

Ethical Wills – Curriculum by Jean Sheridan. OLLI - University of Southern Maine

Ethical wills are life review documents originating in ancient Jewish tradition. This is a text and course outline designed to guide students through the process. I have expanded the traditional form into ten units and have used experiential techniques and writing prompts (the Preparations) so as to demystify and facilitate the writing process and open up the imagination. I teach this course in eight weeks.



INTRODUCTION

Ideas, like snowflakes on a hazy March day, float slowly in the air--you can almost count them--and one by one gently fall onto the ground, where they disappear. Still, they keep coming. That is the way it has been for me with this book, and with its subject, the ethical will.

Colleagues and writer friends with whom I shared bits and pieces throughout invariably objected to the term "ethical will," saying that it would not resonate positively with a contemporary audience, that it sounded pompous, and that it was off-putting; they strongly suggested that I find a more inviting term. The following will explain why I resisted.

I first heard the term ethical will on public radio some years back. The story was about an older man--father, grandfather, lawyer--who had written a letter to be read to his family after his death. In this letter he recounted some family history, reflected on his own life, made statements regarding his religious beliefs, and offered loving advice to those he was leaving behind. I was

touched, not only because it was a stirring story but also because it seemed like such a reasonable idea. First snowflake.

Some time later, while dawdling on the Internet, I ran a search on the topic and came up with a Web site (www.ethicalwill.com) created and maintained by Barry Baines, a doctor who encourages his Hospice patients to write ethical wills. I joined his list and read the books on his bibliography. From them I learned something about the history and shape of ethical wills of the past and that they are an established part of Jewish tradition.

Tzavaot, as they are called, were originally an oral tradition with roots in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) and the Talmud (scholarly explication and commentary). Scripture provides ancient examples. In Genesis 49 Jacob gives the first tzava'ah to his twelve sons; Moses says stirring words of farewell to his followers in Deuteronomy 33. The Book of Proverbs could be understood as a wellspring of advice from a wise elder to future generations. Other Biblical treatises, according to Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer in *Ethical Wills and*

How to Prepare Them, deal with "future blessings, moral directives, and burial instructions." In later times, writers added personal history and ethical values and beliefs.

For European Jews in the Medieval and Renaissance periods these documents were a way to preserve their heritage in the face of forced conversions to Islam and Christianity. Written by male heads of households for their families and by rabbis who wished to leave a record for their congregations, they were "moral assets" for a people whose material assets were more often than not in jeopardy. They were framed mostly as informal letters, some brief and simple; some long, weighty, and heavy with detail; some later ones, as in the abrupt urgent final communications of holocaust victims, heartrending. How they were shaped varied widely depending on the personality and nature of the author.

What I had learned so far about ethical wills only piqued my interest further. (The snow was still falling.) I ran a search on an academic database to see what might be found in recent literature and came up with some

surprising results. In recent years, shocked by the stock market slide, the fall from grace of the technology sector, the corporate shame of Enron among others, and, most recently, the banking losses due to the sub prime mortgage debacle, many people in active life began to look inward. Some used this reflective energy to write ethical wills. *Money Magazine* in a March 2000 article mentioned that these documents were being utilized in estate planning and appended to material wills. Numerous magazine and newspaper articles have followed. Now a Google search results in pages and pages of "hits." No longer written solely by older men, it seems, women too are writing ethical wills, people in mid-life (the "Boomers"), those who are single through divorce or the death of a spouse, the ever-growing population of never married.

Why Write an Ethical Will?

Ethical wills are a way to honor the past, remember family and community, help the writer understand her own life better, and provide a legacy for family, community or professional generations to come.

All of us have made contributions in government, education, science, business, the workplace, religion, technology, sports, the arts, our local communities. We realize that we have much to share and are moved by a generative impulse to leave something of ourselves behind. An extended thought of Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller (*From Age-ing to Sage-ing*) links this desire to the practice of mentoring.

The age-old practice of mentoring [is] the art of intergenerational bestowal by which elders pass on to younger people the living flame of their wisdom. As philosopher Martin Buber points out, in the crucible of this generative relationship, the elder helps forge a center in the younger person. Mentors do not impose doctrines and values on their mentees in an attempt to clone themselves. Rather, they evoke the individuality of their apprentices, applauding them as they struggle to clarify their values and discover their authentic paths. (P. 189)

Is this the Right Time for Me?

Is there a perfect or right time to write an ethical will? I believe that this answer is as varied as we are. Some will wait for the elder years to "sum up" their lives. Others begin to take stock in mid-life; for them, that is the right time.

Significant life events can spark the imagination and set the will: the birth of a child or grandchild; that child's first day of school or graduation from high school or college; the marriage of one's firstborn; one's own marriage, remarriage, or divorce; the onset of a serious illness; loss of a job or disappointment on a career path; death of a parent, sibling, mentor, spouse, lover, or close friend, even the death of a famous person. Small things, such as a significant dream, a class reunion, a visit with a childhood or college friend, can be the moment of inspiration. And big things, too, such as major news events.

I remember being profoundly moved on the day the Berlin Wall came down. For my generation, the Wall represented a fearsome world political climate that, along with the Second World War, marked the years of our childhood and youth. The day the Wall came down, I cried--with relief, with hope, in disbelief. The younger people around me did not understand my tears. I want to tell my children and grandchildren what those years were like; in my personal recollections they may see some similarity to the experiences that could lie ahead for them.

Then there are the times when the rhythm of our lives is interrupted and we are caught off balance and thrown off the boat into choppy waters. These are our times of grief and loss, whether they are due to a literal death, the onset of serious illness, loss of a job, depression, or some other event that subverts our daily routines. At such times, life seems like one long night, and we cannot foresee the dawn that will eventually spread across the horizon. Thomas Moore in his writings--I think especially of *The Care of the Soul*--urges us to welcome these "untimely times" as invitations to reevaluate the patterns of our lives. A time such as this may give us the chance to step back and reflect, to write, or begin to write, our ethical wills.

Finding the Time

But how can a busy person in a busy world find the time to accomplish what can seem to be a formidable task? One possibility is to grant yourself a sabbatical. Having spent some years in the academic world, I am a firm believer in sabbaticals, that seventh year time off that is a perquisite of college professors and certain fortunate others. For Jews, every seventh year is sacred and is honored as a time

to take account, to reflect on the past, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, to plan for the next period of life. Some few, alas too few, businesses have incorporated them into their employee benefit packages.

For most of us, unfortunately, taking a formal sabbatical is out of the question, but there are ways to develop a sabbatical frame of mind. One can carve out certain times--Sunday afternoons, for example, one weekend a month, every Wednesday, Tuesday nights, a summer vacation--off limits to anything except drafting one's ethical will. In this way, with some perseverance, little by little and bit by bit, it will grow and take shape.

Today memoir writing is a popular literary genre, and people of all ages are taking classes or enrolling in workshops or seminars. The material produced in these classes or inspired by them can lay the groundwork for an expanded document. An additional benefit is having one's ongoing work reviewed and supported by others.

A New Model

An ancient Hasidic tale imagines a dialogue between "Naked Truth" and "Parable." Naked Truth, of course, has

many lessons to deliver and puts them forth harshly, "without guile." Parable, anticipating the inevitable resistance, takes Naked Truth in hand, works with him, and "[dresses him] in story's fine attire, with metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire." The story, of course, has a happy ending. I hope that writers of ethical wills will take to heart this advice from the ancients and spice up their "naked truths" with the entertaining elements of good storytelling. Writing, in order to be effective, must be delightful and lively.

The Preparations

Thus, in my new model I have developed for each section of the will a set of creative exercises that I call Preparations. These Preparations are designed to ensure that our work will not turn out to be a boring piece of exposition but something eminently readable. As a teacher of writing, I know that some do not like to write or are hesitant or insecure about it. The Preparations take this reality into account and offer a variety of alternatives. Many are based on the research of Harvard professor Howard Gardner as explained in the book *Seven Ways of Knowing*:

Teaching for Multiple Intelligences(by David Lazear).

Each of us, Gardner came to believe, is inclined either by birth or conditioning to a certain way of learning: interpersonal (or extroverted), intra personal (or introverted), linguistic, mathematical, naturalistic, spatial, or musical. (Gardner later added spiritual, existential, and moral to the list although these are challenged.) Working with this schema and the writing and journal-keeping techniques I have used in my own teaching, I have collected and created suggestions that will appeal, I hope, to everyone regardless of individual preference.

So, whether your preference is to write in a journal, or bang a drum, or kick your feet, or talk with friends, or take long solitary walks, or doodle with geometric shapes, or keep a sketchbook, you will find in each set of Preparations something to your liking. One may be enough to spark your writing. Or several. They can go into your document just as you initially "play" with them or serve as springboards for your writing. Anything goes.

The Outline

So that the writer will be able to stay in control of a large body of material, I have departed from a traditional six-part outline and broken the process down into ten discrete manageable components.

CHAPTER ONE, OPENING: The brief opening statement dedicates the ethical will to specific persons or groups.

CHAPTER TWO, FAMILY MATTERS: This chapter concerns the writer's family, including parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, other relatives, and family friends; significant parts of the family's past, including the events and anecdotes having to do with its cultural, religious, and ethnic origins; and a review of the history of the times in which the family flourished.

CHAPTER THREE, PERSONAL MATTERS: The writer's personal history, including the people, events, and critical decisions that shaped him and his artistic and otherwise creative output is the material for Chapter Three.

CHAPTER FOUR, SPIRITUAL MATTERS: Chapter Four relates the writer's religious and spiritual experience, past and present; persons who have figured significantly in that

unique journey; and favorite scripture passages, teachings, prayers, and rituals.

CHAPTER FIVE, PHILOSOPHICAL MATTERS: In Chapter Five the writer presents her philosophical, political, and social positions, ethical ideals and values.

CHAPTER SIX, DEATH MATTERS: Preferences regarding death, end-of-life procedures, and funeral and burial plans are addressed in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SEVEN, EDITORIAL MATTERS: Chapter Seven is a time to sum up and refine what has been written, to decide what to keep and what to discard, to critique the quality of the writing.

CHAPTER EIGHT, LOVING MATTERS: The writer, in Chapter Eight, affirms, gives advice, and offers his hopes for the present and future generations.

CHAPTER NINE, CLOSING: The Closing includes blessings, requests, and a brief summarizing statement.

CHAPTER TEN, FUTURE MATTERS: Then in Chapter Ten the writer turns to new material and plans a rich dynamic future.

This ten-part outline answers the question of what to write about and breaks down this most ambitious undertaking

into manageable units. No particular order need be followed; indeed it is better to let the psyche take charge here so that the writer can go from one section to another as memories and ideas begin to percolate.

Practical Matters

How one attends to the technical aspects will differ from person to person. Some may prefer to work with a looseleaf binder and label sections according to the suggested outline, recording whatever is uppermost in their minds as it strikes them. No particular order needs to be followed; ideas are added to each section as they rise to the surface. Such a plan has the advantage of being portable, adaptable, and infinitely expandable, a good first place to take notes, moving later to the computer. With laptops and personal computers in common use, however, many will prefer to begin right there, creating separate files--and backups--for each section. This is an optimum process as it allows the work to be reread, revised, added to, and deleted from cleanly and efficiently.

Some people prefer talking to writing and may prefer to use a tape recorder and transcribe later. Others may enjoy sharing pieces of their work with other writers as they go along. Couples can take on the project at the same time,

pooling their shared memories, comparing notes. This is an interesting concept that could be used also with adult family members--brothers and sisters, cousins, even parents. Here the ubiquitous email system could be a boon.

