Sermon "A Little and a Little"

In the beginning God created the seven-day world, and even though he was new at the task he knew it was big, it was huge, in some ways it was bigger than any other task he had undertaken and so he began by calling into being light, and he separated the light from the darkness, and the light he called day and the darkness he called night. And then, the story goes, there was evening and there was morning, the First Day.

He didn't go about creating the world will-he, nil-he, running himself into the ground trying to get it all done at once. He began with days, with evenings and mornings, with sunrises and sunsets. It was a big task and it was going to take time so he'd better have something to measure it by.

That's how Christians and Jews tell the story of the Beginning, with the powerful God making figures of earth and breath in the cradle of the world's rivers, and that God is rarely human-natured. In the Hebrew Scriptures especially he tends to get angry and jealous, and there's usually a masculine pronoun for him, but that's as far as his humanity goes. Except, when he has a big task like creating the world, he's got to break it down like anyone else.

Think about the universe for a moment. The whole universe. Not just our galaxy, but all the stars and all the space and stuff between them, out to the edges of everything. Close your eyes if you have to. Try to imagine it. Try to hold it all in your head. Just try.

Feel the edges of your mind reaching out to try and touch the vast and impossible boundaries of space and time. Think about everything, everything all at once.

It's beautiful and stunning, but it's too big. Our little human brains can't do it. Just as we think we're getting a grip in one place, the opposite edge slips loose and goes careening outward. When we try to tell someone about this big thing we're thinking about, we have to break it down, make it manageable somehow, so we use light-years.

The distance light travels in a year is still a huge number, but it's smaller. We can use it to begin to grasp how big ten million of them might be. And if we string enough light years together, we can start to imagine what trillions of light years would look like--we can begin to comprehend the size of the universe.

Now if we were not human, this might not matter. I don't know any dolphins so I can't say for certain, but as far as we know, humans are the only beings who regularly contemplate the size of the universe and our place in it. It is a very human thing, to want to know where you fit in the grand scheme of things. We want to know how much and how big and how it works, and why why why--and we want to know so we can know ourselves better, the role we play and the things we do, and what we should be doing, if there is a should, in this beautiful world of ours.

Our response to anything new, our very human response, is to cast it in terms of our own experience, of things we can understand and have seen and preferably, things we have done. We want to make it all fit in our heads somehow, even the grand and infinite, even the infinitesimal, even the profound.

Recently I was standing in line at the grocery store when I saw someone purchasing a children's

book which shouted from the cover, "Teaches pre-math skills! Sorting! Sequencing! Our math learning trains us in logic--in the language of breaking things into their component parts that we might better understand the whole. Appropriately enough, we also learn to use measuring tools in math class--rulers prepare us for graduated cylinders and pipettes, the stuff of which precision and comprehension are made.

There *are* other kinds of comprehension, other ways of understanding. There are things that we understand by intuition, or by past experience, paintings that are best grasped by stepping back to see the organized whole. We talk about needing a bird's eye view for things--things that are only complicated when you can't see the big picture. So we strive for balance.

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Recently, the Merriam-Webster dictionary website advertised their new Collegiate edition with, "Now We Go To Eleven!" It was a reference to a mock-documentary called *This is Spinal Tap*, which chronicles the life and times of a fictional rock band. Early in the film one of the band members is showing off their equipment, and he says of their amplifiers, "These go to eleven!" He is very proud--that makes their amps louder, he figures, than any other band's amps, which only go to ten. The interviewer asks why they don't just have a louder "ten" and he says, "…these go to *eleven*." He misunderstands the question and, true to character, misses the joke.

It is only when we see the run of the dial as a complete whole that we can understand the joke--every dial goes to ten, because ten is not a unit which has meaning. Ten dB would have meaning. But a dial which goes to ten and a dial which goes to eleven may be otherwise identical. We need to know both the units and the larger context to understand.

