

12-2013

Nothing to Remember Except the Story: How the Ethical Will Inspires Authentic Leadership

Andrew J. McIlree
St. Catherine University

Follow this and additional works at: http://sophia.stkate.edu/maol_theses

Recommended Citation

McIlree, Andrew J., "Nothing to Remember Except the Story: How the Ethical Will Inspires Authentic Leadership" (2013). *Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership Theses*. Paper 18.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Organizational Leadership at SOPHIA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership Theses by an authorized administrator of SOPHIA. For more information, please contact ejasch@stkate.edu.

**Nothing to Remember Except the Story:
How the Ethical Will Inspires Authentic Leadership**

By
Andrew J. McIlree

An Action Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

**St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota**

December, 2013

Research Advisor: Gene Scheffler, MAOL

Date

Signature of Advisor



Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

© Copyright by Andrew J. McIlree, 2013

Abstract

The focus of this Leadership Action Project is to explore how the ethical will can inspire authentic leadership. Authentic Leadership theory is predicated on the growth of self-knowledge and self-awareness in a leader. These twin notions, developed through practical experience and lifelong reflection, inform a leader's legacy of values, beliefs, and behavior. Due to the immediacy of daily challenges, modern leaders often lack the presence of mind to reflect on their crucible experiences and practical wisdom. As a result of this lack of contemplation, these leaders do not extract as much self-knowledge and self-awareness from their personal ethical legacies. The ethical will, a document designed to articulate an author's values and life experiences as a legacy for others, can be a practical medium for inspiring authentic leadership. The research findings inform a set of recommended best processes for inspiring authentic leadership through writing an ethical will.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	3
Introduction	5
Analysis of Conceptual Context	6
Research Question and Methodology	16
Validity	18
Results and Discussion of Findings	18
Ethical Will Practitioners	18
The Ethical Will as a Leadership Instrument	19
Authentic Leadership and the Writing Process	20
Recommendations for Best Processes	26
References	30
Appendix: Research Instrument	33

Introduction

Over five centuries ago, an ancestor of mine was the head of a Norbertine abbey in rural Scotland. My research on his life's leadership journey is what inspired me to pursue a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership. What were his personal values? I wondered. What crucible experiences shaped his life, and what wisdom would he have wanted to share with me about living in an authentic manner during a challenging time? Because he never wrote about his own life, those questions will go forever unanswered.

Those questions are what drew me to examine Authentic Leadership theory and the concept of a leader's personal ethical legacy. Today, leaders throughout the world face a crucible of challenges that demand swift responses. Studies have shown that reflecting on these experiences can make a leader's life rich with wisdom and self-knowledge (Thomas, 2008). Due to the immediacy of these challenges, however, most leaders often lack the presence of mind to contemplate their personal ethical legacy: what they learned from life experiences, and what they would like future generations—their loved ones and the public—to remember about them.

My Leadership Action Project examines the creation of an ethical will as a means to communicate a personal ethical legacy and inspire authentic leadership. "Unlike traditional wills that transfer worldly possessions," wrote Flashman, Flashman, Noble, and Quick (1998), "an ethical will bequeaths values, ideas, and personal reflections." For the writer, creating an ethical will encourages the definition of personal values, the articulation of life lessons from crucible experiences, and wisdom imparted to future generations. This process further incorporates these components into an authentic leader's daily practice.

I analyzed existing literature, research, and case studies about the history and practice of ethical wills. I also conducted interviews with ethical will practitioners: a rabbi, an estate attorney, and others who wrote them. My questions focused on best processes for creating ethical wills grounded in Authentic Leadership theory, which was developed by Bill George and others. In practice, this theory “relies heavily on the life story of the leader and the meaning the leader attaches to his or her life experiences” when interacting with followers and responding to challenges (Northouse, 2010, p. 206).

The outcome of my Leadership Action Project is a set of recommendations with which an authentic leader can create a personal ethical legacy. These recommendations are based on my research of ethical wills and the best processes identified in my interviews, compared and contrasted with George’s five dimensions of Authentic Leadership theory.

Analysis of Conceptual Context

I begin the following analysis by outlining the evolution of the ethical will throughout history and offering a modern definition for it as a leadership instrument. I then proceed to define and outline Authentic Leadership theory as described by George (2003, 2007). Finally, I demonstrate how in recent years the ethical will has been used as a practical medium for both inspiring authentic leadership and establishing a leader’s personal ethical legacy.

History of the Ethical Will

The ethical will is rooted in the history of leadership, notably within the founding of Judaism. Scholars point to the Book of Genesis 49.1- 28 in the Hebrew Scriptures as the first example of an ethical will, when Jacob, patriarch of Israel, summoned his sons

for a deathbed speech. “Then Jacob called his sons, and said, ‘Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come,’” and offered his life’s wisdom through warnings and blessings (New Revised Standard Version Bible). Jacob, whose sons founded the Tribes of Israel, used his ethical will both as a means to preserve his legacy and as an opportunity to give final thoughts on leadership. Ethical wills became a Jewish leadership tradition, and they gained importance across centuries of societal growth and change for the Jewish people.

