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INTRODUCTION

Women spend a year planning their wedding, men a whole afternoon choosing their fantasy football picks, and both at least several weeks deciding on a place to call home. That's life! The weird thing is most people spend no time discussing or planning how they want the final part of their lives to go. Think about it: a year planning a party that lasts four hours? Hey, what about a little planning for the ever after that follows?

In *My Last Wishes* . . . it's time to start thinking about how you want the final part of your life to play out. If you're asking yourself, *But Joy, how do I know if and when this book is for me?* Well, if you're over 18, not currently living in your parents' basement (you might have bigger issues that need your attention), have a pulse, your sanity, and possess even one of the following: a set of dishes, a color TV, a car, or a child . . . then this book is for you!

See, it doesn't matter how far into your future it's going to

happen; we are all going to die (at least according to the latest scientific findings at the time this book was printed). And once we have all the tricky questions answered, we can sit back and enjoy whatever amount of time we have left—whether it’s fifty days or fifty years. So instead of hiding from it, let’s be strong and view this as a great opportunity to look at our lives, convey love to those we cherish, and celebrate the life we have yet to live.

I myself have lost quite a few loved ones: two of the most important men in my life (including my first love and my great love), all of my grandparents, a high school friend, a sorority sister, a couple of coworkers, and several other friends and relatives. Unfortunately more than one of them had no idea it was going to be their time to go; shocking as it might seem, illness and death can show up at the most unexpected and inconvenient of times. Besides, having attended more than my share of funerals, I often wonder what my own service will be like. Don’t pretend you haven’t thought about it! We all wonder who will come, who will cry (not that I want people to be devastated, but a tear or two might be touching), or even what our obituaries will say. Why wait? Let’s start looking into our lives and take a quick peek at deaths while we can still enjoy the view from a distance.

To make sure we are all on the same page, I want to be clear that this book is *not* a legal document. Rather it’s a place to capture your thoughts, a springboard for conversations with loved ones and caregivers, and a planning assistant for when it comes time for your wishes to be honored. Imagine, if your wishes have been laid out clearly, the weight that will be lifted from your loved ones left with the task of following through on your requests. They may not pull it off perfectly, but at least they will have some insight into what you wanted, and a guide to help them make it happen.

Note: This book is written to share information in case you

are dealing with others' end-of-life situations, as well as contemplating your own. So sometimes I refer to you, sometimes to me, and sometimes I'm just talking about the subjects in general. And although it should go without saying, I'm going to say it anyway: Fill out as much or as little in this book as you want. The most important thing is for you to have the conversation with your family and then get as much of it down in writing (hopefully with legal documentation) as possible. If you whiz through the book and cover the basics with your family, you've done more than the majority of the population!

WARNING: Before we begin, know that even though this is a very valuable and practical book, it is also designed (by me) to be humorous (you know, a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down?). While I realize not everyone may share my same sense of humor (my sister thinks the odds are about 3:5) my hope is that you'll enjoy it for what it is. And if for some reason you are not amused by something or if it offends you, feel free to scratch it out (I won't mind . . . really).

That said, let me also clarify that I am absolutely not pro-death. I want to be around a long time, and I want my loved ones to be around a long time, too. I mention this because some might find my bluntness and humor to be a little too direct. I've designed it this way, however, with the sincere desire that this book initiates the frank discussion you've always meant to have with your loved ones about your life (including your end of life). I know I would have loved for the people I have loved and lost to have had this discussion with me; it would have saved me a lot of tears and heartache. Luckily for me, I get to honor their memories with this book; and luckily for you, you get to honor your loved ones by using this book while you're still alive and magnificent!

So take a deep breath, and let's have some fun with it.



CHAPTER ONE

YOUR LIFE

What's life all about? Yeah, I'm not sure either. The better question might be: How's your life going? Before we even get into a discussion about death, let's take a quick look at your life and see if there are some things to be noted there. How many of us have actually taken the time to tell our loved ones all that we want them to know about our lives? Now is your chance.

The following questions will help get you in the frame of mind to start pinpointing who and what is important in your life. First, let's look at the love in your life.

