

# How To Write an Ethical Will

Writing an ethical will may seem difficult. However, it can be viewed as the writing of a love letter to your family. Ethical Wills can include personal and spiritual values, hopes, experiences, love, and forgiveness. It may well be one of the most cherished gifts you can give to your family.

Here are three basic approaches for creating your ethical will.

## Approach #1

Using an outline structure and a list of items to choose from. This is by far the easiest way to get started and it can build your confidence quickly. You can create a rough draft to work from in less than an hour. [The Ethical Will Writing Guide Workbook](#) and [The Ethical Will Writing Guide software](#) were developed for this approach. This approach is also covered in [\*Ethical Wills: Putting your values on paper.\*](#)

An outline might look something like this:

Opening Thoughts; Values and Beliefs; Lessons and Reflections About Life; Hopes for the Future; Love; Forgiveness; Requests; Concluding Thoughts

## Approach #2

Using guided writing exercises to help you create content for your ethical will. [The Ethical Will Resource Kit](#) contains several guided exercises to help you. [\*Ethical Wills: Putting your values on paper\*](#) contains even more exercises.

Here are some ideas to help you get started.

- Over time, write down ideas --a few words or a sentence or two about things like:
  - My beliefs and opinions

- Things I did to act on my values
- Something I learned from grandparents / parents / siblings / spouse / children
- Something I learned from experience
- Something I am grateful for
- My hopes for the future
- Write about important events in your life
- Imagine that you only had a limited time left to live. What would you regret not having done?
- Save items that articulate your feelings, e.g., quotes, cartoons, etc
- Review what you've collected after a few weeks or months
- Clump related items together -- patterns will emerge
- Revise and expand the related categories into paragraphs
- Arrange the paragraphs in an order that makes sense to you
- Add an introduction and conclusion
- Put this aside for a few weeks and then review and revise

### **Approach #3**

Starting with a blank sheet of paper.

This is the most open-ended approach. Keeping a journal or diary is an excellent way to write about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Over time, review what you've written. Themes will emerge from which you can create a comfortable structure for your ethical will.

# The New York Times

## The New Middle Ages The Older-and-Wiser Hypothesis

By STEPHEN S. HALL  
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In 1950, the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, in a famous treatise on the phases of life development, identified wisdom as a likely, but not inevitable, byproduct of growing older. Wisdom arose, he suggested, during the eighth and final stage of psychosocial development, which he described as “ego integrity versus despair.” If an individual had achieved enough “ego integrity” over the course of a lifetime, then the imminent approach of infirmity and death would be accompanied by the virtue of wisdom. Unfortunately for researchers who followed, Erikson didn’t bother to define wisdom.

### The Wisdom Scorecard

As an ancient concept and esteemed human value, wisdom has historically been studied in the realms of philosophy and religion. The idea has been around at least since the Sumerians first etched bits of practical advice — “We are doomed to die; let us spend” — on clay tablets more than 5,000 years ago. But as a trait that might be captured by quantitative measures, it has been more like the woolly mammoth of ideas — big, shaggy and elusive. It is only in the last three decades that wisdom has received even glancing attention from social scientists. Erikson’s observations left the door open for the formal study of wisdom, and a few brave psychologists rushed in where others feared to tread.

In some respects, they have not moved far beyond the very first question about wisdom: What is it? And it won’t give anything away to reveal that 30 years after embarking on the empirical study of wisdom, psychologists still don’t agree on an answer. But it is also true that the journey in many ways may be as enlightening as the destination.

From the outset, it’s easier to define what wisdom isn’t. First of all, it isn’t necessarily or intrinsically a product of old age, although reaching an advanced age increases the odds of acquiring the kinds of life experiences and emotional maturity that cultivate wisdom, which is why aspects of wisdom are increasingly attracting the attention of gerontological psychologists. Second, if you think you’re wise, you’re probably not. As Gandhi (who topped the leader board a few years ago in a survey in which college students were asked to name wise people) put it, “It is unwise to be too sure of one’s own wisdom.” Indeed, a general thread running through modern wisdom research is that wise people tend to be humble and “other-centered” as opposed to self-centered.

“Wisdom is really hard to study — really hard,” says Robert J. Sternberg, a former president of the American Psychological Association who edited “Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development,” one of the first academic books on the subject, in 1990, and also edited, with Jennifer Jordan, “A Handbook of Wisdom” in 2005. “People tend to pooh-pooh wisdom because, well, you know, what’s that? And how could you possibly define it? Isn’t it culturally relative?” And yet Sternberg, who is the dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University, says he believes the cultivation of wisdom — even though the concept is “big, important and messy” — is essential to the future of society.

Certain qualities associated with wisdom recur in the academic literature: a clear-eyed view of human nature and the human predicament; emotional resiliency and the ability to cope in the face

of adversity; an openness to other possibilities; forgiveness; humility; and a knack for learning from lifetime experiences. And yet as psychologists have noted, there is a yin-yang to the idea that makes it difficult to pin down. Wisdom is founded upon knowledge, but part of the physics of wisdom is shaped by uncertainty. Action is important, but so is judicious inaction. Emotion is central to wisdom, yet detachment is essential.

If you think all those attributes sound fuzzy, vague and absolutely refractory to quantification, you've got a lot of company in the academic community. But there is a delicious paradox at the heart of the study of wisdom. As difficult as it is to define, the mere contemplation of a definition is an irresistible exercise that says a lot about who we aspire to become over the course of a lifetime and what we value as a society. And little pieces of that evolving definition of wisdom — especially the ability to cope with adversity and the regulation of emotion with age — have begun to attract researchers with brain-scanning machines and serious chops in neuroscience.

"It's very intriguing, and it's becoming a big issue in our field," says Suzanne Kunkel, director of the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Ohio. She noted that the number of formal talks about wisdom and the aging process has increased significantly at professional meetings. "Part of me is a little skeptical," she says, reflecting the compelling ambivalence the subject elicits, "and part of me thinks there's something there."

The formal study of wisdom as a modern academic pursuit can legitimately trace its roots back to the 1950s, to an apartment building on Newkirk Avenue, just off Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn. That is where a keenly observant young girl named Vivian Clayton became fascinated by special qualities she attributed to two prominent elders in her life: her father, a furrier named Simon Clayton, and her maternal grandmother. There was something that distinguished them from everyone else she knew. Despite limited education, they possessed an uncanny ability to remain calm in the midst of crises, made good decisions and conveyed an almost palpable sense of emotional contentment, often in the face of considerable adversity or uncertainty. Long before she went to college, Clayton found herself contemplating the nature of wisdom.

"My father was 41 when I was born," she said recently. "By far, he was the oldest parent among all my friends, almost the age of my friends' grandparents. He had emigrated from England but had lived through World War II there and experienced the blitz and had to care for his dying mother, who was so sick that she refused to go down into the shelters during air raids in London. She lived in the East End, where the docks were, and they were always getting bombed. So he would sit with her while the bombs were falling, and when it was over, she would say, 'Now we can have a cup of tea!' He was a very humble man, and very aware of his limitations, but he always seemed to be able to weigh things and then make decisions that were right for the family. He knew what to respond to quickly, and what you had to reflect on." Clayton's maternal grandmother, Beatrice Domb, was the other central figure in her early life. "My mother saw my grandmother as a simple person," Clayton says. "But her simplicity I saw as a sign of deep contentment in her own life. She, who had less than a high-school education, was the matriarch of this very large family."

During her childhood and adolescence, Clayton obsessed over the differences between her mother and father, her grandmother and grandfather. She recalls pondering these differences as a teenager, dipping her toes in Mahwah Creek during family outings in Suffern, northwest of the city; as an undergraduate studying psychology at Buffalo University; and more formally, as a graduate student in the early 1970s at the University of Southern California, working with one of the country's leading gerontological psychologists, James E. Birren. Clayton is generally recognized as the first psychologist to ask, in even faintly scientific terms, "What does wisdom mean, and how does age affect it?"

Clayton's study of wisdom began with a bias, but one that counterbalanced a pre-existing bias that pervaded the biomedical literature on aging in the '60s and '70s. Half a century ago, although only 5 percent of the elderly lived in nursing homes, almost all the gerontological research

focused on this frail and struggling population. Not surprisingly, these researchers found plenty of negative things about being old. Memory, especially working memory, began to fade. The speed with which the brain processed information slowed down. Older people were more likely to be cognitively impaired.

One of the leading voices pushing for a more balanced view of the aging process was Birren. In what might be viewed as a battle between modern psychology and cultural attitudes toward the elderly, Birren was one of the leaders of an effort to investigate positive aspects of aging. At the time Clayton was at U.S.C., Birren's graduate students were exploring the relationship of aging to topics like love, creativity and wisdom — topics so big and unwieldy that they almost defied study.

Clayton went off to consult the "literature" on wisdom, which almost mirrored the central canon of Western civilization. She rummaged through the Hebrew Bible for clues to wise behavior, analyzed the stories of Job and King Solomon, parsed the meaning of ancient proverbs. "What emerged from that analysis," she says, "was that wisdom meant a lot of different things. But it was always associated with knowledge, frequently applied to human social situations, involved judgment and reflection and was almost always embedded in a component of compassion." The essential importance of balance was embodied in the Hebrew word for wisdom, *chochmah*, which ancient peoples understood to evoke the combination of both heart and mind in reaching a decision. At that point, Birren advised Clayton to "become more scientific" and treat wisdom as a psychological construct that could be defined well enough to be measured and studied ("operationalized," in psychological lingo).

Between 1976, when she finished her dissertation, and 1982, Clayton published several groundbreaking papers that are now generally acknowledged as the first to suggest that researchers could study wisdom empirically. She identified three general aspects of human activity that were central to wisdom — the acquisition of knowledge (cognitive) and the analysis of that information (reflective) filtered through the emotions (affective). Then she assembled a battery of existing psychological tests to measure it.

Clayton laid several important markers on the field at its inception. She realized that "neither were the old always wise, nor the young lacking in wisdom." She also argued that while intelligence represented a nonsocial and impersonal domain of knowledge that might diminish in value over the course of a lifetime, wisdom represented a social, interpersonal form of knowledge about human nature that resisted erosion and might increase with age. Clayton's early work was "a big deal," Sternberg says. "It was a breakthrough to say wisdom is something you could study." Jacqui Smith, who has conducted wisdom research since the 1980s, says it "was seminal work that really triggered subsequent studies."

As Clayton began to describe her research at psychological meetings in the late '70s, the work on wisdom created considerable buzz. One of the people who grasped its significance immediately was Paul B. Baltes, a legendary psychologist then at Pennsylvania State University. Baltes helped pioneer life-span developmental theory, which argues that in order to understand, say, a 60-year-old person, you need to take into account the individual's biology, psychology and sociological context at various stages of life, as well as the cultural and historical era in which he or she lived.

Baltes closely monitored the initial wisdom studies, Clayton recalls, and regularly peppered her with questions about her progress. "I went to all these meetings," she says, "and we would have lunch or dinner at every meeting. He was always asking, where was I with this wisdom stuff?"

