

# INTENTIONAL LIVING

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CHOOSING A LIFE  
THAT MATTERS

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CENTER  
STREET

NEW YORK BOSTON NASHVILLE

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# 1

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## Your Life Can Be a Great Story

**W**hat's your life story?

When I meet people for the first time, as soon as the introductions are out of the way, I ask them to share their stories—to tell me who they are and where they're from, where they've been and where they're going. I want to understand what matters to them. Maybe you do the same. The telling of our stories becomes an emotional connecting point for us. It bridges the gap between us.

Why is that?

Everyone loves a good story—we always have. Stories tell us who we are. They . . .

- Inspire us.
- Connect with us.
- Animate our reasoning process.
- Give us permission to act.
- Fire our emotions.
- Give us pictures of who we aspire to be.

Stories *are* us.

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Every day millions of people watch movies, read novels, and search the Internet for stories that inspire them or make them laugh. Every day we listen to our friends tell us about the dramatic or funny things that happen to them. Every day people take out their smartphones to show pictures and share stories. Stories are how we relate to others, learn, and remember.

As a communicator, I spend a good portion of my days sharing stories. People don't care a lot about cold facts. They don't want to look at pie charts. They want excitement. They like drama. They care about pictures. They want to laugh. They want to see and feel what happened. Statistics don't inspire people to do great things. Stories do!

### **What's Your Story?**

So I'll ask you again: What's your story?

I wish I could sit with you right now and hear it from you. When you get to the end of this book, I'll tell you about a way you *can* share your story with me and with others. But before we get to that, I want you to think about your story so far. What kind of story is it?

We all have a bit of humor in our stories, as well as some drama. We all have our ups and downs, wins and losses. There's a bit of comedy, tragedy, and history in all of us. But overall, each of our lives tells a larger story. What do you want yours to say?

I believe that no matter what "plot" each of our stories may follow, deep down we all want one thing. **We want our lives to matter. We want our stories to be of significance.** Nobody wants to feel like the world wouldn't miss him if he'd never lived. Are you with me?

Have you ever seen the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*? It's

the story of George Bailey, a man who dreams of traveling the world and building things, but who instead stays home in Bedford Falls, because he repeatedly chooses to do what he believes to be right for others. A point occurs in the movie where George experiences a moment of crisis, and he comes to believe that everyone around him would be better off if he had never been born. What he's really saying is that his life doesn't matter.

The great twist in the story occurs when, with the help of an angel, George gets a chance to see what his town and others' lives would look like if he had never existed. Without him, it's a dark and negative place. George comes to recognize the positive impact he had made because, time after time, he took action to do what he knew was right and helped other people. As Clarence the angel tells him, "Each man's life touches so many other lives." George had touched many lives in small ways and made a difference.

Have you looked at your life from that angle? Have you thought about what you want your life story to be? Do you believe you can live a life of significance, that you can do things that really matter? Can you make your story great?

With all my heart, I believe the answer to these questions is yes. You have it within your power to make your life a great story, one of significance. Every person can. Regardless of nationality, opportunity, ethnicity, or capacity, each of us can live a life of significance. We can do things that matter and that can make the world a better place. I hope you believe that. If you don't now, I hope you will by the time you're finished reading this book.

Don't let the word *significance* intimidate you. Don't let it stop you from pursuing a life that matters. When I talk about significance, I'm not talking about being famous. I'm not talking about getting rich. I'm not talking about being a huge celebrity or winning a Nobel Prize or becoming the president of the United States. There's nothing

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**To be significant, all you have to do is make a difference with others wherever you are, with whatever you have, day by day.**

wrong with any of those things, but you don't have to accomplish any of them to be significant. To be significant, all you have to do is make a difference with others wherever you are, with whatever you have, day by day.

Back in 1976, I received a gift from Eileen Beavers, who was my assistant at that time. As I unwrapped it, I saw it was a book, and I was intrigued by the title: *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. I couldn't wait to read it.

But when I opened it, I was shocked. The pages were blank.

