

Small Things

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As I was pondering what to say here today, the phrase “make a difference in the world” kept coming to mind. We often hear this phrase in this season of graduation proceedings and commencement addresses; it’s commonly used at a university. When I searched this phrase on the BYU website, I got over five thousand results. It’s a phrase that is often expressed in the context of future opportunities and actions, frequently suggesting something extraordinary. In this context, when students hear that they are preparing now to make a difference in the world, they might assume that the difference they are to make somehow lies dormant until after graduation, so that when they do go out into the world, they are prepared to make a big impact.

Today I would like to look at this phrase in a different way. I would like to discuss making a difference in the world in the context of the here and now and the small and simple.

Wanting to make a difference in the world, Mother Teresa founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity in 1950. The mission of her small organization was to help “the poorest of the poor” in the slums of Calcutta, India, by educating and meeting the needs of the destitute and starving. She wanted to bring

comfort to the sick and dying who often felt unloved, uncared for, and unwanted.¹

Some twenty years later the BBC sent an award-winning journalist to interview Mother Teresa about her work. The journalist reported that Calcutta was a scene of suffering and despair, the streets crowded with naked, hungry, homeless people whose needs stretched far beyond what the Missionaries of Charity could provide. The journalist suggested that a government agency would be better equipped than Mother Teresa to handle the destitute in the slums of Calcutta.² He stated, “Statistically speaking, what she achieves is little, or even negligible.”³ He thought—as he later revealed—that the difference she was making was so insignificant that it was hardly worth the bother.

Responding to the criticism directed at the “insignificant scale” of her work “by comparison with the need,” Mother Teresa noted that “welfare is for a purpose—an admirable and a necessary one—whereas Christian love

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is for a person.”⁴ She told the journalist that the one was about numbers, the other about Christ.⁵ She explained that what the poor need as much as food and clothing is to be wanted and loved.⁶ Her simple purpose was to provide that love. She served the one within her reach, doing the best she could with what she had.

At another time Mother Teresa said: “What we do is nothing but a drop in the ocean. But if we didn’t do it, the ocean would be one drop less.”⁷ Through her humble service, Mother Teresa made a difference in the world, drop by drop.

After the interview the journalist concluded: “Christianity is not a statistical view of life. That there should be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over all the hosts of the just, is an anti-statistical proposition.”⁸

Jesus Christ taught us to love and serve the one within our reach. Sitting by a well in Samaria, Jesus spoke with a woman from the local village (see John 4:4–28). He spent time with her. He listened. He answered questions. He showed respect. The teachings and miracles of Jesus attracted crowds. People in need—like the woman who reached out and touched His clothes to be healed—pressed about Him, seeking His individual attention. Some tried to bring little children to Him, wanting Him to put His hands on them and bless them. When some of His disciples tried to send the children away, Jesus stopped them and asked that the children be brought to Him. He took time out of His busy schedule to be with them. “He took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:16; see also Matthew 19:14).

Jesus spent time in the home of His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. On one such occasion He listened patiently to the complaints of an anxious and perhaps weary Martha, who felt she was carrying more than her fair share of the burden of hosting guests. Jesus responded with kindness, understanding, and love (see Luke 10:41). Later, when Lazarus

became sick, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus (see John 11:1–35). When Mary heard that Jesus was near, she ran to meet Him, fell down at His feet, and said, “If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died” (v. 32). When Jesus saw her weeping, the scriptures tell us that “he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled” (v. 33) and that He “wept” (v. 35). He showed great compassion in mourning with and comforting those around Him. Near the end of his mortal ministry Jesus said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

While Jesus sat at the well or visited with friends in their homes, the streets of Jerusalem were filled with the homeless, the hungry, the crippled, the blind, and those with leprosy, but there was nothing negligible about His services. There’s nothing negligible about the simple acts of kindness and assistance that you and I offer to those around us on a daily basis. At BYU the one within our reach might be the roommate who has had a difficult day and needs someone to listen, the professor who is having an off day teaching and needs a little patience and understanding, or the guy in the lane next to us who needs us to give him a break by slowing down to let him over so that he doesn’t miss his turn ahead. Every day in our homes, in our communities, and in our classrooms right here on campus we can find the one within our reach who needs our assistance. It may only be a drop, but it does make a difference in the lives of those around us.

