



Self, and Importance.

A Call to Reflection and Action

Scott Ballum

It is a common cry, the desire to have an impact on the world.

We want to find meaning as to why we are here and a purpose with which to leave our mark. We did everything right, finished our homework, followed the rules to get ahead, working to get to the top of the ladder or in with the right crowd where we would finally have the opportunity to make decrees or solve the great problems of our time. But we feel trapped somewhere along the way, waiting for our big break, and are dejected—or at least impatient—while we wait. Our lives seem inconsequential until that time when we will be deemed important, and we spend our daily lives going through the motions until we reach this imagined level where people begin to notice us and our actions will actually start to matter. Until then, it seems, no one cares what we do, and we do nothing that anyone cares about, a cycle that ensures we remain either cynical, or apathetic at best.

“No matter what one’s class, race, gender, or social standing... without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow.”

bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom

In believing that we don’t make a difference, not yet, we ignore the impact of our daily decisions and allow ourselves to let others think for us. Whether to politics or religion, or branding and marketing, we subconsciously look to outside influences to dictate our desires and behavior with continued disregard for their motivations. When we are not overtly asked for our opinions, we will not bother to form them—the popular views or the status quo are good enough, at least for now. At least until we’re “important.”

The underlying assumption is that *someone* else thought these things through, and by making the acceptable choice we are making the best decisions—from the best brand of sneakers to the balance of responsibility between spouses or the appropriate stance on our country’s foreign policies. When we align ourselves with the opinions of others without examination, we are robbing ourselves of the opportunity to analyze our own preferences and desires, to determine our own solutions. We miss the chance to review the criteria others are utilizing, to question their biases and seek our own inspiration. In stunting the development of our own individual perspectives and initiatives, we trap ourselves in lives that appear to be predestined, and deny the possibility of realizing our personal potential.

Individual daily actions, as insignificant as they may feel, impact the world around us in a multitude of ways. Consider at an example that may seem trivial initially: perhaps our most frequent interactions with the world are financial transactions. The ways in which we spend money and make money are the easiest to study and yet often the most overlooked. Perhaps it is because of their frequency that we deem them too challenging to process, but to ignore them is to neglect a major role we play. From consumption to production, we are indispensable parts of a chain that reaches thousands of others in every direction. We have the opportunity to examine our motivations and calculate our actions of purchase, or in fact decide not to make purchases at all. We can pay attention to a product’s cost and value in regards to environmental and social factors, and we should ask ourselves, “If I were not getting anything in exchange for my money, if I were merely making a contribution, is this the type of corporation that I would support?” By understanding where businesses are located and how they treat their employees, we have the opportunity to questions whether there is another manufacturer offering a similar product that we would rather sponsor. We can examine the added costs and added values in choosing to finance one company over another. We will begin to see that we hold the greatest power when choosing to trade with smaller businesses—for whom our contribution may mean whether they meet their bottom line on a particular day—versus the relatively meager effect we have when choosing to offer or deny our funding to multinational institutions for whom our few dollars are insignificant.

In addition to the impact of our purchases, we can also examine our motivations. When we have not done significant research to determine whether a product or service is particularly appropriate for our specific personal needs, but rather reach for the commodities that are popular or are marketed to our demographic, we essentially let advertisers and focus groups make decisions for us. Our choices of brands and styles, from clothing to cars, are often guided by a desire to be accepted by a certain social class. In examining our reasoning to lean towards particular products and deciding who is making the choice, we can discern whether it is a personal one or one made by celebrities or social groups. In nearly every case, there is likely a product that will do what we need it to do better and cheaper than what is popular or well advertised. Even more probable is that our “need” is questionable in the first place.

In most cases, there is a product that will do what we need it to do better and cheaper than what is popular or well advertised, but we do not know without looking.

As we broaden the scope of how we examine our possibilities of choice and impact, the critical eye can be turned towards how we have decided to earn our income, as well. Certainly, it is not challenging to judge some occupations and industries as more altruistic than others, and it may be naive to suggest that our economy could subsist if everyone

worked for libraries and art museums (though I, for one, wouldn't mind seeing us try). Regardless, we must consider whether our income is at the expense of others, is unfairly weighted higher or lower than others doing the same work, or if it is in return for assisting the creation of a good or service that betters our communities. Beyond denouncing occupations that make a profit at the detriment of others, take the tobacco industry, we should also examine whether a career that does nothing to change our situation or improve the lives of others is, in fact, superior.

We must examine not only our prejudices and preconceptions, but also our traditions and trends.

