



Legacy Tips & Tools Annual

~ 2011 ~

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Welcome To The Second Annual Legacy Tips & Tools Online Magazine!

In his endorsement of my book *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies*, Dr. Weil wrote, "The ethical will is a wonderful gift to leave to your family at the end of your life, but ... its main importance is what it can give you in the midst of life."

To introduce you to legacy writing, let's unpack his words:

First, what is an ethical will? The ethical will is an ancient tradition in which fathers instruct their sons about their culture's ethical values.

Why did I change the name to a "spiritual-ethical will?" To indicate that this ancient patriarchal practice has a spiritual as well as an ethical dimension. My goal is to make this tool accessible to moderns and especially women (whose voices have been silenced in today's culture and by believing we have nothing noteworthy to preserve for the future).

Why do I describe this modern spiritual practice as "writing legacy letters?" Many are intimidated by the term "will." But we can all write a letter (even in this day of easily deleted emails and text messages). Legacy letters vary in length from a one-page letter to a series of letters, or a lengthier document.

How are these letters important to future generations? Legacy letters nourish the future with our words: to fill the gaps in their history, to connect them to their roots, and to provide them with values and blessings.

Dr. Weil says: "Its main importance is what it gives [us] in the midst of life?" In his book, *Healthy Aging*, he writes that the ethical will is pertinent to those of us "concerned with making sense of our lives and the fact of our aging." What I've found over time and in diverse situations guiding people to write their legacy letters is that the process addresses deep universal needs that we may not even be aware we have. They include: the need to be connected (belonging); the need to be known, heard, and remembered; the need to make a difference (make a contribution); the need to be needed; the need to bless and be blessed; and to celebrate life.

I believe it both a **privilege and a responsibility** to record, communicate, and preserve your family and community histories, document the legacies you received, and the experiences you've lived that make you who you are. Preserving your wisdom and your love establishes a link in the chain of generations, and passes on a legacy for those of tomorrow's world.

May all your legacies be blessings,

Rachael Freed

About Rachael Freed



Rachael Freed, founder of [Life Legacies](#) and Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota's Center for Spirituality and Healing, is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist.

An inspirational lecturer and workshop facilitator, she provides legacy-related programs and training for health care, philanthropic and religious organizations, for public and non-profit institutions, and for diverse groups of individuals experiencing celebratory and challenging life transitions.

Freed is the author of *[Women's Lives, Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations](#)*, endorsed by Dr. Weil: "The ethical will is a wonderful gift to leave your family at the end of your life, but I think its main importance is what it can give you in the midst of life.

Women's Lives, Women's Legacies is invaluable: an inspiring and practical guide for crafting your own spiritual-ethical will to link you to your history, give purpose to your daily life, and communicate your legacies to those you love."

[The Women's Legacies Workbook for the Busy Woman: A Step-by-Step Guide for Writing a Spiritual-Ethical Will in 2 Hours or Less](#) is currently available as a download from [Life Legacies](#). Her Legacy Tips&Tools appears monthly on DrWeil.com, The Huffington Post-Living, and LegacyConnect.com. Personal email [subscriptions](#) are available.

Harvesting the Wisdom of Our Lives: An Intergenerational Legacy Guide, Freed's book in progress, is scheduled for publication in early 2013.

Freed has trained professionals internationally to support the emotional and spiritual recovery of cardiac families. Her book and journal, *[Heartmates: A Guide for the Spouse and Family of the Heart Patient](#)* and *[The Heartmates Journal: A Companion for Partners of People with Serious Illness](#)*, are unique resources for families coping with the life transition of heart disease.

For more information, visit [Life Legacies](#), [Heartmates](#) or contact Rachael at <mailto:Rachael@life-legacies.com>

Reflection:

Writing legacy letters (spiritual-ethical wills) is a response to the deep human yearning in us to **articulate and preserve** who we most authentically are and by what values we have lived. How is this different from the Lascaux cave painters communicating to the future over 15,000 years ago? How different are we from Emanuel Ringelblum who spent his last months gathering 25,000 documents to preserve life as it was lived in the Warsaw Ghetto? Burying Holocaust history in milk cans echoes back to the Essenes, who preserved their history and values in canisters too (The Dead Sea Scrolls) some 2000 years ago.



We are all links to the past and the future. That doesn't change, whether we're pre-language like the cave-painters, post printing press, or even wireless.

It's easy to understand our **urge to preserve** at joyful occasions in our lives. Life cycle events like birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, baptisms and bar mitzvahs, confirmations and graduations, religious and secular holidays, fill us with gratitude and open our hearts to express our love. We're attuned to deeper thoughts, awe, and a sense that we want to leave our imprint and blessings as we experience those times. There's also the bittersweet as we experience time passing & the impermanence of our lives.

What seems to make the **urge to preserve** more intense, more demanding of our attention, is an awareness of our mortality. That may come gradually as is normal in the second half of life, or abruptly, often without warning, when an accident, illness, or mortal danger befalls us or others.

We stand today at the **beginning of a new year, 2011**, as people have faced the future for millennia. How will we, members of sacred human communities, define it, communicate it, remember its past and paint its future?

Deeper than the New Year resolutions that we make so facilely and break so easily, let us **seize the opportunity** "to begin to begin again." Let us commit to responding to the profound yearning within us to communicate and preserve the values that matter most to us.

"... we begin to begin again"

~ Marcia Falk

Let us write our spiritual-ethical wills. Using the simple format of legacy letters we can celebrate Life, link our stories to our history, share life lessons, and participate in **preserving our culture's values** for the future.

