

## Ethical Will of Kim, Age 52

Kim writes about the experience of participating in an ethical will workshop:

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*It was interesting, I have to tell you, talking with other people who had no children to leave a legacy for – how few of them felt they were “entitled” to write an ethical will. In some cases, there was a bit of embarrassment, the old “who-would-want-to-read-my-thoughts” but from a decidedly disenfranchised place of being either single or childless. I felt it a bit, but then charged ahead. I’ve decided I’m going to mail it out with my holiday letter this year, as much because I’m not sending a lot of presents as I am because, hell, I could be dead next year, and I’d like to see what my loved ones think and how/if they respond.*

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### TO MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY,

Since I’ve never married or had children, I don’t have a conventional family system, but I have definitely created my family of choice. I feel incredibly lucky to include in that my immediate blood family but I also add into that number the amazing group of people whom I have been lucky enough to have love me. I often tell people that YOU are my greatest accomplishment. I have surrounded myself and bonded with the most exceptional people I have ever met. Being part of a clan has always been vitally important to me, as many of you who knew me in my cult years know. I have not always made the wisest choices, but I believe that with your help I have milked my mistakes for whatever vast or miniscule lesson I could learn, and then took it to heart. Through all this, I have tried to give you what I value most: honesty, trust and unguarded love.

I think the need to learn has always driven me. I have tried to outgrow myself constantly. My spiritual beliefs might be hard for some to understand, but I believe that we are part of something incomprehensibly bigger than ourselves, and that we are responsible to strive to understand it enough that we are able to give something back to this life we were blessed with. I have tried to treat each of you as though you have the potential to outgrow any obstacles or challenges you were given along the way, and if I have pushed you a little too hard because of that faith in you, I am sorry. The older I get, the more precious every moment is to me, and I want everyone I care about to live as large as they can.

Nature is alive to me, and I trust that it is absolutely complete in all the metaphoric instructions we need to know to live in our own divinity-God, hiding in plain sight, surrounding us everyday. I wish for all of you, with your busy lives, to remember that all it takes is a good long walk in the woods several times a week to remember to listen to the smartest parts of yourself the parts that will keep you in respectful relationships to your body, your life and the Universe.

Without kids, I’ve had to be more intentional in where I put my devotion and focus. My work with hospice has been incredibly precious to me, as it has given me access to some of the language and experiences of letting go that we don’t get growing in this culture. I am grateful for what I’ve learned, and I hope that I’ve made a difference in the lives of the grieving people and co-workers that I’ve been

honored to work with. Having to remember to get myself out of the way constantly to serve others has helped me overcome my natural tendency toward self-absorption. This is partly what I mean by outgrowing myself. I've had the opportunity to be several completely different people in this lifetime as I've shed each set of beliefs and limitations, and I recommend it to everyone.

At 52, I have to say something to anyone who's younger than me. It's amazing to get older. Not necessarily fun, but amazing. Each age has its gifts and its limitations and I hope that every young, middle aged and older person in my life gets the right kind of support to go for the gusto in their age-appropriate tasks. For example, I wish I'd finished my education when I was in my '20s and didn't have anything better to do. I did finish college in my late '40s but it wasn't as easy as it would have been if I'd done it earlier. Your energy changes appropriately in each age. There's a lot more of it when you're younger, but it gets more sophisticated and interesting when you're older if you use it for the right things. I say this because I've had a hard time of letting go of the past, generally. Today I'd tell anyone, don't miss a minute of your life by trying to hold on to something whose time is over.

My greatest life-transforming lessons have mostly come from my hardest times-working with a biochemical disorder, leaving the cult I was in while dealing with cervical cancer, the break-up of my serious relationships with lovers and friends. I think that's true of everyone-that you dissolve when you are in deep grief and you live in the possibility of deepening your values and focus. For me, as I said above, they were lessons in letting go of the past, who I was and what I wanted, releasing my frantic need to never let go of anything. This must be one of my greatest lessons to learn in this lifetime, since I seem to be given opportunities to work with it almost daily.

Whatever difficulty presents itself to you is a gift, either something begging to be seen and understood, as Rilke said of our dragons, or a chance to let go of your personal agenda and align with more What Is. Same goes for whatever joy presents itself. Try to find your own way to trust God or the universe so you can get a bigger picture than your own small agenda. Once you do, you realize how lonely you were.

Take care of your health. You're riding around in this incredible vehicle with operating systems you can't even begin to grok, and it's not only respectful to take care of it, it's critical if you're going to fully enjoy the ride. No matter what state your health is in, be grateful. There are lessons in illness, and the alternative to ANY state of health is death, so don't be complaining unless you're ready to get out of the vehicle.

I don't believe we are meant to understand ourselves, grow, grieve, change, or fully enjoy life without other sets of eyes that see us through love. If you can't let other people in, really in, to influence you and love you when you're at your worst, or save you sometimes, you are going to have a tiny little life and probably be very angry on your deathbed that you missed something and you don't know what it is. I pray for all of you that that never happens.

I've tried to be a good friend to all of you. I've tried to bring something into the world that may not have my name on it when I leave, but that brought comfort, encouragement and spark into people's lives. I meant what I said at the beginning of this letter: you are my greatest accomplishment and I'm so grateful that you have loved me.

Blessings, Kim

## Ethical Will of Samuel, Age 70

The following ethical will was written by a 70-year-old grandfather. He died of lung cancer about one month after this was written.

Dear Barry and Sandy:

A few words to express my feelings and thoughts while time is running out on me.

Some standard values that I have basically lived by throughout my life, are that I have always believed in honesty and advocated truthfulness. I cherish the family with all my heart. I always felt that I gave of myself to everyone in the family. The satisfaction and gratification that I received in return is in the accomplishments of my children. No father could be as proud as your father is of you. Throughout your lifetime so far, you have more than exceeded my greatest expectations. You continue to move forward in a manner that makes me love you more and more. I'm proud to say "that's my son!"

Through the years, I've tried to take care of my family and give them some of the better things in life. I tried and succeeded in being able to give my children a good education. Although I was only a working man, many was the time I worked two jobs for the extra money so that the family could have a little bit more. I had often thought of going into some kind of business, but I didn't have the expertise in any particular field, or the finances to afford the luxury of risk. However, I'm proud to say that you have shown me through the years, the aggressiveness that I lacked emerged in you.

I have tried to be financially sound and leave behind an adequate amount of finances to carry your mother through the rest of her days. Being no one can predict the future, I ask that should it ever be necessary, see that your mother remains comfortable financially and otherwise.

Sandy, you have always made me proud with your accomplishments and different endeavors. You have never undertaken a task that was under-achieved. Through the years you have been in my confidence and as close as a daughter. I love you and the girls deeply.

My concentration is not too great at this point as I'm sure I can say much more. Barry could not have picked a finer mate. You are a good wife and excellent mother. I feel a father and daughter relation to you.

I hope Alisha and Hannah follow in the footsteps of the family and their traditions. I love you all.

Dad