



By sharing your wisdom, experience and gifts with others, you build a legacy that will last far beyond your years.

★★★★★ Chelsea Greenwood |

**IMAGINE YOUR FUNERAL. Not the brightest topic, to be sure, but one worth serious thought—no matter what your age. Your family and friends have gathered to honor your life. But what do you leave behind? Beyond the contents of your last will and testament, what part of you remains on earth even after you've passed away?**

Your legacy. It's something you create during your life solely to benefit future generations, something you may never see come to fruition. Just like a farmer who plants a tree knowing he'll never live to taste its fruits, a legacy is a gift you leave behind without expecting anything in return. Think of John F. Kennedy and the space program or Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights. They died before their legacies were fulfilled, but they will be forever revered for their efforts.

Just like that farmer's sprouting tree, legacies don't happen overnight—and they don't happen by accident. They're deliberately crafted over years of hard work and dedication. But you don't have to give up your worldly possessions and become a Mother Teresa to start building your legacy now. Here's how.

#### **Understand your legacy.**

First, you need to really grasp why it's important to leave a legacy in the first place.

"The legacy we leave is part of the ongoing foundations of life," says business philosopher and author Jim Rohn. "Those who came before leave us the world we live in. Those who will come after will have only what we leave them. We are stewards of this world, and we have a calling in our lives to leave it better than how we found it, even if it seems like such a small part."

Look back on your own life, and you'll see legacy-leavers everywhere, from the founding fathers of our nation to your parents, former teachers and elder family members. All of these people left you with instructions on how to live—for better or for worse. And now it's your turn to decide what kind of legacy you'll leave for posterity.

#### **Choose your legacy.**

Legacies come in different shapes and forms, requiring varying levels of effort and commitment. Some choose to leave financial legacies, supporting causes such as funding breast cancer research or a new building at one's alma mater. Other legacies are institutional, like when somebody founds a nonprofit or builds a business that's a positive force in the community. All of these examples have their value and place in society.

Yet, in his *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John C. Maxwell believes in a third, more lasting avenue of legacy. "Too often, leaders put their energy into organizations, buildings, systems or other lifeless objects," says the leadership expert and bestselling author. "But only people live on after we are gone. Everything else is temporary."

Gerontologist and author Ken Dychtwald reached a similar conclusion in a recent survey focusing on elder generations and their baby boomer children. He and colleagues at his company, Age Wave, discovered four "pillars of legacy": values and life lessons, instructions and wishes to be fulfilled, possessions of emotional value, and property and money. When asked which pillar meant the most to them, both groups answered resoundingly: values and life lessons.

"There's this enormous craving, this desire for people in their maturity to share what they've learned, to

pass on lessons of a lifetime, to teach, to feel that their life experience is being invested, even planted, into the field of tomorrow," Dychtwald says. "There was also a similar response—a natural, innate appetite on the part of younger generations—to receive that."

### **Focus your legacy.**

Granted, conveying the accumulated lessons of a lifetime is easier said than done. In deciding exactly what you want to put out into the world, look inward first.

Start by identifying your strengths. "The most obvious place to look is your career—but don't just focus on your job title, Dychtwald says. "You are trained to think of your skills and talents as what you do at work," he says in his latest book *With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance in Work and Life*. "But if you think of them as core strengths instead, you can begin to see how they are more widely applicable. You're not just an administrative assistant; you're someone who gets things done. You're not just a retail manager; you're someone who can spot the strengths in others and suit them to the task."

Talk to your colleagues, friends and family members for their insight. Keep a running list, and see which strengths come up most frequently. Often, others see our gifts more clearly than we do.

Also, consider what topics and activities you're passionate about and that you find interesting. "Think about how you spend your time," Dychtwald says. "Most of us tend to be drawn—either directly or indirectly—to the settings, activities and people that allow us to express our interests."

In short, your legacy should be a labor of love—not a chore.

Next, use the findings from your introspection to establish a "life sentence." Writer and politician Clare Boothe Luce embraced this idea of "a statement summarizing the goal and purpose of one's life," says Maxwell. His own statement has changed over time—from "I want to be a great pastor" to "I want to be a great communicator"—but he thinks that he's finally settled on a winner. "My life sentence is, 'I want to add value to leaders who will multiply value to others.'"

