

1 You Have a LEGACY

(Whether You Want It or Not)

*Oh, if a man tried to take his time on earth
and prove before he died
what one man's life could be worth,
I wonder what would happen to this world.*

—Engraved on singer Harry Chapin's tombstone

In his hometown of Huntington, New York, it wasn't his celebrity status that they liked—it was his hugs. They knew him as a neighbor, friend, and philanthropist. To his fans he was a master storyteller and folk singer. To music insiders, he was a mediocre talent. But to his family he was anything but mediocre; he meant everything to them.

Late singer, songwriter, and master storyteller Harry Chapin¹ raised millions of dollars for world hunger before his death in a car accident in 1981. His personal legacy was a rich one, both publicly and privately, but perhaps his greatest gift was to help others think about the legacies they might leave.

His 1974 chart-topping single, "Cat's in the Cradle," was about a father who passed his legacy on to his son only to realize too late that it wasn't the legacy he desired to leave. Chapin was known as a singer who could tell a powerful story. Though his voice is silent now, the words of this song still speak.

*A child arrived just the other day,
He came to the world in the usual way.*

*But there were planes to catch and bills to pay.
He learned to walk while I was away.
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew,
He'd say, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad.
You know, I'm gonna be like you."*

*And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little Boy Blue and the man in the moon.
"When you comin' home, Dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know, we'll have a good time then."*

*My son turned ten just the other day.
He said, "Thanks for the ball, Dad. Come on—let's play.
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today.
I got a lot to do." He said, "That's OK."
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed,
It said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah.
You know, I'm gonna be like him."*

*Well, he came from college just the other day
So much like a man I just had to say,
"Son, I'm proud of you. Can you sit for a while?"
He shook his head, and he said with a smile,
"What I'd really like, Dad, is to borrow the car keys.
See you later. Can I have them, please?"*

*I've long since retired, and my son's moved away.
I called him up just the other day.
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I could find the time.
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kids with the flu,
But it's sure nice talkin' to you, Dad.
It's been sure nice talking to you."*

*As I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,
He'd grown up just like me.
My boy was just like me.*

These lyrics, penned by Chapin's wife, Sandy, are a poignant reminder that we all leave a legacy whether or not it's intentional. Ironically, the demand for Chapin's concerts and appearances grew with his success. He was en route to one of those concerts when he died on the Long Island Expressway. After his death, friends were quoted as saying how alone Chapin felt while traveling because he missed his family. The very song that helped to create his legacy ultimately made him so famous that it required him to travel more, taking him away from the family he loved.

Everyone Has a Legacy

We all leave a legacy.

Some might disagree by saying, "I'm not dead yet," or "Only famous people have legacies." The truth is that we don't have to be rich, famous, or even dead to have a legacy. Just like the father in the song, we leave our legacy—our imprint—on the hearts and minds of those who know us best. The little decisions we make on a daily basis and the behaviors we repeat over time are the things that people remember long after we move, change jobs, or die. Our legacy is the sum of every choice we make. Finish the following sentences:

My mother always . . .

My father never . . .

My friend would . . .

The end of each sentence is part of the legacy that person has left with us. It's how we remember him or her. Some have inherited positive legacies:

"My mother always prayed."

"My father never missed a Sunday at church."

"My friend would give me the shirt off his back."

But then, sometimes the legacies we receive aren't the things we would choose:

"My mother always criticized me."

"My father never came to my games."

"My friend talked about me behind my back."

How would our children, friends, and coworkers finish the following sentences about us?

He always said . . .

She used to . . .

He never tried to . . .

The answers to these questions reveal the legacy we're leaving the people close to us. Even people like Oprah Winfrey or Bill Gates, who have a very public legacy, leave a private legacy to those who know them best. The dad in Chapin's song was obviously outstanding in his job, but the private legacy he left to his son at home wasn't so positive.

For another example, consider a career politician at his visitation and funeral. While his fellow government servants talk about the difference the deceased made in his job, his children rarely talk about such things. Instead, they remember the quiet moments, the laughter, and the personal, intimate details of their father. This reminds us that we each have two legacies, the public persona that often involves our jobs or church activities, and the private, personal legacy left to those closest to us. Perhaps the best definition of success is how our personal and public legacies match up.

We may never have the kind of public legacy of Bill Gates and Oprah, but we have family, friends, and coworkers who will continue to respond to the private legacy we leave long after we've changed jobs, moved, or died.

An Inherited Legacy

Patrick Borders is the father of two children, a solid member of his metro-Atlanta area church, and a man who loves his country. He's probably a lot like someone you work with or know from church: strong, dependable, and unassuming. Patrick left the corporate world to become a full-time writer, and during the transition he spent time interviewing his grandmother Ivy for a book project. It was during one of these interviews that Patrick learned more about Ivy's father, Walter Collins, Patrick's great-grandfather.

Walter Collins loved the United States so much that he enlisted in the military in 1903. When Ivy was born, he was stationed at Bedloe's Island (now Liberty Island, the location of the Statue of Liberty). He named his daughter Ivy Liberty Collins after the statue that meant so much to him. Always an optimist, Walter believed

that the United States offered opportunities not found anywhere else in the world. With those opportunities came individual responsibilities to make wise use of them, and he did his best to take advantage of them.

