

Words Left Unsaid: Legacy Letter

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Many people die with regrets: regrets that they did not mend damaged relationships; regrets that they did not share their life story; regrets that they never told family and friends how much they cared.

Talking about these heartfelt topics, however, takes courage. These conversations cover sensitive matters and are difficult to start. All too often the words just don't flow.

A "legacy letter" might help you share important thoughts – including memories, gratitude, and love – with family and friends before it's too late.

Legacy Letter

A legacy letter (also known as an ethical will, emotional will, or forever letter) is a message – audio, video, or written – that captures the essence of who you are. It tells your survivors what you want them to know or remember about you and your heritage.

The legacy letter is rooted in Jewish tradition and has been used for thousands of years to pass down personal and family information to loved ones. Unlike a last will and testament, it is not a legal document but can be used to express your intentions and help prevent misunderstandings among those you leave behind.

There is no standard structure for a legacy letter; it can include anything you want to pass along to friends and family. Common components include memories and stories, life lessons and wisdom, core values and beliefs, expressions of love and gratitude, and blessings.

Many sources provide outlines and templates to guide those drafting legacy letters. One popular template is the "Who Matters Most Letter" that was developed as part of the Stanford Letter Project and based on clinical experience with thousands of severely ill patients and their families.

The "Who Matters Most Letter" template guides users through the seven vital tasks of a life review and encourages them to

- 1) Acknowledge the most important people in their life.
- 2) Remember treasured moments with them.
- 3) Apologize to them if you hurt them and ask for their forgiveness.
- 4) Forgive them if they hurt you.
- 5) Express gratitude for their presence in your life.
- 6) Tell them how much you love them.
- 7) Say goodbye.

The template includes an introduction to explain why the letter has been written and a closing that expresses gratitude and love. The template and sample letters are available free of charge at med.stanford.edu/letter

Tips

As you create a legacy letter, keep the following in mind:

Choose an audience and format. Recipients often include children, grandchildren, extended family members, and friends, but can include whoever you wish. You may choose to leave individual messages for different people, tailoring your message and format to each recipient to make it more personal and meaningful.

Be authentic. Write or speak in a way that reflects your own style and character. Be genuine in expressing your thoughts and emotions. Do not be afraid to share personal anecdotes and memories.

Consider the length. A short, meaningful letter or recording will have more impact than a long, rambling one. In early drafts, include everything that comes to mind, but then edit your work to remove repetitions and tighten the language. Ask someone else to review your draft and give you feedback.

Decide when to share your message. You can share your legacy letter before or after the end of your life. The former allows for follow-up conversations with the recipients and could be more satisfying and impactful. If you wait to have your legacy letter distributed until after your death, store it in a safe place such as with other essential documents (e.g., will/trust).

Writing or recording a legacy letter can be a gift to yourself and those you love. It can be a vehicle for self-exploration that brings you a sense of closure about your life and peace as you reminisce and reflect. By documenting your experiences and insights, the message also can become a lasting legacy for those you leave behind – a treasure that words can't describe.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.