

My life matters

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Life becomes purposeful when it is spent in the service of others

My father died when he was 42, not very old to die, nor warranted. His death was tragic, dying as he did because of health abuse. In the year leading up to his death, he had been bitter, feeling worthless and inconsequential. He often told his close friends that he had been a failure and saw little purpose in continuing to live. Most of his friends, I reckon, for they shared with me, a young boy, after his death, empathised with my father and felt sad for him. While I was sad at his passing away so suddenly, I was also angry and upset that he should have left my mother and me to fend for ourselves. My mother told me later that I had ranted and raved and cursed my father, calling him callous and selfish. I lived this unforgiving existence for years, calling him a loser, whose life had been worthless.

A few years ago, when I was grown, married and had children of my own, I chanced to meet an old barber, who would, when I was a child, come home to crop my hair. He recalled my father with tears in his eyes. He said my father had once gifted him Rs.10,000 and that had helped him set up his own shop. Today, his shop is flourishing with his sons running it successfully, and his grandson, after securing a first class in his B.E., is working for Infosys. The reason? An education his family could provide his grandchild only because my father had helped him set up his business.

On another occasion, I met an old colleague of my father, who said I was blessed to have had such a generous father. On enquiry, he told me that when he needed Rs. 50,000 to pay for his wife's medical treatment, my father, who did not have the sum, borrowed it and gave it to him. The colleague was unable to return the money and when he told my father, he graciously said 'forget it'; such was his generosity.

When my father-in-law passed away a couple of years back, a mutual friend, who had studied with both my father-in-law and my father, told me that he remembered my father fondly, for when they were young bachelors, working in Bangalore, and the friend was lonely, homesick and companionless, my father would come every day and keep him company.

I suddenly realised, and happily so, that actually my father's life had not been wasted. He seemed to have touched so many people; why did he then call himself a 'failure'? As I ruminate, I am coming to believe that he thought he was a failure not because he had not performed good deeds, but because he had felt 'insignificant'. What had frightened him most was the notion that he had lived a life of little consequence and that when he died all that he had done would not matter.

I chose that day to shift my own trajectory of living. I said to myself as Gibran has said in his book *The Prophet*, and I paraphrase, 'I am no push over; I am life's longing to be lived, and I have purpose, even if only minuscule'.

Through my life and work I have touched many lives, not necessarily by performing great deeds, but by just being me, by being available to friends and others when needed, by standing by friends in grief, not knowing what to say, but just giving them space to share.

Martin Buber, the famous social psychologist was once asked 'Where is God?' He did not give a clichéd response, but instead said 'God is in relationships'. I realise that I may never reach heights of success, as defined by society, yet if, as Ralph Waldo Emerson has so beautifully said, '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 lived — that is to have succeeded'.

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