Inside was a note from Eileen that said, "John, your life is before you. Fill these pages with kind acts, good thoughts, and matters of your heart. Write a great story with your life."

I still remember the excitement and anticipation that surged through me when I read her words. For the first time it made me think about how I was the author of my life, and I could fill every "page" with whatever I wanted. It made me want to be significant. It inspired me to do whatever I could to make my life matter.

So what's the secret to filling the pages of your life? What's the key to a life that matters?

*Living each day with intentionality.*

When you live each day with intentionality, there's almost no limit to what you can do. You can transform yourself, your family, your community, and your nation. When enough people do that, they can change the world. When you intentionally use your everyday life to bring about positive change in the lives of others, you begin to live a life that matters.

**When you intentionally use your everyday life to bring about positive change in the lives of others, you begin to live a life that matters.**

I vividly remember watching Reese Witherspoon's emotional

acceptance speech after she won the Best Actress Academy Award in 2006 for portraying June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line*. Witherspoon said that people often asked June how she was doing, and she'd say, "I'm just tryin' to matter!" The actress went on to say that she understood exactly what June meant because she too was trying to make her life matter—by living a good life and doing work that meant something to somebody.

And isn't that what all of us want? To make our lives matter? So if that is true, why doesn't it happen for everybody?

## Get into the Story

Most people want to hear or tell a good story. But they don't realize they can and should *be* the good story. That requires intentional living. It is the bridge that crosses the gap to a life that matters. I'll explain this in detail in the next chapter, but right now I'll just say this: when unintentional people see the wrongs of the world, they say, "Something should be done about that." They see or hear a story, and they react to it emotionally and intellectually. But they go no further.

People who live intentionally jump in and live the story themselves. The words of physicist Albert Einstein motivate them: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

Why do so many people do nothing? I think it's because most of us look at the evils and injustice around us, and we become overwhelmed. The problems look too big for us to tackle. We say to ourselves, "What can I do? I'm just one person."

One person is a start. One person can act and make a change by helping another. One person can inspire a second person to be intentional, and another. Those people can work together. They can

become a movement. They can make an impact. We should never let what we *cannot* do keep us from doing what we *can* do. A passive life does not become a meaningful life.

Not long ago I read *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Don Miller. He eloquently writes about seeing our lives as stories. He explains, “I’ve never walked out of a meaningless movie thinking all movies are meaningless. I only thought the movie I walked out on was meaningless. I wonder, then, if when people say life is meaningless, what they really mean is *their* lives are meaningless. I wonder if they’ve chosen to believe their whole existence is unremarkable, and are projecting their dreary lives on the rest of us.”<sup>1</sup>

If you are reading these words and thinking to yourself, *That’s me. My life is meaningless. My existence is unremarkable. I wish my life were less dreary*, then I have good news for you. This doesn’t have to be your story. Your story can be about a life that matters.

Don Miller also writes, “You can call it God or a conscience, or you can dismiss it as that intuitive knowing we all have as human beings, as living storytellers; but there is a knowing I feel that guides me toward better stories, toward being a better character. I believe there is a writer outside ourselves, plotting a better story for us, interacting with us, even, and whispering a better story into our consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

**If your story isn’t as meaningful or significant or compelling as you want it to be, you can change it.**

No matter what your beliefs are, I can tell you this. If your story isn’t as meaningful or significant or compelling as you want it to be, you can change it. You can begin writing a new story, beginning today. Don’t settle for

being merely a teller of stories about significance. Decide to *be* the story of significance. Become the central character in your story of making a difference!

## Your Story, Not History

I have to admit, this notion goes against everything I learned in college. It may go against your education, too. In the courses I took on speaking, the professors taught us to take our stories from history, not to draw upon personal experiences to illustrate our points. They believed to do anything other than that appeared egocentric.

As a burgeoning communicator, however, I observed that the greatest speakers didn't just tell better stories. They actually made the stories better by living them first. Their stories came from their experiences. They were at the heart of their best stories.

