

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Faith in Small Things

Mother Teresa, Albanian-Indian Catholic nun and missionary, said, “We cannot all do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

“Be faithful in small things,” she added, “because it is in them that your strength lies.”

Be faithful in small things.

This is Vermont poet Julie Cadwallader Staub’s *Reverence*.¹

The air vibrated
 with the sound of cicadas
 on those hot Missouri nights after sundown
 when the grown-ups gathered on the wide back lawn,
 sank into their slung-back canvas chairs
 tall glasses of iced tea beading in the heat

and we sisters chased fireflies
 reaching for them in the dark
 admiring their compact black bodies
 their orange stripes and seeking antennas
 as they crawled to our fingertips
 and clicked open into the night air.

In all the days and years that have followed,
 I don't know that I've ever experienced
 that same utter certainty of the goodness of life
 that was as palpable

¹ Julie Cadwallader Staub, “Reverence,” in *Friends Journal*, published by Religious Society of Friends

as the sound of the cicadas on those nights:

my sisters running around with me in the dark,
 the murmur of the grown-ups' voices,
 the way reverence mixes with amazement
 to see such a small body
 emit so much light.

Be faithful in small things.

As we stood talking in his driveway, our friend, Trevor, a fabulous gardener, apologized for the messy milkweed that was sending crazy airborne fluff everywhere. "I'm letting all the pollinators grow," he explained, "whether or not they're officially weeds." I'd been fretting about the bats, the bees, the degradation of the natural world, the extinction of species. You know, things you think about. And then our friend Gary said the words, "pollinator corridor," and I was hooked. I thought, That's where I can cast my lot. Not with the end of the world, but with even one small thing I can do to help save it.

A pollinator corridor offers contiguous habitat and forage to vulnerable species. So maybe there's a roadside flower bed, a park, someone's garden, a grassy median strip — all connected. I said, I want to live in a pollinator corridor ... and got to work. I planted butterfly bushes, transplanted Queen Cheryl's bee balm, hung hummingbird feeders, and let the milkweed go wild. Rick Cresta, who created a pollinator corridor in the parking lot of his condo complex, taught me to rescue maple tree saplings from storm drains and plant them where they'll flourish. This was not a heavy lift. It was a series of very small gestures. It's something every one of us can do, making it just a little easier for all the species threatened by human activity encroaching on their habitat ... which is all of them.

And then one early morning this week, crossing the highway to the bike trail that had been built on the old railroad bed — speaking of the human invasion — I noticed something stuck to the sleeve of my jacket. It was a single milkweed seed. The word Victory came to my lips. I know it's a small victory — a tiny parachute of hope with a lot stacked against it. But I'll take it.

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Dr. Shinichi Suzuki pioneered the idea that even very young children could learn to play the violin if the learning steps (and the instrument) were small enough. But whether or not small things lead to big things, faithfulness in small things is a

recipe for joy. Some of it is about noticing; some of it is about breaking down the big picture into small components. In her book *Mended*, Anna White writes, “Maybe it’s not about having a beautiful day, but about finding beautiful moments.... I [can] choose to believe that in every day, in all things, no matter [what], there are shards of beauty [to seek and find].”

We can listen to a favorite song. Sing along. Dance to it! Sip a hot drink on a cold day. Make someone smile. Catch a seasonal smell — fallen leaves, apples — and breathe deeply. Breathe! Think of a friend, and call them. Don’t miss the sunset. Check off the final to-do of the day. Shake out some fresh sheets. Wake up ahead of the alarm and snuggle back in ... or swing your legs over the edge of the bed to greet the gift of the morning.

This is American poet e.e. cummings:²

i thank You G*d for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

When we center our attention on what is small and beautiful, we find ourselves bathed in gratitude.

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² e.e. cummings, “i thank You G*d for most this amazing,” #65, XAIPE (1950)

The more small things we attend to in our lives — the more of these joys we include in our day-to-day routine — the sweeter our lives become. It all starts with paying attention. Choose where you're giving your attention, and make your list.³ It's a spiritual practice.