Finally, a caveat and a practical note. We know from past sad experience that the technology we used yesterday is not the technology we use today, and the technology we use today is not the technology we will use tomorrow. Therefore, producing hard copy is essential. But neither can one count indefinitely on good old paper. To ensure proper preservation, the final copies of our wills need to be printed on acid-free paper and placed in acid-free boxes. Or printed and bound as this book is by a local printer.

But we are far from the end product now; first we must begin. So take a walk and think about it. Consider your options and your level of desire. Like the snowflakes that floated down one March day as I began to write, ideas take time before they settle to the ground and begin to pile up. I do hope that you decide to go ahead, however. There are many,

some of them not yet born, who are waiting to hear what you have to say.

CHAPTER ONE OPENING

"To my family and friends, To my wife, To my dear brothers and sisters, Dear friends, To my grandchildren." Such are the openings found in compilations of ethical wills of the past. They speak to the complexity and depth of human relationships.

The stories follow. A grandchild has been born; a young man goes into war; a son has died in his youth; a material has been drawn up and the ethical will is to be appended. "Dear Ones, I must pause in my life to tell you something, to tell you some things." The impulse has rooted and a person needs to recount all that he has experienced, all he has learned; another needs to tell her story, wants to say "I love you."

Today the salutations and the stories may be written by people in middle age, people who are single through divorce or the death of a spouse or who have never married, the young and the old, the sick and the well. A woman in mid-life has

just learned that she does not have cancer, another that she has. A man in later life is surprised and delighted to be remarrying. A never-married aunt, retiring in her sixties, says, "To my dear nieces and nephews." A woman writes, "My darling Elizabeth."

The circumstances may also differ. In our day daughters as well as sons are going off to war. Elders are graduating from college--and having babies. On the eve of the 2000 millennium, a grandmother and grandfather wrote a common will to their family. Yet, underneath these shifting sands lie the same deep and complex human connections that moved medieval patriarchs to write. Who will it be for us? To whom will we address our wills? What pregnant moment prompts us to engage in this work?

My own turning point came one summer when I realized that my role in the family had forever altered. As was my custom, I rented a beach house for a few weeks in the expectation that, as in previous summers, my children and their families would visit. To my surprise, disappointment, and chagrin, no one came. There were good reasons. Some were traveling or

visiting a spouse's family during their vacation weeks; grandchildren were off to camp or working; some preferred to go camping with friends. It took a while to recover from the shock and, yes, the affront to my pride, but I did, and I spent the following summer house-sitting and dog-sitting for these young families as they roamed around the country and the world. In their pleasant homes, on their porches and decks I had the time to sit with my thoughts and begin to work on my written legacy, my ethical will.

When we have come to a point in our lives such as this, a time to sit at leisure with a cup of coffee or tea and open up a notebook and begin to write, it will most likely be obvious to whom we will address our remarks. These opening statements are generally brief, no more than a paragraph or two, even a sentence or two. So let's pour ourselves a warm cup of something, take up our pens, and think about what we might want to say. Whatever it is, whatever is in our hearts at this time, we should say it fully and honestly, setting it in a time and place of history, both our own personal history and that of the larger world. With these words we

invite our readers to follow along as we tell the stories of our families, ourselves, and the world as we have known it.

PREPARATIONS FOR OPENING

1.

Separate yourself from your normal routine and spend an hour or two in your favorite natural space--a beach, city park, nearby woods, or mountain trail. You may prefer an indoor place, such as a window view that overlooks a familiar street or yard. Spend the time jotting down the names of all those living persons or groups of persons with whom you are close or intimate. When your list is finished, look it over and select several names. Then, one at a time, do the following meditation.

First, settle into quiet, your feet squarely on the ground, your back straight against a comfortable surface, your eyes closed. Attend to your breathing for a few minutes, becoming aware of your body from head to toe. Say your own name over and over for several minutes until you feel completely centered.

Now begin to say the name of one person from your list. Picture her in your mind, creating a full image of her either at rest or engaged in some typical activity. Gaze lovingly

on her for as long as you wish, repeating her name over and over, just as you did your own, until you feel her presence fully.

Next, imagine the two of you together, gazing on one another, fully connected. Stay in that moment for as long as you wish.

When you are ready to break the connection, simply withdraw your attention. To do this, stand up and move around, or leave the room or place you have been in.

2.

Collect favorite pictures of family, friends or a special group of persons you may be addressing. Play some quiet music as you look over these photos. What faces affect you the most? What feelings arise as you contemplate these pictures and listen to the music? Stay with the faces and the feelings for a while. Write a few words of affirmation and endearment to them.

3.

Take a long walk, swim, or bike ride, or work out at the gym using headphones to block out distractions and think

about your life at this present time. What circumstances are motivating you to write your will? What other thoughts arise?

After your workout, sit in a quiet place with a notebook and reflect back on your thoughts. In a few sentences or paragraphs, write an opening statement. Now close your eyes, pause, and wait for the appearance of an image: a shape, an object from nature, a scene, a symbol, or something else. Draw it or describe it in words.

4.

Imagine yourself around a dinner table with your family and friends. You are telling them that you are beginning to write your ethical will and that you hope they will read it when it is finished, will preserve it carefully, and will pass it on to future generations. What is their response?

After you have imagined this moment, think about creating it in real time. You may be surprised to find that some may want to help you with the project and may offer technical expertise, their own memories, help in gathering

genealogical information, ongoing editing, or feedback. You may also ask specifically for these things.

5.

Take a walk with a friend and talk about beginning this project. He or she may decide to write one as well, and the two of you can share your work, comparing your progress along the way.

6.

Pick up some molding clay at an art supply or craft store choosing a color you particularly like. Find a half hour or so when you can be by yourself. Play some quiet background music, if you wish, and take up the clay; a palm-sized piece is sufficient. Close your eyes and begin to work the clay, focusing your thoughts on the opening statement. Do not be anxious about remembering what comes to you; it will return. You can do this exercise anytime you are getting ready to write.

7.

Try out several salutations and opening thoughts, saying them aloud or writing them down; let the feeling and tone of

voice seep in. With which voice are you most comfortable? Which conversational style feels natural? This is your authentic voice. Keep to this natural style of expression throughout your writing.

When it is time to begin, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: Dear, I have chosen this time to write my ethical will because. . .

CHAPTER TWO
FAMILY MATTERS

Psychologists tell us that we best understand ourselves when we have knowledge about the three generations that preceded ours; in other words, we need to know about the lives of our great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. Documents such as the ones we are preparing will certainly assist future generations; for us, however, unless our families have been conscientious in preserving the family story, the undertaking may be daunting, if not impossible. The resources I have to assist me are meager: some photographs, scant memories of my grandparents, and a crumpled piece of paper on which my father's youngest sister Helen recorded a genealogy of sorts. Even if we have scant knowledge, however, there are ways to fill in the gaps. Here is one.

In my fifties I decided it was high time that I went to Ireland. For reasons I have never fully understood, my aunts

and uncles, parents and grandparents seldom mentioned their Irish heritage, customs, history, or memories. When I became aware of this omission rather late in my life, I felt drawn to make a pilgrimage. I signed up with a hiking group and spent a memorable week in County Wicklow south of Dublin. From the first moment I set foot in the country I felt at home, and in the three trips that followed I came to feel even more akin to the Irish themselves and taken, of course, by the country's extraordinary landscapes. I learned a good deal on those trips and gained a perspective on my ancestors' journeys and the events that precipitated them.

We can all fill in the gaps. Even if we did not hear the details from them directly, our schoolbooks educated us about the historical circumstances that formed our forebears. Devastating world events such as the Great Depression, the Holocaust, innumerable "ethnic cleansings," the World Wars, massacres and famines formed our families' attitudes and behaviors. But there were triumphal ones as well: coronations, the deposition of demagogues, liberations, world fairs, the rise of the railroads and the cities, the

inventions of labor-saving machines, processed foods, the telephone, radio, automobile, airplanes, even sliced bread.

Individual families also experience their ups and downs as we know all too well. Sudden deaths, reversals of fortune, disaffections, and scandals are all part of the past, but so are the rise of fortunes, educational advancement, the grand home finally built, the awards and honors, the books written, the music composed, the artistic effort and public service recognized, the athletic prowess applauded.

Just as with individuals, a family's memory is selective. One way for us to enter into the seldom-told stories and secrets, as well as the often-told ones, is through pictures. I have a box of photos gathered a few years ago when I noticed that my mother, in her increasing dementia, had begun to tear apart the albums she once carefully tended and was shuffling photographs around from pile to pile and drawer to drawer. Some had been ripped up and some covered with indecipherable scrawls. Deciding that I needed to rescue them, I packed up a file box and brought them home. What a treasure! I found pictures of my great-grandparents, my grandparents and their

siblings, my parents as beautiful young lovers, my brothers and me as babies and teenagers, vacation highlights, and travels far and wide. Some of the people in the older pictures were, sadly, unidentifiable; nonetheless, they were there to stir the imagination. I put these pictures in plastic sleeves and wrote notes about what I knew about them and what memories and feelings they evoked in me.

Photographs are our most familiar entry point; some of us have 16mm films or slides and, today, digital and video cameras. Indeed, the amount of information available to us can be overwhelming and the task of reviewing it daunting. Our approach then should be selective and focused on only those persons and events that have affected or influenced us the most. This is our story after all.

Let's consider what one might include in a reflection on family. We could begin at the beginning and tell about the immigrant journeys. Where did our forebears come from? Why did they leave? What political, cultural, or religious leaders played significant roles in these events? What stories of the family during these times have survived? What

tall tales have been told? Who was the Paul Bunyan, who was Slue-foot Sue? Who was Amelia Earhart, who was Charles Lindbergh? Which family members were the heroes, which the villains, which the losers, which the winners, the famous, the infamous, the brave, the cowardly, the innovators, the reactionaries, the successes, the failures? Who disappeared, who was hidden away?

In our families there were the major and minor players. Some had glad histories, some sad ones. Some succeeded, some failed. Some were forgotten or left out. Some were absent from the family photos or hidden behind the others in the back row. We may be the first to tell their stories, or to speculate on them.

How does the family deal with the sad side of life, with death, disappointment, illness, divorce, dishonor? How does it celebrate the glad side? What occasions are still celebrated? What jokes, expressions, and anecdotes are repeated over and over again?

What do we know about the family dynamics and our forefathers' and foremothers' interpersonal relationships,

about how our grandparents brought up their children, our parents? What were their positions on education, religion, politics? Were they active in public life? Dare we, should we, speculate about sex?

What communities, neighborhoods, and homesteads figured significantly in the family history? Did the family have a Tara in the ancestral homeland? Or here? Was there a beloved vacation spot or summer home? Did any family members leave a significant creative legacy, a body of writing, art, sculpture, or music that needs to be recognized, documented, and preserved?

Is there a record of the houses the families once lived in? The vacation homes? The material possessions that featured significantly? The portraits, jewelry, furniture, automobiles, musical instruments that have survived or disappeared?

My prized possession is a beautifully carved and upholstered Victorian armchair that once belonged to my paternal great-grandmother, Agnes Joyce. After emigrating, she worked as a seamstress for wealthy New York families,

married, and had a child. And then one day the first Mrs. Joyce stepped off the boat from Cork. Disaster. Agnes retreated, babe in arms, to family in Rhode Island. That child was my grandmother, who would marry an upwardly mobile businessman and become the mother of eight. "Nana Joyce's chair" sat proudly in the foyer of the family's house in Providence, and now it sits proudly in my home. I want to ensure that it is well cared for after my stewardship is over and will say so. Moreover, I will use it as a central image as I recount my family's story.

