

Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was around 15 years old, I was in front of an ice cream parlor in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and there was a large group of kids around my age gathered around a well-dressed man who appeared to be in his mid-30s. The man was wearing a good-looking dress shirt, khakis, and good shoes. I quickly realized, however, that the kids were all making fun of him. The man was quite off emotionally, and all he kept saying was that he used to work for a United States Congressman. The kids were all making fun of him and asking him about what he did for the Congressman. The man would list various details about what he had done for the Congressman but after a few minutes would begin acting crazy again. The kids weren't being nice to this man. Based on his mannerisms and other things, it was obvious to me that the man had experienced some sort of nervous breakdown. For weeks, I would see him around the city nervously puffing a cigarette. Kids would always stop him.

"Tell us about how you went to [Yale Law School](#)," they might say. The man would then launch into a monologue that would slowly descend into his insanity. For example, he might start talking about how he went to Yale [Law School](#) and then somehow segue into a story about how he had worked on a project for the Congressman where he was fighting against rapists being chemically castrated. Then he would start talking about his own anatomy. That was one I remember. The man was clearly insane, but by all accounts, had at one time associated with, and worked with, some incredibly important people in Washington.

All he kept talking about, however, was how he worked for a Congressman. I learned later that the man was from a very old and extremely wealthy family in the city and was living with his family after going crazy. No one knew why he went crazy, but he did.

After watching the chemical castration monologue, I never chatted with the man again or joined the groups of kids who would taunt him. I felt very sorry for him and wasn't interested in participating in this. Kids thought it was funny talking to him, and I viewed it as cruel.

What occurred to me back then, however, was that all the man wanted to talk about was what he had been. He had a need to feel important and significant. As I have gone through my life, I have come to realize that one of the most important things to any human being is to feel important. We all need to feel important and will do whatever it takes to feel important. I have a lot of people in my family who have done great things, such as Laura Ingalls Wilder (the author of *Little House on the Prairie*), a former United States Senator, Amelia Earhart, a former President, and others. The thing about this, however, is that no one in my family has really done anything of great significance like this for well over 100 years. However, to this day, many members of my family define themselves entirely by someone else's past achievements. This is something that makes them feel extremely important. I have watched many of them tell anyone who will listen, even within a few minutes of meeting. Other relatives have gone to Harvard, Yale, important East Coast prep schools, like Andover and Exeter, and to this day will tell the people they encounter about their achievements in attending these schools within moments of meeting them. There's nothing wrong with this. Every single person does this. We all have a profound need deep inside of us to feel important.

We try to feel important based on who our families are. If this doesn't work, we may try and feel important based on the groups we associate with. We may join the [Army](#) or Marines to feel important. We may become doctors or lawyers to feel important. We may convert to a different religion to feel important. We may convert to Orthodox Judaism to feel important. Regardless of who we are, most of us do everything we can to feel important. Feeling important is one of the most fundamental human needs there is. In fact, for people who are motivated by achievement (presumably you are if you're reading this), feeling important may govern their entire outlook on life.

I want to talk about you and your job. If you've ever lost a job, then a major source of your identity and importance has been shaken. If you're in a [good job](#), then a large part of your identity and significance is most likely related to this job. If you are an attorney, a good measure of your importance in the world is likely related to the prestige of your background and your current employer. Our sense of importance is incredibly tied up with our careers and how we perform in these careers. For most of us, there's nothing more important to our sense of importance than our careers.

One of the hardest things in my career is dealing with the incredible anger and sense of betrayal that people experience when they lose their jobs. Although I deal with people who lose their jobs and are making career transitions for a reason, I also run several companies and am ultimately responsible for final decisions as to whether or not someone stays or goes in the company. One of my greatest personal successes and failures is having run companies that have boomed and then have experienced setbacks due to forces beyond my control. For example, a couple of years ago I was running a large [student loan company](#). All of a sudden, the financing for this company dried up. For months, I tried to make the company work and kept many employees on. When the company finally couldn't hold its own anymore, I was faced with letting hundreds of employees go. The employees who lost their jobs became incredibly angry, and many are still angry with me to this day. In fact, based on what I've seen, some have dedicated their lives to being angry with me. I don't harbor these people any malice. I know when they lost their jobs, their very foundation about what made them feel significant and important in the world was shaken. Since they know I am the ultimate decision maker, they have let their anger out on me and, in trying to tear me down, this makes them feel more important. I hope for their sake it's working and wish them well despite their attempts to harm me.