Sheridan found that after the Roman destruction of the Jewish nation, in 70 C.E., for Jews dispersed throughout Europe and the Near East,

...these documents were a way to preserve their heritage in the face of forced conversions to Islam and Christianity. Written by male heads of households for their families and by rabbis who wished to leave a record for their congregations, they were ‘moral assets’ for a people whose material assets were more often than not in jeopardy. (2009, p. 114-115)

According to Baines (2002), ethical wills during the Medieval and Renaissance periods also became an opportunity for women, especially mothers with children, to exercise leadership and create a legacy independent of their husbands, “since society’s rules usually precluded them from writing a legal will or dispensing property as they wished” (p. 13).

The Modern Ethical Will

Global cultural and societal changes have continued to shape the ethical will as a leadership and legacy instrument, wrote Faulkner (2010). Rather than a ritual deathbed speech or a documented safeguard for religious preservation, “Modern ethical wills deal

more with passing on personal values and beliefs, spiritual values, [and] hopes and concerns for future generations,” and are now used by people of all faiths (Faulkner, 2010, p. 454). Further, the creation of an ethical will is no longer limited by the writer’s age or stage of life (Taylor, 2011). In the context of modern society, “legal wills bequeath valuables, while ethical wills bequeath values,” (Baines, 2002, p. 14).

Researchers of ethical wills are in general agreement when defining the modern document. Baines described it as “a vehicle for clarifying and communicating the meaning in our lives to our families and communities,” an especially useful instrument for helping one “reflect on and share [his or her] life’s experience” (2002, p. 2). Similarly, Faulkner wrote that an ethical will gives an author “the opportunity to permanently recount and place those [life lessons] in a preserved place” (2010, p. 457). This document “allows future generations to access experiences that they would not otherwise have personally encountered; and this perhaps gives them a better idea of their own experiences based on what members of their family have experienced” (Faulkner, 2010, p. 457). Frank (2003) offered the most succinct definition of an ethical will: it is “any document which seeks to pass on to current and future generations, the values, experiences, and lessons of an individual and her ancestors. In short, it is a document which creates a human legacy” (p. 70-71).

Authentic Leadership Theory

The notions of self-knowledge and self-awareness in a leader are what form the heart of Authentic Leadership theory. A survey by Northouse (2010) of the literature on Authentic Leadership, however, revealed little agreement among scholars on a formal definition of the theory beyond the importance of these twin notions within a leader’s

emotional intelligence. Therefore, for clarity this Leadership Action Project will use the Authentic Leadership model developed by George (2003; 2007). According to George:

Authentic leaders are genuine people who are true to themselves and to what they believe. Rather than letting the expectations of others guide them, they are prepared to be their own person and go their own way. As they develop as authentic leaders, they are more concerned about serving others than they are about their own success or recognition. And they are constantly looking for ways to grow personally. Authentic leaders develop genuine connections with others and engender trust. Because people trust them, they are able to motivate people to high levels of performance by empowering them to lead. (2007, p. 205-206)

Leadership Growth and Evolution over Time

Personal leadership growth and evolution over time is a major component of George's model. Authentic leaders, he wrote, are dedicated to a lifetime of learning from experiences. "The medium for developing into an authentic leader is not the destination but the journey itself—a journey to find [the leader's] true self and the purpose of [his or her] life's work" (George, 2003, p. 27). Continuing with his analogy of the lifelong leadership experience as a journey, George (2007) created a compass metaphor informed by his five dimensions of Authentic Leadership: Pursuing purpose with passion, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing connected relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline, respectively. Together, these moral points guide a leader to her or his internal "True North" purpose of authentic leadership (George, 2007, p. 65-66). The following section expands upon the five dimensions of George's model with research from other scholars.

Dimensions of Authentic Leadership

Pursuing purpose with passion. “Without a real sense of purpose,” George found, “leaders are at the mercy of their egos and are vulnerable to narcissistic impulses” (2003, p. 19). Research by Shamir and Eilam (2005) corroborated George’s findings. “Performing a leadership function and related activities are self-expressive acts for authentic leaders,” Shamir and Eilam found (2005, p. 396-397), suggesting that the purpose itself of leading carried more importance than public affirmation. They concluded:

Authentic leaders do not take on a leadership role or engage in leadership activities for status, honor, or other personal rewards.... They have a value-based cause or a mission they want to promote, and they engage in leadership in order to promote this cause or mission. (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 396-397)

Practicing solid values. “Leaders are defined by their values, and values are personal—they cannot be determined by anyone else,” George wrote (2007, p. xxxii). A review by Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) of Authentic Leadership literature similarly defined this dimension as *internalized moral perspective*. This term “refers to being guided by internal moral standards, which are used to self-regulate one’s behavior” (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 424). Shamir and Eilam (2005) are in agreement with this concept, and echoed George’s point about leadership lessons drawn from lifelong experience. They found the values held by authentic leaders were internalized “on the basis of their own experiences. They hold their values to be true not because these values are socially or politically appropriate, but because they have experienced them to be true” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 397).

