

Ethical Will Project

Ethical Wills are not legal documents (although the name might have a legal ring to it). These are a powerful way to communicate love, wisdom and values to your children and grandchildren - even if they have not been born yet!

Write in your own voice about your love for family, the best lessons you learned in life and your deeply held values (the values that have guided how you have lived your life and helped you make decisions large and small). Do not worry about being formal or fancy - it should sound like you. Use slang (if that is how you speak) and your normal speaking language - your Ethical Will should have a "voice" that reflects however you speak.

Some folks write several pages (I am guilty of that) and others write a very short couple of paragraphs. Some are funny, others deeply sad and some have both and more.

What is important is that your love comes through as well as the hard-earned wisdom and life-guiding values.

So, grab a pad and pen or tablet or laptop, or stone and chisel, but start putting down the words of your legacy. To help you along, here are two examples (one is mine).

Warnings:

*Do not get trapped into copying these or competing with them. Use them to get your ideas flowing and be original and express yourself.

*Also, avoid the trap of lecturing or sounding like you know better than your kids. The feel should be mellow, generous, sharing.

Sample #1

Written by: Jeff Savlov

48 years old

Married father of 2 boys (Jeremy-16 & Matthew-13)

Ethical Will to Jeremy & Matthew Savlov

To my sons, Jeremy & Matthew, and our unborn descendants:

While you both have known me as your dad, others (not yet born) will hopefully read this too. I'll meet some of you along the way. Others will never meet me but might hear about me from those who have. So, whether you actually knew me upright and in the flesh (alive & breathing) or just as some dead guy from generations past, I'd like to share some of the things I've learned along the way. It is not that I assume you are not smart enough to find your own way, it is that I have learned so much from others and from my own life experiences and I'm hoping you will find it interesting and helpful along your own path. Some of my best knowledge came from listening to the experiences and wisdom of another, usually older person (not always older - some wise folk were quite young!)

Family is a wonderful, fulfilling, intense and trying thing. My parents (Grandma Bev and Grandpa Hal) and siblings (Aunt Donna and Aunt Jill) had all kinds of ups and downs. Bottom line - we always supported one another and moved past our strains and disagreements - especially around the happiest and saddest times. There will be hurts and disappointments but with love family relationships can sustain us all. Family relationships (and, honestly, with any important relationship) taking a deep breath and observing your own part in any relational conflict is so tough and valuable. It is easy to see conflict as the other person's issue but when I have slowed down, found some part I played in the dynamic and taken responsibility, almost every time it led to a closer and more productive and loving relationship. It is true you can pick

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your friends and not your family but I have found that family connections are super-strong. I hope you will nurture your family relationships with an eye towards strength and compassion.

Marriage is a wild ride. I have enjoyed it for the 18 years mom and I have been together. Most parents do not tell their kids how hard this kind of commitment can be. Grandma Bev (one of the wisest people I know) told me way before I got married how hard and how rewarding it can be. This was so helpful as it prevented me from being shocked when the tough times came. Compromise, deep-breathing, humility and sometimes just shutting up all help along the way. The more mom and I weathered and survived, the closer we became (I know it might sound corny or trite but it has been the absolute truth).

Friends are amazing. At times I've had many and other times few. Always had at least one or two really close buddies I could count on – sometimes on the other side of the world. I have valued friendships so much. They can be challenging relationships (like any relationship). Sometimes they feel one-sided and I've worked hard to understand the part of me that seemed to seek out relationships in which I gave way more than I got out of them. Over time I made better decisions about who I picked as a friend and my friendships have become much more mutual. I will say that when a good, valued friendship does not seem to be going well, it is worth a direct and compassionate discussion to express yourself and try to get some understanding and growth. Many people are intimidated by a direct relationship discussion and one needs to be both direct and gentle. When a friend is able to hang in there with a relationship discussion and hear you out, take responsibility for how their behavior may have hurt you, apologize and move ahead with you, the friendship grows and becomes even more valuable. Of course, I've always given my all to the process of patiently and non-defensively listening to what my friends have had to say about my part. Ultimately, even one really close and reliable friend is incredible.

