

Growth

Creation, everywhere is in the process of becoming, of evolving, of changing, of growing—or of fighting it. Think first of the seasons, an endless cycle of birth, bud, blossom, leaf, falling, dying and rebirth. That cycle, like the pattern of our heartbeats or the ocean's tides, is built into the rhythm of our life. Growth is inherent; the promise of the new life is always present. Yet, because of irrationality and fear, when it comes to our own growth, we see it as a threat. For becoming something new means leaving something behind. That is why it is promising and threatening, exciting and terrifying.

Growth is in some ways inevitable and in other ways impossible. To witness the inevitability simply observe the endless creating that surrounds us. A seed is planted. There is a sprout, a twig, a sapling. A tree grows. There are buds, then flower, then fruit. That fruit grows, too. Watch that little green apple grow and ripen into a beautiful, inviting red. Marvel at the growth of a kitten into a cat, a puppy into a dog, a vulnerable fledging into a soaring eagle, an infant into a toddler, a teen—if we are lucky—into an adult. Although it has happened billions of times it still, for me, seems somehow miraculous. The stages are predictable—from cute, to awkward to fully grown. That is the inevitability, the aging process that cannot be denied, that women and men—with all their skill and surgery and Botox—cannot contain or control. Think of growth here—any aspect of it, any manifestation of it—as evidence of ongoing creation. That is how it is inevitable.

Growth can seem impossible, on the other hand, when it is a growth we do not choose, when it is a change to which we are called yet against which

we struggle. There are so many other ways that we grow—or do not grow. Emotionally. Intellectually. Psychologically. Spiritually. Think about it. We all know people, for example, who are highly developed intellectually, but have no idea about what is going on with their emotions. This work of becoming, of growing into, all that God intends for each of us is just that—work. And it always seems that there is something holding, even pulling us back, as there is that which calls us to grow.

Any of us who have ever gone through counseling know that growth is work. Work, however, requires an expenditure of energy. And there is something in each of us that fights against the growth, the realizations, the changes, the possible transformation. This kind of work means thinking about things we don't want to think about, facing things we don't want to face, and learning things we don't want to learn. A lot of our addictions—not just the obvious ones like alcohol and chocolate—are things that we do to avoid growing. We anesthetize ourselves against the inevitable. Because real growth—the kind that takes work—can also be uncomfortable at best and painful at worst. Picture Tom Hanks in *BIG*, a twelve year old awakening in an adult body. Use it as a metaphor for when something new is going on inside of you. I know what I was, but I don't know what I might become, and that scares me. Oh Lord, leave me alone. So we curl up with our ice cream in front of our big screen TV and watch other people avoiding maturity on “reality” shows that promise to take us away from our own reality. Ah, escape! I will deal with that other stuff tomorrow—maybe.

Today is yesterday's tomorrow, like it or not. And just think of all the ways you have been called to grow, urged to grow, in your lifetime. We are encouraged and cajoled into taking first steps. We are callously dropped off

into the wonderful/terrible world of kindergarten. We graduate from high school. We look for a job. We leave the structure of the Army. We marry. We have babies. We attend funerals. These are surely the times when we are the rawest, the most vulnerable, the most fearful, the “newest.” We know what we were; we do not know what we will be. We know who we were, we do not know who we will be. We know where we were; we do not know where we will be. We may even sense we know why we were; we do not know the why in what comes next.

In all of these times of transitions we are called to grow. “Grow up,” we hear. “Be a big girl,” we hear. “You are not a baby any more”, we hear. “Be a man,” we hear. “You are a mother now,” we tell ourselves. “Get a grip,” we tell ourselves. “Grow up!” the enraged wife yells. “Accept aging graciously,” we are encouraged. As we deal with the ever-changing truths of our physical bodies we are called to expand intellectually, to cope emotionally, to mature psychologically and—this can be the most challenging—to confront the call to spiritual maturity. “When you were a child you thought like a child, but now put away childish things.”

Life—yours, mine and ours—in all its forms is about growth. But the joy of growth is often accompanied by a profound sense of loss. That is why we are so moved by the premise of *Toy Story*. Teddy Bears are left listless in the corner once the boy becomes a man. Barbie dolls are left half-naked in the corner when the girl worries more about her own emerging looks. Well, this is tomorrow. So let’s deal with it—at least for a minute or two. Let’s look at growing as addressed by two authors: Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled* and the author of the letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus. The specific kind of developing, or growing, addressed by Scott Peck and Saint Paul is spiritual growth, is soul growth.

According to Peck, “spiritual growth is the evolution of the individual. An individual’s body may undergo the changes of the life cycle, but it does not evolve...Decline of physical competence in old age is(inevitable). Within an individual lifetime, however, the human spirit may evolve dramatically...Spiritual competence may increase (although it usually does not) until the moment of death in advanced old age. Our lifetime offers us unlimited opportunities for spiritual growth until the end But spiritual growth is an uphill battle. Spiritual growth, too, is like water flowing up a hill. Spiritual growth is “...conducted against natural resistance, against a natural inclination to keep things the way they were, to cling to the old maps and old ways of doing things, to take the easy path,”¹ to watch reruns of NCIS, to twitter and text until your thumbs are numb, to drink yourself into a perpetual buzz, to work yourself to physical exhaustion or to shop ‘til you drop. It is anything and everything we do so that we do not have to think about ourselves—about who we are and where we’ve been and where we are going—or to think about our relationship with the God who called us into being.

