

## "THE DYNAMICS OF GROWTH"

### INTRODUCTION

In his novel, The First Circle, Alexander Solzhenitsyn describes life in an elite Russian prison camp at the end of World War II. Two men are talking. One of them, a middle-aged man by the name of Sologdin, has already spent twelve years in this prison camp. Endless years stretch ahead of him. He has lost his wife, his children, his property - all but his life. Yet, strangely, the experience has not embittered him nor has it destroyed his spirit, but rather distilled his humanity to a deep, rare wisdom.

The second man, Nerzhin, is a brilliant young scientist in his early years of imprisonment. He seeks out the old man for insight into his own years of deprivation stretching out ahead of him.

"Sologdin looked past Nerzhin into the zone, at the thick little clumps of bushes all furry with frost and just touched by the gentle pink of the East. The sun seemed uncertain whether to show itself or not. Sologdin's face, drawn and lean, with his reddish-grey, curly little beard and his short mustache, revealed some ancient Russian quality....

'How to face difficulties?' he declared again. 'In the realm of the unknown, difficulties must be viewed as a hidden treasure! Usually, the more difficult - the better! It's not as valuable if your difficulties stem from your own inner struggle. But when difficulties arise out of increasing objective resistance, that's marvelous!'"

Sologdin continues,

"Failures must be considered the cue for further application of effort and concentration of will power. And if substantial efforts have already been made, the failures are all the more joyous. It means that our crowbar has struck the iron box containing the treasure. Overcoming the increased difficulties is all the more valuable because in failure the growth of the person performing the task takes place in proportion to the difficulty encountered!"

As I tried to visualize that prison - its pygmy-souled authorities with the power of life and death over a giant-souled human being like Sologdin - I realized with great clarity that things like power, position, prestige, status, success, authority are not finally what matter at all. What could Sologdin have of any of these things? What matters is not success or failure, but growth - the growth of the human being. That's what is left when it's all over....when it's just beginning.

What matters for you and for me in our various prisons of age...of health...of work....of sex...of family....of circumstances - all that limits and confines us - what matters is not success or failure in any quantitative sense, but growth.....Not what we are by reason of external achievement, but who we are becoming in terms of the humanity growing within us.

What prison am I in? What prison are you in? What is now binding you - restricting, confining, restraining you? Growth - the growth of the human being.

RECOGNITION This powerful novel of a man's humanity growing like a flower out of a rock, in the midst of grotesque inhumanities, laid bare for me the dynamics of growth.

There are two such dynamics. The first dynamic of growth is recognition. Growth begins when we recognize that difficulties are opportunities to grow, that failure is an open door to the future, that the iron box of frustration contains treasures of insight and strength.

Paul put all of this recognition into religious terminology when he wrote in his Letter to the Corinthians,

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

Paul is encouraging us to recognize, at the heart of our death-dealing experience (and who among us is immune) - the life-giving power of God. Not that God sends difficulties upon us, but that He is hidden in them as the power to endure, the power to overcome, the power to grow. Growth begins when we recognize God in our difficulties.

But so often we're blind and deaf to God's presence in our difficulties because of our own pain or anger, resentment, self-pity. We indulge in what may be called the "if only" syndrome. You know how it goes. If only I had another job. If only my boss would move or be transferred or have a heart attack. If only I could make another \$10,000 a year. If only I weren't short and pimply-faced, or tall and awkward. If only my parents would listen to me. If only my kids would do what I tell them to do. If only I didn't have allergy, so little hair, nervous colon, omnipresent in-laws, and teeth decaying in my mouth. If only I had a large apartment, or a car to drive. If only, if only, if only. Growth begins when we stop saying "if only" and start to recognize that difficulties are opportunities to grow.

Think, for a moment, of failure. Failure is the greatest teacher of all. It strips away illusions that will go by no other process. It makes us realize that some things don't work. And it can force us to try new approaches and to think new habits. It breaks us loose of the blocks, the prison, the routine, the habits, the rigidities that we just get sucked into and held by. When we face up to a failure, we discover resources within us that enable us to learn, to overcome, to grow. Growth begins when we recognize failure as an open door to the future, when we recognize that the iron box of frustration contains treasures of insight and strength.

Whenever you have an enforced period of confinement, when you're sick, or for whatever reason, have a lot of time alone by yourself, you have a chance to think, to reflect, to cultivate your own depths, a chance to keep company with your own soul. This can be a very healing, quieting time. People in hospitals and nursing homes, people who live alone, know about this kind of solitude. Prisoners know about it. So did this brilliant young scientist, Nerzhin. Of him it was said that "Because of his inner life...intense inner life...he was free

of envy". That's an intriguing line. "Because of his intense inner life...."