There are many ways, such as using an ancestral home, one figure, or a vivid memory, around which to organize this section of one's ethical will, as family history, whether founded on fact or imagined, is rich with story and memory and detail. Draw out these elements with description, scene building, even dialogue (Who said what at that long ago Thanksgiving dinner?) They will enrich the experience of readers now and in the future and put a human face on what could otherwise be dry historical reporting.

PREPARATIONS FOR FAMILY MATTERS

1.

Make a pilgrimage to an ancestral country and absorb the images, faces, speech patterns, food, drink, festivals, religions, geography, architecture, art, music, style of dress. Be like a child and simply enjoy without analyzing. What surprises you? What chance encounters or experiences catch you unaware?

Or, become an armchair pilgrim and make the same trip through videos or DVDs. Read some travel literature. Read the myths and fairy tales, some history. Check out local ethnic celebrations and go to one. Buy a cookbook and make some national dishes. Try some folk dancing.

2.

If you want to extend this exploration you can create your own travelogue, guidebook, or annotated photo album using separate files or sections for categories such as geography, myths, music, historical figures, literature, and so on. You

can now create compact disks for photographs and link your own computer-generated document to related Web sites, online bibliographies, and so on, sort of like a (very sophisticated) fifth grade project. (Indeed, you can even set up your own site; ask a fifth grader how to do this.)

3.

Imagine that you are taking a walk with an ancestor who emigrated to this country. What would be on her mind? What would she look like, what clothes would she be wearing? Imagine her speech mannerisms, her choice of words, the sound of her voice. Would she be excited or depressed, morose or joyful, serious or frivolous, fearful or courageous? Ask questions about her life. Tell her what you know of the family history since that time. What is her reaction?

4.

Write down the names of every living or dead person in your family about whom you know something, even if you do not or did not know them personally: your great-grandparents and their siblings, your grandparents and theirs, your parents, aunts and uncles. Select a few and using a 5x8 index card for

each record everything you know about them. What strengths and vulnerabilities did they exhibit? What strengths and vulnerabilities did you inherit from them? In what ways are you like them? In what ways are you not? What have you chosen to keep? What have you rejected?

Of these, which inspired you and made the most difference in your life? What was it they said or did or stood for that influenced you? What paths have you taken as a result? Bring them into your consciousness and let them accompany you for a while during the day as you are driving or walking or resting. What do you want to tell them? What do you want them to tell you?

5.

On a large sheet of newsprint draw a picture of a house you remember from your childhood. Depict in some way the interior and the rooms you best remember. What was the atmosphere in the house? What furnishings, art, tableware, jewelry, knickknacks, and religious items were displayed? Are any of them still around?

6.

Try to recall an actual family gathering that included several generations. Draw a circle to represent the table or gathering and set smaller circles around it, one for each person present. Who was pushing whose buttons? Whose buttons were they pushing? Who was pushing your buttons? Which persons were most memorable? Which were on the sidelines? What tensions bubbled beneath the surface or spilled over? What made it a joyful gathering, a sad or even dreadful one, exciting, tender, calming? Who organized the occasion and brought everyone together?

7.

Block out a film narrative or romance novel in which your parents are the main characters. The elements of love stories are usually these: the meeting, the falling out, the reunion. What do you know or imagine about the unfolding of their love story? Do not take them into the years after marriage; just leave it there.

7.

Play some pleasant music as you look over your collection of older family photographs. Write about the feelings and memories they stir in you and what you know about the people, their relationships, and the times. File what you have written along with the pictures in plastic sleeves and place them in a three-ring binder.

8.

Gather with a group of friends and work through one of the Preparations with them. What insights into your own past are revealed? What insights into theirs?

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: A long, long time ago . . .

CHAPTER THREE
PERSONAL MATTERS

According to an ancient wisdom story, The Master was asked how to acquire learning. In response, he said, "Learning is gotten by reading books and listening to lectures." And wisdom? "By reading the book that is you."

If I were to imagine the book that is me, I would give it the title *Real Estate*. Simply enumerating the houses I lived in and left as an adult, along with stories about the circumstances surrounding all those moves would be material for at least an epic. Add to that list the homes I lived in and visited as a child and the stories of the people who lived in them and you have another. Real estate as a metaphor serves my life story very well.

What central metaphor lies at the heart of your life story? It could be the game of baseball. Every year during the summer I reread an essay by A. Bartlett Giamatti, onetime commissioner of baseball (and past-president of Yale). His

essay, "Baseball as Narrative," appears in a slim book, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (Summit Books, 1990). In it Giametti uses the game of baseball as an analogy for life. The player, who is both a hero and an ordinary person, stands at home plate, surveying the elegant geometry of a baseball diamond. The pitcher is the adversary and also the agent for opportunity, as our hero has only one single-minded purpose, to return home. There are obstacles to overcome, but the player will be assisted in the endeavor by an intentional community of teammates and an affirming group of bystanders. Again and again, the player will attempt to reach the goal, to get home; again and again he will fail. But every so often he will reach the place of desire and triumph. The team will cheer; the fans will cheer.

Home: ideally, a place where we are most ourselves and where we can be secure and at peace. Home: a place within ourselves where we have realized the potential for which we were intended. It is so for each and every one of us. We all yearn for it, and we all must navigate the playing field until we finally arrive.

Depending on one's preferences, there are any number of ways to present this large body of material, our personal life stories, but we can be sure that our readers will be grateful if we incorporate narrative techniques found in good fiction and creative nonfiction here. If we are dramatic and bring in a sense of anticipation, surprise, and foretelling when speaking about life-shaping events; if we use dialogue when telling about significant persons and description when telling about special places; if we report what we have seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled, and savored, we will hold our readers' attention and keep them involved in our stories.

If we are to be truly authentic and honest "authors" of our lives, we need to reveal more than simply dates and events. Life after all is a mysterious and unpredictable journey, no matter how much we would wish it otherwise. In order to fully describe this journey we need to interweave the obvious linear "reality" with the mysterious inexplicable turnings (the fumbled ball, the stolen base, the intrusive fan). What unpremeditated action or chance encounter resulted in a sudden breakthrough into a new

consciousness? How did intuition play a part in our decision-making? What or whom did we see one day on the street or while traveling that changed us forever?

Since handling such a large body of matter can be challenging, finding a "hook" such as those used by journalists and magazine writers, such as my real estate metaphor, such as a baseball game, can be helpful, if not essential. John Steinbeck, toward the end of his life, wrote a delightful book describing a camping trip he took across the country with his dog; he called it *Travels With Charlie*. The English novelist Graham Greene wrote about trips he made with an eccentric relative in his book *Travels With My Aunt*. May I suggest that we approach telling the stories of our lives as a series of "Travels With . . ." Here are a few starters.

Travels in our hometowns, at school and in college; in our local, national, and global communities. Travels outside our "comfort zones" into the unknown. Did we change careers, pack our bags and travel to places in the world near or far, uproot ourselves literally and move to a place far from home,

get involved somehow with the marginalized in our society?
Which journeys and destinations have meant the most to us?
Which were life-changing? Which were accidental,
intentional, undertaken as pilgrimage?

Consider the people we met as we trekked along: family members, teachers, partners in love and marriage, friends, children, mentors, co-workers, colleagues, teammates, chance acquaintances. Did we journey (virtually) with public personalities in the fields of government, sports, education, religion, spirituality, literature, the arts, law, medicine? Why did their lives so profoundly affect or influence our own? Along with that train of thought, what significant local, national, or global events affected the course of our lives?

How have our bodies traveled with us? They too have life stories to tell, stories of strength, achievement, grace, stamina, ailments, illnesses, disabilities, accidents, even abuse. Have our bodies participated in team sports or did they prefer individual ones such as running, walking, swimming, or hiking? Have they danced? Have they learned

yoga, tai chi, the martial arts? Have they been taught wise lessons regarding diet? Been burdened with addictions to tobacco, alcohol, food? Healed with the support of Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, or some other support group?

And just as we have traveled intimately with our physical, intellectual, and spiritual selves all our lives, so too is our sexuality intrinsically intertwined with our life experience. No longer do we separate body from mind or mind from spirit, or body from spirit; we have come to recognize that all is one and that each is a face on the prism that is our totality. What insights and wisdom come to us as we look back on that profound and powerful force in our lives we call sex?

What about our mental well-being? Have our emotional and psychological lives been enhanced or healed through therapy? Even a short time ago, these areas of concern would have been suppressed, dismissed, or ignored, but consider how helpful it will be for those who live after us to know that wholeness is not miraculously granted as if by the glancing

tap of a good fairy's wand, but more often than not, something we intentionally struggle toward.

And finally, another struggle, one with often amazing and wonderful outcomes, our struggle to express ourselves creatively. How have we traveled with that? Have we been generous with our time, or stingy; believed that we could be creative, or too impressed with the masters to give full rein to our more modest efforts; been boldly masterful, talented, and successful ourselves? And just what is creativity anyway? Surely it has a broader sweep than painting portraits or writing novels.

Creativity is what we do that wholly absorbs us, that we look forward to doing, and that we reflect back on with satisfaction when finished. Consider these: painting a room, practicing the piano (or trumpet), making pots, painting with watercolors, planting flower boxes in the spring, fixing up an old car, keeping up with photo albums, writing in a journal, making a model boat, flying a kite, tying flies, setting the table for a dinner party. When we

are creative in defining creativity, we might be surprised at the opus we are leaving behind.

Here, too, is a place to acknowledge the major creative artists who have enhanced our lives: dancers, artists, sculptors, musicians, composers, writers, actors, film makers, photographers, playwrights, and entertainers of all sorts; all these have sustained us in times of stress and distress, amused us, awed us, or otherwise enriched us. Pay tribute.

Work, creativity, relationships, events experienced passively or actively. These and more are the stuff of life, so much of it in fact that it is difficult to control. Paradoxically, however, it is not control that is required here but its opposite. We must allow ourselves to roam at will, to stay awhile here, not to go there. Every person's story is a tale worth telling, but if we try to record every single thing or adhere to a strict chronological order, we will either run out of steam or produce writing that is dry and unreadable. We are the authors in this endeavor, it is right and proper for us to control the material.

This section of our wills may well be the longest; it will take the most time and have the potential to drain us of emotional energy. Because of that it is best to take our time with it, savor it, enjoy it, and work on it at a comfortable pace, working on other sections of our will in between and returning to our life stories as the spirit moves. Think of it as a subterranean stream of consciousness that calls us when the spirit moves. And when we have told it, when we have told how we hit the ball, rounded the bases, advanced from base to base, and finally made it back to Home Plate, let us pause for a moment, look up into the stands, and listen to the cheering.

PREPARATIONS FOR PERSONAL MATTERS

1.

Use 5x8 index cards for this exercise, one for each seven-year segment of your life. Then quickly and at random with no order in mind list what you recall during these time periods. Write down the names of people with whom you interacted; the circumstances, situations, and personal, local, national, and global events that occurred during this period of your life; your educational, work, and sports activities; the turning points you came to and the choices you made—or did not make; the social, family, or civic groups with which you were involved. What was the experience of your body at the time? What books, art, dance, and music were you enjoying? What were your own creative endeavors?

Select one of these time periods, close your eyes, and focus on it. Put aside the need to analyze and pay attention only to your feelings.

After a while see what image, symbol, metaphor, phrase, or descriptive word emerges. Sit with the image. Then

gently open your eyes and draw the image or write the word or phrase. Maintain your meditation awhile longer.

2.

Close your eyes and sit in silence until one person from this time period becomes prominent. Write the name of that person on the top of a fresh sheet of paper. Then, quickly, in a few paragraphs, write a statement that synthesizes the essence of your relationship--its beginning and history, the phases it has gone through, its place in your life now.

Read the statement aloud to yourself. Add to it if you wish, but do not edit or delete anything.

Now close your eyes again and try to step into the experience of the other person, imagining his or her own version of your relationship. Write that out too.