Practice:

1. Use the format of a letter (far less threatening than writing a spiritual-ethical will). There is something special, even sacred, about receiving a letter written in a loved one's hand.
2. Time yourself, writing for 15 minutes, and no more. Setting a reasonable limit focuses your attention and intention. Legacy writing need not be an overwhelming task.
3. If you choose, you can divide your letter into four components (paragraphs). They include: a) providing the context or history, b) telling the story or experience, c) sharing the learning or lesson culled from the experience, and d) offering a blessing to the recipient of the letter.
4. You can always go back to rework, edit, or amend your draft. Most writers find that the discipline of timed writing almost magically results in expression directly from the heart, sending a powerful message to your loved ones.
5. As Marianne Williamson suggested, "**we are all mothers of the planet**" making legacy writing a privilege and responsibility for all of us, not just parents or grandparents. Legacy letters may be written to a family member, friend, co-worker, colleague, or community.
6. Use holidays, life-cycle events, memorable experiences, and life transitions as appropriate "moments" to write legacy letters.
7. Write "reflections" for no more than a few minutes directly after writing a legacy letter. Reflections, the mental counterpart to your heartfelt letter, are *for you*. They provide you with a valuable perspective about the experience of writing the letter ... an opportunity to document your writing process and learn more about yourself.

**May this new year be a time of commitment
to the sacred urge to preserve,
... for yourself today
and for those you love tomorrow,**

~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

The **legacy of civility**, beyond our personal hopes for our families and loved ones, is imperative in our own country and the world. We have just in the past month witnessed the tragedy in Tucson, the Jasmine Revolution in my Peace Corps home - Tunisia, and the ongoing struggle for human dignity and opportunity in Egypt.

What can we do about these seismic and historic events? We can strive individually to relate to others, especially those whose opinions, faiths and politics differ from our own, with respect, compassion, understanding, even love. These qualities underlay civility. If we don't confront our personal fears and resentments, civility will slip away as the memory of the events that brought forth the call for civility fade from our fickle attention.

**If we do not change our direction,
we are likely to end up where we are headed.**
- Chinese Proverb

The public goal was expressed by President Obama in his Memorial Speech in Tucson, "...at a time when our

discourse has become so sharply polarized - at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of **those who think differently than we do** - it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that **heals**, not a way that wounds....let us...listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and **remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together**....the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us."

**... hear the right in another's wrong,
and the wrong in our right...**
~ Reinhold Niebuhr

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke similarly in his "Strength to Love" speech in 1963: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only **light** can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only **love** can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction ... The chain reaction of evil - hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars - must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."

Today we experience a lack of civility and its underlying fear and hate all around us, from the Mideast and North Africa to our own country, as well in our own often troubled families, even within ourselves when we fall prey to harshness about our own personal failings.

What is our legacy? What is our obligation to future generations? To do what we can as individuals. **Only we can** recognize our own uncivil thoughts, words, and actions, understand our own failures of trust and fear of difference so we can replace them with understanding, compassion, and love. This is the most meaningful gift we can **bequeath to the future**.

**...children sing, children dream, and the
tears may fall, but we'll hear them call, and
another song will rise, another song will rise
- Not by might, and not by power, but by
spirit alone - shall all men live in peace.
- Song, Debbie Friedman**

Practice:

Reflect on the personal fears and resentments you carry that prevent you from relating to yourself, family, friends, and the larger community with the civility, respect, compassion, and love you intend - today and for your legacy to the future.

1. Write a list of fears and resentments you are aware of at yourself, friends, family members, and groups in which you count yourself a member.
2. Choose three from your list to explore further. Write a paragraph about each, focusing on your feelings and the memories of the events that you carry with you about them. Be sure to choose one of your fears or resentments toward yourself.
3. Put the writing away for one or two days. When you return to it, write a paragraph for each, imagining that you are safe and secure and are letting go of the fear or resentment. Then imagine that you are face to face with that person and you are speaking words of civility, forgiveness, understanding, compassion, even love to him or her.
4. Finally, choose one from the three you've been working on, and write a legacy letter to that person expressing your newfound feeling and understanding of yourself (sharing the life lesson that you learned doing this exploration) and making an amend if that is appropriate. Consider addressing your letter to yourself and unborn generations!
5. Your letter need not be sent. That is a choice for another day.

**May this be a time to
grow civility,
compassion and love
... for yourself in this day
and for the children of tomorrow,**

~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

The ethical will is often described as a legacy of values – differentiated from a legacy of valuables, which refers to the gifts of our material wealth. Courage, a value that we've seen practiced and heard much about at home and around the world in 2011, is what we'll concentrate on in our legacy writing this month.

Hold these questions as you read my reflections and suggestions for *your* legacy writing about courage:

How were your ancestors courageous in their lives?

When's a time you were personally courageous?

What are the risks you face when a situation asks you to be courageous?

What are the costs to acting courageously?

What do you want unborn generations to know about courage in our times?

Consider the courage required of all of us in our daily lives: whether it's returning to the field after striking out in a baseball game, apologizing to someone we've hurt, continuing to apply after losing a job, undertaking the painful daily regimen of rehab or recovery, rebuilding life after the loss of a precious person, or speaking up when we witness bias, bullying, or disrespect.

My first memory of being asked to be courageous was when I was in the fourth grade. I'd come home from school crying after a classmate called me a dirty Jew on the playground. My mother told me to return to school and to be especially nice to this girl to "show her" that I was not. Amazingly, the girl and I became best of friends for the rest of our elementary school days. The positive result of my effort is not what makes me remember this story and want to pass it on to my grandchildren – no, it was the courageous stance my mother recommended, and although she never spoke the word, she, encouraged it in me, teaching me the value of standing tall and proud in who I was, and being kind, rather than harbor hurt or hatred, or becoming a powerless victim.