We all need to feel significant and will do so in every way we possibly can.

Before we go further, however, what I would like to encourage you to do is explore what makes you feel significant in the world. The more you understand this, the more you won't allow your need to feel significant work against you. You need to make your desire to feel important work to your advantage and not against you. What do you do to feel significant? Many

people will try many different things in their push to feel significant. You need to realize that the most important thing you can do is skillfully apply your need to feel significant. I love the study of Buddhism, kundalini yoga, meditation, and other mind-enhancing personal development tools. What one begins to realize the deeper and deeper one goes into these studies is this: *You need to surrender all attachment in order to truly be free.* This is a crucial observation because the more attached you are to feeling significant and the more you concentrate on this attachment, the unhappier you are likely to be. True happiness really does come when we can just be. Notwithstanding, hardly anyone knows how to just be. Instead, they are constantly pushing to feel significant.

Your emotional state shapes you and what happens to you and your life. You need to choose how to control your mind. When looking for a job, the most important thing you can do is move away from being attached to the need to feel significant and move, instead, to a position where you're not attached.

I want to discuss something briefly that I believe is relevant to your need to feel significant. I have spent almost my entire career working and living in Los Angeles. I was young when I first moved here and saw countless people who desired to be famous actors and actresses, writers in the movie industry, and producers. I know so many people who've done this that I'm having a hard time recalling them all right now. One of the clearest patterns I've noticed is that most of the people who want to become involved in the movie industry come at it in an arrogant and superficial level. They act as if they are incredibly important and are, quite simply, full of attitude. They are also incredibly calculating. Others come with a strong desire to just be in the entertainment industry. Their desire isn't about being better than others. It's just to share their talent with the world. The pattern I've seen over and over again is the people who are clearly focused on their own significance never make it--and if they do, it's never at a high level. The people who are focused on the work go to a different level of stardom and rise to a higher level. They are focused on the work and not how it sets them in relation to others. They are able to go into the "zen" state where they are only focused on the work and their need for significance doesn't factor into the equation. These are the people who most often succeed at the highest levels from what I've seen.

Being focused on the work is incredibly important. Being focused on your own significance is attachment, and all attachments eventually result in disappointment.

One of the most important things for any human being out there--you included--is to feel significant. In fact, this need is so important that most of us will do whatever we can to place ourselves in a position where we feel important. While this is something that's fairly widespread, I've learned to recognize this more among the highest achievers than others. In some cases, going to excellent schools, or having worked for the very best employers can actually be something that drives people more and more to find reasons why they are significant and important in the world.

Your need to feel significant may have created a life for you that you don't deserve. Since I am involved in the legal industry, I know how to recognize good attorneys. I know someone with the most amazing legal skills who never finished law school who, in my opinion, would be an incredible lawyer. This person thinks like a lawyer and has a mind that works in a way that's quite brilliant from a legal perspective. Unfortunately, this person grew up believing the most important people in the world are those who work as executives in large corporations. This person's career has been incredibly unfulfilling and marginal due to this. He was working in large corporations because this was his idea of what would make him significant. This person could be a world famous attorney today if he had pursued his real skill.

I chose to go to law school because I believed lawyers were very important. I took the law school admissions test and, despite months of studying, did horribly. I took the business school admissions test and did exceptionally well despite not studying. I struggled to get into law school because my test scores were so sub par. When I applied to business school, I applied only to Stanford Business School (at the time it was ranked the #1 business school in the country) and got in. I believed, however, that lawyers were more important, and I would be much more significant if I was a lawyer and always pursued this despite my better judgment. For three years of my life, and three years of law school, I did something I hated because I believed this was what would make me significant. I was never unhappier in my life.

What have you done with your career and life out of the need to feel significant? How well has this served you? People will do all sorts of things to feel significant, and you are no different. What have you done to feel important?

