

The Great Big World is a Good Little Garden

Rabbi Zoë Klein

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If I were to give each of you

a large piece of paper,
and asked you to fold it once over,
and then take that folded paper and fold it over again,
and then again,
and then again,
until you have refolded the original paper
50 times,
how tall do you think the final stack would be?

The truth is that you can *really* only fold
any sized piece of paper seven times
before it becomes too thick and too small
to fold again,
but if we *were* to fold this paper,
in our mind's eye, fifty times,
how tall would the final stack reach?

Malcolm Gladwell, author of a book
called "The Tipping Point,"
says that most people guess
that the pile would be as thick as a phone book,

or, if they are *really* courageous,
they'd say it would be as tall a refrigerator.

But the real answer is
that the height of the stack
would approximate **the distance to the sun**.

And if you folded it over one more time,
the stack would be as high as the distance to the sun and back.

This is an example of what is called in mathematics
a geometric progression.

Epidemics are another example of geometric progression:
When a virus spreads through a population,
it doubles and doubles again,
until it has,

figuratively,
grown from a single sheet of paper
all the way to the sun in fifty steps.

At our heart, we are all gradualists,
our expectations set by steady passage of time.

But, Gladwell explains,
that world of the Tipping Point
is a place where the unexpected becomes expected,
where radical change is *more* than possibility,
it is, contrary to all our expectations,
like the height of that stack of paper,
a certainty.

“The Tipping Point” is the name given to that dramatic moment
in an epidemic when
everything changes all at once.
That pivotal moment
when suddenly everyone has the winter flu
or measles spreads through a school.

But he also points out that there are Tipping Points
in every area of our lives,
not just epidemics.
For example,
he points out that the brand of shoes
called Hush Puppies
in early 1995
was about to be phased out because it was selling
just a few thousand a year,
when suddenly a small group of hip kids in lower Manhattan
who had bought them at ma and pa shops
started wearing them to clubs
and within one year they were selling millions of shoes,
Isaac Mizrahi was wearing them,
designers used them in their spring collections,
and in 1996 the company won best accessory
at the Council of Fashion Designers award show,
where the president of Hush Puppies stood on a stage
with Calvin Klein
and Donna Karan,
all because of a handful of kids in the East Village and Soho.

The idea then, in The Tipping Point,
is that contrary to what we may believe,
there is this number
that can tip the world

from control to chaos,
or from chaos to control,
and back again.
And that number is tiny.
A tiny group of people,
a tiny number of steps,
a tiny change,
upset in balance,
tiny.

He looks at an outbreak of syphilis in Baltimore
about six years ago,
and notes that the city had recently cut back
because of budgetary problems,
and the number of clinicians in the city's poorest neighborhoods
went from 17 to ten.
The number of patients visiting the STD clinics dropped
and that *tiny difference*,
the difference of only **seven clinicians**,
allowed the disease to erupt.

There is this *tiny* number
that can tip things.

There was a time when we weren't so afraid of little tiny things.

As a child I wasn't afraid of little things,
I was afraid of **big** monsters in the closet,
I was afraid of the **big** sound of thunder,
sounds in the night I interpreted as
big burly burglars.
I didn't *leap up* onto the nearest chair
and *shriek* when I saw a mouse.
I wasn't afraid of **little** cuts
and contracting the flesh eating bacteria,
No one was afraid of the **little** peanut,
afraid that bringing peanut butter and jelly to school
might be fatal to a friend,
I wasn't afraid of passing shadows
and the soft mist of pesticide,
or tar,
or benzene,
or the invisible effects
of pcb toxicities,
or the gentle glow of gamma rays
and x-rays and ultra violet rays,

aluminum foil,
silicon, the smoke of tobacco,
the wax on the skin of an apple,
high saturated fats and low fiber
and my grandmother's vegetable hair dyes.
In my father's studio I could wield a razor
to cut fluid curves in corrugated board.
I wasn't afraid of box-cutters.

And it is not that as *I* have become older
I have become more frightened
of little things,
it is that *for all of us*,
little things have become more frightening.

Even our assailants are becoming tinier and tinier,
we've gone from fearing angry grown ex-convicts with guns,
to unhappy teenagers with guns,
to children with guns.

Cro Magnum man may have been dashing away from three story T-Rex,
but his descendents are fleeing,
with no less fear,
the vicious jaws of the **Deer Tick**,
which is hardly larger than a vanilla bean.

