Deciding to Live Intentionally

When I turned sixty, I became aware of the dash.

Not the dates.

Not the stone.

The dash.

Born — 1960

Died — _____

That small line between them.

I began to wonder what would fill it.

For most of my life, I moved fast—built things, fixed things, started things. I assumed impact required intention: big plans, mission statements, bold declarations.

But a few years ago, I ran into an old friend from my elementary school years.

“Do you remember walking me to school?” he asked.

I didn’t.

We had been boys. He had just arrived in America—unsure of the language, unsure of the rules, unsure of everything. I had simply walked beside him. Every morning. No speeches. No strategy. Just presence.

“That’s one of my strongest memories,” he said. “I didn’t feel alone.”

That sentence landed hard.

I began to wonder how many lives I’ve touched without knowing it—how many small moments meant more than I ever realized.

And then the thought widened into something heavier.

I realized I’m making impressions on people all the time—small ones, quiet ones—without noticing. For good or for bad. A careless word. A sharp tone. A dismissive look. The kind of moment I might forget in ten minutes could live in someone else for ten years.

And that possibility horrified me.

Not just the good I might have done without knowing—but the harm. The bad impacts I may have left behind in other people’s lives without ever intending to.

In day-to-day living, I never expected to change someone’s life unintentionally. Sometimes I just showed up.

Now, there were other times when I did choose it. I stepped into roles where the whole point was to be used—to help, to guide, to carry someone through a hard moment. Youth ministry. Mission trips. Those

long nights at summer camp when a kid hit a breaking point and melted down. Those moments mattered, and I knew they mattered, because I had chosen to be there for that purpose.

What shocked me was learning where the biggest moments usually lived.

Not in the sermons.

Not in the plans we made.

In the quiet stuff.

In the hallway conversation after everyone else left.

In sitting with someone when they couldn't talk yet.

In a simple sentence at the right time.

In noticing someone who was slipping through the cracks.

You just never know the impact you make on other people's lives.

And that was when I understood something:

Impact and intention are not the same thing.

You can stumble into impact.

But you cannot stumble into a meaningful life.

Impact may happen accidentally.

But intention must be chosen.

So I began asking myself different questions.

Does my life have meaning?

Am I making people's lives lighter or heavier?

What will still matter after I'm gone?

I began asking:

"What can I do that outlives me?"

"What kind of man do I want to be remembered as?"

I realized living intentionally doesn't mean scripting every conversation or forcing grand gestures.

It means structuring my life around direction instead of reaction.

I started small.

“You’ve never met a stranger,” someone close to me once said.

“You don’t know how to walk past people.”

It was true.

So I decided to use it.

What used to be personality would become purpose.

I began to see it as a kind of strength—my small superpower. The ability to make people feel seen. The ability to lower the temperature in a room. The ability to leave a smile where there wasn’t one before.

I carry humor like a pocketknife—not to cut anyone, but to open a smile. I’ll tell a tired cashier they look like a Monday-morning survivor, or ask a waiter for the “honest truth” about the menu. Sometimes it’s corny, but it’s always warm.

Intentional living isn’t about grand gestures.

It’s about refusing to let people feel invisible.

I believe you brighten a room either when you enter it or when you leave it.

I choose to brighten it when I enter.

Now, when I think about that dash, I hope that when I’m gone, people won’t talk about what I built or fixed or accumulated.

I hope they’ll say:

“He made me feel seen.”

“He left me laughing.”

“He didn’t grow bitter.”

“He finished well.”

And most of all, when it’s over, I hope I will hear:

“Well done, my good and faithful servant.”