President David O. McKay was fond of the nineteenth-century quote “Life is made up not of great sacrifices or duties, but of little things in which smiles and kindness and small obligations given habitually are what win and preserve the heart and secure comfort.”⁹

Mother Teresa said:

It is never too small. We are so small we look at things in a small way. But God, being Almighty, sees everything great. Therefore, even if you write

*a letter for a blind man or you just go and sit and listen, or you take the mail for him, or you visit somebody or bring a flower to somebody—small things—or wash clothes for somebody or clean the house. Very humble work that is where you and I must be. For there are many people who can do big things. But there are very few people who will do the small things.*¹⁰

We read in the Book of Mormon “that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). This is illustrated beautifully in the birth of Christ. The Savior of the world was born in a simple stable in an obscure village to a woman of no great standing in the world. Out of these simple, small circumstances proceeded the Lord’s great work of salvation. One of the most recognizable symbols of the Christmas season is the Nativity, with a small babe lying in straw and surrounded by animals. It is a reminder to us all that “out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).

When celebrating the birth of Christ, we surround ourselves with symbols to remind us of what life is really all about, why we’re here, and what we’re supposed to be doing with our lives. There are two very similar fictional stories that have become a part of the Christmas tradition in the United States. One is Frank Capra’s film *It’s a Wonderful Life*; the other is Charles Dickens’ novella *A Christmas Carol*, which has been adapted for film and theater. I believe the broad appeal of these simple stories lies in their ability to remind us of things that we so easily forget but really want to remember. They help us rediscover the small things that get misplaced in the clutter around us. I know it’s a little off-season, but I hope you’ll indulge me in referring to these stories to remind us today of some things.

The main characters in these two stories—George Bailey and Ebenezer Scrooge—live their lives in relative obscurity, interacting on a daily basis with the people in their neighbor-

hoods and communities and going about the mundane tasks of life. Both are businessmen in the profession of lending money—a trade that brings them into daily contact with individuals who need assistance. Like his father did before him, George Bailey runs his business with his heart rather than his head. He puts people before profits. His purpose in running a building and loan company is to help people get out of the slums. Kindness and respect characterize his daily interactions with those around him. On the other hand, Ebenezer Scrooge is described by Dickens as “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!” He conducts business with his head rather than his heart—a head that Dickens says is as “hard and sharp as flint.”¹¹ Profits come before people. Despising the poor, Scrooge is perfectly content to keep them in the slums.

Despite their differences, these two characters are very much alike. Both have forgotten the significance of their simple, daily interactions with others: the powerful, cumulative effect of daily living is lost on them. They don’t get it—not until there is Christmas Eve intervention to remind them of things they probably already know in their hearts but have forgotten in their heads.

George feels like a failure because he did not pursue his dreams of becoming an architect and world traveler. He has lived out his life in the same small town where he was born, doing the same small things day in and day out. He feels like he has made no difference in the world. Looking back on his life, he can find no meaning or purpose to it, and he contemplates ending it.

George’s life, however, is saved by an angel named Clarence who has come as an answer to the prayers of George’s family—and to earn his wings. Clarence’s job is to show George the impact of those small things he did day in and day out. Clarence sets out to prove to George that he really has had a wonderful life

by giving him a vision of what life would have been like for others had George never been born.

Visiting that same small town as a stranger who has never lived among them, George finds people without hope living in the slums. He finds unhappiness and despair. He hasn't been there to offer a hand up, and no one else has bothered. George realizes that his little deeds of goodness, his habits of selfless service—his small drops—have brought a better life to those around him and beyond. He's astonished at the reach of his small gestures. George had made a difference in the world without having ever left his hometown.