The answer would soon be: nowhere. In 1982, Clayton published her last paper on wisdom. By then, she had applied for, but failed to receive, a grant from the National Institute on Aging to pursue the wisdom studies, had quit her position as assistant professor at Columbia University Teachers College and left academia for good. Part of the reason was that she recognized her own limitations in studying a very diffuse topic. "I was lost in the Milky Way of wisdom," she

admits, “and each star seemed as bright as the next. Ultimately that’s why I didn’t continue with it.” The universe shifted to Berlin, and the working definition of wisdom acquired a German accent.

The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, as it came to be called, was built in part on research using hypothetical vignettes to discern wise and unwise responses to life dilemmas. “A 15-year-old girl wants to get married right away,” one vignette suggested. “What should one/she consider and do?”

A wise person, according to the Berlin group, would say something like: “Well, on the surface, this seems like an easy problem. On average, marriage for 15-year-old girls is not a good thing. But there are situations where the average case does not fit. Perhaps in this instance, special life circumstances are involved, such as the girl has a terminal illness. Or the girl has just lost her parents. And also this girl may live in another culture or historical period. Perhaps she was raised with a value system different from ours. In addition, one has to think about adequate ways of talking with the girl and to consider her emotional state.”

That reply may seem tentative and relativistic, but it reflects many aspects of wisdom as defined by the Berlin Wisdom Project, which began in 1984 under the leadership of Baltes, who along with Birren had championed the search for late-life potential. Born in 1939 in Germany, Baltes had established a reputation as a leading quantitative psychologist by the time he returned to Germany in 1980 to become director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. There, Baltes and many collaborators — including Jacqui Smith (now at the University of Michigan), Ursula M. Staudinger and Ute Kunzmann — embarked on an ambitious, large-scale program to, as they put it, “take wisdom into the laboratory.”

Boiled down to its essence, the “Berlin Paradigm” defined wisdom as “an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.” Heavily influenced by life-span psychology, the Berlin version of wisdom emphasized several complementary qualities: expert knowledge of both the “facts” of human nature and the “how” of dealing with decisions and dilemmas; an appreciation of one’s historical, cultural and biological circumstances during the arc of a life span; an understanding of the “relativism” of values and priorities; and an acknowledgment, at the level of both thought and action, of uncertainty. “We picked up from the philosophical literature that wisdom is like a peak performance,” Smith says. “It’s the highest level of potential or achievement that a human mind might be able to achieve.” And so the Berlin group focused more on expertise and performance than on personality traits, because such an approach lent itself to more rigorous measurement than the typical self-report tests of psychological research.

“Wisdom in action,” as the Berlin group put it, might manifest itself as good judgment, shrewd advice, psychological insight, emotional regulation and empathetic understanding; it could be found in familial interactions, in formal writing and in the relationship between a student and mentor or a doctor and patient. Yet by its very nature, the researchers conceded, wisdom was a utopian concept that was virtually unattainable. Baltes and Staudinger pointed out in one paper that “wisdom is a collectively anchored product and that individuals by themselves are only ‘weak’ carriers of wisdom.” They generally did not see wisdom as the function of personality. As Smith puts it: “We went in the other direction and tried to define what a product might be. Not the person as such, but rather some sort of performance that we could assess.” In evaluating the wisdom of Gandhi, for example, they focused on his speeches and writings.

One instrument the Baltes group developed to measure wisdom was posing open-ended, hypothetical questions like the one about the 15-year-old girl who wanted to marry. (In their view, a reply garnering a low wisdom-related score would be an inflexible, authoritative response like: “No, no way, marrying at age 15 would be utterly wrong. One has to tell the girl that marriage is not possible. . . . No, this is just a crazy idea.”) These vignettes located wisdom firmly in the universe of problem-solving around significant life events — from issues like choosing a career

versus child-rearing to facing decisions about early retirement to dealing with a diagnosis of cancer.

The Germans were among the first to reach what is now a widespread conclusion: There's not a lot of wisdom around. Of the 700 people assessed, "we never found a single person who gained top scores across the board," Smith wrote in an e-mail message. They also punctured one conceit about growing old when they found no evidence, in four different studies, that wisdom, as they defined it, necessarily increases with age. Rather, they identified a "plateau" of wisdom-related performance through much of middle and old age; a separate study by the group has indicated that wisdom begins, on average, to diminish around age 75, probably hand in hand with cognitive decline. Nonetheless, the Baltes group suggested in one paper that there might be an optimal age and that "the 'world record' in wisdom may be held by someone in his or her 60s."

The Berlin Wisdom Project made a huge impact on the handful of people interested in wisdom research; by one account, academic "wisdom" publications numbered only two or three a year before 1984 but had grown to several dozen a year by 2000. But the German research, though much admired, did not overcome many of the mainstream reservations in academia. Jacqui Smith, who was collaborating with Baltes on one of his final wisdom papers when he died of cancer last fall at age 67, says wisdom studies remain on the fringe of academic respectability.

Even some wisdom researchers found the Berlin wisdom studies to be abstract and difficult to understand, and although emotion was always part of the formula, it struck some people as secondary to the emphasis on expert knowledge. "It's great work, and they've looked at it more closely than anybody else," says Laura L. Carstensen, a psychologist who directs the Center on Longevity at Stanford University. "But one of the critiques people have had is that they left emotion out of it. I don't think you can have wisdom without having emotional regulation be a part of it."

How might emotion be important to wisdom? Consider C., a 67-year-old mother of seven children who lives in Gainesville, Fla. Her life has not been without heartache or emotional tumult. She grew up poor, and she has been drawn into custody battles and financial imbroglios with in-laws. More significant, one of her children was born with cerebral palsy; rather than place the child in a home, as some urged her to do, she insisted on caring for and raising him at home with the rest of the family. "I would put my healthy kids in a home first," she told doctors at the time, "instead of putting a baby in there that can't talk for himself." Despite years of challenge (the son eventually died at age 12), C. managed to maintain a kind of emotional equilibrium. "I don't sit around and dwell on bad things," she said. "I don't have time for it, really. There's so many good things you can do."

C., who appears as a pseudonym in the psychological literature, is arguably one of the few certifiably wise people in the world — "certified" in the sense that she scored well above average in a "Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale" developed by Monika Ardelt, a German-born sociologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

In 1990, as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Ardelt wanted to identify factors that contributed to a sense of life satisfaction and well-being in old age and began to focus on the acquisition of wisdom. She discovered Vivian Clayton's early research, which made emotion a central part of wisdom, and she began to build upon Clayton's framework. By 1997, Ardelt had joined the faculty at the University of Florida, and she received a grant from the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute on Aging to develop a psychological test to assess wisdom. She was interested in investigating measures of wisdom and looking at a trait that often goes by the name "resilience" — how some older people are able to deal with adversity and bounce back emotionally while others cannot. Indeed, as she has noted, "successfully coping with crises and hardships in life might not only be a hallmark of wise individuals but also one of the pathways to wisdom."

Thus, beginning in December 1997, Ardelt began to recruit 180 senior citizens at churches and community groups in north-central Florida to participate in what she called a “Personality and Aging Well Study.” The participants did not know that one purpose of the study was to road-test a series of questions designed to assess general wisdom. In Ardelt’s working definition, wisdom integrated three separate but interconnected ways of dealing with the world: cognitive, reflective and emotional. Hence, a “three-dimensional” wisdom scale, which, according to the habit of psychological measures, is designated “3D-WS.” The cognitive aspect, for example, included the ability to understand human nature, perceive a situation clearly and make decisions despite ambiguity and uncertainty. The reflective sphere dealt with a person’s ability to examine an event from multiple perspectives — to step outside oneself and understand another point of view. And the emotional aspect primarily involved feeling compassion toward others as well as an ability to remain positive in the face of adversity. In the initial phase, participants responded to 132 questions that probed for these qualities. Later, Ardelt settled on 39 questions that, in her judgment, captured the elusive concept of wisdom.

There is, of course, something utterly quixotic about assessing human wisdom on the basis of a self-report test in which subjects agree or disagree with statements like “People are either good or bad” and “I always try to look at all sides of a problem.” Yet the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale, Ardelt argues, distinguished “how relatively wise older people cope with life crises in comparison to older people relatively low on wisdom.” And when Ardelt went back and intensively interviewed some of the subjects (including C.), a seasoned, pragmatic, everyday version of wisdom — wisdom with a small “w,” you might say — emerged in their life stories.

J., who was also described in the literature, is an 86-year-old African-American man who is also no stranger to adversity. He went off to fight in World War II and, after experiencing the horrors of battle, suffered severe depression upon his return to the United States. He acquired an advanced degree and became a successful school administrator, although his marriage had fallen apart. He was devastated when his mother died. Yet he managed to step outside his immediate troubles to assess the situation with a detachment and graceful calm that helped him cope during times of adversity. “I’ve had as much bad things to happen as good things, but I’ve never allowed any outside force to take possession of my being,” he explained. “That means, whenever I had a problem, I went to something wholesome to solve it.” One of the “wholesome” things that helped, he said, was bowling.

The popular image of the Wise Man usually does not include a guy in a bowling shirt, but several qualities have emerged again and again in older people like J. who score high on Ardelt’s wisdom scale. They learn from previous negative experiences. They are able to step outside themselves and assess a troubling situation with calm reflection. They recast a crisis as a problem to be addressed, a puzzle to be solved. They take action in situations they can control and accept the inability to do so when matters are outside their control.

All these sound like noble attributes, but the litany of qualities is so squishy that the definition of wisdom begins to resemble a multicausal pileup of platitudes. One person’s positive attitude might be another person’s form of self-delusion; perceiving one’s limitations might be another name for passivity or indecision or lack of persistence. The common-sense language of wisdom often teeters between proverb and cliché. In fact, the Berlin group mounted an extensive study of proverbs as a way of thinking about wisdom, and Ardelt cites the well-known serenity prayer as an example of a proverb that emphasizes the discernment implicit in wisdom. (This is the saying that goes, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”)

But as I read the undeniably self-satisfied profiles in wisdom published by Ardelt, they reminded me that wisdom unfolds on many stages and very much depends on the *dramatis personae*. We tend to think of wisdom as a Cecil B. De Mille production in human enlightenment, with Biblical sets and King Solomon (or some similarly commanding figure) talking down to us from a position of social and moral authority. But in our daily negotiation with the improvident turns of an



imperfect world, we probably need a more personal form of wisdom in dealing with in-laws or coping with financial stresses. Perhaps the most important yin-yang of wisdom may be the different shapes it takes in the public and private domains. The public face of wisdom has to do with leadership, judgment and a responsibility to the collective future, offering a kind of moral inspiration to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people; this is the face that emerges when people are asked in surveys to name people they consider to be wise (the nominees invariably include people like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and again Gandhi). The private face of wisdom may be Vivian Clayton's father, my parents, your Uncle Myron. By comparison, the example of their wisdom is invisible to all but the inner circle of kin and acquaintances that benefit each day, in myriad specific ways, from the exercise of wisdom.

If nothing else, the 3D-WS studies suggest that a kind of wisdom can arise in ordinary people from unexpected backgrounds. With Ardelt's help, I had an opportunity to speak with some of the people who ranked high on her wisdom scale. C., it turns out, grew up on a tobacco farm in Kentucky, never finished high school and harbored no greater ambition than to have children. "We're not mountaineers," she told me, "but we are hillbillies."