How does one develop "an intense inner life". I believe that prayer is the key to it. Prayer is the anguished longing to grow in difficulties...it's the patience born of unfulfilled hopes. Prayer is appropriating the fruits of failure, believing that there is a treasure in every iron box....and the courage to keep on searching for it, the confidence that at the rock bottom of everything every event and person, is God. Prayer is taking the time to remember this and to keep on hoping it. Growth, I believe, begins when we recognize God at the heart of our difficulties.

RESPONSE And growth continues when we respond to God in our difficulties. Response is the second dynamic of growth. Sologdin continues speaking to this young man, Nerzhin, saying:

"And now listen: the rule of the Final Inch! The realm of the Final Inch. The work has been almost completed....the goal almost attained.....but the quality of the thing is not quite right...in that moment of fatigue and self-satisfaction it is especially tempting to leave the work without having attained the apex of quality. In fact, the rule of the Final Inch consists in this: not to shirk this crucial work. Not to postpone it...and not to mind the time spent on it, knowing that one's purpose lies not in completing things faster, but in the attainment of perfection".

Growth, in other words, continues when we wrestle difficulties into opportunities, wringing success out of failure, crack open the iron box and get the treasure. Paul put it in religious terminology when he wrote,

"....we do not lose heart. Thou our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen".

Growth continues when we respond....when we respond to God in our difficulties when we decide: when we choose, when we act, when we say "yes" or "no".

SAYING NO Sometimes we respond to God by taking negative action, deciding not to do something, saying no to a sure thing. Gay Talese, in his book about the New York Times, "The Kingdom and the Power" tells a marvellous story about Adolph Ochs, the publisher of the Times in the 1920's. He says,

"Ochs had an instinct for avoiding the tempting of business.. At one time he was so short of money, that to save a few pennies, he would sometimes wander through the Times shutting off the lights over desks not in use - and yet, when a prominent New Yorker - a trusted friend - offered him a contract for \$150,000 worth of advertising with no strings attached, Ochs refused. He did so on the theory that he needed the revenue so desperately that he might adjust his operation to the windfall and he was unwilling to trust himself as to what he might do if, after that had happened, he was threatened with a cancellation of the contract. Ochs was a very human man with his share of human frailties, and knowing this, he was wary of the slightest twitch of temptation in himself".

We should be as careful of the integrity of our humanity as Ochs was of the integrity of his paper. I admire that exercise of the will power in the realm of the Final Inch.

Today, we do not know how not to have everything. We know little about self-denial, even less about discipline. Yet, it is doubtful if major achievement in any field, especially that of growing to our full human potential, can be accomplished without discipline, pain, self-denial, of one sort or another.

This ability to say "no" to ourselves today for the sake of some better tomorrow, this capacity to postpone gratification for future fulfillment, this (hard) courage to make choices and to stand by them, to know our own weaknesses, to anticipate them, not to allow them to reign over us, not to let the glorious idea of doing your own thing be carte blanche to do anything - such ability to say NO is critical to growth. We may not be captains of our souls, but neither are we slaves of our circumstances or our psyches. We are responsible for what we are becoming.

SAYING YES Sometimes we respond to God by taking positive action, deciding to do something...saying "yes" to some wild possibility. Svetlana, Stalin's daughter, while in India, chanced to read Chester Bowle's book, Ambassador's Report, and was struck by this line:

"It is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration".

And with those words burning into her being, on the spur of the moment, she called a taxi and had the driver take her from the Soviet section of town to the United States Embassy, where she asked for asylum. In a moment, all the frustration and longing of her forty years were lanced by those words, and she decided to leave the old life behind her for a daring leap into the unknown future.

So, you and I can lay the foundation for the renewal of a family, or a life, or a congregation, a nation - by one courageous action. The realm of the Final Inch may call for us to look for things unseen, to jump over a fence, to change a job, to do a new thing, to think a new thought, to be radically open now - in the present - to the Spirit of God who is alive and leading us forward.

FINAL WORD April is the month when growth becomes so apparent to us in the world of nature. Growth can occur in human lives, our lives, too. We are in charge of our lives. We can do great things. John Gardner said recently that "one of the reasons why mature people stop learning is that they become less and less willing to risk failure". But without great risks there can be no great rewards. We cannot ooze into the future. We have to leap into it. Sometimes we grow literally by leaps and bounds. Sometimes our pygmy selves grow into giant selves by taking just one small step of hope.

I wonder...is there some small step of hope just waiting to be taken in your life? Is there some wild possibility before you now to which you really want to say "yes"? Then say it...and grow...

PRAYER As we witness the miracle of growth and new life taking place all around us, O God, help us in our lives to be sensitive to the dynamics of human growth, recognizing thee in all of our problems, frustrations, difficulties and failures and then make us willing to respond to thy probing in our lives - to say "no" to some things and "yes" to others - that we may grow in the likeness of thy Son.