

The Slow Evolving Process of Personal Growth

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People who participate in a therapy, counseling or life coaching experience, are very special. They deserve to feel proud. They are choosing to invest their time, energy and money for self-improvement and personal growth. Setting goals, overcoming challenges and experiencing growth are important aspects of a healthy life.

Resistance to such activities are rampant in all of us. Parts of us want to grow and other parts want to maintain the status quo. Life becomes a tug-a-war between these competing parts. The proverbial “yoyo syndrome” is the most graphic demonstration of these opposite gravitational pulls from within. Anyone who has ever gained weight, lost it and then gained it back, plus or minus three pounds, knows just what I mean. Same with quitting any other unhealthy behavior. For those engaged in a personal growth experience the challenge is to stay the course. Many get frustrated, quit prematurely and do not accomplish their goals. Resistance forces take advantage of our impatience, whisper “waste of time” messages and short-circuit our motivation. This is especially true at a time when we are all in a hurry.

A recent research study showed that Americans are more impatient than ever. The dial-up wait for e-access can seem like the e is for eternity. Waiting on a line in the supermarket or gas station is intolerable. Sitting in a doctor’s office for twenty or thirty minutes unconstitutional. Taking the time needed for personal growth to occur can quickly become an “I give up” experience. The purpose of this brief article is to encourage you to slow down in all zones and stay the course in your bid to modify your self and your life.

The Personal Growth Process

For over thirty years I have observed that personal growth evolves slowly. It needs to be seeded, fertilized and given time to take root and grow. Like grapes growing on a vine in Sonoma or Burgundy, there is a reliable cycle that needs to be respected. It can’t be speeded up.

This is especially true when tackling lifelong themes, deeply engrained habits or quirks of personality. Learning to change a self-defeating nature, finally manage an easily triggered temper, reverse a tendency to see life and self in a negative light, or overcome panic and anxiety problems can not happen quickly. It will take time to understand the origins, resolve deep seated hurts, learn new tools and strategies, incorporate them so they are strong enough to override reflexive ways of responding and chose these new responses consistently. As I always say, “I wish I could wave my magic pen and make it all go away and be different right now. But I can’t. We have some work to do. It will take awhile until we reach your goal - but we will reach them.” I also say, “It takes

patience to be my patient,” in the only instance I use that term. Counselors and therapistst see people, not patients!

The Life Process

It also takes patience to live comfortably in a world that doesn't always work very well. Even in simpler times than today, patience was a virtue worth having, given the complex contours of everyday life.

When you look at life from this particular angle everything is a process that takes time to evolve. Witness the human species and it's evolution over more years than we can imagine. Look at the cycle of our lives from helpless infant to child to teen to adult to older adult to helpless adult. It is a magnificent rise and fall of an evolving process.

Look at science and technology and you will see a slow, ever evolving process of understanding. Both my father and father-in-law who died young from coronary blockages in 1960 & 1967 respectively, would have been alive and fine in today's high tech world. Yet, the sixties were "high tech" compared to medical and scientific understanding at the turn of the twentieth century.

Look at computer technology as a slow evolutionary process as well. When I worked for IBM in the sixties, computers were huge boxes, filling icy cold rooms only available to large companies and universities with deep pockets. Now there are hand held devices available to anyone with a few hundred dollars. How they evolve over the next forty years is anyone's guess. We know for sure that they will evolve as the "growth" process continues.

Look no further than the world of business to see the slow process of evolution. For better and for worse we have gone from Mom and Pop shops to superstores from luncheonettes to fast food, from simple restaurants to gourmet cuisine, from American food (with Chinese on Sunday night) to a veritable United Nations of choices. All of this has evolved slowly over the last half century. The same is true of a person's career that typically evolves over decades. Very few begin at the top

Looking within business shows a similar growth process. IBM and every other major company have shed many skins as they have slowly slithered along. Products and services evolve as do manufacturing and marketing approaches. Even accounting rules change as we have recently seen in higher accountability standards through the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. Whole markets eventually evolve and change as we are seeing right now in China, India and Pakistan.

In fact, show me a zone of life and I will show you a slow, evolving growth process. Music? A no brainer. Photography? A no filmer. Animal breeding, building construction, film making, water purification, looking for oil, etc., all share the evolving process of change and growth. It is a clear that all progress occurs over time in an evolving way. Why should human growth and progress be any different?

From this angle, life is about going from one evolution of advancement to another. Medicines, computers, spaceships and just about everything else goes from one stage of growth to the next to the next. Yes, a can of peas is still a can of peas, but how they were grown, preserved, packaged and shipped are all different.

Committing To a Slow Personal Growth Process

The same is true with people. With or without therapy, counseling or coaching we evolve as we go. Those interventions help us to evolve in a healthier, growth oriented manner so that we truly “get better with age” and don’t keep repeating unhealthy ways and habits over and over.

At some point in the self-help process you may become bored, frustrated, impatient, tired, etc. Discuss that with the person with whom you are working. Be open. In all likelihood they will understand. They have been there themselves. They have dealt with many other people who have been there as well.

Talking about the frustrations of the personal growth process typically helps ease them. Sometimes it leads to some change in direction (i.e., let’s go to every other week, let’s take a two week break and then get going again or any other creative stimulant to the process) or approach. Sometimes, it is a signal to change the facilitator, as you’ve accomplished as much as you can with that person.

However, if you just leave a “midnight message,” canceling your next session, never return and don’t get involved in an alternative personal growth process, one thing is pretty certain. The likelihood that you can achieve your goals is low. A few people can do it on their own, but the majority of us need a stimulus, a focus, a prodder, an encourager, and a learning channel through which to challenge our most frustrating areas. It is hard and slow enough with a helper. By ourselves, it is even harder and slower, if not impossible. Once we accept that personal growth (and all important areas of life) are slow, evolving processes, it is easier to stay focused, motivated and active in a therapy, counseling or coaching experience.

I know of what I am speaking from direct personal experience, as well as my professional observations. When, I had anxiety and panic disorder in 1973, those words were not yet in our everyday vocabulary. It was an age of ignorance. The many brands of therapy that exist today and the meds that help the cause were in the developmental stages. They had not yet evolved. TV had not yet evolved to Oprah and Dr. Phil raising our awareness of these types of problems. I took the slow boat in a five year, three times a week, on the couch, psychoanalysis.

When I would get frustrated with the fact that my pain was acute and no gain was apparent, my analyst would say, “We must keep analyzing. It will take time, but eventually you will be OK.” He was right and I have been symptom free for over twenty-five years. I guess, in his own way, he was teaching me about the slow, evolving process of personal growth. I hope I have helped you to more clearly understand it as well. Stay with your personal goals. Keep moving forward slowly. No matter what, never give up. Never!