



## ORIGINS

### JILL & EMILY MARGO - QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Jill & Emily, you wrote *Living On for the elderly*, or people living with a life threatening disease. But the concept behind [myheartwill.com](http://myheartwill.com) has grown – it's more universal, touching everyone. What general advice do you have for those setting up their Heartwill account for the first time?

The beautiful thing about a Heartwill is that it can take any form or shape – the only limitation is imagination. Making a Heartwill doesn't mean making a comprehensive family history – that's daunting. Rather it's about leaving a taste of what was, remembering important moments and significant events, sharing memories and family stories – all of which can be given to loved ones while you are all together or when you are no longer here. It also enables you to create a specific message for a loved one, marking a future occasion or event, which you may not be there to share. You can start building it at any time, putting things together. You don't have to worry about it all being in order. It's not about perfect text, it's about emotional texture. When you include a photo it's not about keeping a photographic record, it's about keeping alive the feeling within the photo.

*(Jill & Emily Margo)*

Jill, what first inspired you to write a book on leaving an emotional legacy?

A few years ago, a young mother of three suddenly discovered she was gravely ill and didn't have long to live. In her great distress, her main focus was on her children and how they would manage without her. More than anything, she wanted to make a tape recording for them, to leave them with a sense of herself, her love, faith and memories. But there was so much to say and so little time to do it that she felt overwhelmed by the task. She mentioned this to her family doctor who happened to be one of my good friends. The doctor asked if I could draw up a simple plan to help the young mother make the tape. The plan was to prompt and guide her through the process.

The young mother liked the plan and showed it to her cancer specialist, who made copies, saying he would like to give it to other patients. Along the way, it was suggested that I expand the idea and write plans for video recordings and letters too. With my background in health writing, I decided to compile them all into a small book.

For help with the book, I turned to my eldest daughter, Emily, who had been writing for a few years. Together, Emily and I researched, read and spoke to many people who had thought about leaving an emotional legacy. We put an advertisement in relevant newsletters, asking people to tell us what they had done in such situations. Many of the responses were then included in the book *Living On*.

*(Jill Margo)*

## Why is it important for individuals to create a personal legacy?

Most people plan to leave a material legacy. They have a legal will, which allocates their material belongings to others. But some people want to leave more than just belongings. They want to leave a sense of who they were, of their love, their memories and their stories. They want to live on in the hearts and minds of those they love. A Heartwill works in three ways. First, it gives the person who is creating it the comfort that they will continue to be heard when their voice is still. Second, it leaves something for those who remain, something with a familiar texture from which they can draw solace and emotional sustenance. And third, the creator can prepare dedicated messages for loved ones to mark specific events and occasions in the future.

*(Jill & Emily Margo)*

## Have you seen evidence of an individual leaving a personal legacy to those they have left behind? Has it helped them deal with their grief?

Yes, we have seen evidence of Heartwills making a lasting impact on their loved ones. Heartwills can take many forms. One man we knew well decided to leave a long letter to his children. The letter roamed over many aspects of life and became increasingly precious to the children as they grew up. When they had difficulties in their own lives and didn't know what to do, they'd often consult the letter. "What would Daddy have done?" they asked. His letter was rich in experience and full of his values. His advice to "tell the truth, even if it hurts you," became a guiding light to all three children. The children loved to hold the hand-written letter but over time, it became frayed and was in danger of falling apart. The family decided to scan it so it could be available online for the children wherever they were in the world.

Another parent, whose future was uncertain, recorded herself reading stories for her young children. They were stories she had heard as a girl and as she explained this on the tape, so she started talking about her own childhood. The tapes grew into a rich mix of reading, reminiscing, chatting and talking about her life and her hopes for their lives. Eventually she had recorded several hours of tape, covering many subjects. The tapes were suffused with her experiences, her values and her beliefs. They were also filled with love.

Not only parents make Heartwills, anyone can. We knew one older man, who had never had a family of his own but had a close knit group of friends. He wanted to leave them something and as he was passionate about cooking, he bought himself a scrapbook from the local store and wrote up his prized recipes. To each recipe he added something special - a note about the seasonality of the ingredients, the kind of olive oil to use or occasions that the particular dish had been prepared to celebrate an event in the group. The book contained so much of him that his friends could hear him talking in its pages. He knew that when they gathered for lunch on a Sunday, they would have cooked from it and, in that way, he would be at the table too.

*(Jill & Emily Margo)*

## What kind of obstacles and hurdles do you find people meet when they sit down to create a personal legacy?

Some people worry that what they have to say will not be "profound enough". They feel pressure because they are leaving something for posterity and they feel it ought to be full of meaning and significance. Actually, it doesn't need to be. All it needs to do is be genuine and provide a sense of its creator. It's not a masterpiece on display to the world; it's a small, private expression of self, intended only for a select group of people.

Other people are anxious about their ability to express themselves. They feel they can't quite say what they mean, that their grammar isn't good or they are unsure of their spelling. These are minor hurdles that can be overcome when one realises that it's the feeling in the sentences - and not the construction of the sentences - that is important.

Mixed feelings can be an obstacle too. If there are issues that have been left unresolved, it can be difficult to create an emotional legacy that is warm and open. We suggest people try to find a way

through any anger so they don't leave a poisoned legacy. If they can find the personal strength to declare peace, they may be surprised by the relief and calm it can bring.

*(Jill & Emily Margo)*

### How have people responded to the concept of a Heartwill?

Whenever we talk about leaving an emotional legacy, it seems to touch something in people. They intuitively understand the importance of leaving more than just material things and often reflect on people they have lost and how they wish those people had left such a legacy. The desire to live on, beyond your lifetime, resonates with most people. When we talk about this subject, some people realise they are already working towards leaving a legacy, in their own particular way. They have thought about the time when they will no longer be here and what sense of them will remain. And for many of them there is the comfort of being able to create a specific message for a loved one to mark a future occasion or event, which they may not be there to share.

*(Jill & Emily Margo)*