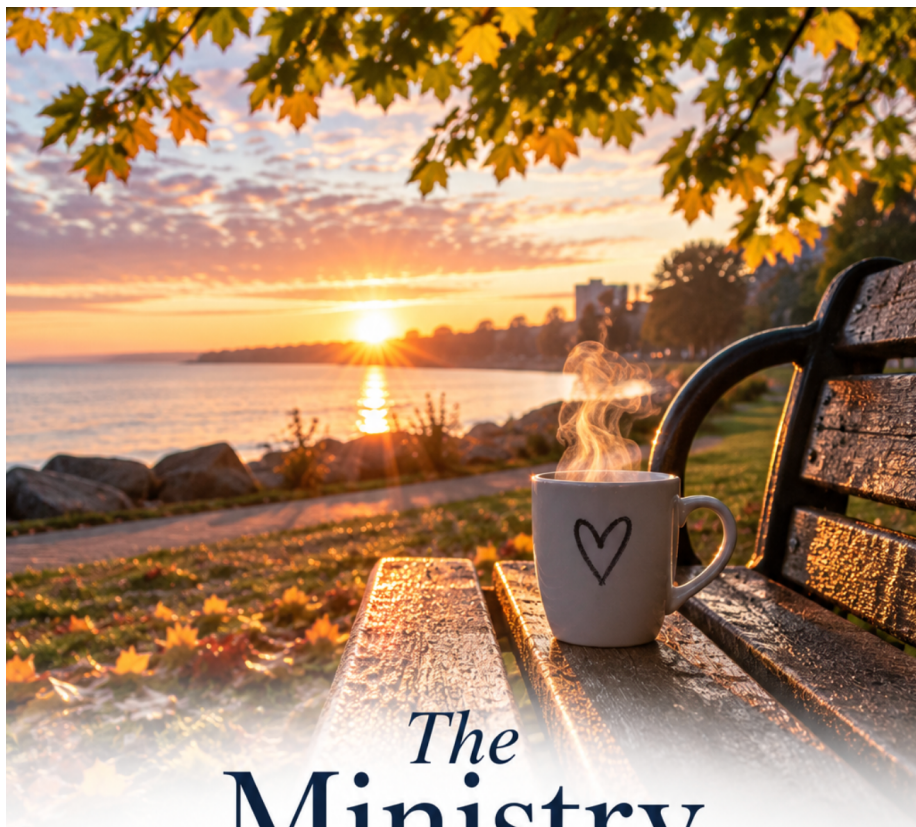




The
Ministry
of
Small Things

*How Everyday Acts of Kindness
Change Lives — and the World*



ROSS HARVEY

Dedication

For Christy Anne,

who has shared the ordinary moments with me,

and helped me understand that sometimes
the smallest expressions of love
are the greatest ones.

And for all the people I have met along the way —

on benches, sidewalks and street corners,
in parks, stores, elevators and hallways —

who have taught me that there really are
no ordinary people.

Epigraph

The world changes one human encounter at a time.

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Foreword

There are books about changing the world that begin with governments, economies, institutions, technologies and grand plans.

This isn't one of them.

This book begins with a bench.

It begins early in the morning in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Montreal, when much of the neighbourhood is still waking up. A man sits down. Someone walks past.

"Good morning."

That is about it.

Except it isn't.

Because the person walking past smiles.

Tomorrow, perhaps, the same person passes again.

"Good morning."

A few days later there may be a name.

A week later there may be a story.

And eventually two people who were once strangers begin looking forward to seeing one another.

Nothing appears on the evening news.

No government program is announced.

No money changes hands.

Nobody wins an award.

And yet something has happened.

Two human beings have become a little less separate.

That is the territory of this book.

Ross Harvey has spent years thinking about enormous questions. How could we create stronger communities? How could we make sure people are fed? How could we reduce loneliness? How could neighbours become neighbours again? How might we build a kinder world?

Those questions eventually led him somewhere unexpected.

Back to the individual.

Back to the sidewalk.

Back to the person walking the dog.

Back to the elderly woman resting her feet.

Back to the homeless man who needs something to eat.

Back to the friend who needs a telephone call.

Back to the person standing in the elevator beside us.

Back home to the person we love.

Perhaps there is no contradiction between dreaming enormously and acting very small.

Perhaps the second is how the first begins.

This is **The Ministry of Small Things**.

And membership is open to everyone.

— **Einstein/Noel's Pen**

Author's Note

For much of my life, I have been attracted to big ideas.

I have been an athlete, veterinarian, entrepreneur, author and dreamer. I have spent years thinking about how we might create a better world.

But increasingly I have come to believe that a better world cannot simply be designed.

It has to be lived.

And it has to be lived between people.

Over the past while, I have developed a very simple routine in my neighbourhood of NDG in Montreal.

I get up early.

I go out.

I sit.

I walk.

And I meet people.

Some encounters last thirty seconds.

Others last half an hour.

Some people I see regularly. Others pass through my life only once.

There are people walking dogs, people going to work, store employees, seniors, athletes, neighbours, people struggling financially, people carrying grief, people who are lonely and people who simply seem happy to have somebody say hello.

I have begun to treasure these encounters.

They have taught me something I wish I had understood much earlier:

Human beings need to be noticed.

Not admired.

Not celebrated.

Not analyzed.

Not fixed.

Just noticed.

We need someone to look at us and recognize that we are here.

We need someone to remember our name.

We need someone to ask how we're doing and occasionally remain long enough to hear the answer.

I don't always do this well.

There are days when I am distracted. There are people I avoid. There have been moments when I knew I should have said hello and didn't.

Those moments belong in this book too.

Because this isn't a book about becoming a saint.

It is a book about becoming a neighbour.

Most of the stories that follow come from real encounters and experiences in my life. In places where a vignette is reconstructed, combined or used to represent recurring experiences, it should be understood as literary storytelling rather than a claim that every detail occurred exactly as written.

The lesson, however, is very real.

Every morning, millions of us walk past opportunities to make the world slightly better.

They don't look like opportunities.

They look like people.

This book is about learning to see them.

Introduction

What Is a Ministry of Small Things?

When we hear the word *ministry*, many of us think of religion.

A minister.

A church.

A congregation.

A pulpit.

But I have come to understand ministry differently.

To me, ministry happens whenever one human being genuinely cares about another.

You don't need a church.

You don't need a title.

You don't need theological training.

You don't even have to be religious.

You need eyes that notice.

Ears that listen.

And a heart willing to become involved.

That involvement doesn't necessarily mean changing someone's life.

Sometimes it means holding a door.

Sometimes it means remembering the dog's name.

Sometimes it means sharing a loaf of bread.

Sometimes it means buying noodles and popcorn for somebody who has nothing.

Sometimes it means calling your sister instead of merely thinking about calling her.

Sometimes it means sitting beside somebody.

Sometimes it means saying:

"Good morning."

The remarkable thing about small acts is that we rarely know where they end.

A smile creates another smile.

A conversation changes someone's mood.

A small kindness restores somebody's faith in people.

That person becomes kinder to someone else.

And the effect moves outward.

We tend to imagine changing the world as an enormous undertaking.

Perhaps we have made it too complicated.

There are approximately eight billion people on this planet.

Imagine what would happen if, tomorrow morning, each of us deliberately made life a little better for just one other person.

Not eight billion people.

One.

And then did it again the following day.

That is the idea behind this book.

It is not:

Think small because large dreams are impossible.

It is:

Dream enormously — and begin very small.

I still dream about transforming communities.

I still dream about A NuVo World.

But I increasingly understand that the world I dream about will not arrive because somebody writes the perfect plan for it.

It will arrive when we start treating one another differently.

And so each morning I go outside.

There are people waiting.

Usually they don't know they are waiting.

Neither do I.

But eventually somebody comes around the corner.

And another small thing begins.

PART ONE

SHOW UP

Before you can change someone's day, you have to be there.

That sounds ridiculously obvious.

It isn't.

Modern life gives us thousands of ways to be somewhere else.

We can sit beside someone while looking at a telephone.

We can walk through a neighbourhood without seeing it.

We can live twenty feet from another human being for ten years without knowing their name.

Community requires presence.

Presence requires showing up.

Again.

And again.

And again.

That is where my ministry of small things began.

Not with a sermon.

Not with a strategy.

With two benches outside a grocery store.

Chapter One

The Office

I call it **the office**.

That makes me smile because there isn't a desk, telephone, receptionist or computer anywhere in sight.

There are two park benches outside Metro on Somerled Avenue in NDG.

That's my office.

On weekday mornings, I try to arrive around 5:30.

At that hour, the neighbourhood is different.

There is something intimate about a city before most of its inhabitants have awakened.

Delivery people are working.

Employees are arriving.

Early walkers pass by.

People are taking their dogs outside.

The occasional cyclist rolls past.

And I sit.

At first glance, I am doing absolutely nothing.

That may be one of the most productive things I do all day.

Because eventually someone passes.

"Good morning!"

Some people answer enthusiastically.

Some nod.

Some barely acknowledge me.

Some seem suspicious the first time.

But I keep coming back.

And so do they.

Eventually something changes.

A nod becomes a hello.

A hello becomes a sentence.

A sentence becomes a conversation.

A conversation becomes a name.

And once you know someone's name, something remarkable has happened.

The stranger has begun disappearing.

I have met many people this way.

Some have become part of the rhythm of my mornings. If they're late, I notice. If I don't appear, perhaps they notice too.

This has taught me one of the simplest truths I know about building community:

You cannot manufacture familiarity.

You accumulate it.

One encounter at a time.

We spend enormous amounts of money trying to create communities.

We build facilities.

We establish programs.

We form committees.

We commission studies.

Some of those things are worthwhile.

But perhaps the fundamental building block of community costs nothing.

