

The ethical will – an expression of you



Did you ever find an old photo of a relative, say a great grandmother, who passed from this world long ago? Marveling at that photo of an ancestor you never knew in person, you think to yourself, “I wonder what she was like?”

What if, enclosed with the photo, was a letter that expressed her values, beliefs, guidance and wisdom, and that enabled her to address living family and friends in her time, and reach across time to touch descendants like you?

Such a scenario is just one of many in which an “ethical will” can create a lasting legacy of a person’s personality, life and soul.

What is an ethical will?

Not a legal document at all, an ethical will is a personal letter that comes from the heart. It’s a written piece (or perhaps a video) that expresses the things you want to say to family and friends after you’re gone.

A legal will is about property and finances. An ethical will passes along the non-material.

It is as unique as you are and might convey philosophy, spiritual values, realized and unrealized dreams, life lessons, accomplishments and failures, or wishes and advice for future generations.

Maybe it forgives or asks for forgiveness, aims to heal personal wounds, shares an inspiring story, explains an action, seeks closure, radiates hope and blessings to those yet to be born...

(Continued on page 2)

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*Think of it as
a personal letter
from you
to those who
come after you.*

An ethical will can include practical elements as well. It might explain and resolve issues presented in your legal will. You might communicate the reasons behind financial decisions or instruct heirs how to carry on your legacy of charitable or religious activities.

Whatever you want to say to those who go on after you, this is it. This is your soliloquy, and the stage is all yours.

How to write one

First, realize that few things can be as satisfying as reaching deep and sharing your soul. Second, people really will be interested. If these facts alone are not enough to inspire you to start drafting, begin by “collecting thoughts.” Over time, write down things such as:

- ▶ Beliefs and opinions
- ▶ Valued times in your life
- ▶ Lessons learned – from others and from experience
- ▶ Inspirations
- ▶ Hopes
- ▶ Important life events
- ▶ Regrets for things left undone
- ▶ Proud accomplishments

After the collection phase, sit back and review. Look for patterns and themes. Organize these

patterns of thoughts and beliefs into paragraphs to create a “story” that flows naturally. Perhaps write an introduction and conclusion. Then, set aside your draft for a week or so.

Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously said, “There is no such thing as good writing. There is only good rewriting.”

He was right. The bonus is, when you revisit the draft, you’ll be amazed at how easily you can shape your words into a cohesive whole.

When to write one

Conscientious seniors write their legal wills long before they’re needed, and an ethical will is no different. In fact, these authors often

update and improve their writing over time. Working toward a masterpiece this way can be a greatly fulfilling regular exercise.



When to read one

An ethical will is typically read first as part of a funeral or memorial service. It can then take its place as the lasting treasure it was meant to be, a document of mind and spirit that can be enjoyed and passed down from generation to generation.