

WHAT GROWTH INCLUDES

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Sitting here with our beating hearts and rhythmic breath, feeling the warmth and comfort of people nearby, processing what is being said—all of this made possible by millions, if not billions of years of evolution. Each of us has a marvel of a brain, really three brains, nested, in the manner of Russian dolls. Our oldest brain is reptilian, controlling our heartbeat, respiration, and basic instincts. This reptilian brain is nested within our early mammalian or limbic brain, the seat of feelings and unconscious value judgments. This limbic brain is nested within our neocortex. Found in primates and humans it enables consciousness and abstract thought. In any diagram of the brain this nesting is evident. As we evolve a new brain it transcends and includes the old brain. And in our lives we know this to be true: the primitive impulse to save ourselves precedes the mammalian impulse to save a loved-one, which precedes the human impulse to save a stranger, all humanity, even all life.

In physical development this nested growth is obvious. There are milestones, and if one isn't reached at the appropriate time, there is concern. For perhaps thousands of years we've noticed: a child must crawl before she can walk, and she must walk before she can run. How much did we consider, though, that a crawl is contained within a walk? We are simply upright with the same rhythmic movement of arms and legs, pumping us along. And the same is true when we run. Contained in a run is that rhythmic pumping action of a crawl, and the upright manner of a walk. We transcend, but always include as well; it is a sign of health and wellbeing. No growth is wasted or squandered. All of it is necessary, and all of it continues to unfold.

Growth is always both expected and amazing. Think of language. It begins with simple sounds, which become nested in words, which are then nested within phrases and sentences—and amazingly we can communicate. Our brain, our locomotion, and our language, are just some of the ways we grow by transcending and including what has come before. This same manner of growth occurs emotionally, socially, and spiritually as well—with incredible leaps at times.

The philosopher, Ken Wilbur, has a detailed model of spiritual development. He lays out a nested process by which what is whole at one moment becomes part of a larger whole at the next. According to him, we move from a mythic stage of spiritual development, to a rational stage where reason attempts to demythologize all religion. From there we move into a pluralistic stage where we understand there are multiple ways of seeing reality. At this stage we co-exist, but there is no absolute truth. From there we move to an integral stage where we see how each previous stage points to an essential truth—and we begin to hold those together. We move from there to a transpersonal stage recognizing that the cosmos and I are one.

We are always more than we imagine ourselves to be. It is something we continually discover. As we develop spiritually our sense of self expands to include life's history. Our bodies, our lives hold all of it. And that ability to hold all of it also enables us to occasionally

transcend all of it. Where we have been and what we have been must be brought along at each instance of fresh transformation. Transcendence is made possible by the inclusion of what has come before.

As a child, one of my favorite places to play was a cemetery up the hill from my house. It wasn't one of those garden cemeteries with the feel of an arboretum, but the more familiar variety, with a few original trees left standing. In spite of this, it was called "Forest Hill." It's striking to me now how there were never any adults around when we were there. Only a couple of rules learned and remembered over time: no climbing on the gravestones, and don't touch the flowers covering the new graves. I learned that after returning home with a beautiful bunch of flowers for my mother.

At Forest Hill we could enjoy our bikes and sleds without the worry of cars, and it was the best place to fly kites. One kite-flying day stands out to me. I was about nine years old at the time and it was at the highest spot that we gathered: me, the Gallo brothers from across the street, and a dozen other neighborhood children. Michael and Robert brought the kite and we had such an easy time getting it in the air. There was a current that quickly caught and tugged at it, pulling it almost sideways from the top of the hill. It was all we could do to hold on, and soon we were out of string, so the Gallo brothers jumped on their bikes to buy more from the local store, and when they returned we attached the string with care. We did this three times that day. By late afternoon we couldn't see the kite anymore.

But the tug on the string remained, now connected to something invisible and powerful. It had taken on a life of its own, a mission we could only imagine. I don't remember how that day in the cemetery ended, whether we finally released the kite or whether it got away. What I do remember is at dinner that night learning how people in the valley of downtown had stared up at our kite with wonder. They had seen what we could see no longer—and there was something thrilling about that. Most of those people had no idea of the kite's origin, that cemetery where the town's past lay resting and the tug of the future was impossible for its children to visualize.

Our past supports and frees us, it always has. We always stand on the remains and the completeness of what has come before, and fly kites from that vantage point—often for others to see.

True growth occurs when we admit the past, when we admit the fullness that has come before. And it is a fullness upon which we must rely. One man in Unitarian history seems to have embodied this more completely than most. The Reverend James Freeman Clarke, whose ministry began in the 1830s, had an amazing ability to embrace the past, admit the present, and open to a future he could barely imagine. A colleague said of Clarke, he associated closely both with radicals and conservatives: with the former, because of his faith in progress; with the latter, because of his respect for the progress of past times-- which institutions preserved.

Clarke was a rarity, one of only two ministers who considered himself a Transcendentalist Christian. It was not a popular stance, to both transcend and include religious identities.

