

---

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Foundation of Legacy Living: How It All Began*

*Make yourself useful.*  
MILDRED McEWEN

MY FATHER GREW UP IN THE SMALL, racially segregated town of Oxford, Mississippi, where his mother spent each spring and fall working with dozens of other men and women planting and harvesting cotton. She often worked from sunrise until sundown. My father wished his mother didn't have to work so hard, and he often told her so. At the end of each day, my father would look into his mother's eyes and say, "Someday, I'm going to live in a house in town, a house with running water." Looking at him with tired, loving eyes, my grandmother would smile and say, "Oh, Junior, you're always dreaming."

My father would just grin. "You'll see, Mama. Someday we'll have our own house, and someday I'm going to go to college, too!" He dreamed not only of going to college, but also of designing and building a house of his very own. His dreams were also fueled by his love of reading. Although my grandparents were too poor to buy books, that never stopped my father from reading every book he could get his hands on, borrowing them from teachers, and even fishing them out of the trash. The people he read about

lived in different places and led different lives from the life he and his parents knew. But how could a poor, black youth living in the South during the 1930s and 1940s be able to afford college? And even if he could, there were few opportunities for a black man to attend college, let alone become an architect.

## MY FATHER'S GIFT: SEEING TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

My father knew that it would cost a lot of money to buy a house with running water, money that neither he nor his parents had. He figured that getting a good education would be his means to leave the poverty of the South behind. The first problem he faced was finding the money for college. Though he had few prospects of finding a job, he never let a lack of money deter him from keeping his faith and his vision of a brighter future, a time when he and his parents would enjoy the fruits of a better life.

Each day after school, my father went from house to house selling seed packets to supplement the family's meager income. What little money he earned was barely enough to buy a few books, and there was none to set aside to pay for college or to buy a house. Determined and focused despite what seemed to be an impassable mountain, he never lost sight of his goals. Even after he married and started a family, my father remained optimistic that he would someday find or hear about a job where he could earn enough money to support his wife and daughters, and still save enough to go to college.

I was only a babe in arms when my father managed to get a job as a janitor at the University of Mississippi, a job that paid a black man better than most others in town. He wasn't able to enroll in classes there, and his job didn't pay enough to make all of his dreams come true, but it put him slightly closer. He took great pride in his work; he believed that whatever the job, you should always do your best. He scrubbed the floors not once but twice, and then waxed and polished them until the white linoleum glowed. All the while, my father would talk to anyone who would listen about his dream of going to college. He never expected special treatment. He believed in devoting himself to his work—"Steady

and sure; you reap what you sow; hard work pays off and has its rewards”—these were the bedrock of his values, the enduring legacy that my father’s parents had passed on to him. One professor took notice and started a chain of events that would change my father’s life, and that of our family, in a most amazing way.

While my father worked as a janitor, he continued to read any books he could get his hands on. One of the professors, I’ll call him Professor Charles, offered to let my father use his office before and after work as a quiet place to read. As I remember this story so many years later, I can still hear my father’s description: “One morning before work, I was reading when the office door opened, and in walked the dean of the university, Dr. Dean Love. He wore a hat, bow tie, tan-colored suit, and his brown shoes were polished to a shine. The man spoke slowly, ‘You must be Earnest McEwen.’”

Professor Charles had told Dr. Love about my father’s desire to go to college and his interest in architecture. Moved by my father’s passion and determination, Dr. Love continued, “Mr. McEwen, I know just the person who can help you with your dream.” He reached in his pocket and handed my father a piece of paper with a name and address on it. “Now when you go to see Mr. Faulkner, tell him I sent you.” Then Dr. Love extended his hand for a hearty shake.

## A VISIT THAT WOULD CHANGE OUR LIVES FOREVER

A few days later, my father walked up a long pathway to a big white house on the Rowan Oak estate, with no idea what to expect when he arrived. He had heard stories about the great writer William Faulkner, but what was he really like? He knocked on the door and waited. A dark-skinned woman in a yellow dress and white apron greeted him. “You must be Earnest McEwen. Mr. Faulkner has been expecting you. Please wait here for just a moment.”

