

INTRODUCTION: REFRAMING LEGACY

“At least two implications flow from our inevitable mortality. First, because we will die, we need to pay attention to how we live. Second, if we care about anyone, we need to think about leaving something of ourselves behind.” Susan Bosek, *Legacy Project*¹

The exhibit in a modest museum in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania transfixed me. A simple mural depicted three of our earliest known human ancestors loping along in a vast African plain, peering back at a smoldering volcano looming behind them. Beneath the artist’s rendition of an actual event was the real marvel—a cast of their actual footprints, found nearby, which had been encased in the lava ash that presumably claimed their lives some 3.6 million years ago. My fingers traced the footprints of what appears to have been a family. Here, preserved for millennia, is a bit of their lives and the impression they made on this earth.²

Most of us leave behind “footprints” that vanish within a few generations at best. Nonetheless, these footprints are our precious, unique legacies, connecting us with unborn generations. I believe that we humans are hard-wired to find and make meaning of our lives, to make a positive difference, and to hope that some evidence that we existed and mattered continues. For many of us, myself included, bringing children into the world sharpens our awareness of legacy. Awareness can turn to an urge, often strong, as we progress beyond midlife or face a terminal disease or other life-threatening situation. As we age, our personal horizons often expand to include past and future generations. We tend to see our place in a larger continuum of people, places, and time. And we understand that we acquire a certain kind of immortality through what we leave behind—memories, stories, artifacts, and influences—preserving, for at least a few generations, something of who we were and what we stood for.

During most of my forty-five years of professional life, I have worked with people of all ages who were seeking to discover their authentic selves and to craft lives and work of fulfillment and meaning. For nearly twenty years I’ve been exploring the challenges, possibilities, and gifts of aging

by leading workshops on themes like “Passion and Purpose: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life” and, more recently, “Legacies of the Heart.”

My passionate interest in legacy grew naturally out of my work on the second half of life and the question, how can we make the best use of the gift of added longevity? Personally, losing many close friends prematurely, one in childhood and many during my fifties, heightened my awareness that we are leaving legacies all the time. And hearing the intensifying drumbeat of my own approaching mortality simply added urgency to the mix.

The question for us all is this: *How do we live so that we shape our legacies consciously, so that the best of who we are and what we value lives on, at least in our family, for at least three generations? Can we preserve our footprints that long?*

This book challenges you to consciously cultivate your legacies, from early adulthood and especially as you navigate midlife and elderhood. Legacies improve with a special kind of intention and attention, which I have described using the concept of living and leaving legacies of the heart.

What is Legacy?

Legacy is often narrowly construed as the contents of a will, a gift or bequest of property, or the simple receipt of an inheritance. In this book, legacy means so much more.

Legacy is:

- as general as the imprint of your life that lasts into the next generation and as specific as a single possession (for example, a family heirloom) willed to a survivor;
- as mighty as a religious or scientific paradigm shift or great artistic output and as mundane as a single family recipe passed down the generations;
- as public as an architectural monument and as private as a letter written to children or grandchildren;

- as tangible as a bank check and as intangible as a seemingly casual word of advice;
- as life-denying as the terrorists' bombs at the 2013 Boston Marathon and as life-affirming as the many acts of heroism in response.

Thus, legacy is anything—tangible or intangible, of any size. Our legacies are what we intentionally or unintentionally give, bequeath, or leave behind during our life or at our death that last beyond our death. Some of us leave public legacies in the form of organizations and their work, published or sold artistic works, public buildings and other structures, or widely disseminated ideas. But most of our legacies remain in the private realm of the family, friends, colleagues, students, and other individuals whose lives we have significantly influenced.

Although the concept of legacy is enormously rich, multi-faceted, and complex, its meaning can be boiled down to *the imprint of our lives that endures in some form*. It is the imprint of our essence and our actions, our being and doing. It lives on in the memories of those we have touched and in their own essences and actions, and in tangible records of all kinds that embody or signify the intangible qualities.

Why Legacy?

End-of-life experts have noted that people almost always ask variants of these three questions on their deathbeds as a way to leave the world with a sense of meaning and completion: *Have I given and received love? Did I live my life and not someone else's? Have I left the world a little better than I found it?*³

These questions are all about legacy, and I believe they are too important to be left till the end of life. They have increasingly preoccupied me, as I have spent much of the last twenty years helping people navigate the second half of their lives. As I become an elder myself, with intimations of mortality becoming indications, I increasingly want my life to have meant something to others and to have made some positive difference to the world. And I want to be more intentional and generous as I continue to leave my footprints.

Like the idea of legacy itself, these deathbed questions are actually about living, about how—from a big-picture perspective—we want to live our lives. We are all leaving legacies all the time, whether consciously or not, because who we are and what we say and do has an impact on others that often persists and ripples outward and forward in time. Given the inevitability of leaving legacies, don't we all, deep down, want to leave legacies that have made a positive difference in at least one person's life and left the world a little better? As I have noted, the concern for finding meaning and leaving positive legacies intensifies in the second half of life, and this is a developmental “urge” (in the words of pioneering gerontologist-physician Gene Cohen) we should not ignore.⁴

Finally—and this is key—the more *intentional* and *heart-centered* we are about living our legacies, the more likely that our legacies will be positive and we can answer affirmatively and throughout our lives the universal deathbed questions.

