

OBSTACLES TO GROWTH

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

INCREASE AND MULTIPLY' is a law of life, God's first blessing on mankind. But the sardine-tin existence of a crowded city, without even the benefit of lubricating oil, sometimes makes one reflect that perhaps mankind has gone about that task of increasing with too much enthusiasm. Quantitatively we have certainly grown, but what of the quality of our growth? The material boons of civilisation are paid for at the price of neuroses, unhappiness, anxiety and insecurity. In an epoch when we can reach any part of our planet with increasing speed and comfort, the question, 'Where are we going?', looms ever larger in our collective and personal consciousness. The wise have always understood that growth is primarily a thing of quality, but the wise are few. As children we could measure our physical growth against a mark on the wall and a weighing-machine. The state told us when we were adult in terms of being able to vote, to fight wars and to drink in bars, but do we not each ask ourselves sometimes what does it mean to grow? Have I grown up? Has the quality of my life grown in wisdom and in favour before God and man?

It is good to ask such questions provided that we are not looking for answers. Quality is not something that can be measured except by arbitrary and artificial standards. But the question is right because it means that we are not taking ourselves for granted. For perhaps the biggest obstacle to our personal growth, apart from external factors, is our own fear of growing. Growth implies whole areas of unrealized possibilities within ourselves; it means leaving behind the self we think we know in order to launch out into depths that perhaps we would rather not know about.

The very notion of growth means that we interpret our existence in terms of a question mark rather than in terms of seeking for answers. Indeed, the universal sign under which we are all born is the sign of the question mark. And the universal sign under which we shall all die is also the question mark. If we live out our lives between two question marks, how can we not expect those lives to be moulded by that sign? The question mark is full of the mysterious, the unexplored, the yet-to-be. But how often we turn our

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backs on the question of life and self, and allow that awesome question mark to shrivel up on itself to a full stop. We tend to settle down to ourselves and to a particular way of life, and by so doing we accept a half answer that can become a downright lie. We say, ungrammatically, 'This is me'. 'I am this sort of person'. 'This is my life'. So often this means that we have abandoned the search, we have buried our talent in the earth.

We settle for a pseudo-self-acceptance, a self-acceptance that is exclusive of further possibilities within ourselves and, by that fact, of further possibilities in others. We take ourselves for granted and others too, and shy away from or condemn those who do not fit into our particular frame of reference. We may even end up by rejecting a world that does not conform to our ways of thinking and behaving. The world has, we imagine, got out of step, but we fail to see that it is we who are simply marking time, going nowhere. We cease to grow once the capacity for true wonder and amazement is replaced only by the ability to be shocked, whilst remaining comfortably insulated against the effects of shock. We can no longer accept ourselves or anything in depth. Perhaps we may even shock ourselves by sinful lapses, but our superficiality will indulge in remorse rather than true sorrow. We will explain away our lapses as uncharacteristic, and deprive ourselves of the experience of mercy and pardon that demands a penetrating awareness of the depths of our sinfulness.

Fear

Of course, it is much more comfortable to settle down with a self and a way of life that are as accomodating as an old pair of favourite shoes. It is easier to go on making the same familiar mistakes, committing the same familiar sins, than to run the risk of finding new ones. There is a greater sense of security, but only a *sense*, when we settle down in a way of life that is predictable to ourselves and insured as far as is possible against the unexpected. But it is difficult to imagine a more thoroughly unchristian and un-evangelical way of living. The gospel message is an invitation to live one's life as a challenge, to leave all and follow Christ, to lose one's life in order to find one's real self. In short, the gospel invites man to live by faith, to believe what he does not see, to listen to all that God is saying in his world and to act upon it. This is the way of growth that is Christ himself, but it is a way that we fear to tread. Even when we set out across the tossing waves at the invitation of Christ, we can still doubt and lose heart and begin to sink.

