

## Book Review

### **Your Legacy Matters: A Multi-Generational Guide for Writing your Ethical Will**

Rachel Freed; Minneapolis MN: Minerva Press, 2013

Rachel Freed, social worker and marriage-family therapist, is a fellow of the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing. She consults, lectures, and designs workshops on writing legacy letters. Out of this innovative experience, she has written this book and created the website [life-legacies.com](http://life-legacies.com).

**Legacy Matters** is based historically on religious traditions of blessing younger generations and writing ethical wills to accompany one's legal will. Freed invites older adults to harvest lessons from their lives to write letters of appreciation and to offer blessings on special occasions. In addition, letters to be read after our deaths can convey our values and hopes for the future as well as elaborate on our choices regarding advance directives and our material legacy.

*Reflecting on, clarifying, and documenting a legacy is an important component of a life well lived. Its major purpose is to gather, preserve, and communicate values, wisdom, and love for future generations. Components may include family history and story, values and life-lessons, blessings and gratitude, appreciation and love. But unless the intention of making a contribution to the future is fulfilled, it does not qualify as legacy.*

Writing legacy letters can fill needs of late life personal development, Freed writes, including the need to belong, be known, be remembered, make a positive difference, bless and be blessed, and celebrate life.

Freed offers specific suggestions and many examples of different types of letters. The heart of a legacy letter is the blessing for the recipient(s). The structure of a typical legacy letter, for example, follows this template: Setting the context, Personal story, Learning (to give deeper meaning to the story), and Blessing for the recipient. This format assists the writer to avoid instructions, but rather to create a message connecting to the recipient in "I" language vs "you" language, with a feeling of spaciousness. Emphasis upon personal memories and lessons learned naturally calls out our unique message. Throughout learners are invited to reflect on the process of writing drafts, blessings and letters.

Tips about storing legacy letters and related material over time are very helpful. For example, notes we send (or receive) on special occasions (birthdays, graduations, family funerals) can serve years later as the core of a subsequent legacy letter.

Through sequential chapters, Freed addresses topics such as the importance of family names, linking the past and future generations, the meaning of work, learning about love, family relationships, forgiveness (asking for and granting), cleaning out our closet (physical and emotional), aging, and death. Readers also glean information about how to facilitate the writing of legacy letters by other older adults and about how the spiritual practice of writing legacy letters supports the celebration of life.

To offer a specific example, Freed talks about sorting our possessions in order to let go in a reflective manner. A useful exercise is to choose 5-20 favourite items we would want to keep through future downsizing – recognizing our need for comfort, coherence, and continuity. We can write about these items and why they are special to us. We can use the writing practice to choose potential recipients of these items when we are gone. We can also invite family members to identify items they would like after we are gone. Freed suggests we might be surprised by the choices. We can write about the chosen items, and might find ourselves able to give them away sooner than later. Holding on to the story (and a photograph) might be all we need. During this process of choosing treasures, we will naturally see that which is only clutter and be able to let it go.

The book is intended to guide individuals and groups to progress through developing personal folders of legacy letters of various types. The style of the book supports the content very well. Helpful exercises are listed at the end of each chapter, while the sample letters engage the writer in finding his/her own writing style and form. The rationale for writing legacy letters and its benefits is largely composed of a wonderful collection of precisely relevant quotations set out in bold print.

Additional tips and tools are available on Freed's website: [life-legacies.com](http://life-legacies.com). One can also subscribe to a useful e-newsletter on writing legacy letters.