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## Lightness vs. Significance

Recognizing how we apply significance to the events in our lives is a great first step to shifting the energy of a particular event from significance to lightness.

The significance we give to a wonderful event is empowering. We relive the moment and feel very good about it, therefore drawing on the positive feeling. When we give significance to a negative event, it feels heavy and burdensome, like carrying something heavy for a very long time.

The word significance means “something that has great value or is very important”. Most often significance is given to major events in a person’s life. A major event can be something that impacts a person positively or negatively.

What would happen if you were able to let go of the heavy thing you are carrying around and feel a sense of lightness? Detaching from the weight of the negative event naturally creates a sense of weightlessness. What was a burden (significance) is now simply an experience – free of the emotions that created the burden (lightness)?

Imagine carrying around a heavy suitcase. It is weathered, old and dusty. As you open it, you recognize family members, you see past friends, hard times, and many experiences – some that may have hurt you deeply. All of these images bring back memories – some painful and even scary. Your body stiffens and you begin to feel sick and your stomach feels nervous. As you remember these events, you recognize that you have choices. You can shut the suitcase and leave all those old, irrelevant events and images inside the suitcase, you can deny having ever seen them, or you can continue to carry them with you.

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## We have choices

You really have two choices when it comes to attaching significance to a negative event or emotion:

1. You can deny that you ever had the experience in the first instance. If you chose this path, you will be deceiving yourself and over time, living in denial leads to bitterness and even more fear and anger. This is significant.
2. You can continue to give significance to painful, fearful events of your past. Each decision you make is made through the significance you attached to these past images. Every thought, feeling or movement you make reinforces these negative events. This is significant.

However, if you chose to shut the suitcase and leave all the events and images inside it, you begin to realise that you have closed out the significance you attached to the past events in your life. These events are no longer valid to you and therefore do not deserve the significance they once had. This exercise is powerful. It affects your whole body. You feel great. Your energy is strong. You are happy. This is lightness.

Metaphorically, everyone carries a suitcase. Consciously or unconsciously we have applied significance to our experiences and emotions. Awareness of what you are giving significance to is the catalyst for replacing significance with lightness. You may not realize how heavy your suitcase actually is until you set it down and put it away.

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## Self Application

### What is the Significance?

Here is a Buddhist tale that illustrates what happens when we become overly significant.

A young monk was travelling with an older monk. Along the way, they came to a stream where a beautiful woman was standing, afraid to cross. Without hesitating, the old monk picked her up, carried her over the water and placed her down safely on the other side. The young monk was shocked but said nothing. They walked on until they reached their destination. Finally, the young monk, who was so disturbed by what he had seen, could hold back no longer.

“Why,” he asked angrily, “ did you carry that young woman across the stream. We, monks, have rules – it is forbidden to touch women!”

The elder monk smiled at him and said, “ I left her on the other side of the stream, but you are still carrying her.”

He was carrying his Significance – a suitcase of fixed ideas about what is right and wrong, true and false. The young monk’s significance blinded him to the reality of the moment. A woman needed help, and the older monk responded to his own humanity. His Lightness at the moment freed him from judgement and allowed him to act spontaneously.

We become significant when we bring our baggage to a situation. We carry it around, weighing ourselves down with beliefs, notions and learned behaviours. That “unobserved mind” and the significance we give it, keeps us from the lightness of living life without judgment or bias.

Significance shows up most often when we are attached to our outcomes. Ask yourself, when engaging in any exchange, “What am I attached to here? What baggage am I bringing to this conversation that is weighing me down?”

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## Case Study

Dominic was sitting at the board table preparing for the directors meeting. He had spent many days working on his presentation outlining to the board how the company needed to go forward. His presentation was extremely detailed, supported by data and graphically represented his proposal. He was pleased with himself.

Slowly each director entered the boardroom. The board members exchanged greetings and took their seats. Dominic felt the excitement rising within him. He was excited to showcase his capabilities. This presentation could potentially catapult his career. He had worked on this presentation all night making sure it was just right.

The chairperson, Delia, opened the meeting, announcing that all items on the agenda had to be cancelled as something urgent had come up that needed to be addressed immediately. Dominic felt his excitement drop. From that moment on he didn't hear a word that Delia said. All he could think about was how he could try and get the board to hear his presentation. He was upset that Delia didn't advise him of the situation prior to the start of the meeting. After all, she knew how hard he worked on this presentation.

At that moment Bill, who was sitting beside him nudged Dominic. Dominic had not heard Delia mention his name. He did not hear Delia ask him is a suggestion for a solution to the urgent problem they were facing. In fact, he didn't even know what the urgent problem was because he wasn't listening. Dominic couldn't answer. Everyone stared at him waiting for his answer, but nothing came. His moment was lost.

Dominic's motivation for doing this project seems to have been driven by a desire to show everyone what he was capable of. This is a very good example of a person who is looking outside of himself for recognition. He placed significance in his presentation to the Board. When he realized he was not going to be able to deliver his presentation to the Board, he shut down and became disengaged. Dominic's need for recognition was misplaced by putting significance on his presentation rather than his knowledge of the organization. This misplaced significance resulted in Dominic being unable to offer a solution to the urgent issue. He was ineffective and lost his moment to shine.

