



An Ethical Will &
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Leaving Your Values Behind

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Some people leave nothing to chance. They not only buy life insurance and regularly update their will, they also put down a deposit for a burial plot and select the hymns to be sung at their wake. And now more and more are opting for an ethical will, a detailed accounting of the values and beliefs they want to pass on and the cherished memories they don't want forgotten.

Far more elaborate than a note dashed off to loved ones from a deathbed, an ethical will, sometimes called a personal legacy, is proving especially popular among baby boomers as they begin contemplating their mortality in earnest. A mini-industry has sprung up to help those seeking a bit of emotional immortality. Fancy binders with silk-moire linings and archival paper are now available. How-to workshops abound, as do websites and consultants who will preserve the bequest on videotape.

Barry K. Baines, a physician specializing in hospice care, began popularizing the concept in 1999 through his website ethicalwill.com and says he has noticed a huge uptick in interest since the 9/11 attacks. Will writers "don't have to be Hemingway," he says. "It's the voice of the heart that comes through."

Valedictions can range from the wrenchingly personal ("Please remember me not only for what I did or said but how I made you feel.") to the painfully platitudinal ("Get a good education." "Treat others with respect"). Some bequeathers share the contents while they are alive in the hopes of stirring a dialogue with their loved ones. Others, like Joella Werlin, 65, a former TV producer from Portland, Ore., have chosen to lock theirs away with their legal wills, wanting them revealed only upon death. "I'm not trying to tell anyone what they have to do. My grown children already know they have to write thank-you notes. I wanted to write a letter to my grandchildren telling them what had given me pleasure in life," says Werlin.

While these legacies are ostensibly intended to impart wisdom to heirs, the creators often find immediate benefits for themselves. "It was a tremendous growing experience," says Richard Hudson, 53, of Syracuse, N.Y. "You start really sharing your human weaknesses, and it is a challenge." He has already given scrapbooks to each of his two children, 27 and 24. Though Hudson realizes the contents carry no legal weight, he says they have begun to have an impact. "We've had a lot of insightful discussions," he says. "They caused a lot of emotions, tears and bonding." Still, Baines and others caution that ethical wills should not dredge up family skeletons. Says Baines: "I teach people not to reach out from the grave and guilt-trip their loved ones."