If you want to extend this exercise, begin to write a dialogue with the person. Write as you "speak"; then pause briefly and give the other person time to formulate a response; write that down too. Let each of you have a unique independent voice. After the dialogue has run its course, close your eyes again and sit in silence, attending to the

emotions you felt as you wrote out the imagined conversation. Open your eyes and read the dialogue out loud.

You can expand this script at will, sometimes adding to the dialogue, sometimes allowing your thoughts to flow freely, sometimes simply rereading what you have written.

3.

Write down the names of people--heroes and villains, enemies and friends, models and mentors--who have played significant roles in your life. These can be public figures as well as people you have actually known. They can be in the sciences, the environment, politics, education, the arts, sports, religion. They can be characters in novels, myths, fairy tales, movies, plays, paintings, or operas. Select some and write briefly about how and why they affected or influenced you.

4.

Write two letters of thanksgiving, the first to a person who challenged or confronted you in an unkind way, the second to someone who also demanded much from you, but in a positive

way. What new insights about yourself are revealed as you write and reread the letters?

5.

Consider the life history of your flesh-and-bone self and write a letter to your body. As you review your mutual history, express your thoughts and feelings freely. Take a walk with your body today. Notice how it works. Thank it for keeping you going all these years.

Now using paints or colored pencils, draw a picture of your tangible, visible self. Try to draw a side, back, and front pose. What is your body doing? Is it standing, sitting, dancing, playing baseball, poised to dive off the high board, reading a book, picking apples? What do you notice about the drawing? Are parts of your body distorted or hidden; are others disproportionately large? What age are you in the drawing? What colors have you used? What do you think they signify? Does your drawing remind you of a character in a myth or fairytale?

6.

If you were to make a film, write a novel, paint a mural, choreograph movement, or compose a symphony or opera about your life, would you create a tragedy, a romance, a heroic myth, a complex drama, a saga, a mystery, a travelogue, a comedy, a political or social documentary, an action-packed thriller? Block out the story using a concept map or traditional outline. Give it a title.

Now choose another genre. If you chose to "write" your life as a heroic myth, for instance, now make it a comedy; if you wrote a comedy, make it a travelogue. What new perspective does this exercise give you?

7.

Revisit the literature of fairy tales and myths and find one that attracts you. Then, using it as a model, with yourself at the center of the drama, write the tale of your own life. Include elements such as the cruel or kind king, the aloof queen, the earnest young prince, the captive princess, the dark and thorny forest, the helpful or jealous siblings, the three tasks, the good fairy, the bad one, the wild beasts, the benign magical ones.

Invite a group of others to do the same, and then read your stories out loud. "Once upon a time . . . "

8.

If you were to choose a song for your life story what would it be? "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," an opera aria, a Schubert song, "The Man/Woman I Love," "Let's Go Ridin' in the Car, Car," "Alligator in the Elevator?"

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: If I were to imagine my life as a novel, I would call it . . .

CHAPTER FOUR
SPIRITUAL MATTERS

Billions of humans since time began have believed in the existence of an intangible force, often called the Divine, and yearned to connect with it. Religions grew up in support of this desire and, for centuries, provided the framework within which it was made or at least attempted. There is good reason for this. The search for spirit is the work of each individual, but humans are communal beings, more comfortable in groups than in solitude. The small groups and communities in which this activity originally happened eventually and inevitably evolved into larger and larger institutions called religions, and as we know only too well, all institutions, including religious ones, are flawed. Nevertheless, institutionalized religion has gifted us in many ways. Without it we would not have the great rituals, liturgies, scholarship, music, stories, celebrations, memories, and lessons, to say nothing of the art and architecture that enrich our personal, cultural, and

spiritual lives. For all its faults and failings--and crimes--it would be folly to dismiss religion out of hand. At its best, it superbly serves the need of humans who quest for a connection to the ineffable.

Most of us can remember the churches or synagogues we attended as children, the music and voices, priests, ministers, rabbis, and cantors; the rituals, smells, colors, interior space; the celebrations, such as Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs, First Communion, and Confirmations, rites of passage for many of us. We may remember certain religious leaders from those early times and their teachings and homilies. As we build this section of our ethical wills, let us consider how this early experience played out as we grew older.

For many of us the religion of our childhoods did not sustain us into adulthood and we affiliated with other religions or systems of spiritual thought, or chose not to. What was the experience of that intensely personal journey? Many of us, even if we continue to maintain a connection with our "home" religions or have affiliated with another, are

learning meditation and the liberation of detachment through a study of Buddhism. Perhaps we are deepening our mind/body connection through yoga, a Hindu practice. Let us take note of that.

One way to look at this material is to see our lives as a series of sacred or spiritual moments. Some will be peak experiences, mountaintop experiences if you will; others will be letdowns, times of discouragement, disappointment, despair, or rejection.

A long psalm (107) speaks of this spiritual narrative. Life is a series of challenging experiences, says the psalmist, using images from nature as metaphors: fording a fast-moving river filled with floating debris, getting lost in a dark wood or open desert, being imprisoned in myriad ways, tossing about on a roiling sea. Gradually we worked our way out of treacherous times and found ourselves in a safe port, on the other side of the river, in a habitable town, released from prison, finally enjoying life again. And we wondered what it was that brought us out. The psalmist says that it was not an invisible detached God, but a benign loving

one that brought us to safe harbor. This force is revealed to us only through the human and the natural: wives, husbands, lovers; sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers; cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents; friends, mentors, guides, counselors, religious leaders, philosophers, writers, artists; calming rivers, oceans, and lakes; blooming oases; magnificent mountains and gentle hills; an unexpected warm day in February, a refreshing summer rain. Suddenly, all the hurt was gone and life was once again an open road. Who led us to safety?

Indeed, it has been suggested that we can imagine our lives as a series of ascents to glorious mountain tops and descents into murky valleys. Moses stopped at the Burning Bush and met Yahweh. Jesus' mountain top experience was called the Transfiguration. The Apostles were filled with elation when the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost. Martin Luther King spoke about having been to the mountaintop and compared his own spiritual journey to that of Moses. While attending an inspiring retreat one summer, a young mother felt the certain presence of the Divine.

Then the descent begins. Moses returns to his unruly band of complainers. Jesus, coming down from his mountain top, encounters a herd of smelly disgusting mad pigs. Martin Luther King returns to the climate of violence that bred his killer. The original apostles plunge into tumultuous times, hard work, and martyrdom. The young mother returns to the kitchen and the car pool.

A famous wisdom story addresses this cycling up and down. Asked one day by a farmer what he should do after attaining enlightenment, a Zen master replied, "Go back to your fields." The spirit is alive in everything, the Master was saying, the highs and the lows, the retreats and the car pools, the farmers' fields.

We all experience moments on the mountaintop, but it is the coming-down-from-the-mountaintop experiences in our lives, the ordinary daily human activity with which we are primarily concerned here. In the Jewish *Daily Prayer Book* one will find blessings and prayers for such little things as the new moon, guests, dew, rain, and the lighting of candles. Christian Celts devised prayers for milking cows and lighting

the hearth fire. Ochs and Olitsky in their book *Jewish Spiritual Guidance* suggest that prayer "is any occasion intended to be an encounter with God." If we embrace this definition, then we see that prayer can be almost anything. While many of us may still practice traditional forms based on devotions and pious practices of the past, others have come to understand prayer in new ways. For them walking on a beach or hiking up a forest trail, having dinner with a special person or playing Checkers with a child, spending an hour with clay or listening to a great symphony bring them closer to "an encounter with God."

For some, silence and meditation nurture their relationship with the transcendent. Observant Jews and others keep a gentle Sabbath filled with quiet pleasures, also a form of meditation. In that spirit many religions maintain retreat houses. For others active engagement in social or environmental justice issues, also a tenet of all valid religious traditions, defines their prayer. Wise spiritual leaders recommend a blend of both. How do you understand prayer? What is it for you?

Spiritual friendship is an often overlooked but quite common experience. When you think back on your life, do you find that you have had mentors, close friends, or trained spiritual directors who have guided you? Have you been a spiritual companion for others?

Has your religious or spiritual history included an experience of community? Have you yourself been influential in helping form small intentional communities within your religious tradition? Reform movements? What about other extra-church communities to which you belong or that you have formed? Are there spiritual elements in those?

All these and more make up the totality of religious and spiritual experience. Each is different, each is valid, and each provides a rationale for our actions in the world. It is important to share these unique and special stories with our family, friends, associates, and with future readers as well, for they hear our voices as they hear no other. In the telling of our stories, we in turn validate theirs and encourage them to look beneath the obvious, the "what happened," to the intangible, the "what really happened." In

those places they also may recognize the activity of the ineffable in their own lives.

PREPARATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL MATTERS

1.

Write a history of your religious life considering the following questions: During your childhood and adolescent years, how did your family practice religion? What places of worship did you attend? Was your personal practice different from theirs in any way and did this difference take you in another direction? What turning points or forks in the road occurred? What people guided you or influenced your religious life? Have you remained a member of the religion or faith into which you were born? If not, why not? To what faith or faiths have you belonged? To which do you now belong? Are you intrigued at this time by another faith system? How could you learn more about it?

Now write a brief summary of your spiritual life, paying close attention to significant turning points. Is the story blended with or separate from the story of your religious life? What is different about each?

2.

Using 5x8 cards, write the names of those who have been your spiritual or religious mentors or guides. They can be people you have known, such as teachers, rabbis, ministers, priests, or friends who have been spiritual companions; well-known or famous religious or spiritual personalities, theologians, writers, artists, musicians, and architects; significant figures from scripture.

On a day when you wake up to beautiful weather and open time, bring one of these persons into your consciousness and invite him or her to take a walk. Rather than trying to enter in their lives, welcome them instead into yours in the here and now. What comments do they make about your joys and struggles at this time? What advice and counsel do they offer?

3.

Meditation is a spiritual practice embraced by many regardless of their religious beliefs (or unbeliefs). It is a listening practice. During the time set aside, usually twenty minutes, we silence the "voices" of mind, memory,

imagination, and emotion by focusing on our breathing. We try not to control what goes on but attend rather to the silence and what is in it. Some people keep a record of their meditation experiences in a journal. Comparing these notations with what is going on in our day-to-day lives can be very revealing. Meditation is usually done in a seated position; as an alternative, try walking meditation. The practice is described by Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, in his book, *A Guide to Walking Meditation*.

4.

Consider expanding your definition of meditation to include such ordinary daily activities as reading, bathing, preparing and eating a meal, cleaning the bathroom, washing the car. To do this, choose a day or an hour to be conscious of your breath as you go about one of these activities. Move at a slower than normal pace. Stop every once in a while to think about what you have been doing. Pause for five minutes or so before beginning a new activity.

This method of prayer moves us into the daylong practice of Sabbath-keeping in which we enjoy quiet pleasures such as

taking a nature walk, recreational reading, engaging in a favorite hobby or craft, visiting with friends and family. How does this practice compare with religious or spiritual practices to which you are accustomed?

5.

Try this on a pleasant outdoor day. Take a large sheet of art paper and some crayons, colored pencils, chalks, or watercolors, whatever you prefer, and go for a walk. Find a tree that you like and visit it. Paint or draw it as you imagine it in four seasons.

Study your drawings as metaphors for your spiritual life. When has it been a bright spring green and idealistic? When has it flourished in summery fullness? When has it shriveled and faded or become dormant? What is your present spiritual season?

6.

Ritual is said to be a series of gestures, words, and music that, when taken together, form a sentence that communicates with the Divine. Attend a religious service of your choice and notice the place of ritual in it. What part

of it particularly appeals to you? Consider the place of ritual in your own life. Do you use ritual to prepare yourself for prayer, for instance, to celebrate special events, to transition from one season of the year to another? Write them down as if you were planning a religious service.