“How could we even begin to disarm greed and envy?” asked German-British economist E.F. Schumacher in his world-altering book, *Small Is Beautiful*. “Perhaps,” he answered, “by being much less greedy and envious ourselves; perhaps by resisting the temptation of letting our luxuries become needs; and perhaps by even scrutinizing our needs to see if they cannot be simplified and reduced.”

And here is the quotation I've carried for nearly half a century, from the first time I read *Small is Beautiful*: “Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction.”⁴

Be faithful in small things.

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There's a wonderful book called *Making It On Broadway*. It's collection of candid stories from some 150 Broadway actors about their decidedly unglamorous struggle for stardom. One of the stories is from Doug Storm. Struggling with the pull of big things, in his words, this happened:

“I was with the national tour of *Les Miserables*, and we were performing in Salt Lake City. At the time, we were doing poster sales for Broadway Cares/ Equity Fights AIDS. If someone donated fifty dollars, they would receive a poster signed by the entire cast.

“After one performance, I was ... selling posters in the lobby. I noticed a ... girl who was looking at me like I was the Messiah.

“I heard her say, ‘Please, Mom, please, please can I have a poster?...’ Her [mother] said no, and they walked [out]. It was a moment I will never forget. In my left ear, quite distinctly, I heard a little whisper. It said, ‘Go, Doug, go!’

³ Thanks to Steve Mueller, “80 Little Things in Life that Make You Happy,” 2/ 3/ 20

⁴ E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, 1973

“Suddenly, without giving it any ... thought, I took off in full costume. After walking through the crowds outside the theater, I saw the girl and her mother down the block. They had already crossed the street.

“As I was running [toward them] in my [*Les Miz*] costume, I thought that I was so busted. But I didn’t really care.

“As I approached the ... girl, I said, ‘Excuse me.’ She turned around and just stared.

“‘You forgot your poster.’

“I handed her a poster, and I was gone.

“I turned around and ran back to the theater.... I went to the company manager’s office and ... said, ‘I gave away one of the posters. Here’s my fifty dollars — my contribution to Broadway Cares.’

“A few days later, there was a letter that showed up on the call board. It read, ‘Dear cast of *Les Miserables*, You moved me so much. Thank you. I also want to thank you for giving my daughter the poster. I don’t know who you [are], but it was a nice young man, and he was gone before [we] could say thank you.

“... My daughter [has] always wanted to see *Les Miserables*. [But] she’s sick... They even [let] her out of the hospital that night so she could see the show. The tickets were a gift from a family friend.

“I am a single mom. Money is very tight. It broke my heart not to be able to buy the poster for my daughter.

“Thank you so much, whoever you are. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Doug Storm continues, “The whole cast was standing around weeping. I didn’t say a word.

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“Four years later, the night before *The Scarlet Pimpernel* closed, I remember [feeling] bitter and jaded. Soon I would be unemployed again. Out of nowhere, at the stage door, I heard a little voice.

“Mr. Storm?’

“I thought, O, G*d, who’s calling me Mr. Storm? [I went to the door and] froze. It was that ... girl.

“... I knew you were in the show because I’ve been following it on the Internet. I brought you ... a card.’

“O, my gosh, how are you doing? Do you want to come in? Are you seeing the show tonight?’

“No,’ she said. ‘... I’m seeing it tomorrow. I’m seeing the last one.’

“I said, ‘Why don’t you come around tomorrow before the show? I’ll take you backstage.’

“I went upstairs and started putting on my makeup. I stopped for a second to read her card. ‘I just want to let you know that I’ve just been accepted to NYU Tisch School of the Arts for Drama, and I’m going to enroll because someday I want to give a kid a poster.’

“Thank you for helping shape my life.’

“I lost it,” Doug Storm concludes. “In a moment of my own despair and selfish[ness], there was that kid. Everything came full circle. That alone is why I got into this business.”⁵

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we be faithful in small things.
There are shards of beauty to seek and find.
May we find ourselves bathed in gratitude.

Notice the young person looking at you,
Listen for the voice in your ear,
Give away a poster.
Pass it on.

⁵ David Wiener and Jodie Langel, *Making It on Broadway: Actors’ Tales of Climbing to the Top*

May we do small things with great love.
Amen.