Ebenezer Scrooge also has Christmas Eve visitors. The first is the ghost of Jacob Marley, Ebenezer's former business partner. He appears "captive, bound, and double-ironed"¹² with a long chain wound about him made of "cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel."¹³ The ghost explains to Ebenezer that he wears the chain he "forged in life," having made it "link by link, and yard by yard"¹⁴ through the choices he made, being eternally linked to that which he valued most in life. He explains that he is now required to walk the earth and witness what he could not now share "but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness."¹⁵ Shocked, Ebenezer exclaims, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob."¹⁶

The remorseful ghost says, "Business! . . . Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the . . . ocean of my business!"¹⁷

And Ebenezer doesn't get it. He doesn't comprehend how the big things count so little nor how the small things matter so much. He cannot get that flint head of his around it. In the course of that long night he is visited by the spirits of Christmas past, present, and future. They come to show Scrooge that his

cold-hearted, tight-fisted ways—his drops—have brought misery and unhappiness to those around him. His single-minded focus on his business has gradually resulted in his turning his back on his family and friends and in rejecting the needs of those in his community.

Both George and Ebenezer have Christmas epiphanies that bring them back to that simple stable in an obscure village. They come to realize that "by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls" (Alma 37:7). They remember, as we do through their stories, that the essence of life is in the small and seemingly insignificant daily interactions we have with others.

We are busy people here at BYU. There are appointments to be kept, projects to be finished, papers to be written, assignments to be graded, and any number of things to be organized on any given day. In the rush of our daily lives, we—like Marley and Scrooge—can easily get our priorities mixed up and forget the small things that are the most important. The one we need to assist could be sitting right next to us, but we do not see that person. Perhaps the person needing our individual attention has worked in the same office with us for years, and yet that person is invisible to us. If we become too preoccupied with the distractions that crowd around us, we may not feel the prompting when our Heavenly Father has an assignment for us.

One of my responsibilities at the library is to meet one-on-one with students to assist them with their research. I consider it the best part of my job. I also sometimes have to write reports and attend to mundane office duties. On one occasion I was feeling the pressure of an upcoming deadline. It had been a busy week, and I wasn't sure how I was going to get everything done. On my calendar I designated a couple of hours to get a certain task done. I told the student employees at our desk not to

send any students needing research assistance to me that morning. I then went into my office and closed my door.

A short while later there was a knock at the door. I was irritated at the interruption. I went to the door and opened it. The student standing there explained that he really needed to meet with me as soon as possible, and he wondered if now would be a good time. Looking at my face, his smile dropped. Whatever I was radiating that morning, it wasn't friendly.

Before I could answer him, he said, "I see you're busy. I'll come back at another time." As he started to walk away, I received a prompting—a chastisement, really. I had made a bad choice. I had gotten my priorities mixed up. Like Marley and Scrooge, I had forgotten for a moment that mankind was my business. I told the student to stay and that I would really like to meet with him now.

As we talked in my office, the student explained that he had transferred to BYU from a small college. The course work here was more difficult than he had anticipated. He was feeling discouraged and doubting his abilities. He had two papers due, and he hadn't had much experience writing research papers. He found the library to be a large, complicated, and—I'm sure, thanks to me—unfriendly place. I had nothing better to do at that moment than to orient a new student to library research and offer a little encouragement. He returned to me several times for help after that. If I had let him walk away because I was too busy for him, I'm sure he would not have returned—the prompting told me that.

I believe that our Heavenly Father has small daily tasks that He would like us to do right here at BYU to make a difference. He would like to make us instruments in His hands in helping to fulfill His work. President Spencer W. Kimball said:

God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he

meets our needs. Therefore, it is vital that we serve each other in the kingdom. . . . So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds!¹⁸

Knowing that there are angels among us attending to our needs and that no sparrow falls without the Father's notice gives us courage and faith to let go of our own troubles long enough to reach out and help others with theirs. It's a system of give and take that works best when all focus more on the giving and less on the taking. Along the way, our Heavenly Father sends us gentle reminders of the small things that are of the greatest worth.

I first arrived on this campus as a freshman nearly thirty years ago. I had only been a member of the Church for four months, and I was the only member in my family. I was over two thousand miles from my home in Virginia and knew no one here in Utah. It was a lot to get used to all at once. At times I felt like I had landed in a foreign country. I was overwhelmed with all there was to learn and do.