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One of the common tasks of IQ tests is number recall. The tester reads off a list of digits, and you must repeat them back to her in the same order. They go all the way up to ten. Then they start again, but you have to repeat them in reverse order. They go up to ten doing that, too. Studies have found that the way most people do it is to make number clusters. Remembering "seventy-eight" takes the same amount of memory as remembering "seven" and our brains can only handle about ten units. So if you remember them in groups (like a phone number) you have a better chance. Phone numbers are only seven digits because that's a number of numbers that's easy to remember. When we started adding area codes, people were right that remembering ten digits would prove harder than remembering seven, significantly harder. Ten is a human threshold for memory. Seven is another threshold. And those dashes and parentheses in phone numbers are there to help us remember those otherwise meaningless number strings.

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When I lived in Minneapolis, it seemed like everyone composted. Everyone. The apartment dwellers had worm bins, the homeowners had heaps in the backyard, and nothing went into the trash if it could reasonably be expected to decompose harmlessly under its own steam. Recycling was already an embedded way of life, made easy by the city's one-bin commingled system, and shabby chic had elevated thrift shopping to a fine art.

At first I thought it was just my ultra-liberal activist friends, but I soon realized that their friends and *their* friends and even the people I worked with were whole levels beyond anyone I had ever known. It was a comforting place to try to adjust to American culture after eight months of living in India, where potable water in the toilet would be unthinkable. It took some work, but with everyone around me practicing good ecology like they practiced breathing (deliberately, but without much thought) I picked it up fast enough.

It was a shock to move to Chicago. That vast metropolis didn't do much with recycling, had never heard of compost, thought nothing of driving somewhere even if the El would get you there, too. Pressures of poverty and crime and infrastructure that seemed to be rotting at the core were driving people all the way to the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy, the place where all you can think about is breath,
and food,
and shelter.
Life was just one thing to do after another.
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It's a common affliction. We often seem to divide our days by our calendars and mark the passage of time with our to-do lists, which may be effective, but it may also keep us from considering the ways we spend our time. Early in school we learn to mark the passage of time by the beginning and ending of the school day. Then it's classes in college, then work. We even rely on the unpleasantness of our work, if unpleasantness there be, to help us mark the time. Without it, how would we know we were alive? There have been studies which show that it takes us a week of vacation just to know we're on vacation, and another week to settle into being on vacation, which is why in South Africa people are required to take at least three of their minimum six weeks of vacation in a block, so they actually get rested. I have been considering going on a Vipassana meditation retreat (ten days of silent meditation) for some time, but have put it off partly out of fear—what will I confront in ten days of silence? Will it be something I am willing to encounter surrounded by strangers? Will it be something I am capable of encountering at all? I'm told many people avoid Vipassana practice for that reason. Ten days of silence, not subdivided into to-do lists, can be very intimidating.

In ten days of silence, we might encounter the possibilities and meanings behind the choices we make. The pressures of everyday will no longer excuse unmindful living. It sounds to me like boot camp for the soul.
I know we can change ourselves, our ways of life, our planet. I know we can learn to live in harmony with each other and with the earth. I know we can learn to be mindful, but it is a matter of constant support, immersion, and practice, which we must offer each other. Thoreau went to the woods because he wished to live deliberately—we no longer have that luxury. We must live deliberately here and now.

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Mueller's poem gives us the cadence of running, just running, breathing and footfalls running a complex counterpoint. The underlying bass swings on every mile, units subdivided by breaths subdivided by steps. The human body is not made to run 26.2 miles—it gives out around mile 20, having exhausted its supply of readily available energy, at which point it starts burning stored

fat. That's the wall that the runners hit, that moment when the pain of running is almost enough to stop them. People training for marathons eventually have to train for that moment, that time when they can't imagine going on and they go on anyway. Every step is just one more step, just that next time you put your foot down on the ground. I used run, although never marathons—I would zone out, breathe according to my pace, let the units consume me.
Increments can do two things: they can tell you about progress, or they can help you forget. It all depends on whether you count them. If you spend time counting your units, counting how many-how much-are we there yet? It can destroy you. If you let each unit be the only unit, as in meditation when breathing becomes the focus, then you never need to know how close you're getting to the end, or how far you are from it. Units can become a space of manageable focus—the place where we can understand and accept and believe that we will get to the end. This one unit we can hold in our heads. This one unit is all we have to understand.

