

Making Your Legacy Live Now

by Ruth M. Schimel, Ph.D., Career and Life Management Consultant

Thinking about your legacy may seem as unappealing, distant or daunting as considering aging or retirement. But just as these subjects can be transmuted into golden opportunities with your intelligence and imagination, so can the process of creating your legacy. See your exploration as a bridge to development, concrete action and greater enjoyment that you can cross whenever you wish.

The Anglo-Saxon derivation of legacy supports this approach. It merely means to say or assert. Contemplating and expressing your legacy therefore can relate as much to who you are now and want to be as to what you leave behind.

Then why wait to explore and act on creating your legacy? The earlier you start, the better chance you have of influencing what happens. And the greater pleasure and satisfaction you'll have by being true to yourself now. With this perspective you will not only contribute to others, but also enrich your present quality of life.

Legacy of impressions and values: Intangible legacies can be as significant as tangible ones. My father taught young men in a South Bronx vocational high school for several decades. Yet the hands-on experience and knowledge he gave them may not have been as important as the message his choice of service sent. An electrical engineer and the first of his family to go to college, he committed most of his professional life to helping his students earn their living. When Pop would meet them on the street, I don't think the affection in their eyes came from remembering their classroom 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 can send messages. For example, a misleading message in many people's lives is 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 inadvertently imply. If it's my fault, I have failed in being authentic. "Being busy" gives an impression that I don't want to leave with others. It may suggest that:

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

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

Certainly you can't control the opinions of others, but you can be alert to their impressions and clarify your perspective. For example, when someone comments on how busy I am and it seems appropriate to respond, I explain 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 one action that helps someone thrive. For example, you might:

- Listen carefully, reflecting back a child's concerns to help her feel understood.
- Give specific and positive feedback about a colleague's, family member's, or friend's accomplishment to contribute to his self-respect.
- Use concrete language to express curiosity, acceptance, enthusiasm or 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.
- Explore choices with someone unaccustomed to having them, instead of telling him what to do. This could encourage independent thinking, motivation and action.
- Refuse to collude with someone's destructive habits by specifying your concern about the consequences. This may put the relationship in jeopardy, yet also open a healthier path. If your connection is not strengthened, it could still leave a useful impression because you demonstrated that you care, that you have underlying hope and respect for the person.
- Treat someone with less power, prestige or position with dignity and care, supporting their development and progress according to their interests.

While some examples involve some 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 a person's life, you could provide an opportunity that did not already exist. Your encouragement of someone else can let you express an authentic, positive aspect of yourself, whether or not the outcome is immediate or clear.

Legacy of money: Donations and inheritances are examples of this more traditional choice. Money may be given to individuals, groups, organizations or causes. When you have the dough, sometimes it's the easiest thing to offer because it usually does not require anything else of you than 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 results aren't always beneficial, though. Think, for example, of children who receive large inheritances. Some find ways to use the money to challenge the values of the givers, fritter it away, or add it to the roiling pot of their own search for identity. Money inherited by people who lack focus, integrity or self-respect may have a different effect than intended.

Consider also what could happen to well-intentioned non-profit or other organizations that no longer have to scrape for resources to survive. Without wise leaders and a responsible staff that has clear vision, cohesiveness and minimal internal political issues, well-meaning largess may not have its intended result. So clarify the amounts of money and its preferred use that could both satisfy your need to give and make an actual difference.

Legacy of unfolding visions: These opportunities lie between the intangible influences described at the beginning of this article and the material contributions just mentioned. Possibilities in this context could start with an approach that reflects your originality and dreams. Criteria for choice might be: How can I benefit others as well as support my own development and meaning in life?

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

- Develop and launch a plan to benefit a group based on your common interests and passions. How well could it express your skills and values?
- Form a collaborative group, including family, friends and/or colleagues, that defines its own vision.
- Contribute time, ideas or resources to groups whose work and members you respect and enjoy.
- Lead groups, organizations or communities in improved directions that honor their purposes.
- Commit for a significant period to helping one or more individuals develop themselves.
- Share and experiment with fresh ideas and methods to address social problems possible to ameliorate.

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

Refine and add to these ideas to fit your interests and dreams. Seek out people with whom you'd enjoy collaborating. Over time, your actual vision for a satisfying legacy can become clearer as you explore, negotiate and implement commitments together.

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, chosen, renewed and adopted — and other people you cherish. These relationships can be 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 outcomes of interest and value?

- Describe your own development, the lessons you've learned, and the mistakes you've made as well as your joys and regrets. Use prose, poetry, illustrated booklets, narrated videos, photographs or anything else you'd like. They can provide a trove of learning opportunities and possibly inspiration for yourself and others.
- Keep clear, brief records and descriptions of your health, including problems and what you did about them. The information about vulnerabilities and self-care may encourage loved ones to take better care of themselves as well as be alert to inherited problems.
- Organize and label photographs, videos and other records of the past. 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 about your health care and ultimate disposition to be discussed at any time in your life. Learn from listening to yourself periodically, alone or with others whom you trust and cherish.
- Make videos capturing pleasant and/or uncomfortable situations for later discussion, appreciation and learning. Showing authentic emotions 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, history 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. That could help everyone develop new insights about how to improve the quality of life and relationships now.

After considering any of the foregoing possibilities, adapt them and add your own ideas. Choose one approach, planning time for conversations with all who may be involved. If everyone is 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. Decide on how you will proceed. Commit to a manageable plan with necessary resources and timeline while recognizing that progress is not always neat or linear.

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

Whether or not reincarnation and the afterlife exist, aspects of yourself are reborn through your tangible and intangible contributions to others, your influence through what you do and how you do it. By serving your own interests in creating an engaging and meaningful legacy over time, you'll also benefit and enlarge the existence of others.

What legacy do you want to make your focus for now?

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 Consultant. www.ruthschimel.com ruth@ruthschimel.com 202.659.1772