His heart pounded when William Faulkner greeted him and invited him inside. My father hesitated, for they both knew the unspoken rule—blacks were allowed to work for whites, but not to socialize with them. “No thank you, Sir,” my father said.

They talked for a long time in the shade of Rowan Oak’s giant old oak trees. Mr. Faulkner listened intently as my father told

him, “Ever since I was a boy, I’ve loved books. In those books, I’ve learned about people and places that I may never see. My wife and I have worked hard all our lives, and we want our girls to have a better life than ours. It’s my dream to go to college, and to give our children a life where they can learn and be able to do whatever they want to in this world.”

Mr. Faulkner felt my father’s excitement, and saw the determination in his face. “Let me ask you, Mr. McEwen, where do you intend to go to college?”

“There’s a college called Alcorn about one hundred miles from here. I understand it’s a wonderful school that focuses on providing a solid education for black people,” my father replied.

Mr. Faulkner knew about Alcorn and that it had a good reputation. He looked my father in the eye, and right there and then he offered to become my father’s benefactor. All these years of yearning and now my father was about to taste the tantalizing fruit of his dreams. After a long silence, my father shook his head slowly from side to side. “Mr. Faulkner, I want to go college more than anything in the world, but I can’t accept your generous offer.” He paused for a moment then continued, “I just don’t see how I’d ever be able to save enough money to pay you back.”

Mr. Faulkner looked surprised. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “Why, I don’t expect you to pay me back!” Then he smiled. “Mr. McEwen, the only thing I ask of you is that you pass this kindness on and let it just keep on going.” Mr. Faulkner told my father that he would send payments directly to the President of Alcorn College and that he would arrange to have clothing sent for our family as well. He invited my father to stay in touch and to let him know how he was doing. My father thanked him for his generosity and assured him that not only would he “pass it on,” he would also stay in touch, which he did until Mr. Faulkner’s untimely death almost a decade later.

As they shook hands and said good-bye, I imagine my father’s face radiant, his stride strong and sure, his whole being expectant and filled with deep gratitude. When he reached the edge of Rowan Oak, my father knelt on the cool grass beneath an old oak tree and said a prayer of thanks for his family, Professor Charles, Dr. Love, and William Faulkner. As he stood, Mr. Faulkner’s kind words echoed in his ear: “Pass it on.” From that day forward my

father did just that, offering the blessing of Mr. Faulkner's kindness to countless others. The legacy created by my father's vision and faith and by Faulkner's generosity continues to resound within our family and throughout the world.

## LEGACY LIVING: A SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE

I am a storyteller. And I am a storyteller with the hope that my stories will lead you to a life with purpose, goals, and direction to start living your legacy now. As such, I tell my stories

- To educate
- To emphasize ideas
- To encourage creativity
- To support others in their personal and professional development
- To allow a listener or reader to be encouraged by the experiences of others
- To invite a listener or reader to value her own experiences and stories, for she holds the key to the person she is and wants to become

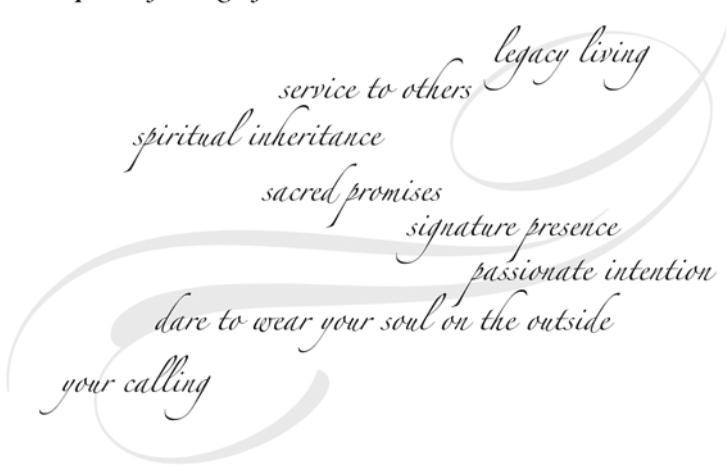
I often tell the story of Mr. Faulkner and my father. It is a story that honors their legacies and embodies all that we have as hopes and dreams for ourselves and to be of service to others. I also tell this story to show how it laid the foundation for my own work as a writer, teacher, coach, and leader. And though it is deeply personal, this story is ultimately a universal one in which I hope you can see a little bit of yourself, both in my father and in Mr. Faulkner.

