



Delight in the Little Things

“Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.”

Robert Brault

Pizza Hut® is the best restaurant in the history of the world. Or at least it was when I was a kid. I was utterly enchanted by the entire experience that was Pizza Hut. It was a rare occasion when we’d make the trip out to dinner as a family. It usually coincided with the attainment of one of those “Book-It” certificates that schoolchildren earn by reading a certain number of books. One certificate was good for one free personal pan

pizza. But my favorite was thin and crispy, so my mom would usually get the individual one for herself.

I was enthralled with the whole experience of the place. Not just the perfect, crispy-crust pizza, but also how the sausage tasted way better than anything on the frozen pizzas I was accustomed to. I thought it was so awesome: the dark woodwork and dimmed lighting, the red and white checked tablecloth, the red glasses filled with syrupy soft drinks, and the waitresses with those classy visors. Without a doubt, Pizza Hut was a real treat.

I know it sounds cheesy (pun absolutely intended), but I still love going to Pizza Hut. My perspective on the level of ritziness has corrected itself, but I still get a thrill every time I go out to eat. My parents kept a close eye on their money; going out to eat was a treat, not the norm. Even getting a McDonald's Happy Meal was a great event, because it was cheaper for my mom to buy us boys each a cheeseburger and have us share a bag of fries.¹

I am very grateful for those experiences from my youth, because, intended or not, my parents helped instill in me an appreciation for the little things in life. For many kids, both then and now, eating out at restaurants and indulging in Happy Meals is boring and commonplace. Somehow, over twenty years later, I still get a little rush of excitement every time I sit down at a Pizza Hut. The emotion is only slightly less intensified now that I have a little bit more control over when I get to go.

Our society has become so consumer-driven and materialistic that it doesn't take much for us to get sucked up into

wanting to move on to the next big thing, or the rewarding new elaborate experience, hardly taking the time to appreciate the present moment. It's easy to grow discontented with our current situation when there is something newer, bigger, faster out there.

Children aren't so materialistic, however, as illustrated in a story I once heard about a father who became very angry with his young daughter. It was around Christmas time, and he found her wasting a roll of shiny wrapping paper in an attempt to wrap a box. He scolded her terribly, for money was tight, and they could not afford to be wasting things. He became embarrassed the next day when the little girl presented him with the gift—she had wrapped it just for him. But his patience was tested again when he opened the gift only to find an empty box. “Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside?” The daughter looked up at him, tears welling up in her eyes, and said, “But Daddy, there is something inside.

Yesterday I blew kisses into the box. They're all for you.”

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Perhaps I've had more time to reflect on this than most of my peers because the road to success for *Kim & Jason* has been long, arduous, and in the early going, penniless. I guess you could say it has

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been relatively *thingless*. While friends started families, went on tropical vacations, and built nice homes, Kim and I were shopping at discount grocery stores, rotating our meat selection between frozen ground beef and frozen chicken breasts (because the other meats were too expensive), and putting up with our neighbors' loud music and screaming kids in an apartment that was overtaken by greeting card spinners and big boxes of *Kim & Jason* catalogs. (Seriously, given all of the products that populated our living space, I now know what it is like to watch TV and have family dinners in a Hallmark store, as if I ever wanted to.) There were many inconveniences and frustrations, but most of them only surfaced when I got distracted and started comparing my situation with that of others. And that, my friend, is not a vicious cycle you want to venture into. There is *always* somebody better off than you.

It is helpful to gain perspective by considering that there is always someone *worse* off than you, too. In many cases, MUCH worse. The grace of God and my involvement with The Make-A-Wish Foundation^{®2} (more on that later) are what have really helped keep me grounded. I've realized that I have a lot to be thankful for, and that fact, combined with the lessons passed down from my parents, has helped me to embrace the importance of appreciating the little things.

Little things are big deals.

One more day is a big deal to parents whose seven-year-old son is dying of cancer. The ability to hear music is a big deal to the conductor who has become deaf. A Happy Meal is a big deal to a child who doesn't know where his next meal will come from. An old apartment overrun by packing boxes and product

displays is a big deal to someone who is homeless.