The direct encounters between God and Abraham/Moses/Jonah/David and so many others in the Hebrew Scriptures tell this tale over and over. The direct encounters between Jesus and the disciples/leper/paralytic/blind man/woman at the well/rich young ruler/Zaccheus/you name it in the New Testament tell this tale over and over. The encounters between Paul and the new Christians in Rome/Corinth/Ephesus tell this story over and over. God does not just breathe us into being. God calls us into growth. Read anyone of those stories and you will hear God say: leave your fishing nets/blindness/demonic/big bucks/religious hypocrisy/cheating/screwing

¹ Ibid, 266.

around/ job/hometown/comfort zone and come grow with me. Some come. Others, more like you and me, pull the covers up and say: I do not feel like growing up today. Come back next month, or year.

But what is the force that pushes us as individuals and as a whole species to grow against the natural resistance of our own lethargy?... It is love. (Scott Peck defines love as)... ‘will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.’ When we grow, it is because we are working at it, and we are working at it because we love ourselves. It is through love that we elevate ourselves. And it is through our love for others that we assist others to elevate themselves. Love, the extension of the self, is the very act of...² growing. That evolutionary force, that pull to crawl out of the mud and move toward the skies, and to encourage others to spread their wings, too, is love. Among people, “love is the miraculous force that defies the natural law of...³ lethargy. And the source of love is God.

This is the God described so exquisitely by the writer of the letter to the early Christian church at Ephesus. He had not read *The Road Less Traveled*, but the essence of his message is the same. Let’s look at it. “I... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” That is what the writer wants to emphasize. I want you to change. I want you to grow. I want you to work at it! What does growth look like? It looks like humility, gentleness, patience. Now I ask you, how much do we value humility, gentleness and patience in 21st century America? How much time do we spend saying: I am going to be humble and gentle and patient today? Speaking for myself, I think I am much more likely to be arrogant,

² Ibid, 268.

³ Ibid.

abrasive and impatient. So to be humble and gentle and patient would take work. Those things, like water going up that hill, go against my nature. Yet the writer says, as a follower of Jesus, I am called to those things. And (she said with the Beatles words echoing in her head) will you still love me if I do change? What are the risks of behaving like a Christian, of growing into Christ? What, and who, do we stand to lose?

Read what Paul is asking them. What a call to growth! What we are growing into is Christ. When we are called to be Christians—and don't kid yourselves; it is a calling—we are called away from the ordinary, the lethargic, the easy way out, the things that we do just to get someone to love us. We are called by God to the work of growing our very spirits; we are called by God and to God, by Christ and to Christ, by Spirit to Spirit.

The words are clear. Paul forcefully expresses the why. “We must no longer be children...[B]ut speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-16 NRSV)

It is God who is the source of growth and God who is the destination. That can be a terrifying idea, one that can send us back to our boutique beer and our remote controls. “For no idea ever came to the mind of man which places upon us such a burden. It is the single most demanding idea in the history of mankind. Not because it is difficult to believe it, but because it then demands from us all that we can possibly give, all that we have. It is one thing to believe in a nice old God who will take good care of us from a lofty position of power which we ourselves could never begin to attain. It is

quite another to believe in a God who has it in mind for us precisely that we should (grow into) ...His power, His wisdom, His identity.

Were we to believe it possible for man to become God, this belief by its very nature would place upon us an obligation to attempt to attain the possible. But we don't want this obligation. We don't want to have to work that hard. We don't want God's responsibility. (Even feeding one hungry person can wear us out.) We don't want the responsibility of having to think all the time. As long as we can believe that (we cannot grow into God through Christ as the writer of Ephesians suggested) we don't have to worry about...spiritual growth, we don't have to push ourselves to higher and higher levels of consciousness and loving activity; we can relax and just be human. If God's in his heaven and we're down here, and never the two shall meet, we can let Him have all the responsibility for evolution and (running) the universe. We can do our bit toward assuring ourselves a comfortable old age, hopefully complete with healthy, happy and grateful children and grandchildren; but beyond that we need not bother ourselves. These goals are difficult enough to achieve...(but) as soon as we believe it is possible for (us to be like Christ) we can really never rest for long, can never say 'OK, my job is finished, my work is done.' We must constantly push ourselves toward greater and greater wisdom, (service, and love)...[T]he idea that God is actively nurturing us so that we might grow up to be like Him,"⁴ as we see Him in the life of Christ, brings us face to face with our own reluctance, resistance and just plain laziness. But that is what is going on here. That is what it means to be a Christian.

It just seems too darn hard. But it isn't with God's grace. "To be aware of grace, to personally experience its constant presence, to know the

⁴ Ibid, 270-271.

nearness of God, is to know and continually experience an inner tranquility and peace that few possess. On the other hand, this knowledge and awareness brings with it an enormous responsibility. **For to experience one's closeness to God...is also to be the agent of His power and love.** The call to grace is a call to a life of effortful caring, to a life of service and whatever sacrifice seems required. It is a call out of spiritual childhood into adulthood.”⁵ It is a call to grow up!

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. (With gratitude to M. Scott Peck) The Gathering of Baltimore. July 30th, 2017

⁵ Ibid, 301.