Be somewhere regularly.

Become recognizable.

Say hello.

Learn names.

Ask questions.

Listen.

Return.

I don't know what will happen at my office tomorrow morning.

That's one of the things I love about it.

There is no agenda.

The next person walking toward me may simply wave.

Or they may sit down.

And if they do, I will move over.

There is room on the bench.

The Small Thing

Show up.

Choose somewhere in your own world — your apartment lobby, local café, park, front porch, dog run, community garden or neighbourhood street — and become a familiar face.

Don't go there looking for anything.

Go there to be available.

The first revolution in rebuilding community may simply be this:

Put yourself where people are.

Chapter Two

Good Morning

Two words.

That is sometimes the entire encounter.

Good morning.

I say it to people while I walk.

I say it to people entering stores.

I say it to dog walkers.

I say it to people I recognize and people I have never seen before.

Not everybody answers.

That's okay.

The point isn't to extract a response.

The point is to offer recognition.

You are here.

I see you.

For one second, our lives have intersected.

Good morning.

I have watched faces change after those two words.

Someone walking toward me looking preoccupied suddenly looks up.

There is a moment of surprise.

Then a smile.

"Good morning!"

And we continue in opposite directions.

Perhaps neither of us will ever see the other again.

Was that meaningless?

I don't think so.

Loneliness doesn't always look like loneliness.

It wears business clothes.

It walks dogs.

It buys groceries.

It rides elevators.

It sits in cafés staring at telephones.

Some of the loneliest people in a city may speak to dozens of people every day without experiencing a single genuine human connection.

A cashier asks what they want.

A colleague asks for a document.

A stranger asks whether the seat is occupied.

People speak *at* them.

But does anybody see them?

I cannot solve another person's loneliness with "Good morning."

But for a second I can interrupt their invisibility.

And sometimes that's enough to start something.

Tomorrow:

"Good morning."

The next day:

"Beautiful morning!"

Later:

"I see you out here all the time. What's your name?"

And suddenly the city has one fewer stranger in it.

The Small Thing

Tomorrow, say good morning to someone you normally pass silently.

Don't worry about whether they answer.

Give the greeting freely.

Then try it again.

Because a better world may occasionally begin with nothing more complicated than two people acknowledging that the other exists.

Chapter Three

Darren Came Early

There is something special about discovering that another person has adjusted their day because they wanted to see you.

Darren works at Metro.

One morning, he came in earlier than usual so we could connect.

Think about that.

It would be easy to dismiss the moment as insignificant. Two people talking outside a grocery store early in the morning isn't exactly the stuff history books are made of.

But I saw something else.

Relationship had formed.

Not because either of us had formally decided to build one.

It happened through repetition.

Through little conversations.

Through being there.

That's how many of the best relationships begin.

No announcement.

No contract.

No strategic plan.

Just:

"See you tomorrow."

And then somebody actually comes tomorrow.

There is a wonderful message hidden inside another person's effort to see you:

You matter enough for me to make room for you.

We can give that gift to people ourselves.

We can arrive ten minutes early.

Stay ten minutes longer.

Cross the street.

Make the telephone call.

Sit down instead of rushing away.

Most people won't remember everything we say to them.

But they may remember that we made time.

Darren came early.

I remembered.

That's the ministry of small things.

The Small Thing

Make room for somebody.

Not when it's perfectly convenient.

Precisely when it requires a little effort.

Sometimes ten minutes of our time tells another human being something they desperately need to know:

You're worth stopping for.

Chapter Four

The Bread Man

His name is Bedis.

He delivers bread.

And occasionally, when our paths cross in the early morning, he gives me some loaves.

One morning it was five.

Another morning, three beautiful loaves of bread.

I didn't need all that bread.

But somebody did.

So I brought it home and put it where people in our building could take it.

And they did.

There was no application.

No eligibility test.

No committee.

No receipt.

No photograph for social media.

Bread arrived.

People needed bread.

Bread disappeared.

Perfect.

I have spent a great deal of time thinking about hunger and food distribution and how communities might make certain that everybody has enough.

Those are important questions.

But that morning the entire food-distribution system consisted of three people:

One person had extra.

One person carried it.

One person needed it.

Perhaps generosity becomes unnecessarily complicated when we insist on knowing who deserves what.

Bread doesn't ask.

Bread feeds.

There was another lesson too.

I wasn't really the giver.

Bedis was.

Or perhaps the bakery was.

Or perhaps whoever baked the bread was.

I was simply the bridge.

That is a role available to all of us.

Sometimes we don't possess what somebody needs.

But we know someone who does.

Sometimes we aren't the answer.

We're the connection between the question and the answer.

That can be enough.

The Small Thing

When something good comes into your hands, ask:

Do I need all of this?

If the answer is no, don't merely think about generosity.

Move the good thing along.

You never know who might be hungry.

Chapter Five

The Loaves in the Mezzanine

There is something beautiful about leaving something behind and watching it disappear.

Not because it was stolen.

Because it was needed.

The bread Bedis gave me ended up in the common area of our building.

Then, one by one, the loaves were gone.

I don't know who took them.

I don't need to.

That anonymity matters.

There is a form of giving that subtly demands repayment.

Recognition.

Gratitude.

A thank-you note.

Even the satisfaction of seeing the recipient's face.

But another kind of giving simply releases something.

Here.

Take it.

No questions.

Imagine if our communities contained more places like that.

A shelf where extra food could be left.

A rack for winter coats.

Books waiting for readers.

Tools shared between neighbours.

A chair somebody no longer needs.

Tomatoes from a garden that produced too many.

We possess an astonishing amount of abundance.

The problem is that much of it sits behind doors.

Perhaps one of the great opportunities in rebuilding community is simply learning how to circulate what we already have.

Money isn't always required.

Sometimes what is required is movement.

From the person who has too much

to the person who has too little.

And somewhere in between,

a neighbour willing to carry the bread.

The Small Thing

Look around your home today.

Is there something useful you don't need?

Don't throw it away.

Don't leave it forgotten in a cupboard for another five years.

Put it back into circulation.

Abundance becomes generosity when it moves.

Chapter Six

The Woman With Two Little Dogs

I don't know how many friendships have begun because of dogs.

Probably millions.

Dogs have a wonderful disregard for the invisible walls human beings construct around themselves.

They don't care whether two people have been properly introduced.

They don't care about age, occupation, education, politics, income or social standing.

They sniff.

They wag.

They approach.

And suddenly two strangers are talking.

There is a woman in our building whom I often see with her two little dogs.

At first, she was simply that:

the woman with the two little dogs.

But repetition changes things.

You see someone once and they're a stranger.

You see them five times and they're familiar.

You see them twenty times and their presence becomes part of the landscape of your life.

That's one reason I enjoy sitting in the front area of our building in the morning.

People come and go.

Dogs need walking.

People need work.

Elevators open.

Doors close.

And in between all that movement are tiny opportunities for connection.

"Good morning."

"How are you?"

"Beautiful day."

"How are the dogs?"

Nothing profound.

Except perhaps it is profound.

We have somehow created a culture in which people can live in the same apartment building for years without knowing one another.

We share walls.

We share elevators.

We share hallways.

We share entrances.

We may even hear one another's televisions.

And yet we remain strangers.

Dogs seem to find this arrangement ridiculous.

They pull toward one another.

They investigate.

They force their humans to stop.

Perhaps they're trying to teach us something.

Community doesn't always require a community centre.

Sometimes it requires a leash.

And two little dogs.

The Small Thing

The next time you see someone you've encountered repeatedly but never really acknowledged, change the relationship by one degree.

Smile.

Say hello.

Ask the dog's name.

Introduce yourself.

You don't have to become friends.

Just become **slightly less like strangers.**

Chapter Seven

Susan Sat Beside Me

One morning Susan came down and sat beside me.

She had recently undergone hip surgery.

We talked for perhaps twenty minutes.

But we didn't spend twenty minutes discussing hips.

We went backwards.

Into memory.

Gayle.

My father's store.

Royal Vale.

West Hill.

Old times.

Names and places that meant something because we had lived through them.

There is a peculiar pleasure in talking with someone who remembers part of the world you remember.

You don't have to explain everything.

A name can contain twenty years.

A street can contain childhood.

A school can contain hundreds of faces.

Memory is one of the ways human beings tell one another:

I was there too.

As we get older, I think these conversations become increasingly important.

The world keeps changing.

Buildings disappear.

Businesses close.

People die.

Technology transforms everything.

The neighbourhood we knew becomes another neighbourhood.

But then someone sits beside you and says a name.

And suddenly an entire world comes back.

Perhaps that's another form of ministry.

Listening to someone's memories.

We tend to think conversation should be about what is happening now.

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give another person is permission to return to what happened then.

Tell me about your father.

Where did you grow up?

What was the neighbourhood like?

Who was your best friend?

What did you do on Saturday mornings?

What do you miss?

Twenty minutes can become a time machine.

Susan sat beside me.

And for a little while, the past sat beside us too.

The Small Thing

Ask someone about a memory.

Not because you need information.

Because their memories matter.

There are entire worlds living inside the people around us.

Sometimes all they need is someone interested enough to open the door.

Chapter Eight

Anne in the Elevator

Anne thought I was Scott.

I liked that.

Not because I particularly wanted to become Scott.

But because mistaken identity is one of life's little reminders that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously.

We were in the elevator.

She looked tired.

She said she was tired.

And for a few moments we talked.

Elevators are peculiar places.

Human beings enter a small metal box together, stand a few feet apart and often behave as though nobody else is there.

We look at the numbers.

We look at the floor.

We look at our phones.

Anything except one another.

Why?

Perhaps because acknowledging another person creates the possibility of involvement.

If I ask how you're doing, you might tell me.

