

Just Being Ordinary
by Rev. Michelle Collins
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This past week, a friend from my high school posted a video clip from one of our marching band shows onto Facebook, and despite the fact that we were incredibly out-of-tune and seem a bit less grand than I remember, within 24-hours her post had yielded 16 comments and a slew of “likes.” Social media and its prevalence in our lives keep on growing and increasing. Statistics I could find on how much time is spent on social media in the US vary, but they are all mind-numbingly large. Many ranged from 7 or 8 hours per month to 15 hours per month – averaged over the entire population. I recall having heard that those in my age bracket spend about an hour and a half each day on Facebook. I’m not sure whether I believe that number or not, but it’s still a lot of time!

It brings one to wonder what’s driving it. What’s the pull to spend so much of our lives on Facebook and Twitter and Tumblr and Instagram and YouTube and Pinterest and the rest. Now I like to think it’s about relationships and connecting, finding care and celebration with those who are special to us, and that’s certainly a topic for another day. But I think there’s other stuff there too, driving the need to post both the big events but also our entsy ones. I wonder perhaps how much is driven by a desire to seem exceptional and maybe a sense of desperation. How many of us at some level are afraid of just being ordinary, of not being memorable or of dying without leaving some sort of a legacy.

This is a fear that has some current day manifestations – on Facebook alone, there are 70 billion pieces of content shared each month – that’s billion with a ‘b’.¹ 70 billion updates on what’s happening in our lives. That’s a lot of putting the little bits of our lives into public – maybe on some level saying “Hey, look, I’m unique; I am somebody!”

I think the drive to feel like one is exceptional has been around for quite a while. When I was in high school, each year I looked ahead in the yearbook at the seniors, especially who had been named as one of the superlatives – the most likely to succeed and all of the other most likely’s that they come up with. We had more than twenty different ones – and that was in a class of only 95 students. I often wondered what superlative I might be named and which one best fit me. None of them, as it turned out. I was destined to just be another ordinary graduating senior.

I heard a good explanation of this desire to be exceptional a couple of years later, from a dungeon master who was trying to teach a group of us how to play Dungeons and Dragons. To start the game, we each had to build our characters – to pick what we would be and roll for our

¹ <http://www.statisticbrain.com/social-networking-statistics/>

abilities and talents. After doing this, she told us to pick one of our abilities that she would then increase significantly. In our fantasies, she said, we all want to be heroes. Why play the game if you can't be one there too. Because we all want to be heroes.

I forget which ability I chose, but I remember having fun choosing it. I was all set to be an exceptional hero. But I never got the chance to use my heroic qualities there. Due to some scheduling constraints, the group was only able to get together a few times. Here we were, all decked out to be our new heroic selves on our new heroic quest, and the most heroic thing that one of us got to do was use their increased agility to catch a falling bowl of soup. Instead, we got to do all sorts of completely ordinary sounding things. Walk down this road, decide which way to turn, stop at this tavern for a meal, talk to this person, fill up our water from this stream... now to be sure, we had fun together, but it was just doing ordinary things.

Our quest was just a sum of many small ordinary actions and decisions. I think of how much this parallels life – that our journey is a sum of our everyday usually pretty ordinary actions and decisions.

One of my personal practices that I've engaged in for years looks at some of these sums of ordinary things for myself. I'd probably go so far as to call it a spiritual practice for myself since it constantly raises mindfulness for me, and it reminds me of the interconnections with the earth. This practice is ecological footprinting.

It's a fairly simple concept that also appeals to my mathematical side. Ecological footprinting is a process that uses a variety of tools to calculate one's personal footprint, literally the amount of the earth's resources used impacted or consumed because of the needs and lifestyle of a person. It's going through a bunch of calculations to figure out how much of the earth is impacted just because of me. To me, it's a very tangible and uniform way to look at a wide variety of things that are less tangible.

There are both paper-based and internet-based ways to calculate this footprint. One of my favorites is a website² that walks you through a number of different areas like your diet and type of house and recycling and waste habits and transportation and then calculates the equivalent of how many acres it takes to support your own choices and practices about each of those things. The fun thing about this website is that it has you create a little on-screen avatar representation of yourself—I'm partial to the green-haired option—and then she walks around as the representations of the user's choices fall from the sky with a satisfying thud. I answer the questions about meat and dairy and processes versus unprocessed food, and then my avatar narrowly misses a produce store that crashes down beside her. I answer questions about how much I recycle and a trash and recycling bin thump next to her. It's quite satisfying

² <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/gfn/page/calculators/>

visually, and if I want more detail or to be able to be a little more specific with my answers, there's always the possibility of calculating it longhand, which I do at least once every year or two.³

The vast majority of the questions are about small ordinary actions and choices, not grand things that are obvious about their heavy or light impact on the earth's systems. Just small ordinary questions, like how much milk and eggs do you consume in a week. How about chicken? What's your monthly electrical bill? And for the ultra-specific footprinting calculations, how long do you take showers for, and do you purchase new or used books, and how many pounds of books per month? It's usually hard for me to think about any of these questions on a larger scale than just the impact of just that one thing immediately in front of me. Footprinting calculations help to open that up for me – it creates that grand scale where I can see my tiny ordinary choices, and it says that “Look! This one regular choice, added up over time, makes THIS much difference!”

