

# Part One

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## What Is Impact?

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# Essay 1

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## Impact Is the Fingerprint, Not the Finger That Printed It

All You Leave Is Your Impact

“All you leave is your impact.” That thought lifted me out of a pool of tears one afternoon as I left the hospital, having just said good-bye to my dear client, Elaine Chius-Gowell. Elaine had suffered a massive stroke, and I knew it would be the very last time I’d see her alive (if you could call a coma alive).

Had it been anyone else, I might have used the words “final farewell”; but there was nothing final about anything Elaine had ever done. Her loving-kindness, empathic spirit, good sense, and unending wisdom will stay with me until the moment I am the one lying in a bed somewhere—with any of my unused potential in a puddle around me.

Elaine was a psychiatric nurse practitioner who had written several books and traveled the world teaching (healing and shamanism); she had a slew of initials trailing her name. Watching this dear woman lying there with her life force replaced by a morphine drip, I realized that more than the books and articles she wrote or the classes and speeches she gave, what she’d really leave behind was her passion for people and the impact that had. That was all; and it was plenty.

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When our own time comes, few people will remember what we did, or even how we did it. What *will* stay with others is how they felt when they were with us, and maybe what they felt when they thought about us.

The indelible print is how someone made us feel about ourselves; what emotional taste that relationship left in our mouths. Time erodes the details that caused the dread or delirium that we experienced. All details fade into the background, and what is left is the impact of that moment—and how it carries forth to this day.

*“Think of impact as the fingerprint, not as the finger that printed it.”*

- ◆ Your impact is not what you did, but the consequence of this action.
- ◆ Your impact is not what you said, but the outcome that came from your saying it.
- ◆ Your impact is not what you thought, but the action that sprang from your ideas.

When we impact people, we become the catalyst that helps them to activate their latent life purpose.

Some spark within people is ignited—just by virtue of having connected with us—that reminds them of their personal DNA for greatness. Our impact triggers the memory that they came here to get something done; that they, too, made a promise, and the note has come due.



I don't recall precisely what Mrs. Claire Tornay taught me in fourth grade, but I do remember the magnitude of her belief in me. She was the first person ever to tell me that I was *really* smart, and that I could

do anything I set my mind to. I acted on her faith in me as though it was the absolute Truth, with a capital T; which, of course, made it so. When I was in her presence, I stood a little taller, was a tad more confident, and I eagerly focused my attention on the things I did well. I can't be sure that any of this is factually true; but I can tell you that my memory of it is that she thought I was destined for great things, that I was worthy and lovable, and that I was smart in my head *and* my heart. Doors still open today because of those feelings that Mrs. Tornay stirred.

Ditto for my chemistry professor, Mr. Dennis Clancy. I was in lab with my regular class the day my mind enviously wandered off to the gorgeous twins at the next table. They were size zeroes, popular with the 'in' crowd, and wore the ID bracelets of the school hunks. Thinking I was alone in my reverie, I longingly stared at them as I wondered what it would be like to be a foot shorter and a single digit size. By then I had already reached my full height of five feet eleven inches, and I was born bigger than the twins were in high school. (I might be exaggerating.)

Mr. Clancy caught my eye and, out of the blue, said, "You have a classic beauty that will never grow old." He left me standing there baffled by his comment. It was probably 20 years before I realized that he had read my thoughts that day, and the beauty he spoke of had to do with my soul—not my size. There were many dark days when I retrieved his comment from the back rooms of my spirit and held them as a life preserver, to keep me from drowning in the sorrow and disappointment that escorted depression through the first half of my life.

You see, it wasn't what either Mrs. Tornay or Mr. Clancy actually *did* that made one shred of difference in my life. It was neither their comments nor their deeds that influenced me to transcend my doubts and transform my potential into something worth leaving behind. It was how they *held* me that made every difference then, and continues to do the same thing to this day. Both of them perceived me as a winner, when I clung to the cloak of loser. They *held* me as worthy, when I couldn't see a trace of value. They *held* me as a treasure, when I felt like crap. They *held* me as no one had done before. That was their impact.



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You have undoubtedly had people do the same for you—whether you’re aware of it or not. For some it was your parents, grandparents, or siblings. For others, it was a neighbor, a friend, a grocer, a stranger. Most of these acts were not deliberate; they were subtle accidents of nature committed by people who, in all likelihood, were not conscious of what they were doing—and were ignorant of the impression they’d left.

You’ve surely thought about these people. Every once in a while, they appear in your mind; you wonder what made you remember them at that moment. Thinking of them brings a smile, a twinge, a smirk, a tear. Is it time for you to tell someone about the impact they had in your life, in your heart, on your success?

Quickly—before you have a moment to censor yourself—ask out loud, “Who has most impacted my life?” (No editing: If you sense it was the Queen of England, write it down. Likewise, if it was the school janitor, or a relative or friend whose name has long been forgotten—write it down.) Right below this person’s name, jot a few words to describe the impact that he or she has had on your life.

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1. Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Impact \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Impact \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Impact \_\_\_\_\_
  4. Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Impact \_\_\_\_\_
  5. Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Impact \_\_\_\_\_
- 

What you don’t know, what you might never know, is who you yourself impacted.

