

National Unitarian Fellowship

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Viewpoint



Sermons by

Sheena Gabriel & Hilary France

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A Service by Sheena Gabriel

Chalice Lighting:

Words by H. Thoma – Dutch Unitarian (ICUU Global chalice lighting for March)

A light that silently works in me,
Allows me to know the world in its entirety.
I don't know what it is, or what it wants;
With awe – I'll call it divine.

Hymn: SYF 128 – Our World is One World

Reading - The Power of Small Things – by Steven Mills

I'm a huge believer in not sweating the small stuff. This means not blowing up all the little things that happen in your life into something more than they are. It means moving past the drama of the small stuff and into a higher plane of peaceful wellbeing. The small stuff happens every hour of every day.

However, the other side of that is the incredible power of small things. The compounding power of a series of small steps can create something very big. You don't run a 26 mile marathon, you take 9,000 small individual steps. Small acts of kindness can make a big difference to someone else's day. Small details that nobody else notices, can separate you from the rest of the pack. You can be extraordinary by doing small things. William James says: "I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny, invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride."

Is there a place for bold action, dramatic change, and big audacious goals? Certainly. But there is only so much room for those. Don't forget the power of the small things you can do all day every day.

Imagine a few small acts of kindness done every day of your life, each one making a difference to someone. What a legacy you would leave and it would cost you nothing! One kind compliment to a frazzled sales clerk, one small sentence of encouragement to a colleague, or one small act of helping a neighbour or a complete stranger. In small acts of kindness, you see the incredible power of

small things.

I've previously written on changing habits gradually. I made a massive change in my diet by very gradual steps over a period of months. I felt no pain because the change from one week to the next was so small I could barely tell the difference.

I've started exercising and I started small. I went on daily walks for months before I ever lifted a weight or went for a run.

Ian Newby-Clark says this "The Power of Gradual works because, quite simply, little things add up to a big thing if you have enough little things. Given enough time, the steady drip-drop of water becomes an ocean. Given enough time, small regular deposits become a small fortune."

Reflection / Prayer (Gordon B. McKeeman - adapted)

A drop in the bucket.

What does that say about futility, insignificance?

A drop in the bucket. What's the use?

Just suppose that we *are* the merest drops in a bucket?

We assume that a full bucket is what we're aiming at, and that until the bucket is full, nothing has been accomplished.

There is never a shortage of buckets. The empty bucket litany is long and tedious: racism, sexism, oppression, injustice, violence, poverty

You feel like a drop in the bucket?

Who asked you to *fill* the bucket - especially all alone?

Remember how many there are who share your concern.

We may feel daunted - but together - we are not one drop.

Don't think you can do a large bucket? Try a smaller size.

Even imparting a bit of hope - a pat on the back, a financial contribution, a few hours of service – every drop helps!

It might even be wise to remember why you need to help fill *this* bucket - possibly to quench the thirst of someone hard at work on a larger one.

Buckets of whatever size are filled a drop at a time.

If you don't help, it will take even longer.

And your drop may be one of the last ones needed.

Where would we be, if everybody gave up putting drops in the bucket?

Persistence depends on patience, on keeping at it when there is little to reassure us...

After all the Grand Canyon was fashioned by drops of water, as ordinary as they seem.

Silence

Renew us, O Wellspring of life

As the bucket drops further down the well, each day depleting our resources
When commitments drain our time and energy, When emotions overwhelm...
when our thoughts sap our spirits.

Renew us O Wellspring of life....

Fill the wells of our hearts - not just a little, but so that our cups run over, creating new life in our midst

Amen (*from words by Cody Coyne*)

Musical interlude

Address:

Ever since the economist E .F Schumacher coined the phrase 'small is beautiful' in the 1970s, there has been a growing consciousness of the importance of small things in making a difference.

Schumacher argued against the prevailing idea that bigger is better, claiming that "Small scale operations are always less likely to be harmful than large scale ones." Whether in matters of the economy, politics, business or social policy, it's necessary to have a big vision - sometimes we need to see the wood from the trees - but if details are always overlooked, or small people get trampled on in the process, ultimately big ventures can be counterproductive – and even destructive.