Not all sacred space is contained within the walls of a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. For some, a library is sacred, an art museum, a concert hall, a room or quiet corner at home. Others find that "church" exists in the natural world. Take some time to return to a place that is or has been special for you and notice how you ritualize the time you spend there. Stay for a while. Listen.

7.

Return in your mind to a desert time in your life, a time when you experienced pain, disillusionment, the presence of evil, betrayal, self doubt, deep sadness, unbearable agitation. How long did the experience last? When did it begin to ease? If you can, recall that moment and draw something that depicts the experience symbolically. Who or what served as an oasis for you during your desert time?

8.

Most religions are grounded in sacred texts or scriptures. Buddhism has the *Dhammapada* and Zen koans; Jews the *Torah*, which are the five books of Moses, the *Talmud*, which is an extensive library of commentary on it, and other scholarly and sacred writings; Christians read the *New Testament*, the *Hebrew Bible*, and a compilation of sacred writings known as the *Old Testament*. The revelations of Mohammad in the *Qur'an* are read and memorized by Muslims. Consider also the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, the *Book of Mormon*, and numerous prayer and devotional books such as the Episcopalian *Book of Common Prayer*. Confucianism offers the *I Ching* and the writings of Confucius. The wisdom books for Hindus are the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Taoism is based on the writings of Lao Tzu, compiled in the *Tao Te Ching*. Followers of Christopher Robin seek enlightenment in *The Tao of Pooh*.

Consider how your study of, and speculation on, one or several of these sacred texts have guided and sustained you during the various passages of your life. Copy some

particularly significant passages into a blank book to compile your own set of texts that are sacred to you. (These blank books, many of them exquisite works of art in themselves, are readily found in bookstores and art stores.) Besides scripture, include quotes from religious or spiritual writers, inspiring poetry. Consider for instance Mahatma Ghandi, Dag Hammarskjold, Martin Buber, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Martin Luther, Abraham Heschel, C.S. Lewis, Teresa of Avila, Tilden Edwards, John Henry Cardinal Newman, Thich Nhat Hanh, Emerson, Thoreau, George Fox. The list is endless.

Do not be concerned about ordering your personal scriptures in any way, but do date your entries. What resonates with you on a certain day reflects the experience of that particular day; if you keep a daily log or journal, you will find it interesting to compare the two.

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your

eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: I first felt a spiritual connection when I . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

PHILOSOPHICAL MATTERS

Our work is nearly half done, and we have arrived at a well-deserved marker, a point when we have earned the right to make high minded and lofty statements, to be pompous, to speak in somber tones. In short, we can now play the philosopher. But this is not play, for in truth, if we were not philosophers to begin with, life with its many twists and turns has surely made them of us.

A young man, in the throes of ennui, decides to take on an immense, dramatic undertaking; he will leave his humdrum existence and ply a boat down the Congo River. Along the way he finds that he does not have a clue about the condition of humanity in Africa nor about the terrible legacy White Imperialism bequeathed to the continent. He relies immoderately on the help of others, some of whom are disreputable, in order to avoid red tape and inconvenience. He misunderstands and exploits a native man who agrees to help him navigate the river. Hyper vigilant about his own survival, he fails to see what is most obvious about the needs of those around him or to connect with them.

This is the story of *Facing the Congo: a Modern Day Journey into the Heart of Darkness*, by Jeffrey Tayler, a freelance travel writer. At the end of his tale, after the ordeal is over, he philosophizes. "The alien in Zaire had seduced me; the threatening had challenged me; and I had pictured its wilderness as a bourne where I could rejuvenate myself through suffering and achievement and the conquest of

fear. But my drama of self-actualization proved obscenely trivial beside the suffering of the Zaireans and the injustices of their past."

Like Jeffrey, we too ply the Congos of our lives, unable or unwilling in the moment to see the larger realities. But this blundering along we must do; it is part of the human experience, and not to do it would be akin to process-skipping, like babies who walk without first crawling. Concluding his post journey observations Jeffrey acknowledges this, saying, "That it should have seems obvious to me now, but I learned this only by buying a pirogue and attempting the descent."

So far we have told the stories of our ancestors, our families, and ourselves. We have chronicled our travels in the seen world and our relationship to the transcendent. Now we acknowledge that we, having made our own descent down the sometimes murky river of life, have earned the right to philosophize, and that, just as we are members of families, agents in public life, and spiritual beings, so too are we philosophers, with beliefs and ideals, opinions and

positions on almost any subject from politics to morality. They are significant and important in the big picture of who we are in the world and what we would do to right its wrongs, and they deserve a prominent place in our ethical wills. Along with passing on family history and religious and spiritual values, this, in fact, has been the predominant focus in wills of the past, thus the appellation ethical will.

I have chosen "philosophical" over "ethical" to describe this section, however, because I wanted to choose a term that would allure rather than repel readers. Indeed, the field of ethics, I discovered, is a subset of the much more far-reaching discipline of philosophy, which I image as a great umbrella-like tree with many broad leafy limbs. Each limb represents a distinct aspect of human activity with its unique theoretical questions, debates, and discussions. There are branches of philosophy for politics, art, music, law, business, science, education, morality, work, sports, leisure, civic responsibility, the environment, justice, and so on. The branch known as moral philosophy, or ethics, focuses on standards of behavior, right conduct, goodness,

duty, responsibility, obligation, and virtue, as one understands it.

Most likely, at some point in our education, we were required to study the great philosophers: Plato and Aristotle, Socrates and Augustine, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Buber, and Maimonides. If we planned to be teachers, we took a required course called "The Philosophy of Education" and read the works of John Dewey and Paolo Freire. If we were sociology majors, it would have been John Locke, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer. Perhaps we were introduced to the work of Hannah Arendt, the great moral philosopher. We happily left behind these heavy hitters when we took off our caps and gowns after graduation and entered our fields of endeavor; nonetheless, their serious intentional thought undergirds our everyday life and work. It is now our turn to join the ranks of these and other great teachers and to deliver our own well-considered thoughts "on shoes and ships and sealing wax . . . "

Here is an example from my own life. Ever since I was a child, I have loved all aspects of nature. I can still see

myself scuffing through the dry fallen leaves of fall on my way to and from school, breathing in the crisp autumn air, noticing the contrast between a bright blue sky and tawny fall foliage. In the summers my family vacationed on Cape Cod, and there I spent hours musing to the sound of softly rolling waves, pushing my bare feet into warm sand, floating face up in cool water for long minutes while I thought deep thoughts. As an adult I prefer vacations that involve hiking or birdwatching or being on beaches.

My children, as they grew to maturity, took environmental issues seriously, very seriously. They urged me to conserve water, recycle, follow rules of low impact hiking; they passionately mourned blighted whales and wept over oil spills. I went along, humoring them. And then one day I made the connection between my love of nature and the imperative to take personal responsibility for it. Suddenly, I saw the link between my actions and the future health of the natural world I love so much. I realized that my behavior could affect the future for better or for worse, that it was no longer possible to be a passive admirer, that,

in effect, I was in an intimate partnership with the earth. In short, I now have a philosophical stance regarding the environment.

If education is of continuing value to us, what are our positions regarding higher education, public education, private education? Does life include the responsibility to be an educator in some way? A mentor?

Is charitable or philanthropic involvement important in a harmonious life? Should one be involved in specific areas of social concern such as economic justice, homelessness, domestic violence, human rights? And what are our hopes for the future regarding global economic issues, the well-being of women and children around the world, the globe itself and all that is in it, on it, and above it? And if so, to what degree should we be involved? What do we see as the proper distribution of time between public and private or family life?

What principles, philosophical and ethical, guided us in our careers, jobs, or professions? Were we at times disillusioned? Did we learn valuable lessons along the way?

How did we prevail? How would we state succinctly our ideals regarding the relationship of work to social issues, political issues, ethics? What about the balance of work to family, to civic duty, to friendship? Does one define work as a job, a profession, a vocation? Is "good" work intellectual, manual, technical, pragmatic? Should it be life giving or motivated only by duty? Should it provide a service and fulfill a mission, or is it about almost anything that puts bread on the table? Are friendships forged there or left behind at the end of the day? If there are problems at work, should we engage, or disengage; stay to fight it out, or leave? Is it forever, or will it have an end?

Those who have served in the armed services, as well as those who have not, have strong opinions regarding war and the art of war, peace and the art of peace, and what it means to be a true patriot. How have our perspectives changed since the events of September 2001? Our world view?

If, as we reread the many positions we have taken on the branches of the umbrella tree called philosophy, we may

detect an overarching theme or synthesis and be inspired to create a brief "This I Believe" statement, similar to the feature on National Public Radio. In it we state in a few well-written paragraphs what single guiding principle governs our ways of being in the world.

PREPARATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHICAL MATTERS

1.

Tape a conversation in which a friend asks you questions about your positions regarding such issues as education, politics, war, religion, economic justice, business ethics, class, creativity, physical and emotional particular philosophers or grand theories. Take your time with this. When you have finished and are by yourself, complete the process by writing in your journal or drawing any images that come to mind. Later on, listen to the tape and transcribe what seems of value.

Do the same for your friend.

2.

Create a spreadsheet and label columns for each aspect of creativity, the arts, social justice, family, religion, selfhood, civic duty. Under each write your position and the actions you have taken to support it. You may also use 5X8 index cards for this. Keep it brief.

3.

Using a 5x8 index card, list the teachers, coaches, mentors, thinkers, philosophers, family members, spiritual down what it was you were taught, and how. Was it through conversation, teaching, argument, debate, example, persuasion, personality, writings?

Take an imaginary walk with one of them and discuss the details of the day and past week, the past year, a situation you are facing. Listen to what they have to say; listen to how they say it. What is the pattern of their speech, the rhythm, the tone and timber of their voices? Are they fast talkers or slow, methodical or disorganized, soothing or distracting? Do they encourage a contemplative stance or an active one, a blend of both?

4.

Ask a small group to which you belong to bring objects from natural environments that are special to them. Arrange them on a table. Ask each person to share what makes the object special and take note of

the variety of natural environments mentioned. After the sharing, discuss what you as a group can do in your local community to keep the various ecosystems safe and whole.

5.

Walk or drive through a neglected part of your town or city. Who and what do you see there? What are the people doing? Are they relaxed, energetic, happy, agitated, lethargic, confused, hostile? Imagine sitting in a coffee shop with one of them. What would you talk about? What would you be told? What would you be asked to do?

Now imagine yourself in a neglected part of the world. To what degree are you involved in the issues affecting the people there?

6.

Observe or take part in an athletic activity such as baseball, soccer, hockey, or tennis; or simply take a brisk walk or a refreshing swim. Observe (or imagine)

your body interacting with a team or alone. What do you notice? What are your thoughts as an athlete, spectator, or coach on "the rules of the game," honor among athletes?

7.

Imagine that you are being honored at a testimonial dinner and have been invited to make a speech that sums up your philosophy of life. What would you say? How would you say it?

Write your speech. Make it come alive by using good rhetorical techniques. Give examples, compare and contrast, show process, describe, make analogies, show cause and effect. Add dialogue, imagery, metaphor, description, and narration. Be persuasive. Quote from your favorite thinkers and writers, mentors and past teachers, This is your valedictory speech. Wow them.

8.

Write your own Ten Commandments. What is new or different from the "original?" In what order of

importance are they written? If you do this in a class, how do yours compare with others? How do others compare with yours? What do you notice?

When it is time to begin writing, find a good chair in a quiet place and sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: These are my thoughts on . . .

