

Ethical Wills—*What are they and How to write one*

The Unexpected Caregiver Radio Show with Kari Berit
www.unexpectedcaregiver.com

Ethical Wills: The writing of an ethical will enables you to pass down your life lessons, hopes and dreams for the future.

The Hebrew Bible first described ethical wills 3000 years ago. If you look at Genesis, Chapter 49, you'll get a glimpse of Jacob leaving an ethical will to his family. He blessed them each individually and then told the assembled how he would like to be buried. End of life is just one time—and the most common—that ethical wills are written. Over the centuries, men and women have used this vehicle to leave a final message to their families and friends. Unlike a Last Will and Testament, Living Will or Health Care Directive, and Ethical Will *is not* a legal document; however, it is suggested that these wills are stored with a trusted family member, friend, or lawyer.

Think of it as writing a love letter to your loved ones. It reflects the “voice of the heart,” and is as unique as the person writing it. Listen to these two examples of ethical wills:

1. Written by a mother in her 60s:

Dear children-

I've lived a wonderful and full life. You children have given us only joy and happiness. I am so proud of each and every one of you-children, grandchildren and spouses. Keep in close touch with each other always.

I have no last words of wisdom, I guess when you were young I said all I had to say. Bring up your children wisely with love, discipline and tight reins.

Take good care of my wonderful guardian angel (my dad).

Lovingly, Mom

2. Written by a woman approaching her 80th birthday
*To my dear Children, Grandchildren and their spouses:
I've traveled the road of life a long time. I honestly read this prayer often and
pray God help me:
To remember I'm growing older (not old)
To keep me from getting talkative.
And particularly from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every
subject on every occasion.
Release me from craving to try to straighten out everyone's affairs.
Make me thoughtful but not moody
Helpful but not bossy...
I do not want to be a saint—some of them are so hard to live with.
Help me to extract all possible fun out of life;
There are so many amusing things around us.
And I don't want to miss any of them. Amen...
Do know that I love everyone of you. I love my friends; I love life, I hope to bring
happiness to all with whom I'm associated.
Much love to all,
Mom and Grandma*

Ethical Wills range in length from one paragraph, as in the first example, to a small book!

They can be a sort of life review, which is another way of sharing lessons learned throughout life. The prayer included in the second will is a good example of how this woman passes on her values—through sharing a special prayer. There are many more examples...you can go to ethicalwill.com to help you get started.

How do you write an Ethical Will?

There are several approaches to creating an ethical will:

1. Start with outline. This allows one to see the various points and pick and choose from a list.

Here's your chance to interact with your parents, sitting down and each of you brainstorming ideas. For example, you could start with a suggestion—Something I learned from my grandma or grandpa—and each of you write for a specific

amount of time. Other ideas: Things I did to act on my values; My beliefs and opinions; Something for which I am grateful; Important personal values; Important spiritual values; Hopes and blessings for future generations; Life's lessons; Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness. It may also be helpful to have a brief discussion before the timed writing or after. Sharing these stories is another benefit to creating an ethical will.

2. Over a lifetime, your parents and you have probably collected a shoe box of special greeting cards, cartoons, favorite poems and Bible verses. Ask your parents to share those special writings with you. Talk about their meaning and then ask your parents to write about them. Again, you could do this together...as an exercise, even a mental fitness exercise. Make it fun. Let go of expectations or outcomes and simply be together talking, sharing and writing.
3. Remember that creating an ethical will can be a month-long or year-long process. Allow time to ruminate. You could set a goal as to when you want to present them to other family and loved ones and have an evening of sharing. Or you could suggest that your parent give the ethical will as birthday or other holiday gifts. Believe me, it will be a cherished gift.

If your parent is unable to write or remember or has died, you and your siblings or other family members can become the biographer. This can be very cathartic to do. Here's a lovely example:

*If Dad had written an ethical will, I think this would be it...
Dear Family and Friends,
I am leaving you with what matters most to me and what I hope you remember most.*

1st and foremost is the love of family. They are the wellspring of who you are. Nurture the relationships, be there for each other.

—Dad was always there for his mother, brother and sisters. When he married, he added his in-laws as part of his family. When we married, he refused to be considered an in-law, he was Dad and our spouses were his children.

2nd, Value education and life long learning. It keeps you stimulated, keeps you young, and helps you succeed.

—One of the favorite parts of Dad's job was writing the store ads. He loved words. His help on my Bar Mitzvah sermon was grueling, hard to believe even after that experience part of my career is public speaking.

3rd, Give to your community. We all come out of a community, were enriched by it, and have the responsibility to give back to the community.

—Dad was an active fundraiser for his Pittsfield temple, and continued in Florida at Menorah Manor. With pride, he told about his father letting tenant's stay in his building during the depression even though they could not pay the rent.

4th, Whatever you do, work hard, play hard and compete hard at both.

—Dad put in many hours at the store to be successful, and after a long Saturday at the store, he and Mom would go play nine holes of golf. Later, he switches from golf to tennis. Last week I was telling Dad's caregiver that I could not beat Dad at tennis until he was in his 70s. At that, though I hadn't thought Dad was listening, I could see him smile! Last week when he was in pain, I said "you're a fighter Dad" and he nodded his head.

And finally, friends and family (he would have written), never lose your sense of humor; remember not to take yourself so damn seriously.

—Two days before he died, Jane said to him "see you tomorrow," to which Dad weakly replied- "not if I see you first!"

As I said to Dad this past Friday, when I think about how to handle my kids, I ask—what would Dad do?

He never wrote it down, but through his actions he left us a very clear ethical will.

There is no single right way to create an ethical will.

Other resources: *Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper, The Ethical Will Writing Guide Workbook* and *The Ethical Will Resource Kit*, all by Barry Baines. Also, *So That Your Values Live on: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them* by Jack Reimer and Nathaniel Stampfer, Editors. These are all easily found on Amazon.com