Throughout this book, I will tell many stories and will work with you through the details of others' experiences. I hope that these stories, along with explanations and thought-provoking questions, will guide you along the path to discovering and nurturing your hopes and dreams for the present, for your future, and for the future of others.

We all want to contribute something of ourselves that is worthy of our lives here on earth, that leaves the world a little better off

than the way we found it. We create this **spiritual inheritance**, this contribution, by walking a path of thoughtful choices.

*Your path of thoughtful choices*



In this book you are given the opportunity to experience a path that in my life I have come to call **legacy living**. Legacy living is about being fully who you are and doing what you have to do because it is the only choice that simultaneously links your present with the past and the future and that ensures a congruent life. It is about living your life to consciously create something of enduring value that will benefit both present *and* future generations. And you will come to understand that you must do so with passionate intention.

**Passionate intention** means being deliberate about who you are, how you show up, what you do, and in choosing your words and actions. When you live with passionate intention and act on what matters to you, these decisions shape every other choice you make, propelling you forward with purpose, drive, and an unstoppable momentum into a field of infinite possibility and allure, a field that can only be known by those who accept the **dare to wear their soul on the outside**. When you accept this dare, you are being true to your inner compass, to your authentic self, to your soul's **calling**.

To wear your soul on the outside means that you choose sovereignty over your life by saying *yes* to your own hopes and

dreams and *no* to someone's agenda for your life. When you connect to your passion, you respond to your calling and are then able to bring forth and manifest your **signature presence**—your unique personal attributes and the special gifts and talents that only you can offer, that can only come through you. Empowered in this way, you can follow *your* path of legacy living.

Along this path are what I see as twin goals of legacy living—wearing your soul on the outside (when what you say and what you do are in harmony *and* aligned with your calling) and being of service to others (when your focus is other-centered, not self-centered, and it is directed toward being of service to others in the here and now and on behalf of the future). To reconcile and integrate these goals into my own life, I use what I have come to call the **Seven Sacred Promises** of legacy living. My seven tools of choice are: **gratitude, faith, love, vision, integrity, creative action, and legacy.**



The Sacred Promises in this book will support you as you make this critical choice to bring forth your signature presence, thereby transforming your life and the lives of others in your family, community, congregation, workplace, and beyond.

Each of us creates and leaves our unique legacy, whether we are aware of it or not. The greatest gift we can give to others is to be intentional about the choices we make today and every day. Because he steadfastly held on to his dreams, my father manifested his vision for a better life for his family. His choices eventually led him to Ole Miss and William Faulkner, who intentionally passed on a kindness that he could only hope would be felt by future generations.

The impact of your choices creates the footprints of your life, the legacy that you live and the one by which others will remember you. To be intentional about your legacy and to live to your fullest potential, you must ponder the following questions that will serve as the foundation for moving into a realm of intention and foresight:

- *What matters to me?*
- *What do I stand for?*
- *What do I want to create and for whom?*

And further:

- *How will I inhabit my life so that I live in harmony with my values?*
- *How can I create something of enduring value to pass on to others?*

These timeless questions, adapted from the world's great wisdom traditions, are yours. Write them down on a card or in your notebook or journal. You don't need to answer them now. In the following chapters, you will delve into these and other questions to assist you on your path to legacy living. For now, simply be aware that when you answer these questions from the deepest wellspring of your passion and desire, with clear and conscious intention, they will lead you across a threshold to step boldly into the golden life that is waiting just for you. Your answers will help you shape the rest of your life. You must be clear about your answers, because the steps you take and the choices you make will become



the footprints—the legacy—that you leave for those around you and for the generations to come.