The idea that small can be beautiful - that little things matter, applies not just to the economy or politics, but in our everyday lives. Proverbs abound that remind us of this – for example 'if you look after the pennies the pounds will take care of themselves' and 'a stitch in time saves nine'. And you may recall this poem from childhood:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost

For want of a shoe the horse was lost

*For want of a horse the rider was lost
For want of a rider the message was lost
For want of a messenger the battle was lost
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.*

This poem has many variations that go back centuries and describes the escalating consequences that one small oversight can have.

The earliest reference to the proverb may refer to the death of Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field, where the king was unhorsed in battle (although the historical accuracy of the lost nail is doubtful).

You've probably all heard the saying that 'the Devil is in the detail' – but this came from an earlier, more positive saying – not so often heard – that 'God is in the detail'. *Both* are true. Small things can have big consequences for good or ill. The Bible, the Koran, and Buddhist scriptures all make reference to the smallness of the tongue – yet that tiny part of the body can cause great harm; an ill timed word, an unkind remark, the delicious but unsubstantiated piece of gossip that spreads like wild fire can have devastating consequences.

There are countless examples of small things that wreak havoc – the tiny mosquito bite that spreads malaria, the tiny spark that starts a forest fire, the microscopic virus that creates an epidemic, the loosened nut that causes a plane to crash, the misplaced digit that wreaks havoc with bank accounts...

If small things can have negative consequences, the opposite is also true. Jesus in the Gospels highlights the importance of small things. He likens the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed, almost invisible, which grows into the greatest of all shrubs, providing shelter for the birds. And he claims that if we have faith only the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains.

Jesus also highlights the contributions of the poor and weak in his teachings – the little child in their midst, the least of all - becomes the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven; the widows gift of just two small coins – all that she possessed – far surpasses the offerings of the rich.

In Jewish tradition, there is a saying in the Talmud 'that whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is

considered as if he saved an entire world.' Most of us may never get to save a life and will never destroy a life – in the literal sense at least - but we can consider the saying metaphorically. I often wonder about the many small experiences, which accumulate over a life time, to ultimately save or destroy a person and their essential humanity. In the media we hear too many stories of apparently loving fathers, or husbands - and occasionally mothers and wives – suddenly turning on their loved ones in acts of shocking violence. Often times people will say how 'out of character' their behaviour was, or will refer to the pressures that had built up over time. Things rarely happen out of the blue; a lost job, spiralling debts, an act of unfaithfulness, one more bout of untreated depression, one too many arguments, one more misunderstanding, can sometimes be the straw that breaks the camels back.

If unkind words, deeds, or negative experiences can add up to such devastating consequences – what power could accumulated acts of kindness, or words of encouragement have in a person's life? The book which I have here - 'The Power of Small' by Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval - cites true stories of how seemingly insignificant things make a big difference; whether through making a lasting impression, securing a new job, forming a new relationship – and even on occasions saving a life.

And there are an increasing number of popular books and websites devoted to stories about the power of 'random acts of kindness'.

We may never know the impact of the small things we do, but perhaps we can all think of one person who believed in us, or remember one word of encouragement or act of kindness that spurred us on to change. You may have heard of the 'Butterfly effect' – a term coined by Edward Lorenz, mathematician and meteorologist - who in 1961 found that the most miniscule change in computer data, could have a huge impact on predicted weather systems. From this grew the question of whether the tiny flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can have repercussions on wind movements, ultimately causing a Tornado in Texas. This idea has captured the popular imagination and has been extended to the realm of psychology, spirituality, and the knock-on effect of our everyday actions.

There is power in small things, and this is even more the case when we combine our efforts.

One person alone may have insufficient resources to make much difference, but a single idea can spread and multiply beyond what we ever imagined. In joining

with others in the fight against injustice, in adding our voices in protest about something that matters, in contributing to the life of this church and the wider community – together we are stronger.

Single drops of water can combine together to create a thirst quenching pool or a tsunami, which destroys everything in its path. In planning this service I was reminded of an incident many years ago when I lived in a rented attic flat above the surgery of a doctor. In the rather rundown bathroom there was a cast iron Victorian bath – with no overflow. You can guess what's coming, can't you? One morning I had a bath as usual and rushed off to work. I didn't come home at the usual time, but went on to a party. On arrival home I found the bath full to the brim and trickling over the sides. I had accidentally left the plug in with the bath still full of water and the slowly dripping tap had, in my absence filled it to the brim. To make matters worse the bath was not boxed in - there were big gaps in the floorboards below. Without thinking, I plunged my hand in to take the plug out, and water spilt out at an alarming rate. The sheer volume of water coupled with my unthinking action brought the ceiling down in the consulting room below! The doctor who rented the premises below was very understanding, but it happened a 2nd time, a year or so later. I can't recall the details, but on this occasion I ended up just staining the ceiling! These incidents served as a wake-up call to get that dripping tap fixed! Who says a drop of water doesn't amount to much?