When we imagine our ancestors' courageous choices: to immigrate, to learn English and to navigate a strange culture, to endure the hardships of isolation, weather, and backbreaking work homesteading, farming, and building railroads – or living crowded in tenements, working in deplorable conditions in factories to feed families and educate children, sacrificing their lives for the future of their children. We wonder whether we'd have had the courage in such situations.

The chaos and unremitting stress of the unknown when assumptions and beliefs you built your life on disappear in the flash of a second: being critically injured in an accident, receiving a dread diagnosis, becoming suddenly widowed, as examples. The courage it takes to get up and face each difficult day, to function for the sake of others who need us; to remain positive when there are setbacks.

Recently I had the opportunity to mentor a woman who is writing her story for her children and grandchildren. Born in 1936, her young childhood in Germany was made safe and even innocently joyful because of the courage of her mother – left as most because the men were away at war. Her memories of her mother's courage – a legacy she received – is now a legacy to pass on to the future generations in her family.

Multiply individual courage by 10 million, by 80 million this very year, 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East. We're witnessing the world changing by the elegance of non-violent civil disobedience as a matured tool in the hands of young people. As they demand an end to the corrupt and entrenched dictators with their songs and chants, flags and posters, patience and persistence, the energy vibrates around the planet, both the trepidation and the optimistic hopes for a new and better future and the courage to have a hand and a voice in crafting freedom for the future of their country.

And finally the courage to love – our selves, each other, and the Divine – when we're plagued with fear of rejection, the pain of old losses, and have protected our hearts.

**'tis better to have loved and lost,
than never to have loved at all.
- Alfred Lord Tennyson**

Practice:

1. Write a list of experiences and memories you are aware of in yourself, family members, ancestors, friends, and community that are examples of courage.
2. Choose three from your list to explore further: reflect and journal about each, focusing on your memories of the event or circumstance, your feelings, and your learning. Be sure to choose one from your list that is about *your* courage in a specific situation.
3. Put the writing away for a few days. Continue to reflect on courage. When you come back to it, write a paragraph for each that focuses on how the courage was either a legacy you received or a legacy you want to preserve and communicate to the future.
4. Finally, choose one from the three you've been working on, and write a legacy letter to someone who may need courage at this time in their life or someone you can gift with your thoughts. Share the examples of courage you reflected on and what you learned about courage doing this exploration. Consider addressing and mailing your letter to yourself as well as someone today or unborn generations.

**May your courage be blended
with love and compassion.**

**May you and your loved ones,
present and future,
grow in courage.**

~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

How do we **individually echo** the **larger changes** happening today in nature (earthquakes and tsunamis) and our political worlds (revolutions throughout North Africa and the Mideast)?

Simultaneously the season is changing, replacing the deep stillness and hibernation of **winter** with the awakening that denotes **spring**. This transition returns the birds, crocuses pulse toward the sun out of the warming earth, restless, jacket-free children hit the playgrounds, lovers laugh, creativity bursts forth in us and beyond us, potential manifesting new realities. Each of us needs the courage to be awake to confront the changes happening within and beyond us.

How do we go forth? Are we seeking the **opportunities or resisting** the changes with clenched fists and eyes shut tight? Aren't we powerless to stop the momentum, the transition: whether it's a tsunami in Japan, a lake's ice melting, rivers flooding after a snowy winter, youth awakening - yearning for freedom and democracy? Change happens, but if we're resisting and denying, we miss the joy and the awe of the moment.

...And moments that should each last forever
Slide unconsciously by us like water.
- Kenneth Rexroth

How often we've heard that
change is the only constant, that
we're not in charge, that we only
have control of our perspective

and attitudes about what's happening to us? We can either appreciate and experience the preciousness of the moment, or we can experience the evolution and revolution in our world, with our heads in the sand ostrich-like, holding back mule-like. Nonetheless we flow with or are dragged forward by the momentum of change.

It's easy to write about this abstractly; the challenge **to live it is another story**. And to **share revolution** and its meaning as a **legacy** to those we love and those yet unborn is a gift to them, and perhaps more, a gift of clarity of purpose for ourselves.

My personal (R)evolution of this season in my life is about learning how to be open-hearted, kind, trusting, truthful: in other words, risking loving another. These are values I've long espoused, but not qualities I developed in my growing up family, nor in a long marriage. It has been a long winter! I told myself it was my karma; that to love and be loved was not an opportunity nor a lesson I was to have this life.

Unexpectedly a man has come into my life -- beginning with an invitation to study sacred texts together. It has developed into a sweet friendship. The movement within me is like a frozen creek melting, gurgling and flowing, slowed by twigs and moldy leaves from past seasons. Alternately I sparkle with discovery, laughter, and joy, then refreeze into old patterns of fear and distrust remindful of the historic, protective cold of my **personal winter** where voices warn me that I'm "not enough," "I'm going to get hurt." Cautioned from within to defend myself from anticipated rejection, my heart closes. In this internal winter I am self-absorbed, alone, afraid, and protective. I continue learning from this spiritual revolution within: to leave winter behind for the beauty of **spring**.

What I can leave as a **legacy** is my learning: about how I deal with personal (R)evolutions and to stay attentive to larger revolutions in the world, about my desire to face the changes in my life with love and awe, and to **record my learning** as a gift to my family and loved ones...expressing my values, my gratitude, and the blessings of my life.

A revolution resembles the death of a fading star,
an exhilarating Technicolor explosion that gives
way not to an ordered new galaxy but to a
nebula, a formless cloud of shifting energy.
And though every revolution is different,
...all revolutions are local....
- Simon Sebag Montefiore *

Practice:

1. Reflect about your personal changes [internal (R)evolutions] in this season, spring 2011, and the season you are experiencing in your life.

