

"I Wanted My Kids to Know Me"

Recently, an acquaintance of mine had the terrible misfortune to lose his Dad in a car accident. As the only child, it fell to Dan to go through his Dad's apartment where his father had lived alone since the death of his wife three years before. He told me that as he cleaned out the apartment, he was hoping to find some kind of personal note that his Dad might have left for him. To his great disappointment, he found nothing. "I just wanted a note, an old letter, something to remind me of my Dad. I found nothing. It made me feel sort of empty, like I was missing something."

That "something missing"² is being provided more and more frequently these days by people who have rediscovered the ancient practice of drawing up a spiritual or ethical will. A spiritual will is a way to share your values with your family in the same way that a legal will provides instructions for passing on your property and possessions. Some have described a spiritual will as a love letter to your family and friends. In it you have a chance to tell your spouse or kids what was important to you in life, what you believed in and hoped and prayed for. You can put on paper family stories, ask for forgiveness, relate your most precious memories of them, the way you remember your daughter in her first prom dress and the time your then three year old son ran out of your house buck naked. Maybe you can tell them things about yourself growing up as the kid they never knew, the lessons you learned from life, that special teacher who turned your life around.

Most of all, writing a spiritual will is your final gift to the people who have been most important to you. We don't say "I love you" nearly enough in life. We can let all those inhibitions go when we write our farewell letter. This is your opportunity, a last chance to tell the people who matter most to you how you feel about them and the life you have shared together.

There is no one formula for writing a spiritual will, no set length or format. A spiritual will can be one page or fifty. It can be put on tape or CD or just scrawled on the back of a yellow pad.

Some people who find it easy to put their thoughts on paper may want to start with a blank sheet of paper and just write their farewell letter to their loved ones. This works well for those who keep a journal. Others like to have an outline to follow. In my classes on writing a spiritual will, I suggest to my students a sample outline that seems to work quite well.

A. Salutation: Like any letter, you need to decide the person or persons you are addressing. Your spouse? Your kids? Your family and loved ones? Some people write separate spiritual wills, one addressed to each of their two children, or one to their spouse and one to extended family. I know of one married priest who is addressing a spiritual will to the religious congregation in which he had spent many years.

B. Statement of values and beliefs: Sit down and, with paper and pen in hand, give some serious thought to the values and beliefs that have been important to you. This should not be a difficult task for those of us who spent years in the ministry but then again many of us have been caught up in earning a living or providing for our kids or forging a successful career, so it may not be as easy as we think. In any case, we need to take some time to reflect on the values that give our

lives meaning. Retreating to a quiet place we can ask questions of ourselves like, At this stage in my life, what is really important to me? What did I do in my own life to stand up for these values? Where did I fail?

One of my students wrote that the equality of all human beings was one of her core beliefs. Then she remembered that she had marched with Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement. She had forgotten that part of her life and it made her feel good to realize that, at least on that one occasion, she had acted on her beliefs. Another told how she had at one time left her Catholic faith and recounted her own very difficult journey back to the Church.

C. Meaningful life experiences: Once you have written down your own values, look back on your life and write down your meaningful life experiences. Who were the persons who had the biggest impact on your life? What were the things you did that you are most proud of? What was the hardest decision you ever made? Name an event that changed your life. What were the lessons you learned from living? You may think your kids know all this about you. Don't be too sure. In writing my own spiritual will, I realized that I had never told my kids that much about my years in the seminary and priesthood. I was surprised at how interested they were.

D. Hopes for the Future: An important part of the process is to put down on paper the hopes and dreams you have for your loved ones future. What do you really want for your son or daughter? Do you want them, more than anything, to live their dreams? To enjoy life? Do you hope that they will make a difference in the lives of others? To be givers, not takers? Some kids go through their whole lives thinking that their Mom or Dad wanted them to be wealthy and successful businessmen or women when, deep down, all their parents ever wanted for them was to be happy.

E. Personal and family memories: Another major part of a spiritual will is to recall your memories of your kids or other loved ones. A woman in one of my classes wrote of her oldest son, "I will always remember the way you stuck up for your little brother. At first, I wasn't too happy with you when I found out you had gotten in a fight with that bully next door but when I found out you were standing up for your brother, Tommy, I was proud of you." Family stories can be an important part of a spiritual will. Humorous stories add a light touch. I recall one of my students writing of the time when his kid was two years old and had peed in the dishwasher. Some students like to add a note about the things they learned from their kids or loved ones. Growing up, as I did, in an Irish Catholic family that was not demonstrative with their feelings, I have included in my spiritual will a note of gratitude to my own kids for teaching me to say "I love you" more often.