I've found that children have much to teach us in the way of appreciating the little things. Ask any new parent about the joy a baby gets when she first discovers her feet. They may be little feet, but they're a BIG deal. Now it is true that some children seem to be caught in the trap of always wanting something bigger, better, and flashier. I submit that they are that way because of learned behavior from the parents.

My family took a fair number of vacations when I was young. When I say vacations, I'm not talking about European jaunts or Disney World adventures. No, these vacations never extended more than a few hundred miles from home, usually lasted no more than a long weekend, and often involved a discount motel with a loud air conditioner and an overheated pool.

And we loved them! They were a break from the routine, a chance to see something new, and an opportunity to go out to eat in fancy restaurants...like Pizza Hut. I'm not sure how I was able to have so much fun on these budget-friendly road trips, while some kids find themselves bored at Disneyland. Perhaps it is simply because the latter are conditioned to look to the next thing.

Recently, my parents treated my brothers and me to a family vacation in Door County, Wisconsin. Everyone went—my two brothers, our significant others, my brother's two daughters—ten of us in all. It was nice, because we stayed in a big house on Lake Michigan and were free to come and go as we pleased, not restricted to doing everything as a group. There were certainly lots of things to command our attention,

but I am certain that the best part for everyone was our nightly bonfires. It was a time when we all came together, recounting the day's adventures, watching the stars come out, and eating novelty jelly beans that tasted like earwax and earthworms.³ The entire week, including those nightly fireside chats, is a memory we will all carry with us forever. It is a recent reminder in my life of just how important those little things are.

One of my favorite movies is *City of Angels*, starring Meg Ryan and Nicolas Cage. In it, an angel named Seth falls in love with a human and then takes “the fall”—gives up his angelic powers—to become human so he can be with her. The most captivating theme of the movie for me is not the theology within it, but how it portrays this angel experiencing the emotions and sensations of human life for the first time. They are the little things that we have taken for granted because we don't know any different. Seth is taken by all of the sensuality life has to offer—the shower's darting warm water cascading over skin, and the tart, tasty crunchiness of a fresh pear. When contemplating whether or not to take the fall to be with this human being, Seth says, “I'd rather have one breath of her hair, one touch from her hand, one kiss from her warm lips than an eternity without.” One breath. One touch. One kiss. Three little things with eternal importance.

I was in college when I first saw the movie. It was a matinee and I remember walking back to the dorm with the day's sun a few hours from



fading into the horizon. It was as if my eyes had been opened to things that just a few hours before had been much less than an afterthought. Whether it's the smell of smoky air from the late-summer barbecue, the preciseness of a single blade of grass, or the purity and peace put forth from a baby's smile, the little things are where true joy in life is hidden.

Life is a blessing. To become awakened to and get caught up in the mundane details and hidden surprises that often get lost in the ebb and flow of our days are among the greatest blessings life has to offer. Children see every day as a new adventure, an opportunity for great discoveries, be they large or small. Like Seth the angel, kids are routinely surprised by how cool life is. It is not uncommon for them to be absolutely THRILLED by such things as a lightning bug in captivity, the intricacies of a snowflake, and the giddiness of taking a bubble bath. They're turned on by helium balloons, bedtime stories, and cereal box prizes.

My wife Kim was a kindergarten teacher, so she got to see things through kids' eyes every day. Kindergarten seems to be filled with little things that take on spectacularly gargan-



tuan proportions. Every St. Patrick's Day, some mischievous leprechaun plays havoc in the kindergarten room and leaves mysterious notes all over the place. Green footprints (made of construction paper) are left behind. The kids conspire to build a trap out of blocks and toys. The leprechaun destroys the trap and trashes the room, but not before he leaves some gold behind (Hershey's Kisses wrapped in gold foil). By the time it's over, it escalates into quite a big deal.

In kindergarten, the hundredth day of school is a BIG DEAL. Big enough to warrant a party complete with candy, cookies, and chocolate cake.

Losing your first tooth commonly occurs during kindergarten. THAT is a BIG DEAL. The Tooth Fairy and her satchel of shiny coins make it so.

Planting seeds into a little cup filled with soil is fun, but it's a BIG DEAL when that little seed sprouts and pokes its head up through the dirt.

