

Michael Zuckerman
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“Insignificance”

The first *major conversation about life* that I remember having with my dad was at the Jersey Shore—before it was famous—and it was about what it means to live a significant life. I was five or maybe six years old, and I remember so distinctly his saying that my goal should be to live so that the effects of my life were not merely “like a hand dipped in a pail of water.” Maybe I remember the event so well because I was five or maybe six years old, and playing on the beach with a pail filled with sea water at the time. The image seemed clear.

As a 24-year-old, I don't have that same clarity about what makes (or fails to make) a significant life. Here at Harvard, we look at pictures of dead people on the walls and perhaps think: their lives must have been significant. After all, they wound up on a wall. They weren't a hand in a pail of water—they lived such great lives that now I can't sit down to enjoy a plate of golden nuggets and some fro-yo without seeing them.

Then again, there is the irony that many of us have absolutely no idea who these people are. If I could remember any of their names, I might be more persuaded to say: *these people* lived *significant* lives. But I have no idea who they are! I suppose I could read the plaques, and I assume many of their last names are Lowell, but honestly I can't remember.

Playing that string to its logical conclusion can be depressing. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius writes: “Observe how transient and trivial is mortal life; yesterday, a drop of semen, tomorrow, a handful of spice or ashes.” If you read the *Meditations*, you'll find that Marcus Aurelius spends about 200 pages repeatedly coming to this exact same conclusion. And he ruled the entire Roman Empire, at the apex of its power. When I go home to visit, I can't even get my mother's dog to sit down.

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It is a scary idea—that all you do is negligible. That against the great vastness of time and space you are doomed to insignificance.

Perhaps because of how frightening that thought can be, I've begun thinking about it a lot. I even wrote my senior thesis exploring the question through one particular lens.

You see, in the fall of 2008 I spent four months running a field office in Canfield, Ohio, for the Obama presidential campaign. At the time, when I told people I worked for the Obama presidential campaign, they thought I was doing something really significant. Then again, I was one of maybe 200 organizers across the state—responsible for winning over maybe five or at best ten thousand extra votes. There are over *eight and a half million people who vote in Ohio!* And it was only one state in a national campaign. That doesn't seem *so* significant.

Now, what made the job great was that I got to meet many wonderful new people every day. But mostly, my job was to convince these people to take five, ten, twenty hours out of their weeks to go door-to-door talking to voters. I tried to persuade them that by giving up their time—with their families, at their jobs—they were going to be doing something *really significant*.

But if you think about it, these folks, when you do the math, were probably going to have a chance to influence five, maybe six individual voters in two hours if they were lucky. They were going to walk block by block, getting doors slammed in their faces – for five or six votes. I didn't put it this way to them, but these were smart people—they could do the math.

So that's what I decided to study for my senior thesis. Why in God's name would these wonderful citizens—patriots—give up their most precious resource for such a seemingly insignificant contribution?

In my most cynical moments, I really do think about the work that way. But fortunately for me, all of these people were much wiser than I am. They understood that, singlehandedly, they were not going to—as Bobby Kennedy put it—“bend history itself.” Instead, they put their faith in a simple truth, that from among—as Bobby Kennedy also would have put it—their “numberless diverse acts of courage and belief”—something would be accomplished, and they would have played a role. As a retired auto-worker told me, “Sure, I was a cog in the wheel. You know what? If there aren't any cogs in the wheel, how do you think the wheel turns?”

It should surprise no one that I had to leave Harvard Square for Youngstown, Ohio, to learn how a wheel turns.

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There is a reason I asked Sandy if I could speak on March 9th. Tonight marks exactly twelve years since my father, the man who argued I should live a life that wasn't like a hand in a pail of water, died of a heart attack.

He left behind a life that, by most measures, was pretty insignificant – there are no plaques to him, his picture isn't up on any walls. History looks the same without him.

And he didn't live long enough to parse the “hand in the pail of water” comment for me, now that I'm old enough to question it.

But he was a good person, and he played his role. I was pretty bewildered at his funeral, but I do remember hearing the story of an old black woman who had been pushed down a flight of stairs by a racist police officer. She didn't have enough money for a lawyer, but she asked my father if he would represent her anyway and he agreed, with one caveat: he asked if she would bake him a sweet potato pie every so often. It was his favorite dessert.

As our president would say, “that single moment, by itself, is not enough.” It isn't. No single moment is enough: no single *pro bono* legal representation is enough to heal a legacy of racial intolerance, no single vote is enough to win a major election, no single life is enough to bend the arc of history. This recognition might tempt us to say that these things, on their own, are insignificant. Maybe they are. But maybe this is *exactly the insignificance we should seek*. Our names may never be on plaques in these hallowed halls, and our portraits may never hang on these...yellow...walls. But we can play our role with honor and integrity and passion. We can add our notes to a much broader symphony, in which we are blessed to be both audience and performer. We can leave—to borrow one final Bobby Kennedy quote—“ripples of hope” in the pail of water.

Thank you very much.