That lighthearted remark, that unsolicited hand you lent, that word of encouragement or phrase of feedback, that timely wink or lapse of memory—all of it, unquestionably, has left its mark. The only question is what kind of mark it left. Did it encourage or discourage its recipient? Did it pick someone up or—quite unintentionally—put someone down? Did it raise the stakes or lower the bar? Did that person feel heinous or heroic, lovable or laughable, powerful or pitiful?

Although it is impossible to predetermine precisely how any individual will react to you or your actions, there are some things in the impact department that are well within your accountability range.

- ◆ **Know your intention.** It is the intentions behind your actions, rather than the actions themselves, that are most significant. Your intentions will linger long after you are gone.
- ◆ **Live your life purpose.** Anything you do that is in accordance with that which you came here to do will be passionate, positive, productive, and practical.
- ◆ **Demonstrate right use of will.** What separates you from lower life forms is your ability to reason and make choices. So make good ones.
- ◆ **Err on the side of love.** Always. Love yourself first, and all else will harmoniously flow. While you may come to the end of your life with a few regrets, the way you treated others will not be one of them.



I learned some of these rules from someone I met through business and who has, over the course of a few decades, become my best friend and colleague. Chuck Shelton is one of a handful of elite members of the Highly Functional Family Society; he is also the first and only member of that club whom I have ever personally met. Chuck and his family are the poster people for healthy, loving, and nurturing families. While I did indeed ask them to adopt me, I was told that they do not have honorary family memberships; and I am too old to be adopted anyway. Oh, well, it was worth asking, right?

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I could go on at length about Chuck's career success in leadership development; about the profound influence his book has had on diversity in this country; or about the extraordinary commitment he has to God. All that, however, would be eclipsed by the emotional and spiritual impact he has on everyone who knows him or who has experienced him vicariously through his work.

Over the years, I have spent some time with Chuck's parents as well as with his wife and two children. Witnessing the relationship between all three generations has been a miracle in my life. I recall the time when his daughter Melinda was playing basketball in high school with a coach who was, on occasion, demotivating, unfair, and to say the least, not supportive. Melinda, a leader in her own right, had just about had it with his attitude. She decided that no matter what, she would resist the coach's domination. Her family stood by, supported, encouraged, and defended her. It's easy to see that the genuine love between them is the glue that keeps them strong and powerful as individuals, as well as a family unit.

I asked Chuck about his parents' impact on him. He told me this story: When he was 11 years old, he defended an unpopular boy and was verbally humiliated in front of the class, at length, by a teacher. He stood his ground, and told his mother about it when he returned home. The next day, Mary Shelton confronted the principal and the teacher; the teacher was transferred out of elementary education the following year.

I asked Chuck what he gained from that experience and what he had learned from being parented by Mary and Beck. Here's what he told me:

- ◆ He could stand up for what was right even against adults, even though he was young.
- ◆ He could share his hurt with his mom.
- ◆ His mom would use her power to stand up for him.
- ◆ He would have power to use on behalf of his own kids.

Once he had finished sharing the story, I made some comment about the apple not falling far from the tree. He asked me what I

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meant. I'd observed that Chuck's lessons that day were identical to the ones Melinda learned in confronting her coach's behavior. We know that past behavior is a predictor of future behavior; so now all of us know what the impact of the Sheltons will be on the next generation, and on the generations after that.

When I became a parent myself, I looked to the Sheltons as role models for ideal parenting. I was determined to raise my family with the same consciousness and values I'd learned from them. Chuck had learned about the responsibility that comes with having impact very early in his life; one can only imagine where his parents had learned the same values.

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While you may never know what your impact has been, it is guaranteed that you have had one. You are not in charge of how anyone will receive you into their lives—no matter how long or fleeting your moment of interface.

You are not in charge of whether the receptor dials of others are tuned to love or to fear; and you cannot will them to embrace the gift that you are, or the gifts that you bring.

The only thing that you will know for sure on the day you pass from this life is whether you made your life count—because deep in your soul, you'll know that all you'll be leaving is your impact. You are responsible for the impact you have on others, and for the way you manage the impact they have on you.

### Initiate Impact!

1. What do you notice about the people who have had the most impact on your life?
  - ◆ Do they have anything in common with one another?

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- ◆ What role have they played in your life?
  - ◆ How have they had impact on your personal life or your professional life—or both?
2. How do you impact the people in your life?
- ◆ How will they remember you?
  - ◆ How is this different from how you want them to remember you?
  - ◆ What role have you played in their lives?
  - ◆ How will your “leave-behind” be spiritual, emotional, mental, and/or physical?
3. How does the organization you work for or the company you own impact you?
- ◆ How do you feel about yourself when you're at work?
  - ◆ Are you invited to make a contribution most days? Describe the contribution you make. Is this the same or different than the contribution you want to make?
  - ◆ How do others receive your impact?
  - ◆ Is there someone you work with, either a colleague or a customer, who would benefit from hearing about his or her impact on you and your organization?
4. What do you need to do and who do you need to be to create a more positively impactful life?
- ◆ What would you need to change?
  - ◆ To let go of?
  - ◆ To do or be more of?