

CHAPTER 42

The Process of Growth

When you were born, how much did you know? Were you able to walk or talk? Everything and everyone goes through a process of growth and development before reaching maturity or perfection. As the proverb says, “From acorns mighty oak trees grow.” And it is not just our bodies that grow and mature. Intellect, emotions, and character also grow.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women, merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling, puking in the nurse's arms:
Then, the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then, a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like a pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth: and then, the justice,
In fair round belly, with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws, and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide,
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble pipes,
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

— William Shakespeare
As You Like It

Although you already have been through many changes and have had many experiences, more changes and experiences await you in the future. There are different ways of looking at how people change and grow. Jacques, a rather cynical character in one of Shakespeare's plays, in a memorable passage to the left outlined his slightly mocking vision of the “seven ages of man.”

Of course, this is not the only way to view the process of human development, as we shall see. Yet we should have a sense of perspective on where we came from and where we are going. Too many people try to arrest the process, whether by cosmetic surgery or other means, instead of gracefully letting go and moving on.

In fact, we can say that all development goes through three main stages:

- ✗ Formation
- ✗ Growth
- ✗ Completion

Physical development

Physical growth and development happen naturally. We don't have to worry about stretching our skin and enlarging our organs as we grow taller. We don't have to train our stomach to digest food or take courses in breathing. We don't have to supervise and regulate our heart to make sure that it is pumping enough blood through our arteries.

Like everything in the natural world, our physical body reaches maturity through an automatic growth process governed by natural law. Still, we have to channel our physical energy constructively into sport, art, music or some other skill.



Around the world many people celebrate their twenty-first birthday as their passage into the adult world. Adulthood represents perfection, but is everyone mature by the time he turns 21? There is another aspect to growth — the perfection of one's character. Although the inner self also develops through stages, it is not automatic. As we know, there are many people who have an adult's body but continue to act very childishly.



Stages of inner growth

A number of psychologists have studied psychological growth and concluded that each of us passes through a series of progressive developmental stages.

For example, the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg described the following levels of moral development:

- the *pre-moral* level of behavior, in which a person is motivated by biological and social impulses and has no sense of obligation to rules.
- the *conventional* level of behavior, in which an individual accepts with little critical reflection the standards of his group.
- the *autonomous* level of behavior, in which a person's conduct is guided by his own thoughts and he judges for himself whether something is good, not accepting the standards of his group without reflection.

There is an order and connection between the stages. Each of us must take responsibility to advance to a higher level of morality. The challenges of life and training at home and school may speed this process, but a person's will decides whether he cultivates a better way of thinking, feeling and acting. Let us look at the process of growth in more detail.

Experience shows us that the spirit does not grow in the same way that the body does: Spiritual growth requires conscious effort. For example, the intellect develops, but sometimes to make it do so we have to think "till it hurts." Learning to concentrate is not easy. We can describe three principal stages of spiritual development.

Formation stage

A newborn child is driven by a few basic needs and desires. Babies want to be nourished, to sleep peacefully, to excrete comfortably and to be held and loved. When any of these needs is not met adequately, babies communicate immediately through crying: "I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm wet, I want to be held — and someone had better do something quickly!"

Mothers generally take center stage in fulfilling these needs of their babies. Through a relationship with a warm, responsive environment, the baby develops a confidence and an attitude of basic trust toward life. He knows that his mother loves him and will fulfill all his desires. He knows that even if she is absent for a while, she



will return. Soon he expresses his joy at seeing his mother with a smile and finds that this is rewarded with even more love and attention. If, on the other hand, these desires are not fulfilled consistently, or if the mother is absent, a person may grow up with a basic mistrust not only of his mother but also of people and life in general.

This initial stage of life is characterized by a receptivity to love. Infants and children are keenly aware of their own needs and desires. They have a very limited awareness of the needs of others. No one complains about their behavior,

telling them, "Oh, you're so selfish." This kind of self-absorption is natural in their growth process. If an older person acts like this, we tell him to "grow up and stop acting like a baby."