F. Conclusion: No spiritual will is complete without heart-felt parting words. To put down on paper your gratitude for being part of your loved one's lives, to ask their forgiveness if you have hurt them, to wish them every happiness, all of these need to be said and will make your will feel complete. For those who find this outline more detailed than they are comfortable with, I suggest to my students a quick and dirty formula:

1. What I believe 2. What I did 3. What I learned 4. What my dream is for you. The thing to remember is that the format of a spiritual will is much less important than the content. What you are doing is conveying to the people who have been significant to you in your life your love, your forgiveness, your stories and your thanks that they have shared their lives with you. Be real. Write from the heart and you will be giving them a gift that will live with them and the generations that will come after them.

While writing your spiritual will is not complicated, neither is it easy. For one thing, the very act of putting on paper your farewell thoughts is to face your own mortality. You are admitting to yourself that you are not going to live forever. Not an easy admission for us to make. Barry Baines, a Minnesota physician who, through his work with hospice, has become one of the leading proponents of spiritual wills, admits that "Writing my own spiritual will is one of the hardest things I have ever done." A student at one of my seminars echoed Dr. Baine's experience by saying, "The process of writing my spiritual will was an emotionally draining experience." She was only expressing what I have heard from many others who have made the effort to write a spiritual will. After all, in sharing your most intimate thoughts with your family, you are writing your own heart. You are putting on paper, perhaps for the first time, your values, what is important to you, your dreams. If you write honestly (and there is no point in not writing honestly) people reading your spiritual will have a window into your soul. That's scary. It is also a gift so precious that it makes the material "stuff" we leave our kids pretty small by comparison. Is it worth it? The same student who called writing a spiritual will an "emotionally draining experience" also added, "But I can't begin to tell you how much I gained from the experience. I really wanted my kids to know me. This was a big help." Dan, the man who lost his Dad in an automobile accident is now writing his own spiritual will. "I can't do anything now about the fact that my Dad and I never said goodbye but I can make sure my kids will never experience that sadness."

If you need to jump start your own effort to write a spiritual or ethical will (spiritual and ethical are used interchangeably to distinguish this type of will from a legal will), you might want to read "Ethical Wills, Putting your Values on Paper," by Barry Baines, M.D.. Dr. Baines gives some concrete suggestions on what to include in a spiritual will and also a number of sample wills you may find helpful. Also, check your community college or place of worship for classes on writing your spiritual will or go on line to www.thelegacycenter.com.

What do you do with your spiritual will after you have written it? Many people staple their spiritual will to their legal will and leave it with their attorney or in a safe place. One woman left instructions for her legacy to be read at her memorial service. I have known others to read their spiritual will to their loved ones before they die. One of my students addressed her spiritual will to her husband at one of my seminars then rushed home to read it to him. "I want him to know NOW how much I appreciate him." Whatever you decide to do with your spiritual will, I think you will find that there are few gifts in life more rewarding to give and more gratefully received.

Sample Spiritual Will

The attached is the first draft of a spiritual will written by one of my students to his two kids. I am including it, with his permission, to give you an idea of what a spiritual will can look like. Your own spiritual legacy will take whatever form you choose.

³ Dear Michelle and Tommy, I'm writing this to you tonight not because I'm expecting to die anytime soon but just in case something unexpected happens. I don't have much in the way of material possessions to leave you but I would like to share with you some thoughts that are important for me to tell you. My most treasured gifts are both of you. Your presence in my life has been a miracle, a wonder. Michelle, your smile, your whimsical sense of humor, the way you pull our family together (Ms. Social Director), your concern for kids, especially disadvantaged kids. I love you for the way you are. And now that you are a Mom yourself (and an incredibly good one), I see you passing on your gifts to little Julie. I can't begin to tell you how happy you make your old Dad feel. Tommy, I see such spiritual depths in you. I know you suffered greatly through the divorce. I would give the world if I could only have spared you that grief. Please forgive me. Maybe some good has come of your struggle because I see in you the gift of understanding pain in others. Tommy, I admire you, too, for the way you can sniff out the phoniness in people and are not afraid to speak out for what is right. Both you and your sister have taught me a great deal about being more open with expressing my own feelings. For that I am grateful. Michelle and Tommy, I believe strongly in the inter-connectedness of all life and the responsibility we all have for one another. I hope I have been able to pass on that belief to both of you because it's important. There's no such thing as "us" and "them" in this world. We must see each other as brothers and sisters or we will perish. My dream for you, my kids, is that you will always be there for one another and that you will leave our little corner of the world a better place than you found it. Please know that I have loved both of you more than words can express. I am so proud of you and know deep in my heart that you will make a success of your lives.
Your Old Dad.²

Hank Mattimore, a former Oblate of Mary Immaculate, is the author of "The Priest Who Couldn't Cheat." He conducts seminars and teaches community college courses on "Writing Your Own Spiritual Will." Hank became interested in the idea of spiritual wills through a Jewish acquaintance. An Associate member of the Legacy Center in Minnesota, Hank feels strongly that the very act of writing a spiritual will is taking a stand against the culture of consumerism/materialism in which we live. The most valuable gift we leave our loved ones is the gift of ourselves.

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