Gardening is not a rational act.
What matters is the immersion of the hands
in the earth, that ancient ceremony....
In the spring, at the end of the day,
you should smell like dirt.
- Margaret Atwood

2. Journal about the challenge of change, focusing on your memories of earlier significant changes in your life, your feelings, and your learning.
3. Reflect on revolution, its **opportunities** and its **dangers**. Consider what your experience with revolution has taught you and is teaching you about yourself and your life.
4. When you've exhausted the subject, journal one more entry, **connecting** your personal (R)evolution to the larger revolutions occurring at this moment in history throughout the world.
5. Write a letter to someone(s) to express and preserve your values, who you are, and what you believe is significant about **(R)evolution** as a **legacy** you choose to preserve and communicate to the future.
6. Consider sending a copy of this letter to yourself as a gift to support your (R)evolutions as well as to preserve the history of this time as a legacy to others yet unborn.

**May you and your loved ones,
present and future,
experience gratitude
for the growth of internal and external
(R)evolution**
~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

Blessing our children is as old as Genesis. The ethical will was modeled after Jacob blessing his sons before his death (Gen: 49). Earlier, after Jacob stole his brother's blessing, Esau approaches Isaac to ask the question we all ask, aloud or in our hearts, no matter how old we are: **"Have you no blessing for me, father?"**

Even in the aftermath of the earthquake in Japan, the violence rocking the Mideast, floods, tornados and loss everywhere, we find ourselves noticing new life, growth, and we celebrate spring. New babies bring hope - be they hungry birds chirping in their nests, ducklings quacking in ponds, blossoms in their vibrant dress nodding hello to the sun or we humans celebrating the many occasions and family events of the season. **Everyone hungers to be blessed**, and there is much to feel blessed about.

Blessings are at the core of legacy writing. Just a few of the opportunities to write blessings at this time of year include Mothers' Day, new babies, confirmations, graduations, and of course the weddings and anniversaries of June.

To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer.
- Henri Nouwen

When we write blessings to celebrate the moment and the people, we are responding to the need for nurture we all have: the ones who bless and those who

receive the blessing. **Blessings are a special glue**: strengthening the bond of family, affirming caring among its members, explicitly appreciating each other and the special moment. Writing legacy blessings are a powerful way to honor our covenant with the past and the future.

Recently a friend travelled across the country to celebrate his 80-year-old father's birthday. He and each of his siblings **blessed their Dad** in a legacy letter, defining the lessons he had taught them, and expressing appreciation about how those values continue to impact their lives. What a gift to an aging parent, and a blessing drawing the grown siblings close at a joyous time before the potential stresses of the future.

Here's an excerpt of a blessing by a mother to her son, who's about to become a father: **"I remember when you were a small boy. When asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, you once answered, 'a daddy.' Here you are!I wish for you the joy of a busy, messy, loud house I wish for you a fridge covered in art projects and spelling tests. May you feel the pride of hearing a line in a Christmas play well-spoken....I wish you the rich, rich texture of a family life that is uniquely yours. I wish for you, dear son, a small measure of the immense love and joy you have brought to me."**

Mothers Day, often joyful, sometimes stressful, and like all holidays, a time when old regrets and disappointments show up no matter how well planned the gathering. There is hope of healing when the focus is on a favorite story about Mom recalled and retold by each family member. The stories can easily be gathered electronically: begun and ended with a **blessing of Mother** honoring her and the family's special memories and moments. Laughter and fond memories can ease old tensions. Future generations will cherish a view of their grandmother or great grandmother not in role, but as a person of her time, a woman with values, desires and dreams of her own.

Here's a blessing by **a son for his special mother**, reread by the two of them each year since it was first written: **"Early in life you showed what true sacrifice is.... As I fell into the depths of drug addiction, your unconditional love never wavered and you are still my biggest fan. You have given me hope that love can conquer all things and that change is possible in even the darkest of moments....I share this with you because I don't ever want to wake up without you knowing how much I appreciate your love and guidance."**

To bless....a moment in which the gift of ourselves flows to another with a depth that only spirit can provide.
- David Spangler

Practice:

1. In preparation, write a list of the occasions of this season that your family members, friends, colleagues, and community are celebrating, noting the dates and the addresses you'll need.
2. Prioritize the list by date, with the nearest in time first, and farthest out in time at the end.
3. Reflect about what you love, admire, and cherish about the person you are going to write the blessing to/for. Reflect too about the occasion for the blessing.
4. Draft your blessing, spending from 5 to 15 minutes writing; no more.
5. Put the writing away for at least one day, while you find or make a beautiful card suitable for your blessing for the person and the occasion.

The one who blesses becomes an agent of self-realization and fulfillment for the one who receives the blessing.
- Lawrence Kushner

6. Return to the blessing to edit it, making sure that the words convey the message and meaning of your blessing. Write the finished version on your card and mail it. (Keep a copy for yourself of each blessing you write, preserving a compendium of your blessings to those you love in your own legacy file.)

May your loved ones be nurtured, cherished and loved by the words and intention of your blessings, today and always.
~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

When we reflect on our relationships, we can't help but recognize that we've said and done things that we wish we hadn't. We've made mistakes, **mistakes** that have hurt those we love - sometimes without even realizing it, sometimes accidentally, sometimes through neglect, judgment or gossip, and yes, sometimes purposely.

Writing a legacy letter to **acknowledge and take responsibility** for what you've said or done, may be a welcome gift to the one you've wronged and a **release and relief** for you.

