

Our Human Need for Significance  
Friday Forum: 25 October 2008  
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You see some interesting notices around. There was a sign up on the wall of a greengrocer, which read, 'Please don't handle the fruit. Ask for Debbie.'

There was another sign in a clothing store that promised 'Wonderful bargains for men with 16 and 17 necks.'

Or in a New York restaurant: 'Customers who consider our waitresses uncivil should see the manager.'

Or on a plumber's van: 'Don't sleep with a drip – call your plumber.' Arguably a bit hopeful!

Signs are trying to tell you something. Signs point beyond themselves to some reality of which we might otherwise be unaware – like a crumbling cliff edge, for example, or the danger of quicksand. Signs alert us to the fact that there is more going on than we might otherwise have noticed.

Significance doesn't have the word 'sign' in it for nothing. To be significant is to point to more and deeper realities than those that are immediately obvious. A significant event is one that is important in its own right, but which *also* reveals something, say, about the age we live in. The birth of Dolly the sheep, for instance, was significant because it wasn't just the birth of another sheep, important though that is for Ma and Pa Sheep and for the wool industry – it also marked a whole new level of scientific achievement and genetic manipulation.

A significant person is one who somehow points beyond themselves, who somehow speaks beyond the narrow confines of their own lives. Which is why we tend to be concerned about our own legacies.

When I was attempting, with no great success, to master the mysteries of mathematics at school, I remember being told the story of a mathematician who spent his whole career creating a set of logarithmic tables to more decimal points of accuracy than had previously been accomplished. The sense of achievement and accomplishment he felt at this triumphant product of his working life, however, were short-lived. A couple of months after publication, someone else published a set of log tables to *more* decimal points of accuracy, having only worked on it for a few months. He had discovered some formula that made the whole calculation far faster and more straightforward. The man who had spent his whole *life* working on the project tragically committed suicide.

It happened to him more quickly than for most of us, but for all of us, sooner or later, the time will come when our life's work, our continuing influence, our legacy, will simply dissipate. As an ancient Hebrew poet put it, 'Our days are but as grass: we flourish as a flower of the field. For as soon as the wind blows over it, it is gone, *and its place shall know it no more.*' (Psalm 103:15-16). Our mortality is bad enough – our lack of a lasting legacy adds insult to injury. The sand of our significance seems to run through the hour glass all too quickly.

I've written a book – thought I'd mention that! – but I'm under no illusion that it will still be in print by the time I retire, let alone years after my death. The winds of fashion will blow over it, it will be gone, and the Books in Print catalogue shall know it no more. (If you would like to stave off its obsolescence and my consequent insignificance for a little longer, there are copies available afterwards!)

We need a world-view, we need a view of significance that doesn't just work for the genius, but which works for the rest of us as well.

The Jewish and Christian world-view sees human beings as being signs. It sees us as being important in our own right, but also as pointing to a reality beyond ourselves. It sees us as being in the image of God – it sees us as being self-portraits of God, icons of God, signs of God. Rather as in a life class, a roomful of artists will each paint the model from a different angle, so each one of us reflects a unique aspect of the nature of God.

So when people see us and get to know us, they are meant to see and get to know the unique, particular, infinitely valuable person that we are – but they are also meant to see and meet with something of the being and character of the God whose image we bear. In our creativity, they are meant to see something of the Creator. In our love, they are meant to experience something of His infinite love. In our relationships, they are meant to glimpse something of the eternal Relationship by which and for which we were made. There are depths of meaning to each one of us, therefore, that lie beyond the surface level.

Each one of us, therefore – not just the Shakespeares and Michelangelos of this world, whose work lives on – each one of us has significance because we are signs. Our every act and word can be charged with the grandeur and the grace of God.

Isn't this just wishful thinking? Isn't this some Walter Mitty dream of our own importance? What evidence is there for any such view of ourselves?

Well, let me select two bits of the evidence, very briefly. The first is our need for significance itself. Why are we not satisfied with a single level of existence? Why are we concerned with our legacies? There was a lady who went into the office of her local newspaper, and asked to put in an obituary for her husband, who'd just died. She was told that it would cost her a pound a word, and she only had two pounds, so she said, 'Just put "George died"!'. The obituaries editor felt sorry for her, and felt that George deserved

more than that, so he told her that she could have an extra three words for no extra cost. The woman replied, ‘That’s very good of you, thank you. Then let’s change it to, “George died – boat for sale”’.

She wasn’t too concerned about his legacy, but most of us – not just second-term presidents - are concerned about ours. That’s why charities like Help the Aged do well out of offering to name a room after a loved one. To stave off the day when their place knows them no more.

But that desire is itself significant. Animals don’t seem to be concerned with any legacy other than the genetic. Why are we? I suggest that our need for significance is itself a sign that there is more going on in human existence than is immediately apparent, that there are more levels than the surface level.

And the second piece of evidence is the resurrection of Jesus. John’s Gospel relays a number of events that John calls ‘signs’, and the last of these is the resurrection of Jesus. It is not, of course, an unimportant event in its own right. It is important for Jesus Himself. But it *also* points beyond itself to give us a glimpse of *our* destiny as human beings. It is a sign of what God wants to do, not just for Jesus but for each one of us and for the whole creation.

Being in the image of God gives infinite *depth* to our lives. The Resurrection of Jesus offers eternal *length* to our lives. Taken together, they offer the sort of significance we crave.

The Hebrew poem I quoted earlier says that our days are but as grass: we flourish as a flower of the field. The wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.’ But then comes the vital word ‘But’. ‘But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever and ever towards those who fear Him.’ Because of that merciful goodness, at work in the resurrection of Jesus, our place will know us *again*. In the end, legacy is no substitute for life.