And that's what I want for you. I don't want you to be merely a *storyteller* of significance. I want you to be a *story liver*! Your story still has many blank pages. You can write on them with your life. When you get right down to it, intentional living is about living your best story.

One of the biggest comedy acts of the sixties and seventies was the Smothers Brothers. I remember a routine they performed on their television variety show that went something like this:

"What's wrong, Tommy?" asked Dick, who was the straight man. "You seem a bit despondent."

"I am!" replied his brother Tommy. "I'm worried about the state of our American society!"

"Well, what bothers you about it? Are you worried about the extent of poverty and hunger in the land?"

"Oh no, that doesn't really bother me."

"I see. Well, are you concerned about the growing threat of nuclear war?"

"No, that's not a worry of mine."

"Are you upset about the use and abuse of drugs by the youth of America?"

"No, that doesn't bother me very much."

Looking rather puzzled, Dick asked, “Well, Tom, if you’re not bothered by poverty and hunger, war and drugs, what are you worried about?”

“I’m worried about our apathy!”

Apathetic people will never make their world different. Indifferent people will not live a life that matters. Passive people take themselves out of the greatest of all stories—their own. Maybe they want to see themselves in the story, but they exist as mere observers on the sidelines. They wish for more, but they fail to become active participants. Why? Because they are unintentional.

## **How to Start Writing Your Significance Story**

If you’re like me and want to make a difference and have a significance story to tell by the end of your life, I can help you. I’m going to show you the simple pathway toward intentional living. But first, you need to be willing to take an important step forward. And that comes from a change in mindset, from a willingness to start writing your story by approaching your life differently.

### **1. Put Yourself in the Story**

No one stumbles upon significance. We have to be intentional about making our lives matter. That calls for action—and not excuses. Most people don’t know this, but it’s easier to go from failure to success than from excuses to success.

In a famous study by Victor and Mildred Goertzel published in a book titled *Cradles of Eminence*, the home backgrounds of three hundred highly successful people were investigated. These three hundred people had made it to the top. They were men and women

who would be recognized as brilliant in their fields. The list included Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Clara Barton, Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and Sigmund Freud. The intensive investigation into their early home lives yielded some surprising findings:

- Three-fourths of them as children were troubled by poverty, a broken home, or difficult parents who were rejecting, over-possessive, or domineering.
- Seventy-four of the eighty-five writers of fiction or drama and sixteen of the twenty poets came from homes where, as children, they saw tense psychological drama played out by their parents.
- Over one-fourth of the sample suffered physical handicaps such as blindness, deafness, or crippled limbs.<sup>3</sup>

Adversity tried to knock these people out of their stories, but they didn't allow it to. Why? They were highly intentional. They had a strong *why*—a purpose—which drew them forward even if the road wasn't wide and smooth. (I'll tell you about finding your *why* in chapter four.)

Look at the lives of people who have achieved significance, and you can hear them calling you to put yourself into your story. Perhaps they didn't use those exact words, but if you look at what they've said, you can sense the call to action:

*“To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.”*

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

*“If you aren’t in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?”*

—T. S. ELIOT

*“Be the change you want to see in the world.”*

—MAHATMA GANDHI

*“Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. . . . Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”*

—STEVE JOBS

People ask me all the time for advice about how to write a book. I tell them to start writing. Many people would love to write a story, a poem, or even a book, but they never do. Why? They’re afraid to start.

To have a life that matters, you have to start. Start with yourself. Your *best* story begins when you put yourself back into it. Be in the picture. Stop looking—start living! Not only will that change your life and help others, but it will also give you the credibility and moral authority to inspire and team with others to make a difference. (I’ll talk a lot about this throughout the book.)

Once, while walking through the Orlando Science Center, I read these words on a sign: “Experiment—Experience—Explore. *Do not touch* isn’t in our vocabulary.” I love that philosophy, not only for a science center, but also for life. Dive in! You never know how well you can swim until you are in over your head.

## **2. Put Significance in Your Story**

A well-written story is built using elements that people think are important. When we live for significance, we are telling people around us that it is important to us. Almost everyone wants to live a life of meaning and significance, whether or not they express the desire.