Let's consider ourselves first. No one wants to pass on a legacy of hurt or pain, yet often this is part of what we do inadvertently when we are silent about our actions. Acknowledging our wrongdoings reduces the personal baggage we carry around with us, sometimes for many decades. Bringing **closure** to something unfinished lightens the psychic load we carry, and may result in a sense of **liberation** and lightness. Admitting that we aren't perfect, and that we are sincerely sorry when our imperfection hurts another, can heal a relationship that has long been constricted and distant even many years after the wrongdoing. It takes **courage** to write a direct and specific **apology**, but it is well worth considering; it is a significant component of our legacy writing.

It can also be worthwhile to write a letter of apology to a person who has already died. Apologizing, making an amend, may be just the closure you need in a relationship that ended in a troubled way. Some years ago I led a workshop in which I asked the participants to **write an apology, as a precursor for a legacy letter**. When the workshop concluded, a young woman approached me saying that she'd written it "all wrong". I translated her remark to mean that she wanted my approval for what she'd written. I explained, "There's no wrong way to do this. We're each unique, but I'd like to hear what you wrote." She read a moving amend to her father. After she finished reading, I said that it couldn't have been better. She responded that her father was dead. I expressed my belief that **death doesn't mean an end of a relationship**: that she was courageous to have addressed her unfinished business with her father so honestly. She was visibly relieved and explained that she couldn't have made the apology while he was alive.

Writing a **legacy letter of amend** does not necessarily demand sending or sharing what you write. It is your **choice** to send the letter -- either now or at some later time -- or to destroy the letter in a ritual act of release.

For the **receiver of the letter**, there are many potential results. Our written apologies and regrets may be received as a generous and humble act of love that will be appreciated now and long after we are gone. But that may not always be the case. Another possibility is that the

receiver never experienced the hurt you are apologizing for, and will receive the letter with respect, but little emotional reaction. It's also possible that the receiver will experience your legacy letter as "too little, too late" and nothing in the relationship will change. No matter the response, we need to remember that we are writing because it is important for us to express our values and take responsibility for our actions. **We can**

never know or predict how even our best efforts will affect another. If this writing is done looking for a specific response, it defeats its purpose. We need to state our truths, in a kind way, of course, and with the hope, as the Buddhists say, that our writing will "do no harm."

As part of the legacy she wrote her daughter, who was leaving home for college, Sharon Strassfeld wrote this moving and **humble apology**:

"I have no way to lessen for you the pain you suffered in having been an acutely sensitive child in the hands of a strong and assertive mother. But I will tell you that always, always, I gave you the best that I had available to give. And sometimes my best was simply not good enough. I'm sorry for that."

Practice:

1. In preparation, list three people to whom you want to offer amends or apologize for something harmful you have done or said. (The people on your list may be living or not.)
2. For each name, describe in a paragraph of any length the harm(s) you have done.
3. Choose one person from your list and write your reasons for seeking resolution.
4. Spending no more than 15 minutes writing, draft a legacy letter to that person that includes a description and acknowledgement of what you did or said, concluding with your apology. Be sure that you don't ask for the other's forgiveness, that your letter is simply you taking full responsibility for your actions or speech.
5. Put the letter away for at least one day, then reread and edit it, and decide whether and when you will send it. If you decide "not now," put the letter with your private personal papers. Bring it out regularly to reconsider your decision.

"Address things now that could otherwise turn into regrets."

- Jane Fonda

6. You can repeat steps 2 - 5 with the other two people on your list. Add as many others as you need anytime in the future.

May your reflections and writing result in increased compassion for yourself and those you love

~ Rachael Freed



Reflection:

Ethical wills are about values, not valuables. But what about the category of **stuff** – of value or not? You know “you can’t take it with you,” but it’s too simple to see *stuff* either as necessities to function in the material world, or merely useless acquisitions.

What about the *stuff* you inherited, saved, collected, received as gifts from a beloved? **What about those objects infused with meaning, symbols of your identity, your relationships, your work?**

My mother’s Wedgewood **dishes** - bought on her 1937 Canadian honeymoon; my daughter’s first shoes, red patent with tiny straps - in a family that has loved **shoes** for four generations; the pair of handmade 19th century brass **candlesticks** my grandmother brought when she immigrated from Kiev; the Santorini blue **bowl** - memento of my first trip to Greece; my **frog collection** - a source of fun and humor for my grandchildren. These are some of my precious things – *stuff* that I love and want to pass on to friends and my children and grandchildren.

Your stuff and their stories provide a window into your identity, illuminate what you value and why, and connect you to future generations. Yes, **even stuff is a significant component of your legacy.** For more about legacy and your precious objects, see chapter 8 in *Women’s Lives, Women’s Legacies*.

To ensure that future generations receive your valued objects and inherit their history and stories, you need to document what those objects represent to you. If *you* don’t **preserve the meaning** and value attached to your *stuff*, one day both the objects and their significance will be lost at the inevitable garage sale.

Gerontologists suggest that **the stuff elders choose** to take with them when they leave their own homes, to move into communal housing, are powerful aids to **maintain coherence and continuity of identity** in this complex transition. These objects are ‘**emblems**’ of belonging, kinship, and relationship. They are **reminders** of life history, achievements, and life roles. Precious objects **support security**. Even when memory has diminished, these special things can **provide comfort**.

...even though you’re far away from home, you start to feel okay, because after all, you do have some of your stuff with you.

- George Carlin

We need to take care that our elders **choose** which objects accompany them should such a transition become necessary. Even the most compassionate professional caregivers or movers don’t have the history or know **the meaning of personal objects of a lifetime**. We should strive to diminish our elders’ vulnerability and enhance their sense of **dignity and being empowered** as they confront the inevitable transitions of aging.

