

Creating A Legacy Out of Everyday Living

by Claire B. Willis
from a forthcoming book

For the last 10 years, I have facilitated writing groups for people who were living with and dying from cancer. I choose this work because of the immediacy with which people live when they know they don't have "forever". Like my group members, I often wondered how I would be remembered and what kind of difference my life was making, often writing about these questions in my journal, and simultaneously wondering about the purpose of these entries.

Then I attended a workshop offered by Rachael Freed based on her book *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies*. There I was introduced to a new way of holding these questions and making meaning. By creating an ongoing legacy through various structured writing exercises, many of the daily questions about which I had been journaling for so long found meaning and a vehicle for expression. Since then, I have been teaching and personally using these techniques for creating a legacy in my own work and with folks living with cancer.

The six universal needs that legacy writing addresses are: the need to belong, to be known, to be remembered, to have our lives make a difference to be blessed and to bless, and to celebrate life

We began by making a list of instructions or messages, implicit or explicit, that we had received from our family, community or religious training. We were then asked to make another list of instructions that we might want to leave for future generations - our children, a partner, close friends or relatives.

At this point some of my list consisted of the following:

Be generous and give anonymously
Stay thin and watch what you eat
Find work in which your passion and the world's needs intersect.
Always take into consideration others feelings

We were asked to convert these "instructions or messages" into blessings using stems that might include some of the following: *May you always...May God or your higher power...May you be blessed as I have been with...I wish for you...I hope for you...*

We reframed our instructions into blessings using a stem from above. We selected for our focus one of our blessings, making certain that we had not just re-written an instruction,

Instruction: *Be generous and give anonymously*

Initial conversion to a blessing: *May you find a way to give anonymously.*

Rereading this, I realized that it still sounded like an instruction, and that I had not really “softened” the language sufficiently. I had written it from my mind instead of my heart. I rewrote it:

May you always be guided through life by generosity and the capacity to give without having to be known or seen for your gifts.

In my re-write, I could feel how the language I chose softened, not only the message but something inside me as well. The harshness of a command/instruction became a wish for my children to do something differently than I had done. I wanted to save them from a sorrow I had experienced. I could even feel grief in my body as I wrote it and knew that there was a great deal of feeling behind that initial instruction. I could not just tell my children to do something differently than I had done, but sharing how I learned that lesson, they might remember the anecdote in a way that they wouldn't an instruction.

I asked myself why I had chosen this particular blessing. I wondered what was behind my particular wish to pass this along. Then I wrote the story from my life from which this instruction and blessing had come, trying to write from my heart and not my head, integrating the wise part of myself with the personal pain, so that the legacy came from the strength of my vulnerability. The writing stirred a great deal of grief in myself.

May you always be guided through life by generosity and the capacity to give without having to be known. Several years ago, I facilitated weeklong residential retreats for people living with cancer. At the end of the week, I donated my salary back to the sponsoring nonprofit. I enjoyed the gratitude that came my way. I loved this little grass roots group. In addition to donating my salary back, I made a monthly donation on my credit card for a number of years following my work there. A year later, I decided I would stop the monthly giving and find a local no profit that did similar work I called the director, a friend of mine, and explained my decision.

Weeks later, I received a phone call from the director, inviting me to return to the retreat center to again facilitate a weeklong retreat. I wondered if they wanted me to come again because they hoped that I would donate more money or whether it was because they wanted my facilitation skills. That persistent question led me to decide, like your grandfather had always done, to only donate money anonymously. My relationships now are more protected from my own questions, insecurities and fears. While I may miss the acknowledgement that can come from making donations, the clarity of my relationships feels much more important and I have found a way to protect myself from myself and those lingering questions.

Completing this exercise, I realized that I had learned a way to share life experiences and convert them into a legacy for my loved ones. I had only to leave open my heart to the intensity of an instruction to realize that it often came from a hard-earned lesson, something that might still contain a seed of sorrow or wisdom that needed my attention, and was worthy of passing on.

It gave me a way to work with sorrows, to explore mistakes and my strengths. It gave me a container for reflection and it helped me transform wishes for others into blessings for others, inviting me to look inside to explore why a specific instruction or blessing was so important to me. Where did my heart need to soften and break open a little more? Where had it been broken and need healing or new meaning? Where might there be a possible teaching for myself or others?

Legacies are vehicles to pass on hard earned heart filled wisdom and experiences to those we love and will leave behind. What better way to show our love.