And then what?

Maybe that's precisely the point.

Anne was tired.

I couldn't fix that.

I didn't need to.

Not every human difficulty is an assignment.

Sometimes another person's burden merely needs to be acknowledged.

"I'm tired."

"I understand."

Those can be enough.

We seem to have developed a strange belief that unless we can solve someone's problem, there isn't much point in discussing it.

But people don't always need solutions.

Sometimes they need witnesses.

Someone to recognize:

Yes.

You're tired.

You're grieving.

You're worried.

You're overwhelmed.

You're lonely.

You're excited.

You're happy.

I see you.

The elevator arrived at the floor.

The doors opened.

Life continued.

But for those few moments, two people occupied more than an elevator.

They occupied the same human moment.

Even if one of them apparently was Scott.

The Small Thing

The next time you enter an elevator with someone, resist the automatic urge to disappear.

Look up.

Smile.

Say hello.

Ten floors may not be enough time to change someone's life.

But it's plenty of time to acknowledge one.

Chapter Nine

Bailey Needed to Rest

I met Bailey because her feet hurt.

She needed somewhere to sit.

There was room.

So she sat down.

Bailey was eighty-two years old and still walked every morning.

She lived nearby.

And because neither of us was in a hurry, a conversation began.

She told me about her life.

Her children.

Places she had lived.

Years spent in Brockville.

Time in the United States.

Pieces of a life that had existed for more than eight decades before our paths happened to cross.

Think about that.

Every elderly person we pass is carrying an autobiography.

Love affairs.

Children.

Jobs.

Triumphs.

Regrets.

Journeys.

Illnesses.

Birthdays.

Funerals.

Songs.

Homes.

Friends who are no longer alive.

Entire generations of experience walking slowly past us.

And we often see only:

old person.

Bailey reminded me how much we lose when we reduce people to categories.

Elderly.

Homeless.

Cashier.

Immigrant.

Executive.

Disabled.

Rich.

Poor.

Dog walker.

Delivery man.

Behind every category is a name.

Behind every name is a story.

And sometimes the only thing separating us from that story is an empty place on a bench.

Bailey needed to rest her feet.

I received eighty-two years of humanity.

I'd say I got the better end of the arrangement.

The Small Thing

When an older person begins telling you a story you've never heard, don't rush them.

Listen.

Ask another question.

You may be receiving something valuable that cannot be replaced once that person is gone.

PART TWO

WALK

Chapter Ten

The Cardinal

Not every small thing involves another human being.

Sometimes the world itself says hello.

I was walking through NDG one morning when I saw him.

A beautiful male cardinal.

That unmistakable red.

For a moment, everything else disappeared.

I stopped.

There he was.

And there I was.

That's all.

But I carried that cardinal with me for the rest of the morning.

How many beautiful things do we miss because we are moving too quickly?

We walk while thinking about where we're going.

We eat while looking at screens.

We sit outside while checking messages.

We travel through magnificent summer mornings while mentally attending meetings that haven't happened yet.

The cardinal doesn't care about our schedules.

The flowers outside Concordia don't care about our problems.

The trees don't care how many emails are waiting.

They are simply there.

Beauty is constantly being offered to us.

Free of charge.

The question is whether we're available to receive it.

My walks around NDG have increasingly become exercises in noticing.

People, yes.

But also gardens.

Dogs.

Clouds.

Flowers.

Birds.

Trees.

Architecture.

Sunlight.

The way the neighbourhood smells after rain.

Perhaps paying attention to beauty makes us better at paying attention to people.

The disciplines are related.

Both require us to get out of our heads long enough to see what is actually in front of us.

The cardinal did nothing extraordinary that morning.

He simply appeared.

My contribution was noticing.

The Small Thing

Find one beautiful thing today that you would normally walk past.

Stop.

Look at it.

Give it ten seconds of your complete attention.

Beauty doesn't always need to be pursued.

Sometimes it only needs to be noticed.

Chapter Eleven

Marie at the Outdoor Gym

I saw an elderly Asian woman exercising in the park.

I could have continued walking.

Instead, I started a conversation.

Her name was Marie.

She told me she used the gym at Concordia but preferred exercising outside.

I understood why.

Fresh air.

Sunshine.

Trees.

People passing.

The feeling that you're part of the world rather than sealed away from it.

Marie wanted to put on some muscle.

We talked about exercise.

We talked about health.

We talked for perhaps ten minutes.

Then eventually we went our separate ways.

Before that morning, Marie wasn't part of my world.

Afterward, she was.

Not in some enormous way.

I didn't suddenly have a new best friend.

But now there was a person named Marie whom I might see again.

That's how our human world expands.

One introduction at a time.

There was another thing about the encounter that stayed with me.

Marie was still trying to become stronger.

I loved that.

There is a cultural tendency to treat aging as a long process of surrender.

Do less.

Expect less.

Attempt less.

Marie was in the park trying to build muscle.

Perhaps that is a metaphor for more than physical strength.

Maybe we should keep building ourselves for as long as we are here.

New friendships.

New interests.

New abilities.

New adventures.

New muscles.

Why should growth have an expiration date?

The Small Thing

Talk to somebody outside your usual circle.

Someone older.

Someone younger.

Someone from another background.

Someone doing something that interests you.

Curiosity is one of the shortest bridges between strangers.

Walk across it.

Chapter Twelve

Ian Robinson

I met Ian outside Burger de Ville.

He was seventy-five.

And he looked great.

As we talked, I discovered that Ian had spent much of his life as an athlete.

Running.

Tennis.

Extreme skiing.

Cycling.

Golf.

He was also still working in the financial business from his home on Ballantyne.

Sharp.

Engaged.

Active.

Alive.

I enjoyed him immediately.

Perhaps because athletes recognize something in one another.

Not necessarily accomplishment.

Something deeper.

The understanding that you don't get stronger by thinking about moving.

You move.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Ian's age interested me less than his attitude toward it.

There is an enormous difference between **being seventy-five** and deciding what seventy-five is supposed to mean.

Numbers are useful.

They tell us how many birthdays we've had.

But they are terrible at telling us what we should do tomorrow.

Walk.

Cycle.

Work.

Learn.

Love.

Laugh.

Play golf.

Meet somebody outside a restaurant and have a conversation.

Life doesn't stop presenting opportunities because the candles have become crowded on the cake.

Sometimes we need people ahead of us on the road to demonstrate that.

Ian was one of those people for me.

And then he introduced me to somebody else.

A man they called Speedy.

And just like that, one small encounter opened another door.

That's another fascinating thing about human connection.

People lead to people.

One hello can eventually introduce you to an entire world.

The Small Thing

Don't ask yourself:

Am I too old?

Ask:

Am I still alive?

If the answer is yes, there is something available to you today.

Move toward it.

Chapter Thirteen

Speedy

His nickname told me something before I knew anything else.

Speedy.

Ian introduced us outside Burger de Ville.

Speedy worked there.

Then I learned that he had run forty marathons.

Forty.

And apparently forty ordinary marathons weren't enough.

Now he did ultramarathons.

There are moments when you meet someone and immediately discover that an extraordinary story has been standing right in front of you disguised as an ordinary person.

Speedy was one of those moments.

How many people do we encounter this way?

The person serving our coffee may be a musician.

The woman at the checkout may have raised four children alone.

The janitor may speak five languages.

The elderly man feeding pigeons may once have run a company.

The quiet neighbour may have survived something we cannot imagine.

The restaurant employee may have run forty marathons.

We make judgments astonishingly quickly.

Clothes.

Occupation.

Age.

Accent.

Appearance.

Within seconds we believe we know who someone is.

We don't.

That's one reason questions are so powerful.

Questions open doors appearances keep closed.

"What do you like to do?"

"Where are you from?"

"How long have you lived here?"

"How did you get into that?"

And suddenly the person behind the counter isn't behind the counter anymore.

They're standing in front of you.

Human being to human being.

Speedy reminded me of something worth remembering every day:

Never assume the visible part of someone's life is the interesting part.

It rarely is.

The Small Thing

Ask someone you encounter regularly a question you've never asked before.

Then listen carefully.

There may be forty marathons hiding behind the answer.

Chapter Fourteen

Pearl on Walkley

I turned up Walkley and saw Pearl outside her duplex.

That was all it took.

A walk.

A familiar street.

A familiar face.

A brief conversation.

And yet those moments have become some of the most meaningful parts of my mornings.

There is something deeply reassuring about seeing people in the places where they belong.

Pearl outside her duplex.

A neighbour on a balcony.

Someone watering flowers.

A person sweeping the front steps.

These small images tell us something:

People live here.

Not units.

Not addresses.

Not demographic categories.

People.

One of the dangers of city life is that a neighbourhood can become scenery.

Buildings.

Traffic.

Stores.

Intersections.

But a neighbourhood is not primarily made of structures.

It is made of lives.

Once you begin knowing the people in it, the map changes.

A street becomes:

That's where Pearl lives.

That's where I often see Susan.

That's where the man with the dog walks.

That's where I met Felix.

That's where Darren works.

The geography becomes human.

And when geography becomes human, something changes in us too.

We become more protective of it.

More invested.

More caring.

More likely to notice when something is wrong.

This is why I believe one of the simplest ways to strengthen a community is to know who is in it.

Not everybody.

Just more than yesterday.

Pearl and I spoke briefly.

Then I continued walking.

The conversation may have lasted only a few minutes.

But the street felt different afterward.

It had a person in it.

The Small Thing

Learn one more name on your street.

One.

Not ten.

Not the entire neighbourhood.

One.

Then use it the next time you see them.

A neighbourhood becomes a community when addresses begin turning into people.

Chapter Fifteen

Felix

I saw Felix near Benny Park.

He was homeless.

