

## Little Mind, Big Mind

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*We participate in our natural spaciousness so seldom that we have come to believe we are whatever arises in the mind.*

– Stephen Levine

I stared at the dark ceiling. I rolled onto my stomach. I rolled onto my side. I rolled onto my back again and closed my eyes to meditate. My eyes popped open. I stared at the ceiling.

Church issues called for attention. I was leaving on a minister's retreat the next day and I hadn't worked out the parts of the retreat I was leading. And being away for a few days put more time pressure on all the other issues.

Ordinarily, these would not keep me awake. But my son Damon was home for a few weeks. Between the time I got back from the retreat and the time he went back to college, I had no time to hang out with him.

People visited Henry David Thoreau when he lived in a cabin on Walden Pond. If they wanted to talk about the market price of beans or local politics, Henry David was content to sit inside with his visitor. But if they wanted to talk about the nature of life, he took the chairs outside. Important discussions about big issues need more space.

I had some bigger issues to explore with Damon. Grabbing a few hours here or there did not give us the space to settle into them.

Staring at the ceiling I thought, "I can skip the retreat to get more time. But I'd be letting colleagues down. I could cancel church meetings. But I'd be letting people down who had shifted their

schedule to accommodate me. I could forget about quality time with Damon. That feels bad.”

My mind spun around and around this circle of thoughts like a dog exhausting himself chasing his tail. “Maybe this obsessive thinking is part of post-concussion syndrome.” That thought didn’t get me anywhere. I rolled over again.

Finally I fell asleep for a few hours.

First thing in the morning I called a few colleagues. “I’m not coming to the retreat,” I said. “I need to spend some time with my son.” They said, “We’ll miss you, but we can cover for you. Family comes first. Do what you need to do with our blessing.”

An hour later Damon and I were heading down Interstate 80 toward Point Reyes for the day. As we drove, Damon told me about the courses he had taken last semester and the things he was thinking about. He told me about a new girlfriend I had not heard about before. I reflected on my life at his age and my memories of him as a baby. We even imagined different futures for Damon without me getting into a parental, “What are you going to do with your life, young man?” We listened to the “News From Lake Woebegone” from my iPod. We waxed philosophical and told inane jokes.

Near the coast we turned north toward Elk Reserve and Tomales Point. The road ended at Pierce Point Ranch, a dairy farm built in the late 1800s. We walked amongst the old buildings, through a grove of huge Bishop pines sculpted by winds from the sea and out onto the grassy hills with cliffs dropping to the ocean.

We still talked. But there were longer pauses as we looked at flowers, smelled the salt air, listened to the surf a half-mile away and scanned the ocean for signs of whales.

After a while, Damon walked ahead.

As I came up a rise, I could see Lawson’s Landing a few miles across the water. There was Sand Point and Tomales Bluff. Many miles to the south, past Elephant Rock and several beaches I could see the cliffs around Point Reyes itself. Off to the east was Sacramento. I couldn’t see the city of course. But I knew about where it was. It took up about one degree of the horizon. Around the other 359 degrees were hills and shoreline and the expanse of sea itself. And the sky was huge. My worries and concerns and delights and ambitions were still with me floating in the background, like that one-degree speck on the horizon. All around me was a bigger sense of life and all its textures.

A half-mile ahead I could see Damon walking his own path, literally and figuratively.

When I came up the next rise, Damon was gazing out to sea. We were still several miles from Tomales point itself. Neither of us spoke for a long while.

“Wanna head back?” Damon asked.

“Sure,” I whispered. We had come far enough. Time to return.

On the way back, we spoke of simpler things: the way the elk looked at us as they munched, the flight of a raptor amongst the cliffs below, where to stop for food, whether to pick up a movie before we got home.

Damon and I didn't solve any problems or unearth any insights that day. We did connect more in a father-son kind of way. Still, the issues in his life were the same. The issues in mine were unchanged. But I could see them in a larger context – like waves and tides that come and go, ebb and flow. My mind was more expansive, my heart more trusting of the flux of life itself.

I slept very well that night.

### **Little Mind, Big Mind**

This morning I want to talk about little mind and big mind. Little mind is the ordinary consciousness most of us spend most of our days in. Big mind is a wiser, deeper and higher form of consciousness. If you sense my consciousness lying in bed that night and my consciousness walking the wind swept bluffs, you have a feel for the difference between little mind and big mind.

Summer with its ease of being out doors and more relaxed pace is more conducive to big mind. So this morning seemed a good time to talk about big mind: what it is, why it is important and how to cultivate it.

### **What**

It is difficult to define exactly what big mind is because defining is a small mind activity. So I offer an analogy.

### **Spider**

Close your eyes, if you like, and imagine being very close to a very large spider with hairy legs, alien head and grotesque mandibles: good material for a low-grade horror movie. Feel your consciousness.

Now imagine moving back enough to see the spider and the leaf it is standing on.

Move back a little further so you see the spider, leaf and bush that holds them all. To the right is a large web covered with dew lit up by the morning sun.

