

'You Are Not Special; You Are Not Exceptional': Why David McCullough Jr.'s dose of reality to young people is important

David McCullough Jr. is a high-school English teacher and the son of Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough. In 2012, his ["You Are Not Special" graduation speech](#) went viral. His speech is more relevant than ever, and not just for new graduates.

McCullough tells the graduates, "You are not special. You are not exceptional." He continues,

"Contrary to what your U-9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing seventh grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you... you're nothing special."

Imagine what McCullough might say to a group of adults: *Contrary to what your job title or the size of your house suggests, despite your Diamond Medallion status on Delta Airlines, your platinum status at Marriott, and no matter that you are the only person in your neighborhood to drive a Tesla X SUV...you're nothing special.*

Putting us in our place, McCullough exhorts, "Your planet, I'll remind you, is not the center of its solar system, your solar system is not the center of its galaxy, your galaxy is not the center of the universe. In fact, astrophysicists assure us the universe has no center; therefore, you cannot be

it.”

We can all recall a time when we put ourselves at the center of the universe. We may have felt frustration when the traffic on the highway didn't part like the Red Sea. We may have become indignant while sitting in a crowded physician's waiting room, not knowing a genuine emergency has caused the delay.

Most people we encounter today will treat us like the ordinary person we are. Meeting our goals may be the most important thing in the world to us, but not to them.

Know What Is Important

About goals: Do we even know what is important? McCullough believes we have “come to love accolades more than genuine achievement.”

When accolades become “the point,” McCullough cautions, “We're

happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that's the quickest way, or only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece, something to pose with, crow about, something with which to leverage ourselves into a better spot on the social totem pole."

Echoing the [wisdom of Viktor Frankl](#), McCullough points out that the path to fulfillment is never direct: "Like accolades ought to be, the fulfilling life is a consequence, a gratifying byproduct. It's what happens when you're thinking about [and doing] more important things."

A purpose beyond self-aggrandizement leads to the good life. McCullough advises, "Exercise free will and creative, independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them."

We can't lead a meaningful life when our mind is full of *look at me* thoughts of specialness.

Taking Action

What do we do when we find ourselves thinking and acting in ways to reinforce our specialness?

In his book, [One Small Step Can Change Your Life](#), psychologist Robert Maurer applies kaizen, a Japanese organizational development strategy, to personal change. To change, rather than relying on easily depleted willpower or overly ambitious targets that set you up for failure, deploy small steps. Maurer writes,

"Small actions take very little time or money, and they are agreeable even to those of us who haven't laid up bulk supplies of willpower. Small actions trick the brain into thinking: Hey, this change is so tiny that it's no big deal. No need to get worked up. No risk of failure or unhappiness here. By outfoxing the fear response, small actions allow the brain to build up new, permanent habits— at a pace that may be surprisingly brisk."

Suppose your specialness takes the form of overspending. Maurer prescribes, as a first step, taking one item out of your shopping cart. Suppose you are too special to tidy your home? Maurer recommends tidying up for just 5 minutes.

Maurer assures us, “By taking steps so tiny that they seem trivial or laughable, you’ll sail past obstacles that have defeated you before.”

Kaizen is a method of change for those who are willing to give up being special. No sweeping changes, no grandiose plans, just simple, small actions that will compound into a purposeful life.

Special people don’t take simple, small steps. Instead, they craft grand plans. One-year later, while sitting on the couch, they may see nothing has changed and blame the world for its failure to recognize their greatness.

Start Before You’re Ready

When we give in to our need to be special, we have no one to blame for the lack of fulfillment we experience. Self-aggrandizement leads only to temporary highs. McCullough said,

“The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life, is an achievement, not something that fell into your lap because you’re a nice person or Mommy ordered it from the caterer. You’ll note the founding fathers took pains to secure your inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—quite an active word, pursuit—which leaves, I should think, little time for lying around watching parrots roller-skate on YouTube.”

There will never be a better moment to pivot away from being special. In his book [Do the Work](#), Steven Pressfield observes how our thinking will derail us if we let it: “The enemy is

our chattering brain, which, if we give it so much as a nanosecond, will start producing excuses, alibis, transparent self-justifications, and a million reasons why we can't/ shouldn't/ won't do what we know we need to do."

Since our desire to be special will come again and our mind will always be able to make excuses, Pressfield advises, "Start before you're ready."

The world may or may not acknowledge what you achieve, but "the fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life" will be yours.

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