Leading with heart. “Sometimes we refer to people as being bighearted,” wrote George. “What we really mean is that they are open and willing to share themselves fully with us, and are genuinely interested in us” (George, 2003, p. 22). Avolio et al. (2009) articulated this dimension’s qualities as *relational transparency*. This analogous concept “refers to presenting one’s authentic self through openly sharing information and feelings as appropriate for situations (i.e. avoiding inappropriate displays of emotions)” (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 424).

Establishing connected relationships. Through his study, George (2007) found that:

the ability to develop enduring relationships is an essential mark of authentic leaders. People today demand personal relationships with their leaders before they will give themselves fully to their jobs.... In return, people will demonstrate great commitment to their work and loyalty to the company. (George, 2007, p. xxxiii).

Authentic leaders, noted Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) in a similar finding, rely on their self-awareness and self-knowledge for confidence when interacting with followers. By intrinsically understanding those twin notions, authentic leaders “will display higher levels of trustworthiness, openness, and willingness to share...their thoughts and feelings in close relationships” (Gardener et al., 2005, p. 358).

Demonstrating self-discipline. “Self-discipline is an essential quality of an authentic leader. Without it, [a leader] cannot gain the respect of [her or his] followers,” wrote George (2003, p. 24). Avolio et al. (2009) defined this component as *balanced processing*. This term “refers to objectively analyzing relevant data before making a decision” (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 424). Shamir and Eilam found similar results, noting

that “authentic leaders are self-concordant individuals, namely people who pursue life goals with a sense that they express their authentic choices rather than externally imposed duties or conventions” (2005, p. 398).

Reflecting on Practical Wisdom

As noted earlier, George’s model encourages the development of a leader’s ethical legacy by the emphasis it places on the reflection of practical wisdom gained from lifelong experience. “The Greeks often talked about *phronesis*, practical wisdom,” wrote Greitens in his autobiography on leadership (2011). He continued:

It’s a concept that has no direct equivalent in English. We sometimes talk of ‘knowledge’ or ‘common sense,’ but *phronesis* implies something more.

Phronesis is the ability to figure out what to do, while at the same time knowing what is worth doing. (Greitens, 2011, p. 283-284)

Greitens discovered the practical wisdom within his “True North” over years of experience as a human rights activist, a Rhodes Scholar, and a combat veteran of the United States Navy SEALs, respectively. “Hard decisions are best made by good people,” he concluded, “and...the best people can only be shaped by hard experience,” (Greitens, 2011, p. 283-284).

As Greitens demonstrated, a leader discovers and hones his or her self-knowledge and self-awareness, especially regarding personal values, while enduring an extreme and often difficult experience. George described this experience as a *crucible* (2007, p. 14). The following sections explore how an authentic leader gains wisdom from living through a *crucible* experience, and how a leader can deepen and convey that wisdom to followers by reflecting on it, notably by writing an ethical will.

The Authentic Leader and the Crucible Experience

Researchers Bennis and Thomas (2002) conducted an extensive study on how leaders respond to crucible experiences. In each case, they discovered that the leader judged the crucible as an opportunity to succeed in the face of trying circumstances rather than perceiving it as a cause for failure. Their research revealed that the crucible experience became a trigger event for developing the leader's sense of self (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). According to Bruner (1994), a trigger event is a psychological turning point that "usher[s] in a new and intense line of activity" for the leader, the results of which are deeper self-knowledge and self-awareness (p. 50). In other words, a leader enters a crucible, is tested and chooses to learn from it regardless of the outcome, and exits with a more authentic leadership purpose.

Wisdom through Stories

Bennis and Thomas found that "the extraction of wisdom from the crucible experience is what distinguishes our successful leaders from those who are broken or burnt out by comparable experiences" (2002, p. 94). To extract this wisdom, these successful leaders crafted new, empowered life stories informed by their formative experiences. Admiral James Stockdale provided the brightest illustration to corroborate their findings when describing his crucible experience as an American prisoner of war for eight years during the Vietnam conflict (Collins, 2001). "I never lost faith in the end of the story," Stockdale said. "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining moment of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade," (as cited in Collins, 2001, p. 85).

George (2007) wrote that such an ongoing self-narrative about one's leadership journey is a defining characteristic of an authentic leader, which is in agreement with research on self-knowledge conducted by Sparrowe (2005). "The basis of narrating one's self is to take oneself as an object of reflection for the self. Put simply, to tell our stories we have to see ourselves as others see us," wrote Sparrowe (2005, p. 429). They continued:

This is a key insight because, in order to examine whether one leads...an 'authentic life' in the domain of contemporary leadership theory and research, it is necessary to construe oneself as an object and, at the same time, recognize that it is one's own self that is the object of reflection. (Sparrowe, 2005, p. 429)

Indeed, George (2007) concluded his thoughts on Authentic Leadership theory with an activity designed to inspire the narrative reflection process described by Sparrowe. George asked the reader to imagine being at his or her last moment of life, as seen through the eyes of the reader's young great-granddaughter. "Please—tell us what did you do in your life to make a difference in the world?" the girl asks (George, 2007, p. 201). The reader's response to this question would be, in effect, the start of an ethical will. George's exercise points to how creating an ethical will can inspire authentic leadership.

