

The Not So Big Life: Making Room for What Really Matters

By Sarah Susanka

Introduction

One night perhaps a dozen years ago, I was lying in bed reading a light novel. This was my way of decompressing at the end of a stressful day in a very busy life. I'd been doing this every evening for years. It was a routine. It was usually comforting, but on this particular night I suddenly felt frustrated. I put down the book and started to listen to the thoughts feeding my irritation. "Is this really all there is?" came the thought. "Is this what my life has amounted to? I'm a successful architect, the managing partner of a firm of forty five people. I have a lot of responsibilities, plenty of challenges to handle, and a to-do list that's a mile long. I work hard all day, answer innumerable phone calls and attend a steady stream of meetings, all the while keeping up an incredible pace as I fulfill the dozens of obligations, both professional and personal, that I call daily life. Then I come home – usually well into the evening-- to engage in a few mindless activities to help me change the subject from all the challenges of the day so that I can sleep sufficiently soundly to be prepared for another day of the same. Surely there's something more meaningful to life than *this*."

Once I'd allowed myself to really let that question sink in, I knew I had to make some changes. What I saw was the incongruity between the dreams of my early adulthood and the life I was actually living. As a highschool student I'd always been full of ideas and ideals. I'd wanted to study the way the mind works. I'd wanted to explore what makes an object beautiful or an equation elegant. I'd wanted to design buildings that made people's hearts sing, and I'd wanted to work with individuals who cared about the places they lived and worked. But more than all of these, I'd wanted to write. I adored writing, no matter the topic or genre, and found that when I could still my mind and just let the words flow

out of my fingertips, there was a palpable sense of magic as the meaning of what I was writing expanded my understanding of the subject at hand. I knew, in some deep place, that this was my true passion, and I longed to find a time and a place to fulfill it.

But alas, the life I had fallen into, although it fulfilled one or two of my early aspirations, had no room for anything else. It wasn't so much full of meaning and the pursuit of my heart's desires, as it was overstuffed – so jam packed with obligations in fact, that I felt almost suffocated on this particular night. Without some intentional shifting of priorities on my part, I now realized, this would be how things would continue to the end of my days. I was asleep at the wheel while barreling down the road of life on cruise control, believing all the while that I was going somewhere important. But some instinct warned me that I was missing the most important part of the journey – the part that requires alertness, awareness, and full engagement. My life was so frenetic, so *big*, in the overwhelming sense, that the pace of it was its single most salient quality.

I felt as though I'd just been startled awake from a dream and was suddenly alive for the first time in my adult life. Now there seemed nothing more important than to learn to stay awake throughout each day's activities, and to figure out how to do so as soon as possible. Usually moments like this seem to happen in the lives of people who have had a close brush with death or face serious illness, but I had experienced neither of these. It wasn't something external that had brought this to my attention. It arose from within, when I was relatively peaceful, and able to take the time to listen. Providence had simply tapped me on the head and invited me to look at what I was doing in an entirely new way.

That was the day I began to explore the possibilities of living my life differently. Although I continued to work as an architect, I also started watching myself and the way I engaged my life, observing the underpinnings of its design. I started to question why I believed what I believed, and gradually all around me doors started to open that I'd never known were there. I began to simplify my life and focus on those things that were truly meaningful to me. Among other things, I made the time to write, that long neglected passion. It was only by moving with my heart's desire – a key player in wide awake living--that the Not So Big House series of books was born.

So in fact it was my living a not so big life that gave rise to the idea of a house designed to inspire us daily, and it was by fully engaging in the writing process that the term “not so big” came to be – it flowed out onto the page without premeditation as I wrote that first book's introduction. That's how I came to understand something important through the process of writing that I hadn't realized I knew. But with the phrase committed to paper, I saw that it was exactly what was needed to explain our dilemma of scale, pace, and proportion, both in house design, and in life.

I'm no different from you. Any of us can wake up from the overstuffed lives we are leading, and make room for what we long to have time for. It's possible to take the blur that is modern life – the obligations, the messages to return, errands to run, and family and friends to squeeze in there somehow – and slow it down so we can actually be there in what we're doing. It's possible to start living a not so big life of full, rich, vivid moments where everything that happens to us is experienced fully, and where spirit and connection have room to thrive. Just as I gave myself permission to explore beyond the normal boundaries of my particular career path, you'll discover that you too can pursue the aspects of your own nature that aren't being lived but that yearn for liberation.

Today I'm using the process of living in this new way as the *core* of my life, and not, as you might imagine, my career as an architect, or my career as an author. Those are the content or storyline of my life, but the process is what has allowed me to explore more and more of the potential I always knew was possible. That's the promise of a Not So Big Life, and it's accessible to anyone with a desire to live a more meaningful life with an increased sense of balance and harmony. If you are up for a life remodeling, follow the directions in the blueprint that follows and you'll discover there really is something more to living than you currently know. I'm hooked. I hope I can infect you too.