Walter loved people, and he studied them endlessly. He instilled in Ivy a desire to understand others and their motivations. He had a strong sense of right and wrong, so strong that he lived his life by a strict code of honor—he did the right thing no matter what.

As Patrick processed the information he gathered about his great-grandfather, he realized that Walter's legacy had passed down through his grandmother and was alive in him. Patrick made the transition from corporate career to freelance writer to take advantage of the opportunities and legacy given to him. Despite an initial lack of work, he remained optimistic, as did Walter. His desire to do what was right provided the motivation for several foreign mission trips to help underprivileged children.

What startled Patrick most when he discovered those parallels with Walter was that he had inherited his legacy from a man he had never met. Patrick's great-grandfather, Walter Collins, died 11 years before Patrick was born.

A Legacy Lived Out

Legacies aren't always inherited; sometimes they're experienced. Born and raised in California, Scott was only three when his mother left home for good. Scott never understood why; he only felt the pain of her rejection. When Scott was four years old, his father remarried. Too young to articulate his emotional needs, Scott sensed that this woman would not fill them. His stepmother was insecure and dominating. She monopolized his dad into spending more time with her and less time with him. Scott compensated by spending more time with his dog.

When his stepmother moved in, so did John, her son. John also knew the pain of divorce, and unlike his mother, he saw what was happening to his little stepbrother. Determined to compensate for the losses in Scott's life, John bonded with Scott as only boys can do. Through play, he and Scott grew close via wrestling matches and knuckle sandwiches.

John was 10 years older, and he took his mentoring responsibilities seriously. He taught Scott to throw a baseball, pass a football, and kick a soccer ball. Later, he coached Scott's teams. Even after John left for college, he returned home to spend time with Scott, attending the games his father and stepmother never found time to attend. John's coaching taught Scott more than how to play sports. It taught him how to take risks, how to trust, and how to be a man.

One day while educating the boy on the finer points of throwing a curveball, John lost his patience. Scott was goofing around—more interested in doing impressions than learning the correct fingering. John picked up a ball and hurled it at the fence.

That night as Scott lay in bed, he worried that John might not come back. For the first time, Scott thought about the sacrifices his stepbrother made in giving up time with friends his own age to spend it with him. John often stayed up late finishing his college homework or studying for upcoming exams. He defended Scott to his father and stepmother, even when it meant taking sides against family. John made him feel as if he were the most important person in his life. Scott went to sleep not sure if his stepbrother would be there in the morning.

The next morning before he awoke, a soft thud hit his sheets. He opened his eyes to see a baseball lobbed gently onto his bed, and then another and another. He jumped up in time to miss the next one. By the time he had gotten his clothes on, his floor was covered with balls that had hit the bed and rolled off. Finally, he heard John's gentle words from the hallway: "I'm sorry for losing my temper yesterday. Can we try again?"

John's devotion changed Scott's life. He taught Scott passion for sports and life. Years later, Scott became a coach for both his daughter and son's soccer teams. Today he continues to pass on the values he learned from his stepbrother, both on and off the field. John has left a legacy that lives on in Scott and Scott's kids, who know that their dad will always be there, just as John was there for Scott.

A Chosen Legacy

One meaning of "legacy" is a gift made by will, especially of money or other personal property. It can be something transmitted by or received from an ancestor, a predecessor, or the past.

“By will” is the interesting part of the definition. While the word refers to the legal document created by a lawyer, for our purposes it also has another meaning. We have a will, the part of us that makes choices and decisions. A legacy is a result of those choices, of doing what *we will*. It is deliberate, conscious, and volitional. There are consequences for the choices we make, and only we can decide what kind of legacy we *will* have.

Leaving a legacy isn’t about a single choice or a one-time event in our life, good or bad. It isn’t about how much money we donate to charity or having a building named after us. It isn’t about the worst things we’ve done in the past or the best things we’ll do in the future. Rather, it is the culmination of the seemingly insignificant things we do each day—the things that add up and are remembered later.

Most of us have probably never heard of John, the kind step-brother, or Walter, the great-grandfather, but we probably know someone like them. Both of these men lived their lives deliberately. For Walter, the insignificant decisions he made on a daily basis added up to a lifestyle, passed on to his daughter, Ivy. She created her own legacy when she passed those values, morals, and choices on to her grandson as she helped raise him. And John made a choice to commit himself to his little brother regardless of the personal sacrifices it cost him.

Patrick and Scott both received legacies from their families; so did the son in Chapin’s song. His father passed on a legacy of choosing work over family. His son learned that lesson so well that even years later, he “couldn’t” visit his father because, like his father, he had other priorities.

We make decisions about what our legacy will be, whether we do it consciously or not. This book helps explain how the sum of small things leads to our legacy. It demonstrates how we’re also the product of the legacies we’ve inherited. By examining the impact our choices have on the legacy we leave, we’ll learn to make wise choices.

We *will* leave a legacy, yet the question remains—Will it be the one we want?