

WHAT SIZE ARE YOU?

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Physically he was a big guy...six-foot something, and lots of bulk...but spiritually and emotionally he was as little as human beings come. His name was Seth and he was – and for all I know remains? – what I can only reluctantly call a “small and miserable little human being.” Let me tell the unpleasant story.

Seth and I were neighbors in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Collins and I owned a summer home for seven years. I was the elected President of our Condo Association [and a quick aside here...if anyone ever asks you to serve as the president of a condo association (anywhere on the face of the planet), run in the opposite direction just as fast as you can! In my experience, it is usually a hard and thankless task. In any case... Seth was the owner of one of the other condo units in our complex, so he and I had to relate regularly about our shared property interests and community concerns.

Without going into unnecessary detail, at every turn – in our relationship as neighbors and fellow Condo Association members – Seth was fiercely self-centered (myopic really in his focus upon himself), and was never able to even consider – not one iota, even for a moment – how his own personal needs, wants, beliefs, interests and desires should or could ever be modified, balanced or restrained by the needs, wants, beliefs, interests and desires of others.

He was indignant, for example, when I and the other owners asked him to stop letting his dog swim in the complex's pool...he was outraged (and threatened to sue me) when the association unanimously voted to take down a favorite tree of his in the common area, which was endangering the building and destroying a costly retaining wall...he was furious when we insisted he pay his Association's condo dues in a regular and timely fashion, as required of everyone else so that we could pay our bills...and he was surprised when several owners objected to his breaking into an unoccupied unit – owned by someone else! – to store his personal possessions over the winter.

On and on went the battles and bad relationships that swirled around this guy. And each time his neighbors and I asked him to be a responsible, restrained and respectful member of that small community, he spewed out anger, indignation and outrage because (I guess) we couldn't see the primacy and superiority of his needs and wants. Indeed this was Seth's little angry “modus operandi” in the wider community as well; he was known far and wide in that town as a selfish jerk. This guy – big in body, but small in spirit – left a dark wake of upset, anger, and broken/unpleasant relationships everywhere he went.

Seth's systematic littleness of spirit and perspective reminds me of that similarly exhibited by one of the most outrageous and "oversized" public personalities of our age – Donald Trump. In a biography of the Trump family, Gwenda Blair reports (with justifiable disbelief and disdain) that at his own father's funeral (the father who – as you may not know – graciously handed Mr. Trump the foundations of his prodigious wealth and real estate holdings) that "The Donald" (as he grandly likes to call himself") turned his eulogy for his father into a thinly veiled diadem about his own personal greatness! I quote her and the reviewer of her book, "*As his own father's funeral [after other family members [graciously] rose to extol the man who had been so influential and kind in their lives, Donald could not refrain from] patting himself on the back and promoting himself...[in his eulogy] the focus quickly shifted from the man in the coffin to the one at the lectern, and the tenor of the occasion changed from the eulogistic to solipsistic...it was an astonishing display of self-absorption.*" Donald Trump could only talk about his generous father through the self-aggrandized lens of his own, duly noted achievements. So the "big" real estate tycoon (who blazes his own name across the tops of skyscrapers in 40-foot neon letters – and loves to bellow "YOU'RE FIRED!" at interns on contrived and dehumanizing television shows) turns out to be one of the littlest people in the country.

Now...these two, admittedly extreme examples of human "littleness" are precisely what we mean in common, everyday parlance when we say – to another human being who is in some way acting badly and is not in "right relation" with the world and others – that "That was little of you!" What we generally mean when we accuse someone of being "little" is that they are acting selfishly – in narrow, petty, self-serving and mean-spirited ways – acting without taking into sufficient account the feelings, needs, rights and value of "the other," or of the community as a whole. Clinical psychologists have even identified, in extreme cases of self-centeredness, a mental illness called Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which means that a person exhibits (and now I quote from a mental health reference guide) "*A pattern of traits and behaviors which signify infatuation and obsession with one's self to the exclusion of all others, and the egoistic and ruthless pursuit of one gratification, domination and ambition.*"

Now...the truth is, of course, that "human littleness" and "self-absorption" are not restricted to just a few highly unpleasant, narcissistic individuals like Donald Trump or my old Cape Cod nemesis, Seth. Surely everyone in this room realizes that any of us – as normally flawed human beings – are all naturally "selfish" to some extent and from time to time, and thus are vulnerable to at least "a little littleness" now and again. I certainly know that I am...try that I do, I occasionally fall victim to NOT taking the needs and wants, rights and prerogatives of others (most especially, I confess, my long-suffering spouse) into sufficient account .

