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insists that it's simpler — and more important — than you think.

Q: What is the basis of an ethical will?

A: The ethical will is an ancient and sacred tradition. It started in the Book of Genesis when Jacob was dying; he called together his 12 sons, blessed them and died.

In the 20th century, rabbis rediscovered the concept, using the ethical will not just for blessing your children but also passing on your values. "Ethical will" is a scary term. I prefer "legacy letters."

Q: What should be in a legacy letter?

A: Nothing in it can be legally contested. That's not what it's for. It's a letter or, better yet, a series of letters from you to your family that identifies what's important to you. Legacy letters can also include apologies, family histories. Anything that tells about your values with the hope of educating the next generation.

Q: When should you write a letter like this?

A: Anytime! A legacy letter helps put order in our lives. Research about aging finds that this is a time when we gather our thoughts and make sense of our lives. As we start giving away our stuff, going through the house with each child and grandchild to identify which things they'll want when we're gone, we must also share our successes and regrets. We have a responsibility to pass on what we've experienced, our interests, priorities and passions.

Q: How do you get started?

A: Legacy writing can be simple. Set a timer for 15 minutes, pick a topic, be focused and write without interruption. Write one page, a few paragraphs, in your own voice. Don't worry about punctuation, grammar and vocabulary, let that go. Don't be scared off by not being an accomplished writer. Write your values, write your love.

I recommend writing the final version of the letter in your own hand. Otherwise the kids might say, my dad didn't write that, he must have gotten it out of a book.

Q: Is there a formula you recommend?

A: Legacy letters extract lessons from the lives we've lived. For my workshops I created a legacy letter template. It asks the writer to tell a story about something that happened to them that they learned from. The end of the letter involves passing on a blessing that came out of that experience.

Q: Can you give an example of a lesson like that from your own life?

A: I wrote my son and daughter a legacy letter about the summer when I was 22 and living in New York City. I was on the subway, minding my own business. A homeless woman sat down next to me with her two bags. I low-

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