Ardelt is now testing her wisdom scale on a different population. In collaboration with George E. Vaillant, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist affiliated with Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, she is assessing a group of Harvard University graduates who have been faithfully filling out psychological surveys every two years since they began college in the late 1930s. "I have identified people I consider wise and people I consider relatively low in wisdom," says Ardelt, who is still analyzing the data. People who rated high in wisdom, she adds, were "very generous," both financially and emotionally; among those who rated low in wisdom, "there was this occupation with the self."

Ardelt acknowledges that no one really knows what wisdom is. "I like my definition," she says. "The Baltes people like their definition, and Sternberg likes his. There's no agreement on what wisdom is, and that's the fuzzy part. We're not there yet."

The "fuzziness" of wisdom studies scares many people away from the subject; as James Birren and Cheryl Svensson noted recently, the 13 chapters of Sternberg's 1990 collection "Wisdom" offer 13 different approaches, and many self-respecting psychologists and neuroscientists fairly flee from the suggestion that they are investigating the biological basis of wisdom. Yet many of the emotional and cognitive traits that rank high on current research agendas — resilience, positivity, expert knowledge systems, cognitive processing and especially the regulation of emotion — closely overlap with qualities that have been consistently identified by Clayton, Baltes, Ardelt and other social scientists as crucial to wisdom.

One of the most interesting areas of neuroscience research involves looking at the way people regulate their emotions and how that regulation can change over the course of a lifetime. Laura Carstensen of Stanford University has produced a substantial body of research over the past two decades showing that the ability to focus on emotional control is tightly linked to a person's sense of time and that older people in general seem to have a better feel for keeping their emotions in balance. This has emerged in part from a long-running research project known informally at Stanford as the "beeper study."

In 1994, Carstensen and her colleagues provided nearly 200 Northern California residents, young and old, with electronic pagers; since then, in several waves of data collection, the subjects have been beeped at random times, up to five times a day over the course of a week, and asked to describe the emotions they are feeling at that exact moment. For Jan Post, who lives north of San Francisco, several of these beeps arrived when she was, as she put it, "doing what husbands and wives are supposed to do." Daniel Zucker's pager pulsed on occasion when he was in meetings at work or driving on the highway. Whatever they were doing, the subjects paused to fill out a questionnaire reporting the intensity of 19 emotions ranging from anger to happiness to boredom.

As part of the ongoing study, participants are now coming into the Stanford lab for intense psychological testing, which often includes a session in brain-scanning machines.

What the Stanford researchers have found — in the laboratory and out in the world — is that despite the well-documented cognitive declines associated with advancing age, older people seem to have figured out how to manage their emotions in a profoundly important way. Compared with younger people, they experience negative emotions less frequently, exercise better control over their emotions and rely on a complex and nuanced emotional thermostat that allows them to bounce back quickly from adverse moments. Indeed, they typically strive for emotional balance, which in turn seems to affect the ways their brains process information from their environment.

On a recent spring day in Palo Alto, Calif., for example, the Stanford researchers put 67-year-old N., a very nice, good-natured subject of the beeper study, through a battery of cognitive and emotional assessments. She repeatedly filled out questionnaires asking her to gauge the intensity of her emotions; took a vocabulary test; endured a wearying series of tasks designed to assess the quality of her memory; and before the two-day gantlet of testing was done, would also undergo functional magnetic resonance imaging (f.M.R.I.) of her brain while she performed a monetary-reward task and viewed pictures laden with positive and negative emotional content. Every once in a while, she was asked to chew on a piece of cotton until it was saturated with saliva (a test for the stress hormone cortisol).

These laboratory sessions are not without their frustrating moments, and the low point for N. occurred in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, when she was asked to perform two different tasks: public speaking and a maddening mathematical task that involved a formula for counting backward as fast as she could. Every time N. made a mistake, and she made quite a few, a humorless examiner would say, “Error,” and ask her to start again. She became so flustered that she’d pretzeled her body into an ampersand and kept repeating, “Gosh, I can’t even think. . . .” Later she confided, “I was almost in tears right after doing those numbers.” But by the time N. completed the final task of the day, which asked her to rate her emotions on a scale of one (for low) to seven (for high), she appeared to have rebounded quite nicely.

“Happiness is a seven,” she said with a triumphant laugh, checking the last box on the questionnaire. “I’m getting out of here!”

That, in a sense, is the take-home message of the “beeper study,” too. The results suggest that older people on average are more even-keeled and resilient emotionally. “Younger people tend to be either positive or negative at any given point in their daily life,” Carstensen says, “but older people are more likely to experience mixed emotions, happiness and a touch of sadness at the same time. Having mixed emotions helps to regulate emotional states better than extremes of emotion. There’s a lot of loss associated with aging, and humans are the only species that recognizes that time eventually runs out. That influences the motivation to savor the day-to-day experiences you have, it allows you to be more positive. Appreciating the fragility of life helps you savor it.” Fredda Blanchard-Fields of the Georgia Institute of Technology has produced a series of studies showing that the emotional equilibrium of older people allows them to negotiate solutions to interpersonal problems better than younger people. “She wouldn’t call it research on wisdom,” Carstensen says of Blanchard-Fields, “but I would.”

Carstensen and her colleagues believe that this motivation to focus less on the negative is probably unconscious and shaped by one’s sense of time. “According to our theory, this isn’t a quality of aging per se, but of time horizons,” she says. “When your time perspective shortens, as it does when you come closer to the ends of things, you tend to focus on emotionally meaningful goals. When the time horizon is long, you focus on knowledge acquisition.” As time horizons shorten, she added, “things become much clearer, because people are letting their feelings navigate what they do, who they spend time with, what are the choices they’re making in life, and it’s about right now.”

Carstensen calls this “socioemotional selectivity theory” and says that in the shortened time perspective of old age, people are motivated to focus on the positive in a way that registers as a difference in cognitive processing in the brain. “I’m not a ‘wisdom person,’” she said in a recent conversation in her office. But she readily agreed that many elements of emotional regulation seen in older adults are “absolutely” consistent with qualities that have long been identified by the wisdom researchers.

This is all of a piece with life-span development theory (Carstensen got her Ph.D., in a program founded by Paul Baltes), which has as a central precept the idea that the decisions one makes at each stage of life involve trade-offs. As Carstensen puts it, “There’s always a cost, always a tension, between selecting any goal.” She and her colleague Corinna E. Lackenhoff have speculated that there may even be good evolutionary reasons for this division between knowledge acquisition and emotional fulfillment. Acquiring knowledge (and paying close attention to threat and danger) increases the likelihood that young people will survive to reproductive age; emphasizing emotional connection and kinship at an older age may increase the survival ability of one’s children and grandchildren (and their genes) in the future. “If you invest increasingly in those people related to you,” Carstensen says, “then you are investing in your own genes’ survival.”

This “positivity” effect may even have long-term health consequences. Although the findings haven’t been peer-reviewed or published, Carstensen said preliminary results from the small sample in the ongoing “beeper” experiment indicate that people who didn’t regulate their emotions well as adults and were relatively more negative at the start of the study “were more likely to be dead” 10 years later, independent of their health status at the beginning of the experiment.

This intriguing correlation between positivity and longevity has been seen elsewhere. In 2002, Becca Levy, a psychologist at Yale University, collaborated with researchers for the Ohio Longitudinal Study, who have been following aging in a cohort of people since 1975, and they made a very surprising finding: older people with a more positive attitude toward old age lived seven and a half years longer. “It’s a pretty robust effect,” says Suzanne Kunkel, the gerontologist who heads the Ohio study. “People with a positive perception of aging, of themselves as an aging person, seem to have a longevity advantage.” But there may also be downsides to positivity, and Carstensen’s lab is investigating that possibility. Older people who are inclined to tune out the negative and focus on the positive, she says, might be more vulnerable to confidence scams and make bad, overly trusting decisions.

Richard J. Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, has been looking at patterns of brain activity associated with emotional regulation in a small group of older people who have participated in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. In a paper published last year, the Wisconsin team reported that older adults (the average age was 64) who regulated their emotions well showed a distinctly different pattern of brain activity than those who didn’t. These people apparently used their prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that exerts “executive control” over certain brain functions, to tamp down activity in the amygdala, a small region deep in the brain that processes emotional content, especially fear and anxiety. In people who are poor regulators of emotion, activity in the amygdala is higher, and daily measurements of the stress hormone cortisol follow a pattern that has been associated with poor health outcomes.

“Those people who are good at regulating negative emotion, inferred by their ability to voluntarily use cognitive strategies to reappraise a stimulus, show reductions in activation in the amygdala,” says Davidson, who added that such regulation probably results from “something that has been at least implicitly trained over the years.” It is difficult (not to say dangerous) to generalize from such a small, focused study, but the implication is that people who learn, or somehow train themselves, to modulate their emotions are better able to manage stress and bounce back from adversity. Although they can register the negative, they have somehow learned not to get bogged

down in it. Whether this learning is a form of “wisdom” accumulated over a lifetime of experience, as wisdom researchers see it, or can be acquired through training exercises like meditation, as Davidson’s previous research has shown, the recent message from neuroscience laboratories is that the optimal regulation of emotion can be seen in the brain.

Similarly, several years ago, Carstensen; Mara Mather of the University of California at Santa Cruz; John Gabrieli, a neuroscientist now at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and several colleagues performed f.M.R.I. studies of young and old people to see whether the ability to regulate emotions left a trace in the amygdala. The study indicated that the amygdala in young people becomes active when they view both positive and negative images; the amygdala in older people is active only when they view positive images. Put another way, young people tend to cling to the negative information, neurologically speaking, while older people seem better able to shrug it off and focus more on positive images. This neural selectivity, this focus on the positive, is virtually instantaneous, Gabrieli says, and yet probably reflects a kind of emotional knowledge or experience that guides cognitive focus; Carstensen says older people “disattend” negative information. This “disattention” also echoes some very old thoughts on wisdom. In his 1890 book “The Principles of Psychology,” William James observed, “The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.” In modern neuroscience parlance, Gabrieli says, “you could say that in older people the amygdala is overlooking the negative.”

Much of the research to date has reflected a predominantly Western notion of wisdom, but its definition can be further muddied by cultural vagaries. In one cross-cultural study, researchers found that Americans and Australians essentially equated being wise with being experienced and knowledgeable; being old and discreet were seen as less-than-desirable qualities. People in India and Japan, by contrast, linked wisdom to being discreet, aged and experienced.

Nevertheless, the notion of wisdom is sufficiently universal that it raises other questions: Where does it come from, and how does one acquire it? Surprisingly, a good deal of evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, suggests that the seeds of wisdom are planted earlier in life — certainly earlier than old age, often earlier than middle age and possibly even earlier than young adulthood. And there are strong hints that wisdom is associated with an earlier exposure to adversity or failure. That certainly seems to be the case with emotional regulation and is perfectly consistent with Carstensen’s ideas about shifting time horizons. Karen Parker and her colleagues at Stanford have published several striking animal studies showing that a very early exposure to mild adversity (she calls it a “stress inoculation”) seems to “enhance the development of brain systems that regulate emotional, neuroendocrine and cognitive control” — at least in nonhuman primates. Some researchers are also exploring the genetic basis of resilience.