I believe the need to feel significant is one of our most important needs as people. In law school, I had the opportunity to view patients in a mental asylum, as well as people who were being evaluated after murdering people. When people start disassociating and actually going crazy, what happens most of the time is they start imagining themselves as far more important than they actually are--like the former aide to the Congressman I met. They start telling you how they know this famous person or that famous person, how they're related to this important politician, or how they are actually this famous person. When I was studying these people, I always understood that these people were just trying to feel important.

Listen to the people around you and how they talk about various things. The need of people having to feel important will come out when they tell you how they know this piece of information you don't, how they socialized with this person, how someone complimented them about something--and more. Most people are literally obsessed with feeling important.

As part of my job, I often have to entertain men who are clients of our company. If you go out for a steak dinner with a group of men in a strange town, it seems about 90% of the time, one of the men will suggest going to a strip bar after dinner if you are in an area where there are a bunch of them. When men are together in a group, saying you are morally offended by this sort of thing is generally not an option. I'm not trying to offend anyone--this is just how things are.

I went to high school in Bangkok, Thailand for a year when I was growing up, and I'm totally not interested in strip bars anymore. They say people in France never become alcoholics because they're given wine from the time they are old enough to hold a cup. This is in contrast to Scandinavians, Americans, and others who are denied alcohol as if it is sinful and end up going crazy when they are exposed to it. So, too, is it with me and strip bars. I cannot even begin to express to you how messed up it was going to school in Bangkok at the age of 16. All the boys and girls in my class did all weekend was hang out in strip bars. This was literally the meeting place for our class on the weekends. The entire class would be in strip bars on Friday and Saturday nights every single weekend. As such, in this day and age, I tend to just sit there bored while the people I'm with go crazy dancing with girls and throwing money at the stage. By the time I was 17 years old, I'd probably spent the equivalent of 20 lifetimes in strip bars--and strip bars in Bangkok back then were insane and not something I should be talking about. The stuff that went down on stage was just plain *wrong* and makes even the gaudiest and wildest strip bars in the United States look like G-rated movies.

A couple of months ago, I was on a business trip in Atlanta, and a girl at one of the strip bars came up to me and started talking to me. Typically, the girls will strike up a conversation with the objective of giving you a "lap dance" and charging you

\$10 per song or something along those lines. I wasn't interested in this, and haven't been in decades, because I know the drill and have lost interest. I am also married (but I can tell you from experience this doesn't seem to bother 99% of the men who go to these strip clubs.) In any event, a girl who looked exactly like Marsha Brady on *The Brady Bunch* sat down and started talking to me. Given the fact that my profession is getting people jobs, when I meet new people (especially in fringe professions like stripping), I'm interested in learning about how they wound up doing what they do and also what their job entails. This particular girl was at a bar ordering a drink across the room. She made eye contact with me and smiled, took a hit of her cigarette, walked over, grabbed a chair sitting next to me, turned it around so the back of the chair was facing me, and sat down backwards.

"Do you want to see my tattoo?" she immediately said. She took another long hit of a cigarette. I was sitting with two other men, and they were also watching this spectacle. She had a shirt on and pulled it up standing up to show me her belly. On her belly, just above her crotch, was the most incredible tattoo:

PROPERTY OF EDUARDO ↓

Apparently, Eduardo had claimed everything starting at her waist down as his property. This giant tattoo made this clear.

"Wow, how does Eduardo feel about you working here?" I asked her.

"We're divorced," she said.

"Oh, you better get rid of the tattoo then," I told her.

"Would you like to lick it off?" she asked.

I almost fell out of my chair! That was very original. Over the next 30 minutes, however, I started learning more about her career and particular aspirations for her life. What I found most interesting about the entire conversation, however, was how she kept coming back to the fact that Eduardo had been associated with a certain brutal gang that had chapters all over the United States. She bragged to me about how the gang frequently cut people's heads off in Mexico, and anyone who crossed the gang was likely to be in severe trouble. She literally couldn't stop talking about the gang and how the gang was the most brutal and serious gang the world had ever known. At the time, there was a lot of violence going on in Tijuana (several killings per day), and she bragged to me that this particular gang was involved with this epic violence. She was also very proud of her association with Eduardo since he'd been such a high-ranking gang member.

