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What's your legacy?

By Tricia Cornell

Rachael Freed helps women put their hopes for the next generation on paper

When Rachael Freed talks about her eldest granddaughter Sophie, the pride in her voice is unmistakable.

When Sophie was 5, Freed started a shared journal that would hold their thoughts, activities, dreams, and drawings - something for just the two of them. Freed presented Sophie with the blank book and her plan for it, and Sophie replied happily, "Oh, and then when you're dead, I'll know everything that we did together."

That's a tough thing to hear from a beloved child, but it was exactly what Freed meant. The journal was her way of sharing her legacy with Sophie after she was gone.

Our legacies - our values, wisdom, and love for the people around us - don't fit neatly into boilerplate wills and estate planning documents. But Freed has made it her mission to help people - women in particular - put their thoughts into writing for coming generations. She is the author of *Women's Lives*, *Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations*. She also conducts workshops and retreats around the country, wherein women work on putting their own legacies in writing.

Freed coined the term "spiritual-ethical will" to describe this sort of documentation.

"It can be demanding," she says of the process, "Or it can be writing a one-page letter to the people you love. It can be that simple."

Freed was inspired to pursue the crafting of legacies by her Jewish heritage. In the biblical book of Genesis, Jacob calls his 12 sons to him while on his deathbed and blesses them and instructs them. In a sense, that was the first spiritual-ethical will. Freed was reminded of this story at a Jewish study retreat in the late 1990s and, as she says, "fell in love with the idea." She says she heard a voice telling her to "turn this into a healing tool for women."

When writing down a legacy, Freed says, people are asking themselves, "How do I want to be remembered? What have I learned? What do I want to pass on?" Asking these questions, she adds, can serve practical purposes, as well. Legacies can be used to pass along instructions and blessings, as Jacob did in the story, and to make known any preferences the writer

may have for the end of her life or her funeral. A written legacy can also help shape estate planning decisions.

"How can you do your financial will if you haven't articulated your values?" asks Freed.

Freed offers individualized consulting services and also conducts one or two five-day legacy-writing retreats each year, in addition to shorter sessions.

At the retreats, groups of six to 12 women work on writing and storytelling exercises that explore their histories and the roots of their values, as well as what they want for the future. A common exercise is to write quickly in 15-minute bursts, then discuss the feelings that have come to the surface.

"At the end of five days," Freed says, "you have two things: You know that you have something to say, and you know that you can write it."

Most participants, according to Freed, are in their 50s and 60s, but younger women also participate. Freed describes the women who are drawn to the work of creating a legacy as people who are undergoing some sort of transition in their lives.

"Our society doesn't do very well with transitions," she says. "We want to get on to the next thing as fast as possible. It's in that trough between [stages] where the creativity is, where the energy is."

As her seminars grew in popularity, Freed began to hear from people around the country who wanted to offer similar programs in their area. She has now developed a 200-page handbook and trained facilitators in seven states. She says she's glad to see the practice grow: "I now have a group of colleagues, so I'm getting nourished, too."

She has also taken the art of legacy writing beyond the relatively privileged walls of conference centers and retreats.

"When I was writing [the book], I was very concerned that it would be only for sophisticated, educated, wealthy, white women," she says. So she contacted the Shakopee Women's Prison and arranged to offer a multipart legacy writing course to women serving extended or life sentences.

The group started with a dozen women, and six or seven were able to stick it out. Freed says that one woman explained that she couldn't continue to come to the meetings because "everything I have been trying to forget, you are making me remember."

Although the prison group is no longer meeting, Freed hopes to expand the reach of her legacy work through the nonprofit Women's Legacies Foundation she established.

For more information about retreats and workshops:
www.WomensLegacies.com