

“Small Blessings”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Last weekend, my husband Dave and I went on a short vacation out of town. We discovered Long Point Beach, on the northern shore of Lake Erie.

It was a beautiful day and the water was lovely and the sky was blue.

But I think the thing we appreciated most was the sand beneath our feet.

At one point Dave said that we were walking through time...treading on granules that go back millions of years.

After he said that we were silent for awhile, reminded of the awe-inspiring scale of things, in which our time together--let alone our little weekend vacation--was dwarfed by the lifespan of the sand dunes.

We were aware of how big we were, in a way: the centre of our own story on a beautiful summer day...

And yet how small we were.

How temporary and subject to forces around us...deposited in this particular time and place, not unlike the tiny fragments of quartz deposited by a glacier during the last Ice Age.¹

Our time, just a tiny scrap in history's continuum.

As my songwriting friend Jon Brooks put it, “How small and hardly at all we are.”²

¹ Mostly quartz granules, and likely deposited as glaciers advanced and retreated during the most recent Ice Age. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Erie

But just how small is that, exactly?

Too small to comprehend, really. But that doesn't stop people from trying.

Many have thought to compare grains of sand with the size of the universe, to try to get a handle on the scope of things.

One English researcher said that if the earth were the size of a grain of sand, our solar system would be the size of Durham Cathedral.³ That's an enormous church with a 66 meter-high tower.

So, that's one solar system. One star.
How many stars are there, compared to grains of sand?

Quoting a book called "Spectrums" by David Blatner, National Public Radio reported that there are 70 thousand million, million, million stars—that is, multiple stars for every grain of sand.⁴

If you're curious about how many grains of sand that is (and who wouldn't be?) well, according to the story, researchers in Hawaii (where they're very keen on sand) estimate there are 7 quintillion, five hundred quadrillion grains of sand on the earth.

This sermon is called "Small Blessings"...and the first one is that from this point on, I will not quote any more numbers that large.

My point is, if there are multiple stars for every grain of sand, well, our human lives are certainly very, very, very small. So small, we're "hardly at all."

But on the other hand, the same NPR story points out that the number of stars in the known universe is the same as the number of molecules in just ten drops of water.

² Jon Brooks, "Small" on Moth Nor Rust © 2009 Jon Brooks (SOCAN).

³ Pete Edwards, astronomer, University of Durham. "How Big is the Universe... Compared to a Grain of Sand?" The Guardian on YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC7yFDblzOA>

⁴ Robert Krulwich, "Which is Greater, the Number of Sand Grains on Earth or Stars in the Sky?" National Public Radio website, <http://tinyurl.com/9uobfpj>

So that makes us pretty big.

This paradox is something that has fascinated people ever since, well, since we started gazing at the stars while walking on the beach.

The 12th Century mystic named Rumi put it well when he wrote this poetic little dialogue with the God of his understanding:

“My heart is so small
it's almost invisible.
How can You place
such big sorrows in it?

"Look," He answered,
"your eyes are even smaller,
yet they behold the world."

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When we “behold the world” in prayer or contemplation...in the direct experience of our everyday lives...or as we watch the daily news, we can't help but be aware of the importance of each individual...

...and the magnitude of sorrow that engulfs us when individual lives are lost.

This has been especially present to us this week, as we've reflected on not one but two commercial airline disasters, the horrifying loss of life in Gaza and Israel, individual tragedies in Toronto communities and ongoing losses in our personal lives.

As small as we know we are in the cosmic scheme of things, each of these lives and losses is enormous.

Guided by the principles of Unitarian Universalism, we affirm the worth of every individual...and we extend that appreciation of worth to the whole interdependent web of existence.

As well, our UU Sources encourage us to find insight in our own direct experience, while seeking wisdom from teachers of all religions and from the ongoing revelations of science.

As we hold these principles and sources close to our hearts, we can't help but notice both the relative unimportance of some aspects of human existence—while affirming the crucial importance of others.

For example, I'm thinking that my desires for certain material comforts are pretty “small”—you might even say “small-minded.”

The insistence on being right can seem trivial.
Many ambitions, insignificant.

And yet, any small actions toward kindness, peace or sustainability are hugely important when it comes to weaving the web...or perhaps we should say repairing the web...that is the interconnected Whole.

Such actions—healing, helpful and sustainable—might be so small, they appear to be “non-actions.”

They might certainly appear humble or unimportant through our current cultural lens.

