

# THE SEARCH FOR SIGNIFICANCE

BY SHIRIN TABER

I HAVE AN INSATIABLE NEED to feel extraordinary, to be a woman of influence and to leave a mark on the world. Some might say it's because I grew up as a "third-culture kid," a global nomad. By that, I mean I'm a blend of two cultures—the daughter of an American mother and an Iranian father. My family traveled the world with my father's international airline career. I spent time in cities like Rome, Frankfurt, London, Tehran and New York and attended a bilingual, private British school before the age of 10. It's in my blood—I'm desperate for significance.

Many of my peers—girlfriends, college students and young professionals I have worked among—are feeling the growing itch for significance too. They want to know they matter and that their life has a purpose. They want to help change the world for good, not just watch from the sidelines. I hear it in the way young women talk about their dreams and vocational aspirations: "I want to open a shelter for poor and disenfranchised women." "I want to make movies like Steven Spielberg." "I want to be a neurosurgeon." We believe our God-given destiny is where our greatest happiness lies.

Gone are the days when 18-year-olds went off to college to find a man, had two or three kids and settled for a predictable life in suburbia. We want to feel like individuals, unique and set apart. Many of us embody a mixture of bohemian and bourgeois ideals, seeking to find our distinguished space in the universe. We like to try new things, and we wouldn't think twice about moving across the country to do medical research, pursue the big screen, go into politics, help with relief work or teach inner-city kids.

## WHAT DRIVES US

Perhaps our obsession with celebrities and powerful people also compels us toward celebrity status. After learning our ABCs on *Sesame Street*, we're saturated every waking moment by success stories and the lifestyles of the rich and famous via the television, Internet and gossip magazines. We want to be stars too. We're a generation desperate for significance. For good or bad, it propels us forward, making us breathless for influence, as we desire to have our voices heard.

When I was a college student in the late 1980s, only a handful of students ventured out, despite their parents' fears, to spend an entire year overseas. Today students are leaving the comforts of home to help change the world en masse. Brave women are going off to fight the war in Iraq, heading to Siberia as missionaries, backpacking their way through India as relief workers and teaching English in China. Girls are going where they've never gone before. And why wouldn't we? We were bred to believe we can do anything, go anywhere—even if it might cost us our lives. Gender no longer holds us back. But is there a dark side to our drive, our need to achieve, shine and even outdo others?

## MEASURING STICK

To be honest, my hunger for significance is deeply rooted in a desperate need to feel valued and validated as a young woman from a broken home with a nominal religious upbringing. Perhaps you've felt like you've been there, too. Based on my work among college women and young professionals, I will venture to say that the drive for significance in many young women today is rooted in the desperation to feel known and to know that our lives count. We're not just significance addicts, after all. We're hoping that if we can keep up with the big boys, then we will be truly worthwhile and interesting.

On another level, I need to admit that my obsession with success is a cry for attention, security and, ultimately, the need for spiritual healing. I need my heavenly Father to show me that I matter to Him. The broken and missing parts still need to be restored. I long for affirmation and validation that I am loved. When parents don't tell their children that they love them, they will look for other relationships and experiences to speak to their aching hearts. The significance-shaped vacuum cries out and seeks the comfort of the world's applause.

One of the negative byproducts of living in an affluent society is that I'll never completely feel significant. Someone will always seem smarter, richer or more beautiful. The media constantly bombards me with the message that I don't measure up. I always need some new gadget, beauty product or degree to make me feel good about myself. I'm up when I feel skinny like a fashion model, but down when my home doesn't look like the cover of a Pottery Barn catalog. I'm elated when my writing gains the approval of a literary agent or publisher, but deflated when I'm not publicly recognized for launching a new media project at work. Up, down. Down, up. My significance barometer can be as erratic as a pogo stick.

## SOMETHING'S GOT TO GIVE

There comes a time in many women's lives—whether they're single or married with children, 23 or 43—when they instinctively know they're destined for something great, and when the turning point comes, they seize it with a vengeance. Vera Wang, senior editor of *Vogue* and design director for Ralph Lauren, put it this way in an interview with *Newsweek* in October 2005: "I knew what world I wanted to be in, but wasn't sure I could break into that world. I wanted something to do with fashion. I would have done anything. I would have licked envelopes. I just wanted to be part of it. By the time I was 23, I was senior editor, and then I became European editor for the *American Vogue* in Paris."

