In Memory of Gabriel Marcel and The Little Prince

My name is Grace Williams-Kim, and I am a junior at University Laboratory High School. I live in Champaign, IL, blessed with the best corn and soy fields one may ever see.
Let’s say you are being retro and listening to the radio when you hear about an event at your local library to help encourage young kids to read more books (what with this craze of screens and sorts nowadays). You like to help when you can, and this is a cause that you would like to be involved in. The library advertises that as a community member, you can participate by either donating books or volunteering to read to kids. You try to decide which option is best. On one hand, donating books is simple, takes less time, and still helps the children. On the other hand, it might be more fulfilling to actually interact with the kids and to know that you are actively participating in the cause. At this moment, you might be inclined to ask yourself: What is the relationship between an individual and their community? But before we can arrive at this question, we must first ask, what does a relationship entail? What is the meaning of our individual existence and influence, and how, then, can we create these relationships, and why are they important?

Like on the occasional game show that allows one to “phone a friend” for help, we can call on French existentialist Gabriel Marcel to rise from his Parisian grave and help us formulate the closest thing to an answer to this question that has plagued my own existence for the past month. Existentialism is the subfield of Philosophy that believes the meaning of life and human existence is within the realm of our individual responsibility. Gabriel Marcel was one of the leading existentialists in the 20th century, and he believed that concrete experience, the reality we supposedly witness
day-to-day, is the route to choose when studying philosophy. His belief in concrete experience allowed him to comfortably make observations about our world, including one of his main perceptions:

**we live in a broken world where ontological exigence, a need for the sense of being, is lost.**

According to Marcel, ontological exigence can come from the idea of “having a body” vs. “being a body.” During our encounters with others, he relates “having a body” to a state of assimilation, a body that only takes up space in a room and offers no participation, while “being a body,” on the other hand, encourages one’s contribution to society, which meaningfully connects one with others. Marcel’s idea has now provided us with a foundation of understanding the relationship between one and their community, but it is often helpful to view these kinds of ideas in a more illustrative manner.

We can then call on the well-known short novel, *The Little Prince*, which tells of the encounter between a pilot stranded in the desert and a golden-haired boy, the Little Prince, who is also foreign to the area as he has come from his home far from Earth—Asteroid B-612. Irritated by the countless questions of the Little Prince, the pilot is initially dismissive of him; however, throughout the course of the eight days they are together, a relationship of great importance forms. Their narrative builds on the tales of the Little Prince’s life and travels in which the readers are introduced to ideas that align with Marcel’s states of being—having a body and being a body. *The Little Prince* not only shows the significance between these two distinctions, but it also depicts how cultivating relationships can establish a meaningful contribution to society.

The state of having a body can come in different forms, which we see when the Little Prince visits other planets. The Little Prince experiences a rocky relationship with his flower on his asteroid, so he leaves home and travels to other planets to find more friends where he encounters an adult on each one. There are some who are perfect portrayals of Marcel’s “having a body” ideology. The planets of the conceited man, the tippler, and the businessman, for example, are quite literally only bodies filling up space. The conceited man only listens to praise, the tippler is stuck in an endless cycle of drinking to forget he is ashamed of drinking, and the businessman has devoted his life to counting stars whose numbers he keeps in a bank, an activity even the Little Prince acknowledges is useless. These adults are so absorbed in their own lives that neither their actions
nor presence contributes meaningfully to their community.

There are also people, however, who can contribute productively to society but still don't fulfill the standards of “being a body.” In the novel, it is the lamplighter who is depicted as so. The lamplighter serves his community day and night by providing (and extinguishing) the planet’s light. Unfortunately, the planet has spun faster and faster so day and night only last for a minute, so the lamplighter is forced to stay at his post forever; his job has swallowed his life. Yet the Little Prince likes him because “he is thinking of something else besides himself.” He is not only providing light for the whole planet but figuratively, he can be seen as guiding others on the “right path” as he is supplying them with light to see. Can the lamplighter then be seen as “being a body,” one whose contributions to society in turn allow them to connect with others? Not exactly. The lamplighter is in fact an excellent example of Marcel’s other characteristic of having a body: the “broken world and the functional person.”