The Ethical Will and Authentic Leadership

Much anecdotal evidence exists on the efficacy of the ethical will as a component of authentic leadership development (Baines, 2002; Freed, 2003; Kline Cebuhar, 2010; Reimer & Stampfer, 1991; Taylor, 2011). Few qualitative studies exist on the topic, however, and no quantitative studies have been conducted. Qualitative research on ethical

wills by Cohen-Mansfield, Regier, Peyser, and Stanton (2009), the most recent study available, reaffirmed how a leader can grow in authenticity through self-reflection. They found that “the values described by participants [while writing ethical wills] were often accompanied by justification for the personal importance of those values based on their life experiences,” particularly when these experiences involved a crucible (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2009, p. 532). A separate analysis of the Cohen-Mansfield et al. study found ethical wills to be “a significant and underutilized tool in leadership” (Stanton & Peyser, 2010, p. 538). Stanton and Peyser, when observing how the act of writing an ethical will established a sense of community between leader and followers, predicted that “ethical wills may become centerpieces of...leadership curricula” when more leadership development practitioners become aware of these findings (2010, p. 546).

Both analyses of the Cohen-Mansfield, et al. data set underscore what Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, and Adler (2005) learned about leaders and the self-narrative practice: authentic leaders “not only stress their ability to reflect on experience, analyze it and learn from it, they also present a liking for learning while telling their life stories, which are often presented as tales of self-improvement through learning” (p. 22). Viewed within this context, the available qualitative research supports how the ethical will can be a practical medium for both inspiring authentic leadership and establishing a leader’s personal ethical legacy. This Leadership Action Project will further enhance the qualitative analyses on leadership and the ethical will.

Research Question and Methodology

Research Question

My Leadership Action Project sought to answer the question: How can the process of writing an ethical will inspire George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership in its writer?

Methodology

I used a qualitative research design for my Leadership Action Project. My methodology utilized the in-depth qualitative interviewing method, as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2012), to answer my research question. This method employs a small number of prepared questions for the interviewee, as well as additional questions formed and asked during the interview itself (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The semi-structured, responsive format of the in-depth qualitative interview allows the interviewer greater flexibility to obtain detailed, nuanced responses on a subject (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I chose this design due to the range of knowledge and variance of practice among people who have experience with the ethical will.

My questions focused on best processes for creating an ethical will. In particular, I explored how George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership—purpose with passion, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing connected relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline—can be defined and honed when writing an ethical will. To explore how the ethical will can be used as a leadership instrument, I provided the definition of leadership by Northouse (2010) when asking for examples: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal," (p. 3).

Interview sampling method. As suggested by Maxwell (2005), my sampling method utilized the purposeful selection sample. I created two sample sets, each focused on subjects who had knowledge specific to the ethical will, who had written an ethical will for themselves and had advised others on the writing process. The interview subjects were all over fifty years of age. Each set had three people, for a total of six subjects. I identified these interview subjects through my connections within the professional estate-planning community, professional philanthropic development community, and the Jewish community.

The first sample set, due to the history and practice of the ethical will within Judaism, involved Jewish people who had experience with ethical wills. Two of the three subjects, a male family physician and a female social worker, made their living as ethical will practitioners. The third was a male rabbi emeritus and Biblical scholar.

The second set, due to the growth in practice of ethical wills in secular culture, involved non-Jewish people who had experience with ethical wills. Two of the subjects in this sample made their living as ethical will practitioners: a male estate attorney and a female professional writer. The third was a male English professor.

My recruitment method was to contact potential subjects via telephone and email to gauge their knowledge of the ethical will and interest in scheduling an interview. The interviews were conducted in person and over the telephone.

Data analysis and reporting. I analyzed the interview data by sorting for theoretical themes between the two sample sets and my conceptual context. I examined how these themes point toward best processes on how writing an ethical will can inspire George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership. First, as outlined by Maxwell (2005),

I sorted each sample for themes that showed how my interviewees made sense of their leadership journeys. Second, I compared and contrasted themes from the first and second data sets. Third, I compared these themes against the dimensions of Authentic Leadership development in my conceptual context. With the complete analysis, I recommend a set of best processes with which an authentic leader can create a personal ethical legacy.

Validity

The most serious threat to the validity of my findings is researcher bias: I believe that writing an ethical will can inspire George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership. However, I recognize that the ethical will is not designed exclusively for authentic leadership development, and that each author brings unique intentions to the writing process. Further, when the writing process does inspire authentic leadership, it may not inspire each of George's five dimensions.