But I am not here this morning (in this place where we come together regularly to ponder and work on our lives, seeking to increase our stature as persons...on this first Sunday of the brand new year) to preach a sermon about the persistent and widespread problem

of human “littleness.” No, this is rather a sermon about the positive, related spiritual process of growing ourselves into bigger and more gracious persons...the process of – over our lifetimes – increasing our spiritual and emotional stature, depth and breadth as human beings. Another way of saying this is that this is a sermon about how we can each grow a bigger soul, so that we can be a more positive and responsible presence in creation.

By posing my sermon question for today – “What Size Are You?” – I hope to explore and articulate (in a hopefully clear and helpful way, as we all begin a brand new year of human living and striving) one of the most essential aspects of what it means to be on the religious journey that is Unitarian Universalism. I am persuaded that being a serious religious person in general – and being a Unitarian Universalist in particular is all about growing yourself larger in your living. I am not, of course, talking about waist size or hat or shoe or coat size – although I read the unwelcomed statistic this week that the average American gains 7 pounds between Thanksgiving and New Year’s...so by all logic most of us are a bit bigger this morning than we used to be!...but I’m not talking about that kind of size. Nor am I talking about the size of your bank balance or stock portfolio...I am not even talking about the smart, witty, clever or sophisticated you are to become...and I am certainly not talking about somehow becoming more charismatic, entertaining or extroverted. I am talking rather about the all-important size and stature of your soul...and the reach of your concern, attentions, and embrace as a human being.

I first got the idea of this spiritual question “What size are you?” from liberal theologian Dr. Bernard Loomer, a wonderful man (and, as luck would have it, a Unitarian Universalist) who had as one of his key theological affirmations the idea that religion’s primary job is to help each one of us increase our personal stature...increase, if you will, our “size” as human beings. I quote him now, so please listen carefully:

By “size”...I mean the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of your love, your capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive and insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.

What Bernie was saying is that, at its essence, our individual lifelong journey as religious human beings is all about spiritually growing ourselves larger and more generous – larger and more generous by way of our expanding and respectful relationships with persons and things beyond our own skin...but also larger and more generous by way of nurturing our own interior attentions, sensitivities, and connections. Again...we are obviously not talking about waist, shoe, hat or coat size here, we’re talking about “soul size”...about the dimensions and reach and embrace of your “spirit.”

And a quick aside here, if I might. When we talk about the “size” of a human being...isn't it an irony that some of the “biggest” people in all of human history were, in fact, diminutive in physical stature. Jesus of Nazareth, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama were (and are) all physically small people...but at the same time were undeniably spiritual and human giants. Curious, don't you think?

In any case...this idea – that one of the central goals of being a Unitarian Universalist is the process of spiritually and emotionally growing yourself into a “larger” and more sensitive person – has long been the primary and persistent message of my ministry. I believe – in a pure and, I hope, eminently graspable nutshell – that the religious life, particularly the Unitarian Universalist journey toward wholeness, decency and joy, is all about willfully spending a lifetime developing your spirit in a way that is ever more inclusive, caring and generous toward life around you.

As I articulated in my quasi-best-selling book entitled, *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, we grow our souls – and expand our positive reach as persons – through various everyday spiritual practices – purposeful, repeatable activities of the hands, heart and head that help us to achieve right relation, depth relation, caring relation with the miraculous dance of life that whirls within and beyond each of us. As I say in the introduction of the book, an everyday spiritual practice is, “*any activity or attitude [which you regularly and intentionally engage in] which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you.*”

Let me give just one little everyday example. One meaningful spiritual practice that can help us be larger and lovelier persons in creation is the simple spiritual practice of routinely greeting and acknowledging (humanly validating, if you will) the persons who serve us in our daily rounds. It may seem like a small, insignificant matter to some, but I try to make a point in my day-to-day life of greeting and affirming – which means establishing eye contact and verbally thanking – people who serve me – having a kind word and glance with the grocery store check person who tallies my purchases...the busboy who refills my water glass...the lifeguard who has watched over me as I swam my laps...the bike shop repair guy who fixes my wheel. This simple spiritual and relational process of acknowledging people who are serving and working for me helps me to expand my human reach and sensitivities, and I believe it contributes to the well-being of both my soul and theirs. Everyone just feels better about the transaction...and it costs me nothing!

What I am suggesting to you here is that being on the religious path – purposefully and intentionally choosing to live out the outward-looking and people-affirming principles of Unitarian Universalism through everyday spiritual practices and relationships of connection and caring – is about the business of growing your soul, and your stature as a responsible, respectful, relational person. Again...growing a soul is about the simple

and simultaneous process of: 1) reaching out respectfully and responsively to other life, even as you, 2) work to restrain and check your natural tendency (we all have it!) toward self centeredness. Growing a soul means you ever more strive to look and to live beyond your skin...it really is that simple!

As 20th century Catholic theologian and mystic Thomas Merton wisely observed, the healthy, spiritual individual is always growing and giving outward from the natural littleness of the isolated, inward-looking selfish self.