To put significance in our stories, we must do things out of our comfort zone. And we must make changes that we may find difficult.

We often avoid trying to make those changes. But know this: though not everything that we face can be changed, nothing can be changed until we face it.

To put significance in our stories, we must also take action. Being passive may feel safe. If you do nothing, nothing can go wrong. But while inaction cannot fail, it cannot succeed either. We can wait, and hope, and wish, but if we do, we miss the stories our lives could be.

We cannot allow our fears and questions to keep us from starting. Are you tempted to wait until an ideal time? Do you worry that if you start on this journey without knowing exactly where it will go you might not do well? Are you concerned that you might fail?

Let me help you by telling you something you need to know. You won't do well the first time you do anything. You don't know what you're doing when you start. Nobody is good at the beginning of doing something new. Get over it. Novelist Ernest Hemingway said, "The first draft is always crap." (Only he didn't say *crap!*) And he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. If you want to live a life that matters, don't start when you get good; start now so you become good. I've never known a star athlete who started out good. All start out as beginners, and with practice, some become good. Others become great.

**If you want to live a life that matters, don't start when you get good; start now so you become good.**

Everyone starts out bad, regardless of what they're practicing for. We start so we can improve. We start before we're ready because we need and want to get better. The idea is to deliver our best each time we try until one day, we become good. And then one day, we may even have a chance to be great. That's growth. But we can't evolve if we don't start.

Your story won't be perfect. A lot of things will change. But your heart will sing. It will sing the song of significance. It will sing, "I am making a difference!" And that will give you satisfaction down to the soul level.

### 3. Put Your Strengths in Your Story

Recently I had an enlightening lunch with Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*. We were speaking together at an event in Las Vegas, and after catching up for a few minutes, we began to talk about the meaning and impact of significance.

“Jim,” I asked, “what is required to bring about positive life-change to a community?” I knew he had done a lot of research on the subject of transformational movements, and I was very interested to hear his answer.

“There are three questions you need to ask and answer to test your readiness to be a catalyst for significance,” Jim replied. “They are:

- Can you be the best in the world at what you do?
- Are you passionate about what you are doing?
- Do you have the resources to change your world?”

Since our conversation that day, I have spent a lot of time thinking about those questions. Here is what I discovered. The first question is about talent. You have skills and abilities that can help others. Can you be the best in the world using them? Maybe, maybe not. Can you be the best *you* in the world using them? Absolutely! No one else has exactly your skills and experiences, opportunities and obstacles, timing and gifts. You are unique, and have a unique chance to make a difference only you can make—if you’re willing to get into your story. Your talent will become the leverage in your life for creating the significance story you want to live.

The second question is about heart. Significance begins in the heart when we desire to make a difference. We see a need. We feel a hurt. We want to help. We act on it. Passion is the soul of significance. It’s the fuel. It’s the core.

The third question is about tools. No doubt you already have many

resources at your disposal. My desire is that this book will be another one. It will show you the way so that you can become highly intentional and live a life that matters according to your heart and values.

#### 4. Stop Trying and Start Doing

“I’ll try my best.” This is a statement most of us have made at one time or another. It’s a way of saying, “I’ll work at having the right attitude and I’ll work at the task, but I won’t take responsibility for the outcome.” But is *trying* to do your best enough for a life of significance? Can we move from where we are to where we want to be just by *trying*?

I don’t think so.

*Trying* alone does not communicate true commitment. It’s half-hearted. It is not a pledge to do what’s necessary to achieve a goal. It’s another way of saying, “I’ll make an effort.” That’s not many steps away from, “I’ll go through the motions.” *Trying* rarely achieves anything significant.

If an attitude of *trying* is not enough, then what is?

An attitude of *doing*!

There is enormous magic in the tiny word *do*. When we tell ourselves, “I’ll do it,” we unleash tremendous power. That act forges in us a chain of personal responsibility that ups our game: a desire to excel plus a sense of duty plus complete aliveness plus total dedication to getting done what has to be done. That equals commitment.