To validate my results, I therefore sought to create interview sample sets with a range of subjects, each with knowledge specific to the ethical will. I then triangulated the themes found within my data between the two sample sets and the conceptual context. When found, I highlighted discrepant themes for further study by researchers of leadership and legacy practices.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Ethical Will Practitioners

Each member of the sample became an ethical will practitioner while in another profession, and their interest in the history and practice of the legacy tradition soon led them to become experts in the field. Five of six had written books on the subject of ethical wills to educate and inspire others to write their own. Their responses were not

only informed by their own experience of writing an ethical will, but by the experiences of those who they had guided through the process as well. All of the interview subjects, through examples and stories shared with me, demonstrated themselves to be authentic leaders according to the definition by George (2007): each was a unique person guided by his or her own values, who placed serving others ahead of personal ambition, and who always sought to grow in self-awareness and self-knowledge. The process of writing an ethical will served to inspire and enhance their leadership practices.

The Ethical Will as a Leadership Instrument

Generally, all six of the interview subjects agreed with the literature's definition of a modern ethical will. Referencing the tradition's ancient Judaic roots, they all described it as a means to articulate one's values, share life lessons and wisdom, and offer blessings for others. All of them stressed that an ethical will is a living document that must be continually revised and lengthened as the author's life progresses.

Two of the six interview subjects offered subtle differences discrepant to the literature. The rabbi, for example, stated that a person should not write an ethical will until he or she has reached at least fifty years of age, as it takes decades of life experience for one to identify basic values and put them into words. This belief is not surprising in light of the rabbi's background as an ethical will practitioner: the literature noted that within Judaism, a person traditionally wrote an ethical will during the autumnal period of his or her life. Second, the professional writer did not believe that an ethical will must be a written document. Much like the earliest examples of ethical wills, she found through working with clients that values, life lessons, and blessings could be passed in conversation just as intentionally as in a written document. The important part, she noted,

is that the creator of an oral ethical will goes through the same process of deep introspection necessary for creating a written document.

Regardless of the subtle discrepancies of defining the ethical will, the themes identified in my interviews all point toward the document as being an effective leadership instrument. Drawing from the definition of leadership provided by Northouse (2010), the ethical will influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, particularly in directing others on how to live a better life. Indeed, the writing process is fundamental to leadership development because exemplary leaders “are able to envision the future, to gaze across the horizon of time and imagine the greater opportunities to come,” according to leadership scholars Kouzes and Posner (2007, p. 105). Similar to the outcome of creating an ethical will, their research demonstrated that leaders “are able to develop an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good,” (p. 105). In the following section, I provide examples of how these themes point toward inspiring George’s five dimensions of Authentic Leadership.

Authentic Leadership and the Writing Process

Pursuing purpose with passion. My question explored how the interview subjects viewed their sense of life purpose before and after writing an ethical will. All of them used language associated with passion, such as “fascination,” “love,” and “energy” when describing how the writing process shaped and renewed this sense. As noted in the literature, a sense of life purpose is often tied to a strong sense of leadership. All of the interview subjects described how the writing process clarified and strengthened their leadership roles as spouses, parents, and members of the community.

Similarly, all noted that the clarification of life purpose through the writing process fueled their desire to be leaders in sharing the ethical will with others. “It changed me,” the estate attorney said. He continued:

I was no longer a tax attorney who helped clients minimize tax. Now I was participating in preserving their values and helping them transmit those values in a form that they would be remembered, and hopefully incorporated into practice by the future generations of their families.

The estate attorney’s experience was, to a greater or lesser extent, the norm among my sample, and it demonstrates how the process can inspire purpose with passion in an authentic leader.

Practicing solid values. My question examined how the interview subjects reflected on their significant values when writing, and if that process then motivated them to express their values in new ways. Personal values, the literature stated, are integral to authentic leadership. Perhaps not surprisingly, since the *raison d’être* of the ethical will is to articulate the writer’s values, both the Jewish and secular sets found the writing process to be helpful in identifying these values. Rather than a simple list of values enumerated on the page, however, all of the interview subjects described a painstaking reflection process of sifting through stories to discern which held personal values, and then a weighing of the evidence for how those values were being demonstrated in daily life. The stories, rather than a list, communicated those values on the page.

For the English professor, this process felt like he was explaining to himself and exploring for the first time what he found important about his values. All of the interview subjects noted a similar theme in their responses. In particular, all found that the insights

from the reflection process encouraged greater introspection and further clarifications, including the uncovering of a new value. This thought process continued within the writer long after the ethical will was finished, causing each of them to modify their behavior in accordance with their values. “It wasn’t a dramatic change,” noted the English professor on how the reflection process caused him to express his values in new ways, “but if you’re going to put [your values] out there you better be living” them in daily life, he said. George (2007) wrote that “the values of authentic leaders are...developed through study, introspection, consultation with others, and years of experience,” (p. xxxii). Indeed, the responses in my study point to how the ethical will can be a practical medium for articulating an authentic leader’s values.

