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Dalai Lama speaks to overflow crowd

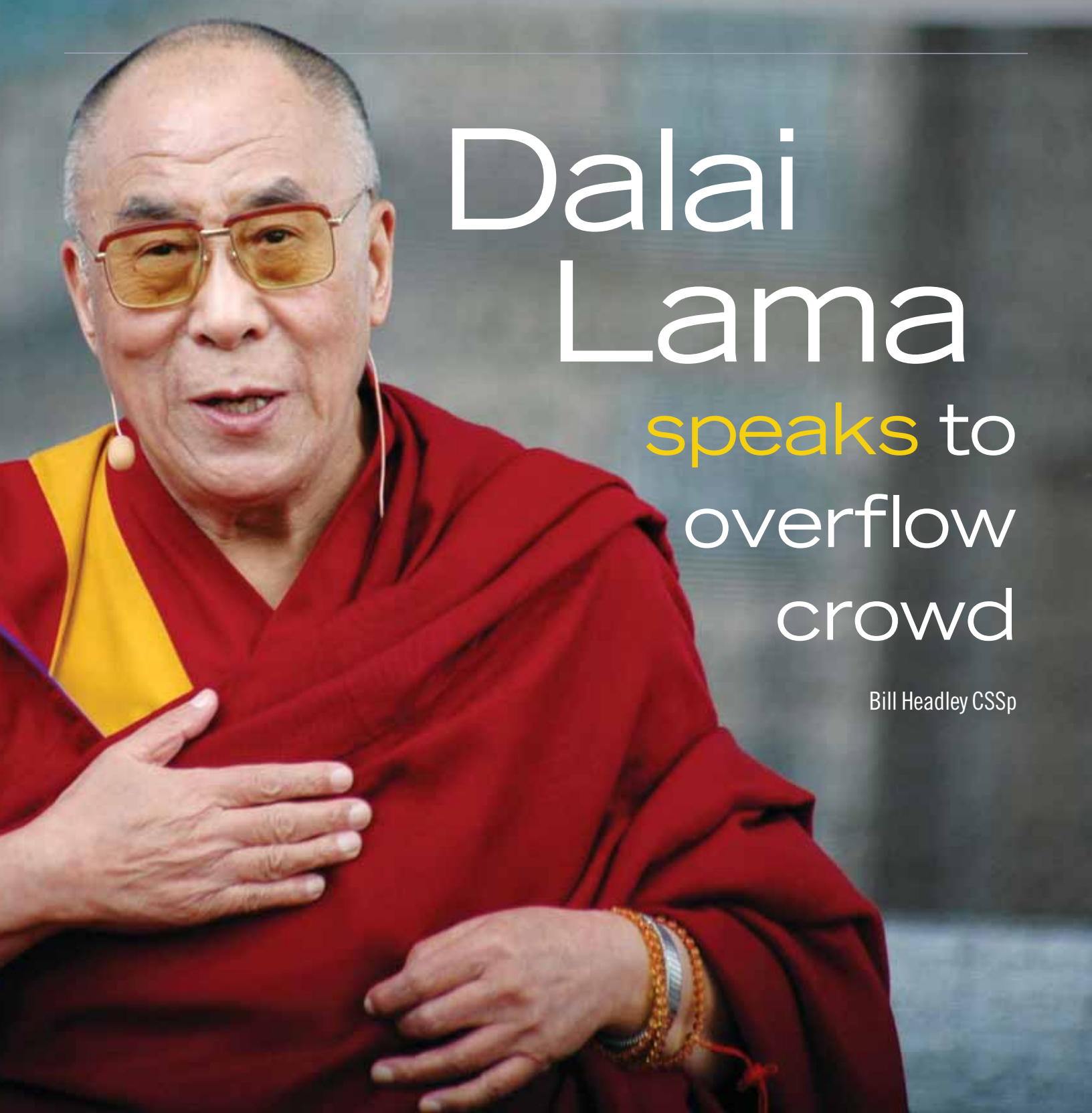
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Bill Headley CSSp

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is Holiness the Dalai Lama visited our University of San Diego where he spoke to an overflow crowd of four or five thousand people in our largest auditorium. Minutes before his presentation, His Holiness and I had met briefly and superficially. I had been part of the greeting party as he entered the auditorium.

