

# Little Us and Big Us

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*It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on not understanding it.*

— Upton Sinclair

In my commentaries, I refer frequently to the *Us-versus-Them* dynamic. I do so because it has become one of the pillars of the young social science discipline of moral psychology, whose assumptions are informed and supported by modern neuroscience research into how human brains are wired. Morality, it turns out, is neither simple nor straightforward. People often judge others with whom they disagree as not only wrong, but “immoral.” That’s a common Us-versus-Them factor: *We* are good, while *they* are bad. But morality is much more complex and multi-faceted. People on all sides of a conflict or disagreement usually feel their own position to be morally justified, and the Us-versus-Them dynamic is woven throughout this conundrum.

We love and honor whomever we regard as Us. We empathize and sympathize with Us. We support Us. We go out of our way to help Us, since Us reflects the basic kinship bonds of affection and loyalty. Such loving concern is the essence of human generosity.

By contrast, we do not care about whomever we regard as Them. They are not our kin or not our kind. Sometimes we ignore Them. Other times we hate Them. If circumstances make it advantageous for Us to harm or even kill Them, we will, and with no hesitation or remorse. Taken to its logical conclusion, we don’t consider Them to be human.

Another dynamic enters the picture to make Us-versus-Them more complicated. That is the distinction between our self-interest — what we do because it benefits us (and those we love) — and devotion to a cause larger than ourselves that involves our serving the greater good. I call this *Little Us* and *Big Us*.

Little Us is, by definition, personal and self-centered. Big Us is interpersonal (or even impersonal) and other-directed (often through the larger dimension of our relation to and inclusion within a larger kinship group).

If I wished, I could subdivide “Us” into five categories:

- Littlest Us — oneself alone, just me
- Little Us — myself, my immediate family, plus some friends and relatives
- Big Us — myself, family, friends, and groups to which I belong or identify
- Bigger Us — myself and all of humanity
- Biggest Us — myself and every other living being (universal inclusion)

Only sociopaths and malignant narcissists focus solely on the *Littlest Us*, meaning that they care *only* about themselves and literally no one else. The next two categories — *Little Us* and *Big Us* — are where most people live. A smaller cohort embraces the *Bigger Us* of all humanity, but only a tiny percentage is actively devoted to the *Biggest Us*. Examples of the last group include Tibetan Buddhist monks who tread carefully when walking so as not to step on earthworms or Deep Ecologists in Norway who live in simple cabins on the sea shore without electricity, broadband, or cars, and who fish, forage, and garden for their food. Needless to say, anyone totally committed to serving the *Biggest Us* must abandon mainstream culture and live outside the boundaries of modern civilization. Precious few of us are willing or able to do that.

For simplicity in this commentary, I’ll stick with the basic binary division — just *Little Us* and *Big Us*. Little Us is myself and everyone I care about personally. Big Us is the collective, however we understand that.

Much of the conflict and tension in the fictional dramas written and produced for movies and TV series revolve around Little Us and Big Us. The protagonist and other major characters in the story often have a “mission” — which is to say, a responsibility they’ve taken on to serve the greater good in one way or another. And yet, they also have personal concerns — more self-centered wants, needs, and goals. These very different perspectives and motivations may be mutually harmonious, where doing one enhances fulfillment of the other, but they can also come into conflict as contradictory or mutually exclusive, where pursuing one antagonizes the other. And that conflict is fodder for entertainment.

Here’s an example from showbiz: the protagonist in a screenplay is a Secret Service agent whose job is to protect the President. That’s his mission, and he takes it very seriously. He devotes much of his life to fulfilling that task by honoring his responsibility. But he also has an ex-wife and a young child he loves. The reason she’s an ex-wife is that he was so focused on his job (his larger devotion) that he ignored her, so she eventually left or divorced him. He still loves her, however, along with the single person he cares about most — his young child.

The plot thickens when his daughter is kidnapped by terrorists or some other villain plotting to kill the President. The nefarious plan is to blackmail the Secret Service agent into dereliction of his duty. The tension in the drama is jacked up. How will the hero manage to save both the President and his daughter? Along

the way to the climax, he screws up and another Secret Service agent is killed (or something else just as bad happens) because our protagonist didn't tell anyone about his double-bind and impulsively took off to search for his daughter. The many different permutations of this story may end differently — sometimes happily, sometimes not — but you get the drift. We've all seen this basic plot repeated a thousand times.

Another example of how Little Us and Big Us come into conflict in fictional dramas (and real life as well...) is sex. Rather than diligently honoring a mission to serve the greater good, some people are seduced by their own biologically- and emotionally-driven personal desires. They screw up by choosing sex over their mission. They may or may not get away with their indiscretions, but it's so common as to be banal, and a favorite device of screenwriters to spice up their dramas and make them juicier.

An obvious real-life example of Little Us/Big Us weirdness is the astonishing (actually, not astonishing at all) cowardice we're witnessing by politicians, specifically Republicans, who have, almost without exception, caved completely to the despicable Trump monster, becoming his all-too-willing and even eager lackeys. For three years, Republican big-wigs have gone along with every one of the reactionary beliefs Trump cherishes and the thousands of bat-shit crazy lies he utters. With exceptions that are as rare as hen's teeth, Republicans have remained silent, or worse, supported all of Trump's cunning brand of madness.