One drop on its own is inconsequential, but over time many drops add up! One grain of rice won't feed anyone, but when those grains are multiplied, they can feed the world.

I was amazed when I came across the chessboard story we heard earlier and still can't quite believe the maths – how things can not only multiply – but once they reach a certain point, can *tip over*. If you do the maths, you see that the numbers on the first half of the chessboard add up to a huge amount, but once you get to the 2nd half, the numbers tip over into something so vast, it's truly mind-boggling.

This idea of a tipping point, has been explored by Malcom Gladwell. In his best-selling book 'The Tipping Point' Gladwell explores social epidemics which spread and gather momentum for good or ill.

He cites the sharp rise in teenage smoking and teen suicide in some areas – caused by copy cat behaviour. On a more positive level Gladwell credits the sud-

den sharp drop in the crime rate in New York in the 90's to a few individuals who had the foresight to attend to small details in the environment. For example, rather than tackling directly the crime and disorder on the subways, the environment was cleaned up – litter was cleared, graffiti-covered carriages were removed and each time fresh graffiti appeared it was immediately cleaned. This clean-up operation worked on the principle of the 'broken window theory' – if a window is broken and left unrepaired, people conclude that no-one cares and no-one is in charge; soon more windows will be broken and anarchy will spread, because crime is contagious.

But the reverse is also true, by cleaning up the environment, the message is sent out that such acts will not be tolerated. There were other factors that helped to reverse the crime rates in New York, but they too centred mostly on making small changes, which had a knock on effect.

As Henri David Amiel says: *'What we call little things are merely the cause of great things: they are the beginning, the embryo, and it is the point of departure which generally speaking decides the whole future of an existence. One single black speck may be the beginning of a gangrene, of a storm, of a revolution.'* So in this era of the Big Society - let's not forget the power of small - small ideas, small words, small institutions, small dreams, and small people. Small really can be beautiful – but it's up to us to make it so.

Shared litany – words by Marge Piercy (adapted)

Alone, you can fight, you can refuse, you can take whatever stand you can, but they roll over you. But two people fighting back to back can cut through a mob, two people can keep each other sane, can give support, conviction, love, hope.

Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.

With four you can play bridge and start an organization.

With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration. A snake dancing file can break a cordon.

A hundred fill a hall. An army can meet an army.

A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter.

Ten thousand have power and your own paper.
A hundred thousand, your own media.
Ten million, your own country.

All: It goes on one at a time, It starts when you care to act, It starts when you do it again, after they said no. It starts when you say we, and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.

Hymn: SYF 124 'One More Step'

Closing words:

I am only one, but still I am one.

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do. (*Edward Everett Hale*)

And so may we find ways to act in the world, empowered by the Eternal Spirit of Love in whom we live and move and have our being.

Amen

Sheena Gabriel

I severed ties with the Pentecostal church of my childhood in my early 20s, and after a brief sojourn with the Anglicans, and then Quakers, finally found my spiritual home at Meadow Unitarian chapel, Godalming, 16 years ago. I have been the Lay person in Charge at Meadow Chapel for 3 years and am coming to the end of my ministry training at HMCO.

I have had a varied career - teaching in further education, working with adults with learning difficulties & disabilities, working as a creative therapist and group facilitator in psychiatric / palliative care settings, and as a counsellor in the NHS.

I live with my husband Rob in Godalming and in my (limited) spare time, enjoy reading, art, creative writing and car-boot sales!

A Sermon by Hilary France, Lay Preacher in Lancashire

The Apostle before the Apostles

‘Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, guard the bed that I lie on...’ I’m sure you have all heard that rhyme. Well, what about this: ‘Thomas, Phillip, also Mary, guard us when the night gets scary...’ OK, I admit it! I made that one up, but what I didn’t make up were the names of those gospels. Yes, there really are Gospels of Thomas, Phillip and Mary and others, as well as the more familiar Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The reason I mention these apparently ‘new’ gospels today is because I started to learn about them when I was researching the subject of my address this morning – Mary Magdalene (meaning ‘of Magdala’). First of all, I will look at the information about Mary as contained in the Christian Scriptures which comprise what is usually known as the New Testament. Next I will examine what is known of her from other sources. And finally, I hope to draw some conclusions about her and women in general in what became the Established Church.