Leading with heart and establishing connected relationships. The literature suggested that authentic leaders are open to experiencing emotions in a healthy manner, and to expressing those emotions appropriately with others. This trait, stemming from a honed sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge, also strengthens the authentic leader’s ability to establish and maintain enduring relationships. My question explored how the interview subjects and their clients experienced emotion while writing their ethical wills, and if that process strengthened their relationships with others. The responses provided by the complete sample confirmed that the process of writing an ethical will can inspire two of George’s respective dimensions, leading with heart and establishing connected relationships.

All of the interview subjects noted that experiencing emotions while writing an ethical will can feel daunting, and that not everyone finishes the process for that reason. The rabbi found that “writing an ethical will is an emotional experience. Identifying

values basic to you is pure emotion.” For the ethical will practitioners themselves, experiencing emotion during the writing process was not as challenging as the difficulty they had witnessed in some clients. This response may be due to the practitioners’ greater knowledge, at the outset of writing, on the emotional impact the process can entail. All of the interview subjects noted that the act of experiencing emotion while writing their ethical wills strengthened their daily relationships with others, and inspired them to share their emotions more freely.

In one example, the family physician said that experiencing emotions while writing about his values improved his interactions with others, particularly in the workplace. “As you read your own reflections” on personal successes and failures in life, “you want to know people better and what shaped” their values, he said. He became more understanding when his staff made mistakes, and he wanted to help them find ways to reflect and learn from them. Indeed, the family physician said that the combination of wisdom, life stories, and blessings in an ethical will “creates an intentionality that helps [the writer] to be more authentic and real, because [the writer has] taken the time to identify the values that are important and must act upon them” when connecting with others.

In a similar example, the social worker described the importance of writing blessings in the ethical will as a means to experiencing emotion and using that experience to strengthen relationships with others. In part, blessings make the ethical will unique from other forms of self-reflective writing, such as autobiography, and they demonstrate how the process can inspire authentic leadership: the writer can access the blessing at a later time for further self-reflection and emotional growth. “As we bless people, we

experience being blessed,” the social worker said. This experience opens the writer to new emotions and deepens her or his relationships with others. “Just the practice of blessing-writing leads us to a deepened understanding of our own awe and appreciation for the world, our family,” and others in the writer’s life, she said.

Demonstrating self-discipline. My question examined if the process of writing an ethical will encouraged a sense of ownership of the writer’s life choices. The literature suggested that authentic leaders practice self-discipline when making decisions. In particular, this practice involves making life choices based on one’s values. I examined if the writing process helped the interview subject gain greater insight into how she or he made life choices. All six of the interview subjects responded that the process encouraged them to reflect on their life choices, and helped inform how they made choices going forward. Their statements confirm that writing an ethical will can inspire self-discipline in an authentic leader.

For example, the professional writer observed that “Many people do a mental timeline when writing an ethical will to look back and look forward on life” that involve stories associated with values. “This gives a profound sense on the forks in the road, a sense of self that has changed over time,” and it illuminates how a person has made decisions, she said. Several interview subjects shared stories about how family members and friends observed a greater sense of intentionality in how the writer, having shared the ethical will, now acted on life choices. “It’s like a covenant,” said the literature professor. He continued: “When you declare these are my values and these are the stories from which they arose, you are covenanting to have those values continue to be manifested in your life. Otherwise people call you a hypocrite.”

Wisdom through stories and the crucible experience. The literature identified a growth process, called a crucible experience, where authentic leaders choose to respond to a life challenge and learn from that experience. The authentic leader's response and subsequent reflection on that choice, George (2007) wrote, can reframe a person's life story and result in increased self-awareness and self-knowledge. My question explored whether or not a connection exists between the description of a crucible experience through the process of writing an ethical will and a corresponding increase through that process of self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Four of the six interview subjects reflected upon and documented in their ethical wills some form of a crucible experience. The family physician reflected on a crucible experience while writing, but did not document the details of it in his ethical will. The estate attorney did not write about a crucible experience, but plans to include one in a subsequent version of his ethical will. For all of the interview subjects, responses to what merited a major life challenge varied in extremes. The literature often highlighted dramatic experiences, such as a major illness, the death of a spouse early in marriage, or unjust incarceration. For my interview subjects, a crucible experience included a range of transformational turning points that resulted in greater self-awareness and self-knowledge, from natural childbirth to a humbling classroom experience as an adolescent.

My findings reinforce that the crucible experience is important to authentic leadership development, but such an experience does not have to be written into the ethical will in order to inspire authentic leadership. More important, I found, was the underlying theme demonstrated in each response about the writing process on the self-narrative that an authentic leader practices regarding challenging life experiences.

