

# Walking with Oscar: Teaching Values by Default?

The actions we take are a constant expression of our values. Whatever values we talk about ascribing to, it's important that we demonstrate actual adherence to them through our actions. Otherwise, the values we teach others, such as our children, may not be the ones we intend.

While my five-year-old grandson was taking his first karate class, I took a walk on a nearby trail with his eight-year-old brother, Oscar. "Look at that," he said, pointing to a smelly doggie deposit. "Somebody left a mess."

I've cluck-clucked over such things myself. Indeed, I espouse ecological responsibility as one of my core values. I've installed solar panels on my home, drive a hybrid car, and turn off the faucet to save water while I brush my teeth. And yet I must confess that I've been known to keep on walking when my dog does his business on the side of some road. So what environmental value am I really passing on to Oscar?

Such questioning has fostered a practice in many cultures that has recently garnered popular attention: an ethical will, or "legacy letter." Sometimes an adjunct to the legally binding document that dis-

poses of personal property, an ethical will bequeaths "nonmaterial assets"—beliefs shaped by experience that may have meaning for the next generation. Ethical wills are delivered in every letter from the battlefield that begins, "If you read this, I'm not coming home..." and they have a long history. Barry Baines, a hospice director and author of the book *Ethical Wills*, cites the memoir of Glückel of Hamelin, written in the 1690s, noting: "Women couldn't bequeath valuables, so they bequeathed values."

The interest in legacy was recently boosted by Randy Pausch's *The Last Lecture*. A professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University and a pioneer in human-computer interaction and design, Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2006. A year later, he delivered his final lecture, subtitled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams," which became an Internet phenomenon and was turned into the best-selling book. But Pausch actually did it so that his three children—all under the age of 10—would have a record, in his voice, of how he lived his beliefs. Pausch died on July 25, 2008, at the age of 47.

You don't have to be as erudite

as Randy Pausch. You can simply jot down a straightforward letter. My husband's parents, farmers with high school diplomas, handwrote three pages that allocated memory-infused items to each of their four surviving children. And by encouraging them to cooperate with and appreciate their designated executor, the oldest son, it was a subtle yet powerful way to resolve more than 60 years of sibling rivalry.

You don't have to be original. You might find something that captures your values in a magazine or on a website—such as the poem of encouragement my mother sent when I was going through a rough patch in my 30s. It expressed her courageous approach to life in the metaphor of the phoenix: "a female, rising from her own ashes, shedding bad experiences like a tired skin."

Even a paragraph may make a meaningful "bequest"—such as the scribbled Post-It my mother sent me in November 2005, a month before she entered hospice care. It says, "Thank you for coming to see me! I appreciate it—the rides, the tuna salad, turning down my bed—and hearing me complain. Love, Mom." I have it taped to a drawer in my desk.

Every time I open that drawer, I am reminded to stay attuned to and grateful for the little things that cement relationships.

Nor do you have to wait for a terminal diagnosis. Many people start shaping their legacies when their children are young, occasionally capturing a thought, revising and developing a document over decades. Typically, ethical will include such elements as:

- ◆ Personal beliefs
- ◆ Spiritual values
- ◆ Hopes for future generations
- ◆ Declarations of love and appreciation
- ◆ Life's lessons
- ◆ Forgiving others and asking for forgiveness

The time to start passing along your values is *now*. My friend Nitsa Lallas, former VP/general manager for a major packaged goods company and now a senior partner at Senn Delaney, a culture-shaping firm, has just written a book, *Renewing Values in America: Lessons from the Wind and the Tree*. It talks about teaching values, as in the following excerpt:

“Despite the fact that corporate literature is filled with references to corporate culture, culture clash, cultures of greed, and many other negative conflicts, many corporate leaders do not consistently or practically talk about or use values to guide people in the organization.

“This situation exists at all levels in organizations, not only at the top. There is a confluence of events in which people are often not making a practical connection between core values and the deci-

“Lives of great men  
all remind us,  
We can make our  
lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave  
behind us  
Footprints on the  
sands of time.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,  
“A Psalm of Life”

sions, behaviors, and words with which they operate every day.

“To teach values, you must first decide on and declare your values. The next step is to make sure that your behavior, words, and actions reflect your values. Then talk about the values, why they are important, and how they influence decisions, behaviors, words, and actions.

“When you talk about values, you may make the assumption that people understand what you say. Certainly, you know what you intend to say and you probably say it clearly; why wouldn't they get it? The bottom line is that you can't count on it.

“Do your best to be clear. But do not stop there. Values are conceptual in nature. This means that they are subject to interpretation. When teaching values to your children, or anyone else, it is important to take time to listen to their understanding. Ask questions to see what they make of it. Talk about ‘what if's...’ For example, ‘What if your friend asked you to

cheat on a test for them, how would our values help you make a decision? What if your friend was pushing drugs? How would our values help you make a decision? What actions might you take?’ See what questions they have. Keep in mind that you need to set the example in the way that you act during these discussions: be respectful, listen, be open to other points of view and be accountable yourself.”

The effort of articulating your values, not only for your business but for your family, may not seem urgent, but it's important. As Nitsa writes, “Teaching your children to live by values is one of the gifts that you give to them. It is also your obligation.”

As a matter of fact, you can't avoid it. Whether or not you intend to teach values, you are doing so all the time. “How you act, what you permit, what you condone, what you condemn—all reflect your values,” Nitsa observes. “Whether you do it consciously or subconsciously, you are teaching a set of values to your children through your own behaviors and actions, by default.”

To delve further into Nitsa's perspective, check out [www.renewingvaluesinamerica.com](http://www.renewingvaluesinamerica.com). As for me, when I'm with my grandsons, I keep returning to Nitsa's challenging question:

Are you teaching values by design or by default? **SF**

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