

A small, beautiful thing: Making a difference; changing the world

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

Years ago, when I had just begun teaching and wondered what kind of contribution I might make to the great world of scholarship, I spoke with a teacher and scholar whose work I very much admired. She had translated neglected works by medieval woman writers, written important articles on medieval women's religious lives, and made influential contributions to the theory and practice of teaching history. What she had not done was write "the big book," the monograph that laid out her theory of everything. I asked her if she planned to write such a book. "Oh," she replied, "I prefer to do the small, beautiful thing."

I've never forgotten her way of describing the kind of scholarship to which she is drawn: the small, beautiful thing. It is a good description of her work: every idea pursued down to the ground, every story told richly and every sentence polished until it glows. The small, beautiful thing has been the doorway through which she has felt herself invited into large, broad places where she could think her best thoughts and do her best work.

"You have set my feet in a broad place," the psalmist sings in Psalm 31. Isn't this what we all long for? A broad place in which to stand and stretch and look about us, a vantage point from which to make the best choices about how to spend our life's energies? A place with room for our engagement with God, the world and one another to take root and grow?

It's what I want. But too often I find myself stuck in narrow places, unable to imagine a way out. Psalm 31 names some of the nets that trap us: shame, entanglement, misplaced trust, affliction. But sometimes getting stuck is as simple as feeling that setting our feet in an increasingly narrow groove is the only way to get from one end of our commitments to another.

God longs to draw us from narrow places into more spacious ones. "God speaks," the psalmist says, "and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting." Coming as it does in every moment of every day, God's call is present not only in extraordinary moments, but also in the ordinary negotiations of our life in community. Our most mundane Lenten renunciations—a daily commitment to prayer, a daily commitment to be present to every person we encounter—are small, beautiful things that lift us from the groove of anxiety and busyness, production and achievement, and reorient us to the gift of our life.

C. S. Lewis begins his autobiography with a story of a small, beautiful thing. When he was a little boy, his brother, Warren, brought him a tiny garden he had created in the lid of a biscuit tin. "As long as I live," Lewis writes, "my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden."

At its best, the life of faith gives an account of some small bit of the world—a bit of moss and twig and flower, a little bread, a little wine—and returns it to us as something larger, broader, more spacious. Religious traditions are full of stories in which something small repays practices of loving attention by cracking the world wide open. C. S. Lewis's brother creates a toy garden in which his brother sees paradise. A young woman in the 13th century studies one line of scripture until light pours from the page. The nurse of the child Krishna pries open his mouth to remove a bit of dirt and finds inside the world spread out in glory.

I have noticed, however, that some of my students shift uncomfortably in their seats when I talk about this. They are in school to learn how to change the world. When I say *small*, they hear irrelevant, ineffectual. When I say *beautiful*, they hear decorative. A middle-class consolation, like Tivo or a trip to the beach.

At the beginning of Lent I feel those worries too. What are these Lenten sacrifices *for*, anyway? Who cherishes these small renunciations? Surely God has bigger fish to fry in this world. Does God really care, or even notice, if I give up that glass of wine, that cup of coffee, that piece of cake?

But the small gestures that we are invited to embrace each Lent help us experiment with our lives; they help us try on different ways of living. Last year, a nine-year-old friend of my daughter told her, “I’m giving up sarcasm for Lent. And it’s really hard.”

Think of what that child stood to learn in her attempt to renounce sarcasm for 40 days. She already knew what it feels like to have a great, sarcastic rejoinder well up inside of her, a comeback that draws the attention of others to her, makes them laugh at her cleverness. But her Lenten practice taught her what it feels like to have that sarcastic reply come to mind, and then to wait and let it pass. Perhaps she learned that to say no to a sarcastic remark opens a space for other kinds of conversation. Perhaps she learned to cherish the anticipation of what might be said instead. And perhaps, through her learning to say no to a small, destructive force, her ability to resist larger destructive forces increased.

I’ve been thinking lately about how much the vocation of the Christian has in common with the vocation of the poet, especially if we understand the latter vocation the way the poet C. D. Wright does. In *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* she writes, “everything has its meaning, / every thing matters; no one a means every one an end.” If everything and every person matters, then the small, beautiful thing is never decorative, never icing on the cake. It is the thing itself. It makes a difference. It changes the world.