

THE QUEST
for
SIGNIFICANCE

Harnessing the Need that
Makes the World Go Round

ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI
DAN RAVIV



“Under the deft guidance of one of America’s great psychologists, this book explores a question that, at one time or another, enters the minds of most human beings: What’s it all about? The answer is Significance. And in making the case, Kruglanski and Raviv cover – in a delightfully accessible way – material from modern psychological research to the ancient philosophies of Rome and Asia. Stunning insights never stop coming. You can’t read this book without understanding your life and society more deeply... and without experiencing an inspiring sense of both challenge and reassurance.”

Claude Steele, Lucie Stern Professor Emeritus in Psychology, Stanford University, California.

“What matters most to all of us? Simply, and profoundly: for our lives to matter and that we be treated with respect. This fundamental insight in Arie Kruglanski and Dan Raviv’s landmark new book, *The Quest for Significance*, is the foundation for a penetrating rethinking of where human choices come from, from choosing friends and lovers to choosing to become a terrorist. This scholarly, beautifully written, and fascinating book tells us what it means to be human. It is a need to know.”

E. Tory Higgins, author of *Shared Reality: What Makes Us Strong and Tears Us Apart*.

“By weaving together engaging accounts from history, politics, and psychology, Kruglanski and Raviv offer compelling evidence for a remarkably encompassing assertion: that almost all of human expression, practice, and goal formation can be traced to the need for personal and social Significance. It’s a *tour de force*.”

Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence* and *Pre-Suasion*.

“In this groundbreaking exploration of human motivation, Arie Kruglanski and Dan Raviv reveal how our universal need to feel significant shapes everything from our most intimate relationships to world-changing historical events. By illuminating this fundamental drive, the authors provide a master key that unlocks deeper insights into relationships, parenting, careers, leadership, mental health, social movements, and even the roots of extremism – empowering us to navigate life’s complexities with greater wisdom, empathy, and effectiveness. This book will change the way you view yourself and others, offering a powerful lens through which to understand human behavior in a rapidly changing world.”

Michele J. Gelfand, author of *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers*...



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THE QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE

The Quest for Significance: Harnessing the Need that Makes the World Go Round is a fascinating exploration of why we all seek Significance – a fundamental human motivation – and how we can understand it to help us lead better lives. Renowned psychologist Arie Kruglanski and journalist Dan Raviv show how the Quest for Significance propels our actions, governs our feelings, and dominates our thoughts: pervasively affecting our happiness, pursuits, and relationships.

Drawing on both academic research and the personal experiences of the authors, including Kruglanski's childhood in Poland during the Holocaust, the authors help readers to understand themselves and people around them – to promote happiness, gain friendship, and find love.

This one-of-a-kind book is fascinating reading for students, professionals, and anyone interested in how they can better appreciate themselves and those close to them, and live a fulfilling life.

Arie W. Kruglanski is a globally esteemed authority on human motivation, goal systems, cognitive closure, and terrorism. A Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, his many awards include the American Psychological Society honoring “his lifetime of significant intellectual contributions to the basic science of psychology.”

Dan Raviv is a bestselling author and covered war, espionage, diplomacy, and politics for CBS News for 40 years.



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Arie W. Kruglanski and Dan Raviv

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We dedicate this book to Hannah and Dori, our wives and most significant others.

This book was completed while Arie W. Kruglanski was a residential fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation Center at Bellagio, Italy.



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PREFACE

This book has had a long past and a short history. The past goes back to World War II and Arie Kruglanski's childhood. As a Jewish boy growing up in the 1940s in the ill-fated Lodz Ghetto in Poland at the time of the Holocaust, fear and anxiety suffused the very air he breathed. The likelihood of annihilation weighed heavy on everyone's minds; and the angst of being reduced to nothingness, of utter *insignificance*, was omnipresent.

Yet strangely, in those dark years of violence and dread, young Arie was made to feel significant and worthy. As his parents' only child, at a time when having children was outrageously unwise, he was surrounded by love, warmth, and admiration, and treated as someone very special. The jarring dissonance between his sense of worth at home – and his worthlessness outside of it – posed for him a puzzle that for long decades remained unsolved.