When his talk was finished and he was about to leave the stage, he came over to the edge of the stage, beckoned me to come forward, and reached down to shake my hand, commenting “my special brother.”

Obviously I was touched. When I returned to my seat the woman next to me said excitedly, “Don’t worry, I have a picture of the Dalai Lama greeting you!”

When the photo arrived in my inbox that night, I opened it with some interest. His image was easily identifiable — if somewhat blurred. What I mainly saw of me was my seriously balding head!

The moral of this story: Some of us are not destined for greatness.

“What is his attraction?”

Though our School of Peace Studies was instrumental in bringing His Holiness to our campus, some of the shine and awe of his coming was missing for me. We had brought the Dalai Lama to Pittsburgh while I was at Duquesne University some years previously. Still, it gave me a chance to listen to the man and his message more deeply. This, in turn, nudged me to ask myself, “What is his attraction?” Certainly His Holiness struggles with big ideas: reconciling neuroscience with meditative practice, cultivating compassion, and in his latest book, *Beyond Religion*, searching for a secular ethics.

Listening carefully, however, to the words he spoke in the presentation, it struck me how simple his message really was. With a touch of cynicism, perhaps, I thought: “If I preached at that level during my weekend liturgies at the Cathedral in San Diego, people would get restless — finding my message too simple, too basic.”

So what is it that attracts those thousands of admirers everywhere he goes? Our online ticketing for the event sold out in sixteen minutes! Here are my answers — perhaps equally as simplistic as his presentation.

First, “he” is saying it. He — the 14th Dalai Lama with his religious aura, Nobel Prize, personal sacrifices and eastern mystic attractiveness — is the presenter, not balding-headed me.

Then there is his “body-spirit” integration. One senses that he is what he talks about.

Then, there is his message about good human living within oneself and among others. With the hype of our daily lives, its busyness and various frictions and frustrations in our society and world, maybe it is the profundity embedded in the simple words and message that really captures attention.

In the week that followed, the Scripture reading was the story of an angel of the Lord telling the apostle Philip, “Get up and head south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to

Gaza.” One of the urgencies of that time was getting the message of Jesus beyond the small Jewish enclave. How better to make that point than to tell a story of a person from a distant land, Ethiopia, who “gets it.” An angel stirs Philip. Reminds me of a point a preacher once made about Mary’s Annunciation. The preacher’s advice; “When angels begin to talk to you — duck — a big job is coming your way!”

We need to reach out beyond ourselves to share the good news. Legend has it that St Francis of Assisi told his followers to do this by the testimony of their lives and, if all else fails, by their words.

Take a vague dream, turn it into a vision and make a plan of it

Julie Sullivan, our Provost, is no angel; I’m no apostle Philip. Yet she grabbed me by the cuff of the neck in 2007. “Give us three to five years of your life to get this School started. Take a vague dream, turn it into a vision and make a plan of it.

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Attract people who want to change, heal and serve the world.”

When friends on the East Coast heard my Dean’s task they would often say, “Start a School of Peace Studies — the first in the country — and from scratch — what an opportunity!”

The Dalai Lama is searching for an ethics that is larger than any one faith e.g. his Buddhist faith. Often in our student body of many faiths and a good mix of secular humanism, I cannot be terribly explicit about my faith convictions.

Yet, behind all that I do is the message of a Jesus who maybe did not settle many disputes in the proper formulaic manner of our discipline’s textbooks. But, he washed the feet of men who he knew would betray him; he had lunch with a tax collector whose honesty was questionable; and he honored a woman whose local community thought of as a sinner and probably scorned.

I must get up and head south on my own road as Philip did. If you think to ask about me, ask: “Is he building bridges by healing hurts? Is he cultivating harmony by sowing seeds of peace?” If the answers you get are “Yes”, know that I am well.

Then, turn these questions on yourself. Ask them of yourself. If the answer you get back is “Yes!” then know that all is well with you also. ■

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