

Tiny Little Things  
January & February 2024

The problems of today's world are massive. Forest fires are no longer local. They spread through an entire state and bring alarm to a continent. A hideous war's death toll cites numbers of innocents, so many that we cannot fathom. The intricacies and vocal sides to solutions for climate change are so many that too many of us wonder if we can save our earthly home or if we should just pack up and go . . . where?

The universe itself proves to be grander than our tiny brains can imagine, yet it does not offer—at least not now—another place called home.

When I was a little girl, I used to do an odd thing. I would tap my index fingers to the pads of my thumbs and then bring the two sets together, fingertips touching fingertips and thumb tips touching thumb tips. A tiny diamond-shaped hole appeared. I found that if I scrunched together all four tips, closed one eye, and looked through the resulting tinier hole, the object I had focused on seemed sharper.

I am reminded that my parents, during the Vietnam war, spoke of a dear friend who was captured and imprisoned by the North Vietnamese. His eyeglasses were smashed in the early days of his captivity. Living with hope, he made do, seeing any tiny means to simulate normalcy. Why would he come in contact with a tiny sewing needle? Somehow he did, and he discovered that in peering through the eye of the needle, what had been unclear now had crisp edges.

We tend to ignore the needle-eye windows in our lives. Arising at dawn, I stumble through the darkness of the hallway, eager to see God's gift of yet one more day—the sunrise. I wouldn't think of absorbing this canvas of colors and brush strokes through the eye of a needle. To the contrary, I race from one window to another as the celestial artistry subtly changes, causing me to gasp and feel, if not humble, certainly blessed. Yet, there is that one little cloud, close, on the horizon, to where the sun will yawn, stretch, and rise above the hills. It is exceptionally pink, and I find comfort in it.

There is peace in the early dawn and in the eleventh hour at day's end. In between, our activities, needs, desires, and responsibilities keep us chugging like the little engine that could. Yet between those bookends of the day, there is a peaceful slowness, perhaps a vacancy, that should not go unnoticed or be unabsorbed. There, in that time, is where the tiny things lurk, in abundance, where we need only make a diamond lens with our fingertips to see that which has not been muddied by the anticipation or retrospection of the doings of the day.

That's where we can practice the art of seeing beyond the big. That's where we can stop the train, disembark, and wander down paths and through the rocks and flowers. We can even meander through pockets of people and ask their names, where they are headed, why they are headed. We can get to know our fellow humans. We can gaze into a flower and note the various colors of the petals. We can hear the sound of the wind through a pine tree. We can feel the warmth from a seaside stone, we can determine how snowflakes taste, and we can smell the plank of wood of a century-old barn.

In a past musing, long ago, I recommended a short list of books for the new year's reading. This year, as I think of the little things—their critical nature, their supreme importance, their ability to bring us humbly to our knees and to raise us to a higher level of caring and generosity—I think of Melissa A. Priblo Chapman's journey, in 1982, from New York to California.

An easy journey, you might remark, until you learn something unusual about the 23-year-old woman's means of travel. Missy rode Sundance, the loyal Quarter horse, the entire way, with her dog Gypsy straddling the saddle or walking. The donkey Amanda carried the few packs filled with horse and dog feed and needs, some human food and clothes. They traveled light, burdened only by occasional fear and loneliness. All that was heavy was the constant show of generosity and guidance by people along this route that Missy felt compelled to take. The traveling foursome, often in the middle of stark isolation with only the elements of nature, developed a deep bond with each other, with the land and each day in it, and with the rurally isolated people who stepped from their porches and welcomed in the strangers. Missy shared repeatedly that she learned to read and appreciate the present and all that surrounded her, all that she—and many of us—fail to note.

*Distant Skies: An American Journey on Horseback*, published by Trafalgar Square Books in 2020, is a first-person chronicle of Missy's journey. Her narrative is honest and refreshingly introspective. She shares an amazingly detailed account of her surroundings, and learns to live entirely in the present, looking neither ahead nor behind. Unwittingly, she teaches us lessons on how to live.

Missy's book is not to be confused with *The Ride of Her Life*, published by Ballantine, which I also recommend, but take your pick. *The Ride of Her Life* is a third-person account of Annie Wilkens' same route (different impetus) in the 1950s, at the age of 60. She rode a horse, led a mule, and enjoyed the company of her dog. Author Elizabeth Letts weaves a story that tugs at our hearts.

Tiny moments and tiny objects are so often missed, yet they hold much beauty and can bring both wonder and peace. It would be good for us to take the time to seek, appreciate, and celebrate them.

Happy reading, and may 2024 fill our world with kindness.