It is a frightening thing to grow so that we no longer recognize ourselves. But this is what growth is all about. And it is that fear that keeps so many of us stunted and wizened in our capacities for living. We talk a great deal about experience, but we forget that the root of that word is the same in latin as the root of the word for danger – *periculum*. Experience implies a risk, a danger that so often much of our experience and experimentation sedulously avoids. We try to programme what is going to happen rather than give ourselves over to the unknown and unforeseen. We term a person prudent when he can foresee every step of the way, and we forget that the real force of prudence is the ability to cope with the unexpected and the readiness to go out towards it. The reactions of so many to a changing world and a changing Church reveal the depths to which this deadly root of fear has penetrated. We pay lip-service to the truth that we have no abiding city, that the fabric of this world is changing, that we are a pilgrim Church; but when these truths start happening we curl up in fear. Basically we would rather settle for the guided tour, the package-deal pilgrimage, than for the real thing.

There are of course good reasons for our attitude. But had the apostles really understood Christ's predictions about his death, they would certainly have given him very good reasons for not going up to Jerusalem. How often there lurks behind the arguments of reasonable people the fear of making a mistake or of failing. Perhaps our greatest mistake is to live in the illusion that we have reduced the margins of error to an absolute minimum. We imagine that growth is possible only after we have eliminated the possibility of mistakes and of sin from our lives. The extraordinary truth is that we grow not in spite of our errors, failures and sins but through them. The wheat and the cockle grow together, and to uproot the weed can ruin the whole harvest. The net of the kingdom contains a mixture of good and bad fish, and the sorting out can only be done at the end. Peter grew up on the night he betrayed his beloved master. Judas who did the same deed shrivelled and died. The difference was that Peter was able to accept his mistake and live with it, whereas Judas was more concerned that he had betrayed himself than that he had handed over Christ. Peter could forgive himself because Christ had forgiven him; and in that was the secret of his development.

We have to learn this sort of acceptance of ourselves if we are to grow. And if we are to help others grow we must offer them the

same sort of total acceptance. But we shall be able to do this only in the measure in which we do not indulge in selfish self-denigration. We forgive others only in the measure in which we forgive ourselves, just as there can be no real love of others unless we first of all have a right love of ourselves. But this forgiveness and total acceptance of ourselves in no way implies minimizing the seriousness of sin or of our mistakes. On the contrary, it demands a much deeper realization of the meaning of sin: a profound, mystical experience of sorrow for sin that is a gift only God can give. Who understands the horror of sin as God does? And who forgives us completely as God does? If we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, we have to strive in prayer for this understanding of sin so that we may learn to forgive. The question is – dare we do this?

The greeting of the risen Christ is ever 'Peace. Fear not'. The christian community is one born of complete forgiving love. It was to be a community without fear, in which there was complete acceptance of each other among the members. The ideal has never been achieved, but it still remains as a challenge. And what a force such a community without fear would be in the world! Its members would probably get up to some crazy things, like Francis going to convert Islam; but they would be a vital leaven of growth in the heavy dough of conformity, desire for approval and respectability that is the mass of the world. The Spirit who liberated the apostles from their timidity and fear is still at work in the heart of mankind; and we shall begin to grow when we live on in that love which casts out all fear.

God loves us as we are, all of a piece, and fosters our growth without our being aware of it. For our part we have to respond with the sort of faith and trust that does not attempt to create signs for itself, either of success or of failure. The desire to grow must never degenerate into the desire to see ourselves grow. One thing we can be sure of is that our own desire for growth will never exceed what God is prepared to grant us. The God of infinite generosity who gave his Son for us is not now going to turn about and be miserly with his gifts.

It is true however that some people just never have the chance to grow. The battered baby is almost inevitably going to become psychotic, or at least so severely damaged psychologically that he will never reach any sort of maturity. There is an evil in this world that can rob people of their possibility of growth, just as surely as a

fatal disease can rob them of their right to live. That force of evil is continually at work, perverting the forces of growth into monstrous caricatures of humanity; and let us not delude ourselves that we are immunized against its influence. It is something we each have to contend with personally and collectively, as Christ did in the desert and on the cross. The blatant manifestations of that evil should be a constant reminder to us of its more subtle and hidden workings in ourselves.

