

On Writing an Ethical Will

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
Rev. Paul Beckel
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Deep Thoughts, by Jack Handy

I hope that after I die, people will say of me: "That guy sure owed me a lot of money."

One thing vampire children have to be taught early on is, don't run with a wooden stake.

If you ever drop your keys into a river of molten lava, let 'em go, because, man, they're gone.

As the light changed from red to green to yellow and back to red again, I sat there thinking about life. Was it nothing more than a bunch of honking and yelling? Sometimes it seemed that way.

INTRODUCTION

It took me far too long to get around to writing for myself a will and a living will. And now those are out of date and out of state. So I'm not really certain what will someday happen to my stuff and to my body. But today I'd like to share some thoughts about a different kind of a will, called an ethical will.

An ethical will arises out of the question, "What *legacy* shall I leave behind insofar as hearts I have touched, hopes I have inspired, and ripples I have generated in the pond of life?"

The process of creating an ethical will involves self-examination, self-definition, and expression of the wisdom we have drawn from our experience – wisdom we wish to gift to the future. Today we can take some time to make preliminary notes for our ethical wills, and, more generally, consider what it means to give and to receive advice.

We'll also hear from Rae Gilbertson, who will tell us about her personal experience and how she has found it useful to document her thoughts about life and death.

And after the service today, Rae and I invite you to meet with us in the conference room if you'd like to continue exploring this topic. We'll begin at about 11:50 and continue to about 12:30.

GATHERING SONG

My Life Flows on in Endless Song #108

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Can you do this old Badger? by Eve Bunting

REFLECTIONS, Part I

A guru was holding class for a group of young disciples when they begged him to reveal to them the Sacred Mantra by which the dead are restored to life. "What would you do with a dangerous thing like that?" the guru asked.

"Nothing. It would just serve to strengthen our faith," they replied.

“Premature knowledge is a dangerous thing, my children,” the old man said.

“When is knowledge premature?” they demanded.

“When it gives power to someone who does not as yet have the wisdom that must go with its use.”

The disciples persisted, however, so the holy man, in spite of himself, whispered the Sacred Mantra into their ears, imploring them repeatedly to use it with the greatest discretion.

Not long afterward the young people were walking through a patch of desert where they saw a heap of bleached bones. In the spirit of frivolity that generally accompanies a crowd, they decided to test the Mantra, which should only have been used after prolonged meditation. No sooner had they uttered the magic words than the bones gained flesh and were transformed into ravenous wolves, which chased them and tore them to shreds.

[from *The Heart of the Enlightened*, Anthony de Mello, SJ]

Advice, pithy aphorisms, and other people’s “deep thoughts” are often received with a sense of frivolity—either because of excessive skepticism, or excessive belief.

It is easy to discount wisdom. On the other hand, it is also easy to take it too seriously, and to fear it. The antidote, I believe, is to study and to understand all things by your own light, to make the wisdom you discover your own, and to remain humble regardless of how deep you think you’ve gone.

Our project today is to begin making notes which could then become our Ethical Wills. There’s some risk in just starting out with a few notes, as it may be hard to get started again, but Rae and I will have still another follow-up session on Ethical Wills after next Sunday’s service as well, so there will be a chance to reflect with others on the process after you’ve given it some thought.

And actually there’s some advantage to just scratching down some notes rather than going to the opposite extreme of attempting to cram *everything* you know and love and think and feel and hope for in a single document. Because etching yourself in history cannot be a one-time event. Ideally it’s an ongoing process of self-knowing and self-sharing.

There are many stories of the revered parent, who calls his or her offspring to their deathbed for a final blessing and words of wisdom. Jacob so gathered his children and grandchildren in the book of Genesis. Moses’ final blessing included a retelling of the story of his ancestors, and predictions of things to come.

But you don’t want to wait till the last minute. Start now. An ethical will has no required format, and no required elements. The outline provided in the order of service today may be *far* more than you’ll want to include. But it’s a way to jog your conscience.

The ethical will is an opportunity to express feelings of love, gratitude, grace, and blessing...

To capture stories...joys and sorrows. It is a chance to consider and to express how we have *really* felt about this journey of life, with the hope that those after us will have an easier time of it...with hope that our insights might make a difference.

This is an exercise to engage in with some humility, because whatever we write, whatever we do in our lives, we can never know for sure if we'll end up getting credit or blame for what we deserve ...or credit or blame for what someone else deserves.

