

## **Center for the Environment at Catawba College**

### **Salisbury, North Carolina**

By Juanita Teschner  
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#### **Q&A: Sarah Susanka on ‘The Not So Big Life: Making Room for What Really Matters’**

Sarah Susanka, an architect and pioneer of the “Not So Big” philosophy, spoke recently with Juanita Teschner of the Center for the Environment at Catawba College. This is a compilation of an edited transcript of that conversation plus information from Susanka’s office.

Susanka, author of nine books, including *The Not So Big House* and *The Not So Big Life*, was named “an innovator in American culture” by *U.S. News and World Report*. She will speak on “The Not So Big Life: Making Room for What Really Matters” at the Lilly Colloquium on Tuesday, March 16, at 11 a.m. in Omwake-Dearborn Chapel and 7:30 p.m. in Hedrick Theatre of the Robertson College-Community Center on the Catawba campus in Salisbury.

The events, which are free and open to the public, are co-sponsored by the Center for the Environment and the Lilly Center for Vocation and Values. To register, visit [centerfortheenvironment.org](http://centerfortheenvironment.org) or contact Amanda Lanier at [allanier@catawba.edu](mailto:allanier@catawba.edu) or 704.637.4294.

#### **Q: How did the “Not So Big” philosophy come about?**

**A:** I started to realize both in my practice as a residential architect and as a human being that there was often a simpler and more elegant way to do things. So if I’m talking about a house, it is smaller but higher quality and actually lives larger as a result. It’s a different type of “moreness.”

So I started with houses, but it very quickly became apparent to me that that was also how I went about living my life. I noticed that I was one of the many millions who were overly busy. I had a hard time figuring out how to find the time to pursue the things I was passionate about. One night after having an extremely busy day at the office, I suddenly realized that if I didn’t make time to do what I loved to do, which was writing, it would never happen. And the only person who could make a shift in my life was me. It struck me like a two-by-four. In a certain fashion, everything I have written came about as a result of that moment.

#### **Q: What is a “Not So Big” life?**

**A:** A “Not So Big” life is one in which you learn to listen to what your heart longs to do and to integrate these passions into your everyday life. By making time for what you are truly passionate about and by letting go of old behavior patterns that cause you to keep feeling trapped by life, shifts will occur that allow you to learn more about who you really are and to live each experience as it comes, engaging it completely.

When you engage what you are truly passionate about, you are automatically present in what you are doing. Life becomes a natural expression of what you love to do – of your true nature. Through this process, you find more meaningfulness, vitality and that sense of being “at home” in life that so many people are searching for today.

**Q: What is the essence of your book, *The Not So Big Life*?**

**A:** What I have tried to do in the book is render down into simple strategies a way that anybody can go about remodeling his or her own life to start orienting more toward those things that the person is passionate about. Just as we can tear down interior walls to open up space in our homes, we can tear down our fears, assumptions and conditionings in a way that opens us up to new possibilities so we can start engaging the things we long to do.

I often call *The Not So Big Life* an owner’s manual. It puts the tools of transformation into your own hands so that you’ll have the ability to recognize what’s missing from your life and understand what’s needed to remedy the situation.

**Q: How do you transform your life?**

**A:** You can’t make it happen, but you can certainly stay aware of what you love and orient toward those things. You can take the first step, but everything else is given to you. Every single event, every person in your life is a kind of spiritual nutrition. When you look with the eyes of a student, absolutely everything will teach you. That’s the core of a “Not So Big” life.

**Q: That strikes me as requiring a real openness to life. How do you facilitate that?**

**A:** Every time you find yourself having a reaction to something or becoming upset by something, you have to be willing to turn it around and use it as a lens to look at yourself. That becomes the way you metabolize the food that is in front of you.

**Q: You have said that you’ll know you’re living the not so big life when your life changes from being too big, too fast and too frustrating to one that is marked by a more manageable pace and clarity. So how do we do that?**

**A:** The key is to learn what presence is, whether through prayer or meditation -- to just learn how to still the mind.

**Q: A lot of people find that when they sit still, their minds are still racing. How do you remedy that?**

**A:** While that may be the experience you start with – what the Buddhists call the “monkey mind” – when you take time regularly to find that place of calm, gradually you come to see that the thoughts are not who you are. As you get a regular practice of coming to stillness, you become capable in the turmoil of everyday life to really live from that place.

**Q: What books have been important in your transformation?**

A: They include *Behold the Spirit* by Alan Watts, *I Am That* by Nisargadatta Maharaj, *The Butterfly's Dream* by Albert Low, the books of A.H. Almaas and Khalil Gibran. These and other books are listed on my website, [notsobiglife.com](http://notsobiglife.com).

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The Center for the Environment at Catawba College was founded in 1996 to educate the public and the college community about regional environmental challenges and to foster community-based, sustainable solutions to those challenges.

Catawba's Lilly Center for Vocation and Values was established in 2003 to help students and members of the larger community determine values for their lives and allow those values to guide decisions relative to the vocations they choose and the priorities they set.