Love

Who do you want to know you love them?

Who do you love that you haven't told?

♥ *What would happen if you died today? Have you told the people you've listed how much you love them? What are you waiting for? Love is the only totally renewable, never depleting resource we can generate on our own—so stop being stingy. You'll never run out!*

A few more love notes:

Who was your first love? _____

Who is the love that got away? _____

Who is the love of your life? _____

2 MY LAST WISHES

Looks like there are some great things going on in your life. The lessons, the laughing, the love . . . Ah, the love! I believe we can never have too much of it flowing, so I'm leaving you with a few parting tips on how to make sure the people in your life feel the love you have for them:

☞ **The Thanksgiving Call.** Pick one day a year to reach out and thank the people who help make your life great. I like to do it on Thanksgiving (it has the built-in reminder—*thanks giving*—get it?). Every year on the morning of Thanksgiving I call my closest friends (about 20) and tell them *specifically* why I am thankful for them that year. My friends say they can't begin Thanksgiving until they receive my call. That warms my giblets! Remember, it's called Thanksgiving for a reason, so if all you're focused on is the football and turkey, you're really missing the gravy boat!

☞ Start a **Birthday Box** for your children. Each year on their birthday add a letter or a short video describing the year you have just had with them and how much you love them. This can be your greatest gift to celebrate and capture the moments of their childhood and heaven forbid . . . it will be an invaluable treasure. (Make sure to include a photo of them or a few minutes of the kiddies on tape to make the entry complete.)

☞ **Toasted.** Who doesn't love to hear how wonderful they are in front of others? Make it a habit to acknowledge people sincerely and publicly. Life is short. Whether in public or in private, tell people often how they make a difference in your life. (Tip: Remember it's not a fabulous idea to give a toast if you're, shall we say . . . *toasted*.)

☞ **Leaf Behind.** Most of us know very little about our family tree. Rumor has it that I'm related to Mrs. O'Leary (no relation to the cow) and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence (oh, to have been able to claim he's the one who came up with that whole *Pursuit of Happiness* line . . .), and yet I can prove neither since there is no good documentation. So leave your heirs a bit of history—even if it's just on a plain sheet of paper. It's priceless!

☞ **In the Name of Love.** Even our loved ones who aren't here deserve a little love. For example, each year on my grandmothers' birthdays, I honor them by donating blood in their memory (this way their bloodlines truly live on). Be creative. You can do a random act of kindness, give to their favorite charity, or anything else that gives you a warm feeling that you know they would've appreciated.

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CHAPTER TWO

FINISH THE UNFINISHED

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—SOCRATES

Socrates . . . so philosophical, that one. I myself wouldn't go that far, but since we're on the topic of looking at your life why not take a look at your whole life? In the previous chapter, we looked at the good, but, alas, we must not forget the bad and the ugly.

The key in life is not that you have no mistakes or regrets (how boring), but instead to “clean” them up as quickly as possible once they're made. I liken it to a festering pus-filled wound—if you don't deal with the ick in your life, it just gets ickier and ickier. (Do I know how to paint a picture or what?)

So let's stop avoiding our mistakes and digressions, and instead determine whether we can free ourselves from them so that there's more room for the love we talked about last chapter. Trust me, you won't regret it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SERVICE

Have you ever been to a funeral where you just knew the person wasn't being represented true to the life he had lived? Sure, maybe the funeral home was tacky or maybe they had a crummy florist, but most likely . . . it's his fault! I know he's dead and all, but if you don't plan, that's what happens: a free-for-all. Think about it . . . his loved ones are in mourning. They can't possibly be expected to make all the right decisions under those circumstances. And even though none of us is going to get the Princess Diana version even if we planned it down to the last detail, we can at least help out our poor loved ones with a few details. This chapter is about your wishes for your service and includes a helpful checklist for your family or you to use when planning for others.