Fast forward to the early 2000s, with the world still recovering from the trauma of Al Qaeda's attack on the United States on 9/11. To understand how this unimaginable tragedy could have happened, scientists of various ilks dropped what they were doing to refocus their attention on terrorism, its causes, and its consequences. By now a seasoned professor of psychology, Arie was among those who did so – in his case to turn to terrorism's psychological underpinnings, and more specifically to terrorists' motivations. Early terrorism scholars explained this form of mass murder

by compiling lists of specific motives including vengeance, religion, adoration of the leader, and expected perks of paradise, among others. But Arie's epiphany was when he hit upon what appeared to be the common denominator of those reasons: the terrorists' Quest for Significance (QFS) and mattering that they believed would be enhanced by acts of martyrdom and perverted heroism.

That discovery marks the start of this book's short history. Whereas initially the Quest for Significance was invoked in relation to violent extremism, it became clear that violence and aggression pave merely one path to Significance, and there are many others laid out by cultural values and narratives.

What followed was a full-fledged theory of QFS, the "mother" of all social motivations. Truly, Significance deserves a capital "S," as its pursuit affects individuals, communities, and nations – its impacts charting the course of history. At long last, the puzzle of Significance that troubled Arie as a child has been resolved.

After discussing this with a friend, Dan Raviv, a distinguished foreign correspondent who has witnessed many historical figures and events up close, we decided to recount the Significance story in the book you are holding, the fruit of a long journey into the mysteries of the human psyche. In it, we aim to convey to you, dear reader, what the Quest for Significance means to you, how it affects your life's experiences, and how it impacts your relations with friends, lovers, adversaries, and the world at large.

1

WINNING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING PEOPLE

Dale Carnegie's 1936 self-help volume, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, is one of the best-selling books of all time – bought by 30 million readers in over a dozen languages. Seventy-five years after the appearance of its first edition, it was number 19 on *TIME* magazine's list of the 100 most influential books. What made this work so incredibly successful? Part of the answer is that it is very easy to read, very direct and practical, a “self-help” book in the truest meaning of the term. Each chapter ends with a principle that is simple, understandable, and seemingly easy to implement: “Don't criticize, condemn, or complain,” “Give honest and sincere appreciation,” “Arouse in the other person an eager want,” “Become genuinely interested in other people,” and “Smile.”

However useful, these are mere techniques: means to a specific end, “winning friends and influencing people.” So, the real question is why millions of readers all over the world seek this particular end to begin with? You may think of that as a trick question – that everyone would agree that

it is nice to have friends and the power to influence, whereas being friendless, loveless, and without influence would feel terrible.

Whereas this may be true, there is a better reply to the question, one that took this entire book to write. In brief, having friends who appreciate you, and having people accept your opinion and be influenced by it, is proof that you matter. You are *somebody*. You have *Significance*.

That is a better answer, because it gets to the crux of the issue. All of us – whether our achievements so far seem high, middle, or low – are on a Quest for Significance (QFS). We believe our book can help by identifying and highlighting the techniques people use in that lifelong QFS. We explain why and how they work, and also under what circumstances they might not.

In addition, we illuminate the importance of seeing how other people react to your behavior, and how you react to theirs. In effect, we connect and amplify Carnegie’s techniques – which he refined into bite-sized advice – and tie them to the encounters, dilemmas, predicaments, and experiences at the core of being human.

Our natural actions and reactions include love and hate, kindness and aggression, pride and jealousy, elation and exploitation, selflessness and nihilistic martyrdom. The choices we make in our QFS lead to our joys and disappointments, and on a broader canvas, they relate to political activism, the striving for social justice, wars, and revolutions.

This goes well beyond Dale Carnegie’s counsel to be nice and considerate to people. Indeed, the simple techniques he proposed are but the tip of an iceberg, concealing a mammoth amount of underlying psychology that governs our thoughts, feelings, and actions. The purpose of this book is to uncover this psychology, spell out how it may increase your understanding of yourself and other people, and ultimately suggest how that can make you a more effective parent, spouse, colleague, and citizen.

The Quest for Significance

The desire for our lives to matter – the uniquely human Quest for Significance – is the pursuit of dignity, respect, and appreciation from people who matter to us. Experts on behavior call it our craving for social worth. The 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau made the quest sound egotistical, dubbing it “self-love” (*amour propre*).¹ Many centuries of history

and culture show that QFS is one of the most fundamental human motivations, truly making the world go round, both for good and for ill, in every stage of every person's life. Questing for Significance not only underlies romantic love, friendship, and devotion, but it also promotes hate and violence. It propels the generous dedication of artists and humanitarians, yet it also feeds tyrants' and dictators' insatiable appetite for power.

