

Penning your own obituary can help you fine-tune your goals

TRIB LIVE WILLIAM LOEFFLER | Monday, July 27, 2009 4:00 a.m.

Anne Fleming died over a year and a half ago. She's glad she did. It gave her the means to take control her life.

Fleming, of Bellevue, sat down one day last winter and composed her own obituary. She performed this hypothetical exercise at the behest of her life coach, Barbara Schwarck, president of Clear Intentions, a "people development" company in Shadyside.

Facing a possible layoff from her job as director of marketing, Fleming was forced to take stock of her own life. So she imagined her own death.

"Once I really actually started to craft an obituary for Anne Katherine Fleming -- b. 1961, d, fill in the blank -- it was very sobering," Fleming says. "At my core is that I'm afraid. I'm afraid of looking bad and failing. I do this exercise. What I got to is really who I am."

It may sound like something out of the Kevorkian playbook, but writing about oneself in the past tense can force an honest reckoning, help to conquer fears and bring goals into focus, say therapists and life coaches.

"I don't think this is at all an exercise about death," Schwarck says. "It's an exercise of life. Even a teenager can talk about who they would want to be and what values they would like to come to fruition."

Seeing one's accomplishments, milestones and relationships condensed into a few paragraphs is also a way of gauging where there is room for improvement. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge when he was shown his own tombstone by the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and taken to his own wake to see how people remembered him.

Fleming eventually was laid off from her job, but writing her own obit helped give her the courage to start her own business, something she'd always wanted to do. Late last year, she launched Women-Drivers.com, a consumer rating Web site where women can share their experiences at various auto dealers.

Dave Wheatner, founder of Idealist Coach in Squirrel Hill, says he's asked participants in some of

his workshops to pen their own epitaph.

"It can be very helpful in helping us to define what our sense of life purpose is, which can be a very helpful anchor point," he says. "Secondly, it can help us clarify what our key values are. When we're doing something like writing our own obituary, those values tend to come out. How much do we value family? How much do we value the legacy that we're leaving through our career? What are the things we want people to remember us by?"

Practical considerations also come into play. A Web site, www.obitnow.com, helps users compose their own obituaries on the pretext that if you want something done right, do it yourself. After all, who better to list the accomplishments that are important to you than you? It also may be a way to clarify wishes, although obituaries will not supersede a will.

Visitors can write their own obituary on www.obitnow.com using a template, or by following several fictitious examples. They can store their obit on the site and make it private or public. They can also update it. For \$30, they also can upload one of their photos.

However, expect that obit to be edited and vetted should it be submitted to the local newspaper upon your passing.

Paul Friday, chief of clinical psychology at UPMC Shadyside, says he sometimes asks patients to imagine their date of birth and death on a tombstone. What, he asks them, would they like their epitaph to read? He says that compels them to focus on "that little line between when you were born and when you died."

"It's not when you started or when you ended," Friday says. "It's what you did with that little dash. That little dash represents everything that you've done and you didn't do."

Obituaries are best shared with loved ones, Friday says. It helps keep the author honest.

"Is it a consensus? Who has the corner on truth as far as the summation of somebody's life. We can go to Michael Jackson -- what do you leave out and what do you leave in? How thorough does it have to be?"

A self-written obit is only as good as the person writing it, Friday says. It can be morbid or narcissistic. Done right, it can offer a new perspective and make the author feel like they've got a "second chance."

"I don't think it's inherently healthy or destructive," he says. "If you use it as an exercise to take stock, like 'Who am I on my womb-to-tomb trip?' That's a very healthy exercise.

Give it a go

Dave Wheatner founded Idealist Coach in Squirrel Hill to help others as "a strategic life, career and transition consultant." Below are his tips for composing your own obituary.

- Consider the things that you would most like to be remembered for -- values, personality characteristics, strengths or relationships. Consider your unique contributions and whatever fears, obstacles or societal expectations that you overcame to express your authentic self.
- Don't limit your obituary to your career. Reflect upon the family, social, spiritual and leisure

dimensions of your life.

- Imagine three people or groups who are most important to you and their reaction as they read your obituary. This may include your partner, a current or future child, an organization, or an entire community. Which lines of your obituary speak most loudly to each of them, reminding them of the impact your life had upon theirs?

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