

Written Legacies: A Valuable Gift for Those You Love

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Times of transition such as the birth of a child or grandchild, marriages, or the diagnosis of cancer or other illness are often reflective times and provide opportunities to think about one's philosophy of life, values and what makes life meaningful. These times are opportunities to communicate about your beliefs and can become a legacy to those who matter the most to you. Legacies by definition are "something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past." Much of the time we think about material legacies that will be left to our children, our siblings, grandchildren, or friends. While it is important to make plans for these legacies, the communication of values is a form of legacy that is often forgotten. I am a strong advocate for the continuous process of communicating values and wishes which can be verbal or written. Written legacies are often one of the most cherished gifts that we can offer to those we care about. A written statement of your values, beliefs, or love is a powerful communication that can be revisited for years to come. It is a remarkable and lasting gift for someone that you care about deeply.

Not long ago I was cleaning up an old box of papers and I came across a card that my mother had written to me on the day of my Ph.D. graduation ceremony which just so happened to be my 25th birthday; it was a significant time and transition. As I sat reading the card, now 10 years after my mother's passing from ALS, I realized that she had written me a legacy that communicated her values, her wishes for me, and her heartfelt love. It was in her handwriting and as I read it I could hear her voice in my head speaking the words to me. It was powerful. The card is now safely placed with my most cherished possessions so that it will never be lost and it is something that I can go back to re-read and plan to give to my children. I now wonder if she knew that she was leaving me a legacy of such import, but this found card means so much to me, especially now that I no longer have her available to consult with at will.

Cancer and other serious illness are threats. Most everyone reacts to a serious medical diagnosis with some measure of fear no matter how good the prognosis. Sometimes those fears are allayed more quickly and easily, but more often than not they continue to exist in some form as individuals transcend through the many phases of, treatments, recurrence scares, survivorship, recovery and wellness. Fear is uncomfortable because it is inevitably based in the sometimes fleeting lifting of a shroud of denial that most of us live with; the shroud that allows us to believe that there is always time and many more days ahead. When that denial is temporarily removed there is recognition, that life may be shortened or condensed, and it

raises opportunities for examination and reflection. In these moments, there may be reflection on what legacies will be left. We as humans have the capacity to imagine a world in which we are not physically present and as such it provides opportunities to make offerings to those who survive us. The question is, **“Will we take advantage of these moments and do something meaningful with them, or will we allow them to be just fleeting moments?”**

My experience is that serious illness often makes these fleeting moments longer and gives rise to reflections about what is important in life. This process can lead to deeper connections with others, greater appreciation for life, mindful approaches to the moment-by-moment experience of day-to-day living. I strongly support these growth experiences and know that we can all benefit from this type of reflection. Reflection also provides the opportunity to assess what gives life meaning. Meaning is so individualized, yet there seems to be a common yearning to live a life that is meaningful.

I want to encourage each person touched by cancer or other serious illness to seize these moments and actually begin creating written legacies evolved from these reflections. Legacies of your values and your philosophy of life are treasured gifts and can be helpful to partners, children (both minor and adult), siblings or anyone close to you. In case you wonder whether I live this belief, I do. I personally have been writing legacies for a long time — at graduations, transitions to college — and yesterday, while sitting on a plane, I wrote one to my daughters just because I thought it was time to write again. Each time they take on a little different form or emphasize something different. They are often not planned in advance, but rather writings that come from my heart and usually in the form of a letter. I have had the benefit of receiving these too. My eldest daughter wrote me a long letter telling me how much my support has meant to her during her college years and across her life. She gave it to me as a gift on her college graduation. Needless to say, it is deeply cherished.

The concept of written legacies about values rather than material objects is not new and has been termed “ethical wills.” Ethical wills have their footings in Jewish traditions whose roots stem from early biblical times and were used to communicate about the practice of religion. There is a growing interest in the development of ethical wills both spiritual and philosophical. Ethical will making has evolved into business endeavors with web sites, books and other materials designed to help you develop your own. While these aides may be helpful to someone unaccustomed to writing, they are not necessary. The most important tools are your heart, your thoughts and feelings, and some way of recording them. In this age, there can be video legacies, but keep in mind that having something to read and reread may be just what your loved one needs. It is a way that your loved ones maintain their relationship with you.

These are some suggestions about things that can be addressed in this type of legacy, but do not wait to create the perfect piece with everything in it. Start with a simple letter. Here are some ideas that you can include, especially if you are having difficulty thinking of what to say:

- What I learned from my family
- What I want you to know about me
- What I hope to have passed on to you
- My spiritual beliefs
- Why I love you
- My hopes and dreams for you
- What I learned from working
- What I am grateful for
- What I learned from my mistakes
- Something I learned from my (parent, grandparent, children)
- Something I learned from a teacher or spiritual leader
- My favorite poems and songs
- My most significant memories from my childhood
- My feelings when you were born
- What I have learned from raising you
- Write a sentence expressing your values on topics such as:
 - Honesty
 - Integrity
 - Friendship
 - Communication
 - Family
 - Recreation
 - Health
 - Spiritual or Religious Beliefs
 - Raising Children
 - Politics
 - Courage
 - Love
 - Marriage
- What I live for
- What makes life meaningful to me

Ethical wills and written legacies can be just a few sentences or they can be volumes of work accumulated over time. If you can see the end of your life coming, the urgency is greater. Many times these legacies are shared during the transitions of life and sometimes, there are legacies that are left in a special place to be discovered later. There are no rules about them; the choices are your own.

As a parent facing a serious or life threatening diagnosis, particularly if you have young or young adult children, it is always the time to write a legacy. Your wisdom and strength gained during your illness may offer valuable insights to your children or loved ones. Finally, let me state that legacies are important, no matter your age.

I want to end with my strongest sense of urging; do this now. The barrier that has to be overcome is the shroud of denial that there is always time and that you will never die. Remember, 100 percent of all human beings, as of right now, will die at some point from something. No one knows our future, but I am certain that when we each leave this earth, our material objects are only part of what is important for our loved ones, and the greatest gift we might offer is our words. Get out a piece of paper and write something. You can write again, there is no law about how many letters you can write, how often, how long or how short. Your children, grandchildren, siblings, or best friends will be comforted by this tangible piece of you that can be read and re-read for generations to come.