The interview subjects all described practical wisdom grounded in life experience that helped them overcome a challenge. They all reflected on these stories during the writing process with a sense of enduring optimism. “I’m an optimist by nature,” the family physician said when providing an example of this practice. His crucible experience involved being a committed spouse while raising a family and establishing a career. “So if [my wife and I] went through hard times, we endured and did not see the endurance as a great accomplishment,” he said. He noted the lessons from his marriage, rather than the experiences themselves, in his ethical will. These findings demonstrate that, whether a crucible experience is documented or not in the writer’s ethical will, the reflection on such an experience during the writing process can lead to an increase of self-awareness and self-knowledge in the writer.

Recommendations for Best Processes

George (2007) found that authentic leaders experience greater coherence between their life stories and their leadership practices when their lifestyles reflect their values and beliefs. The ethical will, as demonstrated in my findings, is a practical medium for both establishing and inspiring those components of a leader’s self-awareness and self-knowledge. All of the texts on creating an ethical will cited in the conceptual context provide excellent instructions on the writing process. The following best processes with which an authentic leader can create a personal ethical legacy, drawn from my review of the literature and analysis of the interview data, complement those instructions.

- Begin the ethical will by expressing gratitude. This process helps define the leader’s passions and purpose by reflecting with gratitude on how influential people and events have shaped her or his life. My interview subjects all described

how a sense of gratitude inspires a person to influence the lives of others with strong leadership practices. Further, this process encourages the ethical will to be revised as the leader's purpose is refined through experience and time.

- Consider which life stories are most important for others to know that demonstrate personal values in action, and spend time reflecting on the details of each story's significance. This process aids in discovering and defining personal values by articulating the meaning of these stories in the leader's life. Not all of these stories, my interview subjects said, must be written into the ethical will. Sometimes only the values will be named in the document. The stories, and the values that emerge from them through this process, provide context and support to a person's leadership practice, lifestyle, and legacy.
- Offer blessings to other people. This process encourages the leader to experience a full spectrum of emotions through both inward reflection and outward expression of feelings toward others. It also establishes connected relationships with others by deepening the emotional bond between the leader and the person receiving the blessing. Reading the blessing aloud, my interview subjects found, can make the emotions expressed in the blessing more tangible. This aspect of the process can enhance a person's ability to share feelings with others. For the leader looking for a more emotive experience while writing an ethical will, my findings suggest completing the process within a communal setting, such as a workshop.
- Inform others that an ethical will is being written, and then share it with them. The process of creating an ethical will is itself an act of self-discipline for a leader, one that demonstrates a commitment to fully sharing one's values and

beliefs. The writing process does not have to take an excessive amount of time to complete. Rather, my interview subjects suggested reserving between fifteen and forty-five minutes to write a draft. Sharing the ethical will further strengthens self-discipline by encouraging the leader to be more intentional in how his or her daily behavior reflects the values expressed on the page.

- Consider a challenging past experience, and spend time reflecting on what life lessons came from responding to that challenge. This process creates and hones a sense of enduring optimism within a leader by demonstrating how a person can learn and grow from life's challenges. Further, my findings suggest that documenting this experience, or lessons from this experience, establishes credibility within the ethical will as a leadership and legacy instrument. "If the ethical will appears too rosy, it is not believable," the rabbi found. He continued: "It has to have a sense of reality to it. Otherwise nobody will take it seriously."

Conclusion

This Leadership Action Project examined how the process of writing an ethical will can inspire authentic leadership. Modern leaders face a crucible of challenges that demand swift responses, and the result is that few take the opportunity to contemplate their personal ethical legacy: how their life experiences, values, and beliefs shape their notions of self-awareness and self-knowledge. Authentic Leadership theory, predicated on the growth of self-awareness and self-knowledge in a leader, uses practical experience and lifelong reflection to define and hone these twin notions. The ethical will, a document designed to articulate an author's values and life experiences as a legacy for others, can be a practical medium for inspiring George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership.

My research included a literature review on the ethical will and Authentic Leadership theory, as well as interviews with ethical will practitioners who have advised on the writing process for others and have written one themselves. My findings inform a set of recommended best processes for inspiring authentic leadership through writing an ethical will.

References

- Alexander, R. (2006). Ethical wills: The gift of a heart. *Journal of Practical Estate Planning*, 8.
- Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. (2009). Leadership: Current theories, research, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60(1), 421-449. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163621
- Baines, B. K. (2002). *Ethical wills: Putting your values on paper*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.
- Bennis, W. G., & Thomas, R. J. (2002). *Geeks & geezers: How era, values, and defining moments shape leaders*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Bruner, J. (1994). The 'remembered' self. In U. Neisser, & R. Fivush (Eds.), *The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative* (41-54). Cambridge; NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen-Mansfield, J., Regier, N. G., Peyser, H., & Stanton, J. (2009). Wisdom of generations: A pilot study of the values transmitted in ethical wills of nursing home residents and student volunteers. *Gerontologist*, 49(4), 525-535. doi: 10.1093/geront/gnp045
- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap—and others don't*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.
- Faulkner, C. (2010). Happily ever after: An ethical will may be a step on the journey. *Thomas M. Cooley Journal of Practical and Clinical Law*, 12(3), 451-468.
- Flashman, R., Flashman, M., Noble, L., & Quick, S. (1998). Ethical wills: Passing on treasures of the heart. *Forum for Family & Consumer Issues: NC State University*, 3(3).