And of course most of us are working on this having very little idea of how much longer we're going to be around. So it may be hard to say whether we're going to have unfinished business. So I'll conclude this portion with a little advice from Tao Te Ching: The master has no expectations, and no regrets.

WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

The Good in Living, by Steve Sellors

REFLECTIONS, Part II

King Solomon was said to be the wise sage of the Hebrew scriptures, and he is credited with writing the Book of *Proverbs*, which is filled with little bits of practical advice, the Book of *Ecclesiastes*, a broad philosophical lament about the meaning of life, and the *Song of Solomon*, an erotic love poem.

But the Book of *Ecclesiastes* was probably written about 700 years after his death; it was only attributed to Solomon in order to identify the work as a legitimate source of Israelite wisdom—to lend weight to its teachings. (Ghostwriting has long been an accepted form of both marketing and flattery.)

There are several reasons modern biblical scholars do not accept *Ecclesiastes* as original writing by Solomon. First, the author claims to have wisdom “surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.” But that would have been a hollow boast for Solomon to make, because King David was his only predecessor in Jerusalem.

Another reason scholars don't think Solomon was the author of *Ecclesiastes* is that the *point of view* changes as the book progresses. The speaker goes from being King, early on in the book, to being a subject of the King, in later chapters.

Finally, *Ecclesiastes* is written in a form of Hebrew used much later than Solomon. The Israelites spent about 300 years in Persia (this is known as “the Babylonian captivity”) beginning some 300 years *after* Solomon's reign. This likely accounts for the number of words from the Persian languages used in writing *Ecclesiastes*.

The title, “Ecclesiastes” is a Greek translation of a Hebrew word for teacher. Thus the book is intended to contain the lessons of life from *The Teacher*. Its focus is on the limits and the contradictions of life.

The teacher, “Solomon,” looks back at life from the top – from the pinnacle of success and power – and finds that life is “vanity.” Even the best life is limited in knowledge, virtue, and power...troubled by evil and injustice, and ultimately ended by death. Yet, in spite of its limits and destruction by death, the Teacher maintains that Wisdom is better than Folly.

Some interpret the Teacher as a skeptic or a pessimist. Some consider him highly irreverent, and believe that the book's references to God were thrown in later by a more orthodox editor. Others suggest that this book's internal paradoxes are exactly the point: The Teacher is an utter realist, but still he will not let go of God.

“Vanity of vanities. All is vanity...” the book begins. Conflicting interpretations of The Teacher's point of view can be seen in the various ways that the word “vanity” has been translated. The more skeptical interpretation is: life is meaningless, absurd...life is emptiness. Life is useless.

The more literal translation of the Hebrew term is “breath,” or “breeze.” So slightly more optimistic translations suggest that life is ethereal...transient. A more poetic version suggests, “All life is vanity, and striving after wind.”

How then, should we live? What's the use? What's it all about? The teacher offers two bits of advice. First, fear God and keep God's commandments. Second, enjoy life. Eat and drink. Love. Work and play. These are the gifts of God for us to enjoy.

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An ethical will is also a gift. It is a gift to ourselves: because it can be an intense spiritual effort. It's an effort that may relieve us of some burden. It's also a gift to those we love, not only for the future but even for now - if the exercise somehow makes us easier to live with.

When we express what we have found to be wisdom, we know what younger people will often think of our advice—and yet we expend our transient breath. We have the urge to convey what we have learned to those who will come after us. ...That they too, may join in the life, of chasing after the truth that cannot be spoken.

My Ethical Will

By:

Dated:

To be read by:

On the occasion of:

How I have really felt about this journey

Milestones

Where I have fallen short...I seek forgiveness

Tender memories of loved ones

Gratitudes (to life, to those I love, even to adversaries who have taught me valuable lessons...)

Last wishes

Instructions for burial and memorial service

Traditions which I hope will be carried forward

(what do we do? what is the spirit of what we do?)

My hopes for those who come after me

Self-Definition

Where did I come from?

Peak experiences and transitions

Where am I going in this life?

Where am I going beyond this life?

What do I give my heart to?

What is my responsibility to society?

How do I move through difficult times?

Do I need ritual in my life?

What is the purpose of the religious institution?

What is my role in it?

Unfinished business

Insights