The Berlin group reported that the roots of wisdom can be traced, in some cases, to adolescence. Jacqui Smith points out that many of the people in the Berlin Aging Study survived two world wars and a global depression; the elderly people who scored high on Monika Ardelt’s wisdom scale also reported considerable hardship earlier in their lives.

This notion that wise people might have been “vaccinated” earlier in life by adversity reminded me of Vivian Clayton’s father, sitting next to his frail mother in London while the German bombs rained down around them, celebrating their survival each time with a cup of tea. It also made me curious about Clayton, who disappeared from academia in 1981. I managed to track her down through a short item on the Internet, which described a psychologist of the same name who tended bees as a hobby in Northern California. It turned out to be the same Vivian Clayton, and she agreed to meet with me at her office in Orinda on a sunny March morning, a few hours before seeing her first patient of the day.

Now 56 — “and proud of it,” she said — Clayton turned out to be a vivacious woman with a soothingly enthusiastic voice. After all the abstraction involved in thinking about wisdom, she had turned to a more pragmatic role as a geriatric neuropsychologist, helping families and lawyers determine mental capacity in older people experiencing cognitive declines; in fact, she helped

write the California State Bar manual for making these determinations. She never contributed anything to the wisdom field after 1982, although Paul Baltes continued to send her papers from Berlin and Monika Ardelt has occasionally sought her counsel. I asked her if she regretted not continuing in the field, and she said not at all. "I reached a fork in the road," she said. "Wisdom can be a very abstract concept, and as I got older, I gravitated to more practical approaches."

We talked about wisdom in contemporary culture, and gradually the conversation turned to bees. "You know, bees have been around for hundreds of million of years, at least, as living creatures," Clayton said. "And when you work a hive, and you're there with that hive alone, and you hear how contented the bees are, you just have the sense that they have the pulse of the universe encoded in their genes. And I really feel that the concept of wisdom is like that, too. Somehow, like the bees, we are programmed to understand when someone has been wise. But what wisdom is, and how one learns to be wise, is still somewhat of a mystery."

## WISE COUNSEL

How researchers elicit the advice people give to judge their wisdom.

Since 1984, researchers affiliated with the Berlin Wisdom Project at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin have tried to develop psychological tests to measure wisdom. In one common test, more than 700 subjects have been asked to respond to hypothetical situations concerning pivotal life events like divorce and job loss, as well as life assessments; the replies were then analyzed according to the criteria of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm and rated on such qualities as knowledge about human nature, acknowledgment of uncertainty and an appreciation of relativistic attitudes. Here are some examples of the situations and questions presented.

Michael, a 28-year-old mechanic with two preschool-aged children, has just learned that the factory in which he is working will close in three months. At present, there is no possibility for further employment in this area. His wife recently returned to her well-paying nursing career. Michael is considering the following options: He can plan to move to another city to seek employment, or he can plan to take on full responsibility for childcare and household tasks. What should Michael do and consider in making his plans? What additional information is needed?

Mary was given a diagnosis of cancer. The doctors told her that she has one year to live. Mary is now thinking about what she should do. Among other options, she can try, as much as possible, to continue living the way she has been, or she can make a drastic change in her life. What should Mary do and consider in making her plans? What additional information is needed?

A middle-aged woman had once decided to concentrate on her family and not take up a profession. Her children are about to leave home. One day she meets an old friend whom she has not seen in a long time. This friend had decided to concentrate on her career rather than starting a family. She is well established in her profession. The meeting prompts the woman to review the life she has led so far. What might such a life review look like? Which aspects of her life might she recall? How might she explain her life course and the motives for her actions? How might she evaluate her life in retrospect?

Stephen S. Hall is the author, most recently, of "Size Matters: How Height Affects the Health, Happiness and Success of Boys — and the Men They Become."

My Dearest Family:

In the busy and often structured pace of our lives there have rarely been times to stand back and reflect upon the big and important things. Our attention has usually been taken by practical details. I want to tell you about what I consider really important.

I was fortunate in time and place. I was born in the America of challenge and opportunity because my parents succeeded in the struggle to get here. I was spared the danger and tragedy of pogroms, of the Holocaust, of major war, of starvation and human misery. I was free to strive and to achieve—to set my goals high and to realize their fruition.

I have always been an optimist. I have never really regretted any of the choices I have made—although I could have lived and been happy with other choices.

I have been blessed with a happy and understanding first marriage and with a happy and sharing second one. I cannot leave you the example of lifelong steadfastness. Let me instead leave you the example of compassion and flexibility. When an old relationship became lost, both your mother and I were honest and insightful enough to recognize this—to make the break, releasing one another and leaving one another free to find new happiness.

Life is imperfect—yet in its living lays ever-renewed excitement.

I have been privileged to watch each of you grow up and move out into the world. I have enjoyed watching your interest and skills develop. I have offered you what I had to share, but have not been disappointed when you have each said, “No thanks—I will find my own thing and do it.” I have been pleased that each of you has taken pride in doing what you do well. Quality has its own rewards. Yet flexibility is also important. It is important to be able to let something go if it doesn’t prove to be as important or necessary or satisfying as you had thought. You are not enslaved by the rigidity of your aspirations.

I have enjoyed watching you share things with one another. Next to your own husbands or wives and children, the closest affinities you can have will be with one another. You know one another’s weaknesses as well as strengths. You have generally supported one another. You have helped one another. I don’t ever remember telling you to do that. Chalk that one up as an undeserved bonus for me.

I have tried to set an example for you in active participation in the Jewish and secular communities. I have always felt the importance of sharing in these dimensions. You are young and I cannot tell whether you will be so inclined. It would please me if you found some of the same enthusiasm and excitement in the Jewish tradition that I have. (Or if not in that, I hope you will participate actively in some spiritual tradition.) It is a dimension of spirit that can bring great meaning and intensity to your lives.

I hope you will also enjoy musical, artistic, and intellectual interests. One can live without these aspects, but they enormously enhance the quality of life. I hope you will always feel close to nature—aware of the many subtleties and miracles that unfold constantly around us and in harmony with these cycles. I hope you will share some of these deep gratifications and awarenesses with your spouses and children, and that you will have the maturity to not expect them to necessarily accept your sharing or see things as you do.

I hope you will continue to have intense interests—although these may change. Disappointments may be more painful, but achievements are more gratifying.

I hope you will have compassion for your brothers and sisters—both Jews and non-Jews. That you will ever strive to help those who need the help—that you will ever speak out against injustice and bigotry—that you will never become smug and complacent because you *have* when others *have not*. All people deserve the feeling of respect and realization in their lives. I hope you can help many attain it.

To my beloved Paula—you stepped into such a big job. It has been hard for you to catch up with the complicated life of the family. You have done wonderfully in understanding my needs and pressures. It has been hard for you, coming from a differing family background, to cope with assertive, grown children. You have really tried to grow and extend yourself.

You have accommodated yourself to a hard and demanding pace. I hope you will want some of the things I have created and that we have accumulated over the years. I would be pleased to have you share these things among you—taking those that please each of you or have special meaning for you. Be magnanimous if more than one of you wants a particular thing.

More than material possessions, I hope I will have left each of you:

- An optimistic spirit
- A fervor and enthusiasm for life
- A sensitivity to nature and esthetics
- A closeness and regard for one another
- A sense of responsibility and concern for others
- And a sense of worthiness about your selves.

I wish your life may be as good and satisfying as mine has been, and thank each of you for having contributed to it.

Lovingly,

Dad/Bill

October 16, 1950

Dear Children:

Somewhere among these papers is a will made out by a lawyer. Its purpose is to dispose of any material things which I may possess at the time of my departure from this world to the unknown adventure beyond.

I hope its terms will cause no ill will among you. It seemed sensible when I made it. After all, it refers only to material things which we enjoy only temporarily.

I am more concerned with having you inherit something that is vastly more important.

There must be a purpose in the creation of man. Because I believe that (as I hope you will some day, for without it life becomes meaningless), I hope you will live right.

Live together in harmony! Carry no ill will toward each other. Bethink of the family. Help each other in case of need. Honor and care for your mother. Make her old age happy, as far as in your power. She deserves these things from you. It was your mother who always reproached me that I was not concerned enough about my children. She always insisted that we give them more. She would never visit a grandchild without a gift. I often felt she was too devoted a mother. Prove she was wise by being worthy of her devotion.

Carry your Jewish heritage with dignity. Though you may discard trivial ritual things, never discard your basic Jewish faith. You cannot live out your years happily without it.

Coming to the synagogue for kaddish will reacquaint you with the old prayers and you may find comfort in them as I did when your grandfather dies in 1923. I was then thirty-two years old.



Being together daily in business has its advantages as far as a father wanting to be noble in the eyes of his children. The aggravations and the heavy pressure in our business cause friction and annoyance with one another. Maybe we said things at such times that in calm retrospect we are sorry for. I was as guilty of these things as anyone. I hope such things will not stand out in your memory of me. I must have some worthwhile things that left good impressions and nice thoughts with you. Please recall these, or anything you feel worth carrying on, on the occasion of my yahrzeit. I leave with happy thoughts, because as your mother and I often said, "God has been good to us. Our children are all good, and married to good mates. Their lives can go on without us just as well. They will meet none who can speak ill of their parents."

I have enjoyed a loving and appreciative wife. She always praised and told me how capable I was. Then I had to live up to her expectations. Any worthwhile thing I ever did was due to her urging and her faith in me.

So don't mourn for me. I have enjoyed my life. Carry on from here, using the many blessings which you have (and I didn't have at your age) with wisdom and consecration to your family and mankind.

You can serve your family best by serving mankind also.

Remember me affectionately as your father.

Shmuel ben Shalom

## **Sam Levenson**

A well-known humorist who had his own TV show on CBS, Sam Levenson published this "Ethical Will and Testament to His Grandchildren and to Children Everywhere" in 1976.

I leave you my unpaid debts. They are my greatest assets. Everything I own -- I owe:

1. To America I owe a debt for the opportunity it gave me to be free and to be me.
2. To my parents I owe America. They gave it to me, and I leave it to you. Take good care of it.
3. To the biblical tradition I owe the belief that man does not live by bread alone, nor does he live alone at all. This is also the democratic tradition. Preserve it.
4. To the 6 million of my people and to the 30 million other humans who died because of man's inhumanity to man, I owe a vow that it must never happen again.
5. I leave you not everything I never had, but everything I had in my lifetime: a good family, respect for learning, compassion for my fellow man, and some four-letter words for all occasions: words like help, give, care, feel, and love.

Love, my dear grandchildren, is easier to recommend than to define. I can tell you only that like those who came before you, you will surely know when love ain't; you will also know when mercy ain't and brotherhood ain't.

The millennium will come when all the ain'ts shall become ises and all the ises shall be for all, even for those you don't like.

Finally, I leave you the years I should like to have lived so that I might possibly see whether your generation will bring more love and peace to the world than ours did. I not only hope that you will. I pray that you will.

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7/25/1979  
5 Tishre 5740

My dear family:

It seems appropriate that I just mailed a proof of a correction on my father's tombstone to the monument people. I was concerned...with the correct manner of recording his good name. He was a *Kohen*, of the priestly class, and it had to be so recorded.

So my link to you is not of words on dead stone, nor nitpicking, but of the good way to keep a good name, as a member of the family you came from, the family you'll spawn and the tribe from whose roots you flower.