An attitude of *doing* also helps us to become who we were meant to be. It is this *doing* attitude that often leads to the things we were meant to do. While *trying* is filled with good intentions, *doing* is the result of intentional living.

As you read this, you may be thinking, *I’m not sure if I’m ready to make such a commitment*. Steven Pressfield, author of *The War of Art*, identifies this reluctance. He calls it *resistance*. He writes,

“There is a force resisting the beautiful things in the world, and too many of us are giving in.” An attitude of *doing* helps us break through that resisting force, and the world needs that. It needs for us to live our stories and contribute to the greater story that’s happening around us.

## **Discoveries in Your Story of Significance**

I hope you will take steps to put yourself fully into your story and begin writing your life of significance—or to increase your significance if you’re already doing significant work. From the moment you start, it will have a positive, lasting effect on you. If you’re still not sure if you’re ready to take that first step, let me help by telling you what it will do for you:

### **It Will Change You**

What is the number one catalyst for change? It’s *action*. Understanding may be able to change minds, but action changes lives. If you take action, it will change your life. And that change will begin changing others.

Entrepreneur and speaker Jim Rohn said, “One of the best places to start to turn your life around is by doing whatever appears on your mental, ‘I should’ list.” What task to help others keeps popping up on your “I should” list? I want to challenge you to develop the discipline of *doing* in that area. Every time we choose action over ease we develop an increasing level of self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence. In the final analysis, it is often how we feel about ourselves that provides the greatest reward from any activity.

In life, it is not what we *get* that makes us valuable. It is what

we *become* in the process that brings value to our lives. Action is what converts human dreams into significance. It brings personal value that we can gain from no other source.

Action is what converts  
human dreams into  
significance.

When I was in college, I felt that I should do something positive in the poorest section of the city where I lived. Often I would hear others say that something should be done to help the people who lived there, but I didn't see anyone doing anything about it. So I decided to lead a clean-up effort in that area. For one month, volunteers did work to spruce up the neighborhood. Then we began helping the people who needed medical assistance. Soon people began to take ownership of the neighborhood and things began to change. I vividly remember walking through that area with a great deal of pride of accomplishment. I was full of joy knowing that I had been part of a group of people who had made a difference in that community. As a result, the change inside of me was as great as the change in the neighborhood.

When you take responsibility for your story and intentionally live a life of significance, how will you change?

- *You will reaffirm your values.* Acting on what you value will clarify those values and make them a permanent priority in your life.
- *You will find your voice.* Taking action will give you confidence to speak and live out what you believe in front of others. You will begin to develop a moral authority with people.
- *You will develop your character.* Passive people allow their character to be influenced by others. Active people struggle to form and maintain their character. They grow and develop because of that struggle.

- *You will experience inner fulfillment.* Contentment is found in being where you are supposed to be. It's found when your actions are aligned with who you are.

When we live our lives intentionally for others, we begin to see the world through eyes other than our own, and that inspires us to do more than belong; we participate. We do more than care; we help. We go beyond being fair; we are kind. We go beyond dreaming; we work. Why? Because we want to make a difference.

If you want a better life, become intentional about your story. The return you get personally will knock your socks off. That doesn't mean it will be smooth sailing. Significance is messy. It's inconvenient. It's overwhelming. At times I've been disappointed in myself. I've also been disappointed by others. All the couldn'ts, didn'ts, and wouldn'ts in my life have shown me my shortcomings. The story I wanted to write and the one being written are different. But that's OK. My strikeouts have developed my character, and my hits have been unforgettable. When your story of significance moves from ideal to real, it will begin to remake you.

### **It Will Bring Others into Your Story**

What you move toward moves toward you. For years I have taught that when a person moves toward his or her vision, resources begin to move toward that person. Those resources may be materials, money, or people. When a person stops moving, so do the resources. As you step into your story of significance and take action, you will find this to be true.