That is the label people might use first.

But it should not be the last.

His name was Felix.

He came from Romania.

He had a story.

He had needs.

He had dignity.

One day, he told me he had no money and was hoping to get noodles and popcorn from Dollarama.

I said I would get them for him.

It was not a heroic act.

That matters.

We sometimes make kindness sound so grand that ordinary people conclude they are unqualified to practice it.

Heroism.

Sacrifice.

Life-changing generosity.

What if kindness is sometimes noodles and popcorn?

What if the question is not:

Can I solve homelessness?

but:

Can I help Felix today?

There are problems in the world so enormous that if we stare at them too long, we become paralyzed.

Poverty.

Hunger.

Loneliness.

War.

Addiction.

Homelessness.

We cannot personally solve all of them.

But the inability to solve everything can become an excuse to do nothing.

Felix taught me something simple.

The scale of a problem does not determine the scale of the response required from me in that moment.

I didn't need a housing policy.

I needed a few dollars and a trip to Dollarama.

And perhaps something else.

A willingness to speak with him.

Homeless people are often looked at without being seen.

People walk faster.

Eyes shift away.

Bodies move to create distance.

Sometimes the first kindness is not food.

It is recognition.

"Hi, Felix."

A name restores individuality.

A conversation restores humanity.

Noodles and popcorn help too.

The Small Thing

When you encounter someone struggling, resist the thought:

I can't fix this.

Ask instead:

What is one useful thing I can do right now?

The answer may be very small.

Small is still something.

Chapter Sixteen

A Man Named Younes

I met Younes while walking through the neighbourhood.

He was from Morocco.

We talked.

Again, nothing dramatic.

But one of the things I have come to appreciate is how quickly a city becomes larger when we begin speaking with the people inside it.

Before the conversation, Morocco was thousands of kilometres away.

Afterward, part of Morocco was standing in NDG.

That's what people do.

They carry places with them.

Languages.

Food.

Customs.

Memories.

Family stories.

Music.

Faith.

Humour.

Childhood.

Migration.

Homesickness.

Hope.

Every neighbourhood contains the world.

But we only discover that if we talk to one another.

I have sometimes wondered why people in cities can seem so unfriendly.

Perhaps it isn't hostility.

Perhaps it is habit.

We learn not to interfere.

Not to stare.

Not to talk to strangers.

Not to impose.

These rules help people coexist.

But taken too far, they can create millions of human beings politely ignoring one another.

Younes helped reinforce something I had been thinking about often:

Friendliness is not trivial.

A smile is a form of permission.

It says:

You may speak to me.

You are not bothering me.

For this moment, the invisible wall between us is open.

Imagine an entire neighbourhood behaving that way.

Not intrusively.

Not artificially.

Just warmly.

A community in which people routinely looked up and acknowledged one another might feel entirely different even if nothing else changed.

No new buildings.

No new programs.

No new budget.

Just warmer human beings.

That may sound naive.

I don't think it is.

Culture is built from repeated behaviour.

If coldness can become normal, so can friendliness.

The Small Thing

Smile first.

That is it.

Don't wait for permission.

Don't demand anything in return.

Simply make your face a little more welcoming to the world.

Sometimes friendliness begins before a single word is spoken.

Chapter Seventeen

Benny and the People Walking Him

Dogs keep introducing me to people.

Benny was one of them.

I would see Jackie and André walking him.

Eventually the dog became familiar.

Then the people became familiar.

Then names appeared.

There is a sequence to belonging.

First:

I have seen you before.

Then:

I recognize you.

Then:

I know something about you.

Then:

I know your name.

Then, perhaps:

I missed you yesterday.

That progression matters.

We sometimes think friendship must begin with some significant emotional connection.

Usually it doesn't.

It begins with repetition.

The same dog.

The same corner.

The same time of day.

"Morning."

"Morning."

"How's Benny?"

"He's good."

And somewhere in these apparently meaningless exchanges, people begin entering one another's lives.

Dogs are very good at repetition.

They want the same walk.

The same park.

The same patch of grass.

The same people.

Human beings crave novelty.

Dogs understand ritual.

Perhaps community depends more on ritual than we realize.

The neighbour you see at 7:15 every morning.

The same cashier.

The same café.

The same bench.

The same dog route.

Familiarity grows in predictable places.

This makes me wonder whether our increasingly mobile, digital lives have robbed us of something.

We can go anywhere.

Buy anything.

Speak to anyone in the world.

But perhaps we belong most deeply where people expect to see us.

Benny taught me that.

Or perhaps Jackie and André did.

Either way, I learned the names.

And that changed everything by just a little.

The Small Thing

Build one tiny ritual into your neighbourhood life.

Walk the same route.

Visit the same café.

Sit on the same bench.

Go at roughly the same time.

Give familiarity a chance to grow.

Belonging often begins with being repeatedly seen.

Chapter Eighteen

The People Who Never Answer

Not everyone answers.

This is important.

Not everyone smiles back.

Not everyone wants to talk.

Not everyone wants help.

Not everyone responds to a message.

Not everyone shares your enthusiasm.

Sometimes you reach out and receive silence.

That can hurt.

Especially when the thing you are offering feels important to you.

I have written to people about ideas I care deeply about and received no response.

I have reached out hoping to begin a conversation and heard nothing.

I have greeted people who looked straight ahead.

I have tried to connect with people who clearly did not want connection.

What then?

For a long time, I think many of us quietly keep score.

I reached out.

They didn't.

I was kind.

They weren't.

I wrote.

They ignored me.

Eventually generosity can become a transaction:

I offer warmth.

You owe me warmth.

But that isn't really generosity.

The ministry of small things has to include release.

You offer the greeting.

Then release it.

You send the message.

Then release it.

You invite.

Then release it.

You help.

Then release it.

People have reasons we cannot see.

They may be tired.

Distracted.

Afraid.

Overwhelmed.

Suspicious.

Busy.

Grieving.

Or perhaps they simply aren't interested.

They are allowed.

The goal of kindness is not control.

It is not to manufacture the response we want from another person.

It is to act according to who we want to be.

There is freedom in that.

I can say good morning even if you don't answer.

I can care without being rewarded.

I can offer the hand without forcing you to take it.

That is harder than it sounds.

But it may be one of the most important lessons in this book.

The Small Thing

Do one kind thing today with absolutely no expectation of response.

No thanks.

No acknowledgment.

No return favour.

No result.

Just the act.

Then let it go.

Love becomes freer when it stops keeping score.

PART THREE

NOTICE

Chapter Nineteen

The Person I Didn't Greet

This book would be dishonest if I only told you about the moments when I got things right.

One day I saw someone I knew.

There was history there.

Complication.

Tension.

I saw her.

She saw me.

And instead of acknowledging her, I put my head down and kept walking.

Almost immediately, I knew.

I should have said hello.

Not because saying hello would have solved anything.

Not because the past suddenly disappeared.

Not because I was required to become close.

Because kindness and boundaries are not opposites.

You can say hello without reopening a relationship.

You can acknowledge a person without inviting them into every part of your life.

You can be civil without surrendering your peace.

I knew that.

But in the moment, I chose avoidance.

And afterward, it bothered me.

That bothered feeling was useful.

It wasn't punishment.

It was instruction.

This is another thing I have learned:

When we fall short of the person we want to be, we have choices.

We can justify ourselves.

We can punish ourselves.

Or we can learn.

The Ministry of Small Things is not a standard of perfection.

If it were, nobody could join.

It is a practice.

You miss the moment.

You notice.

You try again.

There will always be another elevator.

Another sidewalk.

Another person.

Another opportunity.

Perhaps not with the same individual.

But with someone.

That day I walked past.

The lesson came with me.

The Small Thing

Think of one recent moment when you wish you had acted differently.

Don't rehearse it endlessly.

Extract the lesson.

Then carry that lesson into the next encounter.

Regret is useful only if it teaches us how to love better tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty

A Smile Costs Nothing

There are things available to almost everyone.

A smile is one of them.

I became increasingly convinced of this during my morning walks.

I would pass people who seemed serious.

Preoccupied.

Closed.

I would smile.

Sometimes the transformation was immediate.

The face softened.

Eyes lifted.

A smile came back.

Then we continued.

It struck me how strange it is that something so small can change the emotional temperature between two people.

A smile says many things without language.

I'm not a threat.

I see you.

I'm glad you're here.

For this second, the world is friendly.

Of course, not every smile means all those things.

But a genuine one can.

We live in a world that spends extraordinary amounts of money trying to make people feel better.

Advertising.

Entertainment.

Luxury.

Technology.

Therapy.

Travel.

Medication.

None of these is inherently bad.

But meanwhile, some of the most powerful ways we affect one another remain completely free.

Eye contact.

A smile.

A name remembered.

A door held.

A chair offered.

A hand on a shoulder.

A few minutes of listening.

"How are you?"

"Good to see you."

"I was thinking about you."

These are tiny currencies of human connection.

Nobody becomes rich by hoarding them.

They gain value only when spent.

Perhaps that is why I have become so interested in small things.

They are democratic.

You don't need status.

You don't need wealth.

You don't need power.

You simply need another human being.

And sooner or later, one will walk past.

The Small Thing

Spend freely today.

Smile.

Encourage.

Notice.

Thank.

Greet.

None of it will reduce what you have.

That is the strange mathematics of kindness:

The more you give away, the more there seems to be.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Lonely Person in the Crowd

Loneliness does not always look lonely.

Sometimes it is sitting in a busy café.

Sometimes it is walking through a grocery store.

Sometimes it is standing in an elevator with six other people.

Sometimes it is surrounded by family.

That is one of the things I have come to understand more deeply.

We tend to associate loneliness with isolation.

But a person can be surrounded by people and still feel unseen.