Yet, this traditional religious understanding now nested within a burgeoning religious movement seemed to enable an individual, and then a societal leap. Clarke stood out as one, sometimes the only one, to encourage and defend the speech of those otherwise silenced or marginalized. Among them, the early feminist, Margaret Fuller, and the outspoken abolitionist, Theodore Parker. Perhaps Clarke recognized that we are here in all our fullness, not a contradiction but a compilation. He admitted that about himself and he admitted that about others as well. When the completeness of who we are is embraced and engaged, we are able to transcend a previous stage of development. What began then, with his support, continues to reverberate today.

People able to tether themselves to the past and fly beyond where they can see are rare and precious. Most of us become afraid, or have trouble embracing the fullness of who we really are and can be. Think of how thrilling, but also frightening the concept of evolution must have been, this idea that we transcend and include what has come before. There must have been resistance and pressure to embrace our monkey past, now amazingly contained in our humanity. Later there was the pressure to admit a reptilian impulse for life and death that we contain as well. That one we struggled with even more and still do, preferring to say we have grown beyond it—but of course we hadn't and we haven't. And perhaps our denial is part of the problem. We have transcended, but that part of us must be included if we are to grow. We cannot deny where we have been without also denying who we are. In fact, it's dangerous. We fool ourselves at our own peril. How many wars have been fought, how much destruction have we wrought, because we believe we are beyond reptilian impulses, instead of respecting they are part of us?

We are our biggest danger when we deny our past, and we are our greatest hope when we admit it. Think of the strides we have made in dealing with racism and marriage equality, even with the environment. In all these areas we have more to do, but we have begun because we have begun to be honest about who we are and have been. Our past is not always glorious and easy to embrace. It is sometimes ugly and hard to look at. There are times we would prefer that parts of our past not be included. There are times we would love to keep it the shadows.

Carl Jung, a disciple and critic of Freud, posited that we have an individual shadow, those rejected and disowned parts of the self, as well as a societal shadow, those parts that society collectively rejects and disowns. The shadow can be understood as the part of our identity--some portion of our historical whole--that does not fit our image of who we are. That is why we can fight for our individual freedom and deny that of others at the same time. It is why we can pollute and pillage the Earth at the same time we praise God's creation. We are not above who we have been. We may have transcended that in some respects, but we must include it as well, if we are to grow. Jung suggests we learn to "eat our shadow," by bringing conscious awareness to its content. How better to incorporate it so that it comes to sustain us?

Author and marine biologist David Whyte tells the story of what happens when we forget what we used to rely upon. The Maxwellton Stream meets the waters of Puget Sound at a lazy curve near a marshland. Thousands of chum and coho salmon used to migrate up that

little stream until 1910, when a tidal gate was built to drain the marsh behind it. At that moment, the salmon run that had been ongoing for ten thousand years, since the time of the last glaciation, suddenly came to an end. Salmon, as we know, build the next generation on the foundation of their past. When that tidal gate closed the first time, letting the marsh drain into the ocean, but not allowing the tide back in—all that had come before was kept out as well.

Those fish must have died on the other side of that gate, bunched up and longing to connect with their origin and their future. Wisdom held for thousands of years, the force of life flowing from the seas, the same seas from which we emerged—suddenly denied. Whyte writes, “How much satisfaction [the builders] would have had that long-ago day they fitted the tidal gate. How they would have gone to bed without a thought for what they had brought to an end, just as I would have done if I had grown up in that time. Just as I was now, sensing some gate I had built, halting an inner migration, a tidal gate closing off the creative flood, put together in a short year, by my unthinking busy hands.”

We are sometimes unthinking in what we disregard. And we are sometimes under the illusion something can be discarded, that a remnant does not always remain. We need reminding from people like environmentalist, Linda Hogan, that nothing can be “thrown away.” Because there is no “away.” Everything that was once whole remains forever part of the whole—sometimes in tatters and sometimes a ghostly presence, a haunting reminder of what we sought to or unthinkingly ignored.

I wonder where we might be doing that now? Is there a past of privilege or dependency that we would we rather deny or minimize? What of us lurks in the shadows spoiling the environment, undermining social equality, justifying violence--keeping us from being all that we are and all that we need to be? Perhaps we should think of that kite string as seven generations long, and see that we are always flying it from sacred ground, because there is no other.

We must relentlessly pursue inclusion, because we only grow when we transcend and include. Life always builds on itself, with a trajectory toward greater complexity and greater inclusion. And it is our best hope—because eventually there is a creative leap. It happened when sounds became language and enabled communication. Some think it is happening now with our evolving consciousness of unity. A sense of oneness that changes the way we think of ourselves in the cosmos, maybe even the way we think of ourselves *as* the cosmos. And it may be our best hope, a spiritual leap giving us a new perspective on our world and our selves that could bring about real and significant change.

We gather here today with the hope of flying a kite until we can no longer see it. We gather here today with the hope that our full history be acknowledged so that something truly new can arise. And we gather here today with the hope that a creative leap in human consciousness will support and free all life, beginning with our own.