Laughter and a Sense of Humor are very big to me. One bit of feedback I've gotten since I was very young is that I am very funny and I am proud of that. Not like a clown (though many times I was just that) but in a way that took whatever was happening around me, or what was being discussed, and offering insight in a way that is novel and funny as hell. PLEASE, do your best to see humor around you. And see it in yourself first. When you can laugh at yourself, the world around you softens. Our family is pretty nuts (often in a good way, sometimes in a painful way) and we laugh whenever we are together. Laughter is a big part of Jewish culture. As a

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people, we have been through many ordeals over the centuries and humor gives a sense of perspective that has sustained us and made for many good comedians and entertainers. Humor has been a major support to me and some of my best memories are related to making people laugh until they could not breathe. Exhilarating!

Balanced Life – harder than it sounds and worth the effort. Your mom and I decided early on in our marriage that we'd live life by defining our values and making decisions accordingly. When we decided to have kids we both wanted nothing more than special time with both of you and we also wanted our careers. We took risks by leaving mental health agency jobs (we met while working at The University of Medicine and Dentistry of NJ in 1993 and married in 1996) and starting our own practices. These were scary times but well worth it; being a business owner can be very challenging but you generally get paid much better when you own a business and have the ability to arrange your own schedule (freedom!) When business is slow you must hustle and make things happen – this is hard. Mom and I took turns going to see therapy clients and being home with you guys. As a man I was often the only guy in a room full of women and kids which was an interesting experience. Many women avoided me in subtle ways (I do not think they even realized it) and that was lonely at times as most caregivers spent time with other caregivers. Here and there a mom would include me (often tom-boys who grew up with lots of guys and doing what was considered typical guy things) and I appreciated these friendships. Balanced life does not mean avoiding work, to me it is about working hard on all the most important things in life. Being with the two of you has been among the most special times of my life – hands down.

Money is really great. It allows us to do fun things and makes life easier. It gives us choices. PLEASE, do not forget that so many of life's best experiences require no money at all (or little). Hikes in beautiful locations, bike rides in the woods, sitting on a deck with a nearby birdfeeder and watching for hours. Hanging out just about anywhere with a buddy with whom you laugh about anything and everything. I do like to save money more than most people and this is really satisfying. When business is slow the pressure is reduced by a financial cushion (remember the ups and downs of being in business for yourself I mentioned already?) It offers me a feeling of security. When I do spend, I like to make sure it fits my basic life values (exercise/sports-related purchases, great vacations to exotic places with great culture and/or nature). Sometimes - I spoil myself (a large TV, really nice dinners, whatever). Use money in

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the service of what is most important to you. If money is the most important thing to you, in my humble opinion, something is missing in your life and self.

Perseverance, Effort and Failure are big ones on this list. One way to build confidence in yourself is by pushing yourself to your limits, often in more than one way (education, career, athletics, self-awareness, to name a few). I am talking about situations that are difficult and you will need to push through failure. Many of my friends played ice hockey growing up. It looked like so much fun. I put on skates for the first time in 9th grade and went to open skating at the rink with my buddies. We played tag (yes, against the rules and breaking the rules is not always bad...just do not be a jerk and hurt people). I was awful and when I was “it” I took forever to tag someone else. My ankles wiggled and I was wobbly and uncoordinated. But I hung with it, we had some cold winters and I bought skates so I could practice on the frozen lakes almost every day. 10th grade I joined the team with my buddy and was the worst guy on the team. I kept my mouth shut, tried as hard as I possibly could and my teammates seemed to respect that. They did not give me a hard time and I got better. They taught and supported me and I believe this was due in part to the fact that I was humble and showed intense effort. I played through high school and tried out for the University of Delaware ice hockey team my freshman year and made the Junior Varsity squad. I was so humbled by being the worst guy in 10th grade but hard work paid off and I am so proud of what I accomplished with relentless pursuit of my goal. Most teammates in high school had been skating since they were young children. Experiences like this are incredibly valuable!