That may be the more painful version.

Because there is a particular sadness in being physically present while emotionally invisible.

I think about this when I sit in our building entrance in the morning.

People come through.

Some are rushing.

Some are carrying bags.

Some have dogs.

Some have coffee.

Some seem cheerful.

Some don't.

I have no idea what most of them are carrying internally.

Neither do you.

That is why small gestures matter so much.

We do not know who needs them.

A person may be fine.

Or your smile may be the first warm human interaction they've had all day.

You don't have to know.

You simply offer it.

This is one of the beautiful things about kindness.

It does not require diagnosis.

You don't have to determine whether someone is lonely enough to qualify for friendliness.

You can simply be friendly.

There is dignity in that.

No pity.

No rescue.

Just human recognition.

I sometimes wonder how many people are moving through our neighbourhoods with full contact lists and empty hearts.

Hundreds of names in their phones.

Nobody to call.

Thousands of social media connections.

Nobody who asks how they really are.

We have never been more connected technologically.

And we may never have been more skilled at being alone together.

The solution cannot be another app.

It has to involve presence.

Faces.

Voices.

Time.

The Small Thing

Today, notice someone who seems easy to overlook.

Not because you know they are lonely.

Because you don't know.

Give them the same warmth you would give someone you love.

You may never know whether it mattered.

That does not mean it didn't.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Dog Knows

I sometimes think dogs understand community better than we do.

A dog sees another dog and immediately wants to investigate.

A dog sees a familiar person and expresses delight without embarrassment.

Tail wagging.

Body moving.

Eyes bright.

There is no:

"I don't want to seem too enthusiastic."

Dogs have no reputation to protect.

They are wonderfully poor at emotional restraint.

Perhaps that is part of why we love them.

They make affection visible.

Human beings often hide it.

We think:

I like that person.

I'm glad to see them.

I appreciate what they did.

I miss them.

I love them.

And then we say:

"Hey."

Dogs would consider this absurd.

If you are delighted, why not show delight?

I have seen it many times while walking around NDG.

People walking dogs stop because the dogs want to stop.

Conversations begin because the dogs refuse to observe human social distance.

Dogs create permission.

And perhaps they remind us of something we have forgotten:

Affection is meant to move outward.

When I return home and see Christy, I don't want my love for her to exist merely as an internal fact.

Love should become something.

A hug.

A kiss.

A cup of tea.

A question.

A touch.

A word.

Otherwise the person we love is required to guess.

The dog doesn't make you guess.

The dog knows.

And the dog tells you.

The Small Thing

Make one feeling visible today.

If you are happy to see someone, let them know.

If you appreciate someone, say it.

If you love someone, show it.

Do not make the people in your life survive entirely on inference.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sit Down for a Minute

There is an enormous difference between saying:

"How are you?"

while walking away,

and asking the same question while sitting down.

The chair changes the question.

It says:

I may actually have time for the answer.

We have developed many expressions that sound relational but often function as greetings.

How are you?

How's everything?

What's new?

Most of the time, the expected answer is:

"Fine."

If someone actually started telling us, we might be surprised.

That is why sitting matters.

A bench communicates availability.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons my little morning "office" has produced so many conversations.

A standing person looks like they are going somewhere.

A seated person looks like they might stay.

There is an invitation in stillness.

Bailey sat because her feet needed rest.

Susan sat and we talked about the past.

Others have stopped for a minute and remained for ten.

That extra time changes what is possible.

Human beings often reveal themselves slowly.

The first answer is:

"I'm good."

The second answer might be:

"Actually, it's been a difficult week."

But you only hear the second answer if you are still there.

Listening requires time.

There is no shortcut.

You cannot microwave trust.

Sometimes the most compassionate thing you can do is make your body communicate:

I'm not leaving yet.

The Small Thing

The next time someone begins telling you something important, stop moving.

Put down the phone.

Sit if you can.

Face them.

Give them your body as evidence that your attention is real.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Person Behind the Counter

We see roles before we see people.

Cashier.

Waiter.

Barista.

Delivery driver.

Cleaner.

Receptionist.

Security guard.

And because the role defines the interaction, it becomes easy to interact only with the role.

"Large coffee."

"Debit."

"Thank you."

Transaction complete.

But there is a person standing behind the counter.

A person who woke up that morning.

A person with family.

A person with worries.

A person with plans.

A person who gets tired.

A person who wants to be treated with dignity.

I have come to enjoy learning the names of people I encounter repeatedly in businesses around the neighbourhood.

The relationship changes.

"Thanks."

becomes:

"Thanks, Mike."

The addition of a name is tiny.

But names humanize transactions.

I think there is something corrosive about interacting with human beings purely according to function.

When a person becomes only what they provide us, we stop seeing them fully.

The employee exists to serve.

The driver exists to deliver.

The cleaner exists to clean.

But nobody exists primarily for our convenience.

They are living a life.

We have simply entered it briefly.

Perhaps this is especially important with people in service jobs because they often experience the worst of public impatience.

A mistake happens.

A line is slow.

An item is unavailable.

People become angry.

Often at the person with the least power to change the situation.

Kindness behind the counter matters.

And so does kindness in front of it.

The Small Thing

Learn the name of one person who regularly serves you.

Then use it.

You may be amazed at how quickly a transaction becomes a relationship.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Remember Their Name

I have come to believe that remembering someone's name is one of the simplest forms of respect.

It says:

You did not disappear after our last conversation.

You remained somewhere in my mind.

We met once.

Now I remember you.

Names matter because names separate us from categories.

The homeless man becomes Felix.

The woman exercising becomes Marie.

The elderly walker becomes Bailey.

The man outside Burger de Ville becomes Ian.

The person serving food becomes Speedy.

The world becomes populated.

Of course, I forget names too.

We all do.

There is no shame in asking again.

What matters is the effort.

"Remind me of your name?"

Then try to remember.

Because the next time you meet, something beautiful happens.

"Good morning, Marie."

There is often a little spark in the other person's face.

They remember that you remembered.

That matters.

Perhaps especially in large cities.

Cities can make people feel anonymous.

Millions of people.

Thousands of windows.

Hundreds of faces each week.

It is easy to feel interchangeable.

A name pushes against anonymity.

You are not simply another person walking past.

You are Marie.

You are Felix.

You are Bailey.

You are Darren.

You are Pearl.

The world is different when it contains names.

The Small Thing

Make an effort to remember one new name today.

Repeat it when the person tells you.

Use it before you leave.

Write it down later if necessary.

Then give it back to them the next time you meet.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Empty Bench

Sometimes nobody comes.

This is part of the ministry too.

There are mornings when I sit and fewer people pass.

There are walks when familiar faces are missing.

There are conversations I hope for that never happen.

And there is something useful in that.

Because if we only show up when guaranteed a rewarding experience, we are not really showing up.

We are consuming.

Community is partly built through availability without certainty.

You sit on the bench.

Maybe someone comes.

Maybe not.

You go for the walk.

Maybe you meet somebody interesting.

Maybe you don't.

You make the call.

Maybe they answer.

Maybe voicemail.

This matters because modern life trains us to expect immediate reward.

Tap.

Response.

Click.

Result.

Order.

Delivery.

Human connection does not work that way.

It is inefficient.

You can spend twenty minutes somewhere and have nothing measurable to show for it.

Except perhaps something happened inside you.

You became more patient.

More observant.

More comfortable with stillness.

More willing to exist without stimulation.

An empty bench is not wasted time.

It may be training.

You are becoming the kind of person who can remain available without demanding entertainment.

That is a useful kind of person to become.

The Small Thing

Spend ten minutes somewhere without trying to accomplish anything.

No phone.

No task.

No expectation.

Simply be available to the place and the people around you.

If nothing happens, let nothing be enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Someone Is Always Carrying Something

You cannot see most burdens.

That may be one of the most important facts to remember when dealing with people.

The angry person may be frightened.

The quiet person may be grieving.

The impatient person may be caring for a dying parent.

The distracted employee may have been awake half the night with a sick child.

The person who doesn't smile back may be barely holding themselves together.

We rarely know.

Yet we judge quickly.

Rude.

Cold.

Lazy.

Selfish.

Difficult.

I have done it.

We all have.

But the ministry of small things asks for a different first instinct.

Curiosity before judgment.

Maybe there is something I cannot see.

This does not mean excusing every behaviour.

People can still be rude.

Cruelty is still cruelty.

Boundaries remain necessary.

But understanding that another person has an unseen life can soften our response.

I think of all the people I encounter during a typical morning.

Some seem happy.

Some seem tired.

Some stop to talk.

Some barely look up.

Each one is carrying something.

A marriage.

A diagnosis.

A bill.

A memory.

A secret.

A hope.

A fear.

A person they miss.

A decision they haven't made.

Invisible luggage.

Perhaps kindness is partly recognizing that everyone is travelling with bags we cannot see.

The Small Thing

When someone irritates you today, delay your judgment by one sentence.

Say silently:

There may be something here I don't know.

That single thought may change what you do next.

PART FOUR

GIVE

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bread

I keep coming back to bread.

Perhaps because bread is so ordinary.

It has existed in human life for thousands of years.

Simple.

Basic.

Necessary.

You can build grand theories about feeding the world.

But eventually somebody has to eat.

There is something grounding about that.

Bread takes our ideals and makes them physical.

You can say you care about hunger.

Or you can hand someone food.

You can say community should share.

Or you can leave a loaf where somebody can take it.

You can believe in generosity.

Or you can practice it.

The small thing makes the idea real.

That is why I think the ministry of small things is ultimately practical.

It is not meant to be admired.

It is meant to be done.

Bread should be eaten.

Kindness should move.

Love should become action.

Otherwise the words remain words.

I have spent much of my life thinking about big systems and how society might become better.