It is of supreme importance [he wrote] that we consent to live not for ourselves but for others. When we do this, we will be able first of all to face and accept our own limitations. As long as we secretly adore ourselves, our own deficiencies will remain to torture us with an apparent defilement. But if we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be "as gods." We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations play a most important part in our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us.... Only when we see ourselves woven together in a true human context of mutuality, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and "one body," will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents of our lives. My successes are not my own [Merton goes on]. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another.

Professor Cornel West (professor at Yale, and leading African American social thinker of our time) says virtually the same thing about how we increase our spiritual and emotional stature, in more secular language; listen to his words:

A rich life is fundamentally a life of serving others, a life of trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. That rich life comes into being in human relationships. It is difficult to find joy by yourself even if you have all the right toys. It's difficult. Just ask somebody who has got a lot of material possessions but doesn't have anybody to share them with. That's [on] the personal level, but there is also a political version of this. It has to do with what you see when you get up in the morning and look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you are simply wasting time on this planet or spending time in an enriching manner. We are talking fundamentally about the meaning of life....

One more quote on this spiritual idea, this one from George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life [Shaw writes]: being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish, little clod of ailments complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and that as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

All right...I hope that I have spiritually persuaded you this morning that the goal for any of us as serious and caring religious persons is to spend a lifetime steadily and purposefully increasing our size, interconnectedness, stature and reach. We must do this as individuals...and, on an equally important basis, we must do this as members of this community, this congregation. Congregations, like individuals, must constantly strive to expand their reach and soul size. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be serving a congregation that voted last Spring to start giving its entire Sunday offering plate collection away to other organizations here on the Treasure Coast which are serving people in need. At a time when our own financial needs are not insignificant, we are giving away more than \$1,000 a month so that others – mostly strangers – beyond these walls can breathe more easily. This is what it means for a congregation to grow a soul...and become truly large in spirit.

One more example if I might. Two weeks ago – just a few days before Christmas – about 30 of us trekked up to a modest community center in Fellsmere to share a meal with a wonderful group of migrant farm laborers and their children, and provide not only toys and clothing to go under their holiday trees, but also grocery store gift cards (with more than \$100 dollars on them) for their holiday meals. It was so heart-warming to watch those cute little kids light up as they met Santa (some more reluctantly than others!) and received the brightly wrapped gifts he had brought them...and to receive the gratitude and kindness of their parents. It may seem like a small matter to some, but to me it was a holy moment of expansive sharing and connection. Although no one signed the membership book that night, our congregation that night...it grew in size...in spiritual size...as we generously reached out to make the holiday brighter and more joyous for people we barely knew.

I have a rather ebullient colleague in ministry (his name is David) who is in the habit of saying to people who impress him with their reach and sensibilities: *Friend, you are really huge right now...really huge.*” I gotta tell you, when I see members of this congregation reaching up and out to generously give from themselves that others might have a better and fuller life I want to say, “You are huge right now. You generous members of UUFVB are practicing Unitarian Universalism...and you are really huge...and getting bigger every day!

And here is the great (and very important) paradox about spiritual practice and spending a lifetime bumping yourself up in spiritual size and stature. When it comes to spiritual growth (when it comes to growing a soul), good things come in small and incremental packages. The truth is that you grow bigger in here [*SCOTT POINTS TO HIS OWN CHEST*], grow bigger in soul and sensibility not by sudden and spectacular leaps and bounds (not usually anyway), but rather bit by bit, little by little, in small everyday steps of expansion, relationship and connection...in all the unspectacular, incremental small ways that matter most in this fractured world of ours.

The process of increasing our soul size – whether as individuals or a congregation – through everyday spiritual practice is so quiet, unostentatious and gradual that it's often difficult to tell (when you look at the momentary snapshot of a human life) precisely whether or how you or someone else is truly growing in the ways of the spirit. The kind of spiritual growth that makes us evolve as steadily better and bigger persons happens in little, everyday moments of service, outreach, care and connection...not in grand and gaudy gestures of heroic service or sweeping sacrifice.

So let me end this morning by once again posing my really big question today to each of you...the important question I hope you will ponder in a serious, reflective way over coming days and weeks of this new year: "What size are you?" Or maybe the question on this first Sunday of the brand new year should more appropriately be: "What size do you want to be? What size do you aspire to be? How far do you want your soul to reach?"

How expansive, sensitive, intricate and caring do you want your relationships to be in this life? Are you living in the largest and most loving ways of which you are capable? Do you have your own needs and wants in proper perspective? What can and will you do – today, tomorrow, and the many days to come – to further open your heart...deepen your connections...expand your circle of concern...and grow a soul so big that the whole world will feel its warmth...and know the blessing of its embrace? What size are you? How big can you become?

Amen.