My life experience and the legacy my parents passed on to me have had a profound impact on the direction my life has taken. I wrote this book to honor my parents' gift to me, with the hope that by sharing a part of their legacy I might inspire others to live with intention, find their own story, and create their own legacy. I believe that God gave me a special gift by placing me in my particular family at a particular time in our nation's history, so that I could become a bridge-maker and an ally who assists others in navigating rough waters. These gifts allow me to be a passionate champion who sees and nurtures that special spark within others, a treasurer who encourages others to live with passionate intention and who honors and lifts up those who might find themselves unexpectedly beached along the way.

## BLESSING AFTER BLESSING

So how did the kindness passed on by William Faulkner affect my father's life and so many lives beyond his? Blessed by Mr. Faulkner's windfall of generosity, the following autumn my father moved my family to Lorman, Mississippi, where he enrolled in Alcorn A&M College. As promised, Mr. Faulkner became my father's benefactor, and for the next four years paid all his college expenses so that he could pursue his dream and focus on his studies without distraction. Mr. Faulkner also arranged for Dr. Love and others to send extra money and clothing for our entire family. My father and mother were grateful for these blessings. Even so, to ease the strain of providing for a growing family, my mother worked as a cook. My father took refuge in his studies, delving into science and math, eventually earning his degree in what was then called building and construction and is today called architecture.

After my father finished college, my family left Mississippi and moved to Michigan. Faulkner had told my father that with a college degree, life would be better, but it would not necessarily come easily. My father soon discovered what Faulkner meant. In the 1950s, there were few opportunities for blacks to work as architects anywhere in the country. Disappointed but undaunted, my

father turned his love of reading and learning into other arenas. By day he worked as a janitor in a hospital. By night he dove into books. Reading everything he could find about hematology—the study of the nature, function, and diseases of the blood—my father eventually taught himself enough to land a job working in the hospital’s blood bank, which led to his career as a laboratory technician. Many years later, drawing on his knowledge of design and construction processes, he launched another career as an automotive engineer.

True to his word, my father always remembered his debt of gratitude to Mr. Faulkner. Always sensitive to the spoken and unspoken desires of others, my father lived his life reaching out and helping those in need. As a result of his promise to Faulkner to pass it on, my father became even more passionate about encouraging relatives, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and others to complete or continue their education.

And he never forgot Mr. Faulkner, Professor Charles, Dr. Love, or their generosity. Each man, my father included, acted in a way that was quite extraordinary for their time. My family continues to deeply appreciate and reciprocate their courage, compassion, and humanity, and we have been blessed with lifelong friendships with these men. My family has also been blessed by the warm hearth of fellowship and friendship with others throughout the world.

I have always wondered what kind of faith and vision William Faulkner must have had to wear his soul on the outside, by befriending a black man at a time in our nation’s history when the code of conduct in the South virtually prohibited whites and blacks from socializing. And for my father’s part of this story, it took faith, love, vision, courage, and humility to be befriended by William Faulkner. This is the type of spiritual legacy I speak about in this book.

## MY PARENTS’ LEGACY: PAINTING ON THE CANVAS OF ETERNITY

I learned many profound lessons from my father: To dream big and, most important, to faithfully pursue my dreams even when I have no idea of how to make them happen. Watching my father,

I witnessed the power of faith—the kind of faith that goes beyond trusting or believing, the kind of faith that is grounded in knowing that God will make a way no matter what the present circumstances look like. My father had faith in God and believed in himself. He rejoiced whenever he could “pass a kindness on” to other people.

I see my father as a visionary, an architect, a striver, a doer for the future. A tireless champion for racial equity and social justice, he was a proponent and activist for civil rights well before it became a national movement. When he and a number of other students were faced with racial discrimination and the denial of their civil rights by a faculty member and the trustees, in his role as president of Alcorn’s student body my father and a handful of other students led a peaceful protest calling for the faculty member’s resignation and a student body walkout. All of the students stood up for fair treatment and social justice, knowing that they were risking their hard-won education. That same day, the trustees issued an ultimatum that all students were to return to their classes or else they would shut Alcorn down. That day, the trustees also expelled my father and the other student body leaders. They were instructed to leave Alcorn’s campus immediately. With the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), my father finished the final three months of his undergraduate degree and graduated with honors from Central State College in Wilberforce, Ohio. My father knew that he belonged to the civil rights movement; he also knew he belonged to a God who gave him the courage to stand up for his own and others’ rights and who embraced all men and women regardless of their heritage or their beliefs.