I still believe those questions matter.

But the older I get, the more interested I become in what can happen before the system changes.

What can I do this morning?

Who can I feed?

Who can I greet?

Who can I call?

Who can I encourage?

Where can I carry the bread?

Those questions have answers available now.

Perhaps that is the secret.

Work toward the better world you imagine.

But do not postpone goodness until it arrives.

The Small Thing

Take one belief you hold about how the world should be.

Then practice a tiny version of it today.

If you believe nobody should be hungry, feed someone.

If you believe people should be kinder, be kinder.

If you believe communities should be connected, connect.

Become a small example of the world you hope to see.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Noodles and Popcorn

Felix did not ask for much.

Noodles.

Popcorn.

That was the list.

There is something about modest requests that stays with me.

When a person has very little, even very ordinary things become specific.

Not "food."

Noodles.

Not "a treat."

Popcorn.

Human need becomes personal when it has a name.

That matters.

It is easy to think abstractly about helping people.

The hungry.

The poor.

The homeless.

But categories are emotionally convenient because they remain distant.

Felix was not distant.

He was standing in front of me.

And he knew what he wanted from Dollarama.

So I bought it.

I don't tell this story because the act was impressive.

It wasn't.

I tell it because we often underestimate the value of responding to a simple need simply.

Not every act of compassion requires an organization.

Not every problem requires a program.

Sometimes a person says:

"I could use this."

And if you can help, you do.

There is humility in that kind of giving too.

It does not assume we know what another person should want.

We ask.

We listen.

We respond.

Perhaps that is a better model for generosity than deciding on someone else's behalf what would be best for them.

Felix wanted noodles and popcorn.

That morning, that was enough.

The Small Thing

When you want to help someone, ask a simple question:

What would actually be useful to you?

Then listen to the answer.

Generosity becomes more respectful when it begins with attention.

Chapter Thirty

The Ride Home

Sometimes the small thing is transportation.

A ride.

Ten minutes in a car.

A detour.

Picking someone up.

Dropping someone off.

We tend to calculate these moments according to inconvenience.

How far out of the way is it?

How much time will this take?

Will I have to wait?

Those are reasonable questions.

But there is another question:

What does this small inconvenience mean to the other person?

A ride can mean avoiding a long walk.

Avoiding the rain.

Saving bus fare.

Getting home safely.

Feeling cared for.

Having ten minutes of conversation that would not otherwise have happened.

Cars are interesting places for connection.

You are moving, but you are also enclosed together.

There is no need for eye contact every second.

Conversation can arrive more naturally.

Some of the best talks happen while looking through a windshield.

Perhaps because there is no pressure to make the conversation important.

You are just going somewhere.

And because you're going somewhere together, for a little while your lives are pointed in the same direction.

That can matter.

We spend so much time optimizing our days.

Shortest route.

Fastest checkout.

Fewest interruptions.

Maximum efficiency.

But human beings are frequently found in the detours.

The five extra minutes.

The unplanned stop.

The ride you didn't have to give.

Efficiency is useful.

It is not the highest human value.

Sometimes arriving a little later means somebody else did not have to travel alone.

The Small Thing

The next time you can make someone's day easier with a modest detour, consider taking it.

Not every inconvenience is a problem.

Some are opportunities wearing a watch.

Chapter Thirty-One

Make the Call

Thinking about someone is good.

Calling them is better.

I have learned this repeatedly.

A person crosses my mind.

I wonder how they are.

I think:

I should call.

Then life intervenes.

Something else appears on the screen.

Another task.

Another idea.

Another hour passes.

And sometimes the call never happens.

But on other days, I make it.

The difference between those two outcomes can be enormous.

We often tell ourselves that our thoughts somehow travel.

Perhaps they do.

But telephones are more reliable.

There is a strange gap between affection and expression.

We care deeply about people who may not know we are thinking about them.

We assume they know.

Maybe they do.

Maybe not.

Why leave love trapped inside the mind?

Call.

You don't need a reason.

In fact, "I was thinking about you" may be one of the best reasons.

We reserve calls for information.

Plans.

Problems.

Birthdays.

Emergencies.

But connection itself is enough.

The voice on the other end does not have to receive news.

It can simply receive you.

One of the recurring lessons in my life lately has been this:

When a loving impulse appears, act on it before the world talks you out of it.

Call.

Write.

Visit.

Send the message.

Walk across the street.

The instinct may pass.

The opportunity may too.

The Small Thing

Think of one person who has crossed your mind recently.

Do not analyze why.

Call them.

If they don't answer, leave a simple message:

"I was thinking about you."

That may be all they need to hear.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Carol

Grief changes time.

The rest of the world keeps moving.

Traffic lights change.

People buy groceries.

Television programs air.

The sun comes up.

But for someone who has lost a person they love, the world can feel permanently altered.

That is why I thought about Carol.

She had lost her partner.

There is no perfect thing to say to someone grieving.

Perhaps that is why people sometimes say nothing.

They are afraid of intruding.

Afraid of choosing the wrong words.

Afraid of awakening pain.

But grief is already awake.

The pain does not disappear because nobody mentions it.

Often what matters is not the brilliance of the words.

It is the willingness to remain connected.

One evening, Carol was on my mind.

Then a message from her appeared.

I called.

Later, she and Christy went to the gym together.

I encouraged Christy to take them out afterward for one of our favourite meals.

Nothing extraordinary.

Exercise.

Food.

Company.

Normal life.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts we can offer someone in grief.

Not an escape from grief.

A little companionship inside it.

Grieving people do not always need us to talk about the person who died.

Sometimes they need a meal.

A walk.

A laugh.

A change of scenery.

Permission to feel normal for an hour without betraying the person they lost.

We cannot remove grief.

Love has created the grief.

But we can make sure the grieving person does not have to carry every hour alone.

The Small Thing

If you know someone who is grieving, do not wait for perfect words.

Offer something concrete.

Coffee.

Dinner.

A walk.

A drive.

A phone call.

The gift may not be what you say.

It may simply be your continued presence.

Chapter Thirty-Three

My Sister Susan

My sister Susan had cataract surgery.

I was thinking about her.

I could have sent an email.

That would have been perfectly reasonable.

Instead, I called.

I wanted her to hear my voice.

I wanted her to know that I was thinking about her and praying for her.

There is a difference between efficiency and intimacy.

Email is efficient.

Texting is efficient.

Sometimes efficiency is exactly what we need.

But voices carry things words on a screen do not.

Tone.

Warmth.

Hesitation.

Laughter.

Concern.

Silence.

History.

When a sibling calls, you do not hear only the words spoken that day.

Somewhere beneath them are childhood voices.

Family dinners.

Parents.

Old arguments.

Birthdays.

Shared history.

Decades compressed into sound.

That is why a call can feel different.

The technology is not the important part.

Presence is.

Families are peculiar.

We can love people deeply and still go far too long without telling them.

We assume there will be another opportunity.

Usually there is.

Until there isn't.

That is why I am trying to become more responsive to the thought:

Call them.

Not someday.

Now.

The Small Thing

Contact someone in your family simply because you love them.

Do not wait for a birthday.

Do not wait for bad news.

Do not wait until you have something important to discuss.

Love itself is important enough.

Chapter Thirty-Four

What If I Can Help?

I was thinking about my friend Carle and the difficult custody battle she was facing.

Then another person came to mind.

Mikkel Andersen.

A Danish classical guitarist who had recently stayed with us.

The thought was simple:

What if these two lives could somehow connect?

Perhaps Mikkel might be moved by Carle's situation.

Perhaps he might help.

Perhaps he might even consider playing a benefit concert.

I did not know.

So I sent him the information.

That phrase — **I did not know** — is important.

Much of the good we fail to do disappears because we demand certainty before acting.

Will this work?

Will they respond?

Will it matter?

Will the connection lead anywhere?

If we cannot guarantee the outcome, we hesitate.

But human networks are full of possibility precisely because outcomes are uncertain.

One person knows another person.

One introduction leads to a conversation.

One conversation produces an idea.

One idea becomes assistance.

Or perhaps nothing happens.

That possibility must be acceptable too.

Our responsibility is not always to produce the result.

Sometimes it is simply to make the connection.

This is one of the roles I increasingly enjoy.

Bridge builder.

Person connector.

The thought occurs:

Maybe you should know them.

Then I act.

I think communities become powerful when people begin doing this instinctively.

Who do I know who might help?

Who should meet?

Who has what someone else needs?

Who could encourage whom?

We do not need to possess every solution ourselves.

Sometimes the greatest resource we have is our relationships.

The Small Thing

When someone tells you about a problem, ask:

Do I know anyone who might help?

You may not be the answer.

You may simply know the person who knows the person who knows the answer.

That is still useful.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Give What You Have

We often imagine generosity in terms of money.

Money is useful.

But it is only one form of wealth.

Some people have time.

Some have knowledge.

Some have tools.

Some have extra food.

Some have transportation.

Some have influence.

Some have a spare room.

Some have a listening ear.

Some have a useful telephone number.

Some know how to fix a fence.

Some know how to comfort a child.

Some know how to cook.

Some know how to make people laugh.

The question is not:

What do I lack?

The better question is:

What do I already have that could become useful to someone else?

This changes generosity from a future aspiration into a present possibility.

I may not be able to write a large cheque.

But perhaps I can make an introduction.

I may not be able to solve someone's housing problem.

But perhaps I can buy lunch.

I may not know how to repair something.

But perhaps I know Wayne.

Every person is carrying resources.

The tragedy is that much of what we possess remains unused because we have defined generosity too narrowly.

A strong community would not simply be rich in money.

It would be rich in circulation.

Skills circulating.

Food circulating.

Ideas circulating.

Time circulating.