The power of everyday things carry both ideas and passions ... emotional and intellectual companions that anchor memory [and] sustain relationship....
- Sherry Turkle

Practice:

1. Take a trip around your home to inventory your *stuff*.
2. Make a list of those objects that have value for you beyond their material worth.
3. Invite your beloveds (children, grandchildren, friends) to name objects of yours that have special meaning to them. (Don’t be surprised if their lists are quite different from yours.) You may use their lists to decide to whom you want to gift your things. You may decide to give away some things sooner rather than later.
4. Choose one object (from your list or the lists of friends and family) to write about.
5. Here are some prompts to stir your memory about why an object is special to you:
 - Where did this object come from?
 - What is its history, its biography?
 - What is its story?
 - How did it come to you?
 - What makes it meaningful (valuable) to you?
 - To whom will you give this object and what do you want that person to know about it?
6. Once you have written, be sure that someone knows where your writing is. You may want to tag the object inconspicuously, linking it with its story and the name of its future owner.
7. Follow these guidelines to preserve the meaning of other precious *stuff*.



May your precious stuff clarify your identity and values, and deepen your relationships with those you love.

- Rachael Freed



Legacy Tips & Tools

Reflection:

For whatever cultural or natural reasons, at a certain time in our lives we become aware of a deep yearning for our family roots. Some of us, because we are a nation of immigrants, make pilgrimages far from home to walk the land our forefathers and foremothers did. Others of us rely on reading, family reunions, communicating through and searching the internet to connect to our past.

August, this month of abundant natural harvest of delicious fresh fruits and vegetables, is synchronous with harvesting the fruits of our relationships, especially with those who have helped us grow, who nurtured and mentored us. Preserving and passing on those roots of our history is the sacred act of legacy writing.

In the fall of 2009, I worked with volunteers at the U.S. Holocaust Museum. It was a humbling opportunity. I was optimistic that these seniors would recover memories of nurturing relationships from before the war, and simultaneously terrified that they would feel disrespected that I was not focusing on their Holocaust experiences. They had committed themselves, their very identities - some for over forty years - to repeat their Holocaust stories so that the horror beyond understanding would not be forgotten, so this horror would never happen again.

But it has been sixty years since the war. I wanted their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, who yearned for whatever family roots were available to them, to hear about the treasures of life, not just the deaths, of their ancestors.

I asked them to remember someone whom they loved before the Holocaust and to write a short story of this memorable person, and the values that they'd learned from this person. There was some mumbling, some grumbling, and then it got quiet. There was only the sound of pens scratching on paper. Less than fifteen minutes later, they were wanting to share their memory with the other volunteers. Here is one of those memories:

"It's almost impossible for me to remember anyone before the Holocaust, I do have a vivid memory of my grandfather—the Rabbi of Ludbreg.

In that town beggars came knocking on doors and asking for alms every Saturday and Wednesday—market days in that small town. But of course, they didn't come to our door on Saturdays, since my grandfather could not respond on that day—Shabbat. But on Wednesdays my grandfather would set up a little table in the garden when the weather was good and in the hallway in bad weather. On the table he would arrange little piles of change, and as the beggars, accustomed to this, and sometimes a Gypsy (Roma) or two came by, my grandfather would greet them and hand them each a little pile of money.

I was fascinated by all of this then—and have remembered it always as a lesson 'to be kind to the less fortunate, and always be as generous as possible.' "

To lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.

-- Frederick Buechner

Practice:

1. Choose one memory of an ancestor (a parent, a grandparent, or another relative from before you were five years old). Reflect on a time when you were very young. Remember something about that person that you want future generations to know about him or her.
Perhaps it is:
 - * A favorite memory or a story that keeps you connected to him or her,
 - * A value of theirs that has influenced your life,
 - * Something important to you that you want preserved and remembered,
 - * Something that ancestor passed on specifically to you, without their awareness, that you treasure.
2. Write the memory or story in a paragraph. In a second short paragraph, write the lesson you learned from that experience, or why that memory is precious to you.
3. Choose someone in generations younger than you to whom you want to pass on the story. Develop the story as a legacy letter, with a brief introduction of who the ancestor was - how he or she is related to you. Close the letter with a blessing from you, that they will cherish their roots and preserve and pass these treasures to their children and grandchildren.
4. Tell someone of a younger generation something they don't know about who you are: about your rootedness, your identity: something you want to be remembered for, something in your life you feel joy or gratitude about, something that you find precious, something you love to do, or love about your life. Follow the suggestions in steps 2 and 3 to translate your story into a legacy letter.

May the memories and the life lessons
uncovered from your roots
strengthen your family and the identity
of your loved ones.

- Rachael Freed



Legacy Tips & Tools

Reflection:

To have a friend takes time.
-- Georgia O'Keefe

All respect to O'Keefe, but friendship is about more than the priority of time. It takes values in common, trust, caring, tolerance, compassion, perseverance, even love. Friendship is built on mutual acceptance of our essential natures.

When people write blessings to younger generations, they often stress that maintaining and appreciating friendships is as important as family.

Our friendships sustain and define us. They balance our needs for privacy and solitude (our relationship with ourselves) with our need to connect with and be known and understood by others. Often the vow of friendship is implicit: never spoken, though maintained and sustained over decades, distance, and personal changes.