To a kindergartner, every day brings with it a possibility of something exciting happening. Things that may seem ho-hum and everyday to us are BIG DEALS to them. Is it that they have so many more things to experience, or is it more a matter of perspective?

It is the little things that can impact and enrich a life. I think back to the days when I was five and I'd visit my Grandma K. The things I hold most dear about her and my visits would probably surprise her, as they are not the grandiose gestures of love or the expensive Christmas presents she gave me. In fact, I cannot think of a single Christmas present she ever gave me (and she gave me plenty). Rather, my memories are filled with

little things. I remember picking cherries from her tree; she'd use them to make the best pies ever, starting me on a life-long addiction. I remember speeding up and down her backyard sidewalk on a beat-up bike, past the rickety old swing set. I recall sneaking fresh strawberries from her garden, collecting buckeyes from the ground, and pounding out instant classics on her electric organ. When my cousins were over, Grandma would give us full access to her jewelry box so that we could play jewelry store. We spent hours setting up those sparkly riches, then punching our purchases into her antique adding machine, which seemed to weigh more than ten cinder blocks. My grandma always encouraged our imaginations and left us with a treasure chest of wonderful memories. The little things she did stick with me most.

Little things are everywhere, all around us. I love to go to the zoo. Madison, Wisconsin has a really cool free zoo with a good assortment of “big name” animals. By “big name” animals, I'm not talking about two cows, a deer with a broken leg, and some squirrels in a cage. I'm referring to lions, tigers, and bears, with some monkeys, sea lions and giraffes to boot. It is impossible for me to go to the zoo and not come away amazed. I've seen each of these animals what seems like a million times, but I am consistently blown away by the creativity of God in the diversity of the animals He dreamed up. Each one is perfectly designed for whatever it's supposed to do. Why do giraffes have such long necks? To reach the leaves on the tall trees. Why are flamingoes pink? Because of all the shrimp they eat. Why do the lions have such sharp teeth? Mainly because it's awfully hard to gum an antelope to death.

Kim and I routinely go on walks together. She often gives me a hard time because every time we pass a body of water, I'm scanning for fish. I can spot a caterpillar from a block away. And if there is a dead bird or squirrel on the side of the road, I'm certainly going to stop and poke it with a stick. "You're such a little boy," she says.

"Then I must be doing something right," I think, proudly imagining that I'll someday write a book on the topic.

Not that she has much room to talk (although I've never accused her of being a little boy). As I mentioned, one of the first things that attracted me to Kim was her captivating child-like spirit. One of her childlike qualities was her penchant for being easily excited—in a good way. Not only does that take the pressure off a guy (who wants to be with a girl who doesn't bat an eye at a diamond ring because it's not big enough?), but it makes her a very fun person to be around. She has inspired me to let the little boy inside come out and play once in awhile. And, of course, she inspired me to create a certain little comic strip.⁴

I guess it's easier for kids to appreciate the little things, because, in most cases, what other choice do they have? It's not like they have an overly stressful schedule, and they don't have full-time jobs to afford any fancy stuff anyway (unless Mom or Dad over-commit them and sign them up for every extra-curricular activity known to man). But, scheduling issues aside, kids blow us grown-ups away in their ability to notice the little things. Since things are so new to them, children are not hindered by looking at things the way they're "supposed to be." They are not burdened with pre-conceived notions.

One way to take better stock of the little things is to SLOW DOWN. We adults make it hard on ourselves. It's hard to notice the little things when you're running around like a chicken with its head cut off. I really *have* seen chickens run with their heads cut off, and they are, not surprisingly, quite frantic. When you're riding life as if it's a speeding New York subway train, it's gonna be a little hard to notice that every snowflake is different. Many of us arrogantly go around thinking we've seen everything interesting there is to see. With that attitude, it's easy to be closed to the idea that by slowing down, we might notice something we wouldn't see otherwise.