There are those that have made progress in trying to soothe
our fears,
The cover of Barry Glassner's book reads:
The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid
of the Wrong Things.
Crime,
Drugs,
Minorities,
Teen Moms,
Killer Kids,
Mutant Microbes,
Plane Crashes,
Road Rage,
and So Much More.

Inside the book,
he explains that in the 90's crime rates plunged
but people thought they were soaring.
Drug use decrease by half,
two-thirds of high school seniors

never having even tried any drug,
but the majority of adults
think drug abuse is the greatest danger to American youth.
Life expectancy has double over time,
we are better able to control disease than any other time in history,
but when statistics from magazines were compiled and reviewed,
one researcher found that **543 million** Americans were seriously sick,
which is amazing in a country of **266 million** people.
The researcher concluded,
 “Either as a society we are doomed,
 or someone is seriously double dipping.”

In the last ten years, the murder rate has gone down 20 percent,
but the number of stories about it on the media
went up 600 percent.
He reveals that so many fears are unfounded.

There is a metaphor of a town
who is tormented by a **giant** Goliath-like warrior,
and one by one they send their best and their bravest
to conquer this warrior,
and *each time*,
their best and their bravest is defeated the instant
he steps upon the battlefield,
and the Warrior grows bigger.
As the story goes, a young girl and her friends
were playing tag,
when, in the spirit of adventure,
the girl wandered off and became lost.
Unintentionally,
she had wandered onto the battlefield
on the outskirts of the town,
where she saw the Warrior.
Thinking that this was another, albeit large,
player in her game,
she ran toward him shouting gleefully,
 “You’re it! You’re it! I’m going to get you!”
But the closer she ran,
the *smaller* the Warrior became,
and when she was close enough to tag him,
he was no more than an inch tall.
 “You’re it!”
shouted the little girl,
tagging him gently with the tip of her finger.
 “By the way, what’s your name?”
she asked.

And he answered in a tiny voice,
“Fear.”

Roosevelt taught the same idea
far more concisely.
But it just doesn't ring as true today,
there is more to fear than fear,
especially in an age when our assailants
are so *tiny*, and
unidentifiable.

And we are **not wrong** to be afraid.
My whole family has had Lyme Disease.
Parents with children who have food allergies
have to be suspicious of every meal,
and even every person,
a kiss on the cheek from someone who drank coffee
to a child with a coffee allergy
can result in a lip-shaped welt on his skin,
or worse.

Our Rabbis taught:

“There are five instances of fear cast by the weak over the strong:
the fear of the gnat upon the lion,
the fear of the mosquito upon the elephant,
the fear of the spider upon the scorpion,
the fear of the swallow upon the eagle,
the fear of the stickleback fish over the whale.”

Like the whale that's afraid of the stickleback,
(I am not sure that that is an actual marine truth,
and I am also not sure how well
the rabbis of landlocked Babylonia
who wrote those words thousands of years ago
knew firsthand the emotional constitution of whales,
but it is a nice metaphor.)

like the whale who is afraid of the stickleback,
it seems that
that which we fear most of all now,
is small,

the size of a melanomic cell.
The size of a metastatic pinpoint,
the size of a golf ball,
the size of a grapefruit growing where there is no tree.

We are stalked by plastics
and MSG and wheat germ,
and secondhand smoke,
and we do our best,
short of paranoia,
to set up barricades of vitamins
and anti-carcinogenic nutrients
to protect our soft tissues, and lymphnodes,
but somehow,

it seems,

one tiny one gets a ramp pass,
two are undetected by the tired technicians at the x-ray,
three take up residence,
three take up residence
in an ovary,
in a prostate,
in a humble one room apartment
deep in the marrow,
a house in Florida,
and we find ourselves in the battle
against the Tipping Point.

A professor of geophysics (Larry Gedney) wrote in 1992,
 "We tend to relate to things on a scale
 that is commensurate
 with out perspective
 whether we happen to be an amoebae
 or an intergalactic monster.
 We are largely incapable of comprehending big things,
 and we simply don't appreciate the importance of little things."

I agree that we are largely incapable of comprehending big things,

deficits that have more o's than a box of cheerios,
we're incapable of comprehending numbers like the "6 million,"
of folding a piece of paper to the sun,
grasping God as infinite.

But I disagree that we **don't appreciate** the importance of the small.
I think we **are** starting to know the power of the small.
I think we do appreciate the power of the small.

In the last election we started to realize the power of the single vote.

We now know that the difference between the lifeblood of plants
and that of people is only one atom.
Chlorophyll is made up of 136 atoms of
hydrogen,
carbon,
oxygen,
and nitrogen
arranged in a ring
around a single atom of magnesium;
hemoglobin
is made up of 136 atoms of
hydrogen,
carbon,
oxygen
and nitrogen
arranged in a ring around a single atom of iron.