The "liberal media" is shocked and dismayed at this. Over and over, they ask, *"WTF? Don't the Republicans have a spine? Are they completely lacking in conscience? Do they not care about America?"* Apparently these talking heads don't have a clue about Little Us and Big Us conflicts, even though they themselves are as susceptible to it as any governor, senator, representative, or cabinet member.

The Republicans have sold out without so much as a whimper because it serves their personal self-interest (Little Us). In their minds, courage and conscience don't have a damned thing to do with it, except maybe in the dead of night, in their most private moments, but I doubt even that... Getting reelected and maintaining their personal privilege, power, and wealth depend on their genuflecting to Mad Pope Trump. So they do. Little Us wins. Big Us loses.

But such facile moral corruption in politics pales compared to a larger and more serious Little Us/Big Us conflict, one that involves us all.

I am disheartened to the point of despondency by having to watch the death of the living planet. Modern civilization and the way we live is killing it. In fairness, and with considerable regret, I admit to being one of the killers. Damn near all of us are. We're not Tibetan Buddhist monks or Deep Ecologists. We are choosing our personal and self-centered ways of living — the Little Us — at the expense of

the Biggest Us of all. Sure, we can point the finger at the elites who run the show and make policy (and yes, I do feel particular scorn for them and their self-serving neoliberal justifications), but we're all complicit, to some degree, either actively or passively, in going along with the way things are.

Polls suggest that most Americans care about the environment. But this is misleading. For tens of millions of Americans (and maybe many more than that), Nature and the natural world are not part of the Big Us at all. Too many of us don't even consider that our clever but rapacious species might bear some responsibility to preserve *all* life, beyond just human life. We remain blissfully but foolishly unaware that we're part of Nature. Saving the planet's ecosystem is all well and good, but changing the way we live is not an option.

Think about all the advertising you see. The subtext of most ads pushes the implicit assumption that you "deserve" everything you can get, and by all means get it now. Often this message is explicitly stated in the voice-over. Advertisers want you to believe this because it serves their own Little Us (sales and profits). Such propagandistic world-view manipulation is to be expected, of course, especially in a culture whose economics are hell-bent on ever-increasing material consumption, but it carries serious consequences for us all. The snake-oil pitch bathes us in the toxic stew of selfishness as healthy and acceptable.

Look, I think it's great that Americans have taken to the streets to protest the tragedy of systemic racism and violence by militarized police. I'm glad to see an uprising in progress. But can we expect to see a similar uprising against the death cult that is modern civilization? Not likely, and not soon. For far too many of us, Nature is simply an inanimate resource to be plumbed and used for human purposes. In too many minds and hearts, we exist as separate and disconnected from Nature (in other words, Nature is not Us, neither Little nor Big). In that perverse view, Nature is a force to be conquered, tamed, and brought to heel. And if Nature responds to being attacked and ravaged in ways that threaten Us, then we'll just apply whiz-bang technology to continue living as we wish. Nature is the problem, not us.

Am I being too harsh? No. If anything, I'm pulling my punches by being too forgiving. I do understand that everyone is hypnotized, to one degree or another — habituated so completely to our modern lifestyles, conveniences, toys, and mythic perversions about what "freedom" means — that we can't even imagine other ways to live that are more in harmony with the natural world. Our lack of conscience is a result of our unconsciousness and our preference for fantasy over reality. And even those of us who are aware that something is fundamentally wrong with what humanity has done over the past 500 years struggle with the feeling of being powerless to resist, like being swept along by a tsunami. We are all creatures of our times, and we're all part of the problem.

Will a time arrive when we embrace the Big Us in the fullest way by maturing beyond the imperative of the Little Us? I doubt it. We try from time to time, but mostly we remain quite small. If things get really, really bad (and everything I know suggests that this is coming and has, in fact, already begun), will we give up our myopic self-centeredness and enlarge our sense of family and love to include all life? At this point, I see very little evidence for that as an emerging consciousness. Heck, much of America doesn't even believe that the current pandemic is real or to be taken seriously.

I think of John Muir and others who loved and celebrated Nature and sought to protect her, but my heart sinks at what the "environmental movement" has become over recent decades: an adjunct of corporate capitalism lobbying for "green" solutions that don't have a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding. I look forlornly at America, at how quickly and completely we've trashed the continent, preserving only a few places of stunning natural beauty that we've turned into amusement parks for economic tourism, and I despair for us.

Lest I come off here as totally puritannical or luddite, let me state for the record: The Little Us isn't bad. It's part of who we are. The drive for personal happiness is part of life. But the balance has gotten way, way out of whack. Given where we are, concern for the Big Us needs to be a lot more emphatic than it is now. I worry that we're so very far from understanding that, with so little time left to get it, that all the tinkering we might do to "save" or "reform" modern civilization toward greater equality, justice, and even "sustainability" will be too little, too late.

I'm not pleased about feeling this way, but there it is.