CHAPTER SIX

DEATH MATTERS

It is said that, when Moses was dying on Mount Nebo, God revealed himself, lauded Moses for taking care of the Israelites during the Exodus, and kissed him. At that moment Moses' soul left his body and ascended to heaven.

It is a sweet thing to think of death as the moment when God comes down, blesses us with a kiss, and returns to Heaven with our souls in tow. A parallel is found in Native American spirituality in which it is believed that a Holy Wind resides in each of us. At death that wind leaves the body to be reunited with the Divine Wind that enlivens all creation.

Death, I heard someone say recently, is when we no longer need to breathe. The words made me think about the act of breathing and how I am seldom aware of my breath or of breathing except in yoga class or beginning a meditation practice. I also thought of

the word Yahweh, the ancient name for God, which is not an actual articulated word but the sound made as one

breathes in and out. In the Hebrew scriptures God makes his presence known to Moses and expresses the idea of "I AM WHO AM" through the sound of breathing, YHWH. These thoughts, however pleasant, do not entirely dispel our aversion to talking about death, whether it is the death of loved ones or our own. And yet we all know that, along with birth and aging, death is an inevitable consequence of being human. The passage from aversion to acceptance is possible, however, and can be liberating, as Hospice patients and volunteers well know. We can do this by studying the approaches and insights of professionals and spiritual leaders who explain the processes involved in death and dying, by visiting those among us who are in the process of dying, and by acknowledging the reality that we ourselves will someday die.

My own process of befriending the idea of my own death (I say process, because I cannot claim to be

entirely comfortable with the idea.) began a few summers ago when it occurred to me that my children had no sense of what my desires would be concerning my funeral, while I myself had specific preferences. I decided to make a plan. Thus began a sweet strange journey.

My first impulse was to select my favorite scripture passages and write a brief letter, which would be read at the funeral, explaining their importance to me. Then I looked through a familiar hymnbook and pulled out a number of favorites, selecting those which the children would remember from the years when we went to church together. So that part was done. The hard part, talking about caskets and cremation procedures came next. For that I met with a local funeral home director who told me that I was doing "preplanning" and that my children would someday be very grateful to me for having made these preparations. With him I went through a list of choices, most of them at any rate, as some were beyond

my psychological or emotional decision-making capacity at the time. We set up a file, he told me what other arrangements needed to be made, and I went on my merry way.

Now I had to find a cemetery. A century ago, my grandfather bought a "plot" for his growing family, and I have been at the site ten times or more over the years saying goodbye to grandparents, my father, aunts and uncles. Today the idea of a patriarch (or matriarch) purchasing a family plot and expecting that all the children and spouses will want to be buried in it is fantasy. Times have indeed changed. Here I was on my own.

This took a long time and much exploration that I am very glad is out of the way. I learned that there are cemeteries and cemeteries, all with their own sets of rules. I learned that some cemeteries are filled to capacity, that plots for cremations are very different from those for traditional burial, that getting a plot under a leafy tree is not always an option, and that

there are papers to be signed and money to be handed over.

I also learned that cemeteries have strict rules regarding headstones. For a long time I put aside that piece of my project until, one day, I found myself driving by a monument company that had been recommended and pulled into the parking lot. Again I was confronted by a battery of choices, but I came out smiling and lighthearted; the job was over, and all the pieces, or most of them at any rate, were finally in place. I felt satisfied, and I was glad for my children that they would not have to fit all the puzzle pieces together quickly during a sad and stressful time.

When an occasion to share the story of my summertime project arises, I am surprised at the reactions. Some are uncomfortable and even critical; thinking me unduly morbid or controlling. Others are curious and want to know the details. The best listeners are friends my own age, many of whom have

also given it some thought. I was unable to share the information with my children as they strongly resisted discussing the matter.

If I had it to do over, I would ask a friend to go along for the ride, either literally, or by listening to me talk about what was going on, as it was lonesome work at times and occasionally unpleasant. But now that the details are settled, I am left with a feeling of true serenity, and proud of my efforts too. The other day, in the full glow of a New England fall, on a whim, I turned into the cemetery of my choice and drove past the place that will someday be dug up to receive the urn holding my ashes. It looked sweet and beautiful, and I liked the idea that it was a piece of property I actually own, something to keep in the family. And, yes, I did get a tree, a young tree; its leaves that day shone bright and colorful in the noonday sun.

Much of the detail regarding end-of-life planning includes necessary matters such as living wills,

powers of attorney, and, if applicable, preferences regarding organ donations, and is well suited for inclusion in our ethical wills. In fact, it is a logical place to record matters of this nature and importance.

Whether or not we successfully make friends with death, in paying attention to the details surrounding it, we can at least become acquainted, a first date of sorts. One day we may willingly, even happily, accept its kiss.

PREPARATIONS FOR DEATH MATTERS

1.

Take a look at your life review cards and review each seven-year segment recalling how your perspective on death has changed. Write a brief summary of this progression including the perspective you presently hold. What is uppermost in your mind as you think about death today?

2.

What is your first memory of death as a child? Who had died? How did the adults in your life handle the experience and guide you through it? What were your feelings and behaviors at the time? Was it a rite of passage for you?

3.

Attitudes toward death are wide ranging. Fear, defiance, denial, acceptance, curiosity, aversion, comfort, anger, sadness, and longing are some of the many attitudes and feelings one may experience. What

attitudes and feelings come to the fore as you
contemplate your own end-of-life time?

4.

Look over your life review cards and recall occasions or situations when friends, family, or colleagues helped you. Then consider those times in which you helped others. What was it like to be receiving, to be giving? How did these situations change your relationship with the receiver (when you were the helper), with the helper (when you were the receiver)? In what ways did you connect (or withdraw)? In your imagination create a scenario in which you are once again on the receiving end. Who will most likely be helping you? What lessons from the past could help you in such a time?

5.

Return to your drawing of a tree in all seasons. Imagine now that each represents a season of your life. As you made the transitions from one season to the next, what was left behind? Was it a painful or

welcome leave-taking? What was gained? Did it all balance out?

6.

Most of us have attended a number of funerals and memorial services; some, because of our relationship to the deceased, were more difficult than others.

Regardless of our level of emotional involvement, we can still evaluate the relative merits of each. Which practices and rituals do you admire in a service, and which do you dislike? Using elements from several you admire create a composite ideal or model. What elements of this model would you incorporate into your own? Make a project out of planning your own funeral or memorial service. If that is part of the plan, set up a "pre-need" planner at the funeral home of your choice. (You will learn a lot.) Investigate the local cemeteries and consult with the managers regarding rules and regulations. Drop in at a stone masonry and price grave markers. Think about what will be inscribed on yours. If you want to be cremated and have

your ashes scattered rather than buried, visit the location of your choice and check out the weather conditions, terrain, and accessibility. Write down all your decisions and plans and tell several key people where they are filed.

7.

Do you have a position or a statement to make regarding end-of-life procedures? Is this position known to those with whom you are intimately involved? If not, how could you communicate it?

8.

In Hindu culture elders renounce the things of this world; leaving behind all material possessions, burdens, cares, responsibilities, obligations, habits, and attitudes, they retreat to the forest, where they live out their final days in solitude. What burdens would you like to jettison at this time of your life? What possessions requiring special care and maintenance would you be willing, even delighted, to renounce? Not being foolish, the Hindu elders bring

along certain essentials they need for survival. What
would you put in your backpack?

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: When I think about my death, . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN
EDITORIAL MATTERS

"Only the hand that erases can write the true thing." So wrote Meister Eckhart a thirteenth century mystic. Dag Hammarskjold, who was the Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 until his untimely death in 1961, prefaced his spiritual journal *Markings* with these same words. He always intended that the document, which he described as "sort of a *white book* concerning my negotiations with myself and with God," would be published, and he edited it carefully along the way.

This, I think, is the act of a wise person. To refine and prune away what is extraneous, excessive, offensive, or too personal is not an act of deception or dishonesty but a sign of maturity and of respect--for our readers, and for ourselves. Thus, we need to test our output, keeping in mind the feelings of our

intended audience and the appropriateness of what we decide to divulge.

We should also be aware of length, considering just how long it will take until our readers put aside our wills, finding themselves bored, impatient, or simply too busy. This is the time to reread our material and cut away what is repetitive, irrelevant, or unnecessary. In no way should we avoid writing all there is, of course, utilizing the Preparations to their fullest potential. It is good to be comprehensive, to delve deeply into the vast material that makes up our individual histories, as everything is important in some way to ourselves; its importance to others, however, is questionable.

In a class I recently taught, as we wrote and talked about those things we would leave out, a gentleman well into his eighties began to speak loudly, passionately, and in great detail about a hurtful exchange he had with his father, a conflict he had successfully suppressed for sixty years.

Nevertheless, he had continued to carry the unprocessed emotions inside where they continued to simmer. On that day in class, the simmering feelings burst forth, and he spoke later with gratitude about having had the opportunity to release the painful memory. Whether or not he includes this piece of his past in his final version is ultimately not important; an argument could be made for both. What is important is that, in the process of preparing his ethical will, he revisited the painful event.

On a list of "Those Things I Am Going to Leave Out" another participant included a violent row he had once had with an adolescent son. One night after a high school dance the boy came home drunk. The father remembered vividly how he berated him, threatened him, and in anger, slapped him, something he had never done before and never did again. He was forever sorry for his outburst but, having probed, knew that his son did not recall the incident. Long ago he had forgiven himself for his behavior, recognizing that his

inordinately violent response was displaced, that he was really angry with his own father, the boy's grandfather, who had frequently abused alcohol and disrupted an otherwise serene home life. Instead of relating the incident in his ethical will, he decided to tell about his father's substance abuse in his "Personal Matters" section and include in his "Philosophical Matters" chapter a general "lesson" on the appropriate use of alcohol.

In this part of the process, we read quickly, preferably at one sitting. As we read we underline, circle, or highlight those words and phrases that "hit us between the eyes." We do not pause to wonder why or to speculate or evaluate, but move right through to the end. When we are finished, we take a fresh sheet of paper, make a list of what we have highlighted, and take some time to write and reflect on what these selections reveal.

What behaviors and themes strike us? Have we been open about our feelings or have we suppressed them?

Have we kept secrets? From others? From ourselves?
Are we nostalgic or sentimental rather than realistic
about the past? Do we yearn for "something better,"
always looking into the future, unable because of
anxiety, or resistance, or pride to appreciate the
present? Does a certain preoccupation persist
throughout? Are our relationships damaged or
unfulfilled in certain ways? For certain reasons?
Do old wounds constantly resurface? Do we maintain
friendships or relationships that diminish us somehow?
Are we overwhelmed by guilt or regret?
On the other side of the coin, let us also consider
what we see as strengths. In what areas have our
positive energies been most apparent? What has made
us come alive, sing, hum? What activities, people, and
possessions have given us enjoyment and pleasure? What
has been easy and fun? Whose company do we enjoy?
In this rereading we may discover to our dismay
that we have created a boring unreadable document.
But all is not lost. There are any number of ways to deal

with the problem. One is to return to the Preparations that followed each section and use them to juice up the material. Another is to read some of the many memoirs available in bookstores and libraries and take note of the storytelling techniques. Sharing your writing in a group in which all are engaged in this project is another way to learn from others and get feedback. So that our work will be respected and preserved, we need to make several copies and distribute them appropriately. Some of us, if our life's work warrants it, will want to discuss the matter with an archival librarian. Others may wish to attach them to their material wills. Still others may want to make formal or informal presentations to interested friends, colleagues, family members, or associations.

A word of caution. One woman who shared her will with her four children found that their reactions varied widely and dramatically. One was very receptive and enthusiastic about the reading, adding details of her own. Another was only mildly interested,

a third completely disinterested, and a fourth, too distressed at the implied prospect of her mother's death to listen to or read any of it. On the other hand, many have found that sharing these documents while they are still alive opens up the way to a deep level of dialogue and healing. Clearly, a reality check needs to be applied to each situation.

