

CHAPTER ONE

A SMALL TALE

From *The Way of the Small* by Michael Gellert

There once was a great king who died and went to the gate of heaven. He was expecting to see large pearly gates and St. Peter sitting on a throne. Instead he found Peter standing in front of a plain, small doorway.

“May I come in?,” he asked the saint.

“Let’s see,” Peter said, looking over his notes. “It is true,” he began, “that you were a great king with a great kingdom. Yes, you had many wives and children and much wealth, and made many important changes in the world. But you were larger than life. You yourself have become so identified with your crown of greatness that you would not know who you are without it. I’m afraid you won’t fit in here. This place is small. You would not know how to live here. I’m sorry, you can’t come in.”

The king, shocked and dismayed, said, “What must I do to get in? I have nowhere to go.”

“You do have some options,” Peter said. “What I would suggest is that you go back to earth and learn to be small.”

The king thought this over and, though not happy about it, decided it was acceptable. So Peter arranged for him to go back.

In his next life, the king purposely chose a path that was not so big. He returned to the kingdom and became a healer to the poor folk. He studied and became very knowledgeable and skilled. And he traveled far and wide healing many sick people. As he was much in demand, he did not have time to have a family, but this suited him fine—some of the kindred souls he met on his journeys became like family. Finally he reached old age, died, and once again found himself facing St. Peter at the gate of heaven.

He said to Peter, “I have lived a small life, helping others and sacrificing my own comfort. Can I now enter heaven?”

“Hmmm,” St. Peter said, examining his revised notes. “I see that you indeed chose a smaller life, doing much good serving others. But is it not true that you were also secretly very proud of this, feeling like you were on a heavenly mission and doing this mostly for your own salvation?”

“Well,” the healer-king said, “what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Peter said, “but it’s not small.”

Upon hearing this the healer-king became furious, and started shouting obscenities at the old saint.

“That’s not small either,” Peter said.

“Well, what must I do!?,” the healer-king asked in exasperation.

“Try again,” Peter said.

So the healer-king went back to earth, choosing this time a simple life as a shoemaker in a village at the outer edge of the kingdom. He married a village girl, raised a couple of children, and lived in a small cottage with his shoe shop attached. As the years went by he grew into a serene happiness, enjoying his family, his work, his neighbors. At the end of each day he loved to come into the living room of his home and spend the evenings with his family sharing stories in front of the fireplace. He grew to be very old in this life, surviving his wife and even his children. And although he was lonely, he still enjoyed his days, making shoes and sitting by the fireplace at night in contemplative reverie, as old men do.

Finally the old shoemaker died and was once again standing face to face with St. Peter at the gate of heaven.

“You know,” he said before Peter could utter a word, “that was so good, you could send me back one more time.”

St. Peter smiled, “Come in,” he said.