



Chapter 1

SPIRITUAL WILLS: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO



What exactly is a spiritual will? It is easier to begin by telling you what it is not.

A spiritual will is not a last will and testament, the best-known form of communicating with loved ones after a death in most Western cultures. Heirs sometimes wait in anticipation of hearing someone's last will and testament in order to receive money, property, heirloom jewelry, or other valuables that they've been hoping to acquire. This book is something different.

It is not necessary to wait until Social Security age to think about your legal will, and yet, most people wait until late in life to prepare one. Please don't make that mistake when it comes to a spiritual will. Why? Because this is too important to postpone.

Throughout our adult lives, we need to think seriously about life and what our individual lives mean. Who are we and who do we want to be? We need to remember, direct (or redirect), and plan now in order to make the contribution we want to make to our family, our friends, our profession, our neighborhood, our country, the world. The reflections we focus on will help us to decide what it means to live now and into the future.

We are choosing what we want to experience more of, or more deeply: life, love, family, faith, career, ministry—the imprint that we will make. It is this that will be the material for what we want to be remembered by, for, and as. All of this is so much more important than a legal will!

Begin to figure this out now and the process will help you to direct what you do and who you will become in the decades to come. Writing a spiritual will is a way of discerning what is of enough value to you to dedicate your vision, your gifts, and your energy to—so that, by the time you get to my age, you will be proud of the life you have lived. You will have created, with God’s help, the life that you want to be remembered for. You will be able to look back on what you wrote in this spiritual will and say: I did it!

A spiritual will is also about what you have learned: perhaps values formed by love, friendship, service, success, failure, relationships, integrity, as well as your personal moral tenor. Expressed in your unique, personal voice—not in legalese—a spiritual will concerns who you are and who you have become over the course of your life: your values, interests, experiences, relationships, and perhaps your faith. Much more than an accounting of your earnings, your stuff, a spiritual will articulates your deepest values for your loved ones to remember you by.

This Is Not a New Idea

Our Jewish brothers and sisters are often encouraged to write what is called in Jewish moral teaching, an ethical will. Rabbi Jack Riemer

and Dr. Nathaniel Stampfer have described ethical wills as containing “the desire to bequeath to their descendants an instructive account of the ideals and *midot* (traits, measures of refinement) closest to their hearts.”² The purpose is to transmit one’s personal reflection on what it has meant to live life as a Jew, and on the motivating values and events in one’s life experience. Riemer and Stampfer make clear that ethical wills have their roots in the Bible and the Talmud.

The purpose of the book you are holding now is to create something similar to an ethical will, but from the specific understanding of your spiritual life and practice, reflecting on how your spirituality is living out of, and based upon, your faith and interests, the use of your gifts, and the endeavors, accomplishments, perhaps even failures, that have marked your life. A spiritual will must have roots in the spiritual tradition of your identity. It is like an ethical will, deeply humanitarian, moral, and intellectual, but it is also more than that.

Who Is This For?

Many people today no longer identify as belonging to an established church or system of religious belief, but define themselves as broadly “spiritual.” Being spiritual can mean many things, but usually a spirituality can be recognized by one’s activities. These non-church-going activities might include sports or body work (yoga, tai chi, etc.); artistic, musical, or literary interests; vocational accomplishments; or independent spiritual endeavors such as Eastern and Western forms of prayer, meditation, and other practices.

You who are broadly spiritual can benefit from creating a spiritual will just as much as the person who is involved in an organized faith. *All* people, in my experience, find creating a spiritual will to be a deeply reflective experience. While eulogies are generally another person’s remembrance of you (which, by the way, you never get to hear!), creating

a spiritual will is a way that you define yourself. In this way, crafting your own spiritual will can be similar to writing your own eulogy! Creating one, now, might even affect the way that you live the rest of your life—as you “hear” yourself say what is most important to you.

In a spiritual will we describe what is important to us, and what is worthy of being remembered, even imitated, from our lives. The value of going through this process is that you can choose what you feel reflects not only your actions and deeds, but your soul. A spiritual will is a summary of your unique reflections about life and living from the perspective of the core beliefs and principles that have given meaning to your life.

In order to get started, begin by asking yourself some basic questions. Remember, for instance, those first two questions from my philosophy professor:

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

These are good launching pads. Ponder your answers to them, first, from a familial point of view. What did your family teach you that you have tried to embody? Most of us can go back in memory, as well as to written and photographic records, at least to our grandparents, and even sometimes to our great-grandparents, but not much further unless we do a real ancestry search. Ancestry studies can take us back many more generations to other times, countries, cultures, economies, and the challenges which previous generations faced.

