

CELEBRATING THE RIGHT DETAILS A Key to Success

Michael Gellert

*This article on The Way of the Small was published in **Personal Excellence** in 2008.*

When we look at the lives of great people, one feature that clearly emerges is their appreciation for details. This is a vital key to their personal excellence. The genius of Einstein, for example, was very much grounded in his high regard for the importance of details. “My religion,” he wrote, “consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds.” Einstein had no greater access to that illimitable superior spirit than the rest of us do, but he made his life work the scientific study of the slight details through which it manifests.

A close attention to and *cultivation* of details is crucial to the success of any endeavor. This requires us to focus on intricate information and patiently develop an understanding of the big picture that unfolds from the details. We say “Zen is in the details,” or “God is in the details,” or “the devil is in the details.” All are true, and often, all at the same time: the same details that can lead to success can, if neglected, lead to failure or disaster. I remember the moment my doctor told me I had a brain tumor. The following months became an intensely focused pursuit of small details. Anyone who is confronted with such a life-threatening situation needs to consider that the fine line between life and death could be just a small detail. In this position, one’s eyes should be wide open, and one’s appetite for details should be keen. No question is too foolish to ask, and no stone should be left unturned.

But should it be any different in everyday life, in decisions that are perhaps less critical for our survival but just as central to our happiness and well-being? It is curious that our Declaration of Independence promotes the pursuit of happiness, yet the rate of clinical depression and anxiety in America is sky-high. Could it be that we don’t attend to and cultivate the details that actually go into creating a happy life? We busy our lives with the multitude of details involved in gratifying our material appetites, but is there something we are overlooking? When Thoreau said, “Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!” while carefully exploring the details of his surrounding environment at Walden Pond and the inner environment of his spirit, he touched upon a perennial truth: happiness lies in celebrating those details that help us become more simple and spiritually fulfilled. He believed that in observing life’s small details—savoring its small joys and wonders—we can see its larger issues.

It is here that many of us miss the boat. We celebrate the wrong details, or just as bad, we don’t celebrate details at all. Let’s take a look at an instance of each, borrowing from military history, since here the appreciation of details—or lack thereof—can also be a matter of life and death.

Winston Churchill had a most sobering experience in regard to focusing on the wrong details. As First Lord of the Admiralty, he prepared for World War I by expanding and modernizing the British navy. He paid excruciating attention to the details of this renovation, concluding upon its completion that “Everything is ready as it has never been before. I feel sure that we shall give them a good drubbing.” Not much later, Churchill’s campaign in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli failed. A third of the naval force was lost and the Allies suffered over 250,000 casualties. A number of factors contributed to this. The Turkish defenses were

underestimated. The Allies were not sufficiently prepared for the kind of beachhead warfare involved, this in turn giving the Turks time to rearm and reinforce themselves. The physical conditions in the trenches were terrible and the Allied soldiers suffered from disease and water and food shortages. A change of commanders midstream led to further complications. The moral of this story was expressed by Benjamin Franklin two centuries earlier: “Watch the little things; a small leak will sink a great ship.” Moreover, watch the *right* little things, for they will be the ones that go wrong.

More recently, we can observe the effects of ignoring details altogether in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. When we approach things as being simpler than they are, we are not honoring simplicity as Thoreau did but only becoming simple-minded. As Einstein again said, “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” George W. Bush and his advisors did not overlook the right details as Churchill had, but rather dismissed the details presented by their own experts in the National Intelligence Council, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, and the military already on the ground. The comprehensive planning that characterized the Allied occupation of Germany after World War II and NATO’s invasion of Bosnia was absent in Iraq. The results included \$12 billion in damage from riots and looting, social chaos that paved the way for the insurgency and al-Qaeda’s infiltration into Iraq, 50 percent unemployment, and the deaths of several thousand Iraqi civilians and American soldiers.

Details are the stuff of life. They are also the stuff of democracy, whether our own or the ones we are trying to foster in other parts of the world. Our personal excellence depends not only on how we conduct our personal affairs but on our ability to grasp the details involved in responsible citizenship. Jefferson’s idea of an enlightened citizenry was predicated not only upon the basic freedoms of democracy, but of thought: a freethinker is someone who is well-informed and who can think for him- or herself. What does this depend on if not a familiarity with the details of the world around us? We Americans have become too comfortable in our exceptionalism and have consequently tuned out the hard details that affect the rest of the world. Isn’t that why we were so surprised by 9/11? As we approach the 2008 presidential election, it is important that we determine as best as we can whether our candidates can exercise sound judgment, the leadership quality most needed now. And this depends on a mastery of the details that make our world so complex and volatile. The first step though in electing leaders with sound judgment is that we exercise it ourselves in how we evaluate them. *We* need to pay attention to the difficult details—in foreign and economic policy, in ecological planning, in education—in order to assess how *they* pay attention to the details. In a democracy, the citizens are ultimately responsible for what happens.

Celebrating the right details is essential to the way of the small, an ancient teaching shared in common by all our world religions and many schools of philosophy. It holds that the means to personal excellence, to true greatness, is through a refined awareness of the small things that together create the big picture. Indeed, God is in the details. How then can we celebrate the right details? By nurturing a conscientious attitude, responding to each detail as if it is asking us an important question. The celebration lies in unearthing the question and entertaining the answer.