



MENTAL HEALTH AND RECOVERY BOARD



OF ASHLAND COUNTY

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## A Guide to Leaving Your Mark Through Legacy Writing and Projects

*A Collaboration of the Adult Advocacy Centers, the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County and Diana Spore, PhD, MGS*

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Creative writing has been found to be a powerful mechanism for promoting mental health and wellness, for recovering from trauma, and for expressing thoughts and feelings. During this pandemic, writing can be used to remain empowered and empower others, to be productive and to remain engaged intellectually. Significantly, it buffers the adverse effects of being isolated and having insufficient supportive connections. Likewise, the power of legacy writing cannot be underestimated. Leaving a legacy is gift to yourself and to future generations. It offers a permanent expression of wisdom, insight, values and what you want to be remembered for. It allows readers to know more about who you are rather than just what you have done, what matters most to you, and what messages you want to make sure are not left unsaid.

### **Ideas for Starting the Process of Creative and Legacy Writing**

Creative writing options are broad and can include many different forms, such as:

- Journaling
- Letter writing
- Poetry
- Short stories
- Novels
- Essays
- Plays
- Children's books
- Memoir writing
- Responding to prompts and other writing exercises

For examples of writing exercises, refer to "Writing for Recovery - Writing Exercises and Ideas: To incorporate into Personal Recovery Plans and Use in Writing Groups" (MHRB, 2019). This

recovery and wellness-focused resource can be downloaded at [www.ashlandmhrb.org/writingforrecovery](http://www.ashlandmhrb.org/writingforrecovery). It provides information about journaling and mechanisms for boosting your creativity, such as reflecting on quotes, music and lyrics, photographs, images and art work.

A resource for working on creative writing and legacy writing is provided in a manual entitled “Creative/Legacy Writing Manual: When Living Through and Surviving a Transformative Experience — COVID-19 as an Example” (MHRB, 2020). The writing exercises focus on a series of themes: gratitude journaling, heroism, maintaining supportive connections, what you can control versus what you cannot control and grief. The second part of this resource addresses pandemic-focused legacy-writing exercises. This manual can be downloaded at [www.ashlandmhrb.org/creativelegacywriting](http://www.ashlandmhrb.org/creativelegacywriting).

A resource has also been developed to focus on themes and exercises associated with legacy writing. The resource, entitled “Leaving a Legacy: Exercises to Guide You Through the Creative Writing Process” (MHRB, 2020), can be downloaded at [www.ashlandmhrb.org/leavingalegacy](http://www.ashlandmhrb.org/leavingalegacy).

### **Leave Your Mark by Engaging in Legacy Work**

Leaving a legacy is a precious gift for those whom you leave behind, offering a permanent expression of love, wisdom, values, what has brought meaning and purpose to your life and what you want to be remembered for. All of us have unique stories and legacies, and we all can make a difference in the lives of others by what we write and create.

Legacy work is not just for those who are at advanced age, who are approaching death, or who are dying. Admittedly, these factors may serve as triggers for starting the process, as are facing traumatizing or transformative experiences (such as COVID-19). However, all that is being addressed here CELEBRATES life as well as the sharing of lives, precious memories, and “stories.”

Efforts to leave a lasting legacy through multigenerational or peer-to-peer projects are beneficial for all involved. Bonds with family members, caregivers, and peers can be strengthened. Intergenerational solidarity and mutual understanding can be increased. Connections and relationships between legacy work “partners” can be forged.

### **Legacy Work, Grounded in Conversations**

When collaborating on legacy writing efforts and larger-scale legacy projects, conversations matter. The process can be a therapeutic bonding experience. In the workbook, “Leaving a Legacy: Exercises to Guide You Through the Creative Writing Process,” exercises were framed to be completed by the individual engaged in legacy writing. However, “partners” could read prompts, interact, listen and hear, and make the process supportive, worthwhile and empowering for the one receiving assistance. If the one sharing her story is a dementia survivor, the other party could help to maintain a stress-free process by not

correcting her if dates are wrong, allowing her to set the pace and determine the content of what will be addressed during specific conversations.

Use of guided conversation cards can also stimulate conversations, capturing stories and cherished memories. Highly recommended sets of cards that can be used to share legacies include:

- Caring cards: Bridging Generations through Conversations by Kathy Nitz, 2014;
- Grandparent Talk: Connecting generations with conversations! A fun way to interact with your grandkids! by Around the Table Games, 2013.

Both sets can be purchased on Amazon for about \$10.

When sharing stories and memories, posing questions and listening to responses, it is important to use an informal approach and engage in an open and natural dialogue. The process is a great way to strengthen your relationships and learn more about each other.

The process can be therapeutic not just for the one sharing her story -- who is central to the legacy project — but also therapeutic for those helping out and for the eventual recipients of what is created. In addition to bringing closure, “legacy work partners” and other loved ones can heal, can become stronger by working together and can cherish time spent together.

### **Legacy Work Focused on Writing**

When one sets the stage for creating a memoir, a good starting point is to journal, writing about what’s going on at the present time as well as about memories from the past. You can choose different themes or chapters of your life, like the pandemic. Including illustrations and other forms of artistic expressions can bring what you write about to life.

### **Crafting Legacy Letters and Obituaries**

Crafting legacy letters opens the door for family members, friends and loved ones to know what you’d like to have addressed in your eulogy or obituary. Different types of legacy letters are provided in the manual, “Leaving a Legacy: Exercises to Guide You Through the Creative Writing Process” (MHRB, 2020).

Letters to loved ones can be written at any time, at major milestones in the recipients’ lives, or at a crucial juncture in your own life. These letters can be read many times, are tangible and can be kept and preserved. They can be stored away and rediscovered by future generations. By writing these letters, we can gain a better understanding of ourselves and of our most meaningful relationships. And yes, we can influence how we will be remembered. Personal legacy letters can be precious and incredibly powerful regardless of length. They leave a forever message that can be cherished by their recipients.

