



The SERENDIPITY of Writing One's FINAL WISHES

BY ELIZABETH HUMPHRIES, RN, MSN, CNM

"To die will be an awfully big adventure."

—Peter Pan, by J.M. Barre

Conscious dying is a fledgling philosophy of end-of-life care sweeping the country as it inspires innovative thinking about death. It has spread far and wide as people seek to understand, cope, and even celebrate this time in our lives in new and creative ways. The conscious-dying movement has sparked new thought and writing, including works by hospice and palliative care professionals, like Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, Jessica Nutik Zitter's *Extreme*

Measures: Finding a Better Path to the End of Life, and John Abraham's *How to Get the Death You Want: A Practical and Moral Guide*. Abraham, a spokesperson for the group Final Exit Network, includes in his appendix: A Day to be Celebrated, We Used to Die Better, and Let Your Wishes be Known to Your Family.

You may be ahead of the game and have your will completed, funeral home chosen (or completed home funeral instructions), burial plot paid for, and documents and powers of attorney all notified, signed, and ready for any contingency. Maybe

you have spoken with family members or others in your life, discussing the end-of-life options for treatment and all the "what ifs" that can pop up and surprise us during this tumultuous time. If you are like most, however, you have probably not even started this process. Moreover, you may not have thought about the end of your life as a powerful and educational event for all of the ones you love and leave behind.

What are your final wishes for leaving an enduring legacy? A final story? A goodbye event that hopes to capture your personal message

of hope, love, history, change, and growth for future generations? This is what a final-wishes document may capture. It's a deeper dive than a will and testament. It's your voice, song, and blessing to those of us who live our lives remembering you. It's truly one of your final gifts to those you love, as it teaches those left behind how to approach and navigate a loved one's dying with truth, grace, and beauty.

When writing a final-wishes document, the point is to think outside the box. Who are you and what has your life been about? Here is a brief checklist of some areas you may want to include.

- Do you want a traditional funeral home service or another option, such as a parade, singalong, party, or dance or a home funeral planned with your family?
- Would you like a video or story written about your life to be shared at your funeral? What would be included? Do you have any pictures or special moments or life lessons you learned that you'd like to share? How did you live your life? What events changed you, shaped your life, and what did you learn along the way? What can you tell us about your journey and the adventures you had? What should we remember? What is your advice for those of us who are left? This is your chance to give messages to those you love. You can write letters for special ones to open after your death or on important occasions, such as the birth of a future grandchild.
- Do you have any regrets? Any old business you need to resolve? Write them down. Letters are a good way to send a message

after you've passed or before. Even if a person has died before you, it's fine to bring up and resolve old issues. Many who are nearing the end of life have a deep need to resolve old battles and misunderstandings. This is a time to bring peace, comfort, and forgiveness, including those who may be affected by our choices who may have been too young to understand why those choices were made. A few words of reconciliation go a long way at this time. It's a good time to use the opportunity for healing.

For more support, death doulas can guide us through the death process, and are experts in helping to develop a final-wishes plan. Hospice spiritual counselors and grief counselors are often available through your local hospices. For more information about death doulas, home funerals, and green burial options, visit walkingeachotherhomemadison.org, thresholdcarecircle.org, seasonsoflifemadison.com, and naturalpath-sanctuary.org.

Elizabeth Humphries, RN, MSN, CNM, is the owner of Seasons of Life, LLC, a senior home care and end-of-life support service in the Madison area. (608) 770-2730, liz@seasonsoflifemadison.com. seasonsoflifemadison.com.



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(877) 356-4514

info@hhvns.org

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5395 E. Cheryl Pkwy., Madison 53711
(608) 276-4660

info@agrace.org

agrace.org

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147 W. Rockwell St., Jefferson 53549
(920) 674-6255

info@rainbowhospicecare.org

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