Our ordinary choices matter. They matter in and of themselves and the impact that they have, and they make manifest our deeply held beliefs and values. Our actions show us our beliefs. Let me ground this in some of Aristotle's thoughts. He had a particular understanding of virtue. The practice of virtue, Aristotle claimed, was found through the habits that affect an individual's actions.⁴ Virtue is seen and developed by acting regularly in tiny ways. It's not that I believe this great big grand thing and that's why I'm making this particular choice to act this way. It's the other way around. Through ordinary everyday habits we can see what one's motivating beliefs and values are.

I think we can see this in Unitarian Universalist theology also, definitely in UU ethics. UU theology would say that action is paramount. One's underlying beliefs and personal credo are all well and good, and as UU's we get to form these for ourselves, but our actions are where our beliefs take form. Our actions are what make manifest our beliefs and values. And without actions, all the belief in the world doesn't make a difference.

One of the ways that I understand the world is in terms of performance and identities being performed. Identities, including gender identities, religious identities, relational identities, racial identities, class identities, all of these identities we only see in others in how they are performed by that person, how the identity is manifested by that person's actions. I could go on about this for a while, but what I want to extend it to is that with my performance based view of the world, I want to say that values are performed also. Values don't exist until they are performed.

³ My favorite resource for doing this is *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*, by Jim Merkel

⁴ Cited by Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*, pages 86 and 87.

These actions that perform and manifest our values don't have to be big grand actions, not by any means. According to Aristotle, they are not. They are actions that so many times seem invisible, things that are easily overlooked. They are the ordinary stuff that make up our days, but can be just as heroic as the moments of grandness that make the headlines.

And sometimes these moments can happen in unlikely places.

A colleague shared a story about her own experience of commuting across the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. It's a toll bridge, and since she didn't have the west coast equivalent of the EZ pass electronic toll collection device, she waited in line for one of the toll takers each time she went across. Now one of these lines was typically a good bit longer than the others. Sometimes she'd wait for that one, and sometimes she'd go through another. The reason that particular line was longer than the rest was the regulars through the toll plaza who wanted to wait for that particular toll taker. She knew many of them by name. They shared about their lives, bit by bit each day as they went through and paid her their toll. One day, as my friend was waiting in this toll taker's line, she saw something happen that she'd never before seen at a toll plaza. The door to the toll booth opened, the toll taker came out as did the driver of the car and they embraced, a warm heartfelt embrace. My friend pulled up to the toll booth a few cars later. "What happened," she asked. "Oh, her husband just died. She's been going back and forth across this bridge for quite a while to visit him in the hospital."

What precious time they had shared, in that ordinary moment of just paying a toll and asking her how she was doing each day. All of these tiny ordinary moments added up to a relationship that made a difference for that particular woman. And many more too, from the ongoing length of her toll booth's line. The ordinary moment and the ordinary conversations they had added up to be quite meaningful.

I'm brought back to the soup café, from today's story. How much more basic and ordinary can a lunch get than one choice of soup and a roll to go with it. And yet the moments of calm and caring carved out by this woman's soup ministry are many. Ordinary, yes. But I would also call them heroic.

But here's the thing. I can say all of this until I'm blue in the face, but I STILL have trouble coming to terms with the exceptional-ness of something so little and non-exceptional. First of all, being ordinary it just gets invisible to me. I don't notice it anymore because it's just part of everyday noise, and my own autopilot flies right on by. And even more, I want to see the result! Not seeing immediate progress can easily derail me, make me devalue what I'm doing, even make me give up entirely. Perhaps a bit too much I like seeing tangible progress and seeing on a short term scale that what I'm doing is changing something. Even with all of my fabulous ecological footprint calculations, it's still hard to imagine the big picture.

It's so easy to get attached to seeing progress. There's a poem by Bonaro Overstreet that helps to counter this attachment and its companion despair at not seeing a difference. It's addressed "To One Who Doubts the Worth of Doing Anything If You Can't Do Everything."

You say the Little efforts that I make
will do no good: they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where Justice hangs in balance.

I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.⁵

Stubbornness... I've got plenty of that. It's not really a cure for my attachment to seeing progress, but at least it's a place to start. The stubbornness of believing that it does make a difference (and the stubbornness to keep reminding myself of that very fact too)!

Ordinary heroism doesn't make the news, and it doesn't look like it changes the world. It may not look like it changes anything at all, at least not in the moment. But the world is filled with mostly just ordinary people and their ordinary actions every day. And the ordinary, just being ordinary, that's where most of change happens. May you find and cherish many fabulous plain-old ordinary moments as you go about each ordinary day. Our ordinary can truly be extraordinary. May it be so.

⁵ Bonaro W. Overstreet, "Stubborn Ounces."