

Elder Law: Consider leaving a love letter to family

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We'd like to discuss a document that has little legal effect but can impart to your family members your values as a way to provide a degree of guidance to them after your demise.

Some people call this document an "ethical will," some a "legacy letter" and others, like us, a "family love letter."

The intent is to allow you to express your thoughts and values in such a way as to give your family a better appreciation of your wishes for them and their futures based upon your own experiences.

You want to impart those thoughts that matter the most to you and those for which you most want to be remembered. They can also serve as a guide for your loved ones as, based upon your unique experiences, you can impart to them those values that became most important to you.

Such a "love letter" can afford you the opportunity to show yourself and others how you've learned from past mistakes and, in the process, recognize that you may be coming to terms with your own mortality.

Describe those formative experiences that helped shape and guide your personality, and talk about the individuals who helped you along the way. Share the stories of how they did that.

Have you been blessed in your life? Describe why and how. Blessings can come big and small and from sometimes unusual sources and people. Our descendants often don't have the quiet time to reflect on how they may be blessed. Sometimes they need a reminder.

Have you been somewhat challenged in your life? Well, we all have, to one degree or another. Were you a single parent due to death or divorce? Were you subject to major illness? Let your loved ones know how you may have met and overcome those challenges. Or, if you weren't able to, why not.

Additionally, it can often help, and even feel good, to discuss family history. After all, it's not necessarily all about you but about those family members who helped shape you and share the challenges they faced in entirely different eras.

One of us was reminded of that when, while downsizing, we showed a 10-year-old granddaughter an LP album of the Beatles "Revolver" recording. We were sort of dumbfounded when she said she had never seen an LP before. The point is that unless somewhat imparts these experiences to others, they have less than a full sense of who you may be.

The family love letter can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. Maybe one of your children has special needs and, as a result, more of your attention and resources were devoted to that child. Let them know why and how you expect them to assist in the needs of that child after you are gone.

You can consider separate letters to each of the individuals, as you may want to emphasize different values to each based upon their specific life situation.

Finally, express the dreams and hopes you have for each of the recipients. This may, after all, be the best legacy you can leave.

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