Little things make a difference.

Last week we had a memorial service,
and we read a poem by Yehudah Amichai
called "The Diameter of the Bomb,"
which talks about the diameter of a bomb being small,
just 13 centimeters,
its circle of destruction,
about twenty feet,
the family's affected stretching the circle around the planet,
and the cry of orphans pushing the circle
even beyond God.

Like a tossed stone that alters the surface of the entire pond,
like the tiny match that reduces acres and acres to ash,
we know, and we appreciate, and we fear the tiny.

Last year,
tiny bazooka shells,
no more than 13 centimeters,
with a deceptively small, benign sounding "pop"
were fired by the Taliban into the hearts of
two giant Buddhas carved into the sandstone cliffs
around the third century.
175 feet tall,
they were the *tallest standing Buddhas in the world.*
They were destroyed, the Taliban say,
because they were offensive to Islam.
Museums and governments tried to save them.

They failed.

Taliban Information Minister said,

“The destruction work is not as easy as people would think.

Both of them have been carved in a cliff.

They are firmly attached to the mountain.”

And so with a *little* sweat,
and some *little* bazooka shells,
the tallest Buddhas in the world
who had sat, meditative, side by side,
almost two thousand years,
two proud, mysteriously smiling
triumphs of man’s creativity
and spirituality,
symbols of peace and harmony,
**“carved in a cliff and
firmly attached to the mountain,”**
were gutted to rubble.

And last week,
two proud skyscrapers,
graceful silver lines,
who had sat for a generation,
meditative,
side by side,
triumphs of man’s creativity,
the architect said he designed them
as “symbols of peace and harmony
and man’s indomitable spirit,”
carved in steel
and **firmly attached
to the mountain of modernity,**
at one time *the tallest standing buildings in the world,*
were gutted to rubble,
taking with them thousands of souls,

First one fell, and then,
like a wife who loses her husband,
in sadness,
the other fell,

and the Pentagon,
which also had been the *largest* modern structure
when it was built,

and whatever was the target of the plane that was downed
in rural Pennsylvania,

it *too* had to be large,

like the whale who fears the stickleback,
the elephant who fears the mosquito,
humanity and the AIDS virus,
and the camel
who is deathly afraid
of that last little straw,

the jet-plane is overcome by the box-cutter
the biggest buildings in height,
sky-scrapers,
and the biggest buildings in width,
and hosts and hosts of innocents
overcome by a small group,
often referred to as terrorist cells,

and the fear of them
like the billows of dust and smoke
and *tiny infinitesimal specks* of asbestos
has spread and blanketed the world over
and I'd rather be lost among the giants of Jurassic park,
than fear the small anymore.

We live in a world that is bristling with fear.

Terrorism is the use of violence and threats

to create a state of fear for political purposes.

To take an already bristling fear,
and bring it to the Tipping Point
with a *pizza restaurant*, or *hijacking*,
and **tip** the world from fear into terror.

To turn general caution
into an instant epidemic
of terror.

Its aim is to take people's natural nightmares,
and realize them,
and make us feel as if we live in a world of **total fear**,
not just where fear is *a part of* our life,
a part that we live *with*,
but fear that *fills* our life,
fear that we live *in*.

Complete fear.

A world of fear.

How does one resist that?

There is one philosopher that addresses that question and offers a solution.

Emil Fackenheim

wrote a groundbreaking manifesto

called "To Mend the World,

Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought."

He describes the Nazi regime as a regime of total fear.

He wrote,

"The New Order was an unheard-of universe of intimidation, seduction, and psychological warfare so that to resist was heroic and extraordinary, and to yield was easy and even natural."

He wrote that the Nazi regime was *irresistible*, and yet *was* being resisted.

And he explains what he means...

he *doesn't* mean resistance with weapons,

and by resistance he *doesn't* mean uprisings.

Although there were those as well.

Fackenheim offers a new definition of resistance.

First he quotes Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum who said

"This is a time for *kiddush hahayyim*, sanctification of life, not *kiddush hashem*, martyrdom.

Previously the Jew's enemy sought his soul and the Jew sanctified his body in martyrdom.

But life does not need to be sanctified, it is already holy."

This is where Fackenheim gets his definition.

He writes:

"Life does not need to be sanctified.

This is the definition of resistance."

Life does not need to be sanctified.

This is the definition of resistance.