I have taken this principle one step further. When I move in an area of significance, I also ask people to join me. (I'll explain this in detail in chapter seven.) There's great power in inviting others to join you. You can share significance by inviting others to be part of your

story. Don Miller illustrates this in *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. He writes,

When we were in Uganda, I went with [my friend] Bob to break ground on a new school he was building. The school board was there, along with the local officials. The principal of the school had bought three trees that Bob, the government official, and the principal would plant to commemorate the breaking of the ground. Bob saw me standing off, taking pictures of the event, and walked over and asked if I would plant his tree for him.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said. “It would be great for me to come back to this place and see the tree you planted, to be reminded of you every time I visit.”

I put down my camera and helped dig the hole and set the tree into the ground, covering it to its tiny trunk. And from that moment on, the school was no longer Bob’s school; the better story was no longer Bob’s story. It was my story, too. I’d entered into the story with Bob. And it’s a great story about providing an education to children who would otherwise go without. After that I donated funds to Bob’s work in Uganda, and I’m even working to provide a scholarship to a child I met in a prison in Kampala who Bob and his lawyers helped free. I’m telling a better story with Bob.<sup>4</sup>

When you invite others to join you, you both change and have better stories to show for it. As poet Edwin Markham wrote,

*There is a destiny that makes us brothers  
None goes his way alone.  
All that we send into the lives of others  
Comes back into our own.*

My greatest memories have come from the times others were in my story of significance with me. There is no joy that can equal that of people working together for common good. Today, my best friends are those who are taking the significance journey with me. Those friendships are heightened by meaningful experiences. Yours will be, too.

### **It Will Increase Your Appetite for More Significance**

In 2013 at a speaking engagement I had in Bahrain, I sat across the table from Jaap Vaandrager at lunch. He is a highly successful businessman from the Netherlands who lives and works in Bahrain. During our conversation he asked me what I was writing. I briefly shared that I was writing this book about making a difference. He responded, “My daughter Celine is making a difference in the lives of people, and she is only a teenager.” He started to tell me her story, and I was blown away by it.

Growing up in the Netherlands, Celine knew how privileged she was. This became clear to her in India. Her father and grandfather had done many charity projects there, and she had gone there herself and witnessed the conditions. “I have seen how many people live in extreme poverty,” said Celine. “The children in the slums and other less fortunate areas lack basic education, and the only language they learn is the local language, which limits their opportunities later in life. Their greatest wish is to break out of the slums and start a life in the city with a stable job, a stable income, and a loving family.”

The key, she realized, was education. “I believe that it is one of the most important things in life and it enables people to do whatever they desire with their life,” said Celine. She thought that if children could be taught English, they would have a chance at a better life as they grew up.

Celine had a plan. She would provide underprivileged children

at a school with an English teacher. That would help them later in life and provide greater opportunities for them. After doing a lot of research and with the help of her friends in India, she found a school. It needed an English teacher, but didn't have enough money to pay for one. At this school and others like it, students received only the most basic supplies and a lunch, which for many is the only hot meal they get all day.

The school she found was called Mahadji Shinde Primary School. The children who attended, forty-four to a class, were some of the least fortunate children in all of India: 10 percent were orphans, 60 percent had only one parent, and 80 percent lived in sheds in the slums.

Finding an English teacher for the school was not easy, but Celine did it in a month. The teacher was a young single woman whose entire family depended on her salary, including her father, who had cancer. She had been unemployed and was grateful for the job. Now all Celine had to do was figure out how to pay her.

She began raising money by holding bake sales at her school. She also sponsored swims. But the amount of money was nowhere near enough to fulfill her aims.

As Celine's sixteenth birthday approached, she knew what she wanted to do. "For my sixteenth birthday I stepped it up a notch, inviting all my friends, family's friends, and classmates to come to a birthday fundraiser I was having and I told them to bring a plus one."

Instead of asking for gifts, she asked for donations for a charity she was creating called No Nation Without Education.

"Within hours the whole donation box was filled and I already knew I had achieved my target," said Celine. "When I counted up the money I couldn't believe my eyes. We had gone over more than double the money required. Success!"