The Quakers have a saying, "Take one step and way will open," quoted by Parker Palmer in his well-known text Let Your Life Speak. A common metaphor is the long tunnel, the person, and a flashlight. You don't need a flashlight that shows you the end of the tunnel to navigate it safely, you just need to see where your next step is going. Take one step, and the following step is revealed in that same flashlight beam, and in this way you can get all the way to the end of the tunnel, even if you cannot see it.
I started learning that lesson very early:
I'm four, maybe five, no older than six, standing in the sunporch that some former owner-architect had built above half of our garage. It's not sunny, though—the rain is sheeting down in a storm that set my heart racing. I want to be out in it, but not cold, so I stand as close as I can get at the open windows, feeling the mist through the screens and listening to the rush of water.
In comes my mom. "We have to close the windows!" As aluminum frames clatter I ask why.
After all, I say, it's only a little bit of water coming in.
Because, she says, a little and a little makes a lot.
I started learning early, but it is a lifetime lesson for all of us.

We come together here to do big things, to forge a new world, to dig deep inside and see what we can best do with the stuff of which we are made. We come together to wrench transformation from the jaws of apathy and sing in awe when, for just one moment, we can see balance in the complex patterns of our universe. We set ourselves a hard, beautiful act of co-creation when we take an active part in life.

It is easy to get lost, to feel overwhelmed. *I can't do this anymore.*

But we can't afford to stop. We've come this far. We have to try.

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Janine and I went exploring one day and came to a river on the edge of a cluster of cabins. We clambered down into the rocks, let our feet go almost numb in the water, and Janine noticed some trash: a piece of fishing line, a bottle, and then this long piece of rusted pipe, lodged in the riverbed. I thought she should leave it but she was determined, so with the fishing line tucked in her pocket she worked it back and forth until finally she wrenched it free. Her triumph was

palpable. Saving the world, one piece of trash at a time. She's right, though: we have to start somewhere, and there's no place like right here. If we look out to the horizon though, along the route of this almost-impossible marathon course, we will never begin.
We need a strategy.
I will begin
when the gun goes off…
Mueller's poem is captivating because it pulls us into the mind, not of a successful runner, but of a trying-to-be-successful runner, caught in the process the way we all are, trying to work out ways to keep going.
Feeling good
I will run
to the tenth mile.
In order to keep going we have to pace ourselves, know when to eat, when to drink, when to walk a little. We need to know that we have to be able to talk, or we're running too hard.
At mile three
she joins me, a woman
of my same height, weight, and age.

We need to pick up a running buddy,
"I'm staying with you, " she insists.
She walks beside me.
I can't shake her now.

> *"I can't go on."*
> *"I think you can."*

We need another perspective on the same journey. Sometimes we need to believe that they are better than we are so we will believe them when they say we can do it.
Caryl, give me your hand. We're almost there. See up
there at the top of the last hill.

we need to know our course, but even with the best research and planning we have to make it comprehensible—none of us can really wrap our minds around the size of the universe, or the entire compelling arc of a life. There is a humanness to wanting to be immortal, and yet we probably want that most because we can't understand what it would mean. In the classic children's book Tuck Everlasting, Tuck has drunk from a spring that his family now guards, to keep anyone else from falling victim to their fate—stuck forever in the bodies that drank the water, unable to grow old and die with everyone they knew—unable to know that if they marked off enough increments, they would come to a well-earned and comprehensible end.
We drop hands
and finish.
26 miles 385 yards 4 hours 17 minutes and 16 seconds.
It's over.

26 miles, 4 hours, and countless steps--
Together.

Together, with steps following steps
we can get there.
blessed be
and amen.