The pivotal moment in his book comes next, when he takes the words of an Auschwitz survivor named Pelegia Lewinska who wrote:

“At the outset the living spaces,
the ditches,
the mud,
the piles behind the blocks,
had appalled me with their horrible filth.

And then I saw the light!
I saw that it was not a question of disorder
or lack of organization but that,
on the contrary,
a very thoroughly considered conscious idea
was in the back of the camp’s existence.

They had condemned us to die in our own filth,
to drown in mud.
They wished to abase us,
to destroy our human dignity,
to efface every vestige of humanity,
to return us to the level of wild animals,

to fill us with horror and contempt
toward ourselves and our fellows.

But from the instant that I grasped the motivating principle,
it was as if I had been awakened from a dream,
I felt under orders to live,
and if I died in Auschwitz,
it would be as a human being,
I would hold onto my dignity.

I was not going to become the contemptible,
disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be.
And a terrible struggle began which went on day and night.”

Fackenheim then says with great solemnity,

“This is a historic statement.
This is a monumental discovery
and for us in this book it will be pivotal.”

Now, Fackenheim is criticized by other philosophers
for using stories to support his theories
as opposed to pure theory,
to base his entire philosophy on the scribbled words
of one lone survivor,

but Fackenheim defends this critique,
saying that there is no pure theory in a world of total terror,
that the only truth is in the statements,
that the truest philosophers are the witnesses.

He wrote:

“When Pelegia Lewinska
grasped the true meaning of Auschwitz
she “awakened from a dream”
and felt “under orders to live.”

No deeper or more ultimate grasp

is possible for philosophical thought that comes,
or ever will come, after the event.
This grasp, theirs no less than ours,
is epistemologically ultimate.”

I would like to hop onboard with Fackenheim
and use Lewinska’s words
as an ultimate truth,
applied to our time as well.

She had said:

“I saw that it was is not a question of disorder
or lack of organization but,
on the contrary,
a very thoroughly considered conscious idea.”

Terrorism, even with the chaos it causes,
and the supposed randomness of the victims it selects,
is also not a question of disorder
or lack of organization but,
on the contrary,
a very thoroughly considered conscious idea,
with the clear goal of creating terror through violence
for political gain.

Lewinska then said,

“The instant that I grasped the motivating principle,
it was as if I had been awakened from a dream.
I felt under orders to live.”

The instant we grasp the motivating principle of terrorism
which is to terrify,
and to create a complete world of terror
that is *irresistible*,
we awake from a nightmare into a clearer vision.

And we are under orders to live.
And this, to Fackenheim,
is the definition of resistance.
That life does not need to be sanctified.
It is already holy.

Every day, every moment, routinized, unassuming life
does not need to be sanctified.
It is already holy.

**When terrorism kills humans
the idea of humanity dies a little too,**
but we *can resuscitate* humanity
when we know life is holy.

Terrorism kills humans,
and humanity dies a little too.

Golda Meir once said:

“We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children,
We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children,
but we can NEVER forgive them
for making us kill theirs.”

In our **vengeance**,
we cannot forget life is holy.
It *is* holy.
That is our resistance.

How do we live in the knowledge that life is holy?
Our Torah portion for Yom Kippur tells us emphatically
“I have set before you this day life and death,
Choose life.”
How do we choose life in the face of irresistible fear?
How do resist by living in the knowledge that life is holy?

We have already seen how the fear of the little
has become the dominating fear in our world today,

the fear of little microbes,
fear of little mutating organisms,
the fear of little bugs,
the fear of little children with guns,
the fear of little groups with violent means...

but the little things we fear
are **far** outnumbered,

far outnumbered by the little things we *don't* fear.

To conquer our fear of the little things,
we are mistaken when we
ask help from *the God of big things*,
the God of the Exodus
and the Parting of the Sea
and the Creation of the World,
the God of big drama,
and big wrath,
and big salvation.

To conquer our fear of the little things,
we need to address the **God of the little things**.
The rabbis say that at the Revelation at Mount Sinai,
God did not speak in a **big** thunderous voice,
but in a **still, small** voice,
we need the God of the *tiny* Hanukkah candles
that flicker faintly and are
nearly drowned by the **big** dazzling lights of Christmas,
the God of the underdog,
of the little group of Maccabees,
that overthrew an empire,

we need to find the God of little things
in little things,
in the little things that add up to sacred-everyday-life.

The **great big** world is a **good little** garden!

Picking up a pin.
Re-sewing a button.
When we are driving,
and we slow to let someone cross,
and they wave to us,
it is a little thing,
but what they are really saying with that
simple gesture is,
 "I know you are driving a tank,
 and you could have killed me just now
 so thank you,
 thank you for not killing me."