Since there are many different customs and traditions that vary from religion to ethnicity and even to geography, think of this as a general inquiry and feel free to personalize it as you like. Let me tell you even within my immediate family there is a huge

range of observances—everything from loud and slightly raucous (the Irish side) to a dignified luncheon after mass (the Italian side). There are even a few non-traditionalists, like my favorite brother-in-law, whose dream service includes only lots of stories, laughs, and adult beverages. The majority of Americans are still going to go for the ol’ classic wake-then-funeral, which, don’t get me wrong, is nice and all. There is, however, a change that’s a-coming . . . I like to refer to it as the *ME-MORE-ial* service. That’s right, more “ME” (actually—*you*) than has ever been incorporated into an ordinary service before. After all, *you* are the guest of honor, so why not make it more personalized, a real reflection of how you and your family want to honor the life you have lived. I explore a few non-traditional options at the end of the chapter (you might want to glance over them before you start filling things in). I say to each his own. That’s the beauty of deciding for yourself.

We’ll start with the big decisions right off the bat. . . .

What do you want done with your body? Burial, cremation, mausoleum, other?

Do you want an open casket? [Y] [N]

Where do you want your final resting place? _____

If cremated, what do you want done with your cremains?

Now get ready for possibly *the* most important question next to what to do with the body (but in many eyes equally as important). What outfit do you want to be your last outfit?

Hopefully your last party will be years from now, so in case the outfit is no longer in your closet or up-to-date let's also have a plan B. (Warning: Your executor might be organized and a good choice to handle for your estate issues, but that doesn't mean he or she has any fashion sense.) Who would you like to choose your outfit?

Any color preferences? Any style that looks best on you?

CHAPTER TEN

YOU GET THE
LAST WORD!

Bravo! I applaud your courage to get this far in the journey of exploring your last wishes. You are now among a very small, and may I say brilliant, group of people who care enough about themselves and their loved ones to consider how they want to live in and exit this life. But wait, there's more. . . . We are about to get into the hardest and most important part of the whole thing . . . expressing our last wishes. Sure, you've pondered it—and thanks to this book you've even jotted down some thoughts—but the crucial (and some find most difficult) part is having the conversation with our loved ones and care providers. Let's face it, there are those of us who love communicating about any subject anytime, and then there are those who would rather have a root canal. I could nauseate you with horrible stories about how someone dropped dead before they could say they loved their son, or how fights about inheritance drove siblings to never speak to each other, but I assume if you've read this far you already understand that. Instead, I've chosen to

start you off with some ways that might make this process easier and go more smoothly.

Before beginning, let's presuppose you've thought about the basics of how you want your end of life to go. (Completed previous nine chapters? Check. Okay, move forward.)

Now it's time to pinpoint with whom you need to communicate your wishes (list below and don't forget doctors and other caregivers besides your loved ones):

Okay we're almost there. Now let's just run down a few tips and conversation starters for you:

Timing

- ☞ Make sure you have someone's undivided attention. Maybe even ask them to set aside a Sunday afternoon to talk about it.
- ☞ Be proud of yourself and them for being mature enough to get this conversation handled. While trying to be sensitive to another's apprehension, make sure you're direct enough to get your wishes spelled out clearly.
- ☞ Bring a list of everything you'd like to cover (for your convenience I have assembled a handy-dandy checklist summarizing the topics you might want to chat about

with your family—see p. 158 for the *Chat-About Checklist*).

☞ Make copies of anything someone would need to have copies of. It might help to give them a folder or large envelope with the information so they can follow along (medical power of attorney, living will, etc.).

☞ Don't think one conversation will do it. If your life or health changes and you have some new thoughts about your end of life, try to naturally broach the subject with loved ones.

Talking

Tongue-tied? Don't know exactly what to say? Feel free to incorporate any of the following starters:

☞ So and so at our club (church, office, on our street—*pick one*) just lost their spouse and it made me think we should really get our affairs in order. How about we spend next Sunday doing that and then treat ourselves to a nice dinner afterward?

☞ I recently read an article (saw a program, heard about a seminar . . .) regarding end-of-life planning, and I was wondering if you and Dad have ever thought about it for yourselves?

☞ Your mother and I have decided on how we want things to be handled in regards to life support should a decision need to be made. We want you kids to be clear on our wishes, so we're going to have a discussion about it