Shakespeare did say, "A rose by any other name still smells as sweet" (I know I had to remember that during my days on the printing press), but so it is with character from which emanated the good name...you can be in rags, in a poor state, a misunderstood professional...but your good character will earn you your way. It goes without saying you'll work hard toward your chosen goal by education, but working at occupations up the ladder, etc. but it is the uses of your intelligence as you would use it to build character that I would address now.

If there is a pleasure in acquiring knowledge, there is greater pleasure in applying it.

But what knowledge is useful to the end of building character?

I wish for you the joys of understanding the knowledge of our tradition to its deepest soul. I guarantee it will resonate in your heart at times of deepest trouble and soundest joy. There is a mellowness I would wish for you in your later years, which I now am just beginning to perceive.

For instance, take the commandment, "Thou shall have no other Gods before you." If the name of God, "*Yehovah*", means the future tense of "to be", then you as His reflection should also always be becoming...working for a future image of yourself, a better self of more enduring character. You take *teshuvah* [repentance] seriously, you change, you redeem your life, you take Yom Kippur seriously...and when you do this which is your tradition and your best selves, I live for you, my living heritage, my ever-bearing fruits.

I urge you to understand your roots, as they are in you as archetypes and beg you not to deny [them]. The Torah teaches logic, values, and history. For example, if you pass your enemy in trouble you are bidden to help him as you can and go on your way. Logically the seeds of a better future are here. Rabbi Jacob is quoted in Sayings of the Fathers (4:21) that this life is like a waiting room before the bigger banquet. Logically one should always be in preparation. This not only refers to afterlife but you your passages in life from decade to decade.

So many words I've written and so many generalizations. What about specifics:

I would like you to know my writing and keep them...however little of significance or insignificance I've produced. I want my grandchildren to know the fancies of my mind. That is who I am and all of substance I can give them. I leave three notebooks full of experiences with the weekly Torah Service. If nothing else, pass these on. This is my most important life through the decades. Keep family records, of our history, our events. It is a pleasure I want you to have. The only stability in a drifting society is the fabric of our family. Know who are its members and of what character.

It would be nice to always keep the house in some form.

Elizabeth, I wish for your happiness and stability. That your feelings fly toward the dream of fulfillment but still be balanced by your keen intelligence is what I hope for you. I hope you remember our times of understanding, and wherever I am I will send whatever healing is possible. I trust the mountain-guide sense in you to go to peaks I'll never see. Be there for me.

Benjamin, I wish that your keen intellectual nature be rounded by that intuition that comes from the artist in you. At thirteen your insight into the *Akedah* was remarkable. May that become more cultivated as you grow older. I live for you in the applause of that day, that brightened your face, and the applause now for such continued adventurous and original trailblazing.

Rachel, my youngest, who has my name and my old place in the family, the youngest, I want to leave you only my best qualities and not my worst. Listen to the still, small voice of the best in yourself, regardless of what the people around you feel. Be swayed only by wisdom, and not the momentary emotions of others.

Sandy, should you outlive me, I release you to the memories of those joys that endured and survive me. I know you will forget all else. I urge you to hold on to your visions but ground them in reality. We will meet again as no quantum in the universe dies but is attracted to others from whom it has charge. If I have outlived you I go to meet you now.

Remember, please, to talk to one another on the anniversary of my death, and forgive me for my transgressions against you. Of all other dealings, the commonsense mitzvot, the good values the way to deal with people and each other, I need leave you no further instructions. You have been rigorously schooled by me, and I assume you will know how to put my body to rest....

Live out your lives wisely, well and with few regrets.

Your loving mother

May, 1961

To my (as yet) unborn child:

It is late. Though expectant fathers are supposed to be nervous, I am more restless than worried and wish you would already arrive. Observing the children of friends, it is my impression that it may be some time before I will once again have the opportunity to address you in as much quiet as I have available this evening. Since talking to you at this time in the waiting room would merely raise questions in the nurse's mind about my potential competence as a stable parent, I shall commit this address to writing, to deliver it at some presently unknown and undesignated time.

I am full of expectations for you. Not about your sex. I don't have the least interest in whether you are a girl or a boy. Five or six children from now, if the law of averages treats us shabbily, I might have some feelings about the question, but I don't now. There are other matters that seem far more significant. It is, for example, very important to me that you be fun, not so that you should keep me amused, though I wouldn't mind that, but, more significantly, that you should be joyful. It appears that whatever you turn out to be, you are likely to be named after my father, who was an Isaac ("Yitzhak," from "laughter"), so that somehow your name will have to do with laughter or happiness, and that seems right. I do not commend earnestness to you as your chief virtue.

That does not mean that I don't want you to care about others. I want that very much. May you be able to be either kind or angry for others' sakes. You will know which is appropriate when the time comes. Even more, may you be willing from time to time to risk doing something that may turn out to be foolish, for the sake of a wise concern. Tonight I am particularly conscious of our responsibilities to make the world a better place, since it is with mixed feelings of guilt and relief that I am now sitting in the hospital rather than driving to Montgomery, Alabama, with Bill Coffin and John Maguire (they drove off without me) in pursuit of what seems like a very important cause. (Someday, if you like, I'll tell you about them and what their adventure turned out to be.)

I write all this to warn both of us that I shall try not to live out my deficiencies through you but at the same time that I do not plan to abandon all goals and aspirations for you just because they happen to be mine, too. One goal that I think I shall not give up is that I want you to be clearly and irrevocably Jewish. I do not know if my way will be your way, but your way must be a real way, and a serious way. I won't give an inch on that one. It is perhaps a sign of our (or at least my) time that I am already taking a defensive posture on this issue. Perhaps for you being Jewish will be an easy and relaxed thing, not the struggle and effort it has been for me, but I don't feel compelled to wish you an easy time of it. Valuable things usually cost quite a bit. Perhaps part of your struggle will be with me. I want you to be happy, caring, and Jewish. How am I going to get you to be any of them-ah, now the anxiety begins. I don't have the vaguest notion of what it means to be a parent or how one goes about the task. Doing what comes naturally is clearly no panacea. People have been doing that for years, and we can see what the results have been. But then what alternatives have I but to promise you that I will try hard and hope that you won't have to pay too much for my on-the-job training. If you try to forgive my mistakes, I'll try to forgive yours. We are both going to make them-lots.

But, alas, my noble sentiments are rapidly leaving me as I am slowly becoming engulfed by the desire to sleep and my impatience for you, or at least for Dr. Friedman, to appear with joyous tidings. The Almighty is clearly helping me to practice parenting even before your arrival. I am

not sure that I am grateful for His concern in this area at this moment. In any event, my wishes for you and the Messiah are the same at this moment. May you both come speedily.

With love of unknown and untested quality,

Your expectant father

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September 4, 1979

Dear Alisa:

It is eighteen years now since I wrote you from the waiting room of the New Haven Hospital. Though we have communicated by letter from time to time over the years, this seems like the right occasion to resume that earlier correspondence. The last time I wrote, you were an abstract idea. This time I am writing to a very concrete you. In a few hours, I am going to take you off to college. I don't know about you, but I certainly don't feel old enough for this sort of thing. I am not sure which of us is more nervous, though we probably are not worried about the same things.

I should imagine that you are worried about losing old friends and making new ones, about how you are going to do in your classes, whether it is really difficult to survive in big, bad old New York City, and the distant, but not distant enough question about what you will do with your life four years from now.

I am worried about the same matters but some additional ones as well. (At the time of the last letter, I thought I was worrying more than you.) In addition to worrying about you, I am worried about myself, worrying about my failings, worried about whether I have adequately prepared you for what is to come.

The Talmud says that a father must teach his children three things: Torah, a worldly occupation, and how to swim. It is presumed that with skills in these three areas, you can manage anywhere. You are certainly a splendid swimmer, far better than one who is as ill coordinated as I am had a right to expect. I am very pleased about your cooking and catering abilities. They are formidable and will always give you an occupation if you want one, whatever else happens in your life. Whether it is a skill you will use or only store away in your head doesn't matter. I have always been grateful to my grandfather for teaching me to bind books. I doubt if I am ever going to bind books for a living, but it is comforting to believe that I could if I really had to.

I don't think that I have taught you enough Torah. When I was growing up, Judaism for me was mostly something I found in books. For you and your other three siblings, I wanted it to be more immediate, the sounds you heard, the food you ate, as natural as breathing. As a result, though you know a lot of pieces of the tradition, certainly much more than I knew at your age, I don't know if you have the right set of connections, the ideas that make it all hang together. I wanted you to be both traditional and modern at the same time, and I am not sure that I have given you the tools. I am also concerned about the extent to which I have tried to glue onto you my kind of Jewishness and what that might be doing to your soul.

I think I should try harder to realize that we are different people. Of late, I have taken to counseling parents that they have no more right to take credit for their children's success than they are obligated to blame themselves for their children's failures. The most casual glance at your brothers and sisters makes it clear that kids raised in the same home turn out to be very

different people in ways that can hardly be accounted for by position in the family. It may be biology, it may be mazel (luck), or even will that has made each of you unique. That is what I believe in my head. In my gut, however, I and the other parents to whom I dispense this wisdom feel great personal satisfaction from their children's triumphs and great shame from their failure. I secretly say of you: Look what I did (hooray)! or Look what I did (sigh). For both of us, part of the process of our growing up is learning to separate out some of these issues.

I feel comfortable with your political sensibilities, particularly that you have them but also insofar as they incline in the same direction as mine. Then I say to myself, What right have I to be happy about such a thing? They are, after all, your sensibilities, or if they aren't they have no meaning. But on the other hand, didn't I help give them to you? Do I deserve no credit? How do I give you standards as a parent while at the same time view you with at least as much non-judgmental compassion that I would want to extend to any other independent adult? I don't yet know.

You haven't made it any easier, either. Whenever I give you the no-adult-privileges-without-adult-responsibilities speech, you always respond by telling me that you are neither an adult nor a child but are something in between. That is true, but also an easy dodge. We are both rather muddled about this issue, and I am aware of no way out except to be aware of it.

You turned out to be named properly. You are certainly a joy and a ray of sunshine for everyone who knows you. But when I expressed the wish that you would be that way those eighteen years ago, I forgot that the energy that gives people like you, especially, good cheer would from time to time be quite depleted. It is reassuring, however, how much better in control of your gloom you are than you once were.

We have had a special closeness, you and I, perhaps because you were a first child or perhaps because so many of our best and worst qualities and even our styles of dealing with the world are so similar. Perhaps it is because of the way we seem to sweep up after each other. It is more than likely that your mother will have a bird tomorrow upon seeing the state in which you will almost inevitably leave your room. To me, it seems the most natural state of affairs in the world that you should be going to visit Eva in the hospital, and if everything doesn't get done, so be it. On the other hand, you should be clear that people like us need people like her to keep our worlds ordered, and our "flexibility" is most often sustained at small cost to her, by her sense of orderliness, resist it though we may. I do not think I am so much better a parent now than I was eighteen years ago when you were born. I have learned much less along the way than I should have supposed. I have far less insight into how I think you should raise our grandchildren than I would have suspected. What I have learned is that as complex and exhausting as I thought raising children would be, I greatly underestimated the measure of effort and time that would be required. I am now more tolerant of other people's styles of child rearing because I have discovered how much more confusing, exhausting, and sometimes even desperate a task parenting is than I imagined. I certainly no longer believe that if you are sincere, everything works out nicely. But though we have had moments together that have been painful, I can honestly say I do not regret any of them. I have come to view even those hard times as part of what it is all about.