As we show throughout this volume and illustrate via copious examples, the desire to believe that you are significant is really why "winning friends and influencing people" is so universally appealing. Showing people respect and appreciation is giving them what they most desire, thus turning them into your friends who respect you in return and value your opinion.

There is a negative mirror image: Denying people respect – humiliating or insulting them – is extremely hurtful and often the cause of great emotional suffering that can erupt in aggression against themselves or others. This dynamic has been an inseparable part of human nature for millennia, as the following story illustrates.

The Oldest Complaint in History

An archaeological fragment dating back to roughly 1750 BCE was found in the ancient city of Ur, located in what is now Iraq. The small clay tablet (4.6 by 2 inches) is part of the permanent collection of the British Museum. The language on the tablet is Akkadian, the earliest known Semitic language (a Middle Eastern group that includes Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic). It is written in cuneiform script and has been deciphered by scholars to reveal a litany of complaints from a man named Nanni about a merchant known as Ea-nasir. Ea-nasir, the tablet alleges, delivered to Nanni the wrong grade of copper and was also responsible for delays in a later delivery. And worst of all, he was rude to the servant whom Nanni sent to collect the product. This insult in particular occasioned Nanni's sense that he had lost Significance and motivated his angry complaint.

"What do you take me for, that you treat somebody like me with such contempt?" said Nanni.² "I have sent as messengers gentlemen like ourselves to collect the bag with my money, but you have treated me with contempt by sending them back to me empty-handed several times, and that through enemy territory. Is there anyone among the merchants who

trade with Telmun who has treated me in this way? You alone treat my messenger with contempt!

How have you treated me for that copper? You have withheld my money bag from me in enemy territory. It is now up to you to restore [my money] to me in full. ...I will not accept here any copper from you that is not of fine quality. I shall [from now on] select and take the ingots individually in my own yard, and I shall exercise against you my right of rejection because you have treated me with contempt.”

There is little doubt that Nanni feels slighted and treated as unworthy by Ea-nasir, that he detests that feeling, and therefore he vows to restore his self-pride in future transactions. However, his plans to do so appear gentle and civilized.

Human reactions look very different when the insulted individual is a powerful despot, the leader of a well-armed nation with a nuclear arsenal at his disposal. A recent case in point is that of Vladimir Putin, who, upon feeling slighted by the West and in order to restore his and fellow Russians’ feelings of Significance, initiated a major war that killed and wounded around 500,000 people in its first 18 months.³

Putin’s War

In February 2022, Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine and blamed the brutal war that ensued on a Ukrainian fantasy of being part of the West, which he called a clear threat to Russia’s security. Yet, there are strong, Significance-based reasons to believe that the cause of the war was something completely different: Putin’s outsized dream of glory, seeking a place in history as one of his country’s most heroic leaders.

Putin apparently nourished for decades his vision for restoring the greatness of a collapsed empire. When the Soviet Union was disbanded in 1991, most officials in St Petersburg’s city hall were quick to replace the portraits of Vladimir Lenin and other Communist heroes with an official photograph of Boris Yeltsin, the new Russian president. However, there was one exception. The mayor’s personal assistant, young Vladimir Putin, chose for his wall a portrait of Peter the Great: one of Russia’s most important czars who created a powerful European empire.⁴ This incident now seems like a portent, highlighting a streak of Putin’s personality that 30 years later

would make him the alarming center of global attention: his unquenchable thirst for Significance.

The human desire for dignity and worth is universal. No one wants to be humiliated, ignored, or patronized. But only a tiny minority are willing to risk everything for the sake of glory. Putin is one of those select few. When appointed prime minister in 1999, he described his new job as a “historical mission” to save Russia from “bandits” – the Chechen Islamists who had attacked the Russian Republic of Dagestan. “I realized I could do this only at the cost of my political career,” Putin told an interviewer. “It was a minimal cost to pay.”⁵ He ordered the destruction of an entire city, Grozny, to defeat the rebels. An estimated 8,000 residents were killed.⁶ It was clear, from the start, that this newly minted leader was willing to take risky steps that could bring him glory.