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Getting out into nature is a great way to reflect on some of the little things in life. There are a few great exercises that will really sharpen your awareness of the little things. First, find a rock or log to sit on. Next, clear your head, close your eyes, and just listen. Before long, even in the most tranquil of settings, you'll hear a chorus of different sounds come forth, sounds that were inaudible just moments ago. Another thing to try is to find a patch of ground and stare at it. Yep, just stare at it—like a staring contest between you and the ground. Pretty soon, you'll see a flurry of activity with small insects scurrying about. In both instances, you've uncovered a hidden world of life that previously didn't seem to exist. All kinds of strange, fascinat-

ing, wonderful things are going on right under your nose that were moments ago unnoticeable. That's what happens when you slow down and pay attention to the little things. Did these sounds and creatures just all at once start up when you began paying attention to them? Nope. They've been going on all along, but you were just too distracted to notice.

It may seem overly simple to say that paying more attention to the little things will make such a big impact in your life. Maybe. But living for the next "big thing" and running around like a chicken with your head cut off is not very rewarding either—just ask the chicken. If you're unsatisfied with life, bored, or feel envious of your neighbor, try slowing down and looking around.

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exciting. You'll be more appreciative of life, and thankful for what you have. Because of this newfound appreciation, you'll feel less drawn to work like a hamster in a wheel in order to find happiness in a fancier car, or a bigger home, or on a beach somewhere in the Bahamas. Correspondingly, stress levels go down—way down.

A tropical vacation can certainly be fun and rewarding, but real happiness and true rest are found in the beach's breathtaking

sunset, rhythmic tides, and the feel of the warm sand. Just think about the wisdom of the little child, who, when asked to recite the Seven Wonders of the World, thoughtfully replied, “To touch, to taste, to see, to hear, to run, to laugh, and to love.”

Not long ago, I made myself very proud. Every week, I carve out a few mornings as writing time, when I try to come up with a week’s worth of comic gems. I engage in several hours’ worth of mental calisthenics as I think, write, edit, think some more, write some more, edit some more...and then edit again and again. I write jokes that will be told to an audience I won’t see or hear. I am forced to critically judge my own sense of humor without getting confirmation back on whether or not I have judged wisely. I am grateful that I have Kim to read my finished strip every day, if for no other reason than to validate that what I’m doing is real.

Like any good, self-respecting artist, I typically loathe my past work, especially if it is a year or more old. I am always pushing myself to try to dig even deeper in my writing, exploring more fully each character, and going past my first good idea to the point of trying to make myself laugh out loud. Most of the time, I settle for a chuckle. (As my mom and my wife would testify, I don’t get overly excited about things, especially wonderfully thoughtful gifts, but that’s another story.)⁵

So I have a good chunk of morning set aside to get the ol’ joke factory churning. It can be hard to be creative when you have a deadline that doesn’t care whether or not any good strips have emerged. On the morning I’m referring to, I really felt an extra-intense desire to come up with some good stuff. Since

it was an absolutely gorgeous day, I grabbed my sketchbooks and iPod and headed off to find inspiration in a park near Lake Monona. Upon settling in at a sturdy wood picnic table with the lapping of waves in front of me, I was happy that I had picked a day when the construction cranes assembling the new shelter weren't echoing behind me. It was peaceful.

Until I looked down at my shirt and noticed a green worm.⁶

Naturally, I was a bit startled (freaked out), and I casually brushed off (frantically swiped away) the harmless (carnivorous) critter. I laughed to myself at how reflexively shook-up I could get over something so small. I went about my writing, but it wasn't long before I noticed that my friend had returned to the table. To my delight, I realized that it was an inchworm (please excuse the lack of scientific terminology). I marveled at how he (or she, if you prefer) made his way along the wooden highway ahead of him. Then, right before my eyes, his color transformed from a bright, light green to a pale brown, blending almost perfectly with that of the table.

Deadlines whispered from the back of my mind, so I got back to work and jotted down some more ideas. But curiosity got the best of me, and I turned my head a little later to see where my new friend was now. I couldn't find him anywhere, speculating that he must have turned on the afterburners. But out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the worm, seemingly dangling in mid-air. Upon further inspection, I could see that he was descending from the table via a thin, web-like strand coming from his butt (more confusing bio-speak). It was pretty windy that morning, but that web held strong as

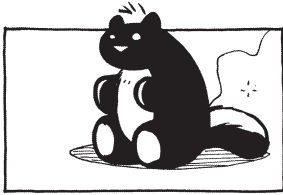
he casually descended. I paused in awe to watch this miniscule marvel complete his patient plunge and get on with his day.

