

one!

Recognize Your Importance

YOU ARE AMAZING!

It was a crowded Saturday afternoon at the mall. I was in a hurry, and so was everyone else. I had a few packages in my hands, and I balanced them as I looked down to catch my footing on the escalator leaving the food court. I was heading downstairs to ground level, a quick turn right, and then out the door to the parking garage. I was glad to be about to escape this shopping madness.

When I finally looked up, I noticed a man out of the corner of my eye. You couldn't miss him. He was sitting in close proximity to the fast food. A mess surrounded him. There were



three-ring binders and notebooks of all kinds. They were not neat at all. Papers were hanging out the edges. He was disheveled too—one side of his shirt hung untucked. He was a big guy—I guessed he weighed more than three hundred pounds.

I don't know what struck me about this man. But my heart was pounding. I am seriously ADHD myself, and I felt one of those bursts of active energy. I needed to reach out to this man. Even with all his rumpled papers and his unkempt appearance, or maybe because of them, I knew this man was special.

I turned around at the bottom of the escalator and headed back to the second level and the food court. I watched him for a minute as he unpacked his stuff. He went to one of the counters and ordered a large bowl of soup and carefully carried it back to his table on a tray. While he was waiting for the soup to cool off, I approached and sat across from him.

“I just want to say that you are amazing,” I began.

“What did you say?” I said it again, only louder: “YOU ARE AMAZING!”

“Are you sure?”

He was definitely shocked and confused, and I wasn't altogether sure that he wasn't about to reach across the table, grab me by the collar, and shake me. I have that effect on people even when I say positive stuff.

“Can I sit with you and explain myself?” I went on.

“Okay.”

The man's name is Andrew. He had all of those papers because he is a writer. In fact, he has worked on several of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. He is practically an expert

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on the ins and outs of book publishing. In the course of our conversation, I learned more about publishing from Andrew than I have from anyone ever since. Without Andrew, I would have had no clue as to how to go about getting my first book, *Hard as Nails*, into print and published by one of the largest publishers.

I found out in sitting with Andrew that day that I was right: he is amazing!

Of course, he wanted to know about me and why I was at his table. I told him it was a long story, but one way to sum it up was like this: “I have a Father in Heaven who loves me more than I know. He thinks I am important just because of the way I am. And he asks me to recognize the importance of others.”

Andrew looked a little shocked. I wasn’t sure if he still thought I was a bit crazy. But he didn’t ask me to leave. And we remain friends today. As a postscript, I have to also tell you that Andrew has lost more than one hundred pounds and continues to make a difference in the lives of others through his gift of writing.

YOU ARE LOVED!

Because of my faith, I reached out to Andrew and told him he was important. The only reason I thought he needed to hear this message from me is that everyone needs to hear how important, unique, and special he or she is. You need to hear it, too: God has made you as a one-and-only you. When God looks at you, he sees you with the pride of a Father who has

made you irreplaceable to him. Our main problem is that we don't always remember how important we are.

When God's Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth, this was the same message he told over and over. On one occasion, Jesus pointed out the birds in the sky to his disciples. "Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds?" (Lk 12:24).

Did you hear what Jesus was saying in these words? The birds don't have a prestigious job or special title like *farmer*. Yet God loves and cares for them.

How often do we think that we are only loveable based on what we do or what we produce? I used to think like that at your age.

I used to wonder how I would measure up to all of the accomplishments of my parents. I didn't think I could. So you know what I did? I did the opposite. Because I connected my importance only with what I could produce, I began to produce nothing. I did a lot of dumb things.

I grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, where there are a lot of small creeks. Probably some of the dumbest things I ever did was to light a few of those creeks on fire. You might be wondering how anyone can do that. With a group of my friends, who were also not too bright, we would pour gasoline in a creek, strike a match, and watch the creek literally blow up in front of our eyes. But soon that wasn't enough. We decided to run through the fire.

A few of my friends went first. They ran through to the other side. There was a lot of whooping and cheering. My

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intensity was rising. I had to do it, too! Only I was even dumber than they were. When I had reached the middle of the fire I could see my friends' expressions go from giddy to shocked to scared. What could it be? And then I realized I was still carrying the gasoline can.

I exploded. I was on fire. Thank goodness that in second grade I learned about “stop, drop, and roll.” And let me tell you it does work. My friends patted me down and somehow kept me from cooking myself to death.

But in my mind there was something worse than being on fire. I had lost my dad's gasoline can. My dad is one of those people who is obsessive-compulsive to the point that every tool in his garage had to be in place. He would certainly notice the missing gas can.

