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 Arlington Street Church
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Get Big!

Some of you will remember a psychological thriller named *Rosemary's Baby*. I was ten years old when the movie was released in which actress Mia Farrow gives birth to the son of Satan. I wasn't allowed to see it, but I heard people talking about it, and I was pretty sure that there was finally an explanation for my little sister.

Let me be quick to say that Lisa grew up into a wonderful woman, no exorcism needed. I have no idea what was going on with her little self, but she was, by all accounts, an unholy terror. If your hand was in the door jam, she'd slam the door. If you cherished something – anything – she'd destroy it. And she threw prolonged temper tantrums, screaming like a banshee – an Irish omen of death, visiting from the underworld.

It wouldn't have occurred to me to try my sister's antics; relatively small infractions earned me big punishments. Of this injustice, my mother would say, "You have to be the bigger person."

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I'd forgotten that until, recently, I learned that San Francisco-based Zen teacher Robert Thomas uses a similar directive. "Imagine you're a two-year-old ... who can't have something [you want] *right this minute*.... Because you have no perspective ... this problem is your entire universe, and so ... you throw a fit.... But as adults, we know that this is a very small problem, and [even if it can't be instantly remedied,] there are, in fact, lots of other things [to make a] two-year-old ... happy."¹ The spiritual practice, says Robert Thomas, is to "get big."

When we recognize that our perspective has shrunk to the size of a two-year-old's, we can remind ourselves that we have a choice. We can ask

¹ Leo Babauta, *3 Little Tricks To Deal With People Who Offend You*. Please see zenhabits.net/offend/

ourselves, Is it worth getting this upset? We can choose a wider view, a broader vision. We can “get big.”

My beloved colleague Rosemary Bray-McNatt always begins the supervision of her students with a single sentence, which, over time, she repeats countless times until they, themselves, lead with her words. “Don’t,” she tells them “– do not – take it personally.” When questioned, she continues, “Whatever it is, don’t take it personally!”

This is a terrific lesson. On the other hand, we might just save the world if we decided to take it all personally. Arlington Street’s Kate Birney used to work for a company whose employees could all repeat this four-step directive: See it. Own it. Do it. Done. In other words, if you see a problem, it’s yours. Do something about it. And see it through to completion: See it. Own it. Do it. Done.

But on the other hand, when we cease to see everything that happens to us as being *directed at us* or somehow about us, the world is suddenly a far friendlier – or, at least, less hostile – place.

Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a beautiful little book called *Being Peace*. You’ll remember this story he tells in it:

A man was rowing his boat upstream on a very misty morning. Suddenly, he saw another boat coming downstream.... coming straight at him.... not [even] trying to avoid him.... He shouted, ‘Be careful! [Watch out!],’ ... but the boat [hit him full-on], ... and his boat was almost sunk.

The man became very angry, and began to shout at the other person, to give him a piece of his mind. But when he looked closely, he saw that there was no one in the other boat. It turned out that [it had] just [gotten] loose and ...[floated] downstream.

All [the man’s] anger vanished, and he laughed and laughed.

The instruction for meditation on this story is to repeat the words *empty boat*. Over and over, whatever we encounter: *empty boat*. In other words, whatever it is, don’t take it personally.

Question: What’s a spiritual warrior to do? “See it, own it, do it, done” *or* laugh at the empty boat?

Answer: both.

It's knowing that there's nobody here but us chickens to do the work that lies before us; *and* it's freeing ourselves of the inevitable injury to our ego that comes from thinking it's all about us. The spiritual practice is to get ourselves out of the way and take that wide view, so we can be both effective and happy.

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I drove recklessly exactly once. While it is not an excuse, the reason was that I was serving congregations in both Brewster and Provincetown on Cape Cod – two towns with over 32 miles of slow road between them – and I was working in Brewster one afternoon when I received a call from Provincetown saying that a parishioner was suddenly sick unto death and he wanted me there.

I have no idea how fast I was going, how many lights and stop signs I'd blown through, how many people I'd cut off when, about two-thirds of the way there, near the drive-in theater in Wellfleet, Eastham's finest caught up with me and pulled me over. I leaned out the window like a woman possessed and told it to the officer. And instead of trying to talk me off the ledge, he told me to follow him. He jumped back into his cruiser, switched on the blue bubble gum machine, and took off down Route 6, siren blazing. It was harrowing.

Yes, I made it in time. But much, much later, in the middle of the night, I lay wide awake, my heart pounding as I thought of all the people I could have killed on my way to a deathbed. When I closed my eyes, I saw again the rage on the face of a man I'd passed on the right, the terrified look on the face of a woman I'd veered toward and then swerved around in an intersection. And suddenly, remembering the countless times I'd been irritated or angered or frightened by other drivers, I thought, Today, *I* was that other driver, and, to the point, it had nothing to do with anyone who was cursing me for it – it was nothing personal. I realized that none of us knows why anyone's driving "that way." At any moment, any one of them – any one of us – could be on their way to someone in dire straits.

That was when I stopped cursing and began blessing bad drivers. To this day, I say the lovingkindness prayer in traffic. This is a literal translation of the *mettā*, or lovingkindness, phrases, as taught by the Buddha:

May you be free of danger

May you have mental happiness
 May you have physical happiness
 May you have ease of well being.

When we pray for people who are driving so as to endanger, or in any way behaving badly; when we engage our compassion instead of our rage; the benefits accrue to us. You can feel the difference in your breathing, your blood pressure, in how you arrive: not contracted, but spacious; not angry, but peaceful.

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Beloved spiritual companions, when we recognize that our perspective is in danger of shrinking to the size of a two-year-old's, we can remind ourselves that we have a choice. We can be the bigger person, and take the wider view.

See it, own it, do it, done. And don't take it personally. The boat is empty: *Empty boat.*

May we be free of danger
 May we have mental happiness
 May we have physical happiness
 May we have ease of wellbeing.

May we *get big!*

Amen.