

Accumulation of Small Things

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Reading

Verses from chapters 63 and 64 of the *Tao Te Ching*
from the translation by Ursula LeGuin:

(from chapter 63)

Study the hard while it's easy.
Do big things while they're small.
The hardest jobs in the world start out easy,
the great affairs of the world start small.

So the wise soul,
by never dealing with great things,
gets great things done.

(from chapter 64)

The tree you can't reach your arms around
grew from a tiny seedling.
The nine-story tower rises
from a heap of clay.
The ten-thousand mile journey
begins beneath your foot.

Sermon

This past summer we spent some time with extended family, as no doubt some of you did as well. One morning, at the house where we were staying, I filled the kettle with water, turned on the burner, and set my Earl Gray teabag into my cup on the nearby counter.

Then I went outside.

Five minutes later (or it might have been ten!) I remembered the kettle and my tea. Heading back inside, I rushed through the dining room toward the kitchen. My nephew, sitting at his laptop at the dining room table, looked up – “Was that your tea, Uncle Ken?”

Turning the corner into the kitchen I saw that not only had my nephew rescued the kettle from meltdown, he had poured my tea!

What a guy! Twenty-one, and with growing maturity to show for it.

(For one measure of maturity, as I understand it, has to do with simply doing what one sees needs to be done – no encouragement needed, no reward expected. And by that measure, we surely do need more mature people in the world.)

It also occurred to me, as I sipped my tea, how important is the accumulation of small things, modest gestures and deeds in the course of our more or less ordinary days. It is, after all, the accumulation of small things which creates big things, great things... like lasting and loving relationship, like community, right on up to a more just and peaceful and sustainable world.

I shared these musings with my nephew. He smiled and agreed.

I think we are going to remember this cup of tea, my nephew and I. The memory itself, the connection made over a cup of tea, another small thing contributing to something actually immeasurable, the quality and depth of relationship over time.

Indeed, we might think on this as we pour our tea and coffee for one another during Fellowship Hour...

A little later in the summer, I was reminded even more forcefully of the power which rests in the accumulation of small things.

My Uncle Ray died a few weeks ago. Ray was the husband of my mother's younger sister. He died after a brief illness, but he had had numerous health problems over the years.

That said, it was not his health problems that most deeply characterized Uncle Ray. Not at all. Rather, it was the accumulation of small things in the way that he lived his life, day by day, year by year, that characterized Ray and that led to the overflowing church at his memorial service.

Uncle Ray was a member of what Tom Brokaw famously called the greatest generation. He served in the South Pacific during the Second World War. And it was there that he sustained the wounds that led to lifelong back pain and eventual disability (so-called, as you'll see) – for a combination of shrapnel and shreds of coral lodged in his spine and could not be removed.

Ray wrote about his war experiences, wrote as if in the first person of the hometown buddy with whom he served and who didn't come back from the war. Reading about all that Uncle Ray went through, what he and the others endured and what they did, one cannot but be in awe.

But here's the thing – as much as I respect and really do feel a sense of awe at what Ray did when he was not much older than my nephew is now, or my own son, I find myself in yet more awe of the way he lived in the sixty years since.

Uncle Ray was an ordinary man in many ways. A working man. A family man. But listen to his accumulation of small things:

In the Connecticut town where he lived most of his life Ray served on various town boards and committees, was a selectman, was a Lions Club founder and past president, served on various committees and boards in his church, was active in the VFW (the veterans outnumbered the family at the graveside, that's the kind of love and respect they had for Ray), and on it went. And meanwhile together with my Aunt Alice they cared for their family of four children and now grandchildren too.

But it was even more, quite a bit more actually, than offices held and organizations supported. One little story makes the point. My brother Jim, who got to know Ray and Alice and their family better than I during years that Jim and his wife lived in Hartford, sent me an email describing a trip to the market with Ray. Jim says he was expecting they would pick up submarine sandwiches for lunch and be back in twenty minutes. But any expedition in town for

Ray, whether to the market or Home Depot for supplies for one of many projects around the house, turned into a social occasion. Everyone knew and loved Ray, and Ray would stop to talk with everyone, young and old. Because for the sixty years of his life after the war, Ray forged these connections with his natural warmth, his unforced interest in others, his sense of humor.

After retirement his volunteering took him to nursing homes and the senior center, serving meals, sharing the chocolates he had made... to give away.