According to Marcel, our feeling towards a routine task which we initially find tedious, can evolve into a “necessity that is accepted with indifference.” Marcel says that our sense of need of being can come from finding a task frustrating, for it implies that we are at least conscious of our broken world; however, the extreme case develops when we become numb to this ontological exigence and can no longer see how our world is broken. The lamplighter seems to represent this extreme case as he has accepted that his monotonous task is now his life. His task also prevents him from creating relationships, for as the Little Prince points out,

“That man [the lamplighter] is the only one of them whom I could have made my friend. But his planet is indeed too small. There is no room on it for two people…” Not only is there physically no room, but perhaps it is also implying that the lamplighter himself doesn’t have the capacity to develop relationships with others. His fixation on completing his job has not only obstructed his life, but the possibility of establishing ties with others as well. As there is no mention of anyone else on his planet, we can say that the lamplighter is so focused on following orders, he isn’t even aware that his job has such an influence on others.

Even if he is technically contributing to society, his actions mean nothing if he cannot also create relations with others.

So why are these relationships so important? Imagine, you arrive at a new school where you know no one, so therefore you are surrounded by people who mean nothing to you. At this point, you could decide to live the rest of your school career alone (lunch, homework, recess, all by your lonesome), or you could venture out and meet your peers and teachers. I suppose if you are an introvert extremist, you could choose to talk to no one, but I think most would agree that meeting others would be more fulfilling. And what’s more, form-
ing meaningful connections with other people increases the value of these relationships. While this might seem obvious, the Little Prince is introduced to this idea from the fox he meets on Earth. The Little Prince is ready to become friends right away, but the fox tells him that they must first tame each other, “to establish ties.” It is only through this taming that they will then become meaningful to one another. The fox says,

“To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you . . . To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other.”

As the fox says, the world will remain ordinary only until you make it not so. It is not just about one’s contribution, for if everyone had a mindless job like that of the lamp-lighter where no one ever interacted with each other, then what a pointless world that would be; no one would be able to appreciate their own existence or one another’s. It is the relationships that are conceived which bring meaning to our lives, even including the little things. The fox tells the Little Prince how the fields of wheat have no meaning to him now, but once they have tamed each other, the color of wheat will remind the fox of the Little Prince’s golden hair, and he “shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat . . .” “The connection between the Little Prince and the fox makes even the ordinary, like wheat, more meaningful. The Little Prince leaves the pilot with this same thought in the last pages of the novel. When it is time for the Little Prince to go back to his planet, the pilot does not want to leave him, but the Little Prince tells the pilot that he will be up in the sky laughing, so every time the pilot sees the stars, he will be reminded of the Little Prince. The stars will always remain in the sky, so it is like the Little Prince, too, will never truly leave the pilot.
The Little Prince is no longer physically with the pilot, but his thoughts and words of wisdom have lingered with him, for here the pilot is thinking about the Little Prince and his stories six years later. The pilot had once been like any other adult—dismissive of curiosity and the little things—yet his time with the Little Prince reminded him of the importance of keeping one’s imagination and childlike wonder alive, which many times disappear when one grows up. If we return to our original question, what is the relationship between an individual and their community, we now know that the answer is beyond merely having a body. It is even more than physical contribution, like the lamplighter. Rather, we have learned that this relationship emerges when one imprints a meaningful influence on their community, which is especially important, for this bond is not one sided; it is a perpetual growth of reciprocity. Your ideas ripple through others in such a way that perhaps one day, your absence will still leave a presence. This, I propose, is the closest explanation to a question with endless interpretations of the true answer.

Endnotes:
7. Saint Exupéry, 80.
8. Saint Exupéry, 83.