

## **The Spiritual Significance of Insignificant Things**

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*"In the particular lies the universal."* –James Joyce

*"Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of each."* -Henry David Thoreau

Luke 18:15-17, "People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

In the television show, "House" Dr. Gregory House is this brilliant MD who diagnoses and cures the most complicated and unsolvable medical mysteries that the writers of the show can come up with. He's a royal jerk, who manipulates everyone around him, drives his team crazy, alienates anyone who might befriend or love him, but all of whom bow down to his brilliance and diagnostic genius. Initially I hated the show, because the guy is such a jerk, but Tracy wore me down, and now I love it. Well, in each episode there's always a few different plot lines going on; this doctor is in love with this nurse and is contemplating cheating on his wife, the patient keeps getting worse and the team can't figure out why, and House is playing some mean spirited practical joke on his only friend in the world, when all of a sudden, these three worlds will collide, House kind of spaces out for a minute, and then brilliantly sees some cosmic connection that enables him to solve the medical mystery. It's a great example of where something significant can arrive out of seemingly insignificant things.

Have you ever experienced anything like that? Found the answer to one of life's great riddles in a completely unrelated conversation you're having with someone? Have you ever experienced a life time revelation on a walk in the woods? Or made a momentous life decision in a place where you might never expect to be thinking heavy thoughts?

My friend Andrew Milman had an experience like that with us on work tour this year. And he has agreed to share his story with you today.

*"Hi my name is Andrew Milman. I am here to talk to you about my work tour cell phone story. Work tour was without a doubt the best trip of my life and if you ever have a chance to go you definitely should.*

*On our trip we were working on a house in the marsh and when we got done with the house we took some of the wood from the house and made a big bon fire on the beach which most of you go to see on retreat. What you didn't get to see was off a little from the beach there was a pier and a lot of the kids went on a walk on the pier and we were all out there talking laying down*

*under the stars looking back on what we have done over the past four days and it was a real great time. When it was time to head back to the fire we got up and started to walk back towards the beach and about half way down the pier one of my best friends got scared or for whatever reason jumped. (everyone who was around has a different story about what happened right then) but after all she ended up jumping and her arms went flying around like this. She hit the bottom of my hand with hers and my cell phone which was in my hand went flying into the water.*

*For the people who don't know me personally I love my phone and always have it with me and am always texting besides in church. I loved my phone so much and in the blink of an eye it was gone. I had thought about what I would do if I had ever lost my phone or something happened to it and what I thought in the past I thought I would be the maddest person in the world. But when my phone hit the water and I had a little time to think about it I couldn't be mad at my friend who through the phone in the water as it was the worst part of my trip it was also the best part of my trip.*

*You might ask why this was the best part of my trip? It made it all real the people who got hit with the hurricane lost everything there house all of their belongings in less than twelve hours they lost everything..... It made me think what is the importance of a cell phone it as just a piece of plastic and what did it really matter to me compared to the way I feel for my family. What is a piece of plastic compared to the love u get and give to your family and friends? I wasn't mad at the girl who made my phone end up in the Gulf of Mexico because in the end I love her because she is always there for me just like all my friends and family. When I had thought about being without my phone in the past I thought it would stink but the rest of my trip without my phone was great I got to sit down and talk to the people on the trip and it was great the way I look at things now are so much more different then the way I looked at life before. Now I cherish what I have now at home and at the church and I think you should too."*

In the blink of an eye, Andrew's perspective changed. And it didn't come about through any great example I could offer him, or that he got from anyone else. Andrew had an experience where he learned a valuable life lesson, one that he might not have learned otherwise as a result of this simple object; a cell phone. This relatively insignificant piece of modern technology became the vehicle for a life altering spiritual experience.

If you're like me, then you crave those moments of transformation and revelation. I try to keep myself open to them, hopeful that something will occur in my everyday existence that will provide spiritual insight when I'm lucky, or will provide revelation when I'm blessed. On those special but rare occasions where something that is seemingly insignificant becomes a totem, an icon, an object that takes on significance far beyond its original purpose, life is interrupted in sacred and mystical ways, and those touchstone moments become steps on Jacob's ladder, bringing us one step closer to an encounter with God. Perhaps they offer deeper insight into who we are as people, or what we are as members of this community, living here and now at this time in our earth's history. Perhaps it is a story that we hear that alters our perspective. Or an experience we have.

Perhaps we will collect mementos of the occasion; retrieve the shells from that sacred beach, or carry with us the stones from the road less travelled that we decided to follow.

Jesus was notorious for offering alternatives to the well traveled road. He would lift up examples from everyday life, and give them spiritual depth and quality that wasn't there before. In just two chapters of Matthew he uses the most common things in the universe—every day things, so frequently taken for granted – to offer the followers examples of God's power and presence made real before our eyes. Salt. Light. Birds. Lilies. Grass. Grapes. Figs. Even beach houses. He shows us how just a teeny weenie bit of faith, no bigger than a mustard seed or a needles eye can be a life altering objects of grace. He brings people to a fork in the road, and instead of leading us inside the temple, he steers us to the less travelled road. And that can make all the difference.

Whenever I have one of these “less travelled road” experiences, I like to memorialize them with a memento.

I'm one of those collector types. I've got plenty of significant shells. I've got stones from many roads. I've got feathers and mugs and slips of paper where I scribbled down a thought or two that struck me as significant at the time.

