zava'ah" in Hebrew) is a way to convey ethical values between generations. This ancient tradition has been adopted more generally in recent years by other communities, and often contains personal reflections, values and ideals. In order to share their legacies, people create "spiritual wills," "personal legacy documents" and "legacy letters." All of these documents are used to articulate a personal history, hopes and dreams for the future, and things that were learned; they often convey blessings and love to family and to future generations. For many people, the term "legacy" refers to material assets and possessions, and "will" conveys a legal document prescribing how one's money is to be distributed. In contrast, "ethical wills" and "legacy letters" pass on wisdom and love.

A Montgomery Hospice patient wrote to her grandchildren:

"My mother used to tell me that I'm like a wild bird, always flying off to new horizons and finding things out for myself. I'm more like the cardinals we see in the yard than birds that live in cages. Now it is time for my spirit to fly away from my poor sick body.

I am so sad to leave you so early in your lives. I would love to be with you as you grow up but that is not to be. So I leave you with the thoughts in this letter to remind you that I love you more than you can imagine. Even if we can't be together the way we have been, my love, spirit and energy are always with you. I love you with all my heart now and forever. You are magnificent."

Another related way to leave a legacy, with a slightly different emphasis, is to tell the story of one's life or the life of a loved one. This can be a simple recitation of facts, or expanded with descriptions of lessons learned during each life phase. This activity is often referred to as creating a life story, a family history, an autobiography or an oral history.

Susan Barrett, Montgomery Hospice volunteer: As a gift to my grandchildren, I recently began writing about the lives of my parents, recording the stories about them growing up in Alabama almost a century ago. It is a project I am finding both deeply satisfying and daunting as I seek to capture their "voices" as I write. My mother, the oldest of three daughters, had to go to work at fifteen to help support her family when their father died; my father was born into the abject poverty of rural Alabama. I want my grandchildren to understand the profound privilege we enjoy because of their great-grandparents' courage, wisdom, and determination in forging better lives in the face of tremendous obstacles.

Research has shown that working on legacy projects has positive effects both for the creator and the recipient. Susan Barrett, by documenting her parents' stories, is actually doing an important thing for her grandchildren. The research of Dr. Marshall Duke (Emory University) and colleague Dr. Robyn Fivush showed that children who know the history of their family have higher self esteem and a stronger ability to deal with the ups and downs of life. Dr. Duke found that in particular, if a family had difficulties but worked together to overcome them, the children have more self-confidence. He cautions that it isn't just knowing the family stories, it also has to do with the way they are shared through regular dinners together or during family vacations and holidays. Families that do these things develop what he calls "the intergenerational self," which is associated with increased resilience.

Research also weighs in on the benefits of receiving an ethical will or something similar to people who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Kip Ingram, Director of Bereavement at Montgomery Hospice writes: *"While every relationship is different, receiving a positive legacy from a loved one can be an enduring gift. Research clearly shows that griever's cope more effectively when they find meaningful ways to maintain a connection to a loved one through shared values, memories, stories, mementos and other ways of remembering."*

For those working to create a legacy who are ill or nearing the ends of their lives, studies have shown that sharing stories of their life experiences with others can bring emotional and physiological benefits. People who reminisced gained a sense of well being, a feeling that they'd contributed to the community, a sense of empowerment. The studies showed a lower heart rate, reduced stress, and an increased feeling of physical health while telling stories.

"Storytelling is one of the oldest and best-known ways to express the meaning and significance of who you are," psychology professor Howard Thorsheim says. *"When we share these stories, we no longer feel isolated."* Other researchers observed an increased confidence, especially about confronting new challenges. Still other research showed a reduction in stress in caregivers who participated in these types of projects with their loved ones, and a strengthening of bonds between them.



None of the research dictates a specific way of creating an ethical will or legacy letter. Do-it-yourselfers can simply pull out a blank sheet of paper, or open up a document in a word-processing program, and write as much—or as little—as feels right. Others who need more structure can purchase a how-to book, fill out a "grandparent memories" book, or use an ethical will template or worksheet. Themes to explore include family traditions, personal values, life lessons, spiritual journeys, the personal impact of a historical event. Some may want to express regrets, gratitude or love, or ask for forgiveness. Integrating photos or other mementos is an option.

Those interested in writing an autobiography can consider taking a class (through Montgomery College continuing education, or the Writer's Center in Bethesda) or an online workshop. Another option is to create an audio recording or a video of a conversation with a loved one by simply using a smart phone.

While many people rely on a newspaper or even a family member to write their obituary, sometimes a person will write his or her own to express, in one last public statement, their most valued contribution in life. An obituary can also be an opportunity for a person to characterize him/herself, capturing the essence of their view of life.

Gary Fink, Senior Vice President of Counseling and Family Support, tells of the creative way one man left a legacy:



Several years ago, we had a patient, a Jewish man. While he did not believe in an afterlife, he was concerned about his legacy, how he would be remembered. His oldest grandchild was pregnant and he knew he would not live to see his great-grandchild. "Pop-pop" had a lot of sayings, such as "you can do anything that you set your mind to." His wife was a seamstress. She embroidered each one of his sayings onto a square, the last one being "Your pop-pop loves you," and stitched the squares together to make a baby blanket. After the great-granddaughter outgrew the blanket, she hung it on her wall, continuing her relationship with her pop-pop whom she had never met, but whose words she read every day.

The bottom line is that neither the specific format, nor the length, nor the timing of the delivery is important. Ronda Barrett, story facilitator with "Honor Your Story," emphasizes that one certainly does not need to wait until illness or old age. *"The important thing is to do it! I'm always trying to communicate a sense of urgency. We always think we have time. Your words and your family stories are so important to share forward."* She reminds people of the value of going through the process, that in reflecting on their experiences they can learn more about themselves and make plans for the next chapters of their lives. Or they can take comfort in knowing that their values and their love will live on in the hearts of friends and family members.

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