Care circulating.

Human beings circulating through one another's lives.

Give what you have.

Someone may need exactly that.

The Small Thing

Make a quick inventory of your own abundance.

Not your possessions alone.

Your abilities.

Your experience.

Your connections.

Your time.

Your attention.

Then ask:

Where could one of these be useful today?

You may already have more to give than you realized.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Gift Nobody Sees

Some of the best things we do will never be known.

Nobody will photograph them.

Nobody will congratulate us.

Nobody will post about them.

Nobody may even realize they happened.

There is something cleansing about that.

A private kindness forces us to confront our motive.

If nobody knows, was it still worth doing?

Of course.

Perhaps it was worth more.

We live in an age of public generosity.

Fundraisers are shared.

Acts of service photographed.

Good deeds posted.

Sometimes publicity creates more good, and there is nothing wrong with that.

But there should remain a part of our lives that belongs only to love.

The anonymous gift.

The quiet prayer.

The message sent when nobody else knows someone is struggling.

The bill paid privately.

The food left without a name attached.

The person defended when they are not in the room.

The kind thing said about someone who will never hear it.

These acts shape us.

They train the heart to separate goodness from applause.

There is an old temptation in all of us:

If I do something good, I want somebody to know I am the kind of person who does good things.

I understand that temptation.

But perhaps part of becoming a better human being is learning to enjoy goodness itself.

No audience.

No score.

No credit.

Just the quiet satisfaction that something in the world is slightly better because you acted.

And nobody needs to know.

The Small Thing

Do one good thing anonymously.

Make sure there is no way for the recipient to repay you.

Then resist the urge to tell anyone.

Let the act belong entirely to the person who received it.

And perhaps to God.

That is enough.

PART FIVE

LOVE

Eventually, every road in this book leads here.

We can call it kindness.

Community.

Neighbourliness.

Generosity.

Service.

Compassion.

But beneath all of them is something simpler.

Love.

Not love as sentiment.

Love as behaviour.

Love that gets up and makes the tea.

Love that remembers.

Love that forgives.

Love that comes home.

Love that comes back tomorrow.

Perhaps the smallest things are not small at all.

Perhaps they are simply the everyday shapes love takes.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Heaven on Earth Bagels

There are grand romantic gestures.

Flowers.

Trips.

Expensive dinners.

Anniversary surprises.

And then there are bagels.

In our home, Christy has something I call her Heaven on Earth bagel.

I love that name.

Because perhaps heaven on earth is not always something mystical.

Sometimes it has cream cheese.

There is intimacy in knowing exactly how someone likes something.

Their tea.

Their coffee.

Their toast.

Their pillow.

Their favourite chair.

Their little routines.

To an outsider, these details mean almost nothing.

Inside a relationship, they can mean everything.

Love accumulates information.

Not because it is conducting research.

Because it pays attention.

After years together, you know things.

Which foods bring pleasure.

Which television programs make someone laugh.

What time they like to wake.

What hurts.

What comforts.

When to talk.

When to leave something alone.

The danger is that familiarity can make these things invisible.

We stop noticing the privilege of knowing another person so well.

Perhaps long-term love requires us to rediscover the extraordinary inside the familiar.

This person has allowed me into the private geography of her life.

I know where things are.

I know what she likes.

I know how she takes her tea.

What an honour.

So sometimes love is a bagel.

Make it properly.

The Small Thing

Prepare something for someone exactly the way they like it.

Not the way you like it.

Not the easiest way.

Their way.

Love pays attention to details.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

A Cup of Tea

Tea appears often in my mornings.

I come home.

I make tea.

Sometimes I make a cup for Christy.

There is no great achievement in boiling water.

Yet a cup of tea can say many things.

I thought of you.

I know what you like.

Here.

Sit.

Rest.

Let me take care of this tiny thing.

The world tends to celebrate spectacular acts of love.

But relationships are usually sustained by repetition.

Thousands of cups of tea.

Thousands of meals.

Thousands of questions:

"Do you need anything?"

Thousands of doors opened.

Thousands of errands.

Thousands of touches.

Thousands of ordinary evenings when two people simply remain together.

That is where love lives most of the time.

Not on mountaintops.

In kitchens.

One of the reasons small things matter so much is that life itself is mostly made of them.

Weddings are rare.

Tuesday mornings are abundant.

Vacations are occasional.

Dishes are daily.

If we only recognize love when something extraordinary happens, we miss most of it.

Perhaps a good life is not principally made from great moments.

Perhaps it is made from ordinary moments treated with great love.

I make tea.

Christy drinks it.

The kettle cools.

Nobody writes about it.

Except now I have.

Because perhaps it deserves to be written about.

The Small Thing

Do one routine thing lovingly today.

Not dramatically.

Just deliberately.

Make the tea.

Wash the dish.

Fold the blanket.

Feed the animal.

The action may be ordinary.

Your attention does not have to be.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Hug When I Came Home

I came home.

Christy was there.

I gave her a big hug and told her how much I loved her.

Simple.

Yet I remember it.

Perhaps because affection becomes real when it leaves the mind and enters the body.

A hug is physical evidence.

I am here.

You are here.

We belong to one another.

There are people who live together and gradually stop touching.

Not because love has disappeared.

Because routine has taken over.

A kiss becomes automatic.

A hug becomes occasional.

Words of love become assumed.

"I know she knows."

"I know he knows."

Knowing is wonderful.

Hearing is better.

Feeling is better still.

We should not force the people we love to live entirely on accumulated evidence.

Give them fresh evidence.

Today.

One of the saddest things about death is the sudden impossibility of physical affection.

We can remember the person.

Talk about them.

Look at photographs.

Hear recordings.

But we cannot hug them again.

That realization should make us extravagant with affection while we can still give it.

There will come a last hug in every relationship.

Usually we will not know it is the last.

So perhaps we should make the ordinary ones count.

I came home.

Christy was there.

I hugged her.

What else was I supposed to do?

The Small Thing

Hug someone you love today.

And if hugging is not appropriate, find another way to make your affection unmistakable.

Do not merely love people.

Let them experience being loved.

Chapter Forty

The People We Take for Granted

Strangers are sometimes easier to appreciate than family.

A stranger tells us an interesting story and we are fascinated.

Our partner tells us something and we half-listen while checking something else.

We greet the cashier warmly.

Then walk through our own front door distracted.

Why?

Perhaps because permanence creates illusion.

The people closest to us seem as though they will always be there.

So we postpone our best attention.

Later.

Tomorrow.

This weekend.

When things calm down.

But life does not guarantee later.

And things rarely calm down for long.

One of the disciplines I am trying to practice is bringing some of the warmth I offer the neighbourhood back through my own front door.

It would be a strange ministry that made every stranger feel important while neglecting the person waiting at home.

Love should radiate outward.

But it must also radiate inward.

Christy should not receive what is left after I have given my best self to everyone else.

The people closest to us deserve our courtesy too.

Our patience.

Our curiosity.

Our thanks.

Our attention.

Perhaps especially our thanks.

We thank strangers constantly.

"Thank you."

"Much appreciated."

"Have a great day."

Then somebody we love does the same small thing for us for the thousandth time and we say nothing.

Familiarity should deepen gratitude.

Not erase it.

The Small Thing

Thank someone you live with for something they do regularly.

Something you have stopped noticing.

Then notice it again tomorrow.

Chapter Forty-One

Forgive Quickly

People will disappoint us.

If you intend to love human beings, this is unavoidable.

They will say the wrong thing.

Forget.

Misunderstand.

Fail to respond.

Become defensive.

Act selfishly.

So will we.

Community without forgiveness is impossible.

So is marriage.

So is friendship.

So is family.

The question is not whether people will hurt one another.

The question is what we do afterward.

I am increasingly attracted to the idea of forgiving quickly.

Not foolishly.

Not pretending serious harm is insignificant.

Not eliminating necessary boundaries.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not always the same thing.

But carrying every offence indefinitely creates an enormous emotional burden.

Eventually we become archivists of injury.

We maintain files.

Remember dates.

Reconstruct conversations.

Collect evidence.

And every time we open the archive, we experience part of the injury again.

Some things must be addressed.

Some relationships must change.

Some behaviour should not be tolerated.

But many of the offences we carry are smaller.

A comment.

A slight.

A forgotten call.

A disagreement.

A bad mood.

What if we became generous about releasing them?

What if we decided that not every irritation deserved permanent storage?

A ministry of small things must include small forgiveness.

Otherwise yesterday's injuries consume today's opportunities for love.

The Small Thing

Release one small offence today.

No announcement required.

Simply decide:

I am not carrying this anymore.

Then put it down.

Chapter Forty-Two

Come Back Tomorrow

Perhaps the most important thing I do at my morning office is not showing up once.

It is coming back.

Tomorrow.

Relationships are built through recurrence.

Anybody can be friendly for a day.

Anybody can volunteer once.

Anybody can make one phone call.

But trust grows through repetition.

You were here yesterday.

You're here today.

Perhaps you'll be here tomorrow.

There is security in that.

Children understand this instinctively.

So do dogs.

So do people who have been disappointed often.

Promises matter.

Presence matters more.

This applies far beyond a park bench.

Call again.

Visit again.

Ask again.

Bring the meal again.

Check in next week.

Remember the appointment.

Ask afterward how it went.

That last one is particularly powerful.

Someone tells you:

"I'm seeing the doctor Thursday."

Then Friday comes.

"How did the appointment go?"

That question communicates something much larger than its words.

I remembered.

You remained in my mind even when you weren't in front of me.

That is one of the deepest forms of human recognition.

The world contains many enthusiastic beginnings.

Perhaps what it needs more of is faithful continuation.

Come back tomorrow.

The Small Thing

Follow up.

Think of something somebody told you recently.