And so, Alisa, may you go in peace and come in peace. May you always be both our child and your own independent person even though it will never be very neat. May you find your path to Torah. May you succeed with hard things. Whatever you do in this world, may you do it well, for then you will remain aliza ("happy" in Hebrew, pun intended).

With a love that has been well seasoned,

Your satisfied father

Richard Israel

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## **The Day of Your Marriage**

June 18, 1985

Dear Alisa and Harold:

I should like to address you this day of your marriage with great love, respect and not a little anxiety.

On two important occasions in the past.. .when you were about to be born and when you were about to go to college, I have written letters to you, Alisa, that were a sort of cross between a classical ethical will and what might be described as a parental position paper. This seems like a significant enough event for the third in the series, though this time, the letter does not go to you alone Alisa, but, rather, to the two of you.

It goes to both of because my relation to Alisa is no longer unmediated. Though you Alisa are no less my daughter now than you ever were, you are a daughter whose new primary relationship will be to you, Harold, her husband. That suggests that the areas in which it is permissible for me to nag are now greatly restricted, indeed, *almost* entirely eliminated. Now that you're home, Alisa is elsewhere and that this house in which you grew up and where you will always be welcome, has become a place to visit, a storage warehouse (though it should be noted for only a finite period of time) and a laundromat that doesn't charge quarters.

That is a very hard thing to think about, much less say, particularly inasmuch as I don't feel ready for you to be my married daughter. It is not that I want to discourage you from getting married. Certainly not! I have been a very active encourager. We all know that. It is just that I have an un-reasonable wish that first you should know as much about what it means to be married, as in retrospect, I now wish I had known those many years ago. I want you to know how wonderful it is and how hard and how many things you can do wrong and what are the comforts you can expect and how to muddle through when the comfort season is a little lean. You clearly ought not get married without knowing these things ...and alas, neither should I have, nor should anyone else who also can't be told and who has to make those discoveries alone.

It doesn't much help me that I understand perfectly well that my concerns are just part of the inevitable war between the generations in which parents always find their children not quite prepared for whatever their children believe themselves to be ready. Whether the question is, who holds the cereal spoon, when it is appropriate to begin using the family car, or when to have babies, parents and children are only rarely on the same time-table. I shall do my best to make my peace with your current innocence in the reassuring knowledge that in the first place you are probably less innocent than I was when I married and second, you, like the rest of us, will get older. As you spend years getting to know one another, you will learn that one of the more curious features of the human personality is how close virtues are to deficiencies. It is likely that you both cook too well for either of your long term good. Alisa, wherever you are, there is a party but parties sometimes take up quite a bit of space. Also, your extraordinary



ability to respond with great competence to the exigencies of the moment does not always leave you with the resources to dole out your formidable talents in measured fashion for more routine matters.

Harold, my congenial fellow woodsman and log splitter, some of whose handiwork will warm this house next winter, I eyed you with all of the suspicion uniquely and appropriately directed to the suitor of one's first born daughter. By now, you are far less a stranger than a comfortable and treasured member of our confusing and noisy family. While Alisa is an expert in liveliness, you Harold seem to specialize in steadiness, she in now, you in then. May each corrupt each other, but only just a little, so that you don't lose these, your very real strengths.

You both know how to work hard. No matter what you do that is a quality that will surely stand you in good stead. Neither of you appears to view yourself as a finished product. That too, I find admirable. It has always seemed more important to me to try to be a *Lamdan*, one who keeps on learning, than a scholar whose learning has already arrived. Don't let your curiosity about important things die as you become engrossed by the routines of living. Don't let your search for the perfectly set table distract you from a concern for a larger vision which will energize both your lives over the years. Your commitments to Torah and Chochma, Jewish wisdom, will nourish you more than Julia Child. Yuppie heaven is ultimately not a very interesting place.

The Midrash assures us that making a proper match, one that will really hold together is as great a miracle as the splitting of the Red Sea. If it was such miracle at the time of our ancestors, how much greater a miracle it must be in our own days when many expect so much more from marriage and invest in it so much less. As you may have discovered already, it is either a great act of faith or an illusion to believe that men and women are really both members of the same species. In the face of the inevitable strains, what will serve you best is what can only be thought of as a moral resolve, your commitment to stick to your marriage and make it work. That determination *is* what you need more than anything else to carry you over the bumps. Off you go on a formidable journey together I hope it will be a wonderful one. We your family and friends are very proud of you today, proud of your qualities as Jews, as students of secular culture, and as very honorable *mentchen*. And there is every reason to believe that we will be even more proud in the course of time.

So, may you go forth in joy and be led forth in peace. May the mountains and the hills before Gou break into singing and all the trees of the field clap their hands. Though you are two persons, there is now only one life before you. May you find happiness in the time to come and may your days be good and long upon the earth.

Your father and soon to be father-in-law.

### **The Completed Cycle**

Thursday, January 14, 1988

Dear Alisa:

I never planned these letters as part of a package when I first started writing them. It seems to me that this is likely to be the last of the four I will have written you on special occasions-the last, not because there will be no further special occasions between us, but rather, because now the cycle is complete. (It is for the same reason that I address it to you rather than you and Harold. I in no way want to minimize the profound affection and respect I feel for him.) I first

wrote you when I was a young parent just about to have a new-born and now, it is you who are a young parent about to have a new-born. It is you who are now more or less in the situation I was in some twenty-six years ago when you first surfaced. The decisions we had to make about your life are now for you and Harold to make about your nearly born child.

In many respects, it is a very different world today than the one into which you were born. Politically, the sixties were full of turmoil and hope. We were confident that we could change the world and make it better. We knew who the good people were and who the bad ones. Now everything is much more muddled and our chances of affecting the system seem much more remote.

Jewish life then was much more bland, but more genial. The world around us was so much more obviously hostile to Jews that we could not yet afford to harass each other. Israel was a tiny country, only a few miles wide and the Wall could only be seen in sentimental pictures of old Jerusalem.

Digital watches and VCRs didn't exist. Hand-held calculators cost a fortune and at that they were as big as Kleenex boxes. Computers lived in large laboratories at universities and didn't come home at night. Students were ashamed to tell their classmates they were going into law or medicine unless they claimed they were doing it to serve the poor. Teaching and the Peace Corps were the preferred professions, and no one, simply no one, would admit to wanting to go into business.

Into all of this, you appeared. I still remember clearly how terrified I was with the thought of bringing this expensive stranger into my house and had only the vaguest notions of what I was supposed to do with it. You already seem to know what to do with babies, something I never quite learned. I have argued that it is programmed into your feminine hardware (feminine software would probably be the more felicitous phrase) but since Harold, too, appears to know significantly more about these things than I, an ostensibly experienced father, perhaps it is only my own soft or hardware that is deficient.

In other respects, too, I think you have an advantage over me. You seem to have fewer illusions. I was determined to be an outstanding parent, an obviously outrageous goal. You are more likely to want to be a good-enough parent. I do not believe you will want less for your child than I did for you, but rather, that you may know more about the limits of parenting that I did. Your aspirations for your child may be better tempered by your child's aspirations for itself. My parenting was grounded in a plan, albeit, not a very clear plan. Yours is more likely to be grounded in your child. I am probably overstating the case, because though part of me thinks I should have done that too, another part of me hopes that you and Harold also have in your heads and hearts some kind of grand notion about the kind of person you want your child to be and the values you want that child to have. I've never been able to escape from the old dilemma. To be altogether person-centered is to assume that only your child knows what one kind of person to become. That is patently a fraud, the same as the other notion which assumes that you can make any child turn out just the way you want if you only try hard enough. As with most anything else in this world, there is undoubtedly a middle ground which makes most sense of all. As I look around at zealous and pure types, whether Jews, vegetarians or Republicans, it has become increasingly clear to me that any good idea carried to its logical conclusion is probably wrong. (I just met someone who wanted to impose the death penalty on people who hurt animals.) It is very easy for people with noble concerns to run amok. Avoid fads, whether of child rearing, Judaism or politics and you will probably be better parents for it.

If you are like us, part of the baggage of childhood that you bring with you into parenthood is the notion that since you are much nicer people than your parents, you and your children will get on much better with each other than you did with your parents. No chance. Undoubtedly you will not make the same mistakes we did. Rather, like us, you will make your own new and improved mistakes. Just don't assume that by doing the opposite of what we did, you will be more likely to be right. In the process of developing your own style of childrearing, do your best not bend over backwards so far you fall on your faces.

You and I have spoken of the old Greek theory of knowledge, reworked by the Midrashic literature, that all knowledge is known in utero but that an angel comes along at birth, strikes the child under the nose, leaving the crease that we all have, and causing the child to forget, so that learning is really recalling. Knowing with exquisite precision how to exasperate parents is one piece of wisdom that never has to be recalled. It always seems to sneak past the angel. Be confident that whatever your weaknesses, your children will find you out at once and immediately leap for the jugular, just as you and your brothers and sisters did. It is part of what parenting is all about. May you manage not to take it any more personally than necessary. It is important to understand your contribution to the mess but not to assume responsibility for all of it.

In particular, be sure to hold your psychic breath throughout those difficult adolescent years and hang on, no matter what. You were about thirteen and at the beginning of it all. There was something we wanted you to do that you didn't want to do, though what it was I have forgotten. You were in your nightgown on the stairs between the second and third floor when you declared, "I am now an autonomous, responsible adult and able to make my own decisions." And your teddy-bear was under your arm, an irony that somehow eluded you.

You will probably have forgotten your own adolescence by the time your child reaches that age. May you at least recollect enough to know that a lot of love and dogged determination will carry you through better than clever psychological insights.

Children are often hard on a marriage. In the course of raising them, it will be important for you and Harold to make a special effort to be nice to one another- for quite some time, particularly since, as we have learned from you and your sibs, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. But we have also learned that things really do become more manageable with the passage of years. In the short run, you should take comfort in knowing that you really will sleep again. Do not assume that life will ever come together in a neat package, but in the long run, there will be some very satisfying resting spots.

Yes, raising children is hard, but it is also the most gratifying activity there is. If you raise them in order to get gratification, you will get none at all, but if you do it because there are few, if any, tasks more important, then child-rearing can provide a measure of extraordinary satisfaction that only those who have raised children can know. I am grateful to you for providing some of those choice satisfactions. It is true that there were times in the past when I would have or maybe did mumble the old curse, "May you have children like you." It turns out that I can still say the same words but now they have turned into a blessing. Alisa, may you have children like you.

With a love that is eager to discover new dimensions,

Your child's alarmingly and perhaps enduringly inexperienced Grandfather

My Dear Children:

Tradition warns us that one of the signs of a false prophet is his claim to foretell the future. How much care should we ordinary beings then take in refraining from glib statements regarding what will be in the days to come.

Therefore, I cannot say in what way your lives will differ from the path my life has taken. All I can recount here are my hopes, dreams, and desires for spiritually rich, rewarding and productive lives for you both and for the families you will raise in your turn.

