Carter Scott Johnston

Dr. Teddy Champion

IDS 142 Living a Life of Significance

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Living a Life of Significance

      Living a life of significance could mean many different things to many different people. Some people might believe that a life is significant for its purpose, while others may feel that being remembered makes a life significant. Many people will probably hold that a person’s virtue deems their life significant. However, a life of significance is genuinely significant because of its impact on the world. Purpose and virtue are obsolete, and remembrance and fame can come to even those who had little effect on the world. To be deemed a significant life, someone must change the world around them. To make people’s lives better, worse, or even significantly different is to make a significant impact. One may assume that many world leaders and religious figures would be significant. This assumption is correct; for most of modern human history, people who have taken these roles have had the most considerable impact on the world. However, anyone can change the world, and some people who were not in either of these roles lived meaningful lives. Some significant people may not have done much directly, but their ideas were later impactful in the world. Significance can come from anyone who makes an impact in the world, be it a huge impact such as a historical figure or a small impact in one’s community; making an impact is how a life becomes significant. Living a life of significance comes from a person’s impact, whether big or small, good or bad; impact is the single way that significance is valued in a life.

      The most apparent lives of significance are lives that make enormous impacts on not only their communities but the world. These people changed the entire course of history, and it is unlikely that anyone is unfamiliar with them. For example, the life of Jesus Christ is among the most impactful in human history. Regardless of whether one believes in Christianity’s stories, the impact of Jesus as a first-century Israeli rabbi is astounding. The surge of Christianity as a religion changed the course of history; there have been wars fought over it, entire countries built on its ideals, and a few hundred-year periods where discovery slowed to a trickle in the western world at the hands of the church. The man, regardless of divinity, who roamed the lands now called Israel, was likely the most impactful single person in all of humanity’s history. Another person with an extreme impact on the world is Napoleon Bonaparte.

Unquestionably one of the most outstanding military leaders in history, Napoleon led the armies of the French Empire to entrench Europe in one of the largest wars of conquest in history. The Napoleonic Wars were the first continent-spanning wars in Europe since the thirty years’ war nearly two hundred years before. It showed the continent a new way to fight their wars and brought glory to the French. Eventually, he was defeated, and the French returned to their original land. However, his impact lived on in Europe. The impact of Napoleon’s army touched every part of the continent. These two men certainly lived lives of significance. While living vastly different lives, one as a rabbi and one as an emperor, both lives had substantial impacts on the world. They are what a person may think of when they consider lives of significance, but a person does not necessarily have to change the world in its entirety to have lived significantly.

      People can make a significant impact on a small scale as well. Perhaps they make an impact on their community or make an impact on a few people’s lives. One example I can think of is my grandmother. She did not change the world in its entirety like those mentioned before. However, she spent her entire career working for the March of Dimes and furthering its mission for decades. She helped countless people and certainly impacted, perhaps even saved, many lives. Aside from her charitable career, she impacted many more lives in her private life. To say she never met a stranger would be an understatement. Sometimes, she would invite random people she met to our family’s celebrations and treat them as though they were lifelong friends. Additionally, she was the matriarch of our huge family. Everyone in our family knows the impact she had on our lives, from how we are accustomed to treating strangers to a general call to socialization and knowing how to have a good time. My grandmother instilled values that will dictate how I lead the rest of my life, and I know it is the same for many others. Another less personal example is former Madison County, Alabama Commission Chairman Mike Gillespie. While almost nobody knows his name or what he has done in his life, he had an extraordinary impact on his constituency. He was the Commission Chairman for over twenty years, and he improved the county significantly during that time. He took Huntsville, the largest city in Madison County, from a city solely relying on its federal government workers to stay afloat to a booming city that is quickly becoming a city with many new jobs and young professionals. He played a significant role in making Huntsville an excellent place for families and improved many people’s lives through these accomplishments. Billie Jean King also has lived a life of significance, unlike those that may initially be thought of. Famous for her talents in tennis, King is also a recognized women’s activist. She has spent much of her life advocating for women in sports and furthered women’s tennis significantly. Activists play a vital role in the world. Many people live meaningful lives as they commit themselves to an issue that affects others. While they may not directly help (or hurt) others, the ideas they spread can do just that. These examples show people who lived meaningful lives without necessarily changing the world. They improved many people’s lives, and their lives are most certainly significant.

      What may be unexpected is the meaningful lives that can be led by people who are not of good virtue. Significance is defined as being of importance, worth, and meaning. These qualities can and are often believed to be good things. However, they are not always positive. Some terrible, even evil, people in history could and were significant. Living a life of significance is about impacting many people. While one is undoubtedly more revered if they impact people positively, it is just as significant to impact people negatively. The most obvious example of an evil but meaningful life is that of Adolf Hitler. As almost everyone knows, Hitler was the Fuhrer of the Nazi Party in Germany. The cause of the second world war and the holocaust, Hitler is widely regarded as one of if not the most detestable human beings in history. He is responsible for the deaths of millions, and he did so based on hate. Hitler lived significantly in that his actions impacted many lives. However, he is the greatest villain in at least modern history. Living significantly does not mean doing good; it means making an impact. Hitler certainly did that, and so his life, while terrible, was significant. Many people in history are similar to Hitler in that they have lived significant lives of evil. Another group of significant but terrible people is killers. While a just killing can occur, they are few and far between the range of those who kill in cold blood or for selfish reasons. Their abject evil is significant because death is such. People with impact are significant, regardless of the virtue in their actions. They may be dictators, murderers, or drug traffickers, but the result is the same; they impact many lives negatively.

      Living a life of significance is to live a life that is impactful to others. Be that a small impact that makes a few people’s lives different or a substantial difference that changes the world. The impact can even be damaging and harm the lives of many others. It is not enough to live with virtue if an impact is not made. Being a good person does not make a life significant, but by making a good impact on the world around you, you certainly will live a life of significance. That is the life one should strive to live. Ultimately, the only thing that can make a life significant is its impact, but perhaps significance is not what should be strived for. One should look to achieve a life of significance; yes, it is also virtuous, purposeful, and of course, impactful.