



## What is an Ethical Will?

From the work of Barry Baines, MD

*"We all want to be remembered and everyone leaves something behind." anon.*

Ethical wills are a way to share your values, blessings, life's lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love, and forgiveness with your family, friends, and community.

Ethical wills are not new. The Hebrew Bible first described ethical wills 3000 years ago (Genesis Ch. 49). References to this tradition are also found in the Christian Bible (John Ch. 15-18) and in other cultures. Initially, ethical wills were transmitted orally. Over time, they evolved into written documents. 'Ethical wills' are not considered legal documents as compared to 'living wills' and your 'last will and testament' which are legal documents.

Today, ethical wills are being written by people at turning points and transitions in their lives and when facing challenging life situations. They are usually shared with family and community while the writer is still alive.

Ethical wills may be one of the most cherished and meaningful gifts you can leave to your family and community. An ethical will reflects the "voice of the heart." Think of it as a love letter to your family. Every ethical will is as unique as the person writing it.

After reading a number of ethical wills, there are common themes that run through many of them. Older ethical wills contained burial instructions, blessings, and personal and spiritual values.

Here's a partial list of common themes seen in more modern ethical wills:

- Important personal values and beliefs
- Important spiritual values
- Hopes and blessings for future generations
- Life's lessons
- Love Letters
- Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness

Writing an ethical will may seem difficult. However, it can be viewed as the writing of a love letter to your family. Ethical Wills can include personal and spiritual values, hopes, experiences, love, and forgiveness. It may well be one of the most cherished gifts you can give to your family.

Here are some ideas to help you get started.

- Over time, write down ideas --a few words or a sentence or two about things like:
  - My beliefs and opinions
  - Things I did to act on my values



- Something I learned from grandparents / parents / siblings / spouse / children
- Something I learned from experience
- Something I am grateful for
- My hopes for the future
- Write about important events in your life.
- Imagine that you only had a limited time left to live. What would you regret not having done?
- Save items that articulate your feelings, e.g., quotes, cartoons, etc
- Review what you've collected after a few weeks or months
- Clump related items together -- patterns will emerge
- Revise and expand the related categories into paragraphs
- Arrange the paragraphs in an order that makes sense to you
- Add an introduction and conclusion
- Put this aside for a while, then review and revise.

### **SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

#### **Pondering the past:**

Who was the one who influenced you most in your earlier years?

What difference did they make in my life?

What do I admire about them?

What would you say to that person now?

What are the "milestone" events on my life's journey?

What time or event would I like most to do over?

What am I most proud of?

#### **Exploring the present:**

How am I spending my most precious resources? Time, Money, Talent?

What motivates me?

What inspires me?

Who do I most like to spend time with?

What do I most want them to know about me?

What adjectives would I use to describe myself?

What do I know to be true?

What do I wonder most about?

What mistakes have I made that I do not want my loved ones to repeat?

What I would like to apologize for? To whom?

What am I most grateful for?

#### **Dreaming about the future:**

What do I want to be remembered for doing?

What do I want to be remembered for being?

When I think of my loved ones, what do I wish for them?

If I could give one thing to them, what would it be?

What phrase, adage or proverb do I want to pass along to them?