Every time I revisit these pieces, I am reminded of just how insignificant they are or could be to other people; and I will admit that sometimes I have a hard time keeping track of which stone was from New Mexico and which was from Lake Superior...but I keep them because they represent growth for me. They represent a change in perspective. They represent a time or a moment in my life when my ordinary existence was overcome by an experience of God; and that is why I keep those insignificant items. I LEARNED something, and I wanted to have something to represent that breakthrough that I had been hoping for, searching for and praying for.

Part of my challenge, though, is to try to keep sacred totems and items of revelation to a realistic collection point. Because, in my quest for those life altering experiences, I could very easily slip into defining everything as a sacred item; and when I do that, those items of true significance can lose their luster.

Take for example, one of the items that I had retained from my New Mexico pilgrimage a few years back. Tracy was going through some items in my closet when she hoisted up my bag of keepsakes from New Mexico. Do you really need all this? She asked me. My immediate reaction was, “Of course, those are from my pilgrimage!” but then she said, “Even this biscotti?” I guess it's ok to let some things go.

So another part of the challenge, for me, is to be able to recognize when things are divine and life giving manna from heaven, and when things are just old biscotti.

Another challenge is when I'm looking too hard for that perfect shell, because I never find it. When I'm trying to find a stone with some magic mojo in it, it always eludes me. This can be an issue for the still seeking pilgrims of the still speaking God.

And then... sometimes the road becomes monotonous. The highway drones on and becomes a blur. The road that once was less travelled becomes the turnpike of redundancy. I can get lost in the daily grind, so lost that I neglect to notice that the iris' are in bloom. I can get so lost in the Biblical story of the prodigals and the Samaritans that I blaze right by the stranded neighbor, or forget to say hello to my daughter or my son (or my dogs). Sometimes I am guilty of confining God to one hour a week at this address, and then becoming disappointed when I can't find God even when I'm here. (You know, I swear I left God laying around here somewhere...)

So what do I do? What do you do? Two paths diverge in a wood...and I...I look around the bend to see what might lay ahead of the one. I look through the trees and see which path might require me to work...and I wait. Stuck at the fork. Waiting for a nudge from someone, somewhere.

I admire and appreciate all those nudgers out there. You heard from two nudgers this morning. Rachel Stein went out to the Mill Creek Farm with her family. Mill Creek is a retirement farm for old or neglected horses. People can go out to Mill Creek with apples and carrots, and feed the horses out there. Apparently they can sense you coming, and they trot on over to the fence, anxious to share some love and receive the gifts freely given. Rachel had a powerful experience out there. She heard about the neglect these poor animals had suffered, and she decided that she could do something to help those horses. And she has. Rachel has saved up her own money and even done some fundraising, and she has raised \$22, all on her own, to give to the Mill Creek Farm. Our Compassion in Action committee heard about this farm, and that our Pow Wow family group was heading out there to feed the horses. And we wanted to help out, too. So next week, if you are so inspired, bring a bag of carrots or apples to worship, and Rachel and her friends from the church will gladly pass on our blessings in the form of carrots and apples to the horses at Mill Creek Farm.

Caryss Baldwin and her younger brother, Zach, go to Country Day School, close to their home. Two years ago, the younger brother of one of Caryss' classmates, who is in Zach's class, a boy named Dale Leider was diagnosed with Duchennes muscular dystrophy. If you don't know about duchennes (and I hadn't heard about it), it is a form of muscular dystrophy that affects the muscular system in the body. Dale will gradually lose all his ability to move, and will most likely be wheel chair bound by the time he is 11 or 12 years old.

Dale's family has been trying to get the word out about Duchennes, and has been raising funds to donate to organizations that are working to find a cure. When Caryss heard about her friend's disease, she decided she could try to help. She started making and selling her own custom jewelry. She keeps some of the profits for her supplies that she needs, but most of the money she makes goes to the Cure Dale's Duchennes fund. So far, she's raised about \$2000.

Both Caryss and Rachel are 10 years old.

How's that for a nudge?

Can it really be that simple? Can it really be possible to find a piece of universality in the particularity of a cell phone falling in the drink? Can the taste of an apple help resign you to the influence of God's creation? Can a piece of jewelry really become hope and life?

I find inspiration in the stories from our young people today. I am reminded that the beauty of childhood faith is the simplicity of saying yes to the insignificant things that we take for granted. Remember those days, when every moment was significant? When life was filled with mystery and imagining? Remember what it felt like to stand before two roads and wonder at the possibilities that might exist beyond the bend, before we had to second guess, or reconsider, or ask for a second opinion? Is this what Jesus meant when he said we need to accept the Kingdom as a child? I think it is. There is good news in losing your cell phone, grace in feeding an apple to a horse, and resurrection in a beaded bracelet.

Blessed be. Amen.

Oh God, we give thanks for all those nudgers out there. We offer a humble word of thanks and praise for those friends among us who remind us to see beyond this simple existence, and find your grace in the simplest things.

Thank you for the inspiration of the young folks among us, who encourage us to laugh more, love with abandon, and confront the most difficult challenges that this life can offer with a prayer and a smile and a willingness to help out.

Open our eyes, that we might find blessing in the beauty of the earth. Open our ears, that we might hear a call of a cause close to our hearts. Open our hearts, that our little light might shine out on the world a light of love, acceptance and hope for tomorrow.

And open our hands, that we might be receptive to your blessings and gifts, and be able to take the hand of the people sitting by our sides, and give them a squeeze to let them know we love them.

For all the blessings, for all the beauty, and for all the nudgers out there- thanks be to God.

Amen.