Mention Mary Magdalene, and most people think of a prostitute or at least, a woman taken in adultery. ‘Magdalen’ has been used as an alternative word for ‘a reformed prostitute’ and sometimes to refer to a home for reformed prostitutes. In the Eastern Christian Tradition however, she has always been seen in a more positive light, and has been called the ‘Apostle before the Apostles’ because she was said to be the first to see Jesus after the Resurrection.

In John chapter 4, Jesus meets the anonymous ‘woman at the well’ and talks to her about the water of life. He correctly discerns that she has had five husbands and is living with someone she is not married to. This woman could not have been Mary. Mary came from Magdala, the woman at the well was a Samaritan.

In John chapter 8 we read of the woman caught in adultery whom the Pharisees wanted to stone, and Jesus famously commanded: ‘Let the one of you who is without sin, throw the first stone at her’. Again Mary is not named. It seems there is a presumption that a woman who has been a great sinner would love Jesus more than an ordinary person, since she would have been forgiven more, and Mary Magdalene loved Jesus very much.

However if these verses do refer to someone who was to become so prominent

in Jesus' story, why was she not named as she was later on?

The true position of Mary Magdalene in the gospels is that we first see her according to Luke as a woman from whom Jesus cast out 7 demons. We cannot know what these demons represent, but certainly her early meeting with Jesus must have been very positive and releasing for her. Luke's gospel mentions her as 'one of the women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases' and followed Jesus and supported him financially. So she was no casual follower.

Some people have supposed that Mary Magdalene is Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived in Bethany near Jericho, and Mary Magdalene came from Magdala on the Sea of Galilee (that accounts for her second name). However, an intriguing theory which would allow for Mary Magdalene to be from Bethany, and therefore Martha and Lazarus' sister, is that Magdalene might be a corruption of 'migdal' – a 'tower' in rabbinic literature, and that she did not take her name from the town of Magdala and did not in fact live there.

The most frequent references that we can know are definitely about Mary Magdalene are connected with her presence at the crucifixion and at the tomb. Mark says, regarding the crucifixion: 'Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.' And in John we read 'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.'

When Jesus was laid in the tomb, according to Mark 'Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.'

And on the third day, Matthew says 'After the Sabbath at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.' After they had seen an angel, we are told: 'So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings" he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, there they will see me."'

Mary was an important witness to something. It is often said to be the Resurrection. But to non-Christians this may be meaningless. If you believe that Jesus was a man only, albeit a holy and inspired man, one of the greatest teachers of

all time, there is no need to believe in a resurrection. There would be no sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the sins of the world, therefore when Jesus died he would be dead just like anyone else.

Could Mary have been the witness to something else?

What has been suggested a number of times is that Jesus did not die on the cross. How can that be possible, you may say. There are a number of points in the crucifixion story according to the Christian Scriptures which are open to reinterpretation.

Crucifixion was both a method of execution and a method of torture for punishment. It normally took many days to die. Ordinarily, if someone is hanging by their hands or wrists, they would suffocate quite quickly because of the downward pull of the body hampering the breathing. To prolong the torture, it was usual to support the feet (as is seen in depictions of Jesus' crucifixion). It is therefore highly unlikely that Jesus would have died after the six hours he is reported to have been on the cross. The other two victims had their legs broken in order that their weight would have been transferred onto their arms, thus speeding up suffocation. This was not done to Jesus. In John 19 v 33 & 34 we read 'But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.' However, it is probable that Jesus was not dead, but drugged into unconsciousness by the wine he was given on the sponge earlier which could easily have contained a narcotic. The fact is that blood would not have flowed from his side if he had been dead.

Blood does not flow from dead bodies but only from living ones. And interestingly Pilate is reported to have ' marvelled if he' (that is, Jesus) 'were already dead' as we read in Mark chapter 15 v 44.

So what did Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witness on the Sabbath? Nothing more or less than Jesus alive and well, having recovered from the dose of drugs he had drunk. The women were able to see him and recognise him and clasp his feet in a normal way. If you find this theory far-fetched, I would ask you, is it more far-fetched than the original resurrection story?