Well, I could go on and on. And none of this is to say that Ray was some kind of perfect guy. Talk to Alice... But he was a good man, a gentle and strong man, who unpretentiously served and served and served. And had time left over to simply be a good friend and have a good laugh and a cup of coffee... and another... with old buddies.

All these small things. Accumulating to a life well-lived, a life weaving community and love (even though Ray of all people would never have put it in such high flown terms).

(All of which is also to say that the word “disabled” *really* didn’t apply to Ray. He did more on his scooter, in unspoken pain, than plenty of folks do pain-free with two good legs.)

Well, I’ve told you a lot about my Uncle Ray. And the message here is I expect by now self-evident.

It is natural enough to wonder (in any case I sure do wonder) whether the things we do make much difference in our troubled world. But all you have to do is to look at the life of one person who so clearly and palpably made a difference through the accumulation of small things to know that we need wonder no longer. We need simply to do the next small thing.

Which will be different for each of us.

To teach the next child.

To soothe the next hurt.

To speak the next kind word.

And whatever our work, inside or outside the home, each small thing grows into larger accomplishment, ripples to wider effect. More than ripples, really, since in our ecologically interconnected and interdependent world, the effects of the smallest act can expand exponentially.

Alice Walker put it poetically: “Helped are those who find the courage to do at least one small thing each day to help the existence of another – plant, animal, river, human being. They shall be joined by multitude of the timid.”

And you know, interestingly, most of the time the results of these accumulations of small things are strangely invisible to us... even though they are often right before our eyes... and they *are* often huge.

The health of a community – whether a family or a church or a town – is almost entirely due to the accumulation of small things, things done by people like my Uncle Ray and like you and me, each day weaving and strengthening relationship with small kindnesses and old fashioned good deeds.

An accumulation of small things.

The web of technological wizardry in which we live – computers to cell phones to GPS and on and on – a centuries long accumulation of small things, one discovery leading to another, one innovation making possible another.

An accumulation of small things.

And life itself. What is the grand pageant of evolution about if not the result, the ongoing, ever changing result of the accumulation of small things, adaptive mutations leading to new species, altered landscapes, and the rich tapestry of life on the earth as we now know it?

Likewise to nurture this life and sustain it will require an accumulation of small things, efforts by scientists, by the business community, by politicians, by you and by me to find ways to live more sustainably.

Now, all this said, there is also a place in our lives for the grand gesture and the heroic act. Sometimes we need to think big and act dramatically. For example, when it comes to global warming, changing one light bulb from incandescent to compact fluorescent is good, but far from enough. We need a radically transformed political landscape and bold action. But we will achieve this, too, through the accumulation of letters and emails and votes. Small things... which do accumulate, and often eventually lead, in the current lingo, to a tipping point of dramatic and substantial change. They are like drops of water becoming a river. (I'm told that in Minnesota you can step across the Mississippi...)

In his book, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming* (another huge reality we haven't much noticed), activist, environmentalist, and entrepreneur Paul Hawken draws our attention to the hundreds of thousands of social justice and environmental organizations around the planet, from the largest ones we've all heard of to the smallest and most local; and he affirms that together they are indeed the largest movement in the world and may well be our collective hope for a better future.

And his point is that single organization, much less no single individual, will save us, will create justice and peace in one fell swoop. But all these efforts – including our efforts – large and small, he believes, are taking us in the direction of that better, more sustainable world. Are there risks? Of course. Might we fail? Yes, we might. Are there powerful forces arrayed against this progressive direction? Yes indeed.

But none of this is reason to turn away. And as Hawken puts it, "There are 'Help Wanted' signs everywhere." So there is no reason or excuse to turn away.

No more than Uncle Ray turned away from engagement in community and love of his family – his injuries could have left him bitter; he could have given up in the face of his challenges. But he intuitively knew the better way – connecting, taking the next step and the next, and in later years the next turn of the wheels of his motorized scooter.

And, as I've been suggesting, that's all *we* need to do, each in our own way.

And then, with the wisdom of ancient spiritual traditions, letting go of our attachment to results, to having things turn out *our way*. For we can't control all the results – but we *can* control our next step, and the next, with faith that the steps become the journey, the small things become the great thing of lives well and lovingly lived, of a world made the better for our presence in it, simply doing what we see needs to be done.

May it be so for each of us.

May it be so for this, our beloved and treasured Old Ship community. Still here, after all, because of the mostly modest ways in which individuals over the course of a dozen generations have cared for this community, for this old house, and for our open-minded and open-hearted faith.

And so... may we continue our shared journey, each step with kindness and love.

So may it be.