Move back several feet and take in the field that contains the bush: birds and bugs and grasses and the little ecosystem.

Move back further. See the spider and web and bush and field and hilltop and oceans and mountains in the distance. Feel your consciousness now.

Nothing essential has changed. You can still see the spider doing its spider thing. But now you

see it in the context of all the processes of life. What has changed is you: you've shifted from little mind toward big mind.

## **Examples**

As I said, big mind is both rare and difficult to define. But we've all experienced the difference between little and big mind.

If you've ever lain awake at night with your mind going over and over a conundrum, you know what it feels like to be trapped in little mind.

If you've ever stood on an ocean cliff or mountaintop and said to yourself, "I'm not going to think about my problems. I'll set them aside and look at the beauty around me instead," you know another, more pleasant experience of little mind.

But if you've ever walked by the surf not trying to block anything out, if you've relaxed and let your worries and dreams wash over you like waves slipping over rocks and at the same time noticed the ocean and sky and a larger sense of life in all its flux and textures and depth, then you've tasted big mind.

If you've ever tried to do a big holiday grocery shopping with a grumpy 2 year old in tow, you know how pressed and compressed little mind can feel. If you've ever looked in on your sleeping child and felt the fatigue in your body and love in your heart, you know how sweet big mind can be.

If you've ever been caught in a spiral of pessimism, you know how obsessive little mind sometimes is. If you've ever taken a course on the power of positive thinking, you know how dogmatic little mind can be. If you've ever caught yourself in the midst of a familiar habit pattern and laughed at yourself, "Wow, there I go again. Far out," you know how relaxed and wise big mind can be.

## **Why**

Why is big mind important?

Little mind is small and tight and narrow. It is concerned with the content of your life – usually one or two fragments at a time. It sees the tree but not the forest. If it is looking at a spider close up, life feels terrible. If it is looking at a flower, life is beautiful. If it is wrestling with bills, life is annoying. If it is thinking about a lover, it is enchanted. Little mind gets jerked around by the content of its experiences.

Big mind is concerned with the context of your life more than the content. It sees the trees and the forest and the hills and the mountains around them. It sees the spider stinging a cricket in its web. It sees a butterfly in the meadow. It is less horrified by one or seduced by the other. And it senses the flow of love and life that holds them all.

Big mind is more than a shift in perspective. It is a shift in modalities. Little mind uses one faculty: usually the intellect or the emotions.

Big mind uses multiple faculties at once: the intellect, emotions, body, sensory perception, compassion, intuition, direct knowing and more. And it does it with a wide-open embrace that is relaxed, clear, mindful, heartfelt and intuitive all at once.

### **Who are you?**

By focusing on one or two fragments of your experience, little mind confuses who we are with our experience. Little mind says we are our history or our memories or thoughts (“I think, therefore I am.”). We are our feelings, our personality, our body, our aspirations or the sum total of all we have experienced.

In contrast, by taking in the content and the context through multiple modalities, big mind says we are none of these fragments. We are the space within which we experience the content of life. We are not the clouds; we are the sky. We are the spacious awareness that can see it all at the same time.

Little mind gets bounced around by the content of our lives. We are scared by spiders and soothed by flowers, disturbed by an unfair reprimand and delighted by praise, content when we have political leaders we like and anxious when we don't. We feel sunny in good weather and cloudy when it rains.

On the other hand, big mind finds peace and contentment even in the midst of loss, failure and pain. It feels those things without being thrown by them. It knows that all things pass. It is less buffeted by the winds of fate. It is a source of stability, grace, wisdom, compassion, love, joy and contentment.

Big mind is an evolutionary leap in how we think and perceive. It combines and integrates a wide range of faculties. It is a higher form of consciousness, if you will.

### **Cultivating**

How do we find big mind?

Searching for big mind is like a fish in the sea searching for water. Big mind is not a big fish amongst all the other critters in the ocean. It's the ocean itself. Big mind is everywhere. It permeates everything. It is part of everything.

But invoking it takes a certain kind of letting go and letting be, a certain spaciousness of heart, an openness to what is. Traditional consciousness disciplines like meditation and contemplative prayer can be invaluable tools. And there are many, many less formal approaches.

## Welcoming

For example, cultivating a welcoming attitude toward whatever life brings. If we are busy judging events as good or bad, right or wrong, something to be held or pushed away or ignored, we are investing in the content of our lives. We are less apt to notice the broader context. On the other hand, if we are more relaxed and accepting of whatever comes along, it is easier to sense the larger flow. We *respond* to the *big picture* rather than *react* to the *details*.

Years ago I heard a story about this.