Legacies of the Heart

A fundamental principle of this book is “live and give from the heart.” When you live from the heart, you live from your most authentic, generous, compassionate self. When you give from the heart, you leave tangible and intangible legacies of the heart that are true gifts—gifts of yourself without strings or expectations. In simplest terms, they are legacies born of love.

What then of legacies coming from love's opposite, fear? Fear-based legacies reflect survival instincts harbored by the ego, such as competition, exclusion, and domination. Legacies born from fear can inflict damage that ranges from hurtful to horrific. Most if not all of us receive, absorb, and initiate legacies based in fear. We also receive, absorb, and initiate legacies where fear and love are intertwined, as well as legacies based in love.

The question is, *do you choose to live and act more out of love or fear?* Of course, very few, if any, of us can live from a heart-centered place even most of the time. But our hearts can be touchstones to inspire and guide our choices. Although we have little control over the legacies we receive or how others receive our legacies, we have a great deal of choice in shaping the legacies we leave. I believe that the surest path to leaving

positive legacies is through opening our hearts as fully as possible to our most authentic, loving, generous selves. This enables us to make conscious daily choices that add up to what, in the end, we leave behind.

Visuals and Metaphors

For those readers who prefer models to metaphors, here is a simple one. Imagine a double funnel, something like an hourglass, but open at both the top and bottom. Now imagine a heart enclosed in a circle that joins the two funnels, giving the hourglass an expanded waist. Coming into the heart from the top are the legacies we have received—the totality of our experiences. And emanating down from the heart are our own legacies that we have given and are giving.

Coming into the top of the funnel are legacies from our life experiences, cultural and social prescriptions, ancestral influences, and our genes, as well as from parents, teachers, mentors, families, and other small groups. The incoming legacies can be positive, negative, and mixed.

We filter these legacies through our minds, personalities, and hearts (the expanded waist of the funnel), and we choose whether and how to pass them on, simply by virtue of who we are and the actions we take. Yet we are not always aware of the filtering we do. Ideally, in order to leave our most positive legacies, we *consciously* make those choices from the heart space of love rather than the primitive-ego space of fear. The heart center is the *ideal* creator of our legacies.

All our legacies bear our unique stamp, whether we are, for example, just passing on a family recipe, modifying that recipe or including it in a family cookbook, or creating a new legacy out of the whole cloth of our total experience, perhaps starting a business based on that recipe. The most important legacies we leave usually come from our roles as parents, grandparents, other relatives, mentors and teachers, and friends, and they are often intangible qualities of character, values, and essence. The most visible (and sometimes most admired) of our legacies are public—works of art, inventions or ideas, institutions, businesses, programs, organizations, buildings. Perhaps most meaningful to those on the receiving end are personal material legacies left behind, such as treasured possessions, artistic creations, memoirs, and legacy letters.

The funnel opens down and out as we leave our legacies to be absorbed, rejected, passed on, and transformed by the people whose lives we touch. And they in turn may pass them on so that our legacies ripple outward and over time in ways we can hardly imagine.

In addition to the double funnel symbol for legacy, footprints and gardens frequently appear as additional metaphors. In the garden metaphor our legacies are what we inherit, sow, cultivate, harvest, and pass on that endure in some form after our deaths. The central question is, how consciously and lovingly do we tend our gardens?

Legacies of the Heart: Living a Life that Matters

This book is organized in accordance with a process I've developed to help people explore their legacies. It consists mainly of stories and vignettes, which I believe best capture the nuances of legacy and the points I want to make. (But in no way can the stories completely convey the complexity of each protagonist's legacies.) These stories come from my own life experience and that of clients, workshop participants, colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. I have also found inspiration in the media and retold some of the stories I have found there. My hope is that you will discover meanings that I have not imagined, and to that end I have added questions for reflection.

The book consists of four parts, bookended by this Introduction and an Epilogue ("My Lessons from the Journey"). Part I, "Our Legacy Inheritance," lays out a cornucopia of possible legacies. (Chapter 1) and adds an evaluative lens (Chapter 2). Part II, "Living and Choosing from the Heart" develops the concepts of legacies of the heart, life purpose, and forgiveness (Chapter 3) and considers the choices we can make for more positive legacies (Chapter 4). Part III, "The Legacies We Leave," takes us to legacies we have already left and can still leave—as parents and teachers (Chapter 5), as players in the public arena (Chapter 6), and as givers of tangible personal legacies (Chapter 7). Part IV, "The Long and Broad View," explores how our legacies may land in unexpected places and times (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 argues for adopting an ancient and neglected legacy as a touchstone for our own legacies, namely, a multi-generation, interdependence perspective, which wise elders may be uniquely equipped

to model and advocate. Finally, those inspired to further explore their own legacies will find additional information and guidance in the endnotes and five appendices.

May you find both pleasure and treasure in the pages to come!