Engaging more deeply with the multitude of businesses we interact with daily and making informed, considered decisions, is a fundamental way in which we can shape the world we inhabit. Far more difficult, though, are the questions this then forces us to turn upon ourselves and our instincts. Cultural subsets of regions, religions, races, and economies pass sets of values from one generation to another with little investigation as to their contemporary relevancy or accuracy, so we should not only examine our prejudices and preconceptions, but also our traditions and trends. We must assess if we accept an entire dogma as written, rather than choosing the facets that resonate with us and denying or challenging others. Closely held beliefs as disparate as our politics and sexualities are typically defined more by the families and communities we were raised in than by a free and open introspection. Asking these questions opens the possibility of options and personal choice for both ourselves and for others. Even if our ultimate conclusions fall near our original biases, we have at least considered that the answers may not be the same for everyone. In allowing for discussion and debate, we do not force our beliefs and judgments on others, but permit freedom of thought and representation for the people around us, and foster considered actions in others.

“This does not mean opposition for opposition’s sake. But it does mean asking questions, making distinctions, restoring to memory all those things that tend to be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action.”

Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*

Aware of our motivations, our options, our personal preferences, and our impact, we become obliged to take measures to realize those impulses and to engage actively. Rather than coast along allowing the influence of others to determine our path, waiting to be told of our appropriate role, we become responsible for calculating our every behavior. Assessing and composing our own working values

requires actions that support them and the forging of a path or place in our communities which exerts control over the way we impact the world. Coming from a place of constant and consistent examination means that every course is a deliberate decision, maximizing our chosen influence with every interaction.

We are also compelled to make decisions that are not only the best for us personally and individually, but also choices that are the most responsible to our communities, our society, and our environment. Whether it be the choosing of manufacturers that display high standards for treatment of their employees, for example, or proactively championing fair labor and workers rights, once we have identified the criteria that matters to us, they will become the issues that motivate us as well. If we cannot find practices that satisfy our scrutiny we must forge new paths and start new processes, or make do without. Where we see disparity and discrimination, we must be driven to not only refuse our support, but to eradicate it. Our positive impact on the world around us grows proportionately.


It is true that an individual alone, however, will not fully transform a society. A single person acting out merely checks out of one system, but cannot affect larger change. In order to take our passion for reflection and outreach to the degree at which movements form and cultural habits are broken, we must offer ourselves to others with complimentary strengths to increase the power of our messages and causes. The history of the potential in the individual voice is in its ability to rouse others to action, to organize and inspire others to look at their lives and possibilities. We are compelled to encourage others to examine and determine their own paths, to see how their actions can make greater impacts and make choices for the greater good. Grouping ourselves together with others willing to ask questions and challenge the status quo heightens the possibility of effecting change and becoming an active participant in the direction of our lives and our communities.

Reaching out can be as abstract as expressing our ideals in a public manner and awaiting the response of others who will gravitate towards it. More effectively, it can be concrete as seeking out and joining existing organizations supporting human interests and the rights and responsibilities of individuals. As we explore our personal desires, our priorities will be as varied as our expertise. Depending on the ideals we hold, about which we find ourselves passionate, we can present ourselves to labor unions, educational communities, social movements, or cultural institutions. The fields of environmental and societal advancement and sustainability will always need the input and cooperation of engaged thinkers, creatives and laborers. The self-held belief that we do not know enough, or that we can't do everything, is a dispensable crutch that hinders our willingness to find our personal value and make contributions. The ways in which we can take advantage of our opportunity to wield complete control of the directed impact of our actions is limitless, and bound only by our abilities to imagine the possibilities.

Importance is not an attribute bestowed upon us by an unknown force or governing body. Significance is an action taken by individuals confronting their desires and creating meaning and discussion. Just as we currently may look to others who appear to be forging trends and starting

movements, others will be drawn towards those who make a conscious decision to declare their own autonomy and engage in the progress of our society.

Historically, the instinct of the many is to follow the decisions of the few, perpetuating stagnancy and dulling personal independence. The truly influential will defer such a following in the determination to encourage others to deny that instinct within themselves, make increasingly personal choices, and take steps to correct the cultural debasement those tendencies have inflicted.

It is definitively the act of overthrowing the status quo, in any minor or revolutionary way, that denotes the influence of an individual. 

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Ballum is a designer and author in Brooklyn, NY. He is the founder of Sheepless Co., a creative practice dedicated to providing deliberate, considered solutions in design and advocacy for small businesses and artistic or cultural organizations intending to affect positive social change. Visit Scott online at www.sheeplessco.com.

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