

*Leave Behind Not Just Your Valuables,
but Your Values:
Ethical Wills are an Important Planning Device*

Everyone, regardless of wealth, has something to give their children, family, and other loved ones. A spiritual and emotional legacy communicates the true meaning behind your life's endeavors, and the recipients of your personal thoughts will cherish this look into your soul. Called an ethical will, endeavors of this type date back more than 3000 years ago to the early days of the Hebrew bible (Genesis Chapter 49), as well as the New Testament (John Chapters 15-18). Not surprisingly, other faiths also find leaving more than just a financial bequest to be important.

Your ethical will gives you the opportunity to include personal and spiritual values, hopes, experiences, love, and forgiveness. You can include your blessings to your loved ones, an explanation of your faith and values, lessons and stories from your life, and instructions regarding personal affects of emotional significance. If you didn't lead an overtly spiritual or religious life, this is the opportunity to share your own value structure with those close to you. An ethical will is the voice of your heart, a love letter to your family.

An ethical will is also a good opportunity to share your family history: Stories about your grandparents and parents, their accomplishments, and their lives can also be included. You became who you are from the lessons you learned from them, so it can be important to include them as well. And, you might want to write different documents for different people. What you want to say to your spouse could very well be different than what you want to say to your children.

Is there someone you love who you've lost touch with, perhaps because of a long ago disagreement? Your ethical will is the perfect place to forgive and to seek forgiveness. It is also an excellent place to tell those you love what you appreciate most about them.

Undertaking this process imparts a sense of control, just as preplanning a funeral, writing a will, purchasing adequate life insurance, and forming a trust does. You wouldn't leave those things to chance, so neglect an important cornerstone to your identity and character? Identifying what you value and what you stand for -- and articulating it-- will make sure your legacy is preserved for future generations. You will live on in the hearts and minds of your loved ones. Those who have written ethical wills report a sense of completion in their lives, a feeling of having a burden lifted from their shoulders just by sharing their thoughts.

You can dictate your ethical will into a cassette tape or use a video recorder, and using a typewriter or computer can work as well. Work on your ethical will for a while, then if possible leave it for a week or so and come back to it. Also, consider the format, type of paper and ink you want to use. You may want to bind your work as a book, using fade-resistant ink and acid-free paper. Use the link below to get started with our questionnaire; you may find you have a complete, satisfactory document when you are finished.

The length, style, or type of ethical will does not matter. What matters is making sure your values, thoughts, and beliefs are preserved for future generations.