

MAKING YOUR LEGACY LIVE NOW

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Thinking about your legacy may seem as unappealing, distant or daunting as considering aging or retirement. But just as these other subjects can transmute into golden opportunities and ideas for refreshing current life, so can the process of creating your legacy. See it as a bridge to development, authentic action and enjoyment that you can cross whenever you wish.

The Anglo-Saxon derivation of the word supports this approach. Legacy merely means to say or assert. Contemplating and expressing your legacy therefore relates as much to who you are now as to what you leave behind.

So why wait to explore and act on creating your legacy, how you want to enjoy its fruits now? The earlier you start, the better chance you have of influencing what happens. And the greater the pleasure and satisfaction you have by being true to yourself now. With this perspective, you will not only contribute to others, but also enrich your own life.

Legacy of impressions and values. Intangible legacies are as significant as tangible ones. My father taught young men in a South Bronx vocational high school for several decades. But the electrical know-how he helped them learn may not have been as important as the message his choice sent as the first of his family to go to college. An electrical engineer, he committed most of his professional life to helping them learn a trade. When he would meet them on the street, I don't think the affection in their eyes came from remembering their experiences with ohmmeters.

You don't have to devote your life so fully to others to make worthwhile contributions. The values you express in whatever you do send messages. For example, one of the most misleading themes in many people's lives can be how "busy" they are. When someone describes my life that way, I'm not sure if it reflects their view of its seeming complexity or what I unknowingly imply. If it's my fault, I have failed in being authentic. For "being busy" gives an impression that I don't want to leave with others. It can suggest that:

- I'm self-important or self-absorbed.
- I don't have time to pay attention to them.
- I'm over-extended.
- I'm not clear about what's important.

What impression do you leave with your words, non-verbal communication and choices? Do your priorities and values match the messages you send?

Certainly you can't control the opinions of others, but you can be alert for their impressions and give them your perspective. For example, when someone comments on how busy I am and it seems appropriate, I explain that I'm sorry I've given that impression. I might say, "Actually, I prefer not to be thought of as busy because it implies that I don't have time for you or that I've chosen to lead a frenetic life."

Legacy of modest, concrete contributions to one person's development. The intangible legacies described above are implicit in the impressions you make and the values you project. Other legacies can be as simple as an action designed to help someone thrive. For example, you might:

- Listen carefully to a child's concerns to help her feel loved.
- Give specific and positive feedback about a colleague's or friend's accomplishment to contribute to his self-respect.
- Express curiosity, acceptance and interest in someone's original idea to embolden her to pursue it.
- Summarize accurately a person's strengths, with examples, in a way that may be new to her.
- Discuss choices with someone unaccustomed to having them, instead of telling him what to do. This could encourage independent thinking and action.
- Refuse to collude with an individual's destructive habits by specifying your concern about the consequences. This may threaten the relationship, but open a healthier path. If your connection is not strengthened, it could still leave a useful mark because you demonstrated that you care and have underlying hope and respect for the person.

While this last example involves risk and planning, how much effort and time do you think any of these actions would generally take? Though there is no assurance that what you choose to do would make a difference in someone's life, you provide an opportunity that did not already exist. Your leap of faith to serve another has also let you offer an authentic, positive aspect of your capacities, whether or not you know the outcome.

Legacy of money. Now to more traditional, tangible legacies. Maybe the first thing you think of is giving money to individuals, groups, organizations or causes. If you have the dough, sometimes it's the easiest thing to offer; giving money usually does not require anything else of you beyond the gift itself. You might even receive tax advantages.

Whether that money is offered freely, requested or provided anonymously, it could do some or great good. But how would you know its actual effect? Perhaps when you receive continuing requests for contributions?

The outcome isn't always beneficial. I think, for example, of children who receive large inheritances. Some find ways to use the money to challenge the values of their givers, fritter it away and add it to the roiling pot of their own search for identity. Money inherited by people who lack focus, integrity or self-respect can have the opposite effect of its intention.

Consider, too, what could happen to well-intentioned non-profit organizations that no longer have to scrape for resources to survive. Without wise leaders and a responsible staff who have clear vision, cohesiveness and minimal internal political issues, well-meaning largess may not have its intended result. So estimate the amounts of money that could both satisfy your need to give and maybe make some difference.

Legacy of unfolding visions. These opportunities lie between the intangible influences mentioned at the beginning of this article and the more conventional contributions and inheritances mentioned above. In this context, design efforts that reflect your originality and dreams to benefit others as well as support your own development and meaning in life.

To explore possibilities that could bridge your past and future or be a catalyst for a dream, here is a range of possibilities to consider:

- Develop and launch your own idea based on your experiences, interests, passions, skills and values.
- Form a collaborative group, including family, friends and colleagues, that defines its own vision.
- Contribute time, ideas and resources to groups whose work and members you respect and enjoy.
- Encourage new directions for groups that would benefit from refreshment.
- Do research on existing possibilities and speak to knowledgeable people to identify opportunities for using your expertise and experience.
- Commit for a significant period to helping one or more individuals develop themselves.

Perhaps your idea relates to things you are doing now or ways to enrich your work in some way. Or it could bring a fresh dimension to your use of personal time, as you start to take small steps in the direction you want by learning and meeting new people.

Refine and add to these ideas to fit your interests and dreams. Seek colleagues with whom you enjoy collaborating. Over time, your actual vision for a satisfying legacy can emerge from this exploration.

Current legacy for your family. None of the previous suggestions more than touched on the range of non-monetary legacies you could give your family — actual, extended and adopted — and other people you cherish. These relationships are among the most meaningful aspects of your life and worthy of deepening right now.

To honor them, consider the suggestions below. Discuss your ideas with people you've chosen. Elicit their points of view and preferences. What opportunities might there be for collaborative legacies in which you work together to create something of interest and value?

- Write about your development, the lessons you've learned and the mistakes you've made as well as your joys and pleasures. Whether you offer prose, poetry, illustrated booklets, narrated videos or anything else you'd like, you will be providing a trove of learning opportunities and possibly inspiration.
- Keep clear and brief records and descriptions of your health, including problems and what you did about them. That information will give ideas to your loved ones so that they may take better care of themselves by being alert to vulnerabilities and opportunities for self-care.

- Organize and label photographs. Discuss them and your associated memories. Would you want to attach a recording of your experiences to a group of photographs with a special theme?
- Create written or recorded wishes and guidance to be discussed at any time in your life. Learn from listening to yourself periodically, alone or with others whom you trust.
- Take videos capturing pleasant and uncomfortable situations for later discussion, appreciation and learning. Showing emotions that relate to real life could be a more moving legacy — a way to say and assert your range — than any chirpy, edited false face. Decide on whether or not you want to purposely capture a discussion of family problems and issues that can be reviewed on your own or with others who are involved. If you do this periodically, you'll also be more apt to pick up on patterns and develop new insights about how to improve the quality of your lives.

After thinking about the foregoing possibilities, adapting them and adding your own ideas, plan time for conversations with your loved ones, especially those you trust, respect and enjoy. If you're all comfortable with the process, record or take notes on what's said to help design legacies that would have meaning for you all, now and in the future.

Ultimately, the children and other people you nourish, teach and influence are likely to be your greatest legacies. They can create a cascade of possibilities that tumbles continuously into the future. Your authentic products and projects that contribute to others are important too.

Whether or not reincarnation exists, aspects of yourself are reborn through your tangible and intangible contributions to people and your influence on their development and enjoyment of their lives. By serving your own interests in creating an engaging and meaningful life over time, you also benefit and enlarge the existence of others.

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