I didn't know who my roommate would be in the dorms that first year, but I assumed he would be a lifelong member of the Church who could explain to me how things worked around here. The Lord, as He often does, had something else in mind. That first roommate of mine wasn't a member of the Church. In fact, he wasn't from a Christian tradition. He was from Saudi Arabia, and he didn't speak English. He had come to participate in BYU's English as a Second Language program. I may have felt like I was in a foreign land, but he actually was. My challenges seemed trivial; his appeared to be overwhelming. He looked to me to tell him how things worked around here, and I hope he has forgiven me for not always getting it right.

President Gordon B. Hinckley told of his experience of feeling homesick and discouraged while serving a mission in England

and how he wrote home about it. His father's simple reply was "Forget yourself and go to work."¹⁹ I think that's the message my Heavenly Father was trying to send me that first year. Years ago President Hinckley visited this campus and gave that very message to the students. He said:

If the pressures of school are too heavy, if you complain about your housing and the food you eat, I can suggest a cure for your problems. Lay your books aside for a few hours, leave your room, and go visit someone who is old and lonely. There are many such right here in this valley. Or visit those who are sick and discouraged; there are hundreds of that kind here, including not a few on this campus, who need the kind of encouragement you could give.²⁰

I was not left without assistance and encouragement that first year. In fact, I don't have time today to tell you of all the helpers sent my way, but I do want to mention one. Before I left home, my grandmother sat me down to determine if I was really serious about going to BYU. When—to her disappointment—she found out that I was, she said, "You might as well know, then, that your grandfather has a cousin who joined the Latter-day Saints some thirty years ago." She explained the complicated family connection, but it went over my head. She explained that in the course of those thirty years they had only seen this cousin and his wife at a few reunions and that it was her understanding that he now lived in New Mexico. She said that at one of the reunions she had heard that this cousin had a son who worked at BYU. She didn't know the son's name, but she provided me with the cousin's name. I tucked this information away in my mind, thinking that perhaps I would look this person up when I came to BYU.

That first semester I had registered for my general electives, including Biology 100. In my registration materials, the instructor of that biology class was simply listed as "staff." On

the first day of class, the instructor introduced himself as Larry St. Clair. I immediately recognized St. Clair as the last name of that cousin. The thought, of course, occurred to me that I should ask him if he was the son of that cousin. However, as the class progressed that day, I started to talk myself out of the idea, thinking that there could be any number of people on campus with that last name and wondering how I would approach the subject since I wasn't exactly sure how we were related. The feeling that I should introduce myself persisted to the point that I felt pushed forward. At the end of class I hung back, waiting for a portion of the class that had surrounded the professor wanting to add his class. If you've ever been in a Biology 100 class, you know that this was a hundred or so people.

My turn finally came, and I introduced myself, asking him if he was the son of Jack St. Clair. When he confirmed that he was, I introduced myself as his cousin. He asked me a few questions. At this point he could have said, "Nice to meet you. Tell the folks hello," and left it at that. Instead he invited me to dinner that week so I could meet his wife, Rieta, and their children. So I went to dinner and met the St. Clair family. At that point Larry had certainly fulfilled any family obligation he might have had, and, again, he could have left it at that with a clear conscience. However, he was in tune enough to recognize the one within his reach who needed his help. He somehow realized that I was a little homesick, a lot overwhelmed, and with no family support in the Church.

The St. Clairs invited me to dinner again and again and again. They invited me over for holidays. They invited me to go to activities with them. A few months after that initial meeting Larry St. Clair bestowed upon me the Melchizedek Priesthood and ordained me to the office of an elder. A year later, Larry and Rieta accompanied me to the Salt Lake Temple for my first visit to the temple. A couple of months after

that, Larry drove me to the Missionary Training Center to see me off on my mission.

Jump forward twenty years. I was two thousand miles from home—this time in the opposite direction—on the East Coast at a conference away from my family and home in Utah. I received a phone call from my wife, who was distressed. I could hear our children crying in the background. Our family had suffered a heart-breaking loss. I felt helpless, and I couldn't get home immediately. After we ended our phone call, my wife loaded the children into our van and drove to Larry and Rieta St. Clair's house. The St. Clairs found themselves with a living room full of heart-broken people. Larry took each person, one by one, and placed his hands on them and gave them blessings of comfort.