My life was shaped by crashing waves of history: mass emigrations of desperate people, economic depression, war, the decimation of our people, the rebirth of Israel, and the un verbalized response of my family to these momentous occurrences. They were not considered topics to discuss with children, opinions were not asked for, no overt teaching came forth, only background murmur of adult conversations, a sense of uneasiness, of time rushing too quickly forward yet creeping incredibly slowly.

Your life is being formed amidst quieter events on the stage of history. Yet a much more verbal coming-to-grips with the meaning of these events is demanded of you. You must consciously determine how you will internalize them, how you will make the past as well as the present an integral part of yourselves as Jews within the human family.

We, your elders, solicit your perceptions. Perhaps we are too intense and do not leave you time for unfettered dreaming and childish selfishness.

My Jewish identify began as pride in belonging to what seemed an “interesting” and “different” people. Sociologically speaking, I found us a treasure trove of unplumbed depths. At the same time I shared in Toynbee’s misconception of us as “fossils.” The inchoate feeling of Jewish affirmation which demanded

expression by marriage in the devastated, conquered Germany were many years later to lead us to Massada for your Bar Mitzvah, Freddy and, God willing, the same for your celebration of Bat Mitzvah, Dina.

I have attempted to give you a more “normal” Jewish life by living the Jewish calendar as part of our daily life. I hope this steadiness along with the continuous study of our people’s history, the shared memories of the Jewish past from biblical times through the rabbinic tradition in to the middle ages, Hassidic lore, the Haskalah and the Zionist idea will give you a meaningful understanding of our group personality. Certainly, you will be able to bring a measure of spontaneity and authenticity to your own homes that I was unable to reproduce.

You were not born into the world at large, but into a certain family and at a certain time. I would wish for you comfort, love, an “at homeness” in this family which shares a common historic experience. But I also wish you always a yearning and a seeking for something more for yourselves and the generations to come after you. These generations go back beyond Sinai to a lone wanderer, our father Abraham, and continue into the future. It endures so long as this unbroken chain of generations continues to struggle toward an end beyond itself, to be of value to others, to dare to be a partner with that power that causes us to struggle for justice, peace, love and beauty.

In conclusion my dears, care for and protect each others well being and share in each other’s joys and be an emotional support in times of difficulty.

Your Mother

THE ETHICAL WILL OF GAIL LOWENTHAL  
MARCH 7, 1997

During the last High Holy Days, Rabbi Raiskin gave a couple of sermons that moved me to this writing. He first talked about how the Jewish Community seems to be obsessing on the idea of "continuity." He went on to say that we will break the chain of 4000 years of Jewish continuity if we don't raise Jewish children. But if the Judaism we are passing on is only "Lox and Bagels" and not the ethics and morals of our faith, it's not worth passing on. We must not raise Jewish children, but raise our children Jewishly.

The second sermon was about a tradition, going back to biblical times, which is now being revived. It is the custom of writing an ethical will to your children so that, not just your worldly goods, but also your values will be passed on. Rabbi Raiskin recommended a book on how to prepare an ethical will, which I have been digesting for several months, so now here is my attempt to put my feelings into words so that I can share them with my family. Hopefully it will be many years before my other will is needed, but I'd like you to have this one now and perhaps it will be revised and updated before then.

It is traditional to state one's desires as to death arrangements. I want arrangements to be handled by Sinai Memorial Chapel in San Francisco. This is not merely a funeral home but a traditional *Chevra Kadisha* which is a part of the Jewish Community and is familiar with Jewish traditions. All profits go to bury indigent Jews and any remaining profit goes back into the community through donations to Jewish institutions. There is now a process going on to try and start a *Chevra Kadisha* on the Peninsula. If that comes to pass, make arrangements through it. I want the cheapest casket possible and request that friends & relatives donate to charity in lieu of flowers. My preference would be Women's American ORT or Peninsula Temple Sholom. The service should be at Peninsula Temple Sholom which has brought me such a wealth of learning and pleasure. It should continue at the cemetery. Hopefully by then we will have arranged a burial plot. I wish to be buried in the ground and if allowed by the cemetery, have a stone, with a book on it, placed at the stone unveiling ceremony 11 months later. I hope that my daughters will light a *yahrzeit* candle and say *kaddish* at temple on the anniversary of my death and at the memorial service on Yom Kippur. So much for the "nuts & bolts."

In 1973 prior to the High Holy Days, Rabbi Raiskin wrote to a few selected members of the congregation asking them what they considered important in life – what their ideals & goals were. That year in his High Holy Day sermon he shared some of the responses. As he read the very deep philosophical thoughts that he had received from some highly educated members, I felt very inadequate. What I had written seemed so simple. But then his sermon ended with my response as the focus of the entire sermon, and I was very surprised & moved. This is what I wrote September 20, 1973.

I have a “Jewish Mother” in the best sense of the word. She has passed on to me the best that Judaism has to offer in the way of ethical standards. In addition to this she has imbued me with a love of Jewish music, traditions, customs, foods and way of life. She did this all by example. My goal in life is to be able to do half as well with my girls. My hope is that they will have such a love of their tradition that they will feel impelled to pass it on to their children and continue the chain.

We have traveled quite extensively. In each distant country I found customs which reminded me of our traditions and taught me that each culture has something to offer the world. In Bali we attended a tooth filing ceremony. In this religious ceremony a girl about 14 years old had a portion of her teeth filed. It was supposed to be a bit of her self being returned to the gods. While others in our group ridiculed this as barbaric, I was struck by the similarity to a *bris*. They even had a party after with all the friends and relatives bringing food.

Thus as each generation passes on the ethical and moral values, traditions, customs, and beauties of its religion to the next generation, the world is enriched. Each group is doing its best to improve the world.

In our travels another saying keeps coming to mind. A friend of mine went to Mills College in 1956. The first thing they were taught (I think at that time it was for snob appeal) was “Remember who you are and what you represent.” I feel each of us needs a heritage to belong to and to represent. I hope I can always be a good representative for the teachings of Judaism and can inspire my husband and girls to be also. Some days I don’t think I’m succeeding; but at least I can try.

That’s what I wrote in 1973. Some feelings never change. Here are some other thoughts that have evolved since then.

The ethical values of Judaism are what have directed my life. One teaching that has always resonated with me is the idea that we are not born in sin, as in other

religions, but are neither good nor evil. We have the power to choose and we are directed to choose good. Even during the High Holy Days the emphasis is not that we are sinful, but we are like the archer who has missed his mark. Now we must make the corrections in our aim so that we can do better. What impresses me about our religion is that the emphasis is not on what happens to us after death but on this world. For that reason we are directed to do our part to make this a better world (*Tikkun Olam* – the repair of the world). We are not told that we must complete this repair or that we must do it alone, but we must do our part. From this comes the idea of *tzedakah*. Again this is not something that we are told would be nice to do but something which we are required to do. For me Women's American ORT was the vehicle for a large amount of my *tzedakah*. The great sage Maimonides formulated 8 steps of charity. I am enclosing a copy of this great work because I think it is important. You will see that the highest form of charity is to see that someone has a job so they can support themselves and their family. Grandpa Levin did this in a big way by forcing the glaziers local union to take in the first black member, whom Grandpa wanted to hire. He also trained at least 4 other people to the point that they were each able to start a glass business of their own. Giving vocational training as ORT has been doing for over 115 years also fulfills that highest form of *tzedakah*. I like the idea that it trains students all over the world, young and old.

I hope that you will each find some form of giving of yourself to others that has meaning to you. I feel that a cause which doesn't benefit you or your family directly will give you a great sense of unselfish satisfaction. In addition it is important to be involved with activities that do help your community and your family such as PTA, your children's activities, temple, Jewish Community Federation etc. Dad's form of *tzedakah* was the Lions Club which was active in local youth sports, helping the hard of hearing, the blind, 4H Clubs and just making San Bruno a better place to live.

Always try to look for opportunities for "Random Acts of Kindness." Little things such as giving a senior citizen a ride, helping a lost child in a store find its parents, visiting the sick or sending a card to a lonely person will do as much to make you feel good as the person you help.

As you know I recently gave up my demonstrating jobs so I could make *Shabbat* dinner Friday nights and go to the Saturday morning *minyan*. I really hadn't figured out why this seemed so important although in the back of my mind was an old saying: "As Israel (meaning the Jewish people) has kept the Sabbath, so has the Sabbath kept Israel." Then this week as part of preparation for the women's



Passover *seder*, I read a magazine article by Rabbi Harold Kushner. He also has written several best-sellers including "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" & the book "To Life" which I gave you awhile ago. He wrote in the article about the last of the 4 questions. "Why on this night do we recline?" He translated it as, "On all other nights we eat either at leisure or in a hurry. Why on this night do we eat at leisure?" No one leaves the table early for a ball game, a meeting or to turn on the T.V. In our lives today we are still slaves as in Egypt, but instead of being enslaved to Pharaoh, we are enslaved by time.

The clock was invented to call medieval monks to prayer, now it has become our master. We set an alarm to wake us at a certain hour, rather than letting ourselves wake naturally. We rush through breakfast because we have to catch our bus or train. We interrupt an interesting conversation because our favorite television program is coming on. We carry around pocket diaries with nearly every line filled in with one appointment or another. From that perspective, the businessman who cannot take an afternoon off to attend his daughter's dance recital or watch his son in a ball game is a slave (although a well-paid one).

But on Passover (and especially on *Shabbat*) we sit down at the table in the liberating knowledge that we have no other obligations for that evening. And that is why the Sabbath remains the great weekly symbol and reminder of the Exodus. It is not meant to be a day of restriction and prohibition. It is meant to be a day that belongs to us, a day without appointments, without obligations" (That's what Rabbi Kushner wrote.)

Several months ago I was doing a demo on Friday afternoon at the end of a really hectic week. Rabbi Straus came into the store, and I was telling him about it. His comment was "Thank G-D it's *Shabbat*." I heard that expression again in N.Y.C. while we were waiting for the Jackie Mason Show to begin; but that first time I heard it is really hit me between the eyes. We have this blessed time each week where *arguments and dissension are forbidden; when we must relax. We must enjoy our family. We must enjoy a glass of wine and a special dinner & we must have intimate relations with our spouse.* (Our ancestors understood the need for the joy of all of these things). This can be a special time in the family, an oasis in a hectic week. I think if started early, it's something the children, as well as the adults, can look forward to each week.

When I see the two of you with your wonderful spouses and children, I *kvell*. When the day care provider told me this week that Marissa has "Such beautiful manners" and that when the other children are misbehaving, she says "Hey –

knock that off" so they will behave, I know you are doing a great job, Evie and John. Debbie, the twins are a little young for table manners, but I know you & Joe are equally wonderful parents.

But remember, children do need an identity. They need to know G-D is there in good & bad times. It gives them a foundation to their lives. I hope that you understand that the values you now feel strongly about came originally from your 4000 year old Jewish heritage. Pass it on.

I'll end with a thought I recently read: "*Pray as if everything depended on G-D and act as if everything depended on you.*"

Your Proud & Loving Mother

Va-y'chi, 5761



***Parashat Va-y'chi***  
***The Torah: A Modern Commentary***  
**W. Gunther Plaut, ed.**  
**CYCLE THREE**

### THE PROPHET

The First Book of Kings chronicles King David's death, Solomon's succession to the throne, and finally with Solomon's death, the splintering of the Land into the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah.

