

A Need to “Feel” Relevant

Recently a seemingly normal conversation resulted in a truly life-changing moment for me. I identified for the first time something that I have struggled with, but had been unaware of throughout my life. It may apply to you too. *I have been struggling it seems my whole life to “feel” relevant.*

My revelation came out of the blue a few weeks ago when a friend of mine had mentioned something about an acquaintance of ours, “Gary, he just has a real need to feel relevant.” Kaboom! I had a breakthrough! I instantly recognized this as my quandary too and I immediately asked myself, “Do I know I am relevant?”

I knew the answer, without hesitation. Certainly I did. I realized I knew I was relevant as a father, husband, lawyer and servant of God, so why, I asked, didn’t I “feel” relevant? I reflected on my childhood and adulthood and had not the slightest hesitancy to see that I had been relevant all my life, just as all of us have been.

The ugly truth, however, is that others can tell us how important we are, remind us of all our accomplishments, and shower us with affirmations, but if we don’t “feel” relevant, it has little value in helping us with our “need” to feel relevant. This is basically the same as one who can’t “feel” loved. We all know at least one person like this, someone that doesn’t “feel” loved regardless of how much love is shown to this person. It’s amazing to those of us who don’t suffer with that problem. Thank God, that isn’t one that I have suffered with, but I certainly have compassion for those who do.

So, realizing that knowing we are relevant but not “feeling” relevant, I decided to explore this further by bringing the subject up to a few friends. I quickly found I wasn’t the only one with this battle, and delving into this topic has been quite an eye opener to myself as well as to some of these friends. How about you? Do you struggle with this as well? Do you have a problem answering “yes” when asked if you are relevant? I seriously doubt it. But, as we’ve said, to “feel” relevant is different.

No one could ever have convinced me that I was so driven by having the “need” to feel relevant. As I said earlier, had someone asked me if I was relevant, the answer would have come quickly. “Sure I am”, just as it would with most of us. But, *when my friend said a mutual acquaintance needed to “feel” relevant, it touched something in me, and in taking a close look at my life I saw the cancer...that I too had the same need.* That’s when I first realized that the need to “feel” relevant is a very subtle disease that we aren’t even aware is there taking our joy.

Once I saw it in myself, I began to recognize the need-to-feel-relevant disease in others. Some even verbally expressed their need. One told me, “My need is to feel respected.” I asked why and he said, “So I will feel relevant.”

Here are some other examples I recall:

- I heard of a spouse that violated his marriage, a marriage that seemed to the outside world to be solid. Why is that? Could it be that the person is trying to feel relevant? Yes, that very well could be the case.
- You may know someone who boasts about how many friends he/she has, about their spouse, their children, etc. Many do this to the annoyance of many around them, trying to fill a need to “feel” relevant. And, how about those we know who seem to constantly post on Facebook about their lives – what they’re doing, where they’ve been, etc., as if the world really wants to know. Who are they really doing that for and why? If so many people didn’t feel a need to feel relevant, Facebook probably would shut down in two weeks. When I suggest this to friends, I often get the response, “Two days.”
- I once heard a man say, “I could bring my wife flowers and candy every day for a month, but if on the first day of the next month I did something that caused her to “feel” loved, all the precious acts of showing her love, went for naught.” This is a good example of a need to “feel” loved even when the person knows he or she “is” loved.
- What about those we know who change jobs more often than is normal? Is this person trying to “feel” relevant? The list could go on and on, could it not?

A very important conclusion I've come to is that until we truly know ourselves, we won't ever know others. As long as we refuse to see the things in ourselves that drive us to do the things that create challenges in our lives, we won't become free from that which drives us out of bounds. Yes, seeking to feel relevant will drive us and consume us. A lot of good will come out of it as well as a lot of distraction, especially when we do it to the detriment of friends, family, and even acquaintances. As I said, a lot of good will come from the “need to feel relevant”. The key is to recognize the “need” so as to be able to seek out the bad that comes from the need, that ends up stealing our joy in life.

Looking back over my life, I can see that being driven by this need to feel relevant has pushed me to great accomplishments. But I also can see how it has caused relationship problems in my life, especially when it has seriously harmed those relationships. In some instances, we feel relevant by seeking the service of others to accommodate our needs...just small things, and sometimes even larger things we have need for, to help us feel relevant. If someone is “serving” us, even our children, that can help some to “feel” relevant.

The need to “feel” relevant may appear in many disguises. It is not always the same as a need to be accepted, approved, or liked...but it can be. It also can create in us a need to prove others wrong, to never admit wrong. This is just one facet of this “chameleon” need that makes it so tricky to identify, and why it takes introspection to oneself to determine if “That’s it. That has driven me all my life.” And keep in mind, being driven to “feel” relevant isn’t necessarily the same in everyone. The need that drives us to “feel” relevant can be different in each of us. And please remember this, **NONE OF US ASKED FOR THE NEEDS WE HAVE**, even the need to “feel relevant”.

