

A Drop in the Bucket

Russell Delman February 2015

Thirty-one years ago, my wife Linda and I were working seven days a week with brain-injured children at Mother Teresa's Mission in Calcutta. With a surprising sense of ordinariness and familiarity, each week we would walk down the street to Mother House for our weekly, private meeting with Mother Teresa in her small bedroom and anteroom, just big enough for her bed, dresser and a few chairs.

One day, with a light, joyful step we climbed the stairs to her room, exuding prideful happiness. Pradeep, a blind boy of approximately 4 years had walked for the first time this week. In a remarkable neurological congruence, he also began saying his first intelligible words. All the sisters and helpers were gleefully thrilled. We felt so special. With her laser-like perceptiveness, before we said a word, Mother, who was helping so many, looked out her window at the masses on the street and said with deep sorrow, "there is so little we can do, we help one and thousands more are born." A humbling moment indeed.

The next week, we were in an opposite inner condition. Feeling the weight of Calcutta, surrounded by so much suffering, we trudged heavily up her stairs. Greeting us at the door, with a twinkle in her eyes, Mother said, "isn't it wonderful, every drop in the bucket makes it that much more full."

This expression, "a drop in the bucket" lives frequently for Linda and me. The dual reality that there is so little we can do to influence all the suffering on this planet AND every drop in the bucket somehow really helps is a true Zen koan.

People often use the phrase "it's just a drop in the bucket" to convey a kind of hopeless minimizing of the effects of one's behavior. When I sense into this version of "just a drop" my chest gets tight and a kind of heavy resignation comes into my heart. From this point of view, with so many devastating problems in the world, any solutions: recycling, electric cars, meditating, eating less sugar, volunteering at the local shelter, donating to causes, etc. all seem so pointless. Simultaneously, I can see Mother Teresa's twinkling eyes extolling the importance and virtue of each act of kindness. Living with both of these seems helpful to me. The former brings humility, the latter hopeful, inspired energy.

Intention and Action: Everything Effects Everything

Our every action is a drop in the bucket. Both our intention and ensuing actions effect the world in often unknown and remarkable ways. I like to tell the story of an ordinary situation that occurred ten years ago when I was driving on the highway, almost late for a very important appointment. There was much traffic, and anxiety flooded my body. All of a sudden I realized that my exit was very close and that I was in the wrong lane. In my mind's eye, I can still see the gracious smile of the woman

in the next lane who waved her hand to let me go in front of her. Many times since then, I have thanked her! Think of how many times each day seemingly insignificant behaviors create ripples of influence. These are drops in the bucket.

What is the effect of any particular action? Is it a life-giving drop? Are we adding, in some small way, to the goodness in the world? By goodness, I mean that there is more kindness, beauty, warmth, truth or genuine freedom as a result. These values can sound big or demanding yet my criteria include very small, seemingly insignificant moments. Holding a door for someone, offering a smile, radiating a moment of gratitude all fit for me. Having an intention toward small acts of kindness literally changes your world. Having an intention toward gratitude for the small gifts of everyday life also instantly changes your world. Even one's inner state, without overt action permeates into and influences the environment.

Effecting and Affecting Each Other

When The Embodied Life School hosts our all day sittings for planetary peace, we are offering a “drop in the bucket”. Our inner state influences the atmosphere around us, we are always inter-effecting and inter-affecting. We never really can know the effect of our state on others and even the earth itself yet, since our entire life is a web of interrelationship, this inter-effecting is constant. Some neurologists speak of limbic resonance to help describe this transferring of states to each other. All pet owners and parents know this. While a day of sitting meditation holding the planet and all Beings known and unknown in our hearts might be helpful, even much smaller deeds are a true contribution to the emotional air we breathe together. This inter-affecting is also constant.

Brief moments of aligning with peace become small transmissions into the atmosphere. If we connect intentionally to the core Embodied Life practice of **PAUSING, GROUNDING, BREATHING** and then allow this moment of “peaceful abiding” to connect with the outer world, we are functioning as emissaries of peace.

I want to call this the “drop in the bucket” practice. Whether sitting all day, for a half hour or just finding our inner neutrality for a few moments, this is a contribution to our collective well-being. One key ingredient is the inclusion of the outer world in our attention. In my opinion, we have a much more potent influence when the condition that we cultivate within our personal bodies is offered in humble hopefulness to the greater body that we share.

A Drop in the Bucket Practice

At least once each hour, and ideally more often, I intend to pause in this way. When caught up in the demands of my inner and outer world, this pausing is the greatest gift I know for everyone, including myself. Even when I feel generally in harmony, I intend to offer this moment to the earth and all her creatures, including you and me. I wonder, will you join me in the “drop in the bucket” practice?

