

## “S<sup>2</sup> =?” 22 March 2009

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, “There are two sources of unhappiness in life. One is not getting what you want; the other is getting it.” What do you suppose he meant by that comment? Depending on where we are in life, we may have different ideas, but I’ll tell you what I think he was trying to point out. In my view, he’s trying to let us know that getting all the stuff we think we want and/or need in life, or achieving success as many of us define it, may not result in the sense of satisfaction that many of us are seeking. Instead, even after achieving it all, acquiring it all, having it all—we may still suffer from a sense of emptiness...a wondering if this is all there is.

You see, many of us envy those who sit at the top of their fields of endeavors, thinking they’ve made it. They must be happy; they must be satisfied. However, we don’t know, and can’t know, what it’s like on the inside for them. Just because someone has achieved wealth or status or any of the values that the world around us has deemed important does not mean that his or her life is filled with a sense of meaning. The success someone is experiencing may, in fact, seem empty and worthless.

Bob Buford is one of those successful entrepreneurs who had it all—again in society’s view, but he reached a crossroads in life, a turning point. As I recall, he was involved in the cable TV business in its early days, and acquired a lot of wealth. He loved his job, and he and his family enjoyed the fruits of his financial success. Yet as he reached the point that many described as successful, he felt something was missing; his life didn’t seem to have the meaning that he wanted it to have. He didn’t feel as though he was creating any kind of a legacy that would outlast and outlive him.

Buford writes about his journey in his book entitled, “Halftime: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance.” He uses the analogy of a football game, and how the coach and team utilize halftime to review what has been going on, and to adjust the game plan to prepare for the second half. We need to do much the same thing when it comes to our lives—or so Buford thinks. He writes in terms of this kind of thing happening at mid-life, and he writes mostly to and for men, but I believe the kind of thing he’s talking about occurs with all of

us—men and women, and can occur at any age or stage of life.

He and others note that there are often signals that alert us to this life shift. Perhaps we’re feeling a little restless, and can’t really identify why. Maybe our accomplishments don’t give us the joy and thrill they once did. Maybe we’re at the point of realizing we can only buy, sell, manage, attain so much, and that we really only live so long. Maybe we’re at a similar spot as one successful Harvard-educated business person, who remarked, “I was always finding out that beyond the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, there’s a sort of emptiness.”

If that’s where we are, then I suspect we may want to move our lives away from success as the goal, and replace it with significance. We yearn for a sense of purpose and meaning that makes our lives worthwhile. Most of us, I believe, want it to matter that we’ve lived on this earth, and as a result, our perspectives on what’s important begin to shift, and there might possibly be changes in our systems of beliefs, values and feelings, or what Buford referred to as a “reordering of our personal myth.”

It can even be described as a longing to fill that hollow place within us, or what someone has labeled “the core desire of our soul.” The theologian Soren Kierkegaard said it like this: “What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know...The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do...to find the idea for which I can live and die.”

Our Bible passage for this morning suggests this idea is somehow to be found in our relationship and connection with God. I’m reading from Today’s English Version that puts Paul’s views this way: “God has created us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus, has created us for a life of good deeds which God has already prepared for us to do.”

The Bible passage certainly isn’t explicit, but it at least gives us a hint that we will find the significance we’re seeking in a “life of good deeds.” And it gives a hint that God has already prepared us for this work. In other words, we already have what it takes to do God’s work; we just need to come closer to discovering what that is. What I do know, without a doubt, that a “life of good deeds” is a life that is loving, caring, compassionate, and that love covers every age and season of our lives. Take a look.

Tony Dungy, in his most recent book, *Uncommon, Finding Your Path to Significance*, puts it this way: “Have you figured out what God has placed you here to do, and are you doing it to the best of your abilities?” While I can’t name exactly what that is for you, and you can’t for me, I think we can identify some elements that contribute to a loving life, and to the sense of significance that we’re seeking.

I believe one mark of significance is that whatever we do has to do with our relationships, and is other-focused. That means that those who want their lives to be significant really listen carefully, and feel with the plight of another person. Their eyes are wide open, and aware of what’s going on around them, and what the greatest needs are that they can meet.

Significant people are those who serve, and demonstrate that it’s not so much about wealth, but more about generosity—of time, energy, money, self. People who live a life of significance can have a positive influence and a powerful effect on all those they encounter. In the long run, every person of significance is successful, because he or she creates a legacy that has lasting value and impacts society for generations to come. Some of those who are considered people of significance include Mother Theresa, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Jonas Salk, Martin Luther King, Bill Wilson, the founder of AA.

Perhaps Mike Myatt’s illustration in his rendering of Success vs. Significance can help us see the difference between the two. He uses the example of a politician, someone who is often considered successful, but in his mind, seldom significant, with a statesman, who is often both. He notes that a politician is mostly concerned with winning an election, is motivated by pride and ego, makes promises and repeats tireless rhetoric. I know those are gross stereotypes and exaggerations, but I’m telling you what Myatt thinks.

On the other hand, he describes a statesman as one who is concerned about future generations. He or she is motivated by service above and beyond oneself, and wants to make a lasting difference. Myatt calls a statesman a “breath of fresh air whose only pursuit is to make a positive difference in the lives of others.” As such, he or she becomes a person of significance.

How do you and I begin to change our game plan, and move more toward significance than success? It’s a process, for sure, and it takes time, so we must be patient. We probably

need to reflect on our past, including our regrets and failures, and make some sort of peace with it. We probably shouldn’t try to go it alone, but find someone who can help us walk the journey. We need to be realistic, especially as we think about what we hope our legacy will be. And we have to take the time to reflect on the important questions of life. I mean questions like: What is missing from my life? What do I value? What do I want to be doing in 10 years? In 20? What steps do I need to take to have a more meaningful and fulfilling life? What does significance look like for me—given my abilities, my interests and passions? What has life taught me that I can share with others?

Again, Tony Dungy talks about what he considers to be really important in life, what significance looks like as compared to the world’s vision of success. He writes: “My scorecard is slightly different...God calls us to be faithful, not successful, and calls us to follow those dreams that are in our hearts and to pursue them with all our might. Sometimes they will proceed in ways that make them a “success” in worldly terms, but other times, it may feel more like futility. Sometimes we’ll be able to witness changed lives, and sometimes the only life we can see changed is our own.”

What really happens, you see, is that when we arrive at that place in life when we begin to question what has been, and to wonder what difference it makes that we have lived on this earth, we begin to re-define what success really is. I hope that, for all of us, success really winds up looking more like significance than anything else.

Closing:

I’ve always liked the writing on success that’s been attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, as success is redefined. To me, it sounds a lot more like what I’d call significance. You’re probably familiar with it. It goes like this:

To laugh often and much;  
To win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children;  
To earn the appreciation of honest  
critics and endure the betrayal of false  
friends;  
To appreciate beauty, to find the best in  
others;  
To leave the world a bit better, whether  
by a healthy child, a garden patch or a  
redeemed social condition;

To know that even one life has breathed  
easier because you have lived.  
That is to have succeeded.

However we define it, I hope and pray  
that, when it's all said and done, the world will  
be a little better for our having been here.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.  
Amen.