Again, I have come to believe that most, if not all, everyone has a need to “feel” relevant, regardless of how relevant one actually may be. In fact, this belief has led me to examine needs in general. Our needs come from our experience, typically from our childhood, and these experiences have created needs that drive us and often become unhealthy in our lives.

However, we know that most needs are not bad within themselves, and our needs seem to be what drive us and cause us to do much that is good. But, like most needs, they can come to control us, and this is when we experience the negatives of the needs. How do we handle this?

First we must recognize when our needs are controlling us, and of great importance, understand that just because we don't see ourselves as being “out of control” in one area certainly doesn't mean we are in others. The key is to be true to understanding ourselves. The rewards of this pay off handsomely. Yet, the rewards of hiding truth within ourselves pays off as well, but it's all negative. So, a good start is to ask others what they see in you, and help them feel safe in telling you. They will have to sense that you seriously want to know.

Once you start turning the tide on the needs that have been controlling you, then you can begin to experience the good that comes from having needs and not being controlled by them to the extent that the need, whatever it may be, causes challenges in your life. Here is the type of thing I am thinking of. Yesterday I went to a large family gathering. I never have particularly enjoyed large groups. I have always said it was because I didn't enjoy “small talk”. I have learned that this isn't true. That wasn't the problem. Yesterday I wasn't even aware of this or thinking of it, but I did enjoy this large family gathering. So, I asked myself why and quickly recognized that I didn't have the need to feel relevant. What is interesting to me is that I didn't even go there thinking about it. I was a bit surprised that it was different for me and thankfully recognized why.

The bottom line is that we all have healthy needs and unhealthy needs and normally can see the difference in others. *But do we see them in ourselves?*

Why do I seek to find answers to things of this nature? My entire life I have been one that wants to know myself as well as I can, to understand what causes me to do the things I do that often cause challenges for me. Why? A need to “feel” relevant, I am coming to see, is the motivation for most such conduct, such actions.

The more that I look closely at this need to “feel” relevant, the more I see things I have done over the years out of this need. But I want to point out that I do not live my life with shame or regret. To me, to do so is foolish. After all, we don't know, until we know. What point would it be for us to beat ourselves up over the things we did out of this need to “feel” relevant when we weren't aware of the need and how it had control over our lives? What kind of sense would that make?

The realization of my own need to “feel” relevant had had a big effect on me, and I can tell that my whole attitude has changed greatly about people now that I have come to recognize the “need” to feel relevant. It makes it more impacting to me that EVERYONE is relevant, and I admire that. Whereas before, I would think, “Who do they think they are to...whatever? After all, look at all my successes and I didn't even feel relevant enough to speak out in a group and

take people's time unless I'm in charge." Diagnosis: I have been judging myself as not being relevant because I didn't "feel" relevant.

This knowledge is powerful, no question! Here's how I know: Recently I attended a financial presentation and when the presenter finished, no one started a handclapping as a show of appreciation. *Then I did.* I know it may be hard to believe, but I am 73 and this was the first time I was in an audience and started a round of applause. I just didn't "feel" relevant enough before. In fact, often through the years when someone initiated and applause, typically thought, "Who do they think they are to start the applause?" Now I am free from that. Praise God.

The illustration in the last paragraph might appear to be a small example, but it is huge to me in that it shows how I was under the impact of this need to "feel" relevant. It also shows how dysfunctional the need can be in that one would think that starting a handclapping would cause one to "feel" relevant, when in fact, that's why I couldn't start an applause before.

Where we all want to be in our lives is expressed best in this excerpt from the Bible:

REST IN ME, MY CHILD. You don't have to perform in order to receive My Love. I have boundless, unconditional Love for you. How it grieves Me to see My Children working for Love: trying harder, yet never FEELING good enough to be loved.

I encourage you to do a search of your own life and in being honest with yourself, see if you can recognize unhealthy needs you many have. Then ask yourself, "Did I ask to have this unhealthy need? And quickly your response should be NO!!! It's an interesting thing; once we recognize them and realize we did not invite them into our lives, we are opening ourselves to the impossibility of making these unwelcome needs healthy. Then we are in a position to ask ourselves, before acting, "Why am I thinking of doing this?"

In closing, I leave you with these thoughts about our quest to "feel" relevant. "What can we do once we recognize the problem that we have struggled with most, if not all, of our lives?" *What has helped me most is learning how to understand myself better by digging deep to get the root of what caused me to first feel the need to feel relevant. That knowledge opened the door to freedom from that need. You can do it too.*

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