
Reviewed by Marilyn Herbert, Toronto, ON Canada

Living Legacies, a Collection of Inspirational Contemporary Canadian Jewish Women, is an impressive anthology. Liz Pearl has researched and organized the views and hopes of women across the country, reaching deeply into their inner thoughts and beliefs. Their willingness to share their personal reflections is Pearl’s gift to us, the readers. Each story, with its vibrant energy, becomes a connecting link in a chain of legacy that feels alive and relevant. The book is organized into easily accessible sections with interesting biographical information about each contributor at the end of her piece.

I don’t know if children still play the game Follow the Leader, and maybe I’m dating myself, but in reading this wonderful collection of stories, notes, and anecdotes, I am reminded of this past-time. The rules of the game are quite simple – there is one person at the head of a line steering the human column in a variety of directions, while everyone tries to stay on track. Every once in a while, the game begins anew with a fresh leader.

This is what living legacies do – like the leader, they steer, inspire, challenge, and encourage those in the group to follow the lines of their lives in as many positive, engaging, and energizing ways as possible. There are multiple routes to take, never just one. And as participants, we can be a leader or a follower at any time. A legacy is meant for us to give as well as inherit.

In her book, Pearl has gathered a number of leaders and followers to fill this collection with motivating stories of lives lived and cherished. Parents, children, teachers, students, spiritual leaders and other professionals, each have a personal story to tell. And just like the game, every story has a singular message. Until we read through the entire book, we won’t know which one will touch us where it counts – in the heart and in the soul.

Several stories stand out.

In Dear Thirteen-Year-Old-Sarah, Sarah Zelcer writes to her past self from her present self. As a thirty-year old woman, she sees how far she has come over seventeen years. In this unique piece, Sarah addresses fears and concerns shared by many teenagers who are on the cusp of adolescence and who still have many hats of identity to try on until they discover which ones fit best. Looking into the future can be as scary as blindly following a leader, especially if you are near the end of the line and cannot see the captain. Sarah underscores reassurance and excitement in her journey and tells us that it is “OK not to know. It is so good to explore ... the journey that lies ahead.” Sarah signs off with the possibility of revisiting her present self thirty years from now. Until then, Sarah has prepared an intriguing trail of enthusiasm and eagerness for the future. This is a good gift to give to the young.

It is, of course, hard to find a silver lining in any Holocaust-related experience, but if anyone can turn such a devastating event into a call for moral and ethical action, Judy Weissenberg Cohen seems to be that person. In her story, From Death March to Liberation and Beyond, she...
Living Legacies: A Collection of Inspirational Contemporary Canadian Jewish Women

describes how she came alone to Auschwitz. Without the support of family beside her, she instinctively knew that her imminent survival would depend on an interactive “we” factor. In the absence of her own biological sisters, she asked two other women (who were in fact sisters) to adopt her into their circle. The three looked after each other, knowing that togetherness and mutual assistance was a vital key to outlasting the horror of that time. And so, they managed to survive.

But life’s road is not straight and there are potholes along the way that a good leader cannot always see or avoid. Coming to Canada and raising a family should have been a calm and quiet reward for enduring the war’s atrocities, but Judy has found that hatred follows its own route and has no respect for boundary lines. A confrontation with a neo-Nazi group infused her with a need for action. “A new purpose filled my life. To teach younger generations about what the ultimate result of blind hatred was and still is.” The legacy that Judy offers is as old as Judaism itself and is based on the principle of tikun olam, the process of mending the world. If Judy can lead many followers, or even just one, down that road of repair, then she will have successfully built a new and stronger model of “we”. By attaching her personal efforts to the efforts of others, she teaches that, after all, we are the world. We are a group, as well as individuals. Judy exemplifies the power of one and the power of many, simultaneously.

The sub-title of Pearl’s book, A Collection of Inspirational Contemporary Canadian Jewish Women, seems more directed to an audience of women, rather than to men. This is not a bad thing, only a perceptible bias in this bank of stories. In her anecdote, Amy Sky tells how she set Maya Angelou’s poem, Phenomenal Woman, to music. She describes the forbidding task of first asking Angelou for permission and then, the even more daunting mission, of writing music that would best express the poem’s amazing sense of empowerment. Sky declares that she was immediately transported back into a very common female territory that includes self-doubt, self-criticism, and a lack of confidence. She was initially frightened, but then mesmerized, by Angelou’s words:

\[\text{I’m a woman} \\
\text{Phenomenal woman} \\
\text{Baby that’s me}\]

Girls are too often taught to create unassuming, humble, unpretentious personas for themselves, and at the same time, to perfect their physical appearances in order to get ahead socially and professionally. This is a very familiar part of my growing up years. Therefore, it is surprising to read how Amy Sky, a new talent, a young slender, and physically lovely woman, felt intimidated by the elder, unpretentious, physically robust and extraordinarily famous, Maya Angelou. Suddenly, everything that the young Amy valued about herself created great anxiety. She began to wonder not how Angelou had the “chutzpah”, the boldness, to call herself a phenomenal woman, but why she, Amy Sky, could not regard herself in the same way.

The story has a happy ending: Sky’s music has taken Angelou’s poem to new heights and to new audiences. What Sky learned, and is now passing on, is that “living your life with humour, respect, compassion, and above all, self love ... creates the energy that draws people to you.” This is a wonderful birthright to bestow on every young girl, and it counters the current culture of physical obsession. But here is my thought: Sky’s story touched me deeply as a woman, but
as the mother of a son, as well as two daughters, I began to wish for a collection of wisdom aimed at boys and young men. It would be interesting to know what thoughts and links the other half of our population considers significant enough to pass on to one another. Like our women, men also need to absorb and benefit from the wisdom of father to son, brother to brother.

**“Life never works out the way it is planned”** are the words Ellen Schwartz includes in *Eyes Wide Open*, her piece about her son, Jacob. Sharon Trostин Hampson, who wrote *My Journey ... with Detours, Adventures and Adversity*, would agree. Both women learned the hard way that life is not always a fair leader and that, in times of trouble and difficulty, it may be best to find a way to change direction, by changing attitude.

Schwartz’ son was born with a neurodegenerative disease and requires round-the-clock care and multiple treatments. Although she is immersed in Jacob’s physical care, and has the responsibility of nurturing her relationships with her other children and husband, Schwartz still finds the time to write, to speak, and to run the charitable foundation she created in Jacob’s name, *Jacob’s Ladder*. Schwartz is a teacher who has learned the most important of life’s lessons from her son – “to take a situation, any situation and make it positive.” This is what she chooses to transmit to her children and to others, knowing that this skill would make it easier for everyone to follow where life leads them. This is the legacy she would like to pass along.

Well-known for her inspirational role in the musical troupe *Sharon, Lois, and Bram*, Sharon Hampson has already shown countless generations of children the way to sing through their joys and troubles. But Hampson, like Ellen Schwartz, has had to learn how to face life’s obstacles and roll with the punches. “The test is not how we deal with [trouble], but **that** we deal with it. If we don’t it is impossible to move forward.”

And moving forward is what Hampson has always been determined to do. Early on in her life, she took a chance on a career in music (a direction that many Jewish parents would not confidently encourage) and she took another chance on marriage (Joe Hampson was fifteen years older than Sharon and had already had another marriage and a child.) But life is all about taking risks and about trusting yourself to be your own leader. Despite all her successes and pleasures, Hampson has been diagnosed with breast cancer three times. Also during this time, she lost her life’s companion, her husband Joe to another form of the dread disease. But, as Hampson says, it is vital to keep following the leader and carry on with your life. She is gratified to be surrounded by loving family and to be well. And so, her journey continues.

And that is the lovely thing about legacy – it keeps on going and it keeps on giving, across the generations, in and among friends and family, even in the presence of strangers. Although we may think of legacy as something old handed down to a new generation, it may be more appropriate to look at the old ideas of inheritance in new ways. Things that are left to us are not only hands-on-possessions, but may simply be a bridge of endowment that links generation to generation. It is a baton used personally and then handed over to a new leader in the game. Each contributor in Pearl’s book bestows her special and individual baton of legacy.

Reading this book is a pleasure that keeps on giving and is meant to be re-read and revisited often. As I said earlier, we never know which of the wonderful legacies Pearl has presented to us will touch us at just the right time and place.