Putin has often portrayed himself as the savior of the Russian homeland from a scheming West bent on destroying Russia’s “traditional values.” In a speech on the day that the 2022 invasion began, he claimed he had no choice, as “a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation.”⁷

In most cultures, Russia and the United States included, one of the most sacred values is patriotism. Serving one’s country with devotion and self-denial bolsters a person’s social worth – in their own eyes and in the eyes of others – claiming a place in history and the aura of a hero. Patriotism is particularly put to the test when your country is in dire straits and threatened by enemies, or when your leader declares that the straits are dire.

For those who crave Significance, the perception of national humiliation offers a golden opportunity for greatness. The whole nation seeks a turnaround story, a comeback offering leaders a chance to achieve glory.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin soared through the ranks of Russian politics at just such a propitious moment. The obvious loser of the Cold War, Russia quickly saw its vast empire in Eastern Europe come unglued. The country was left with fewer than 150 million citizens, half the population of the old Soviet Union, and for many of them, the breakup was a shattering cultural trauma that would last for decades. The loss of empire and global status offered an opportunity for Putin to lead an effort aimed at reversing that catastrophe, and thus to attain greatness and recover all or some of the nation’s lost Significance.

In such circumstances, a person on his Quest for Significance often casts blame on foes and rivals, and Putin increasingly flared with resentment directed at the United States – because even if the United States did not cause Russia’s precipitous fall, the Americans were rubbing it in. Just after Putin first sought to regain power and pride by seizing parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014, President Barack Obama delivered a calculated insult by declaring: “Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness.”⁸ Not a world power? Only regional?

These perceived slights poured oil on the flames of Putin’s discontent and reinforced his resolve to make Russia great again, which for Putin meant a show of force. The rest is history, of course, and a tragic one at that.

Aggressing for Significance

It is no coincidence that Putin used aggression as a way of seeking Significance. Violence and aggression are the primordial ways of gaining dominance and Significance among humans and animals alike.⁹ China’s Chairman Mao Zedong famously proclaimed in 1927 that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”¹⁰ In his preface to Franz Fanon’s anti-colonialist classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*,¹¹ the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre supported the book’s call for the oppressed to “become men” by exercising “mad fury.” The writer Isaac Asimov dubbed aggression as “the last refuge of the incompetent,”¹² and the renowned psychologist William James quipped that “war is the romance of history” because its horrors are endlessly fascinating.¹³

Throughout history, leaders have fanned the flames of humiliation-driven anger to whip their followers into clamoring for aggression. For example, Adolf Hitler cultivated the legend of the stab-in-the-back (*Dolchstoßlegende*) of the German Army by the Jews to explain the capitulation of Germany in World War I and thus to encourage oppression and mass murder of these alleged culprits. Hitler used the humiliation of Germany in the Versailles Treaty of 1919 as justification for his invasions that triggered World War II. Japan, which had fought alongside the Allies in World War I, launched expansionist policies in the Pacific and joined the German–Italian Axis in World War II – partly because of the feeling among Japan’s leaders that

their nation, too, was humiliated by its former allies when they refused to reject racism in the Versailles Treaty.¹⁴

Everyday aggression is also fueled typically by the perpetrator's prior humiliation or Significance loss. This is particularly true among men. When mass shooters have been captured or killed, their neighbors often say that the fellow was reacting to a lifetime of being bullied. Within married couples, murder is more likely to be the result of a wife's infidelity or suspected infidelity – immortalized in Shakespeare's renowned play, "Othello" – rather than infidelity by the husband.

Evidence also suggests that young men who come from disadvantaged family backgrounds have lower IQs, are of lower socioeconomic status, and therefore have less opportunity to succeed in society on a traditional career path. They are thus more likely to be involved in gang activity and violent crime. A key part of their goal is to enhance their Significance in the eyes of females and other gang members.¹⁵

Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, a wife-and-husband team of behavioral scientists, examined all the homicides committed in the city of Detroit in one year, 1972. Their analysis revealed that the majority of these violent crimes were committed in the course of "social conflict" where status (that is, Significance) was at stake. Actors in these murderous dramas – both perpetrators and victims – were predominantly young males, unemployed and single, likely to feel insignificant and low in social worth.

