

# Legacy writing is an expression of love and a glimpse into your soul

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Legacy writing is an expression of love, a glimpse into your heart and soul, an opportunity to find closure and to heal, and a mechanism for touching the lives of those whom you love in a way that can be remembered always. Legacy writing is a gift to those whom you love and a gift to yourself. What is created will be cherished as it is passed down to future generations. At the outset, you might ask yourself “what in the world could I write about or how would I ever be able to make it interesting and meaningful for those who follow me?” All of us have a valuable life story to write about and to share. Set the stage — for leaving a legacy, for crafting legacy letters, and for writing your memoir — by engaging in journaling.

## Start journaling, today

Journaling is a simple, effective process for sharing your thoughts and feelings; for writing about experiences shared with those whom you love; for expressing insights, guiding principles, words of wisdom; and for serving as a chronicle. You can write about what you want your loved ones to know and remember about your life and about the person you are, and express your final wishes. You can write about what you have learned during your lifetime overall as well as during specific stages of your life. Journaling is also a way to vent privately, to write about what you might not want to share with others but what you may need to think about and process in order to heal. Journaling can be therapeutic and promote emotional wellbeing.

Simply write, without censoring your words or trying to perfect your writing. Find moments in your day to write, every day.

Ways to get started are by engaging in legacy writing list-making exercises, by completing sentence starts or responding to prompts and by answering questions, all of which will stimulate your thinking. Think about themes that you might want to address: turning points in your life, family relationships and history, life goals that you did or did not achieve, accomplishments and failures, regrets, views on religion and spirituality, beliefs about death and dying, and personal values (see Campbell & Svensson, 2015).

List-making legacy writing — Create lists of responses (no more than five, to start out!!!) to the following prompt examples: (1) list the accomplishments that you are most proud of — as a child, as a young adult, as a middle-aged person, and/or as an older adult; (2) list what lessons you have learned during your lifetime; and (3) list what grounds you, what characterizes the foundation of your life. With regard to item #3, letting others know what has grounded you can be useful. In addition, consider what message you want to send to those you leave behind about your foundation, your guiding principles. Will you focus on your strengths or advise others about what might have been included, what you now know were weaknesses? Finally, we encourage you to think about what drives you and your legacy, what personal values you hold near and dear.

Responding to Prompts — Sentence starts and questions can also stimulate ideas. To get your creative juices flowing, reflect on the following prompts and consider how you’d respond: (1) I most want my family, friends and neighbors to remember me for ...; (2) When I look back at everything I have done or have had the opportunity to do, I feel I made the greatest difference in the lives of others

by ...’ (3) The memories that I most want my family to remember, to hold in their hearts are .... Then respond to questions such as (1) What words of wisdom would you share with others, based on a lifetime of experiences in which you have faced challenges, joys, heartbreaks and more?, and (2) If you looked in the mirror and saw yourself at the age of 21, and could interact with your younger self, what advice would you share?

## Crafting legacy letters

Writing sincere, thoughtful legacy letters provides you with the opportunity to indicate what you want your entire family or specific family members to know while you are still alive or after you pass away. You can share personal stories and treasured memories, can wish them well, can express your love, say thank you, ask for forgiveness, express your final wishes and indicate what you hope those you leave behind will remember always.

Legacy letters can be of many types, be targeted for your entire family or for individual family members, for other loved ones. For example, you could write a letter to a family member whom you love, indicating what you hope for her, noting what memories you most treasure about experiences shared, expressing gratitude and more. You could write a letter to a family member with whom you have had unresolved conflict, taking this opportunity to express regrets, to indicate what you hope for him to understand about what you did or did not do, and even what you might want to be forgiven for.

Issues to consider when writing legacy letters — You will be faced with the challenges of deciding if and when you want letters to be sent or to be presented upon your death, and of framing letters in a way that you don’t immediately send the message “I am about to die.” However,

some of us will decide to craft letters, most likely with help from others, shortly before death. Intended recipients may already be fully aware that you are dying and approaching the end of your life, that you are getting everything in order, attending to any final tasks and ensuring that no message from you is left unsaid.

One other sensitive issue needs to be addressed with regard to the purpose of and text included in legacy letters. Ideally, legacy writing is an expression of love, that your legacy is one of love rather than hatred, that what you write will not result in a continuation of pain, prevention of closure or healing for the recipient. Legacy letters are not meant to be a forum for expressing anger, for making final statements of why someone was cut out of your will or why certain assets are not heading his way, for controlling someone from the grave. Written words are forever — what you have written cannot be taken back, cannot be explained or defended by you. Written words can be misinterpreted, can cause incredible pain. After your death, the door is closed to having a conversation about what you meant to say, what you wanted the recipient to remember always.

## Message not to be left unsaid

What message would you want to express that should not be “left unsaid” before you pass away? Who would you direct this message to? Is there anything you else you want to express that was not included in any legacy letters that you decide to write and share, in any conversations that you have had with loved ones?

## Next steps

So where do you go from here? Consider writing a memoir — templates are available on websites, a plethora of books are avail-

able in which you answer questions and are prompted (some are designed to be “gift books”), ideas have been presented here. You could set a timeframe for writing your life story from childhood up to the present, participate in a guided autobiographical group, take an online “memoir writing” computer class, plan to publish your memoir. The possibilities are almost endless.

Leaving a legacy does not have to be done alone. Some older adults and dying individuals may need assistance to engage in legacy writing, in sharing their story, in expressing their final wishes and in crafting legacy letters. Efforts to engage in the process can be completed with other family members, caregivers, volunteers or professionals who could read prompts, interact and make the process supportive and worthwhile.

Sharing your story does not have to be done only in written form. You could make a video; tape questions and answers; develop what is basically a powerpoint presentation. This type of video, tape segments, or presentation could be listened to at your funeral, reading of your will or a celebration of life event.

Memory books could be created. This endeavor is beneficial for individuals living with dementia, for helping them reminiscence to the best of their ability. Memory books offer lifetime “snapshots” of experiences, etc. The process will capture the attention of individuals living with dementia. Individuals will need assistance from others, who should make this endeavor a supportive, relaxing experience. Ideally, the process should commence as soon as possible after a diagnosis of dementia is given. Memory boxes are an option; while books rely on pictures and text, boxes include objects that can be touched and can

trigger memories.

Scrapbooks could be developed. You could include photos, cartoons, lyrics of favorite songs that have special meaning for you, wedding or birth announcements, poetry, clips of newspaper articles, artwork, cherished cards, recipes and so much more.

Consider the possibility of making your legacy writing efforts a multigenerational experience. Family members can pose questions that they most want to know about you and your life. Books and other resources are available to help guide you in this process. Family bonds can be strengthened, relationships can be enhanced.

## Concluding comments

If you are interested in learning more about what has been discussed here, please contact Hillary Wertman, special projects coordinator, Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (MHRB, 419-281-3139, hwertman@ashlandmhrb.org). Recently, the MHRB hosted a FIVE WISHES AND LEAVING A LEGACY event, partnering with Hospice of North Central Ohio and the Area Agency on Aging District 5. Materials were created for the legacy writing workshop. These included a short list of resources to take a look at when starting out, exercises to complete (some of which were included in this article), and examples of legacy letters.

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## Aug. 12 boasts car show, health, safety fair

By **JILL HARTSON**  
UH Samaritan

Stop by UH Samaritan on Main, 663 E. Main St. in Ashland, for a fun and educational day on Saturday, Aug. 12 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. First, stroll through the parking lot for a look at the variety of vehicles on display at the popular Lincoln Highway Car, Rod and Truck Show. Pontiac will be the featured vehicle in this 11th annual show. At this event there will be door prizes, a food vendor and a disc jockey. The show also features participant judging.

Inside the building there will be a variety of health-care professionals and organizations on hand at a health and safety fair. Participate in free screenings and massages, learn hands-only CPR, meet doctors and gather health and safety information. Also, bring your unwanted eye glasses in to be donated to the Lions

Club for distribution to people in developing countries. call 419-207-7879 or email Jill.Hartson@UHospitals.org.  
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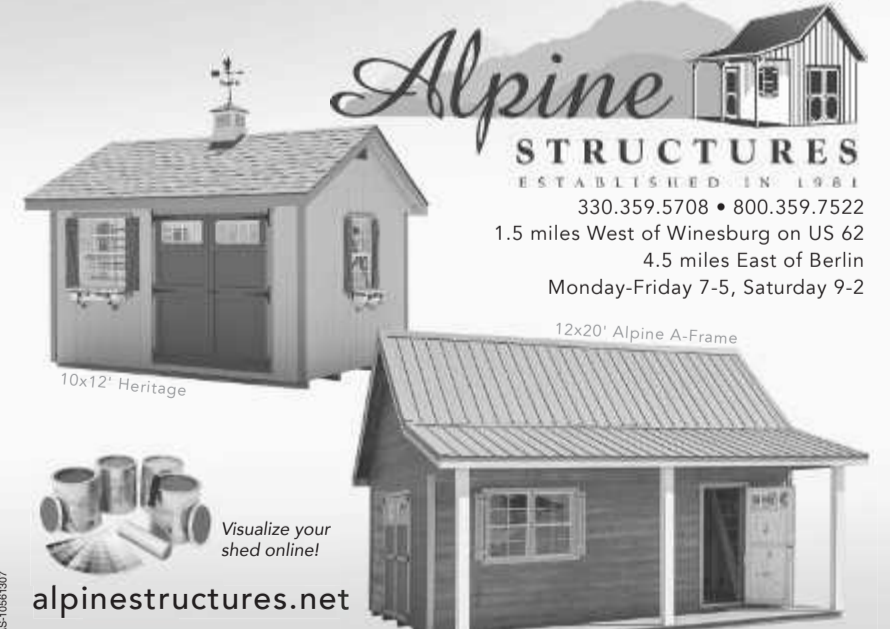
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