I am a bad liar. Nevertheless, I tried to lie, and I told him “I don't know” when he asked me where the gasoline can was. He noticed that I was smirking, and it didn't take much prodding for him to question me to the point where I admitted that I had set the creek, my friends, and myself on fire.

Now I have to tell you an even dumber thing. Because I thought of myself as invincible even though my self-worth was actually really low, I decided to do it again. One week later, I was back on the creek lighting fires again. And this time I didn't run through the fire. I walked. I was on fire again. What was I doing to myself? My clothes were damaged, and my face was seared.

The next morning my dad was hanging out with my friends. I remember we were watching *SportsCenter* and eating our Lucky Charms. My friends may have been enjoying

themselves, but I was worried about what I would say to my dad. I figured he was going to find out, so I might as well go down with my boys nearby. So I said to my dad, “I set myself on fire again.”

My friends were laughing so hard that marshmallows from the cereal were flying out of their mouths. My dad didn’t seem to have heard me. So I repeated, “Dad, I did it again.”

“What did you do again?”

“I lit myself on fire in the creek, and I lost your gasoline can.”

My dad was both shocked and perplexed. He glanced toward my friends, who nodded as if to say, “Yep, he did it again.”

From across the room my dad said simply, “Come here.”

He screamed some at me and told me what I had done was stupid. “You don’t understand how dangerous that was. That could have killed you.” But even while all of the yelling was going on I had a very real sense that he still loved me and that he was saying all he said because he cared about me.

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The way my father reacted gave me a glimpse of God’s love and care for us. By thinking I had to *do* something to possess my parents’ love, I was incorrect. My dad wanted the best for me and for me to be safe. Can you imagine how much more Father in Heaven loves you and will continue to love you no matter what “bad” thing you might do? Think about this: God loves you even if you have struggled with destructive behaviors like using alcohol or drugs, risking your physical and

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emotional well-being by having sex before marriage, or even cutting yourself and trying to end your life. God cares. God doesn't stop caring.

Likewise, your worth in God's eyes is not based on any storehouse or barn of possessions. In your world today so much emphasis is placed on what things you have acquired—not just possessions that can be purchased with money, but also things like membership in the “right” group of friends to chill with, power over another in a relationship, prestige for the way our bodies look, instead of focusing on who we really are. It's not about how “hot” you are or how high your “ranking” is in the world. God's message is this: You are important for who you are, not for what you do or what you own! I love you no matter what!

God says to us the same words he spoke to the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1:5). The Lord has known us since the beginning of time that is, before our conception, before we came into being. If you have been baptized, you have actually been sealed by God and given to Christ as one who belongs to him forever. You all see people with tattoos. You may have one yourself. Well, you have been “tattooed” with the mark of Christ. It is a permanent mark that will never go away. Let that sink in. There is nothing you can do or not do that would keep God from loving you.

When you recognize your importance and never forget it, you can have a great effect on others. By the time I had met Andrew at the mall, if I was not confident in my own importance, do you think I would have been able to approach and

affirm Andrew? I don't think so. Other people need us. We can help them only if we don't forget who we are as sons or daughters of a loving Father.

WHAT DOES JESUS TEACH?

Do you know the story of Zacchaeus from the Gospel of Luke?

Zacchaeus was someone who forgot his importance. He was a Jew, born into God's Chosen People, and taught in the ways of God. But he had fallen off that course. He had gone to work for the Roman occupiers who had forced the Jews to pay taxes to Caesar, the emperor. Zacchaeus not only went to his Jewish neighbors to collect the taxes, he was skimming some money off for himself, too.

Zacchaeus was also a little man. I mean he was physically small. (He was probably like me. My good friend David Tyree calls me an Italian midget!) Could Zacchaeus's short stature have damaged the way he felt about himself? We don't know for sure. But we do know that he stayed out of the way when Jesus came to his hometown of Jericho. The Gospel says that because of his size he couldn't see Jesus along the route. Instead,

He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And he came down quickly and received him with joy. (Lk 19:4–6)

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Jesus' opponents didn't appreciate that Jesus had recognized a sinner. They didn't like it that Jesus was going to eat at Zacchaeus's house. But what happens when someone recognizes the God-given importance of another? That person, newly affirmed, wants to share this gift with others, too! That's what Zacchaeus wanted to do. He said to Jesus so that everyone could hear:

“Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham.”
(Lk 19:8–10)

Don't ever forget the lessons that Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus teach us. Here are a few:

1. *When we forget our importance, we do things that oppose who we really are.* Zacchaeus cheated his Jewish relatives. I tried to destroy myself by walking through a fire.
2. *Our physical appearances don't have anything to do with how loveable we are in God's eyes.* Zacchaeus climbed a tree, not only to be able to see Jesus, but to make sure that Jesus did not see him. Jesus saw beyond the limbs and branches and leaves. He found Zacchaeus and affirmed him. He forgave Zacchaeus's sins and called him to be even better. At first, I noticed my friend Andrew because he seemed lonely and in need of encouragement. But once I started to know Andrew, I moved well beyond skin and pounds and soup spilled on his shirt. (Yes, he had that, too, at our first meeting!)