What have previous generations learned and passed on to you? Because of changing times, many of the things learned in and from previous generations may no longer be relevant, but the values and wisdom with which the decisions were made, as well as the consequences of those decisions, are worth reflecting upon. What was important to them, in their generation, which transcends time and place? Some examples

might be love of family, beauty around them, opportunities for education and employment, a community with mutual compatible interests, particular beliefs. Or, perhaps, the opposites of these! Pause and consider these things as you ponder “Who am I?” and “Where did I come from?”

What one generation learns, another may ignore, reject, forget, or even misunderstand.³ The wisdom of some of the past generations’ choices, in their time, may not be relevant in today’s world, but certainly something was learned, either positive or negative. This process will probably make you wish that your grandparents, great-grandparents, and beyond had written spiritual wills for you! This is one of the reasons why you are going through the process to create one now: to leave behind for your future generations.

There is an ongoing challenge for the present to learn from the past. Generations that have come before us still live in our souls and sometimes in our hearts. They are actually part of our DNA. When we can join time and space to the here and now we may discover the wisdom, or perhaps the folly, of our forebears. It is good to pass on to the next generation the wisdom and the truths that we have come to know, as well as the lessons, joys, and sorrows that have come to make us who we are.

Record your answers to those first two questions in chapter 5 (pages 51–62). This is where you will compose your spiritual will. You may also download a pdf or Word document at www.avemariapress.com/myspiritualwill.

As we go on to the next steps, keep also in mind that writing a spiritual will is one means of discovering yourself, and the process presupposes and even demands a true and honest knowledge of who you are and where you have come from. This won’t work if you are not willing to be honest.

Edgar Albert Guest (1881–1959) helped all of us reflect on our true selves when he wrote this searching poem, titled “Myself”:

I have to live with myself and so
I want to be fit for myself to know.
I want to be able as days go by,
Always to look myself straight in the eye;
I don't want to stand with the setting sun
And hate myself for the things I've done
I don't want to keep on a closet shelf
A lot of secrets about myself
And fool myself as I come and go
Into thinking no one else will ever know
The kind of person I really am,
I don't want to dress up myself in sham,
I want to go out with my head erect
I want to deserve all men's respect;
But here in the struggle for fame and wealth
I want to be able to like myself.
I don't want to look at myself and know that
I am bluster and bluff and empty show.
I never can hide myself from me;
I see what others may never see;
I know what others may never know,
I never can fool myself and so,
Whatever happens I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.⁴

Self-knowledge is what the philosophers would call a *sine qua non*, or “absolute condition,” for writing a spiritual will. Transparency is key!



Chapter 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF REMEMBERING



Writing a spiritual will is about naming who we are at our core. How do I go about identifying what I consider to be my core—what the Trappist monk Thomas Merton called my “true self,” rather than my “false self”? In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote,

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves.

Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of this external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular.

Our reality, our true self, is hidden in what appears to us to be nothingness. . . . We can rise above this unreality and recover our hidden reality.

God Himself begins to live in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self.⁵

In other words, together with God, we each find that true self inside of us. And it is from the core of our true self that we will see what identifies who we really are.

In his book, *And Now I See*, Bishop Robert Barron offers a wider perspective on Merton's approach to finding the true self. Bishop Barron explains that Merton felt his life was a battleground between conflicting interests, warring tendencies, and mutually conflicting "selves." Merton's true life was an awakening to the true "I," the Christ living in him, while dying to the vaporous and destructive ego created by fear. These were the two selves battling within him.⁶

Something similar probably takes place in each of us. You may be aware of who you are, and also of your gifts, but perhaps you haven't reflected sufficiently in order to find the words that describe this well. This may be because you have not yet gotten to know, or identify, your "true self" enough to own it.

As we all age, the desire to be known for who we really are becomes increasingly more important. Likewise, leaving this earth without friends and loved ones knowing the real you can leave a vacuum in them—and in you—and we realize this increasingly, too, the older we become.

As you've now begun to ponder this process in a variety of ways, you have surely also reflected on family members, friends, and colleagues who have died before you. Maybe you've already felt some regret as to how little you knew them. Maybe you've experienced feelings of sadness on occasions when others were able to speak about your family members or friends, mentioning their gifts, their humor, what pleased or distressed them, that you did not know firsthand. Perhaps you've wished that you could have known more