Not only passionate for significance but for the significant, Elizabeth Dole, speaking at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, reflected on what she described as the "three distinct missions" of her life at the Capitol:

As Secretary of Transportation, I was overseeing our highways, airways and railways, enhancing safety in each of these venues ... As Secretary of Labor, my priority was American's human resources—improving skills in the workforce ... And at the Red Cross, my focus is on inner resources—inspiring people to sacrifice their time, to volunteer, to help others in need, to give their blood and their financial resources to aid the hurting and the dispossessed across America and around the world. I know you can identify with that passion, that sense of mission ... the knowledge that God has called you to a particular vocation or to a volunteer position to serve Him and to serve others to the best of your ability. It's a challenge, but also a great blessing.

Here is a woman who committed her time, talents and treasures to things that have eternal value—human beings. As women, we have an amazing desire to want to help people, to devote our best energies and finest creative powers to things that make a difference in the world—things that are noble, life-giving and inherently good for humankind.

## THE DARK SIDE

The dark side of a need for significance is the anxiety and desperation it can suddenly bring to our lives when things don't turn out as we expect. We can drive ourselves and everyone around us crazy when we fixate furiously on "our plans and goals." If you're like me, you want to see results right away. You want instant gratification, and you want everyone to love your ideas, to open doors for you and to treat you like a queen. Sound familiar?

Studies show our generation is prone to perfectionism. Just read about the stress of trying to be perfect all the time in *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *Marie Claire*. Stress sells, says Myrna Blyth, the author of *Spin Sisters* and former editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The media and advertising world knows this and plays on our insecurities, our tendency toward perfectionism and our need to feel sexy, smart and powerful.

Anxiety begins to rear its ugly head in our lives when "we can't have it all." We lose our joy when we find that we can't manage everything—timelines to fulfill, limited finances, baby-sitting needs, a house to clean, kids to carpool, homework to check and dinner to have hot and ready by 6 o'clock.

## YOUR BEST ENEMY

Every woman who dreams of a life of significance must learn to live with criticism. It's the dreary reminder that we don't have the Midas touch. If we are going to see our dreams become a reality, we must develop the ability to receive criticism and respond properly. This is where determination and thick skin come in.

I'm learning that when I'm faced with the reality that I may not see my dreams fulfilled, or when I feel attacked or disregarded by others who "just don't get" what I am after, I need to take my feelings to God. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (TNIV). I go to God in prayer and say, "Here I am, God. I want to be used by You. I want to effect positive change in the culture around me. I know You can speak through me. Please use me for Your kingdom."

Tenacity is sticking with an idea or project until it's completed—being bull-headed, ruthlessly stubborn about fulfilling your dreams, afraid of no one but God Himself. One of the attributes I've noticed about highly accomplished people is that they finish what they begin and don't give up

easily. They make goals and stick to them doggedly while remaining loyal to their vision and to the people they love.

## LEARNING TO TRUST GOD

As I grow in my relationship with God and sense His enduring commitment to me, I see that His plans for me are greater than anything I could have imagined. God hears my cry for significance and whispers, "I put those longings in your heart because I have plans for you. I gave you that voracious hunger for greatness and beauty and purpose because I'm calling you to serve Me and reveal My marvelous purpose." He is a generous and willing Father who tells His children, "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:8). He tells me that I'm part of His family, "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9). As I step out in faith and take hold of the opportunities He gives me, I can trust that He will enable me to leave a lasting influence on the world.

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## SECRETS TO CREATING A LIFE OF SIGNIFICANCE

### 1. WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE BUTTING YOUR HEAD AGAINST THE WALL, ASK YOURSELF:

*Am I doing this because it's a worthy and noble cause, or because I have something to prove to the world?* If you have something to prove, drop it.

### 2. RESEARCH AND EXECUTE.

Whether it's starting a small business, writing a novel or opening a shelter for pregnant teenagers, make sure you speak to as many experts as possible.

### 3. DEVELOP THICK SKIN.

Take criticism lightly, unless you are headed for financial disaster or family problems. Listen to good advice and discard the rest. Plan on feeling anxious and stressed out at times; it's natural.

### 4. ALWAYS KEEP THE CREATOR INVOLVED IN THE CREATION PROCESS.

Listen to His soft whispers of encouragement or correction. Take regular time to pray, reflect, read the Scriptures and invite God to guide you and open the right doors.

### 5. AVOID SELFISHNESS OR AMBITIOUS GREED.

Money and worldly success never satisfy long term. A nicer home and fancier cars don't deliver. Let your dream, God's call in your life, compel you toward leaving a significant impact on the world.

### 6. HAVE FUN!

Don't take yourself so seriously that you miss opportunities to make new friends, serve and enjoy people, mentor younger women, play with your kids or buy yourself a pair of shoes at Nordstrom. Deadlines and opportunities will always be there.