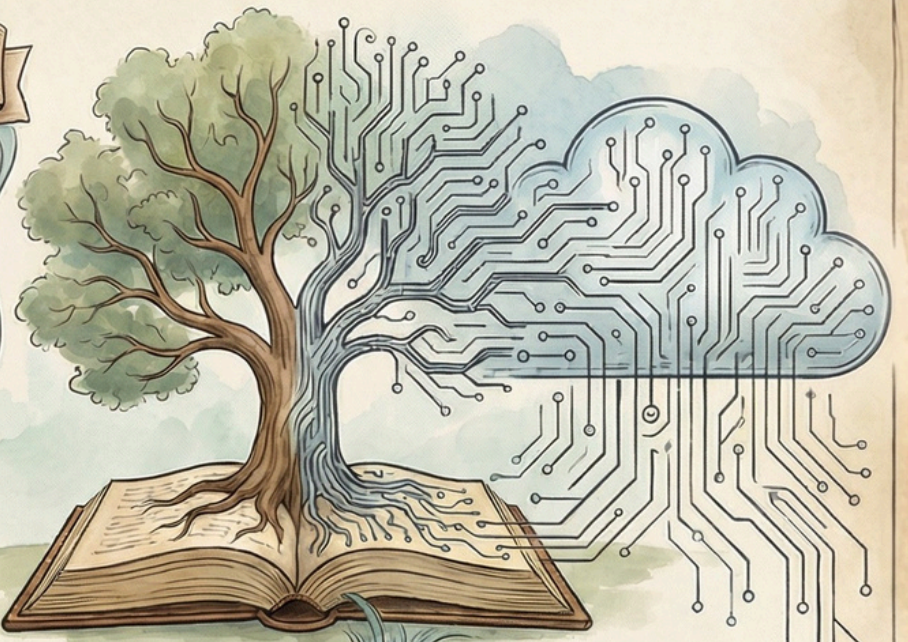
Beyond the Branches:
Creating a Living Legacy for Your Descendants

THE FOUR STAGES OF MORTALITY

The First Two Deaths
As credited to Ernert Handngway:
1. When the body is buried.
2. The last time someone speaks your name.

The Third Death: Loss of Identity
When future generations look your photos and no one recognizes your face.

The Fourth Death: Loss of Meaning
When the story behind the person is lost forever, leaving only disconnected data points.



"We are the history our descendants will search for."

Documentation isn't just about the past, it's about being the ancestor you would want to find.

THE DOCUMENTATION TOOLKIT

Traditional Documentation (The Tangible)
Includes handwritten journals, letters, printed photos with notes on the back, and physical stories with recorded stories.

Digital Documentation (The Modern)
Includes video/audio recordings, blogs, DNA testing results, and cloud-based backups (Computer + External + Cloud).

The Ethical Will
A "legacy of the heart" that documents your personal values, life lessons, beliefs, and hopes for the future rather than money or property.

WHAT YOUR DESCENDANTS WANT TO KNOW

Relationships
Deep human connections and stories about loved ones.

Genealogy
The traditional family tree data (names, dates, locations).

Personal History
Dreams, childhood memories, and personal growth.

Spirituality:
Your spiritual beliefs, practices, and connection to the divine.

Traditions
Cherished recipes, customs, and family values.

Perspectives on the Past/Future
Your worldview and hopes for future generations.

Life Challenges
Beliefs, faith, and guiding principles.

Health
Genetic predispositions and family medical history.

The "One Photo" Exercise
If only one photo of you remained, what would it reveal about your thoughts, feelings, and location at that exact moment?

CALL TO ACTION (The Task for the Brave)

Step 1: Write a Handwritten Letter:
Express your pride, admiration, and love for your children and grandchildren.

Step 2: Record a Video Message:
Share one meaningful life lesson or thoughtful message for a future generation.

Step 3: Provide Access Instructions:
Create a single page detailing where all documentation materials and important passwords are located.

Embrace the Unpolished: Do not wait for perfection; your descendants want your authentic self—warts, mistakes, and all—not an AI-polished version.

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Genealogy for Our Descendants

What will they know about us

Janna Helshtein
Unlocking the Past, Inspiring the Future

The Four Deaths

The first two are credited to Ernest Hemingway

1. When your body is buried in the ground.
2. The last time someone says your name.

3. When no one recognizes your face in a photo.

4. When your story loses its meaning.

The Irony of the Modern Age

In a world overflowing with technology and data, our personal stories frequently become overshadowed by the noise. As the first generation of digital ancestors, we have the privilege to decide which narrative we want to leave behind. What future generations know about us is up to US!

Documentation is in the heart of humanity.

Cave Paintings- painted scenes of hunting, animals, and rituals.

Monasteries as “printing houses”, documented religious events and daily communal life.

Journals to preserve one’s inner thoughts, dreams, and fears. The printing press.

The first photograph- capturing faces of loved ones and moments in time.

Home video and sound recording. Digital storage, social media, DNA testing, and AI.

How much humanity will remain in 100 or 200 years?

When you are an ancestor, what will future generations want to know about you?

This is in no way an academic study. This is me, asking dozens of people from all walks of life, what they would like to know about who their ancestors really were and what they were like. Of all 80 questions I received, 8 categories were very clear.
So I invite you to think about these when you consider what you leave behind.
These might be the things your descendants would want to know:

Questions	**Examples** (what people wanted to know)
Personal History	What was your childhood like? What were your dreams? Who was your first love?
Life Challenges	What was your toughest moment? How did the war affect you? Do you have any regrets?
Relationships	Who were your best friends? What did they mean to you?
Spirituality	Did you believe in reincarnation? What comforted you in harsh times?
Family Tradition	Are there any family recipes? What languages did you speak at home?
Health	Are there any genetic illnesses? What traditional remedies did you use?
Genealogy	Who were your great-grandparents? What was our family's origin?
Past and Future	What do you think of our world? Looking at us, what would you have done differently?

Your Experiences matter!

Documenting with Intention - The Legacy of the Heart

We have the technology. Now we must document with intention.

Everything that is tangible: Handwritten journals and letters. Printed photos-with all the details written on the back. Personal objects with their story. Short anecdotes and "a day in my life" stories.

Video and audio recordings. Blogs or websites. DNA testing. Backup on your computer + an external backup + cloud.

Authenticity Over Perfection - Essence and The Ethical Will

Document your essence by leaving an Ethical Will - a document in which you share your personal values, life lessons, beliefs, hopes, love, and guidance with your family or future generations. It's not a legal will about money or property - it's a legacy of the heart.

The point of documenting your story is to capture who you are. Even if your English isn't polished, even if your video is full of "ums"s and pauses, that's the beauty of it. That's who you are. Embrace that. Never give up your authentic self - there's no replacement for that. When documenting recipes, film yourself giving the instructions and write those instructions down.

The Most Important Lesson - Document today

When you document yourself today, your descendants won't need AI to animate you. They will have you, your image, and your authentic voice telling them your story.

1. **A handwritten letter –** to children, nieces or nephews, or extended family, your feelings for them, admiration, and wishes.
2. **A video message with a timestamp –** an important life lesson that was meaningful to you and that you want to pass on.
3. **Access instructions to all your documentation materials -** where everything is located, including important passwords.

If you can let go of all superstitions about death, and embarrassment...

Ask your children or family members to write to you today what they would write in your eulogy: Make sure they include:

1. One thing they learned from you and carry forward to pass on to their children.
2. One thing they feel is still unresolved between you- this is your chance to resolve it.

Click the icon to view my grandma's pickles recipe

Your stories matter!

Janna Helshtein
Unlocking the Past, Inspiring the Future