She used the money to pay the teacher's salary for a year. That meant the children would get English lessons, and the teacher would

have a stable job for a year and her father's cancer would be treated. With the extra money, Celine bought dozens of basic English books for the children and stuffed animals for the primary school. When Celine went there to deliver the books and toys, the children were overjoyed and welcomed her enthusiastically. On the same trip, she helped with other projects her grandfather had sponsored.

"I had such a fantastic time in India," said Celine. "I couldn't thank everyone enough for helping me. It was a life-changing experience and one I will never forget."

But Celine's story doesn't end there. She says, "My new mission? To build a school in Mumbai, India, for my eighteenth birthday."

Celine's story shows that when you make significance a part of your story, it only increases your appetite to do more things that mat-

**A butterfly cannot go back to being a caterpillar. When you start living the significance story, you get a taste for making a difference and you won't go back.**

ter. I know that once I started adding value to others, it became an obsession in the best sense of the word. The more I did it, the more I became intentional in finding other opportunities. A butterfly cannot go back to being a caterpillar. When you start living the significance story, you get a taste for

making a difference and you won't go back.

I wish I had read a story like Celine's when I was a teenager. Even with all of the advantages I had, no one ever pointed out that there were people doing significant things at that age. And it never occurred to me that I could make such a difference as a kid. Knowing this possibility then would have had a huge impact on me.

## **It Will Outlive You**

In my book *The Leadership Handbook*, there is a chapter on legacy titled "People Will Summarize Your Life in One Sentence—Pick

It Now.” By getting into your story and becoming intentional about making a difference, you can choose your legacy. What an opportunity! Today you and I can decide to live a life that matters, and that will impact how we will be remembered after we’re gone.

My wife, Margaret, was deeply moved by a book called *Forget-Me-Not: Timeless Sentiments for Lifelong Friends*, by Janda Sims Kelley. It is a collection of prose and poetry written in the 1800s. One of the entries particularly impacted her. It said,

*To Viola,  
Dare to do right, dare to be true,  
You have a work that  
no other can do.  
Do it so kindly,  
so bravely, so well,  
That angels will hasten  
the story to tell.  
Your friend, Annie  
Haskinville, New York, February 08, 1890*

Isn’t that what all of us should strive to do? As Viktor Frankl said, “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life. Everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone’s task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.”

## **This Is Personal**

At this point, I should pause so that I can tell you something. If you’ve read any of my previous books, you’re going to find this one different in both tone and approach. I will show you the way to

intentional living and help you to create your own life that matters, but I'm also going to tell you a lot of my personal story—from growing up and going to school in small-town Ohio during the fifties and sixties; to becoming the pastor of a tiny church in rural Indiana; to leading ever-growing churches through the seventies, eighties, and nineties; to crossing over as a speaker to teach businesspeople and leaders; to starting several businesses and a nonprofit organization; to eventually training millions of leaders around the world.

I won't be telling you all this to toot my own horn. My life is flawed, yet I believe I need to share it with you in a way I never have before because I don't know of any better way to teach you how to embark upon intentional living. I believe that if you know my story and how it unfolded, it will help you to write your own story of significance. It will empower you to lead yourself to a life that matters.

Let me also tell you something else. I talk pretty openly about my faith in this book. I do that because it has been an important part of my personal journey. It may also be a part of yours. But I also know that it may not be. Rest assured, I will not try to force my faith on you. If you're indifferent to faith, or even if you have a negative disposition toward faith or God, I sincerely believe you'll benefit from hearing my story. Having said that, I want you to know that I'll let you know when I'm going to talk about my faith, and you can skip that section if you want to. I won't be offended.

Since it's confession time, I'll also let you in on a little secret. I struggled with writing this book—more than with any book I've ever written. Why? The message of intentional living and the resulting significance is so meaningful, so powerful, and so very personal that I felt I had to get it right. I believe what I have to say on this subject has the potential to change your life, as it has mine.

