

Example Ethical Will



AS WRITTEN BY A 47 YEAR-OLD MOTHER

For my children, words to last a lifetime:

You have been the delight of my life, the crucible in which I became an adult. I remember each of your births. They were the most wonderful days of your parents' lives.

I know that my oldest child, Matt, probably wished sometimes he were the only child, and I have heard you two older boys wonder aloud why we had the two smaller children. But four children made an absolutely right-sized family for your father and me.

Tom Cruise said to Renee Zellweger in the movie "Jerry Maguire," "You complete me." Well, each of you completed us and our family. I hope and pray that you will cherish and nourish your sibling ties as you grow up and grow old.

Because Dad and I are both wordsmiths and storytellers, the written word has always been important to us. Read as if your life depended on it; it does. Keep a diary; that way you can have a record of your childhood.

Keep in mind we have a family weakness for alcohol. You know that a couple of your uncles struggled to drag themselves out of the depths of alcoholism. Be suspicious of intoxicants. They are not the source of fun.

What is fun? Fun is running and shaking your booty. Fun is singing; fun is dancing to the music of the television commercials, as Maeve and Tom do. Fun is laughing, especially with those you love. Fun is sledding down Mr. MacPherson's hill, and going camping. Fun is being silly. Fun is discovering new things and new places, especially with those you love.

As I write this, there are reports that the Internet is starting to rob us of in-the-flesh personal connections. You can have fun on the Internet, but don't live and die by virtual fun. The most fun is face-to-face and touchable.

There's an old saying: "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Let me amend that to say: "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly." I fear that, more and more, your generation will shy away from taking risks, believing we have conquered the conquerable frontiers and that risks could endanger a comfortable status quo, a comfortable self-image.

But if you don't try, if you don't stretch, you don't develop. So try something you want to do that you've never done. And if you do it poorly in the beginning, keep at it. You'll do better. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly. This message is aimed particularly at you, Matt. Don't always take the safe bet.

Freud, the old goat, said we are shaped by our work and our love. I believe that. We are also shaped by our whimsy and our passion and, God willing, they intersect with our love and our work. As I grow older, I also understand we are shaped by loss.

I am not especially church-oriented, but every day I say that line from the Scriptures: "This is the day the Lord has made: Let us rejoice and be glad."

I do believe we have a responsibility to the larger community. The trick is figuring out how to contribute. That's why Dad became a mentor to an urban kid. I tried to be helpful to readers and viewers who contacted me. We always contributed to charities we deemed worthwhile. I remember my mom sending small checks to Franciscan missionaries when I was a girl.

Dad and I used to disagree about whether a couple of our friends who died young had made a lasting contribution. "They frittered away their talent," Dad would say. And I would respond, "But maybe the purpose of their life was to pass a stranger on a street corner and give him a smile at a critical juncture."

Now you may think I'm being overly dramatic, but when I'm driving or walking outside, I make it a point to look at strangers, to nod, to smile. Maybe that's the purpose of my life. Always reserve enough leisure time and mental space to smile.

Through our work, your father and I have met rich people and celebrities. Wealth and high profile are their own challenges in life. I wish you enough money to support yourself, your family, and the good causes of your choice, and enough celebrity to get across the message you need to get across to those to whom you need to speak.

Matt, you seem to have a philosophical bent and good people skills. You say you want to be a psychologist. Tamp down any tendencies towards arrogance and let your native kindness and thoughtfulness guide the people in your care.

Mike, you are most like me in looks, temperament, sense of comedy, and writing ability. Try not to fight the similarities too much. You are like a razor cutting through bureaucracy, inefficiency, obfuscation, hypocrisy. Hone your sharpness to get across your message. But try not to cut people out of your life with your razor-sharp wit.

Tom, you are such a sunny human being, the kind of 6-year-old who blows kisses to his mom through the kitchen window. Dad says you are most like him. Dad's advice to the adult you will become: "Treat every person you meet as no better or no worse than yourself. Treat everyone as exactly equal to you."

Maeve, you are the sole female of the siblings. I have no idea whether domestic responsibilities will be more evenly balanced between the sexes in marriages of your generation. At the age of nearly 5, you are already observant, self-sufficient, self-defining, both hearty and sensitive. I wish you the strength to become the very special individual you already are, while nurturing relationships, friends, and families.

One last thing: We have this family problem with joke-telling. Nanny always told the punch line first, and then backed her way down the buildup. One time, she gave the punch line "Wrecked 'em? Damned near killed 'em!" and then gave the buildup for a whole other joke. So always pre-play the buildup to the punch line in your mind before you tell a joke out loud. This joke-telling inadequacy may be a genetic thing.

No matter how lost or disconsolate you may seem at various points in your life, I hope this helps to bring you back on track: That your parents loved you intensely, unconditionally, and imaginatively. Remember my voice when I sang you "Tura, Lura" before you went to sleep.