A friend is, as it were, a second self.
-- Cicero

One way to get a sense of how profound and important our friendships are throughout our lives is through the magic of music. Listen to Carole King singing her 1971 song "You've Got a Friend" with her friends Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan and Shania Twain. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4jxGtFXstM> Some of you may be moved by James Taylor's version <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7RPCFfudmU> Even consider singing along before you begin to write to celebrate your friendships. Here's the chorus:

**"You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running to see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there - You've got a friend."**

Here are some reflection /musings as you think about your friends:

- How has the nature of your friendship changed over time?
- How have you maintained the friendship with someone who lives far away, when there have been changes in your or their circumstances, values, and life decisions?
- Consider some of the challenges of friendship: building a new relationship with someone as you age, changing your relationship with an old friend, letting go of a friend.
- Consider your "best friend": What is the essence of that relationship and what makes it so special?

- What do you value most about your friendships? Are there values or actions that you won't tolerate in your friends? In yourself as a friend?
- What are the gifts of your friendship?
- How have friends disappointed you? How have you betrayed your friends? How do you or have you forgiven one another for these lapses?
- What changes would you like to make in your friendships?
- Describe the sacred experience when you "meet" in the space of your essential natures?

Practice:

1. It is said that one is rich if they can count a handful of friends...how many do you count? List their names. (The list may include some who are no longer alive.)
2. Next to each write a short description of the qualities and nature of the relationship, and what specifically you value in your friend.
3. Choose one friend from your list to write a 15 minute letter that celebrates them and your relationship. Consider the history of the relationship, adventures you've shared, and what you're most grateful for about them. Your letter can include description, blessing, and expression of your appreciation of this miraculous relationship.
4. Share your letter as a gift to celebrate the relationship or share it at a special moment in time, like a birthday or reunion.
5. As a part of your ongoing legacy writing, you may want to write a legacy letter to someone in a younger generation about how much you value friendship. You may also want to write letters to others you count as friends.

May your friendships enrich your life
and the lives of your friends,

- Rachael Freed



Reflection:

Legacy Tips and Tools commonly focuses on specific legacy writing topics. As our elist continues to expand, many new legacy writers are unaware of the basic principles of legacy writing. Others, who've been writing for some time, can benefit from a review to refine or renew their commitment to legacy writing.

Basic **principles of legacy and legacy writing** include the following:

1. Legacy writing is different from memoir, spiritual autobiography, genealogy/ family history or scrapbooking in intention, not necessarily in content.
2. The intention (**purpose**) of legacy writing is to communicate and preserve your values, stories, and blessings for future generations.
3. As Marianne Williamson suggested, **"we are all mothers of the planet"** making legacy writing a privilege and responsibility for all of us.
4. Legacy letters may be written to a family member, friend, colleague, co-worker, or community. It is not necessary to be a parent or a grandparent to leave a **legacy of values**.

Dr. **Andrew Weil** suggested in his endorsement of *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies* that, "The ethical will is a wonderful gift to leave to your family at the end of your life, **but ... its main importance is what it can give you in the midst of life.**"

How so? Because, as the ethical will "links you to your history, gives purpose to your daily life, and communicates your legacies to those you love," legacy writing also nourishes *you*, the writer. Legacy writing addresses universal human needs, **our own personal needs**, needs of which we are generally unaware. These include: the need to belong, to be known and remembered; the needs to make a difference and to be needed, to bless and be blessed, and to Celebrate Life.

**"Stories have to be told
or they die, and when they die,
we can't remember
who we are or
why we're here."**

- Sue Monk Kidd

The rather uninviting or unfriendly term "ethical will" or even the softer "spiritual-ethical will" may frighten away potential legacy writers. [See more details about the ethical will at: www.life-legacies.com/ethicalwills/] **Yet we are all competent** to write "legacy letters" and to **feel confident** that we have something worthwhile to communicate.

Understanding these fundamentals about ethical wills and legacy letters leads to **principles of practice**.

Principles of Practice:

1. Use the format of a letter (far less threatening than writing a document or a book. We can all write a letter.) In this day of swiftly deleted emails and the corrupted spelling of text messaging, there is something special, even sacred, about receiving a letter in a loved one's hand.
2. Time yourself and write for 15 minutes, and no more. The limit will help you focus your intention and set aside the idea that legacy writing is an overwhelming task. (You can always go back to rework and amend your draft. Most writers find that the discipline of brief timed writing almost always results in surprising and profound expression directly from the heart, a powerful message to your loved one.
3. Write your reflections for no more than five (5) minutes directly after writing a legacy letter, and keep them with a copy of your letter in your personal legacy file. These process notes are the mental complement to your heartfelt letter. They provide you with a different perspective about the experience of writing a legacy letter ... an invaluable reflection for its opportunity to learn more about yourself and the values that matter most to you.

May your reflection and legacy writing
be a gift to yourself today
and to those you love tomorrow.

- Rachael Freed



Reflection:

Without succumbing to trite phrases, political slogans, or a naive perspective, I suggest that we spend this month focused on the importance of providing future generations, our children and grandchildren, with a **legacy of hope**.

At the High Holy Days this year my rabbi gave a moving and challenging sermon titled "Angels on Their Shoulders." It was inspired in part by his grandmother's 'legacy' to her daughter. In 1940 the rabbi's mother, age twelve, was leaving Germany alone, bound for the U.S. Frightened, young Agathe looked to her mother, who told her that, "God's angel protects all children and ensures their safety." Further she advised her daughter to take the angel with her to remind her that **she would not be alone...ever**. "Let this angel remind you that **there is hope** and that **I have faith in your future**."

What an act of courage by this mother, on the brink of WWII, sending her daughter to freedom, knowing she might never see her or be able to protect her again.

No matter what today's cynics say, I agree with my rabbi: "The Jewish people are a people of hope." It's not 1940, but late 2011 has its challenges too. As elders, we have a responsibility to be aware of and act on behalf of our children and grandchildren. I know as an American, no matter the trials of our economy, our still virulent racism, our ugly political divide, people talking and no one listening, that under it all, **we Americans too are a people of hope**.

