

## EPITAPHS

The old cemeteries have above-the-ground tombstones on which are inscribed the name, date of birth and death of the decedent, and often an epitaph. Sometimes the epitaph describes the character of the person. For example: “She filled every second of her life with laughter, love, and happiness.” In other instances, the epitaph relates the cause of death: “Here lies good old Fred; a great big rock fell on his head.” Then there are the humorous ones: “Now will you believe I was sick.”

Today, tombstones, and especially epitaphs are far less common. Part of the reason is the growing number of cremations. Fifty years ago only a small fraction of deceased individuals were cremated, but nationally in Canada cremations are now utilized in approximately 70 percent of deaths, though the percentage varies considerably by province. While the cremains may be interred or preserved in a crypt with a marker, they are often scattered in an area meaningful to the deceased. Consequently, other means of preserving the memory of those who have passed on are replacing granite headstones and epitaphs.

One device that is becoming increasingly common is the ethical will wherein the writer shares personal values, beliefs, stories about life experiences, and may offer advice. An ethical will, which is different from the legal document by which a person disposes of property, could be a typed statement, a full-length memoir or a video. It preserves for future generations the character and accomplishments of an ancestor and thereby connects them with their roots. Certain companies now specialize in helping individuals prepare an ethical will.

Another kind of epitaph possible at our institution is a named endowed fund. This fund is sometimes established by survivors who want to honor the deceased, but often it is arranged and funded by the donor, or perhaps a donor and spouse. The endowed fund acts as an epitaph in two respects. First, the fund agreement contains biographical information about the person for whom

it is named, and this information is given through the years to those who benefit from the income. Second, the stated purpose of the endowed fund conveys the values and passions of that person.

The minimum amount required to establish a named endowed fund at our institution is \$\_\_\_\_\_, though more may be required where an endowment for specific purposes is envisioned, which would be heavily dependent on the endowment income for their functioning. You can create the endowed fund now with an outright gift, or in the future through a bequest, a beneficiary designation, or a life income plan such as a gift annuity or charitable remainder trust.

Albert Einstein once said that “only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” An act indicating that one had done this would, indeed, be a fitting epitaph.