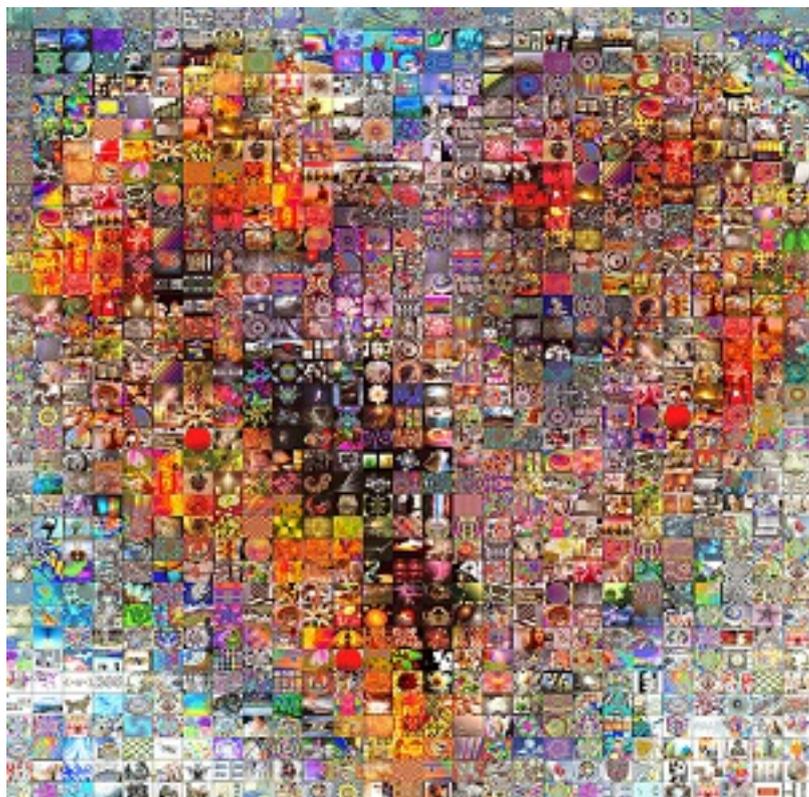


The Size of our Hearts

It's common, particularly among religious commentators, to describe the human heart as small, narrow, and petty: How small-hearted and petty we are!



I find this distressing because religious thinkers especially should know better. We are not created by God and put in this earth with small, narrow, and petty hearts. The opposite is true. God puts us into this world with huge hearts, hearts as deep as the Grand Canyon. The human heart in itself, when not closed off by fear, wound, and paranoia, is the antithesis of pettiness. The human heart, as Augustine describes it, is not fulfilled by anything less than infinity itself. There's nothing small about the human heart.

But then why do we so often find ourselves relating to the world, to each other, and to God, in fact with hearts that are small, narrow, and petty?

The problem is not the size or the natural dynamics of the human heart, but what the heart tends to do when it is wounded, fearful, disrespected, paranoid, or self-deluded by greed and selfishness. It's then that it closes itself to its own depth and greatness and becomes narrow, petty, fearful, and selfish. But that behavior is anomalous, not the human heart at either its normal or its best. At its normal and at its best, the human heart is huge, generous, noble, and self-sacrificing.

The early Church Fathers had a simple way of expressing our struggle here. They taught that each of us has two hearts, two souls:

In each person, they affirmed, there is a small, petty heart, a *pusilla anima*. This is the heart that we operate out of when we are not at our best. This is the heart within which we feel our wounds and our distance from others. This is the heart within which are chronically irritated and angry, the heart within which we feel the unfairness of life, the heart within which we sense others as a threat, the heart within

which we feel envy and bitterness, and the heart within which greed, lust, and selfishness break through. This too is the heart that wants to set itself apart from and above others. And this is the heart that is most often described by religious thinkers when they describe human nature as small and petty.

But the Church Fathers taught that inside of each of us there was also another heart, a magna anima, a huge, deep, big, generous, and noble heart. This is the heart we operate out of when we are at our best. This is the heart within which we feel empathy and compassion. This is the heart within which we are enflamed with noble ideals. This is the heart where we inchoately feel God's presence in faith and hope and are able to move out to others in charity and forgiveness. Inside each of us, sadly often buried under suffocating wounds that keep it far from the surface, lies the heart of a saint, bursting to get out.

Thus on any given day, and at any given moment, we can feel like Mother Teresa or like a bitter terrorist. We can feel ready to give our lives in martyrdom or we can feel ready to welcome the sensation of sin. We can feel like the noble Don Quixote, enflamed with idealism, or we can feel like a despairing cynic, content to settle for whatever short-range compensation and pleasure life can give rather than believing in deeper, more life-giving possibilities for ourselves and others. Everything depends upon which heart we are connected to at a given moment.

If that is true then our invitation to others in terms of moving towards nobleness of heart will be most effective when, rather than emphasizing their faults and narrowness, we instead invite them to try to access what is best, highest, within themselves.

And this is not a simple variation on the axiom that you attract more bees with honey than with vinegar. It's a variation on the dynamics of repentance and healing as the great mystic, John of the Cross, describes them. For him, the most effective way to move towards healing is not by focusing on the moral and spiritual areas within which we particularly struggle. For him, we heal and grow and eventually "cauterize" our faults by fanning the flames of what is already virtuous, best, inside us. As we fan our virtues to full-flame, those fires eventually burn out our selfishness and our wounds. Our virtues, when fanned to full-flame, leave no room inside us for pettiness and small-heartedness. Fanning what's highest in us eventually moves us more and more towards living out of our big hearts rather than petty hearts.

Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it should be named correctly. Nowhere is this more important than in how we name both the size and the struggles of the human heart. We are not petty souls who occasionally do noble things. We are rather noble souls who, sadly, occasionally do petty things.

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