What I realized about 20 minutes into the conversation was that her "claim to fame" and what she felt most significant about in her life was the association with this gang. It was the most important thing she had in her life. She had left home when she was very young and didn't have any meaningful contact with her family. She also didn't have an education. All she had to feel significant about was the fact that she had been married to a member of a brutal gang. That was it.

Had I been trying to impress her, I'm pretty confident that anything I would have told her about myself would have paled in contrast to her former association with this gang. She had so ingrained this into her need for significance that there was nothing I could really do that would measure up to how important she was due to the gang affiliation.

Have you ever met someone who is incredibly angry at the United States? Have you ever met a criminal? Do you know why people do bad things? Deep down, most of the evil in the world is related to people's need to feel significant. The fastest way to become important, for many people, is to point a gun at them. "Okay, you're in control!" you might say to them.

One of the most amazing experiences in my life was the day someone tried to kill me. When I was around 17 years old, kids in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, developed a tradition of holding "keg parties" at banquet halls around Detroit. The banquet halls were typically in terrible neighborhoods. The kids would go out and purchase a bunch of beer kegs, rent out a banquet hall, then charge kids admissions to get into the hall. The kids who would go to these parties were all from Grosse Pointe, which at the time was almost 100% white and a middle- to upper-middle-class suburb. One Saturday evening, I picked up a friend of mine to attend one of these parties. Since I was attending school in a different part of the Detroit area, I didn't see him very much anymore. He'd become a very good student in the past few years and was quite proud of himself. As we were walking into the banquet hall, two African American kids from the bad neighborhood pushed ahead of him in the line. They were apparently thinking they might like to attend the party as well. My friend said something to the kids, and they started arguing. I don't remember what the argument was about. Some of the kids who were hosting the party came out and told the African American kids to leave and that it was a private party. As the African American kids were walking away, my friend said the most offensive and incredible thing I had ever heard him say:

"You guys better be careful how you act because one day you're going to be working for me." The kids didn't flinch, looked at him, and walked away.

Sometime later we exited the party. I was still a little shook up about what my friend said. As we were walking towards the car, I noticed the kids my friend had made the remarks to were sitting on a snow pile. They appeared to have been sitting there for some time.

"These kids are going to kick our asses," I told my friend.

"Just look down and keep walking," he said.

I got into my Yugo and my friend did, as well. We were parked in an alley, and I started the car. A second or two later, I heard a knocking on the windows. It sounded like metal tapping on glass. I looked up and saw a gun barrel pointing directly at my face.

"Who's in charge now!!!" I heard the kid with the gun scream. I will never forget how terrified I was at that moment. I am still terrified thinking about it to this day. I think the car must have already been in gear because within less than a second I had peeled out and was driving like hell away. I had thrown my body in my friend's lap and wasn't even looking out the window. As we drove away, I heard several gun shots, and one of them hit one of the lights on the back of the Yugo. Had I been a second later in starting the car, I'm confident my friend or I would have been killed.

What was going on here? My friend had said something to these guys that had implied he was more important than them. They responded by showing him a gun which instantly made them more important. This is how most violence works, I think. We want to feel important.

I have been sued before by people who have lost their jobs in our company in nuisance lawsuits. Some of these former

employees worked places in our company where I never actually met them--such as in our warehouse. When it really gets down to it, I believe I've been sued because someone feels unimportant when losing their job and wants to level the playing field. The lawsuit gives them more power and they're suddenly significant. This works. It's no different than pointing a gun at someone: Suddenly you have instant power. I recently read a study that said doctors who spend more time with their patients socializing, and are less professional and more likable, get sued much less often. The study concluded that they probably get sued less because they don't hold their superiority over the patient and allow the patient to express themselves and feel more important. They listen and show empathy for their patients. More professional and more distant candidates do the opposite and get sued more often.

