

Claire Willis

## **Creating A Legacy Out of Everyday Living**

For the last 10 years, I have been facilitating support and writing groups for people who were living with and dying from cancer. Like those with whom I worked, I too wondered how I would be remembered, what kind of difference my life was making and whether I was doing the work I had been placed on this earth to do. And I wondered, even though I was doing work that I loved, what was the deeper purpose of my daily life. I wrote about these questions in my journal frequently but I did not seem to get beyond asking the questions.

When I read about a workshop in Minneapolis offered by Rachael Freed based on her book *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies*, I was introduced to a new way of holding these questions. By creating an on-going legacy through various structured writing exercises, many of the daily questions about which I had been journaling for so long found a new meaning and a vehicle for expression

Rachael began the workshop by introducing six basic universal needs that legacy writing addresses which are needs common to all of us: they include the need

- to belong
- to be known
- to be remembered
- to have our lives make a difference
- to be blessed and to bless
- to celebrate life

She then asked us to consider a series of questions as a backdrop for our legacy writing:

- What was most important to me?
- What did I love and value most about my life?
- What things have I done in my life about which I feel most proud?.

We made a list of instructions or messages that we had received from our family, community and religious background. This list included explicit as well as implicit instructions we might have received. We were then asked to make another list of instructions that we would want to leave for future generations - our children, a partner, close friends or relatives.

At this point my list consisted of the following:

Be generous and give anonymously  
Find what is rejuvenating in being out doors  
Find work in which your passion and the world's needs intersect.  
Always consider how other people might feel  
Try to infuse honesty with kindness

Then Rachael asked us to convert these "instructions" into blessings using stems that might include some of the following:

May you always...  
May (God) or your higher power...  
May you be blessed as I have been with...  
I bless you with...  
I wish for you...  
.I hope for you...

Following the reframing and converting of instructions into blessings, we were asked to choose one of the instructions, emphasizing the importance of being certain that we had written a blessing and not a re-written instruction. This turned out to be an important distinction. As I was writing my instructions I had noticed that I felt some intensity and urgency, especially around the first one so I chose to pursue it.:

Be generous and give anonymously

When I converted it into a blessing I wrote it as:

May you find a way to give anonymously.

As I re read this I realized that it still sounded like an instruction, that I had rewritten a command and that I had not really "softened" the language sufficiently so that it felt like a blessing. Rachael had suggested experiencing the difference between writing from our minds and writing from our hearts. So I re wrote it again:

May you always be guided through life by generosity and the capacity to give without having to be known or seen for your gifts.

As I rewrote it a second time, I could feel how the language I chose softened something inside me as well. The harshness of a command became a wish for

my children to do something differently than I had done, to save them from a sorrow I had experienced. I could even feel grief in my body as I wrote it and knew that there was a great deal of feeling behind this initial instruction. I knew that I could not just tell them to do something differently than I had done, but that perhaps if I shared how I learned this lesson, that story might remain with them in a way that an instruction would not.

Rachael then asked us to consider why we had chosen this particular blessing at this particular time, implying that this was not just a random occurrence. What was behind our particular wish to pass this along? At that point I wrote the story from my life from which this instruction and blessing had come. As I did this, she urged us to write from our hearts, integrating the wise part of ourselves with the personal so that our legacy came from the strength of our vulnerability. The following writing stirred up a great deal of surprising grief:

May you always be guided through life by generosity and the capacity to give without having to be known. There was a time in the 50's when I began to do retreat work for people living with cancer. I would spend 7 — 10 days in residence and at the end of the week, I would donate my salary back to the organization. I enjoyed the gratitude that came my way. I loved this little grass roots group and I was so committed to this organization that in addition to my week's salary, I made a monthly donation on my credit card for a number of years following my work there. At some point, I decided I would stop the monthly giving to that group and find a local non profit that was similar work. I called the retreat center and explained my decision to them.

A couple of months later, I got a phone call from the executive director, inviting me to return to the retreat center to facilitate a week long retreat for them. I immediately wondered whether or not they wanted me to come do the work because I might donate more money or whether it was because they wanted my skills. That persistent question led me to decide, like your grandfather had always done, to start giving anonymously. Now I feel that my relationships are more protected from my own questions, insecurities and fears. While I may miss the acknowledgement that can come from making donations, the clarity of my relationships feels much more important and I have found a way to protect myself from myself and those persistent questions.

When I completed this exercise, I realized that I had learned a way to share life experiences and convert them into a legacy for my loved ones. I had only to leave open my heart to the intensity of an instruction to realize that it came from a hard-earned lesson, something that might still contain a seed of sorrow or wisdom that needed my attention.

It gave me a way to work with sorrows, to explore mistakes and my strengths. It gave me a container for reflection and it helped me transform wishes for others into blessings for others. Over and over, this method invited me to look inside to see why a specific instruction or blessing was so important to me. Where did my heart need to soften and break open a little more? Where had it been broken and need healing or new meaning? Where might there be a possible teaching for myself or others?

Legacies are vehicles for all of us to be remembered in ways that we might not have thought to share with the next generation. They invite us to move from didactic instructions into trusting more deeply the strength of our own vulnerability. That particular strength becomes a blessing for others as well as a self blessing. And it allows us to pass on our heart-filled wisdom and experiences to those who we love and will leave behind.

Freed, Rachael. *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies*. Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 2003.