I referred earlier to the Gospels of Thomas, Philip and Mary. It is believed that Mary Magdalene was the author of Gospel of Mary. Why aren't these writings included in the Christian Scriptures?

In the early days of Christian belief, there were numerous Gospels of Jesus. It was not until 367 CE, however, that the New Testament as it became known really began to take shape in a form recognisable to us today. A collection of writings was put together by bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. These texts were confirmed and authorised by the Council of Hippo in 393 CE and the Council of Carthage in 397 CE. Later the text was further limited and the Council of Trent in 1546 approved only the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The number 4 is significant for many reasons (think of the four points of the compass, the four seasons and so on) and so this may have influenced their decision.

However, Thomas, Philip and Mary were not among those originals which were put aside as they had not been discovered then. In December 1945 two peasant brothers, Mohammed and Khalifah Alim were digging in a cemetery near the town of Nag Hammadi when they came upon a large sealed jar containing 13 leatherbound books. The books' papyrus leaves contained an assortment of scriptures written in the tradition that was later to be called Gnostic (one meaning of which is 'esoteric insight'). Inherently Christian works but with Jewish overtones, they were soon known as the Nag Hammadi Library. They included the Gospels of Thomas and Philip.

In Cairo in 1896 a bundle of papyri was discovered which contained the Gospel of Mary. This was published in an English translation in 1977 with the Nag Hammadi Library.

Just suppose the authorised Christian Scriptures contained all the material which was excluded between 367 CE and 1546 CE. Then add the material from the Nag Hammadi Library and the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947. It's altogether possible we would have a quite different 'Gospel story' from the one presented in the four Gospels we normally take as 'Gospel truth'!

But I haven't finished with Mary Magdalene yet! There is a suggestion that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married. Did I hear gasps of horror? Well, although it does not say in the 4 Gospels that Jesus was married, nowhere does it say specifically that he was not married.

It was unusual for Jewish men in those days to remain single – they would generally be regarded as different.

It would take longer than the remainder of this address to give the full explanation of how Jesus and Mary could have been married, but it hinges on the belief

that many names in the Scriptures are a type of code, and that, for instance, the name 'Mary' is a title rather than just a name. My name is Hilary and my designation is 'Lay Preacher'. The theory says that Mary Magdalene's designation was 'Mary' – she was, in fact 'a' Mary, one of a group of Maries. The membership of such a group was by genealogy and rank. Jesus, being an heir of the line of King David, by law would have been required to marry, and he would be required to marry a 'Mary'. It is believed that the marriage at Cana was the ceremony of the first part of the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

The writings about Jesus' marriage were probably suppressed in the early church as it did not fit in with, for instance, Paul's teachings about Christianity. A letter by Bishop Clement of Alexandria, an early Church Father *circa* 150-215 CE, suggests that specific original texts of Mark's gospel were kept secret. There is no reason to suppose this was an isolated case. We have seen previously that whole books have been edited out of the canon of Scripture.

Something else which may have been, and probably was, lost because of the exclusion of previously known material was the importance of Mary Magdalene and other women in the early church. Added to the fact that there was a body of material that was not known until 1945-47, it looks as if women could have had a very raw deal indeed.

The Christian church for most of its history has excluded women from its hierarchy. I heard a woman member of the Church of England being quoted only recently as saying they should not have women priests because Jesus didn't have any women as his disciples.

Oh, didn't he? What about those women including Mary Magdalene who Luke, in chapter 8 v 3 says 'were helping to support them' i.e. the twelve apostles 'out of their own means.' So were the women good enough when providing money, but not good enough to be counted among the apostles? I think there were women disciples.

Mary Magdalene has been celebrated as a repentant sinner in the Western Christian tradition. There is a suggestion that she represents all women and that her position as a penitent should be their position.

It has taken women a long time and a long fight to be properly recognised even in our modern age. Perhaps we should not judge too harshly those men in the

first few centuries of the Current Era who suppressed information about women's place in the Church. There is no excuse today for better informed and educated men, and I'm afraid women too, to try to suppress information which is coming to the fore now, thanks to new discoveries and improved research methods.

I say let Mary Magdalene stand at the head of a line of women throughout history who have, often anonymously, served the church down the ages, and let her be remembered as the 'Apostle before the Apostles.'

AMEN

Hilary France is based at Chorley Chapel in Lancashire but also preaches at other chapels in the district.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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