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I had approached Andrew and told him he was “amazing.” But the real affirmation came in reverse. Andrew recognized my importance through my self-doubt and told me a way that I could really go about having my story published in a book. Only with his help was I able to do that.

3. *Others may not believe that we can change our lives.* When some of the people saw that Jesus was going to stay with Zacchaeus, they began to grumble. Have you ever known people who did not want you to improve your life? Maybe you have quit partying, and some of those who are still hanging out and drinking don't appreciate your change. Why is this so? Do you think some people want to keep you down because it makes them feel better about themselves? In these cases it might be best to tell them of their importance, too. They are capable of changing just like you.
4. *When we know our own importance, we can help others to know theirs.* Jesus, God-Made-Flesh, never forgot his place as the Son of a loving Father. In knowing that, he was able to reach out to sinners. In fact, this was his mission. He tells Zacchaeus and the others this: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10).

SHARE YOURSELF WITH OTHERS

I am reminded of the lesson of being able to translate our positive knowledge of our importance to help others every time I travel around the country preaching to teenagers and witnessing how they are transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ. And I have a friend, Britney, who reminds me of

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this all of the time. A few years ago after I returned from the road, I opened an e-mail from Britney that told her story.

My parents got divorced when I was little and shared custody. At first there were no problems, and everything remained civil. Both of my parents got remarried. My sister and I lived with my mom and stepdad. We both knew that he was abusive to her. We just didn't know how bad and all of the reasons why.

One summer when I was thirteen, I took a trip to California. When I returned home, I found out my mother was in jail. She had been using and selling cocaine. She was addicted.

At first she promised me that she would get help. But she didn't. Things only got worse. She let my stepfather back in the house for about the hundredth time. I couldn't take watching the abuse, so I went to live with my dad.

About the same time, I started dating a guy who I really liked. When he broke up with me, I went off the deep end. Why couldn't I make any relationship work? That is when I tried to kill myself. I took about thirty aspirin and passed out.

From that lowest of lows I heard your message: You are important because of the way God made you. Return to God. Recognize who you really are.

I think about Britney and her story a lot. I am humbled that the Hard as Nails ministry and I were able to help her. But I also wonder what would have happened to Britney if we weren't there to affirm her and proclaim her goodness. And

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believe me, I wouldn't have been in any position to help anyone if those many years ago I hadn't heard God calling to me to help me recognize that I am important because of the way God made *me!* Thank God! Praise God!

And I have to add: Britney now travels with our Hard as Nails ministry team and helps others who have experienced divorce, drugs, abuse, depression, and so many other types of pain that none of us can escape.

As Catholics we are intertwined and interconnected. Our Baptism makes us so. It is Baptism that grounds us in our common mission to be holy and in the mission of sharing the good news with others. Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit:

Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ; and are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1213)

This means that as my dad reached out in love and compassion to me, I reached out in a crowded mall to Andrew, and Andrew, filled with God's grace, affirmed and shared himself with me. It means that a hurt and broken child named Britney heard the message that she was loved and special, made that message the core of her life, and now shares it again and again with teenagers who are as broken as she once was.

Remember that you are important. Please!

Never forget how much the Creator God loves you!

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Questions to Help You Win It All

1. Why does God love me so much?
2. How can I express my real self to others?
3. Who is someone I see every day that needs to be affirmed?

STEPS TO RECOGNIZE YOUR IMPORTANCE

- Write letters of affirmation to a family member, friend, and a classmate you never speak with. Tell each person what you notice about him or her that screams to the world of his or her importance. Put a stamp on your letter and send it through the mail.
- Create an intercessory prayer list of all those who have made an everlasting impact on your life *and* other people who you feel don't know how important they are. Start a regular time of praying for everyone on your list.
- Take five minutes a day to sit and listen to God. Ask God to tell you about how much he loves the one and only you. (See Five-Minute Prayer on page 140.)