When we are willing to accept assignments from the Lord, they may only take a moment, but they might also take a month or a year or a lifetime. The important thing is that we are in tune enough to see the one within our reach who needs our help and that we have enough faith to accept the assignment. It won't be convenient. I hope nothing I have said here today has given the impression that I believe "small and simple" means easy, because it doesn't. But I believe these small and simple things will become our most valued university experiences.

When Mawi Asgedom, an Ethiopian native who had once lived in a Sudanese refugee camp, left for Harvard University, his mother said to him, "Always remember where you came from."²¹

Once he arrived at Harvard he got caught up in the rush of everyday university life, which for him involved clubs, sports, a lot of classes, and a part-time job. He said, "Remembering where I had come from seemed far less important than knowing where I was supposed to be every half hour."²²

During his sophomore year he worked as a delivery man for the Harvard Student Agency.

While waiting for a package in the office, he watched as an elderly and feeble woman walked in. She asked if there was someone there who could type a short letter for her—"such a simple, easy thing to do," Mawi later recalled.²³

The receptionist explained that they offered no typing services and sent her away. Looking a little confused, the woman started to turn away, but another worker in the office called her over, "gently sat her down," and then typed the letter for her.²⁴

Mawi said, "Never has a Harvard student seemed so great to me as in that moment."²⁵ Mawi began to reflect on what his mother might have meant when she advised him to always remember where he came from. He had been the recipient of many such kindnesses in his long journey from a refugee camp to Harvard University. Many angels had helped him along the way, and he had noticed that "most angels don't look like angels,"²⁶ so it shouldn't have surprised him as much as perhaps it did to find one looking like an ordinary college student at Harvard. Thinking back on those angels and their kindnesses, he realized that each had taught him something important about life and inspired him to reach out to help those around him. In their small ways they had made a difference in his life.

Mawi graduated with top honors and gave the commencement address at his graduation in 1999. Reflecting on his time at Harvard, he said in his address he had learned "many facts and formulas, many new ways of thinking, a fresh understanding of the world."²⁷ But he highlighted that seemingly insignificant act of kindness he had witnessed that day in the Harvard Student Agency as a turning point in his education, when he began to reflect on what is most important in life. He said, "While Harvard University taught me well, my true education has come from less-likely sources."²⁸

I pray we will always remember where we came from and that we will follow Christ in

reaching out to those around us. Christlike love transforms our simple, everyday living into something extraordinary. It's the love of Christ that makes the difference. We don't need to leave BYU to make a difference in the world. There are people within our reach here who need us. There are assignments waiting for us here—we just need to accept them.

In the words of David O. McKay:

*There is no one great thing which we can do to obtain eternal life, and it seems to me that the great lesson to be learned in the world today is to apply in the little acts and duties of life the glorious principles of the gospel. Let us not think that because some . . . things . . . seem small and trivial that they are unimportant. Life, after all, is made up of little things.*²⁹

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Edward Le Joly, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 28–29.
2. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta* (London: Collins, 1971), 25.
3. Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful*, 28.
4. Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful*, 28.
5. See Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful*, 28.
6. See Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful*, 22–23.
7. Mother Teresa, *My Life for the Poor: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, ed. José Luis González-Balado and Janet N. Playfoot (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 20.
8. Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful*, 28.
9. *GI*, 388; quoting Humphry Davy, in John Davy, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1836), 391.
10. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Life in the Spirit: Reflections, Meditations, Prayers*, ed. Kathryn Spink (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 49; quoted in *Love: A Fruit Always in Season: Daily Meditations from the Words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, ed. Dorothy S. Hunt (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 26.
11. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1914), 3.
12. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 26.
13. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 20.
14. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 24.
15. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 24.
16. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 26.
17. Dickens, *Christmas Carol*, 26.
18. Spencer W. Kimball, “Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974, 5.
19. In Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 64.
20. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Forget Yourself,” BYU devotional address, 6 March 1977.
21. Mawi Asgedom, *Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard*, ed. Dave Berger (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 135.
22. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 136.
23. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 136.
24. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 136.
25. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 136.
26. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 30.
27. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 137.
28. Asgedom, *Of Beetles*, 134.
29. *GI*, 151–52.