Discouragement

If we overcome our fear of growing, and move in the spirit of joy and love, the next obstacle we have to face is discouragement. It is so easy to lose heart, especially when all our best efforts seem to come to nothing. Indeed, the greatest temptation of all is to give up, to stop trying and to drift along or take refuge in cynicism and bitterness. So much of the gospel teaching on prayer stresses this point of perseverance, of never giving up. It is the heart of prayer as it is of life. Endurance is not a quality we are born with; it can only be gained by experience. We have to learn from the hard knocks and rebuffs of life to become not hardened but resilient and supple. Most of us give up too soon, and because we are too pre-occupied with our own efforts. We grow weary of pushing against a door that will not open, never seeing that there is a notice on it saying, 'pull'. We tire of frantic searches for God, and never notice that he is by our side all the time. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we become so sunk in our own misery that we never notice how our hearts are burning within us. Perhaps we are so conditioned by a world that demands success that we forget that God does not ask success: he just asks us to be good triers and to keep on trying.

The great antidote to the poison of discouragement is the force of patience that is the ability to suffer setbacks, failures and frustrations with Christ and in him. This is the power that transforms the signs of death into the sources of life and of strength. This patience is the practical expression of the dynamism of hope; but it is acquired only in the measure in which we are prepared to go down into the depths of our own discouragement and emerge on the other side. Resurrection is won only through the experience of death, not by half-dying. We have to learn how to wait with every fibre of our being, and not to allow ourselves to be distracted by what is irrelevant in the circumstances. No matter how often we

stare up the road or glance at our watch, the bus we are waiting for will not arrive sooner. Why fritter away spiritual and psychic energy in attempts to do what is quite beyond our control? We have instead to use the occasion to experience our own impotence to the full, and find at its centre the well-spring of hope.

Here again the gospel insists so often on this need to wait open-eyed and ready. We know that the Lord will come. We know indeed that he is here now, even though we may not see him. But this knowing has to become a lived experience, and more often than not it does so through a real experience of the absence of God. Like the watchers for the dawn, we have to cry out from the depths of night's darkness. And if we wait in the Spirit of Christ, that cry will be not one of anguished despair but of hopeful joy. Pain there will be, certainly, but it will not be destructive and useless. It will be the pain of a new birth.

The occasions for discouragement are also opportunities to go deeper. The plants that survive longest in the desert are those that have learnt to put down deep tap-roots. So, discouragement is not overcome simply by adopting an attitude of grin-and-bear-it. Such a stance only hardens us to experience. Instead we have to enter into the experience, and find within it the source of life and strength. The keynote of christianity is the notion of gift; but to recognize a gift we have to experience the need for that gift. God in his wisdom is not going to allow us to call our own what is his gift to us. He seeks to form us in the Spirit, not to delude us into thinking we are self-made men and women. If he seems to refuse what we ask it is perhaps an invitation to go deeper into what we are asking for; and it may be that we are not asking for all he is ready to give us. We can either choose to programme our experience of God, which is an idolatry we are all more or less guilty of, or else wait in hope for the God who is pure gift, and discover the love that is in his gift of himself.

Possessiveness

Growth is only possible where there is true freedom and liberty of spirit. The young man in the gospel who asked to be allowed to grow turned away because he had great possessions. He was possessed by what he owned, a prisoner of his riches. Another rich man, Zacchaeus, found in his riches a way to give himself to others and to Christ. The difference between the two is of course an interior attitude. The young man was possessive of what he had; while Zacchaeus

had somehow or other preserved an interior liberty; his riches were not as important as Christ. Our liberty is fettered more by the demon of possessiveness than by anything else. For possessiveness robs us of the ability to give, and thereby of the capacity to receive, which are essentials to any sort of growth.

If christianity, as indeed many of the other world religions, has consistently upheld an ideal of poverty, of unpossessiveness, this is because it realizes the danger there is to the growth of the spirit in the mere accumulation of possessions. Men can and are so often inhibited in their development because they are tied down to a material style of life that demands, like a tyrant, that they have certain possessions. So many people find themselves locked into a job that they detest simply because it is the only one that can provide them enough money to live in the way in which they have grown accustomed to live. Their daily work is a daily prostitution of their own spirit. And the demon that possesses them is difficult to exorcize.