### FROM TORAH TO HAFTARAH: MAKING THE CONNECTION

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob -- as he is dying -- gives his last words of advice and blessing to his sons. In a parallel scene in the haftarah, King David, on his deathbed, shares his last thoughts and instructions with his son Solomon.

### FOCUS

When King David was dying he spoke the following words to his son, Solomon: "And keep faith with the Eternal your God, walking in God's ways, carrying out the laws, commandments, rules of justice and directions of God, as written in the Torah of Moses, so that you may succeed in all that you do and whatever you turn to." (I Kings 2:3)

### COMMENTARY

The scenes of fathers giving final words of advice and blessing to children from this week's *parasha* and haftarah became the foundation for the tradition of Jewish ethical wills. An ethical will is a document expressing one's innermost feelings, beliefs and ideals which one wants to share with the next generation.

Rabbi Jack Reimer has written the following concerning ethical wills, "Parents would write a letter to their children in which they would try to sum up all that they had learned in life, and in which they would try to express what they wanted most for and from their children. They would leave these letters behind because they believed that the wisdom they had acquired was just as much a legacy they wanted to leave their children as were all the material possessions" (*Ethical Wills - A Modern Jewish Treasury* ed. by Jack Reimer and Nathaniel Stampfer, Schocken 1983).

In the haftarah, King David implores Solomon to remain faithful to *Adonai* and loyal to the laws of Torah and in so doing Solomon would find success in all that he attempted.

Concerns about education, conduct and values are all reflected in ethical wills.

During the Talmudic period Rabbi Eleazer ben Hyrkanos taught: "Pay attention to the honor of your colleagues; don't allow your children merely to learn by memorizing; let them sit at the knees of wise scholars; and when you pray, know before whom you stand" (*Berachot* 28b).

Nachmanides, a 13th century Jewish scholar, also composed an ethical will to his son. He wrote, "Hear, my son, the instruction of your father, and forsake not the teaching of your mother" (Proverbs 8:1). Accustom yourself to speak in gentleness to all men, at all times. Thus will you be saved from anger, the fertile cause of sin" (for a full text of this ethical will see *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, ed. by Israel Abrahams, Jewish Publication Society, 1976).

Moses Sofer known as Hatam Sofer included the following in his ethical will, "Be strong and courageous in diligent and penetrating study of God's law. Establish groups for the dissemination of

Torah, and promote activities for Torah among the populace. If you can do only a little, then do that little with utmost devotion. Beware of altering your Jewish names, language, and attire. A clue to this is found in the verse, 'Jacob arrived in peace (*shalem*), in Shechem' (Genesis 33:18) The author uses the Hebrew word *shalem* as a mnemonic for *Shem* = name, *Lashon* = language, *Malbush* = attire." (a full text of this ethical will can be found in *Ethical Wills-A Modern Jewish Treasury* ed. by Jack Reimer and Nathaniel Stampfer)

## KEEP TALKING

1. Imagine that you are Solomon. How would you respond to your father's comments? What would your response be if you were the child of Nachmanides or Hatam Sofer?
2. Why do you think one's name, language and attire would keep one attached to the Jewish people?
3. Reread the excerpts from sample ethical wills found in the COMMENTARY section. Are there similarities? What are they? Are there common concerns?
4. Are there any ethical wills in your family? If yes, what issues and concerns were included? Has the ethical will influenced you or other members of your family?
5. Ethical wills allow us to remember family members and their core values and beliefs. Whether or not a beloved family member left an ethical will, you can create one from the memories, stories and ideals they shared while they were alive. When the opportunity presents itself, gather together family members to create a living legacy for a relative or friend who has died. An appropriate time may be on the person's *yahrzeit*.
6. What would your ethical will look like? Have each family member share a thought, value, idea or belief that they hope will live on in their descendants.
7. So that your ideals and beliefs will live on, compose an ethical will.

## TAKING A STAND

to preserve the history, memories and legacy of Holocaust survivors a unique project called Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has been established by Steven Spielberg. You can learn more about this project at their website <http://www.vhf.org>

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This week's Family Shabbat Table Talk was written by Barbara Binder Kadden, who loves to cook and bake in the pots and pans she inherited from her husband's grandmother z'l who for so many years lovingly prepared countless meals and delicacies for family and friends.

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[www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)

This ethical will was written by a 38-year-old to her as yet unborn child during her pregnancy. She intends to update it at future life cycle events.

To my unborn child:

I am writing this in eager anticipation of your birth. I know that I have much to learn about being a parent. I'm sure the challenges will be greater than even now I can imagine, and the rewards are probably bigger than I can fathom at this point. Please know that you are a cherished being whom your father and I have waited half a lifetime to meet. We're so excited about your birth and everything that will come afterward.

I write this to you now, knowing that my perspective may change as you grow and develop as an individual and as I grow as a parent. Your father and I are becoming parents later in life, with many experiences and, I hope a little wisdom gained from them. I know we still have much to learn. But this is what I know so far and what I hope for you in the future.

First, know that you will have a unique perspective because you are Jewish, but you also will have your father's culture and traditions. Consider yourself doubly blessed with this wide vista from which to view the world. Even though your father is not Jewish, we agree that it is important for you to be raised as a Jew. You will naturally absorb the secular culture around you. Learning what it means to be Jewish in this world will be more difficult and may be a continually on-going quest, just as it is for me.

As parents, we want you to be knowledgeable about Judaism and to appreciate your religion and history. You will see that there are many wonderful customs and beliefs. Thousands of years of wisdom are contained in the rituals and ceremonies of Judaism that can guide you throughout your life. Remember, you are forever linked to this long and rich history. As a reminder of this, we are choosing a Hebrew name for you.

The world your father and I live in is mainly a secular, liberal world. While your dad doesn't identify with any religion, I always knew I was Jewish even though my mother and father are not particularly observant. I do remember my Grandpa Sol, your great-grandfather, telling stories about being chased by Cossacks, and hiding in haystacks during the pogroms. Even after his family settled in Eveleth, Minnesota, the Finnish miners' kids bullied grandpa and his brothers.

Your great-grandma Gantz' parents fled Kiev, Russia to settle in the wilds of Saskatchewan and trade with the Indians. Often the stories I heard about being Jewish were about the hardships that Jews endured just because they were different.

Our family has become very assimilated and lost touch with many of the religious traditions, but we identify ourselves as Jews and are proud of that fact. Judaism is your foundation, but it is also important to be part of the larger world. While our Jewish ancestors may have lived in fear, confined to the Jewish community or later sought to

bury their identity when they ventured out into the world, I hope you will be proud of who you are and find a trusted community beyond Judaism.

Cultivate a diversity of friends and remember to judge a person as an individual, not by their ethnic, religious or racial group. Be sincere and honest and learn to recognize these qualities in others. Call these people your friends. Be aware of the evils of the world, but do not be consumed by them. Don't let them stunt what I hope will be your adventuresome spirit and desire to taste all the wonderful things the world has to offer.

By adventuresome spirit I don't necessarily mean white water rafting or backpacking through Mongolia, although if that is what your heart desires, then I would say to do it. By being adventuresome, I really mean be broad-minded and curious about the world. I hope that you will have a passion for learning. In school, learn for the sake of learning and not with an eye only to a future career or how much money you can make.

Hard work and a broad understanding will bring success. Ultimately consider yourself successful if you sit back at the end of the day and reflect with a sense of pride and satisfaction on your behavior and accomplishments - both personal and professional - for that day.

Remember you will learn more by listening than by speaking. Be observant, but don't just be an observer. Be confident and proud of what you can offer to the world. This means knowing your strengths as well as your flaws. The only way you can truly know yourself is to embrace life fully and in a balanced way. Enrich your mind, exercise your body, and feed your spirit with music, art, meaningful work, friends and helping the community at large.

I hope that you, just as I do, will continually strive to achieve these ideals. I apologize in advance for any shortcomings I may have as a parent. I promise I will try to become aware of them and to correct them. And I look forward to learning from and about you.

Love, Mom 3/7/99

# Additional Resources For Ethical Wills

[So That Your Values Live on: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them](#) by Jack Riemer

[Legacy : A Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Personal History](#) by Linda Spence

[The Treehouse: Eccentric Wisdom from My Father on How to Live, Love, and See](#) by Naomi Wolf

[Women's Lives, Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations: Creating Your Own Spiritual-Ethical Will](#) by Rachael Freed

[Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical Caring Kids Without Religion](#) by Dale McGowan

[The Last Lecture](#) by Randy Pausch (also see below)

Internet Resources:

## [Writing and Reading Ethical Wills](#)

On the Jewish custom of leaving a written spiritual legacy for one's children  
By Jack Riemer

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Dying/Ethical\\_Wills\\_Meaning.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Dying/Ethical_Wills_Meaning.htm)

## [Medieval Sourcebook: Jewish Ethical Wills, 12th & 14th Centuries](#)

Many of these Jewish ethical wills, such as A Father's Admonition, which follows, are valuable for the insight they give us into the cultural and social ...

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/jewish-wills.html>

## [Ethical Wills](#)

Unlike traditional wills that transfer worldly possessions, an ethical will bequeaths values, ideas, and personal reflections to family members and other ...

[www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/1998/wills.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/1998/wills.html)

## [Something to Remember Me By](#) (more about the author Rachel Freed)

Without knowing it, Press had written an ethical will. ... In their simplest form, ethical wills are letters, usually addressed to grown children, ...

[www.science-spirit.org/article\\_detail.php?article\\_id=535](http://www.science-spirit.org/article_detail.php?article_id=535)

## [Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly . FEATURE . Ethical Wills . December ...](#)

But today, more and more Americans are resorting to another kind of will, a so-called ethical will that began as an oral tradition and has its roots in the ...

[www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week717/feature.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week717/feature.html)

### **Ethical Wills: Preserving Your Legacy of Values**

Information on drafting ethical wills, a way to share your values, beliefs, and blessings with your family and community.

[www.ethicalwill.com/](http://www.ethicalwill.com/)

### **The Jewish Publication Society: Hebrew Ethical Wills**

The renewed and growing interest in ethical wills today speaks to the attraction they have to people who want to reflect on the deeper meaning of their own ...

[www.jewishpub.org/product.php?isbn=0827608276](http://www.jewishpub.org/product.php?isbn=0827608276)

### **Ethical Wills: Mapping Out Your Most Meaningful Legacy**

Jay Robinson is having the time of his life, in what he describes as the “prime of his life.” The 65-year-old accountant has a standing date every Saturday with his three young grandsons, and all four “boys” relish their time together. Given Robinson’s good health, it seems likely that the good times will continue to roll for quite some time. Yet recently, Robinson began setting aside time to compose letters to his grandsons, which one day will be given to them as their grandfather’s ethical will.

[http://www.parenthood.com/articles.html?article\\_id=6771](http://www.parenthood.com/articles.html?article_id=6771)

### **The Last Lecture: Living Your Childhood Dreams**

Randy Pausch, PhD was a professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon. A month before this video was taken, he was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer, effectively a death sentence. Before his diagnosis, he had been invited to participate in a Carnegie Mellon academic tradition of delivering a “Last Lecture”. Pausch, a father of three, delivered this lecture on September 18, 2007. He died July 25, 2008 at age 47.