- Frank, J. (2003). The human legacy: Using ethical wills to enhance estate planning. *Thomas M. Cooley Journal of Practical and Clinical Law*, 6, 65-81.
- Freed, R. (2003). *Women's lives, women's legacies: Passing your beliefs and blessings to future generations*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.
- Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005). "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 343-372. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.003
- George, W. (2003). *Authentic leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- George, W. (2007). *True north: Discover your authentic leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greitens, E. (2011). *The heart and the fist: The education of a humanitarian, the making of a Navy SEAL*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kline Cebuhar, J. (2010). *So grows the tree: Creating an ethical will*. West Des Moines, IA: Murphy.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2007). *The leadership challenge* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Northouse, P. (Ed.). (2010). *Leadership theory and practice* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Riemer, J., & Stampfer, N. (1991). *So that your values live on: Ethical wills and how to prepare them*. Woodstock, VA: Jewish Lights.
- Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Shamir, B., Dayan-Horesh, H. & Adler, D. (2005). "Leading by biography: Towards a life-story approach to the study of leadership." *Leadership*, 1(1), 13-29.
- Shamir, B., & Eilam, G. (2005). "What's your story?" A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 395-417. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.005
- Sheridan, J. (2009). The ethical will: A modern approach to an ancient tradition. *LLI Review*, 4, 114-120.
- Sparrowe, R. T. (2005). Authentic leadership and the narrative self. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 419-439. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.004
- Stanton, J., & Peyser, H. (2010). The use of ethical wills to engage future Jewish leaders. *Religious Education*, 105(5), 536-548. doi: 10.1080/00344087.2010.516217
- Taylor, D. (2011). *Creating a spiritual legacy: How to share your stories, values, and wisdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Thomas, R. J. (2008). *Crucibles of leadership: How to learn from experience to become a great leader*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Appendix

Research Instrument

Purpose

Identify themes from how my subjects made sense of their leadership journeys through the process of writing an ethical will.

Objectives

Learn the definition of an ethical will and how one is written.

Identify and explore potential connections between these themes from leadership journeys and George's five dimensions of Authentic Leadership.

Identify and explore if a connection exists between the description of a crucible experience through the process of writing an ethical will and a corresponding increase through that process of self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Interview Inventory I

- Touring Question: Definition and subject background.
 1. Please define, in your own words: what is an ethical will?
 - When did you become interested in ethical wills, and why?
 - When did you write your own, and what inspired you to do so?
 2. Please walk me through the process of writing one.
 - How would you describe your personal experience of the process of writing an ethical will, and what did you gain from this experience?
 - Who has been interested in writing an ethical will with your guidance, and what have been their reactions to completing the process?

- Focused Questions: Five dimensions of Authentic Leadership and the Crucible Experience.
 3. How did the writing process alter your sense of your life's purpose, if it did so?
 - How did you see your life's purpose beforehand?

- How did you see your life's purpose afterward?
4. What was the process of reflecting on your significant values like while writing your ethical will?
 - How did you identify with your significant values before writing?
 - How did you identify with your significant values after writing?
 - Did the act of writing these reflections down motivate you to demonstrate the expression of your values in a new way, or not? If so, how? If no, how do you express your values in daily life?
 5. When emotions would arise from reflecting and writing on your life experiences, how did you describe those emotions to your audience?
 - Did you encounter any barriers to expressing your emotions? If yes, how were you able to weaken or remove those barriers in order to express those emotions? If no, how did you find yourself experiencing emotions when writing?
 - Did you find that experiencing emotions while writing strengthened your routine interactions with people in your life, or not? Please share an example.
 - Having faced emotions while writing your reflections, how do you now share similar emotions in your daily life?
 6. How did writing an ethical will encourage you to reflect on your life choices?
 - When reflecting on your successes and failures in life, how did you experience a sense of ownership of your life choices? Did this sense of ownership increase or decrease after writing an ethical will?
 - Did this reflection lead to a greater sense of understanding about how you make life choices, or not? If so, please share an example.
 - Did the process give you greater wisdom on making life choices going forward? Please share an example of how you made a choice informed of the wisdom that you gained from the process.
 7. Did you reflect on a challenging life experience that you overcame, and how did the process of writing about it contribute to how you understand your own strengths and weaknesses?

- Please share how you felt about the challenging life experience before and after the writing process. Did you learn anything new about yourself?
 - How do you want your audience to view the way you learned from a challenging experience in light of their own personal challenges?
8. How did writing an ethical will shape your own sense of leadership?
 9. Earlier I asked about working with others on their ethical wills. Based on your observations, what was the process of reflecting on significant values like for your clients while writing an ethical will?

According to your observations, did the act of writing these reflections down motivate him or her to demonstrate the expression of their values in a new way? If so, how?