Even though the link between aggression and dominance (and hence Significance) may be primordial and universal, especially for men, the specific culture in which people find themselves matters a lot. Militaristic cultures such as Germany of the 1930s or Russia have held the value of aggressiveness in high esteem and honor the lives and memory of courageous soldiers and victorious generals. A study of violence in America's Southern states coined the term "culture of honor" to describe the regional norms' belief in fighting to cancel humiliations and insults.¹⁶

Sex and Significance

Desire for sexual pleasure is, of course, one of the most dominant forces affecting human life. Hundreds of billions of dollars a year are spent on sex globally, including money spent on pornography, human trafficking, prostitution, and sex toys. In all known societies, sex is the subject of laws,

norms, and taboos that impact the lives of billions of people around the planet.

Whereas sex is often considered a physical and biological need, it has a substantial psychological underlay related to the Quest for Significance, particularly for men. Sex may confer Significance directly, through evidence of their own attractiveness and charm that are admired and envied, or indirectly, through the demonstration of their power and dominance in the case of rape, or through the propagation of multiple children who symbolically and biologically extend their existence and world impact.

Seduction

In Mozart's illustrious opera *Don Giovanni*, Leporello, Giovanni's faithful servant, sings the seducer's praise by cataloging the women his master slept with, as follows: "In Italy, six hundred and forty / In Germany, two hundred and thirty-one; a hundred in France; in Turkey, ninety-one / But in Spain already one thousand and three."

Don Giovanni's sexual exploits are obviously a source of his pride and claims to Significance. However, the use of sex as a path to Significance goes well beyond the world of opera. Researchers Pamela Regan and Carla Dreyer asked college students (men and women) how and why they chose romantic and sexual partners. They found that young men in particular admitted they were mostly following the behavior of their peers, so that they could enhance their prestige.¹⁷

In a study conducted in 2007, Cindy Meston and David Buss asked approximately 1,500 people why they had sex. Major gender differences emerged: Men more than women reported that sexual liaisons were a way to improve their social status. The males agreed more with statements such as, "I wanted to enhance my reputation," "I wanted to brag to my friends about my conquests," and "I needed another notch on my belt."¹⁸

Again and again, men who are sexually active are found to regard that as a way of proving and enhancing their sense of masculinity and vitality.¹⁹ Indeed, the common phrase "sexual conquests" strongly suggests that sexual success is seen as a triumphant source of Significance and social worth. The seducer is viewed as a "conqueror" to whom glory is due.

Rape

One of the most prevalent yet underreported crimes, rape, is not primarily a sexually motivated act – many scholars say – but an act of aggression intended to degrade, humiliate, and subjugate the victim, to exercise dominance and, in this way, to assert one's own supposed superiority. Analyses of gang rapes suggest that participants in this odious crime are trying to prove their masculinity to the other rapists. Gang rapes often follow a ritualized pattern in which the sequence of carrying out the offense is determined by each man's status in the group.²⁰

Consistent with the notion that rape is a way that a criminal – often a man who is pathetic and powerless in most of his life's domains – tries to build up his own Significance, social psychologists have distinguished between rape-free and rape-prone societies. Rape-free societies are ones where women are respected and enjoy a recognized and positive status in their culture. Rape-prone societies are ones where women are held in low esteem and are subordinate in almost every way; where male power has been toppled from its former overlord status; and/or where societies have rigid conceptions of “masculinity” versus “femininity.”

Researchers conclude that most Western societies are among the rape-prone, in part because of strong women's movements pointing out gender-based discrimination, plus a sense among some men that they have lost their former power. And so, rape is among the most frequent crimes of violence in the United States.²¹

Rape committed as part of war has a second-level intention. War criminals are not only besmirching the humanity of female victims. The attackers are also attempting to humiliate the male-led armies and governments of their enemy – as if to trumpet the insulting notion that the enemies are incapable of “protecting their women.” Thus, the goal is to diminish the Significance of both the women and the men of their adversary.

The fact that rape during wartime is so common attests to the enduring power of this appalling phenomenon. Historical accounts report that over two million women were raped by Soviet troops when the Red Army liberated Berlin in 1945. Between 250,000 and 500,000 women and girls were raped in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, more than 60,000 in a civil war in Sierra Leone, between 20,000 and 50,000 in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo