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Sharing a Lifetime

We are all going to die someday. The awareness of our mortality makes us human—no other species has the paradoxical curse and blessing of knowing of its own ultimate demise.

Even though our conscious attention is usually focused on the busy activities of daily life, mortality remains a permanent concern within the non-conscious dimensions of our minds. This is why the discovery that you have a terminal illness can be such a painful and overwhelming experience. You are suddenly forced to confront consciously what the unconscious parts of your mind have been anxiously pondering from the earliest days of your childhood.

The realization you are going to die opens up the possibility for looking back on your life as a whole, reflecting on past experiences, relationships and insights. There are several ways in which you can share with loved ones the story of your life, providing them with a lasting, meaningful memory. You will be surprised at how much family members and friends appreciate the life-story gifts you are leaving for them.

Here are some possibilities for creating gifts of self-reflection:

A family health history. Try writing out a chronology of your physical growth and health conditions, along with what you know of your siblings, parents and grandparents. This can literally be a gift of life for members of future generations whose doctors can use this history to help with a diagnosis.

A photo/scrap album. Most people have an old box somewhere filled with photos, newspaper clippings, programs, letters and announcements. This can be a good time to look through those pictures and papers and reminisce about especially meaningful moments in your life. You may want to create an album that preserves this material for future generations.

Family stories. Your memory is a treasure-house of stories about love, conflict, success, disappointment, travel and discovery. So many simple but inspiring family narratives are lost when a person dies. You have the chance to record those stories, either in writing or on audio or video tape, for others to enjoy after you're gone.

Eyewitness reporting. You have seen things that future generations will be intensely curious to learn about. Pretend to be a newspaper reporter and write or tell someone what you saw and what people's reactions were at that time. Your narration of an historical event acts like a time machine for other people, carrying them back to historical moments when the world changed in important ways.

Holiday celebrations. Holidays, both religious (for example, Easter, Christmas,

Rosh Hashanah) and secular (for example, New Year's, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, anniversaries), are often times of special social gatherings. You might consider asking your family and friends to help you celebrate a favorite holiday right now. Have Christmas in July, or Thanksgiving in April—bring out the ornaments, share a special meal, and enjoy the experience of a living holiday tradition one more time.

Create a family tree. For many people, dying brings a renewed awareness of family connections and where they stand in the unfolding of generations. Even if you've never been all that close to relatives, you may still gain a new perspective on your dying experience by looking at your life in terms of the rich interpersonal web of births, marriages and deaths by which your family has grown over the years and will continue to grow after you are gone.

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