Experiencing the joy of receiving love is an important prerequisite to achieving a mature heart that seeks to continually give love. Therefore, during this phase it is important to learn how to receive love and respond to it. Have you ever tried to do something nice for someone who was unable to accept it or respond to you? How did you feel when your kindness and concern were rejected?

Thus, the development of responsive love is an important step. Even as adults, it's good to retain the spontaneous qualities of childhood, such as open-heartedness, trust in others, and responsiveness to love. It is this responsiveness that attracts us to the beauty of a child's heart and love.

A critical developmental task for children is to master our most basic physical needs for the sake of others and ourselves. For example, toilet training is very important in one's social development. A child learns to be patient — to tolerate hunger while waiting to be fed — and he learns self-control through toilet training. Self-control gives a feeling of pride and confidence, while a loss of self-control is accompanied by feelings of shame and doubt.

We learn to speak, feed ourselves, dress ourselves, and bathe ourselves. The more we can do for ourselves, the more independent and free we become. With this growing freedom comes responsibility and the sense that some actions and words are right or wrong. Our conscience is largely molded by the social and spiritual environment in which we grow up. During this stage we are quite dependent on others, not only in physical ways. Most of our thinking and emotional strength come from our parents as well.

Growth stage

The time of dependency and absorbing love gives way to a period of learning to share love. This occurs concurrently as we become more aware of others. Even an older baby sometimes has an impulse to share his food or give something away.

As a baby begins to learn how to live with, relate to, and love others, he or she also begins to learn the value of giving. Our giving at this stage, though, is limited and conditional. We tend to give as much as we are given. We give as long as we know that something will be returned. We are usually nice to someone as long as he is nice to us. We are learning about reciprocation, giving and receiving.



Our range of compassion has expanded. Children are more aware of people outside their immediate family. They also realize that other people have different feelings, desires, and ways of seeing the world.

Intimate interpersonal relationships become a central preoccupation. Adolescents want to be together, to do things together, to socialize, to reach out and communicate with one another. Early adolescence is a time of circles of friends, of important beginning steps away from the family to new social relationships.

Our goal is greater independence. We are virtually self-sufficient physically, and we want to be the same internally. Defining oneself — creating a sense of one's own identity — is the central issue during this phase. We may ask ourselves:

- ✗ Who am I?
- ✗ Where do I belong?
- ✗ What am I really like?
- ✗ Why am I the way I am?
- ✗ What or who shall I be?
- ✗ How can I grow and change?
- ✗ How am I developing?

We try to develop our own views of life, and we have opinions on everything. In this stage we are concerned with making moral and ethical sense of our world. We have to make difficult personal decisions of right and wrong. We are meant to receive this inner direction through our conscience (see Chapter 36).

During adolescence many dramatic changes occur in our physical bodies. We have to come to terms with our new appearance. Accompanying this are the awakening of our sexuality and relations with persons of the opposite gender. Our challenge at this time involves channeling our sexual energy into creative and productive activities, relationships, sports, work, or studies — until our character matures in integrity and unselfish love. We have already discussed how learning to live with and love others requires special knowledge, skills and training that can guide us to create peaceful, joyful and loving relationships, especially in our marriage and family.

This period also is characterized by a strong desire for self-esteem and self-respect. One way we gain this self-respect is through the control we have gained over our bodies. During this time adult intellectual capacities are being explored. We learn to appreciate the dignity of using our mind rather than being controlled by our instincts.

We are coming to gain control over our impatience, greed, anger, hatred, jealousy and other unruly emotions. Through these victories over ourselves, we pave the way for success in friendships and working with others. Particularly important, we prepare for a good marriage and family and for being productive in society.

Completion stage

Here we learn to give love unconditionally. This totally unselfish love, described by the Greeks as *agape*, has the quality of giving without expecting anything in return. Joy comes from the act of giving. The prompting of our heart and conscience to live for others fully guides us.

You may wonder if it is really possible to love like this. But we see this standard of love all of the time in parental love. While the child is primarily receiving, the parent is primarily giving. Even through the night, interrupting her sleep, a mother patiently gives to her child. Does the mother expect the child to give her a massage in the morning after a sleepless night? No, the mother expects nothing from the child. Still, she continues to give and give and give.