## What is Lightness?

To be light is to feel – light like a feather, weightless, free, floating. Imagine a feather floating through the air. It turns and spins and moves throughout the air with such ease and grace. It moves in whatever direction the wind blows it. The feather plays with the wind, spinning, rolling and gently floating around.

The feather is not alone. It is moving with the wind.

How does this image relate to our everyday life? We all have to work with someone or something at different stages of our day, just like the feather with the wind. However, there are times when we become so intense about the direction we are going in or need to go in that we lose the ability to be able to float freely around. We begin to try to control the wind, to determine which way we want it to blow.

So how can we bring lightness into our life? The first step is to want to. To do this requires observing where you are significant in your life. You can make a choice to see the world in a positive or negative way. This is a state of mind and a state of being.

Paul Wilson in his book *Calm for Life* believes that being calm is the key to lightness. Wilson describes an activity you can do to achieve calm. He calls this ‘The Pleasure of Calm.’ Here are some steps he takes to achieve the pleasure of calm:

- Run a warm bath.
- Add some bath salts or add five drops of lavender and rose oils. Chamomile is also a wonderful calming oil.
- Light a candle, turn off the electric lights.
- Take a warm face towel and drape it over your face as you sink down into the tub.
- Tell yourself you have all the time in the world. Then listen to the sound of your relaxed breathing as you begin to forget there’s another world outside.
- Being still is very important in achieving lightness.

## Letting Go

There will be times you recognize significance in the situation. It is more likely to occur when you are tired or feeling a lack of self-love and self-respect. Take a moment before you move too deeply into significance and ask yourself these questions:

- Where in my life do I not feel satisfied right now?
- What do I need more of in my life?
- What do I need less of?
- What do I want right now?
- Why or what is causing me to feel resentful?

## Reflection

1. Think of a situation in which you were caught up in significance. What “baggage” did you carry into it that may have weighed you down?
2. Consider a time when you were able to “lighten” a heavy situation.

## Coaching Application

As coaches, we can empower ourselves and help clients make positive shifts by bringing the perspective of Lightness to what we do. Lightness isn't about thoughtless optimism; it's not good trying to see that “silver lining in every cloud” when your underlying belief is that it's going to rain anyway. Lightness is much more about a mental attitude that honours the

Game of Life in all of its complexities. We are present in the moment, free of judgements that can bind us to old ways of thinking. Treating things with Lightness, even though some things are extremely important to us, can free us up to enjoy more of life and be more effective when facing our everyday challenges.

## Mark's Case

Mark was a partner in a small language school that was experiencing a decline in student enrolments. His partner had made a series of decisions that he felt were directly responsible for the drop off in numbers. Attempts at talking with her about this proved difficult as his partner refused to accept any responsibility for the situation. This

infuriated Mark, who was now more determined to prove his case. He felt that she was hiding the truth from him. His significance overshadowed his ability to speak with his partner.

Mark was clearly attached to an outcome – to get his partner to accept her responsibility in the company's decline. The result was a complete breakdown in communication and an unresolved issue that would continue to impact negatively on the school.

As coaches, we want to help our clients identify where Significance is closing them off from the present moment and where they have choices. Introducing the option of Lightness to our clients is much like holding the key to open a locked door. If we can help them see the “suitcase” and resultant baggage they are bringing to an encounter, they are better able to move through the situation with ease and lightness. They can decide to leave it at the doorway and experience what comes up at the moment with a free mind.

## Creating a Mindful Space

When Significance is present in a client, remember that if they can lighten their perspective, they will be able to step back, take some distance and gain greater clarity on the situation.

In her book, *Mindfulness: Choice and Control in Everyday Life*, Ellen J. Langer wrote:

“When we are behaving mindlessly, that is to say, relying on categories drawn in the past, endpoints to development seem fixed. We are then like projectiles moving along a predetermined course. When we are mindful, we see all sorts of choices and generate new endpoints.” Consider ways of holding a “mindful” space for your clients. Help them gain some distance from the Significance of the situation by asking questions such as,

“What do you need right now?”

“Stop and take a deep breath. What are you feeling right now?”

“What is the worst thing that could happen here?”

Discussing the worst case scenario is a wonderful step to shifting a view of significance to lightness. Once we know the worst, we can create something different, knowing that if the worst does happen, we can handle it.

## Lightness vs. Significance as a Coach

At the end of a coaching session, it is paramount to the success of your role as a coach that you leave the session feeling light. If the client has been particularly significant in a session, you may consider replenishing your energy – or clear out any heavy negative energy after the coaching session.

As a coach, you cannot carry your client's "suitcase". Design a process to ensure you stay light and present after your coaching sessions. Determine also your pathway forward if you notice you are becoming significant in a coaching session.

## Reflection

1. What are some techniques that you can develop to remain "mindful" in challenging situations?
2. Why do you think people become overly significant in the first place?
3. What questions would you ask a client who is feeling weighed down by many things?

## Resource

Langer, Ellen J., 1989, Mindfulness, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., Reading, Mass.

Tolle, Eckhardt, 2004, The Power of Now, Namaste Publishing, California

Wilson, Paul, 2000. Calm for Life, Penguin Books Ltd, Australia