Whatever the decision, one thing is clear: someone someday will value and cherish these documents and be grateful to us for having taken the time and devoted the energy to write them, edit them, and make them enjoyable to read.

What I have called "Editorial Matters" is, in reality, a critical review and is placed at this point in the overall outline for a specific purpose. Later we will begin to plan for the years ahead. It is important to go into this planning with a clear vision of who we are, where we have been, and where we need to go so that we can reach our full human potential.

PREPARATIONS FOR EDITORIAL MATTERS

1.

Reread what you have written so far and make decisions on what will remain and what will not. Some decisions will have to do with appropriateness, others with more stylistic problems such as repetitiveness, lengthiness, and tedious writing. This is difficult and may require the help of an objective reader: a classmate, family member, or good friend.

2.

Looking at the life review cards you made in "Personal Matters," review the segments of your life, focusing especially on the painful memories. Stay with these memories, one by one, for as long as you can, reliving the anger, disappointment, sadness, frustration, embarrassment, or any other emotions you felt at the time or still feel. After each time of reflection draw or paint whatever images come to mind.

Give them titles and file them in an art folder. Make decisions about whether or not to include them.

3.

Consider as well those times when you yourself were the cause of pain or trouble, or when you were judgmental, self-righteous, willful, self-centered, or embarrassingly full of yourself. Sit with these memories with as much honesty and humility as possible. Then write your thoughts in a journal in the form of letters to those you have offended. These may be filed with your will or torn up and thrown away; it's up to you.

4.

Reread what you have written so far. Look at the pictures or other artwork you have created, review the journal entries. Do you detect any recurring themes? Is some mysterious dimension to your life now clear? Express this in a visual image, musical phrase, line of poetic language, geometric design, dance movement, or

mathematical formula. To what source do you ascribe this mysterious thread of meaning?

5.

Drawing freehand, create a spiral beginning at the center and continuing outward until you reach the limits of the paper. Then retrace the spiral with your finger. Pause for a moment when you come to the center and wait for a word to come into your mind. Write it there. What significance does this word have in the context of your life journey?

6.

Get a pile of old magazines together (You can pick these up in recycling centers, libraries, second hand shops, Goodwill or Salvation Army stores.) Without analyzing why, tear out any pictures that appeal to you. Glue or paste them in any order onto a roll of brown art paper. Then, with magic markers, water colors, or chalk, draw or decorate around them. When you are finished, look at the colors you have chosen. What associations do you make with these colors? Now

give your mural a title. Would this be the same as the title of your life story if you were to name it? Doing this exercise in a group setting adds a new dimension. See what title the group gives your collage. Does this resonate with you or give you a different insight?

7.

Collect a few musical selections with clear emotional content: joy, sadness, pain, mourning, elation, excitement, sobriety, romance, gaiety, tragedy, piety, heightened energy, quietude. As you reread your will, pause and play appropriate selections. Allow yourself to stay with the emotions that arise in you. You may want to enter a list of these musical selections somewhere in your will.

8.

Find a local baseball field and watch a game. What do you observe about the process as the players start at Home Plate and try to return there? How are the players helped, how are they impeded? Could that be a metaphor for life? Are you Home now? Who or what

helped you get there? Who or what hindered or is hindering your progress? After the game is over and the players and spectators have gone home, walk the bases. When you get to Home Plate, stay for a while and enjoy the moment. Who is in the stands applauding?

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: These are the things I am going to leave out: .

. .

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOVING MATTERS

It is a frigid morning in January when the alarm goes off. I look out the window and notice that my car is lightly blanketed with snow and will need to be defrosted. But I bundle up and head out anyway, my destination the Preble Street Resource Center in Portland, Maine. There I will work with other volunteers and the kitchen staff to prepare and serve breakfast. The people who come through the line will be talking about the cold. Some will be bruised and scruffy from a night on the streets, some will be talking to inner voices, some will be eating quickly and grabbing a bag lunch before heading out to work, some will sit until the dining room closes and then move upstairs to sit again for hours, defending

themselves against the isolation of rented rooms and the cold winds of Portland.

It is the same every day, year 'round. I like it there; I know what to do, and I enjoy the company of the staff and the other volunteers. It is warm and noisy. When I get home and sit down to a real cup of tea, I feel tired but good. I donate money to the Center every month, and I want my family to continue that support when I am no longer able to do so. I will put that request into my ethical will.

This section is called "Loving Matters." In it we take a moment to tell those we love what it is about them that we love and admire and what hopes we have for their futures. This is also the time to mention the persons, and possessions that require special care and attention in the future. We may wish to mention, as I will, the causes that have engaged us and to that we have contributed time and money.

First and foremost in our minds and hearts, of course, will be our loved ones. What can we tell them

at this time about our love for them? What affectionate memories can we share? What words of appreciation, affirmation, encouragement, inspiration? What hopes do we have for their future?

We may also choose at this time to deliver some words of advice. If we do, we should use caution, as advice-giving is often seen as criticism; this could very well thwart our good intentions. We can instead embed our advice in general statements regarding the lessons we have learned throughout our life journeys. This puts the emphasis on ourselves while giving others the opportunity to take the message to heart.

Instructions, condemnations, scoldings have no place here.

What might have a place, however, is a call to forgiveness: granting forgiveness to those who have caused us pain, asking forgiveness of those whom we have hurt by action, negligence, or ignorance. And gratitude also. We may assume that those who have loved and supported us know that we are grateful to

them, but all too often that is only an assumption. The greatest gift we may bestow might well be those words of thanks.

In effect, we are writing a love letter. Remember how wonderful it was to receive such a letter? Now is our chance to write words of unconditional love to those who enrich our lives today. "Only the hand that erases can tell the true thing," said Meister Eckhart. In the final analysis, the only true thing is love.

PREPARATIONS FOR LOVING MATTERS

1.

Return to the Preparations for the "Opening" and imagine that you are at a gathering surrounded by your loved ones. Close your eyes and breathe deeply until you are connected to your center. Then, gently, one by one, take each of them into your consciousness, imagining their presence, lovingly observing them as they go about their daily activities. Imagine that, one by one, they are sitting before you and that you are telling them what you love most about them, what you remember about their lives, how you feel about them at the present time, what hopes you have for their futures. After you end the meditation, write down what you remember from the experience and incorporate what you wish into your will.

2.

At a later time, take each of these loved ones again into your heart and consider the ways in which they have hurt, or offended, or frustrated you.

Consider then the ways in which you have hurt, offended, or frustrated them. Do they balance each other out? Is it appropriate, or possible, to seek out opportunities to have private conversations in which these issues are addressed?

3.

Make a list of all the causes in which you are presently involved or in which you have been involved in the past. What would you like to say about them? How would you like your friends and family to continue to support them when you no longer can?

4.

Consider people with special needs for whom you are responsible. What do you know about their needs? Who if anyone is best suited to continue their care? Make a note of this and include it in this section.

5.

Look around your living space and consider those possessions that require special tending. What is their history? What information can you pass on about

their proper care and maintenance? Take pictures of them and file them with your will along with notes regarding these matters.

6.

Return to what you wrote in "Philosophical Matters" and consider what advice regarding them you would share with generations to come. Write a series of statements beginning with the words, "These are the lessons I have learned about . . ." Some possible topics: love and intimacy, forgiveness, civic duty, religious fealty, business ethics, money and wealth, material possessions, family relationships, physical well-being, athletic and sports activities, social and economic justice, the environment.

7.

Draw a map of your community and mark the locations of the courthouse, the jail, government buildings, museums, schools, churches, libraries, concert halls, theaters. In a perfect world, how would you transform the function of each? Consider as well city parks,

beaches, and other open areas. How are they cared for? Think beyond your local community to a national and international perspective. How would you envision a perfect future? Do you have any ideas about how your ideal world could be realized?

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: Dear,

My hopes and dreams for you are that . . .

CHAPTER NINE

CLOSING

We now conclude our ethical wills. It has been a painstaking process, delightful when we revisited happy periods of our lives, painful when we scrutinized unresolved issues and broken relationships. It has been painstaking, too. Yet, as we know from having lived awhile, after the struggle comes the calm. And so, our conclusion will have a peaceful tone.

We may wish once again to express sentiments of love, gratitude, and hope. Some may prefer to end with a beloved well-known poem or saying, a blessing, a scripture text, the cinquain suggested in the preparations, or the personal Ten Commandments written in the "Philosophical Matters" section. Whatever the choice, it should be brief and potent.

Much of the work we have done has been "heavy," but that mood does not rightly express the full picture of life. Joy and happiness, fun and games, ecstasy and

awe are just as much a part. Do you know a good joke? This may be a good time to tell it if that is your true voice.

We may ask to be remembered in some special way. I would like to be remembered whenever the family gathers at beach picnics. Those times, when we all come together under a warm sun to swim and frolic and chat and eat, are my favorites. Planning the myriad details engages us in a common effort, yet, when we are at the beach each of us experiences it as individuals. Some read, some dig holes, some build sand castles, some explore the tidal pools and watch the sand crabs and starfish. Some dive into the waves, others float on the swells, take long walks, gaze pensively out over the vast deep, throw a frisbee. It seems an appropriate metaphor for life, everyone expressing his or her unique energy while at the same time staying within the circle.

As I noted in the beginning, this work is rooted in a holy tradition. And so it is appropriate to honor its

conclusion with ritual and celebration. Whether it is at a family picnic, during Thanksgiving dinner, within a circle of other writers, or over a bottle of wine with someone special, take the time to raise a glass to yourself for all the effort you have made, and invite whomever you are with to share in your pride and joy.

PREPARATIONS FOR CLOSING

1.

Return to the Preparations for the "Opening," and select one or several. Once again, bring into your consciousness the loved ones to whom you have addressed this will. Imagine yourself with each of them and jot down whatever thoughts materialize during this imaginary meeting.

2.

A cinquain is a short five-line poem. Try to write one that in some way synthesizes your life. Begin with a one-word noun. On the second line, write two adjectives describing it. The third line is made up of three verbs describing an action related to the first. The fourth line is a complete sentence, four words only, describing a feeling. On the fifth line simply write your name. This cinquain form is based on word count. Traditionally it was the number of syllables per line that defined the form. Line 1 - 2 syllables; line

2 - 4; line 3 - 6; line 4 - 8; line 5 - 2. Try it both ways; the title will always be your name.

3.

Find a time and a quiet space in which you will not be disturbed. Play some gentle music. Take a piece of clay no larger than the palm of your hand. Close your eyes and begin to work with the clay. As you work, think of what you might say in your closing statement. Do not be anxious to write it down; simply savor the richness of the thoughts that emerge. When you feel that the experience is complete, jot down the words and phrases that come to you.

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by

once again breathing intentionally for a short while.

Open your eyes.

Begin: In conclusion, I leave you with these words. . .

