

Your Legacy

It has become a popular endeavor these days to write an “ethical will” or “spiritual legacy” for our loved ones which we may then leave for them, along with our material assets, at our death. It’s a wonderful notion, really, that if we undertake writing out our truest, deepest, and best commitments, we can pass them on with greater authority to our families and friends. Who wouldn’t want to leave to your children the finest glimpses of God that you have ever had, the brightest bits of joy, the warmest love, and the most healing hopes? Reflecting and writing out our own vision of such things can be a great gift. But often, I think, we give gifts just as stirring and lovely -- or even more so --without ever quite recognizing that we have.

Edgar Guest, a renowned American poet of the early 20th century, tells of a neighbor by the name of Jim Potter who ran the drug store in the small town where Edgar Guest lived. Guest recalled that daily he would pass this neighbor on the street and they would smile and exchange greetings. But it was a mere casual relationship.

Then came the tragic night in the life of Edgar Guest when his first born child died. He felt lonely and defeated. The days that followed were grim, indeed, and he was overcome with grief. A week or so after his child’s death, Guest had reason to go to the drug store of his neighbor, and when he entered, Jim Potter motioned for him to come behind the counter. “Eddie,” he said, “I want to express to you the great sympathy that I have for you at this time. All I can say is that I am terribly sorry, and if you need me to do anything, you can count on me.”

Many years later Edgar Guest wrote of that encounter in one of his books. This is how he worded what it meant to him: “Just a person across the way, a passing acquaintance, Jim Potter may have long since forgotten that moment when he extended his hand in sympathy, but I shall never forget it, never in all my life. To me it stands out like the silhouette of a lonely tree amidst a crimson sunset.”

Jim Potter’s kind act and gentle, soothing words were probably offered without any premeditation, without intent to be remembered or be influential. But they were offered with care, from the heart, and they were of lasting significance in a life. We have the chance to influence others’ lives like that hundreds of times along the way – without fanfare and without fuss, but with love.

Have you ever wondered how people will remember you when you come to the end of life’s journey? We would encourage you to go ahead and write an “ethical will” or “spiritual legacy” for your family and friends. That will help them to remember what you believe to be important about your life. But never forget that how you live, every singly day, will tell them far more.

Perhaps when you come to the end of your life’s journey people will say: “When I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, when I was a stranger you welcomed me.” Such small, seemingly insignificant but unforgettable acts, may be among the best legacies you could ever offer.