Each of us seeks in some way to possess ourselves. We all have our own great possessions, and their greatness is measured by the tenacity with which we hug them to ourselves. We may have only one talent; but we may be sure that nothing is going to change us. Our growth depends largely on being able to receive from others. If we are possessive about ourselves, and do not give of ourselves to others, the inevitable result is that we simply use others to bolster up the image and likeness of the self that we hold on to tenaciously. We reveal to others only the bit of our self that will capture them and make them our possession. We refuse to allow anyone else to make us question ourself. Basically we do not trust others enough to give ourselves to them and accept ourselves back from them. One need have had only a little experience in attempting to give 'good advice' to realize the truth of this. We all tend to hear and to see only what is filtered through the meshes of our own possessiveness. We may feel free to do anything that we wish and that may be true, but the one thing we shall not do is to grow.

The law of the Spirit is that the more we are able to give of ourselves the more we are able to receive. Giving of ourselves loosens the tightness of our selfish grasp, and allows us to receive from others and to grow in ways we never imagined. But this giving of self inevitably creates a sense of loss that causes us to shrink back from giving. We fail to see that the only hand that can receive is the one that has relinquished its grasp on whatever it was holding. So we struggle like the monkey with its hand in the gourd, wanting

to be free but reluctant to leave go of the one thing that is holding us back. Real freedom is the ability to give of the heart and from the heart, and unless we do this we give nothing. This is what giving in the name of Christ means.

But the liberty to be ourselves requires that we also have a certain independence with regard to the multitude of influences that seek to form us. We must sift out what is profitable and constructive and what is simply reducing us to a faceless conformity, no matter how outrageous the standard to which we conform. So many hippies are just as conformist about their ways of dress and speech as the people against whom they are reacting. Often the drug sub-culture is more intolerant about those who refuse to use drugs than the drinking society is towards the teetotaller. Intolerance is ever a mark of infantilism, a loss of liberty. We have to be able to accept from others what they give us of ourselves without paranoia but with discrimination. Our interior liberty grows in the measure in which we learn to sift out the absolute from the relative in our lives, and to recognize these in others without seeking to impose our own absolutes upon them.

Living in the present

When does this process of growth take place? Is there an ideal time for growth? There is. It is – now. We grow more and more as we become more and more children of the present moment. To try to live off the real or imagined capital gains of the past is obviously a diminishment of ourselves. But even regrets about ‘the good old days’, nostalgia for a world that has vanished, deafens and blinds us to what God is saying to us in the here and now. Our God is a God who lives in the now of our existence. He is not a memory to be treasured. If we keep before us only the God we have known, we rob ourselves of the opportunity of discovering the new faces of God in the present moment. We should carry the past neither as a burden nor as a treasured but withered relic. It is not for us to keep scratching at the scars of old sins that the mercy of God has healed and will continue to heal. The past, with its good and evil, has led up to now, and it is only in this ‘now’ that we really exist.

Christianity has been marked by its eschatology; but we must be careful not to interpret that doctrine in such a way that we live in the future. We wait indeed for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; but that waiting does not mean that we stare gazing into the heavens. He will come again, and we shall see him; but only in so

far as we are awake to what is going on in ourselves and our world in the present. The future never happens; and we can waste a great deal of energy making hypotheses about its probable course. The future only happens in terms of what is going on now; and unless we get into the now we shall simply be living a daydream. Growth means that we eat of the food before us now, however unpalatable it may seem. If we try to sustain ourselves on imaginary future banquets we shall soon starve.

Conclusion

This article seems to have been the description of a spiritual steeplechase course sufficient to daunt the most stout-hearted. It seems to be easier to stand still than to grow. And this is true. But the choice is ours – either to get into the real adventure of living or to stagnate in a plastic happiness. We can always settle for less and even be content with it. But the Spirit of Christ is saddened by such pusillanimity, and the vision of Christ is blurred in our eyes and in the eyes of men. If we choose to live totally for Christ we shall certainly suffer persecution (one of the most consistent promises in the gospel), but we shall also certainly live. We shall grow in that wisdom which is a taste for life in depth and appreciation of all that lives and moves and has being in the miracle of God's creation. The command to grow comes to us in the Word of God, in whom all things were created. The Word of life, of love, of faith and hope. That Word grows in us, and we grow with it; for it is pregnant with the creative Spirit of the Father of all. All that the Word needs for growth is the soil of an honest and open heart, ready to live now and to wait in joyous expectation for the increase that God can and surely will give in his own good time, which is his eternal now.