CHAPTER TEN

FUTURE MATTERS

"Now the open moment," says Ira Progoff at the conclusion of *At a Journal Workshop*, his book about the Intensive Journal and the deep intentional self-reflection process it describes. So far we have been through a similar process. We have relentlessly reviewed the stories of our public and private lives; the history, myths, and cultures of our families of origin; our ethical and philosophical beliefs; our spiritual histories. We may even have made decisions regarding our death and burial. So, is this the end? Well, I hope not. I myself hope to see and do a lot more before I feel the Divine Kiss on my cheek. Schachter-Shalomi and Miller (*From Age-ing to Sage-ing*) suggest that we plan for a future that will take us to our 120th year. What a delightful prospect! They suggest that we plot and plan for this future by engaging in a process called "resurrecting un-lived

life." To do this we look at the forces that acted on us as we developed into adults and the accommodations of personality and spirit we made in response. What we seek to reveal and release through this process is the sound of our authentic voices reverberating into the years ahead so that we at last can live out of what Henri Bergson calls our "elan vital," the inner force that energizes each of us and connects us to a larger consciousness. As a reward for doing the hard work of self-reflection and arriving at a new intuition about ourselves, says Progoff, "we are presented with an opportunity to align our lives with the truths we have uncovered in our intentional reflection of the past." In other words, we have not proceeded on a straight line from the beginning to the end, and yet, we have come full circle. "In my end is my beginning," wrote T.S. Eliot, "in my beginning is my end." This presents a new challenge. How will we, in the present and the future, bring to life the underlying principles on which we have structured our lives? How

will we honor the philosophers, mentors, spiritual guides, and keepers of tradition we have come to recognize as ourselves? How will we realign the habits and attitudes that hinder our coming to fullness of being? A young mother who wrote a letter to her little girls after the terrorist attacks in New York is our inspiration now. She said that she wrote her ethical will, not only to let her family know what she stood for, but just as importantly, to guide her as she lived out the remainder of her life. For us, also, this is a time to show by example how our principles inform our actions.

So, what is it that we will do with the years from now until our 120th birthdays? Fire up the creative drive that has been smoldering unignited these many years? Travel the world? Or to stop traveling and fully enjoy the communities in which we live? Make amends to neglected friends, relatives, or colleagues? Choose to refuse yet another committee position and devote time instead to family or to our circles of

friends? Or the opposite, distancing ourselves from the family ties that bind too closely in order to involve ourselves more in larger issues or our own self-care?

It may be time to enjoy outside activities, to plant a garden, walk more, paddle a canoe; to bring our bodies into harmony with our inner well-being by adopting more wholesome habits regarding diet and exercise; to befriend ourselves as mature persons no longer full of vim and vigor and warmly embrace a meditative and less active lifestyle. Many of us are encumbered by possessions that require time-consuming maintenance. If we chose to jettison some of them, consider to what we will direct that recovered time and energy.

We may direct it toward making unfulfilled dreams come true. As children and young people, we often played imaginative games, envisioning our future lives. I remember building a dream house in my mind. As a child, I could reread a favorite book three times over,

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lie under a tree for hours on a summer afternoon just feeling the sun and the breezes. Those were happy times, now seemingly impossible to recreate. But are they? Take time to imagine. Is there a dream house waiting to be built? A beautiful room waiting to be created? A pilgrimage waiting to be taken? A new endeavor beckoning? A new friend waiting to be invited to dinner? An afternoon to while away reading a book in the shade of a summerleafed tree? Imagine.

Who knows what the end product of this exploration will be? We have nothing to lose and only the best to gain, becoming a person who is fully alive. Now the open moment.

PREPARATIONS FOR FUTURE MATTERS

1.

Make a list of twelve things you really like to do but have not recently taken the time for. (Some things: playing checkers, visiting the work of a favorite artist at the museum, listening to Cole Porter tunes, talking to an old friend, digging into a butterscotch sundae, going to the movies, eating dinner at an expensive--a *very* expensive--restaurant, getting up for a sunrise, buying yourself an extravagant bouquet of cut flowers, singing, playing with a kitten, taking a walk at Audubon, planting bulbs, painting with water colors.) During the next week treat yourself to one or two. Check them off and continue in this way until the list is finished. Then start all over.

2.

Take another look at your life review cards and choose three segments of time, one from your childhood and youth, one from your middle years, and one from the

present. Reconstruct a typical day for each. Then consider how these days are divided up into doing, playing, being, idling, and resting. Has your understanding of doing, playing, being, idling, and resting changed over time? What do they mean to you now; what is their relative importance? Draw a pie chart that depicts a perfect apportionment for you at this present time.

3.

What are some of the things that sabotage your sense of well-being? Habits such as overindulging in food or alcohol, settling into a sedentary lifestyle, watching useless television programs. Others may include tolerating friendships, relationships, or attitudes that negatively affect your emotional or psychological health. Sometime during the next week take stock and make some minor adjustment to break the hold a negative habit has on you.

4.

Draw pictures or images that represent five different lives you might have imagined for yourself at one time or another. What was the one thing about each that appealed to you the most? How could you incorporate these pieces into your life at this time?

5.

Allow yourself to recall a painful memory or a current problem you have chosen to put aside and decide that, for one week, you are going to look it squarely in the face. Be gentle with yourself and go only as far as you are able. One way to do this is to use a timer. On the first day, sit with the issue for five minutes and five minutes only. On the second day, sit for ten minutes, on the third day for fifteen. Gradually increase your time until you can sit for a half hour. If the pain or the denial continues, go back and begin again.

6.

Consider what surprises may be awaiting you if you look for them. Notice the invitations you receive

during the next few days and weeks. Who are the people you run into just by chance? What notices or announcements of cultural events, lectures, or community meetings catch your eye? What travel brochures come in the mail? What unexpected phone calls do you receive? What memory pops into your head? Do you have a dream about a far away place or a long neglected relationship? Are you inspired to respond to any of these stimuli? Be impulsive. Act.

7.

Envision if you will the most beautiful room you can. What furniture is in it, and how is it arranged? What colors are the walls painted? What art is displayed? How are the windows treated? What kinds of rugs cover the floor? What books and music and flowers make it attractive and appealing? What hobbies or crafts are in view? Draw the room or describe it in words. Is it the room you live in now? Could it be?

8.

Consider the following questions. What have I left undone? What more is being asked of me in my personal relationships? In what other areas could I become involved? Answer these questions and make some response, however small, during the coming week.

When it is time to begin writing, find a quiet space and a good chair. Sit in a comfortable upright position. Be as still as possible, attending to your inner world. Close your eyes. For a minute or two become aware of your breathing. Then relax and sit for as long as you can up to twenty minutes. Conclude by once again breathing intentionally for a short while. Open your eyes.

Begin: In the coming years I plan to . . .

CONCLUSION

Every writer has an undeniable agenda, of course; that is the core, the nerve cell, the seed of the creative drive. Why do anything without one? When I first heard about ethical wills on National Public Radio several years ago, the seed for this book was planted. The agenda that grew out of that seed has mostly to do with the truths I have come to and the lessons I myself have learned as I plowed through and continue to plow through the life that has been given to me.

Mostly, the agenda has to do with leading a reflective life. I have a passionate belief in Socrates' bold statement that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and, although some cannot or will not embrace this, I am convinced that the rewards of taking the effort are abundant and resistance to it often tragic. But how does one enter into the reflective mode without undue discomfort? Through the

Preparations attached to each chapter, I hope to move writers gently into this deep and often challenging reflective mode.

While our ethical wills include art, photography, drawing, lists, spreadsheets, music, and other creative elements, they are first and foremost written documents. I am a firm believer in the power of writing, especially expressive writing as opposed to expository writing. Many of us, however, fear or resist writing (as I fear and resist painting and drawing) Again, the Preparations that follow each chapter are designed to help. They are drawn from what I have learned in my years as a writing instructor and from the breakthrough work of experts in the field such as Peter Elbow, who introduced free writing into the classroom, and Ira Progoff, whose *Intensive Journal* process seeks to bring forth the treasures that lie dormant in the deep mysterious recesses of the psyche. These techniques will ensure that your finished documents are pleasurable to read.

That the quality of life is enhanced by participation in the communities to which we belong, especially those chosen intentionally, is another agenda item. Thus, I advocate that people join in groups for mutual support and encouragement as they write their ethical wills. The class I periodically offer at the University of Southern Maine's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute is a splendid experience for all of us who move our chairs into a circle once a week for the eight week terms. The understanding and inspiration that flow from writing shared and read aloud never ceases to awe me.

Breaking down and transforming negative cycles in individuals and families, making functionality possible, is also a piece of my agenda. Writing an ethical will, I believe, is one way to rework the material of our ancestral, family, and personal histories. In some cases destructive patterns of behavior may be revealed; some writers (and later some

readers), if they find that these patterns are still active, may be motivated to address them.

While I myself am a practicing Roman Catholic, it is evident this book is based on a Jewish tradition. It has been a joy in the preparation of this text to learn more about the spiritual tradition that is the grounding of my own. And so, in closing, I offer a reflection, paraphrasing from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's book, *Jewish Spirituality: A Brief Introduction for Christians*.

For a long time, he says, Jews have referred to the Torah as "a beautiful orchard." An orchard when viewed from a distance appears to be only a bunch of trees. On closer inspection, however, one sees that each tree is uniquely beautiful. Gradually one becomes aware of the fruit, seeing at first only the exterior, the skin. When a piece is plucked from a branch and bitten into, however, the reward is a sweet juicy meal. The Hebrew word for orchard is "prds (pardes)"; each letter carries a potent meaning. "Pey" stands for

the superficial or obvious, as when one sees the orchard from afar or quickly skims the books of the Torah. "Resh," the second letter, connotes hidden meaning, a hint (the skin) that something of significance lies beneath the surface. The third letter, "dalet" suggests that this hidden meaning may provide insights (biting into the fruit and tasting its flavor, experiencing its texture) into one's own life experience. "Samech," the last letter, implies that an even deeper mystery is at the core, some unknown message yet to be revealed.

I feel that our lives are like this metaphor of the beautiful orchard. Sometimes we want to generalize and look only at the external events that marked them, searching for an overarching one-word definition. If we look deeper, we find clues that something else has been active and that our emotional and psychological reactions need to be looked at. Eventually, if we choose, we will discover that a unique theme or energy has been active throughout, driving these events and

birthing these feelings. Ultimately we give up the search for meaning, finding that we do not need to delve any deeper, that the search for meaning is irrelevant in the face of something even more mysterious and sublime. It is then that we realize that an ineffable force has been working in us throughout, bringing us to fullness of being.

"It is a tree of life to those who hold onto it," says a proverb speaking of the Torah. And so, I say, are our stories. They are our Torah, our sacred scripture, as we have revealed and scribed them in our ethical wills. We offer them as gifts from our carefully pruned orchards in the hope that their fruit will nourish the lives of generations yet to come.

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This book is dedicated to all the wonderful open-minded and open-hearted people who have taken my Ethical Will class at the Osher Lifelong learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine.

THE CREATIVE ETHICAL WILL:
RE-IMAGINING AN OLD TRADITION

By Jean Sheridan

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The Author

Jean Sheridan is the author of two other books:

Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and the Academic Library: a Guide for Librarians, Instructors, and Writing Program Directors (Greenwood Press, 1995) and *The Unwilling Celibates: a Spirituality for Single Adults* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2000), as well as numerous articles and essays for professional and general publications. She is a former academic librarian and writing instructor and currently teaches at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine.

Back cover

I first heard the term ethical will on public radio some years back. The story was about an older man--father, grandfather, lawyer--who had written a letter to be read to his family after his death. In this letter he recounted some family history, reflected on his own life, made statements regarding his religious beliefs, and offered loving advice to those he was leaving behind. I was touched, not only because it was a stirring story but also because it seemed like such a reasonable idea.

So that the writer will be able to stay in control of a large body of material I have broken the process down into ten components: Opening, Family Matters, Personal Matters, Spiritual Matters, Philosophical Matters, Death Matters, Editorial Matters, Loving Matters, Closing, and Future Matters.

For each section I have developed a set of exercises, called Preparations designed to call forth your creativity and ensure that your work will be entertaining and readable. Whether your preference is to write in a journal, bang a drum, kick your feet, talk with friends, take long solitary walks, doodle with geometric shapes, or travel with a sketchbook, you will find in each set something to your liking.



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