But we need to contemplate what's really big and what's really small.

Perhaps small blessings are the keys to the big changes we need.

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In his book “Coming to our Senses,” mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn invokes ancient Chinese wisdom when he talks about “The Taming Power of the Small.”⁵

As a meditation teacher, he shows us how to appreciate the smallest of blessings: especially the simple experience of breathing—of being alive.

⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 547-550.

In the passage I'm about to quote, he's talking about the United States in particular, but his thinking extends to us as well:

“As a country, we need to take little steps, maybe even tiny steps, but brave steps nonetheless, in the direction of greater wholeness and greater embodiment of mindfulness if we hope to heal the suffering of the world while contributing less to compounding it. [...]

It is important that we not underestimate the power of the tiniest shifts in consciousness...toward greater awareness and greater selflessness.

Whether we are politicians or simply citizens, practice can mean allowing ourselves tiny little tastes of presence and goodness; sampling such moments many times over, and so coming to know the taste of inward clarity and peace.

We can build on our experience by staying in touch with the present moment and not losing our minds in the face of the challenges and opportunities we face.”

Kabat-Zinn continues:

“As a species, we are a cosmic experiment in process. The universe could care less how it works out.

But *we* might, if we care about anything larger than our own small-minded gain and transient comfort. And, clearly, we do.

That is the beauty of our species.

We are not to be underestimated. But the only intelligence on the planet that could ever underestimate us is ourselves.”

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“It is important that we not underestimate the power of the tiniest shifts in consciousness.”

In our world, it's easy to miss these tiny but significant shifts...just as we can often overlook the small talents and gifts we offer to the world...and the multiplicity of blessings we experience each day.

It's been said that to dispel the darkness, you only need the light of one small candle.

With that in mind, it's easy to see how our modern world might make it difficult to appreciate the "light" of our individual actions.

As we are constantly aware of others' activities and of innumerable needs, our own small light can be washed out in a constant glare...and our small voice can become lost in the cacophony.

That doesn't make it any less important.

In the song "Bicycle Bell," I try not only to affirm the value of cycling, which of course is very powerful and important...

But also to affirm the value of all small, clear and powerful actions in this world—which, when joined together with other small, clear, and powerful actions, can bring about meaningful change.

As Margaret Mead said, in words quoted in our hymnbook: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Spiritual growth—which is also explicitly encouraged in our Unitarian principles—supports us in doing that.

Through mindful service, reflection, contemplation and prayer we learn to perceive each moment, each breath, each blessing as one ringing note in the vast sea of Presence itself.

In reverent awareness—which some people call mindfulness, some people call worship and some people call prayer—we become simultaneously aware of how small we are, and how connected we are to the vast Wholeness of life.

Encouraged by Mother Teresa and so many others, we learn to "be faithful in small things, for it is in them that our strength lies."

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Each human life, and each moment within it, is one small blessing.
And within each of us, so much strength lies.

I think I have just a little scrap of time left...so I'd like to share one more short story with you.

It's a story that has passed through several hands, but this version comes from an Episcopal priest named Cynthia Bourgeault.

Her work focuses on reclaiming the contemplative tradition in Christianity, and she's based in Victoria, B.C.

“Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway world, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand oak tree.

Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy;

And since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses.

There were seminars called “Getting All You Can Out of Your Shell.” There were groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall out of the tree.

There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day, in the midst of this kingdom, there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently “dropped out of the blue” by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns.

And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, “We...are...that!”

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded.

But one of them continued to engage him in conversation. I think that must have been an Acornitarian.

She said, “So, tell us, how would we become that tree?”

“Well,” said he, pointing downward, “It has something to do with going into the ground...and cracking open the shell.”

“Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid. Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”⁶

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It seems to me, we all know the small acorn within us—the one that is reluctant to be transformed into a mighty oak.

We might be reluctant to give up our shell, in order to let our true light shine, or the voice of our true presence be known.

Perhaps in order to grow--that is, to become somehow "bigger" or perhaps simply more mature--we must dare to see how small we are, and yet, how equally beyond measure.

By fully inhabiting and blessing the “small,” we find strength to grow.

It’s a task that isn’t easy...but it’s easier together...

As we take our place among the multitude of hearts and minds,
Beholding the infinity of sand and stars...

That make up this magnificent—and miniscule—world.

Blessings to you all.

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⁶ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 64-65.