Ask about it.

Show them their story did not disappear when the conversation ended.

Chapter Forty-Three

There Are No Strangers

Of course there are strangers.

Technically.

People we have never met.

People whose names we do not know.

But I am beginning to wonder whether "stranger" should describe a temporary condition rather than a permanent category.

Marie was a stranger.

Until I spoke with her.

Bailey was a stranger.

Until she sat down.

Ian was a stranger.

Until we talked.

Felix was a stranger.

Until he became Felix.

This realization changes the way I walk through the world.

The person approaching me may be somebody I don't know.

But perhaps that is merely because the first conversation hasn't happened yet.

I like that idea.

It makes the neighbourhood feel full of unopened doors.

Not every door needs opening.

Some people want privacy.

Some encounters should remain nothing more than a smile.

But the possibility matters.

We are not surrounded merely by strangers.

We are surrounded by **people we haven't met yet.**

Imagine teaching children to see the world this way.

Imagine apartment buildings where residents expected to know one another.

Imagine streets where people noticed when an elderly neighbour hadn't appeared for several days.

Imagine communities where newcomers were welcomed.

Imagine cities in which anonymity remained possible but invisibility did not.

Perhaps this sounds idealistic.

Good.

The world has enough cynicism.

Idealism becomes useful when somebody practices a tiny piece of it.

Say hello.

Learn the name.

The stranger disappears.

The Small Thing

Replace one sentence in your mind.

Instead of:

I don't know that person.

Try:

I haven't met that person yet.

Notice how differently the world feels.

Chapter Forty-Four

The Ministry Without a Church

I chose the word *ministry* deliberately.

But this ministry has no building.

No membership list.

No collection plate.

No hierarchy.

No required theology.

No pulpit.

The sanctuary is wherever another human being happens to be.

A grocery store.

An apartment lobby.

A sidewalk.

A park bench.

A restaurant.

A telephone call.

A kitchen.

A car.

The ministry begins when somebody decides:

The person in front of me matters.

Faith is important in my own life.

It shapes how I understand love, purpose and the world.

But you do not have to believe exactly what I believe to practice anything in this book.

You only have to believe that human beings deserve care.

Perhaps even that is too complicated.

You simply have to care.

One of the dangers of religion is that we can become so interested in what people believe that we forget to ask whether they are hungry.

Or lonely.

Or grieving.

Or tired.

Whatever our theology, love eventually has to become visible.

Food.

Time.

Patience.

Forgiveness.

Company.

A ride.

A call.

A smile.

Otherwise it remains an idea.

I am interested in a ministry anyone can join.

Atheist.

Christian.

Jew.

Muslim.

Hindu.

Buddhist.

Agnostic.

Uncertain.

Everyone qualifies.

Because everyone encounters people.

And therefore everyone encounters opportunities to love.

The Small Thing

Forget labels for a moment.

Look at the next person you encounter and ask only:

What would kindness look like here?

Then, if you can, do that.

Chapter Forty-Five

The Magic Is Us

I once wrote a children's story around a simple idea:

The magic is us.

I keep returning to that thought.

We wait for leaders.

Governments.

Philanthropists.

Institutions.

Technology.

Someone powerful.

Someone wealthy.

Someone else.

Perhaps they will help.

But while we are waiting, eight billion ordinary human beings are walking around carrying an extraordinary amount of unused kindness.

What if that is the great untapped resource?

Not money.

Not oil.

Not artificial intelligence.

Human goodwill.

Imagine if we could somehow measure all the small acts of kindness that never happen.

Calls we meant to make.

Meals we could have shared.

Names we could have learned.

Apologies we could have offered.

People we could have encouraged.

Doors we could have opened.

Bread we could have given away.

What an enormous reservoir.

And unlike many resources, kindness increases when used.

A person who receives kindness is often more inclined to offer it.

One action becomes two.

Two become four.

The mathematics can become astonishing.

Maybe that is how the world changes.

Not through magic descending from somewhere else.

Through ordinary people discovering what was already in their hands.

The magic is us.

Not because we are perfect.

Because we can choose.

Again and again.

The Small Thing

Stop waiting for somebody else to make your corner of the world better.

Choose one thing.

Do it.

The magic was never supposed to arrive.

It was supposed to begin.

Chapter Forty-Six

One Person at a Time

So here we are.

Back where we started.

A bench.

A person approaching.

"Good morning."

After all these stories, perhaps you expected a larger conclusion.

I don't have one.

I have a smaller one.

One person.

That is enough.

I have spent years dreaming about a better world.

I still do.

I imagine stronger communities.

Less loneliness.

Less hunger.

More generosity.

More friendship.

More people knowing their neighbours.

More people feeling that they belong somewhere.

Those are large dreams.

But I no longer believe I have to wait for the entire world to change before experiencing them.

I can create a tiny version this morning.

I can sit on the bench.

I can say hello.

I can remember Bailey's name.

I can talk to Marie.

I can buy Felix some noodles.

I can carry Bedis's bread.

I can call Susan.

I can think about Carol.

I can come home.

I can make Christy tea.

I can hug her.

None of these actions will appear in a history book.

That is fine.

History books have never contained most of the things that made life worth living.

Perhaps the greatest mistake we make when trying to change the world is believing the action must be proportional to the dream.

The dream can be enormous.

The action can be tiny.

Because small actions multiply.

They become habits.

Habits become character.

Character influences families.

Families influence neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhoods influence communities.

Communities influence cultures.

And cultures eventually influence the world.

But don't worry about all that tomorrow morning.

That is too much responsibility.

Just find one person.

Notice them.

Smile.

Listen.

Help if you can.

Then find another.

And another.

There is no finish line.

There is only the next encounter.

Perhaps someday somebody will ask when the world began changing.

There probably won't be a date.

There won't be a ceremony.

There won't be a headline.

Maybe it began when someone who usually looked down looked up.

Maybe it began when somebody moved over on a bench.

Maybe it began with three loaves of bread.

Maybe it began when somebody remembered a name.

Maybe it began when a person who was lonely realized that someone had noticed.

Maybe it begins tomorrow morning.

Maybe it begins with you.

The Small Thing

There is only one left.

Go outside.

Someone is coming.

Epilogue

Tomorrow Morning

Tomorrow morning the alarm will sound.

The neighbourhood will begin waking.

Lights will appear in apartment windows.

Delivery trucks will arrive.

Dogs will need walking.

Coffee will brew.

People will go to work.

Somebody will be tired.

Somebody will be worried.

Somebody will be celebrating something nobody else knows about.

Somebody will have received terrible news.

Somebody will be lonely.

Somebody will be falling in love.

Somebody will be wondering whether they matter.

And somewhere, two people who do not yet know one another will walk toward the same corner.

That is where the future lives.

We spend enormous amounts of time wondering what will happen to the world.

Will things get better?

Will things get worse?

Will technology save us?

Will politics divide us?

Will our communities survive?

Will our children inherit something better?

I do not know.

But I know something much smaller.

Tomorrow morning I can decide how I treat the person in front of me.

So can you.

That may not seem like enough power to change the world.

Perhaps it isn't.

But it is enough power to change a moment.

And moments are where people live.

Maybe we have been looking for transformation in the wrong place.

We look upward toward powerful people.

Outward toward enormous institutions.

Forward toward some imagined future.

Perhaps occasionally we should look across.

At the person beside us.

There you are.

Here I am.

What can we do with this moment?

That question will be waiting tomorrow morning.

I hope we answer it well.

And if we don't?

We come back the next day.

There will be another person.

Another opportunity.

Another small thing.

A Final Invitation

Join the Ministry of Small Things

You have finished the book.

Now please forget most of it.

You don't need forty-six lessons.

You don't need a program.

You don't need a membership card.

You don't need to remember everything I have written.

Remember five things:

Show up.

Notice.

Listen.

Help when you can.

Come back tomorrow.

That is enough.

Start where you live.

Your hallway.

Your street.

Your workplace.

Your school.

Your grocery store.

Your park.

Learn one name.

Make one call.

Share one thing.

Forgive one small offence.

Give one sincere compliment.

Sit with one lonely person.

Thank someone you have taken for granted.

Tell somebody you love them.

Then tomorrow, do something else.

Do not worry about changing the world.

Love the piece of the world that is standing in front of you.

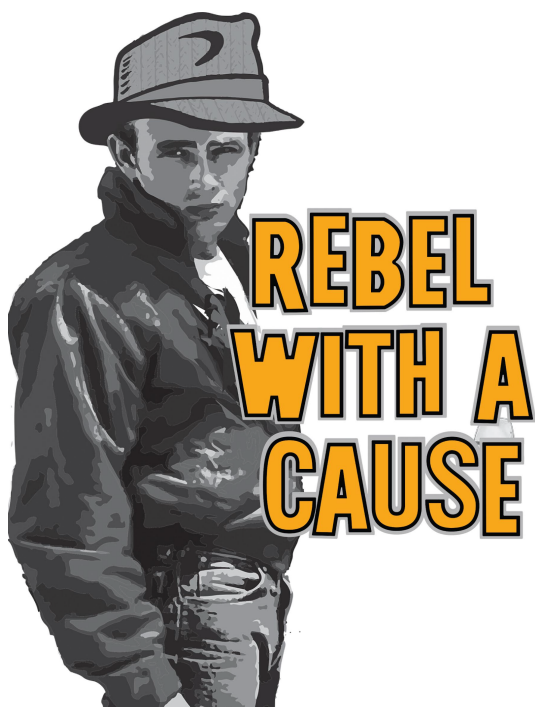
And perhaps, together, we will discover something.

Perhaps there was never any such thing as a small act of love.

The Ministry of Small Things

The world changes one human encounter at a time.

Ross Harvey



rossG3.ca