Water, Fruit, Veggies and Exercise are simple but wildly powerful things. I almost did not put these for fear of seeming an out-of-touch and “preachy” health-nut. Truth is, if you want to have a long and healthy life - these are simple and essential. Water is the basic element of life and drinking crap (soda, sugary juices, sports drinks), except occasionally, is a waste of calories and is poor nutrition – bad fuel for your body. Fruits and vegetables reduce cancer risk immensely. Research on sedentary lifestyles (sitting around playing video games, working at a desk, etc. without regular exercise) shows that it increases the risk of all kinds of health issues. Another perspective for me is that exercise has gotten me through some of my toughest times, helps me hang onto the little sanity I’ve been able to muster and allows me to be active in ways that most men my age are no longer able to (now 48 and still playing ice hockey in an 18-and-over league and having just taken up mountain biking a couple of years ago). My dad

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was so overweight for so long and exercised so little that by his late 60's he could barely throw a ball with you guys. Knock on wood - I want to continue to play ball with you both and also with your kids. So - do what you will - I will love you all no matter what you eat and drink and whether or not you exercise.

Psychotherapy (shrinks, counselors, therapists) is something lots of people do not talk about openly although that is changing quickly. I've had quite a bit. I don't think you need to be crazy to take advantage of it and I may be biased about its usefulness since mom and I are both "shrinks". It has been such a helpful tool to me. I've used it when I had major emotional challenges (the first time I was about 8 and my Grandpa Dave had died in front of me and Aunt Jill). I loved him so much and it was really upsetting. I went when I was growing up (with Grandma Bev, Grandpa Hal, Aunt Donna and Aunt Jill) when our family was going through some tough times. In my mind (and I think others would agree) Grandpa Hal had a lot of old feelings bottled up from growing up with a father who escaped the Nazis and lost his entire family as a young man. Seems this leaked out angrily on me most of all as a kid. Whatever the root cause of our family pain at that time, seeing a family therapist helped us so much. I did it later on by myself as well and have found it so helpful along the way. So, all I'd say is do not hesitate to consider it and if you do try, seek out two or three therapists to consult with before jumping in with one – the connection with the therapist is so important.

People Are Amazingly Good – All Around the World. I really believe this. Of course there are bad people but, by and large, most are awesome. I have found them to be helpful and honest and caring. When I went backpacking through Europe with a buddy during a college summer we met people from all over. Many did not even speak the same language and we traveled together for days. Once we ran out of money in a restaurant in Germany (we only had credit cards and they did not accept those) and the waiter was pissed and we did not know what would happen. A guy from the U.S. saw this and came over and paid with a smile on his face. He was happy to do it. So many times along the way in my life I have asked people in a position to help me in some way to do just that and they almost always did. Along with this is a responsibility to help others when you can – even if it feels like a hassle some of the time (you need not toss your life away for others although some famous folks have and with good success for the world – Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Gandhi...). People are cool – ask for help and give more than you ask for. One small way I live by this is I always hold the door

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for the person behind me – woman, man, child – who cares. And smile at lots of people – most seem to appreciate it. While it does freak some out (they think you are insane except in most southern U.S. states) even that is kind of fun.

Small and Annoying B.S. can really be a hassle. Oil changes, replacing the filter in your heating/A.C. unit, shutting the outside water off for winter, swapping out old water filter cartridges for new ones, rotating tires, paying bills on time. Schedule these in a calendar with reminders popping up as needed and relieve your brain of this energy. You'll stay on top of these tasks without thinking about them and this will release the energy for more wonderful things.