My rabbi concluded his sermon with a challenge, a powerful and significant challenge to all of us legacy writers. He asked and answered this question:

**"Who will be the angels who will speak the words of hope and vision to the children who inherit the future?
I believe that you and I are these angels."**

- Rabbi Simeon Glaser

I believe we are the angels too. It's time to reevaluate our deepest values, set aside cynicism and fear, have the courage to reclaim our voices, to define the kind of world we want to leave future generations. We must act on those values and state them clearly to pass on our yearning for good, and our hopes and blessings for those who will come after us.

"You are not obligated to complete the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to abandon it."

- Ethics of the Fathers

Practice:

1. Reflect on and write about legacies of hope (open to your interpretation as to the meaning and breadth of hope) that you received from the generations who preceded you.

2. Make a list of causes that concern you, that you've planned to or have already taken action to improve, address, or solve (e.g. poverty, literacy, the environment, conditions of children, women, refugees, human rights, oppression of any kind).

**"In this life we cannot do great things.
We can only do small things with great love."
- Mother Teresa**

3. Choose someone(s) of a younger generation (preferably a child or an adolescent in your life) to whom you want to write.

4. Take 15 minutes to write a legacy letter that addresses your concerns and your caring for the beneficiary of your beacon of hope for their future: Your blessing of an angel for them to carry on their shoulder and a reminder that your love and blessing will be with them as long as they live).

5. Reflective notes: When you've finished with your letter, take a few minutes to refurbish and acknowledge **the angel of hope on your own shoulder**, and renew any action commitments you've made to utilize the energy of hope to work for a better world.

May you always be aware
that you are not alone,
that God's angel of hope is with you and
with those you pass it to,

- Rachael Freed



Reflection:

In a world fraught with violence and destruction, we need more than ever ... **beauty**. Of course beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. How can we pass forward to future generations what we perceive and experience as beautiful? Why is it an important value? What sensations and spiritual connections do we derive from beauty? Big questions, as we tackle this month's Tips&Tools topic.

Beauty is an appropriate topic for December, in a month when we journey toward the year's darkest day. In some parts of the country we're **reminded of beauty by its loss**; the colors of autumn are gone and we're left with more dark than light. It's no wonder that we celebrate the holidays of December by embracing light. We decorate our homes, inside and out - **candles twinkle and reflect** - as we do our best to celebrate and bring beauty amidst so much darkness.

**The day beauty divorced meaning ...
The sun went down and all it was, was night.**

- Leslie Harrison

Why beauty?

An inspiration as I read Steve Jobs' sister's eulogy printed in *The New York Times*, October 30, 2011. When she told him in 1985 that she was thinking of buying a computer, he suggested she wait because he was making something "**insanely beautiful**". She continued, "Novelty was not Steve's highest value. Beauty was."

Where did my appreciation of beauty come from? My mother expressed her love of beauty domestically and femininely by the way she set a table, decorated her home, her personal grooming, and her style in dress. Her joy from flowers, colors, textures, fabrics, design, and *shoes* was **a legacy** to me. Though she died 30 years ago, I remember her when I open to beauty in our world: in nature, in things, and in people.

At a commencement address **Steve Jobs** gave at Stanford University in 2005, he told a story about taking a **calligraphy** class at Reed College, where he'd been moved by the "beautifully hand calligraphed" posters and drawer labels on campus. He knew it had no practical application, but he was fascinated because of its "beautiful, historical, artistic subtlety." Later when the first Macintosh computer was being designed, it all came back to him. "we designed it all into **the Mac**. It was the first computer with **beautiful typography**....multiple **typefaces**, proportionally spaced **fonts**."

Being a Mac lover from my first Apple, the 2E, I understood what had attracted me, and I've loved the elegance of every Mac I've owned, (I've named each hard drive "**Aphrodite**" for the **goddess of love and beauty**. My current Mac is Aphrodite X.) I also appreciate the sleek elegance of my iPhone and my new iPad2. As well as accessible and efficient, they are beautiful!

In that 2005 commencement address, Jobs spoke of legacy as he shared his cancer diagnosis from the previous year:

"My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor's code for prepare to die. It means to try to tell your kids everything you thought you'd have the next 10 years to tell them in just a few months. It means to make sure everything is buttoned up so that it will be as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes."

This month let us **bring more light** to the dark; let us tell our kids and grandkids, and anyone who'll listen how important **beauty** is and ways it has enriched our lives.

Practice:

1. Begin by reflecting about the experiences and things that make your heart sing with their beauty. Journal in a free-flowing style about beauty for 10-20 minutes for as many days as you enjoy describing all that's beautiful in your life and in the larger world.

**People often say that
'beauty is in the eye of the beholder,'
and I say that the most liberating thing about
beauty is realizing that
you are the beholder.
This empowers us
to find beauty in places
where others have not dared to look,
including inside ourselves.
- Salma Hayek**

2. If you learned about beauty from an ancestor, remember at least one specific story about beauty that you shared when you were young. This may be one of your legacy letters that also links generations coming after you to generations that have come before, so you may include a story about beauty you shared with an ancestor.

3. Choose a recipient(s) for a legacy letter focused on the value of beauty. Think about what you want to pass forward to them about the importance of beauty (why you value it) and share specifically ways it has enhanced your life.

4. Craft a beauty blessing to conclude your letter.

5. Reflective notes: When you've finished with your letter, and writing about your experience of thinking and writing about beauty, consider making a commitment to recognize, acknowledge, and appreciate the beauty you are blessed with in your everyday life and the gloriously beautiful planet we inhabit.

**May you find beauty
in unexpected places,
and pass it on to all your loved ones,**

- Rachael Freed

