

Knapp: Legacies: So much more than finances

By Marian L. Knapp/Columnist

Wicked Local Newton

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The other day I bumped into a friend at the supermarket. After checking in with each other, he said "you should write an article about legacy." I jotted the idea on my shopping list (I have many scraps of paper with ideas to explore) and proceeded to tell him that I thought this was a complicated topic with many dimensions. "Hmm," he said, "I was thinking about finances."

He's right, of course. It is essential to document assets and wishes making it clear what should happen if we become incapacitated, and for when we die. If we don't do this while our minds are competent we risk, at the very least, confusion among beneficiaries. Besides, dealing now with these thorny issues, means that we have some control over this tangible part of legacy. Having acknowledged this, my mind shot off in tens of directions. Yes, finances, but what else?

While driving home, I mulled over what I wished to leave my children and grandchildren. To help, I reflected on what my family passed on to me. Certainly there were physical items – my mother's little gold earrings, my father's songs, my aunt Lena's Art Deco ring, my aunt Gert's washboard – each emblematic of distinctive temperaments and complicated lives. But my musings kept coming back to intangible things - much of it related to my mother.

My grandparents were immigrants and most died quite young. My parents, who had siblings that died from accidents, diseases, and poor medical care, went through childhood and young adulthood in the early 20th century when the depression devastated lives. During their marriage my father did hard physical labor and when my younger sister entered junior high school my mother decided to go back to work - even though my gentle dad objected strongly. His reputation as a provider was at stake. "I want my own money. If I want to have lunch with a friend or give some gifts I don't want to ask your permission," she responded. When she died at 95 their small estate was divided among us siblings. The inherited money was lovely but the memory of my mother confronting my dad about her sense of worth and independence, at a time when this was uncommon for women, was profound.

My mother's strength keeps popping up in odd ways. Lately, I have been cleaning out my house, keeping only things that I actually use and enjoy, as well as family papers and pictures that my kids may go through in the future to gain insight into their heritage. In one box there was a letter from my mother saying essentially, "any money in my accounts is to be used for me and not for the benefit of my children until I am dead." Throughout her life she was generous – financially, when possible, and emotionally, always. She loved and encouraged us, admired our talents, knew our faults, and was, most of the time, very accepting. But, she recognized that she had to set her own priorities and make them clear for

everyone to know. Her basic character sculpted my image of someone who knew what was right for her and who made decisions on which she had the courage to act. The messages she conveyed through her words and actions over many years, in diverse and disparate circumstances, formed the foundation of her legacy to me.

I would be arrogant to think that I can mandate what my children should value about me and I am certain my mother had no conscious intent to influence my memories of her. Just as my brother and sister have their interpretations of events, I know that my kids will, over time, define my legacy to them according to their own remembrances and unique personalities, which is as it should be.

For my grandchildren, I feel a bit more prescriptive. Simply, I want to leave memories of a grandmother who cherished them. I had no good experiences with grandparents. Three died before I was born and the other was mentally ill. When people say how lucky I am to have grandchildren, I respond by saying it is far more important that they have grandparents. I hope my grandchildren will remember special times together and hold an image of me as someone who not only loved them, but was also strong, resourceful, and excited about life.

This is my imagined bequest as I have constructed it so far. I need to finish cleaning out my house so my children and grandchildren won't have to plow through piles of stuff that have no importance to them. I will continue to revise my legacy over time. I will pass on a few concrete items that I hope will provoke reflections on what they would like their own significant legacies to be.

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