LOVE is one of the essentials. Give lots of it and savor all you get. I love you both, Jeremy and Matthew, with a passion that is hard to understand (I did not totally get what Grandma Bev meant by how much she loved me until I had you two amazing humans).

I love you always –

Dad

Sample #2

Written by: Anonymous

72 years old

Married 54 years

3 children & 6 grandchildren

To my Darling Children:

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Now that you are all parents, you can relate to the consuming, and unending love that I have for all of you. From the time that each of you were born, I fell completely in love with you. It was my mission to love and protect you (maybe too much protection), to the extent of my being. I loved being your mother. It is with such pride that I watch each of you parenting your own children. You all have different styles, and yet the common bond is that all of your children feel unconditional love.

It is with great pride that I watch how you all live your lives, and all of you are kind, ethical, caring people, which I feel is my legacy.....as it continues on with your own children.

I see parts of my life that I enjoyed, being carried on by you, such as my love of the outdoors, the beach, gardening etc. Your values are admirable, and I am so proud to have contributed 3 terrific human beings to the world.

In addition, you have given me grandchildren, who also have the same caring, and values, and as they were born, I fell in love again. As the circle of life continues, I am sure that the great grandchildren to come, (and I will be really mad if don't get to see them) will also carry forth the same caring and values.

Try to spend lots of time with children, they are magical.

When each of you got married, I gave you a letter, trying to prepare you for what life would bring you. I wrote that life is like a horror ride, and that as you go thru, you never know when something scary will pop out, but then it goes away until another one pops out. I really see life that way, and I have tried my best to roll with whatever comes. As you know, much easier said than done. However, I have tried really hard to never say, or think "why me?"

I believe that people come and go in our life for a reason, and even though relationships might not endure, there was a reason for them. Please read "The Secret", by Rhonda Byrne, I really find a lot of truth in this book.

Happiness is a definite choice, but a very difficult one.

Try to be as positive as you can. Every day I am grateful for all of the wonderful joys and happiness in my life. I find that people that are negative are toxic, so try to avoid them, as they drag you down.

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Good friends are very, very hard to come by, and I always said that if you can find 1 or 2 really good friends, you are ahead of the game. Many people have different agendas, and do not have your best interests at heart. You have to know and understand that, and then you can be friendly with them, but you can, almost always, rely on your really GOOD friends.

No matter what, family is the most important. You all share the same DNA, and history, so that no matter what minor annoyances there may be you all MUST stick together. Watching the interaction, of all of you, the cousins, aunts, and uncles, nieces, and nephews... is a source of constant happiness for me because of the love, and caring that is there. These are the people that will have your back, and be there in 1 second if you need them. It is my dying wish (though not yet) that you all stick together and continue to celebrate holidays, birthdays etc.

Our family has always been very funny, and I see the same humor in my grandchildren. Believe it or not, laughter will get you thru many difficult times.

I always said that our family getting together was like a sit-com, and when we are all laughing together, it doesn't get much better.

In general, as an observer, the human condition is hysterical

I have always been so blessed to be involved in your lives....

I love you all so much, the bond I see between all of you, and your children, is amazing, and I know that will continue thru the generations.....

I truly believe all that is said in the soliloquy, from "Our Town," that will be read at my funeral.

Don't ever be jealous of any other person, you never really know what they are dealing with.

I know that no matter what, I will always be watching over all of you, and when you see your flowers bloom, or go to the beach, or read a good book, or just sit in the sun, you will smile (not cry) and think of me.

***Initially, this writer did not want to share her ethical will while still alive, preferring to have it saved for after her death. Here are her comments about the experience of sharing while alive:

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Originally, I was planning to write a love letter to all of you, to be read upon my death. I wanted you all to know how much I loved you, and how proud of you I am. Also, I wanted to give you some of my life advice. I figured that advice from a dead person would be revered, whereas from a live person it would just be annoying.

I really am happy that I wrote [and shared] my Ethical Will now, because it is wonderful hearing from all of you about how much you enjoyed reading it....

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