We each save people every day,
in little things we hardly notice,
and in those little things,
life is sacred.

Fackenheim points out
that in the New Order,
the Universe of complete and total terror,
re-threading a button
was an act of total resistance,
an act of life being sacred.
Sharing a soup,
folding a blanket,
brushing your hair,
your teeth with a twig,
re-threading a button
was an act of total resistance
to a Universe of complete and total terror.

Re-threading a button
is an act of life being sacred.

Not just *then*, but now.
And not just *now*,
but at every time,
because we live
with fear,
with fear of death *all the time*.

And I tell you,
when we officiate at funerals,
when we,
Rabbi Gan,
Cantor Kent,
and myself,
when we talk with families,
it is **always the little things**
that say **everything**,
that seem to sum up
an entire life.

They say,

“It was the stack of white sheets after mom did the laundry.”

“It was the way he said my name.”

“It was the tray of cookies when I came home from school.”

“It was the kiss goodnight.”

“It was her face when she lit the candles.”

“It was the way he sang *Shema*.”

“It was the splinter he removed.”

“It was the way he greeted the guard at the gate.”

“It was the button she re-threaded on my jacket.”

“It was the way she could never make toast without burning it.”

“It was the way he looked at me
when he could no longer speak.”

“It was the way she held my hand.”

Sometimes people say how **great** a person was,
how *great* in career,
how *great* in community,
but sometimes after they say this they also whisper,
but not necessarily so *good*,
great out there,
but not necessarily so *good* to us at home,
but when family says how good a person was,
they are never not great.
You can be a great person who is no good.
But you can never be a good person who isn't great.

And it's the big things that make you great.
But it's the little things that make you good.

If you take a paper plate,
and put a penny in the middle,
and put ten equidistant marks on the edge of the penny,
and ten equidistant marks on the edge of the plate,
and then connect the points on the penny
to the points on the plate,
Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav would have us imagine
that the penny is our world,
and the plate is God's world,
and when we take a tiny step on our penny,
from one tiny point to another,
if we follow the lines,
we see that we are actually taking a giant step
on the plate.
When we pick up a pin,

when we pick up a plastic cap
that blew into our yard from some nearby fast food restaurant,
and we put it into the correct garbage can,
this tiniest of *mitzvahs* is a giant arching rainbow leap
across the cosmos,
one small step for man,
one giant leap for **mankind**,
one small anonymous step for the heart,
our giant leap for *human kind*,
for *human being kind*,
one giant leap toward **being kind**.

If you contemplate a daisy long enough,
Rabbi Nachman says,
you will reach a level of joy
and *a sublime complexity of ecstasy*
that cannot be matched.

Re-thread your buttons.
Put your photographs in albums and label them.
Smush your face in the towels when they come out of the dryer.
Wash your car.
Weed.
Do a somersault.
Buy a new toothbrush.
Catch a moth in a cup and set it free out of doors.
Don't honk your horn.
Don't say the big mean thing,
even though you've been practicing it so long,
rehearsing it,
and it sounds so good.
Say a little something instead,
a little something that you admire about a person you don't like.
There's always a little something.
Make your relationship **all about** the little something you like
instead of the big giant character fault that you don't.
Don't shout big things.
Whisper sweet nothings.
The flap of a butterfly's wing
is heard halfway around the world.
Write a little thank you note.
Leave little messages on your friend's answering machines,
instead of long ones.
Pick up a pin.
Drop by for a little visit.

Don't **stop** being cautious about the little things,
but fight the fear of little things with the love of little things.
Fight peanuts with blueberries.
Fight deer ticks with lady bugs.
Fight microbes with giggles.
If we are going to fear little things,
than we have to fiercely love little things as well,

let this be the year of *thinking small*.
Of little butterfly kisses
over big sloppy kisses,

little adjustments
instead of big changes,

little intimate gatherings
instead of big elaborate extravaganzas,

making a little time each day
to plant a little,
sing a little,
paint a little,
meditate a little,
help each other a little,
and *little by little*,
we will reclaim the **world of the little**,
speck by speck,
until when we add up every blade of grass
and every mustard seed

we will have built a
sky-scraping resistance
from here to the sun
and back again,
and who knows,
the little tiny *button you rethread*
could be the very little thing
that tips this entire world
from frightening and unkind
to a good that is great,

let's do this *teeny-weeny* favor
for a *God of little things*
and turn this great big world,
inch by inch
and row by row,

turn this **great BIG world**
into to a *good little* garden,
an Eden
once again.