Obituaries are usually created by those who are left behind. The lessons learned in vibrant conversations can enhance what they choose to share, providing a personal touch. However, you may decide to pre-write your obituary at advanced age, when approaching

death, or at any point in your life — a process become more common among Baby Boomers. This is an opportunity to reveal what you definitely want others to know about you and how you want them to remember you. Also, it provides a peace of mind for you; it means one less task for your family members. A preliminary obituary written by you can be finished by your loved ones during an extremely difficult time, while they are grieving, even if they are overwhelmed. Writing your obituary can be an essential part of your life and end-of-life planning process, and one which you have control over. You are the expert on yourself and are best able to share anecdotes. An obituary provides a snapshot of your life, and can even set the stage for expanding this work into a memoir.

Crafting an obituary at any stage of life can provide an overview of where your life is heading, helping you to live life intentionally. In short, it can focus your aspirations, outline your contributions and help you to determine what you really want to do with your life.

### **Other Options for Leaving Your Mark**

There are multiple options for legacy projects that do not focus on writing. All of them can be started or completed on your own or can be done with others.

In addition to or as an alternative to writing, stories can be shared in voice or video recordings. Some individuals may feel more comfortable with speaking rather than writing. Hearing someone's voice or observing someone's facial expressions can enhance or clarify the story that is being shared.

Other options include developing recipe collections, time capsules, scrapbooks, and photo albums. You may also want to create family histories, health histories, trees, photo displays or craft projects. Another idea is a family newsletter, perhaps profiling different family members or featuring photos of family gatherings and events.

For dementia survivors, it can be very useful for family members and others to create memory boxes and books, containing items that can help trigger memories and conversations. These could be very multi-sensory, using smell, touch and sound. However, they are a great legacy project in general. The following could be included: photos, lyrics or recordings of favorite songs, wedding and birth announcements, poetry, cherished cards, artwork, newspaper article clips or the scent of a favorite flower or perfume. Memory quilts are wonderful to create with dementia survivors as well, even if they are not able to play an active role in the design or decision-making process. Quilts can be designed to capture memories from the past, using photographic images, different types of needlework (words, designs, dates, and phrases that are used by family members routinely), "mementoes" from the past (ribbons, different fabrics, colors and designs).

### **Forging Connections and Finding Meaning and Purpose**

Leaving your mark, your lasting legacy, matters to you and those you leave behind. What you share and create allows you to express your thoughts and feelings, reduces stress,

helps you to remain empowered, forges connections, and shares your story. Likewise, what you create may be cherished, preserved and passed on to future generations by those who receive it. Sharing your story leaves no message left unsaid, allows others to know who you were, the values you stood for, your words of wisdom and your thoughts about how to live life well. Others could also learn from what you have learned during this pandemic, what you envision as the new normal and what new challenges are likely to be faced. Your historical perspective is valuable and can set the context for others to learn from you and your resilience.

Creative writing and legacy work can help forge healthy connections with your family members, peers and others. Sharing your story can help promote wellbeing, especially now, when many are struggling during this pandemic.

Engaging in writing and completing projects helps everyone involved to find meaning and purpose in their lives. What is written and shared is especially critical at this time. What is ultimately created — a memoir, scrapbook, memory box or books, or other options — are gifts of love to the ultimate recipients. By working on and sharing these creations together, connections can be forged and strengthened and life stories can be passed on.

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### **About Adult Advocacy Centers**

*The Adult Advocacy Centers (AACs) were founded to serve adults with disabilities who are alleged victims or witnesses of abuse, maltreatment or neglect. Ohio will be the first state to develop the AACs model — one-point facilities equipped to provide holistic, accessible, trauma-informed services to adult crime victims with disabilities. Learn more at [adultadvocacycenters.org](http://adultadvocacycenters.org).*

### **About the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County**

*The Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County administers the public mental health and addictions service system in Ashland County. The board conducts the planning, funding, and provision of services that 1) are trauma-informed, 2) promote resiliency and recovery and 3) promote a conservative approach to the use of medication using principles of Medication Optimization. This paper is an outgrowth of a “writing for recovery” initiative established and supported by the board for the last several years. The writing project is a collaboration of Pathways Peer Support and is currently facilitated by Dr. Diana Spore. Recently, collaboration with Adult Advocacy Centers is providing opportunities to broaden the scope of the writing initiative, as in the form of this paper.*

### **About Dr. Diana Spore**

*Diana Spore is an advocate for individuals facing mental health challenges and those who are*

*living with dementia, a writer/editor, and a mental health consumer in recovery. Spore received her Master's degree in Gerontological Studies from Miami University (Ohio), and earned a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in aging, from Penn State. She completed postdoctoral training at Brown University. Spore's areas of expertise include mental health and aging, mental health recovery and trauma-informed care, medication optimization, long-term care, caregiving, and psychotropic drug use and inappropriate drug use among older adults. She is a former Board member of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County (Ohio; MHRB). She was Editor-of-Chief of TAPESTRY OF OUR LIVES, an anthology of works created by individuals in recovery, a project that was done under the auspices of the MHRB. Spore served as Project Lead for a "Writing for Recovery" initiative, MHRB, and engaged in all aspects of the project, which has resulted in sustained spin-off efforts. Currently, she is a consultant at the MHRB, and serves as a facilitator of a "writing for recovery" writing group, which is under the auspices of Catholic Charities' Pathways Peer Support Program, Ashland. Diana Spore has expertise in creative writing, writing for recovery, journaling for caregivers, legacy writing, and advocacy writing.*