

Ethical Wills & Legacy Letters

Your Legacy of Values

An ethical will, or legacy letter, is 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.

An ethical will is not a legal document; it does not distribute your material wealth. It is a heartfelt expression of what truly matters most in your life.

Ethical wills are not new. References to this tradition are found in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible (Genesis Ch. 49, John Ch. 15-18) and in other cultures. 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.

An ethical will may be one of the most cherished and meaningful gifts you can leave to your family and community.

Why write an Ethical Will?

- It helps us identify what we value most and what we stand for.
- By articulating what we value now, we can take steps to ensure the continuation of those values for future generations.
- We learn a lot about ourselves in the process of writing an ethical will.
- It helps us come to terms with our mortality by creating something of meaning that will live on after we are gone.
- It provides a sense of completion in our lives.
- If we don't tell our stories and the stories from whom we come, no one else will and they will be lost forever.
- We all want to be remembered, and we all will leave something behind.

What's in an Ethical Will?

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.

Historically, ethical wills have contained blessings, personal and spiritual values, and burial instructions. Here is 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
- Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness

When would I write an Ethical Will?

Here are some occasions when you might consider writing an Ethical Will.

Betrothed Couples:

Today, the overall divorce rate in our society has “declined” to about 50%. However, 70% of divorces occur within the first 5 years of marriage. An ethical will can help a couple to clearly understand each other’s values, and it can contribute to building a foundation of common values for the marriage. Many clergy are attending to this issue today.

Expectant and New Parents:

It’s been said that children don’t come with a “user’s manual.” An ethical will at this stage will provide a foundation of common values upon which to approach child rearing. In addition, an ethical will can help in conflict resolution by increasing the understanding of each other’s important values.

Divorcing Couples:

Even in divorce, an ethical will can provide some security and reassurance for the children involved, by providing tangible evidence of what’s important to their parents. It’s even possible that in a divorce situation, the “blame factor” might be minimized.

Growing Families:

For growing families, an ethical will can be used to teach values to our children. By writing these values on a document, it has the potential to improve communication with our children.

Empty-Nesters

Provides the opportunity to launch adult children and enter into a new relationship phase.

Middle Age and Beyond:

This is one life stage that writing an ethical will is most fitting. It is an opportunity to harvest our life experiences, convert these experience into wisdom, and allow for the fulfillment of the responsibility of passing this wisdom on to future generations

End of Life:

If energy and time permits, writing an ethical will at the end of life adds a transcendent dimension to our lives by providing a link to future generations. In essence, you are providing your legacy of values and beliefs for a time when you are gone.

Ethical Wills written by people at different stages of life

- [Bettina was 29 years old when she died. This letter to her family and friends was read at her Memorial service.](#)
- [This was written by a married woman to her as yet unborn child, during her first pregnancy. Age: 38](#)
- [Written by a single mother to her teenage son](#)
- [Married father of two teenage daughters, age 47](#)
- [Kim’s ethical will illustrates the appeal of a written legacy for a person in her 50’s without children. She shared hers with friends and other family members.](#)
- [Don, in his 50’s, has written this ethical will for his children and grandchildren.](#)
- [While in his 60’s, Ray wrote this draft of his ethical will which he sees as a work in progress.](#)
- [This ethical will was written by a grandfather in his 70’s shortly before he died of cancer.](#)
- [William, a deeply religious Christian, wrote this ethical will in his mid-80’s.](#)

- [Beatrice wrote this as she neared her 100th birthday.](#)
- [President Obama's legacy letter to his daughters](#)

How to Write an Ethical Will

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.

There are several ways to approach the task, with varying degrees of help and guidance.

Approach #1: Write over a period of time as thoughts come to you.

This is the most open-ended approach. Keeping a journal or diary is an excellent way to write about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Over time, review what you've written. Themes will emerge from which you can create a comfortable structure for your ethical will. Reading [examples of ethical wills](#) other people have written might give you ideas about what to include.

Over time, write down a sentence or two about things like:

- Your beliefs and opinions
- Things you did to act on your values
- Something you learned from grandparents / parents / spouse / children
- Something you learned from experience
- Something you are grateful for
- Your hopes for the future

After a few weeks or months, review what you've collected. Group related items together – patterns will emerge. Revise and expand the related categories into paragraphs. Arrange the paragraphs into an order that makes sense to you. Finally, add an introduction and conclusion. Put this aside for a few weeks, then review and revise it.

Approach #2: Use guided writing exercises.

A suggested outline structure and a list of possible items to choose from can make the writing task much quicker and easier. The [Ethical Wills / Legacy Letters Workbook](#) has been developed for this approach. The comprehensive book [Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper](#) contains even more guided exercises and examples.

Approach #3: Register for our 8-week 'Virtual Ethical Will/Legacy Letters Writing Workshop.'

This self-paced program consists of 8 web-based videos that simulate our live group writing workshops. Each session consists of a short video of 4-8 minutes that includes basic information on Ethical Wills/Legacy Letters and one or two writing exercises to guide you through the process. You can expect to spend 30-60 minutes per week for each session. You will be set-up with your own workshop 'landing page' from which you can access all of the videos at any time. Program access will expire 4 months from the date of your registration. [Register now or anytime.](#)

Free Trial Offer

Experience a taste of the virtual writing workshop by trying the first two sessions with our compliments: [Free Trial](#)

Approach #4: Have a facilitator work with you personally to guide you through the process.

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