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*Five Steps to Making a Difference*

P. K. HALLINAN

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*A Life That Matters: Five Steps to Making a Difference*

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*For Jeanne*

*I'm just trying to matter.*

—JUNE CARTER CASH



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## INTRODUCTION

*In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.*

T.S. ELIOT, "THE LOVE SONG OF  
J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"

I'd like to be clear right up front: All life matters. I would never say otherwise. What this book is about, however, is having a life that matters to *you*.

In this country, more than half the people in the workforce don't like their jobs.<sup>1</sup> One of the main reasons is that they don't feel fulfilled. If this describes you, I believe my observations and suggestions can help.

Not everyone has the same desire to leave an imprint on the world. For me, however, impact has always been a major issue. By my early twenties, I was already a father with two young sons, and I worked as a toy department manager for a major retailer. It wasn't a bad job, but I remember being overwhelmed by the pointlessness of my life. All I was doing was making money, putting it in the bank, spending it;

making money, putting it in the bank, spending it—and on and on.

I was bored to death.

One night in bed, with my wife sound asleep beside me and the rain pelting the roof, I had a real heart-to-heart talk with myself.

*What do you want to do?*

*What do you want to be?*

*What would make you feel good about yourself?*

I didn't have all the answers, but I knew one thing for certain: I wanted my life to matter. I wanted to make a difference in the world around me. I wanted people to know I had been here. Or, as it is sometimes poetically put, I wanted to leave a footprint.

When I awoke the next morning, I decided to become a famous novelist. I chose this career because it sounded like an easy way to make a lot of money—and also a good way to reach a lot of people. I figured all a novelist ever did was smoke cigarettes and type. How hard could it be?

Well, it also helps if you know how to write, but that didn't stop me. I plowed ahead and churned out two really terrible manuscripts about a character—based loosely on myself—who was much smarter and wittier than every other character in the story. Both manuscripts are now in a landfill in Kearny Mesa, California, where they belong.

To a degree, life happens *to* us. That is, we occasionally must react to something that confronts us suddenly out of nowhere—something we didn't plan,

weren't expecting, and maybe didn't even want. This forces us to do something we might not otherwise ever have done but that significantly changes our lives. That's exactly what happened to me.

Christmas was drawing near. It was early evening, and I was loafing around in the living room, watching television instead of typing away on my third awful novel. My wife came into the room with a big smile on her face and said, "Honey, you're a writer. Why don't you write a little children's book for our kids as a Christmas present?"

I remember liking the fact that she called me a *writer*—I sat up a little taller—but I think she was just being generous. I had never written a children's book, I had barely even read any children's books, and I certainly didn't know how to illustrate a children's book. So I said, "Sure."

This was a life-changing answer.

Over the next two weeks, I scribbled out a little story, drew some pen-and-ink cartoons of my kids, and eventually cranked out a real gem called *Kenny and Mikey Meet the Jungle People!* As ridiculous as this book was, the kids liked it. Much to my surprise, so did everyone else! Family, friends, uninvited guests—everyone said I should write more children's books. So I did.

Forty years have now passed, and I have written and illustrated more than ninety children's books and have sold almost ten million copies worldwide. I feel I have left a footprint. I think "leaving a footprint" is what June Carter Cash had in mind when

she would say, “I’m just trying to matter”—reported by many to be one of her favorite responses to questions regarding her personal aspirations.

If there is any one reason why I have sold so many books in my career, it’s because I decided very early on only to write books that help children and parents live better and happier lives.

I was walking down the street one day when I saw a dump truck rumbling by. On the side of the truck was this slogan: “Find a Hole and Fill It!” I loved it! I decided right then to do exactly the same thing with my children’s books. I would look for the empty spots—the unfulfilled areas—in people’s lives and fill them as best I could. This led very quickly to a standard of only writing books that promote good old-fashioned family values.

What I didn’t realize at the time was that these traditional, godly values never change. This fact alone has kept many of my books in print for more than twenty-five years. My books never grow old. They never go out of fashion.

Also, as my young readers grow up with my books—as they mature and change—what they get out of the books changes too. For this reason, I originally called my series of children’s books “Values for Life.” However, by the time I got around to trying to trademark this slogan, it was already taken. So my publisher and I settled on Lifelong Values for Kids. Not quite as clever, but perfectly descriptive of what my books are intended to be.

The real payoff for me has been in how my books

have achieved everything I hoped they would. I remember a woman who approached me several years ago at a book signing at an elementary school. She was clutching one of my books that looked like it had been buried in a coal mine and only recently dug up. She asked if I would mind signing it, even though she wasn't buying it new that day. I happily agreed. She went on to tell me that her son, who had just turned fourteen, was throwing away all his kiddy books, except one. Mine. This was the only children's book he owned that he did not want to part with. I thanked her profusely for sharing that bit of encouragement with me.

It turns out my books have filled a lot of holes in a lot of lives over the years. I feel extremely blessed by this. It helps me feel—to a degree—that my life really does matter.

After forty years of observing life and filling holes, I want to share with you what I consider to be the five most important steps you can take if you want to feel that you have done something valuable with your life:

1. Work hard.
2. Go in the strength you have.
3. Finish what you start.
4. Be patient.
5. Help other people along the way.

These five steps to making a difference are tried-and-true principles that will work for anyone.

I know they will work for you.