I have also learned many profound lessons from my mother. When I was a little girl, I recall my mother saying to me and my sisters, “Make yourself useful,” even if we were already occupied doing something. Today her words echo in my spirit as the voice of legacy. Early on, she taught me and my sisters that you make a living by what you choose as your work or profession, and you make a life by what you do for others.

Recently, I asked my mother what compelled her to go along with my father’s “impossible” dreams. She said, “I loved your father and I believed in him. More importantly, we had an abiding

faith in Almighty God, for He never gave us more than we could handle, and His grace always saw us through.” Even when she didn’t have any idea of how our family would make it, her love and faith sustained her.

My parents left me a legacy that valued education, character, and loving, lifting up, and helping others with no strings attached. In many ways, my parents and William Faulkner painted on the canvas of eternity with their unshakable belief in the nobility of the human spirit. Their palette was imbued with the qualities of humility, faith, and moral obligation to treat every human being with dignity and respect. My father’s encounter with Mr. Faulkner was a magnificent gift from God. An archetypal story of devotion and triumph, it is also a very human story that allows us to witness the boundless capacity of the human heart.

## HIS SPIRIT LIVES ON

My father fulfilled his dreams of going to college and living in a house with running water. Although he created a blueprint for his very own house, he didn’t live long enough to build it. After a long struggle with cancer, my father died at the age of fifty-six. But his spirit lives on through the lives of the many people he touched: family, friends, coworkers, and who knows how many others. At my father’s funeral, when the minister invited the family to enter the chapel to pay our last respects, he expected just the members of my immediate family. The minister was delightfully overwhelmed when several hundred people poured into the tiny chapel—an extended family of relatives, friends, and family of the heart.

How glorious and gratifying to witness the hand of this legacy of kindness in my life and that of my entire family, all begun a few years back between two passionately intent yet ordinary men steadfast in their values:

My oldest sister, Dr. Doris McEwen Harris, is a former school superintendent who made a point of knowing the administrators and teachers as well as engaging with students’ parents, holding potlucks and town meetings, and encouraging them to be involved in the community.

She became familiar with students by visiting their classes and riding the bus and having lunch with them.

My sister Annie McEwen is a community servant and social worker. She is a compassionate listener and enchanting storyteller, and children of all ages flock to her. She especially enjoys working with children who are developmentally disabled, those who tend to be left on the margins or overlooked altogether.

My sister Dr. Deborah McEwen pours her passion for children into her pediatric practice. Formerly a computer systems engineer, she returned to college in her mid-thirties to pursue her medical degree.

My youngest sister Vera McEwen was also a computer systems engineer. She also returned to college in her mid-thirties. Vera is now a cranial-sacral therapist, teacher, and motivational speaker. She is also a passionate homeschool mom.

And I, Dr. Gloria J. McEwen Burgess, am a consultant, executive coach, educator, and poet. I am also founder and executive director of The Lift Every Voice Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides leadership training for youth.

My mother, Mildred McEwen, continues to provide spiritual support to me, my sisters, our children, and the children of many others.

We each count among our blessings my father's and Mr. Faulkner's legacy, and whenever we can, we seize the opportunity to joyfully pass those blessings on to others.

I hope that in using this book you too

- Will be inspired and able to find your path, your calling
- Will live your life with passionate intention
- Will bring forth your signature presence to consciously and decidedly create your spiritual inheritance and intentional legacy

- Will be of service to the present and future generations
- Will experience the relevance and transformative power of the **Seven Sacred Promises**
- Will *dare to wear your soul on the outside*

*I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. . . . It is [the writer's] privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart.*

WILLIAM FAULKNER