

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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When Bigger is Better

Just after his thirtieth birthday, Dr. Richard Moss was sitting in a restaurant, reading Franklin Merrell-Wolff's book *Pathways to Space*, when the words began to dance on the page. He writes, "As I looked around, everything seemed alive with energy. The very air itself was on fire with radiant light, and my body felt like an atomic reactor gone wild."

Dr. Moss walked outside, feeling as though he might explode. "A shimmering brilliance pervaded everything," he says, "and I began to dissolve into the world around me.... 'I' and the world 'out there' were almost, but not quite, indistinguishable.... Everything was significant.... Everything was connected. Everything made sense, not rationally, but because it was all part of one living thing.

"The part of me that was observing all this was trying to regain control.... I became afraid.... My medical mind ... offered a chain of distressing diagnoses: ... stroke, ... psychosis.... I could feel my heart pounding.... I tried to breathe deeply in order to center myself. I found nothing I had learned gave me any authority over this experience. I told myself to let go, but then I began to dissolve even more and the fear became overwhelming.

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Richard Moss was experiencing a spiritual awakening – the lines between self and other blurring, the boundaries between secular and sacred disappearing – awakening to the truth that everything is connected.

He continues, "This state of intense energy continued uninterrupted for ... five days.... I was standing at the edge of an abyss, afraid and unable to let go, yet too anguished to remain where I was. The level of excitement, often mixed with intense anxiety, made it almost impossible to sleep.... For whatever reason, I could not surrender....

“[Finally, I] reached a state of resignation.... I had done everything I could think to do.”

And here are my favorite words: “All that was left,” he says, “was acceptance. I vowed to myself that I would live one moment at a time, and even if I knew nothing but this misery, I would learn to be grateful.”¹

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Later, Richard Moss wrote of this experience, “I had been profoundly humbled. Even today, there is a part of me that remains in awe. I can trick myself into thinking that 'I' had achieved something, but I know that it was only by Grace that it became the doorway into a new life. The ineffable opening had given me everything....

“While it was never as intense as the first five-day episode, I relived dozens of mini-versions of the same process.... I would be afraid and reactive, then gradually bring myself fully into what was happening and suddenly enter a state of peace and radiance.”²

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This morning, as we lean into Thanksgiving, I invite you to join me in a reflection on the ways in which taking a broader view can lead us to gratitude. In this case, bigger is better.

American Tibetan Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, writes, “The biggest obstacle to taking a bigger perspective on life is that our emotions capture and blind us. The more sensitive we become to this, the more we realize that when we start getting angry or denigrating ourselves or craving things in a way that makes us feel miserable, we begin to shut down, shut out, as if we were sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon but ... had put a ... bag over our heads.

“You can experiment with this,” she continues. “You can [look at something vast – maybe a night sky full of stars –] and the first hit is always, ‘Wow! It’s so big!’ and your mind opens. But if you stand there long enough, you’ll start to worry about something. Then you realize ... that it feels as if everything is closing down and getting very small.”

1 Dr. Richard Moss, *The Black Butterfly*, pp. 17-24

2 Dr. Richard Moss, *op cit*, p. 29

The trick is to interrupt that moment, to stop what I call “inner collapse.” We can catch ourselves, let go of the small stuff, and “open up again to that space.” The Tibetan teacher known as Khenpo Rinpoche says the only difference between ordinary people and enlightened beings is the scope.³ We can lift our eyes, and so lift our hearts: open, breathe, and feel grateful.

There’s a great story from ancient Japan about a big, dirty, disheveled young man appearing before a tiny, wizened old roshi, demanding that he teach him about heaven and hell. The teacher says, “You’re a miserable, slovenly excuse for a human being. Why should I waste my words?” The young man’s face reddens to purple, and the vein in his neck begins to throb. “No one could teach you anything,” continues the roshi. “You disgust me.” Consumed with rage, the young man draws his sword, and raises it above the teacher’s head.

The roshi says, “That’s hell.”

The young man lowers his sword and tears spring to his eyes. He understands that “he has just created his own hell,” and it is burning with anger. Putting his palms together, he bows to the teacher.

“That,” says the roshi, “is heaven.”⁴

Pema Chödrön writes, “There isn’t any hell or heaven except for how we relate to our world. Hell is just resistance to life. When you want to say no to the situation you’re in, it’s fine to say no, but when [we] build up a big case to the point where [we’re] so convinced that [we] would draw [our] sword and cut off someone’s head, that kind of resistance to life is hell.”⁵

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Carl Sagan was born in November of 1934,⁶ and though he lived only 62 years, he was a celebrated astronomer, astrophysicist, and author ... among many other things.

This is a story told by his daughter, Sasha, about the ways in which taking a broader view can lead us to healing, to peace, and to gratitude.

³ Thanks to Lama Surya Das! Conversation, 11/20/15

⁴ Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, p. 31

⁵ Chödrön, *op cit*, pp. 31-32

⁶ 11/9/34

Her father died when she was 14. She was devastated. “When a star dies,” she says, “the darkness left by its absence ripples through the universe at the speed of light, which may seem impossibly fast – but over the great distances of space, even that isn’t fast enough. The dead stars appear to shine, but in reality they’re long gone.”

Her father had written, “For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love.” Sixteen years later, Sasha was planning her wedding. The bandleader she and Jon had chosen for the reception asked her, “Are you doing a father-daughter dance?” She was undone all over again. We know how grief is like that.

“... When I was small,” she continues, “my father would take me [to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell] to see a famous Giacometti sculpture and the Japanese scrolls.... Jon and I decided to marry [there, where] my father and I “had been together. I didn’t believe his spirit would be there, but I knew my memories of him would be.”

When they went to visit, there was something new. Sasha writes, “On the ceiling of a massive, open-air room ... the artist Leo Villareal had used a framework of thousands of lights to create a constantly morphing, whooshing depiction of deep space. He called the piece *Cosmos*, a tribute to my father’s work, and to the grandeur of what [he] called ‘all that is or ever was or ever will be.’”

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“That autumn, my mother and grandfather walked me down the aisle.... [At the reception,] the band played, and Jon and I danced under Villareal’s ever-changing tableau, before our friends and family put us in chairs, [and danced the *Hora* as they] ... lifted us skyward. Looking at the beautiful and good man I married, and looking up at the legacy of the beautiful and good man I lost, I was happy in a way I hadn’t believed possible.”

Sasha Sagan concludes, “There is no refuge from the cosmos, or from the heartbreak those changes can bring. But in the midst of all that is, was, or ever will be, there is a light that keeps shining, reaching us from far away.”⁷

⁷ Sasha Sagan, *The Empty Space*, in *Oprah* (magazine), April, 2015

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we learn to be grateful:
Let us practice taking the broader view.

Over and over again, may we open to spaciousness, and invite it in;
lift our eyes, and so lift our hearts;
breathe, let go, put down the sword, and remember gratitude.

“... In the midst of all that is, was, or ever will be,
there is a light that keeps shining,
reaching us from far away.”⁸

Amen.

⁸ Sasha Sagan, *op cit*