This statement is important because it "not only sets the direction for your life but it also determines the legacy you will leave," he says. Focus on your life sentence throughout your journey, and use it to keep you on track.

### **Live your legacy.**

Now that you have a plan of action, it's time to implement it. "What must you change in the way you conduct yourself so that you live that legacy?" Maxwell asks. "Your list may include behavioral changes, character development, education, working methods, relationship-building style and so on. Only by changing the way you live will you be able to create the legacy you want to leave."

Both Maxwell and Dychtwald compare the act of leaving a legacy to passing a baton. "If you've ever watched a relay race, the most important moment of the race is the passing of the baton," Dychtwald says. "The art of handing off that baton is quite spectacular when it's done well. In our society, we don't put that much credence on sitting at the feet of our elders and allowing them to transfer to us the legacy of their lives. And I think that's a great loss."

So, now that you're in the role of the elder, the baton-passer, who will be the recipient? Who will you invite to sit at your feet? Picture your life—and the people in it—as a succession of increasingly larger rings reaching out from a center point: you. Now think about how you can impart your legacy upon the people of those rings, starting with your family. Both your actions and words leave a legacy behind for your children and younger family members, so make sure that you lead by example as well as by what you say. As they grow older, these younger generations will likely seek your wisdom and want to hear about your life experiences. Share the lessons that have meant the most to you.

For many, the next ring outward is one's primary occupation. Think about whom you could mentor in your work environment and how. Which of your core strengths could benefit others in their pursuit of success? Where do you see unrealized potential, and how can you unleash it?

Many might think that today's cutthroat business environment isn't the place for cultivating such relationships—but Dychtwald disagrees. "The soul of American capitalism is, in its heart, enormously generous of spirit," he says. "This idea that business shouldn't solely be about profit-making but contributing to people's lives and trading wisdom, trading positive experiences, has largely been covered over for decades."

"The culture of work has largely become fragmented by people trying to serve their own needs and

short-term loyalties. I think there's much legacy that can be accomplished with your work team, with the way people relate to each other, joining forces with the idea of people coming together to do something great."

Next, look even farther outward (perhaps even outside your comfort zone) to how you can benefit strangers through different groups and organizations. New York City lawyer Matthew Weiss does just that. For the past nine years, Weiss has been a member of the nonprofit Entrepreneurs' Organization, mentoring up-and-coming businesspeople and networking with other small-business owners (Weiss's eponymous law firm is the third company he has started).

"I'm always looking to help other people with what they need," he says. "I meet someone and I want to know, 'What are your challenges in your business? What are your challenges in your life?' And I try and put people together to solve those problems."

Weiss says even when he doubts how useful he can be to the 20- and 30-something entrepreneurs whom he mentors, he's always surprised how his advice can make a difference.

"I didn't realize how much value I had to offer them and the clarity I could provide when they're trying to figure out what their issue might be or how to overcome the issue," says the husband and father of three. "Watching their faces light up when I give them what I think is a pretty simple answer...for me, it's really rewarding to watch that 'light bulb' moment occur."

And, after all, isn't that what it's all about—that "light bulb" moment, illuminating the lives of generations to come, helping them navigate the road ahead? Dychtwald thinks so.

"What's the purpose of having 60, 80, 100 years of life?" he asks. "It's not just to have an enormous wealth of experiences. But I think it's to have time and energy and the resources to teach, to give it back. [Developmental psychologist Erik] Erikson had this great quote: 'I am what survives of me.' That's really a very different sort of battle cry. Stepping out of one's moment in time and thinking about oneself in the chain of development from generation to generation and being motivated to not only make something of oneself—but to share it."

 **decide** ★★★★★

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## Talk Back

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### Excellent!

October 13, 2009 1:55 PM

Chelsea, This was an excellent article! Really made me think and ponder. Thank you so much for addressing the issue of passing the torch instead of just living till you die leaving nothing behind. I hope you will continue to inspire others to live outside themselves. Thank you.

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