*There was a monk living in the hills outside a fishing village. A young woman in the village became pregnant. When her child was born the villagers demanded to know who the father was. The father was a young fisherman. But the woman didn't want to get her lover into trouble. So she said, "The father is the monk who lives by himself up in the hills."*

*The villagers picked up the baby and marched out of town to the monk's cottage. They rapped on the door. The door opened and the monk bowed in greeting.*

*They were not in the mood for pleasantries. They got right to the point: "This is your baby and your responsibility." They handed him the infant. He held it, bowed and said, "Ah so." They turned and stormed back down the hill.*

*Fifteen years flowed by. The woman became deathly ill. She didn't want to die with this terrible lie on her conscience. She confessed, "The monk was not the father of my child."*

*A few hours later, a delegation of villagers knocked gently on the monk's door. The monk opened the door and smiled in greeting. Behind him was a young man with sparkly eyes.*

*With hat in hand the leader of the delegation said, "There has been a terrible mistake. We are so sorry. The child we left with you is not yours or your responsibility. We've come to relieve you of this burden."*

*The monk bowed and said, "Ah so."*

## Ah So

The story is a little outlandish. But it touched something in me. "Ah" is the sound of release. "So" is the sound of just looking at what is with soft, open eyes. I imagine the monk living in big mind. For me, "ah so" became an invitation to remember all those qualities: expansiveness, presence, ease, clarity, kindness, joy, love.

I'd be driving through town late for an appointment, caught behind a slow driver. Sitting at a red light, my frustration rising, I'd remember the story and say "ah so" to the streetlight and remember big mind. I'd either be late or I wouldn't. Nothing I could do would change that now: "Ah so." I'd

feel my irritation: “Ah so.” Something inside me would relax. I’d find myself smiling at this cute little drama.

One evening I went into the upstairs bathroom of our old house to find our cat, Billy, curled up on the floor. He’d been a family member for 15 years. His kidneys were failing. I sat next to him and put him on my lap. He was too weak to move. I patted him softly. He purred deeply. I sat stroking him for 15 minutes as his purring grew weaker and weaker. It stopped. His breathing stopped. Tears ran down my cheeks. “Ah so.” I felt the sweetness and richness of it all: the blessing of this little life. I was very sad and very okay. “Ah so.”

Maybe you are having difficulty with a relationship: a parent, a child, a partner. You lie awake at night tossing and turning as you go through a repetitive cycle of thoughts. Nothing settles it. “Ah so” can be a reminder of a larger context: all relationships struggle at times. This too shall pass. “Ah so” can be a reminder of all your faculties: thinking, feeling, perceiving, intuiting, knowing, imagining. Rather than focusing just on the content of your thought, you feel the textures of your thoughts, the sensations in your body, the sounds of the night. “Ah so” reminds you of big mind. No need to grasp or push away any of it. You let it all wash over you and let the flow take you deeper and higher.

Or maybe you are having an ordinary, mundane day: no particular problems or special delights. Just routine. Your mind is running in its familiar groove. “Ah so.” Ordinariness is a part of life. “Ah so.” Your mind and heart expand into this simple moment with birds and cars in the background, people sitting around you. Lights buzzing. Just this moment. Big mind is here. Spread out into it. Let yourself be.

## **Meditation**

In fact, let’s try it now. Close your eyes if that will help, and just be present.

*There are worries and delights in your life, hurts and hopes. No need to push them away or grasp hold of them. No need to ignore or fix. Let them be.*

*Feel the sensations in your body, the color of your mood, the texture of your thoughts, the movement in your heart. Hold nothing. Push nothing away. Let everything be just as it is.*

*Invite yourself into big mind. Spread out into it. Imagine your body feeling soft and light, expanding out into the room.*

*Just let things be as they are for now. Float in the space of big mind.*

*You are not the clouds. You are the sky.*

*Be like the sky.*

*Sengstan, the third Zen Patriarch once wrote:*

*The Way is perfect like vast space where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. Live neither in the entanglements of outer things, nor in the inner feelings of emptiness. Be serene in the oneness of things ...*

### **Song: Sweet Quiet**

*Sweet quiet, boundless sea,  
where joy and grief are the same;  
Endless sky, pale breeze of dawn  
breathe your light into me.*

### **Closing**

As big mind gets more and more expansive, it sees life in broader and broader context. As it incorporates more and more ways of seeing, feeling, sensing and knowing, it becomes difficult to describe this way of being in words that little mind can grasp.

Mystics use words like “God” and “God consciousness” to describe the broadest, ultimate context with its widest spectrum of modalities. For little mind, God is a big fish. For big mind, god is the ocean. For small mind God is a thing: perhaps the ultimate thing but still a mysterious object. For big mind, God consciousness is all the ways of experiencing all things. For little mind, God is a being. For big mind, God is beingness.

If God language helps you see the ebb and flow of life, great. Use it: ah so.

If God language doesn't help you in this way, that's okay. Ah so.

Big mind is an evolution in consciousness from a small, reactive mind to a spacious, wise and loving consciousness. Big mind brings greater and more lasting happiness because it is not dependent on things being one way or another. It makes us more effective in our lives and in the world. It brings more depth, love and wisdom.

I bow to the big mind that is all of us.

Ah so.