You don't have to be a parent to express this quality of love. A mature person expresses the heart of a parent in every relationship — giving without expecting to receive. Of course, everyone likes to receive love, but a mature person continues to give love even without receiving anything in return. If we use parental love as an ideal for relating to others, we will become more unconditional in our love and therefore freer.

As a small child, do you remember drawing pictures for your mother or father? From an objective viewpoint, the pictures probably looked terrible, but what if your parents had scoffed at your pictures? How would you have felt? You would have felt rejected and unmotivated to give more.

Because your parents could see the picture with eyes of love, they were probably moved by your effort. They could see the heart behind the giving. They probably exclaimed how beautiful your picture was. I'm sure that your parents displayed many of your masterpieces on the walls or refrigerator.

When a child sees the response of his parent, this stimulates his creativity and his desire to give more. He can't wait to draw another picture and another.

Loving unconditionally means that we don't focus on the faults and mistakes of others, but instead look for the beautiful and good things in them. This will encourage others to express more of their best nature.

Parents always enjoy watching their child learn how to walk. When the child falls down, they don't laugh at him. They don't become discouraged and tell the child that he is hopeless. They are proud of his first two steps, even though he may have fallen down 100 times in the process. Each time he falls, the parents are there to help

and encourage him to keep trying. How about ourselves? When we look at others, do we give up on them when we see them fail? Or do we help them, encourage them to try again and congratulate them on their successful steps?

People who love unconditionally are free to love any person at any time, and even to love their enemies. When we can love those who reject and hate us, or commit wrongful actions against us, then our heart is free. This is true freedom.

Mature love requires effort. It is not automatic. Loving is an art and requires training and discipline just as any other skill. Good doctors, musicians, artists, and athletes spend countless hours in training in order to perfect their abilities and talents. How much more difficult is it to become a person capable of true love?



How do we become loving persons? In the same way that we become physically fit: by challenging our physical limitations. If we stop running when we become tired, does our body become stronger? If we stop loving someone when a relationship becomes difficult, then we won't develop our ability to love. If we don't make an effort to love others, we will become isolated and lonely people.

A mature person values interdependence more than independence, because he recognizes the supreme importance and value of properly relating to other people and things.

Love cannot exist without freedom. Love cannot be forced, bought, or claimed. Without freedom, we would be nothing more than sophisticated robots, lacking any true potential for love and creativity. Therefore, in order for love to exist in our life, we must voluntarily participate in creating ourselves, choosing the way of true love and goodness. We are responsible for our own spiritual growth and maturity.

"Responsibility" may not be your favorite word, but when you begin to understand what it really means, then you can appreciate it more. Responsibility is more than duties, obligations and things that we "must" do. Responsibility means our ability to create something new or choose our response to what life brings us.

We are free and creative beings, and therefore we cannot blame other people or circumstances for who we are. Habitually thinking, "If only I had more money," "If I could just have more time," "If I had better parents," "If only the economy were better" means we are waiting for other people to change or for our luck to change. If we keep waiting for the solution to be found outside ourselves, then chances are nothing will change in our life.

A responsible person thinks, "I can be wiser," "I will be more loving," "I am able to be more resourceful," "I can be more patient." We alone determine our capacity to love. You are the one who decides what kind of person you are, what kind of friend you are, what kind of husband or wife you will be, and what kind of parent you will be — by your response to what you know is true and right.

Of course, sometimes we fail to live up to our principles and potential, settling for just getting by without causing too much trouble. We may find we violate our conscience every day. However, if we encourage ourselves and others to live by the principle of true love, then we gradually will mature in our ability to give to others. Our conscience will govern our body. We will achieve integrity over time.

Of course, we are free to take the path in life we choose. But what do wealth, power, freedom and education mean if we're not truly happy with ourselves and our relationships with others? If we *choose* to use our creativity, freedom, and responsibility for the sake of true love and goodness, then the doors will open to endless fulfillment and happiness.

For Your
Journal



Describe an experience through which you grew. Why did you grow and in what way?



To read

Jonathan Livingston Seagull, by Richard Bach