

## HUMAN GROWTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGE

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Some years ago, a military unit was lost in the Swiss Alps. They were surrounded by cold and snow. They were at a standstill. Every way they turned seemed like a dead end. Their food was running short. A blizzard was on the way. Their situation was pretty bleak. Then a soldier discovered a map in his backpack. Using the map, the troops found a path to safety. It was only after finding refuge that one of the soldiers discovered that the map was of the Pyrenees mountains, not the Alps.

My subject is human growth and change, and the point of this story is that sometimes it's more important to move than to know for sure that we're moving in the right direction. In our day and age, if you're not moving and growing, you're falling hopelessly behind.

This story could serve as an analogy for people who may find themselves at a point in their lives when they are not finding adequate satisfaction or fulfillment. There are a lot of ways a person could deal with this situation. He could try to push the issue out of his awareness, he could come up with excuses for taking no action-or he could try to move in the direction of a better life. Aside from not knowing exactly what to do, there are numerous messages a person could feed himself at a time like this:

"What is happiness, anyway?", or "Who am I to demand happiness when nobody else I know seems happy?", or "Whoever said life is supposed to be fulfilling?" Then he can grab a beer from his refrigerator, park himself in front of the television, and hope that he falls asleep before this nonsense bothers him any more.

So the issue is growth and change versus stagnation. Why is growth important? The answer, as I see it, comes back to the question of what may seem to be a trite, worn-out phrase, even a cliché to some people: The Meaning of Life. Victor Frankl, a world famous psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor, wrote a book about his experiences in the Nazi death camp-MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING. One of his key points is that the meaning of life shouldn't be seen as some abstract notion, but instead should be a concrete, specific purpose which demands our commitment.

Many people might agree with this essential idea, but say that what we need is to live for something "greater than ourselves." I question this. What is your "self"? Is it your physical body? Is it the personality you present to the social world? Is it your genetic make-up? No, in the most fundamental sense, your self is your MIND - the same thing you're using right now to process my words, to compare my thoughts with your own memories and experiences, while you monitor what's going on around you as well as inside you. Your self is that marvelous piece of hardware that builds skyscrapers, that took us to the moon, that split the atom. People often say that we need to believe in something "big." For me, there isn't anything bigger in the universe than the amazing power of human intelligence. And that, for me, is the meaning of life-making the best possible use of your rational faculty. And that's exactly why growth is so important.

But the question remains: why is it that so many people don't seem to want to grow, prefer to stagnate, even in many cases waste their lives. There are many reasons, but one important answer has to do with the very complexity of the mind, specifically the subconscious mind-that part of the mind which registers and stores all our thoughts and experiences. From our earliest years, we are all given numerous negative messages "don't do this," "don't do that"-e.g., don't run in the hallway, don't play in the living room, don't make so much noise, et. al. Sometimes we're also given lovely little sentiments such as "you're hopeless", "you'll never amount to anything." Then we go to church and hear about the sinfulness of our desires along with negative moral imperatives such as "thou shalt not" this and that. When we become adults, not surprisingly, we get more negative messages about all the many things we cannot do.

In fact, we are constantly being bombarded with negative messages every day, from all sides. The only exception to this is art-movies, books, paintings, music-which rarely, not often, can inspire us to greatness. Seldom do we hear ideas about the possibilities open to us or the wonderful goals we might accomplish. Instead, we are told about all the things we cannot do. These add up until our subconscious becomes a storehouse of negativity which not only undermines our motivation, but gives us the passive sense of life as happening to us, not something open to our choices and decisions.

We are what we think, and our expectations have a way of enacting themselves into reality. But the good news is that our conscious minds can take control of this process and, with a lot of hard work, reprogram our negative mind-set with a more positive perspective. It takes hard work, but we can rethink our negative ideas and replace them with more positive views on who we are and what we can accomplish. It isn't easy, considering the negative bombardment constantly coming at us, but if we will apply the effort consistently we can change our self-concept and learn to reach for the best within us. It takes hard work, but we can learn to challenge and screen out negative messages, allowing our lives to follow a more hopeful kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. It takes hard work, but we can choose to use our subconscious as a kind of mental map, which can then help us move in the direction of the life we deserve.

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