

# Right or Wrong? Consider writing an ethical will

December 16, 2015

**While channel surfing, I heard the last part of an interview with a person who leads workshops on writing ethical wills. Since I caught only the last portion, I missed the rationale. What does writing an “ethical will” mean?**

How do we pass on to our children and grandchildren the gist of what seems important to us and the meager bits of wisdom we may have gained during our brief lifetimes? In a throw-away culture, what mechanisms exist in this all-too-transitory life by which one can summarize life learnings and communicate them to offspring?

On several instances since my children have become adults, when I offer a word of advice to them, they respectfully respond: “I know, Dad! You have told us that before!” Even if I might have said it before, I long for a means to leave one final message to my kids and to their kids before my voice is silenced.

My tax and legal advisers are trained to assist me in arranging my affairs, so I can leave my accumulated personal wealth and property in a manner consistent with my highest hopes and deepest wishes. But few professionals exist with the training and expertise essential to assist me to leave a “last will and testament” explicitly regarding my values. This question is helpful, because it points us all in the direction of that kind of help. It reminds us there is a stewardship expectation of us that is not just about our money or material possessions, but reflects our personal insights.

Indeed, in our devotion to God, we also are accountable for what life has taught us about what is precious and to be cherished. While too many are

tempted to avoid preparing for death and its attendant responsibilities in any way, we should give some advance thinking to the essential question of how to transfer our accumulated learnings to those who matter most to us in an effective, ethical and responsible manner.

Out of Hebrew history comes a useful pattern and some assistance in finding a solution to this question. In the Bible, we learn Jacob gathered his children to his bedside and communicated how he felt they should live after he died. Moses made a farewell address, replete with moral critique, encouragement and guidance. David passed on the torch of leadership and prepared Solomon by advising him both about those whom he should trust and those whom he should distrust and encouraged him to take up the mantle of governance. The Apochrypha, the Talmud, and medieval and modern literature contain models of ethical wills left by parents to their children.

Ethical wills and the essential self-inventory required to compose them have great value, not only for our offspring, but for ourselves. They require an individual to take a personal inventory, to determine what essential truths have been both uncovered and followed in one's lifetime.

In the process of self-analysis, most of us will discover our lives have not been lived completely, consistently or fully according to what we actually cherish and value. Thus, in preparing them for others, we are reminded of areas in our lives that require course correction. While we are still able, these "future messages" actually can serve to help us make our remaining years much more consistent and reflective of what we, in our hearts, believe to be important and true.

*Bob Newell is the founder and chief USA spokesperson for PORTA, the Albania House in Athens, Greece. He lives in Georgetown.*