Practically every person out there has a massive need to feel significant, and they will do this at whatever cost. I recently read some excerpts from the biography of the woman who played Marcia Brady on *The Brady Bunch*, Maureen McCormick. What really struck me about this biography was that after the series had ended, her life fell into a downward spiral of sex and drugs. Nothing really significant or important at all happened in her life after the series ended. As she is reflecting back on the life she had, she appears to be looking for any significance apart from the work she did on the television series. What struck me about this life after the television series was that one of the most "significant" things that appears to have happened to her is a date with Steve Martin.

Martin had asked for McCormick's phone number through Chevy Chase.

"I remember him being a very good kisser," McCormick writes about Martin. "But I was insecure and either high or spaced out (most likely both), and I didn't laugh at his jokes.

"Though Steve was too polite and confident of his talent to say anything, I'm sure my inability to carry on a normal conversation or respond intelligently put him off," she writes. "We never spoke again after that date. I've always regretted my behavior because he impressed me as an extraordinary guy. I would've enjoyed a second date."

People look for significance in the smallest details and do everything within their power to feel significant. We all have the need to feel significant and this need is something that really controls and governs many of our lives.

Think about the people around you, including yourself, and what these people will do in order to feel important. The list of things that people do in order to feel important is almost never-ending:

- People will collect material possessions
- People will get involved in certain extracurricular activities
- People will do drugs
- People will get tattoos
- People will associate with certain groups
- People will run for office
- People will go to certain colleges and schools
- People will associate with certain types of people
- People will criticize others and tear them down
- People will contribute money or time to organizations

We all want to feel that we are unique and special in some way. This makes us feel as if we have a purpose and meaning for our lives. One of the largest challenges of our lives is making sure we don't meet our need to feel significant in a way that is destructive. For example, many people in their need to feel significant will try and be critical of others. Another popular thing people will do in order to feel significant is to manufacture all sorts of illnesses. Throughout my life, I have witnessed numerous people who would come down with all sorts of sicknesses and ailments that, in my opinion, were related to getting the care and attention of others--so they could feel significant. According to one definition I found on Wikipedia:

In Münchausen syndrome, the affected person exaggerates or creates symptoms of illnesses in themselves in order to gain investigation, treatment, attention, sympathy, and comfort from medical personnel. In some extremes, people suffering from Münchausen's Syndrome are highly knowledgeable about the practice of medicine, and are able to produce symptoms that result in multiple unnecessary operations. For example, they may inject a vein with infected material, causing widespread infection of unknown origin, and as a result cause lengthy and costly medical analyses and prolonged hospital stay. The role of "patient" is a familiar and comforting one, and it fills a psychological need in people with Münchausen's. It's distinct from hypochondria in that patients with Münchausen syndrome are aware that they are exaggerating, while sufferers of hypochondria believe they have a disease.

I have a distant relative that never ceases to amaze me. I love him and he is a very nice person. I don't know how to judge the truth of the things he's told me, however. For example, in the past couple of years he told me stories about people he knows who have murdered people and about the number of gangs he's been associated with in New York. Some time ago, I was in his home, and he started showing me all sorts of things. One thing he showed me was a sword that had allegedly been stolen from a house several years ago during "a job" that his friend did. He told me the sword was from a general in the Ottoman Empire and probably worth millions of dollars--I am sure this made him feel very significant. The only problem is that the blade on the sword looked brand new. Who knows if it was genuine or not? The point is that this person was trying to feel significant by something he was dreaming might be worth millions of dollars--much more than he had ever seen in his life. In reality, the sword probably wasn't more than 20 years old--who knows its value.

You need to understand that your need to feel significant is something that controls your life. The best thing you can possibly do for your career is detach from this need to feel significant and realize how this controls so much of what happens to you. More importantly, you need to do the work you love and live the life you want *without being controlled by a need to be significant*. This will change everything for you and allow you to contribute to the world in a productive way.

THE LESSON

You shouldn't be controlled by your need to feel significant. The need to feel significant is universal and powerful, and most people will do anything necessary in order to achieve this sense of importance. To achieve actual success, you must detach yourself from this need and realize the extent to which it dictates your actions. When you devote yourself to the work you love and stop worrying about your sense of importance, you free yourself up to make substantive changes in the world and your life.

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