And to help you start taking your first steps into significance right away, I've created something called the seven-day experiment. It will show you how to take your first small steps in your journey of

intentional living and significance. Go to [7DayExperiment.com](http://7DayExperiment.com) and try it out. It's free.

As I have looked back at my story and explored my journey of intentional living and significance, I have come to realize that it followed a pattern, a pattern I will use to show you the way. Here it is:

*I Want to Make a Difference*  
*Doing Something That Makes a Difference,*  
*With People Who Make a Difference,*  
*At a Time That Makes a Difference.*

The rest of the book is organized in alignment with the pattern of those four thoughts (after I explain some things about intentional living in the next chapter). My desire is that as you read and hear about me, you will make discoveries about yourself, your calling to make a difference, and about your ability to live a life of significance, which you can start doing now.

Even though I will be telling you much of my story, and revealing more about my background than I ever have, I want you to understand that my story isn't more important than anyone else's—including yours. I believe that every person has great value. Every person matters. I believe in you. I believe in your potential for personal transformation. And I believe you have the ability to make an impact on the world.

Your story, like mine, won't be perfect. Everyone's story includes wins and losses, good days and bad, highs and lows, surprises and uncertainties. That's life. This book is not about creating a *perfect* life for you. It's about wanting a *better* life for you.

I've been an observer of people all my life, and I've noticed that most people are pretty passive about their lives. An indication of this is that when asked to describe significant regrets in their lives, eight out of ten people focus on actions they did *not* take rather than actions they *did*. In other words, they focus on things they failed *to* do rather than things they failed *at* doing. A better story will emerge for you

when you are highly intentional with your life. I know because I have experienced it.

## Your Best Story

One of my favorite movies is *Amistad*, directed by Steven Spielberg. It's about a mutiny on a slave ship and the trial that occurred to determine the status of the rebellious slaves after the vessel miraculously made it to the United States. Representing the slaves was African American abolitionist lawyer Theodore Joadson, played by Morgan Freeman. His advisor was former US president John Quincy Adams, played by Anthony Hopkins.

In the movie, Adams asks Joadson to summarize his case. Joadson's summary is brilliant, accurate, and devoid of emotion. Old Adams then counsels Joadson: "Early in my career in the law, I learned that *whoever tells the best story wins.*"

I want you to win by telling the best story you can with your life.

As you think about your life story and how you want it ultimately to read, I want to leave you with a final thought. I often teach that we have two great tasks in life: to find ourselves and to lose ourselves.

**When I die, I cannot take  
with me what I have, but  
I can live in others by  
what I gave.**

Ultimately, I believe we find ourselves by discovering our *why*. We lose ourselves while traveling the path of significance by putting others first. The result? The people we help also find themselves, and the legacy cycle can begin again. That cycle has the power to live on after us. When I die, I cannot take with me what I have, but I can live in others by what I gave. This is what I hope for you as you read this book.

If you're ready to learn how living with intentionality will change your life, then turn the page and let's look at why having good intentions alone is never enough for living a life of significance.

## **Intentional Application: Your Life Can Be a Great Story**

### **Your Story So Far**

How would you characterize your life story so far? Is it already a great one? Is it good, but not spectacular? Is it falling short of what you want it to be? Take some time to think about it by writing about it. You can do that any number of ways. You can create a list of every memorable moment—both positive and negative. You can write it out as a story. You can jot down ideas or create a summary paragraph. The how isn't that important. What matters is that you take the time to do it, and be sure to think about whether your story is headed in the direction you want it to go by the time you're done living.

### **Start Outlining a New Chapter**

If the direction of your life isn't all that you want it to be, then take some time to write out what you want to accomplish to make the world a better place. It doesn't need to be lofty. It doesn't have to be earth-shattering. It just needs to make a difference in some way that's important to you. What would you like people to say at your funeral? Write it now.

### **Step into Your Story**

Now try to discern what it would mean for you to become more proactive in making your life matter and stepping into your own story. Identify what single action you could take today and every day for the next week or month to start rewriting your own story. As Doug Horton says, "Be your own hero. It's cheaper than a movie ticket."