

Since entering my sixties, I've discovered that despite being busy with many activities, my thoughts are turning more frequently to questions such as, "What is really important in life?" and "What do I want my life to be all about?" Past achievements no longer hold much importance for me. I now find myself looking for something deeper to give me meaning.

Martin Seligman, Ph.D., notes that people who have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life, plus clearly defined values, usually have a greater sense of hope, optimism, and enjoyment. They feel in control, and take responsibility for their lives. In contrast, those who don't, tend to be pessimistic and frequently experience the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness often correlated with depression.

While most of us don't usually associate older age with self-development and spiritual growth, I find myself wanting to make sure that I'm part of the "happy group." Admittedly, that's an over simplification, but that desire motivates me to try to ensure my life is reflecting the things that matter most to me - my relationships, work and volunteer activities, how I spend my leisure time and the legacy I will leave behind as my gift to the world.

This is a topic many of us haven't given much consideration. In formulating my own thoughts, I started noticing which people I most admire. I find myself drawn to those who remain physically vital as they're growing older, but who are also spiritually radiant and socially responsible leaders of the community. These people give their time, money, wisdom, and/or physical energies to the various charitable organizations in our community. They're making a difference in the world by using their life experiences to actively create a legacy for future generations.

Legacies come in many forms. I started laying the groundwork for my own personal legacy when I started taking my dog, Abby, to visit children temporarily placed at Youth Haven, a shelter for abused and neglected children. We also began visiting older residents at the Chateau at the Moorings and Harbor Chase skilled nursing facilities.

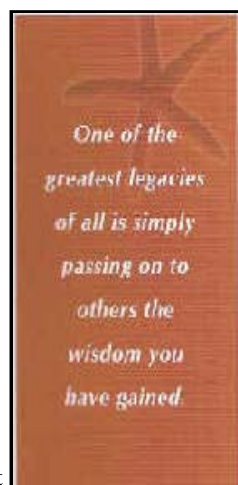
These visits have done a great deal to nourish my soul. The downside, however, is the acute awareness it brings of the tremendous needs of so many people. I kept asking myself, "What can I do that will possibly make a difference? I had trouble coming up with answers until I remembered "The Starfish Story.-



It's the story of a child standing at the shoreline tossing beached starfish back into the ocean. After a while, an adult approached the child and said, "Look at all these starfish on the beach. There are way too many of them for you to make any difference." The child looked at the starfish in her hand, and said simply, "It makes a difference to this one."

No act of kindness is ever too small to make a difference. Each of us has something of value to give. In his book, *From Ageing to Sageing*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi speaks of one of the greatest legacies of all - simply passing on to others the wisdom gained as we grow older. We do this in the stories we tell, the skills we use, and the compassion shared when we help other people.

When thinking about the legacy you wish to create, consider this: "How can I best use the gifts I've been given to make a difference?" Some of us have the gift of patience; some the gift of healing; others are politically savvy; others have the gift of parenting or grand-parenting well.



If you aren't sure where to start, there are a number of places to get ideas. What articles and content pull at your heart strings or inspire you when reading a magazine or newspaper? Who are the people in your life that you feel are making a difference? Do you feel inspired or motivated to use a special skill or experience you've had in the service of others?

In case you're still having trouble getting motivated, consider this message left by philosopher, Peter Russell, on his telephone answering machine: "Who are you and what do you want? In case you think these are frivolous questions, they are not. Most people come into this world and leave it again without having answered either question."

Editor's note: As you begin (or continue) to create your own personal legacy in this world, we would enjoy hearing your story. Please send it to editor@ebellamag.com.

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