Shortly thereafter it was time to pack it up, and as I walked back to the car, I smiled. I was happy and proud that I could still be amazed by the little things, a very childlike quality. My wish is that I will still have that capacity when I'm 90. Interestingly, those five minutes really made my day. And perhaps not ironically, it was a pretty productive one at that.

The next time you're around children, pay close attention to them. Notice how excited they are to find a penny on the ground (even more so when they get to throw it into a fountain). Pay attention to how excited they become when they get to push the elevator button. It won't take long, but after some serious study, you'll start to smile at the little things kids get excited about. They think dandelions are pretty, and when paired with wild violets, they become the most beautiful bouquet in the world. They love licking the leftover batter out of a bowl and putting ladybugs in a jar. They're giddy over the turkey wishbone and delighted by sparklers. They love walking barefoot in the grass and collecting seashells on the beach. It is undeniable that kids make a big deal out of little things; as far as I can tell, they seem to be having a pretty good time.

Maybe you could join me in trying to make a bit more of an effort to notice, and get excited by, the little things. Make an effort to foster within yourself a wonder and appreciation for the little things around you. I'm not promising that you'll suddenly regard Pizza Hut as a five-star restaurant, but I assure you it will do wonders in helping keep you young at heart. Because, as author Tim Hansel said, "Life is really fun, if we only give it a chance."

When you're around children as much as I am, you learn many things...



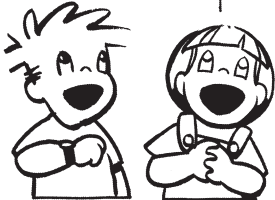
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Things I'm not sure I'd learn anywhere else...



Wow!
Thirty seconds!

A new record!



...Like how long the average pancake will stick to the ceiling.



Kotzcki

11 TIPS

Delight in the Little Things

- 1** Make it a point to carve out some time to watch a full sunrise. I know, you have to get up really early, but it's worth it. Take a good look at all of the colors and pay attention to the sounds of the world waking up.
- 2** Take a friend to your favorite restaurant. Slow down and savor the food, and make note of all the little things that make it your favorite place to dine.
- 3** Go to the nearest zoo. Spend some time *really* watching how the animals interact. Read the little signs by each exhibit. You'll be amazed at how perfectly suited each animal is to its particular habitat.
- 4** Visit a state park and find a secluded area. Sit on a bench, a big rock, or the grass, and just be still. Tune out the distractions in your head and tune in to the calming sights and sounds around you. You might be surprised by what you notice.
- 5** Observe a child under the age of seven (perhaps a niece, nephew, or cousin, if you don't have one of your own).

Watch for what makes them tick and keep an eye out for the little things that delight them.

- 6** If you have a family, take a long weekend somewhere. Not necessarily someplace far or fancy, maybe even somewhere you've been many times before. When you're free from the distractions of new "things" to see and do, you can really focus on what's important—being together and having fun.
- 7** Make a mental list of three people you know who are worse off than you. Think of one nice little thing you could do for each of them, and do it. You'll gain a better appreciation of what you have, and by making someone else feel good, you'll feel good too.
- 8** Volunteer some time to help out a charitable organization, like Habitat For Humanity, The Make-A-Wish Foundation, or Big Brothers Big Sisters. You'll gain an almost immediate appreciation for the little things.
- 9** Rent the movie *City of Angels*. Pay close attention to the things Seth experiences with joy (and sometimes shock) that we routinely take for granted.
- 10** Go for a walk. When you're out of your normal environment, breathing some fresh air and getting the old heart rate up, it's a lot easier to take in some of the simple things in life that are missed on the commute to work.

11

Consider resurrecting a tradition that has unfortunately gone out of fashion in our busy culture: eating dinner with your family. All at once, all at the same time. Spend some time sharing highlights from the day. While seemingly trivial and insignificant, this little thing has tremendous power to bind a family together, creating memories that last forever.

