



PROMOTING PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL CHANGE AND GROWTH

Kevin McClone, Psy.D.

Life is all about change. Sometimes that change is the result of external circumstances such as our recent U.S. economic downturn, traumatic natural disasters, job loss or a sudden illness. Some changes come as we transition through the life cycle stages of growth. At other times change comes in the form of a relationship breakup or some addictive pattern or over-dependency that leaves us feeling stuck and unable to cope. Some changes involve our active pursuit of change and growth such as learning a new skill, overcoming a bad habit or entering a new profession. Whether these changes are thrust upon us by external circumstances or involve desired choices, the challenge is never an easy one and more lasting and meaningful change takes time, perseverance and courage. Our personal responses to change can either propel us to further growth or deeper stagnation, depending on how we respond to these changing realities.

Two authors, James O. Prochaska and Carlo C. DiClemente, who dealt extensively with the dynamics of addiction and change, found that for change to be most effective, it must be seen in a holistic context where any single pattern of behavior occurs within the realm of a person's entire life. Therefore changing habits has important implications for multiple areas of our life. A holistic perspective is needed in order to understand fully the process of human intentional behavioral change. This holistic perspective involves the current life situation, one's cognitive beliefs and attitudes, social relationships and enduring personal characteristics. In other words, change is most effective when all of these areas are addressed in some meaningful way. For example, the person who struggles to overcome an obsessive compulsive pattern like overeating or substance abuse comes to realize over time that to maintain longer term recovery they need to change their whole life situation, beliefs, relationships and even some fundamental characteristics of their personality. Likewise, those most susceptible to relapse into addiction have fewer social supports, stay stuck in old beliefs and cling to dysfunctional or unhealthy relationships.

Indeed the mystery of the human condition's struggle with change is well captured in this famous quote attributed to St. Paul, "For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" (Romans 7:19).

Fullness of life and love comes when we find the grace to embrace the many changes of life. I myself have a love/hate relationship with change. I have both welcomed and resisted change in its many forms. I can recall some positive changes that I made in my life and many experiences of avoiding change out of fear, anxiety, or lack of confidence. All of these experiences give me the opportunity to learn about the process of coping with change. When I have been more open to change in my life, more willing to seek the good and the growth in this new situation, my life has become more full and abundant. Yet, often the fear or anxiety that change provokes in me reflects my own perceived threat of loss. What will this new situation be like? How can I manage and cope with this new reality? At times I fear some loss of identity or self-image that I cling to protect. As much as I have grown in my life because of change, I still find that my first impulse is often one of resistance. Indeed change is often marked with discomfort and anxiety and in many cases may be quite painful. As a result, I may feel drawn to escape or retreat to the seemingly safe grounding of old predictable behaviors and patterns. Yet in reflecting on my own resistance and that of many of my clients in therapy, I can see that while understandable, resistance, when pervasive, only serves to inhibit my growth and in many cases lead to further regression.

Have you ever wondered how some people seem to make changes in their life in the direction of positive growth with relative ease and others seem doomed to repeat old patterns despite their best intentions? Why is change so difficult for me and so many others? Why do I so deeply desire to make changes and yet why is it so hard? I find hope in the scriptures. Indeed the mystery of the human condition's struggle with change is well captured in this famous quote attributed to St. Paul, "For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" (Romans 7:19). Like St. Paul, at times we adapt well to changes in our lives and seek growth and new life and at other times resist it and move toward stagnation and old regressed modes of behavior.

What is your own honest stance toward growth and change? Do you

recognize change as a normal, natural, and necessary part of life? Do you seek to be curious and creative amidst the often chaotic feelings that surround significant change or instead run for the hills in fear and anxiety? In this article, I will explore how the three key psycho-spiritual principals of awareness, acceptance and action can contribute to a meaningful and positive experience of change. I will end by examining several barriers that can undermine that movement toward positive change and growth.

PRINCIPLE 1: AWARENESS

"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." (Leo Tolstoy)

"A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don't know ourselves! Why, thirty or forty skins, as thick and as hard as an ox's or bear's, cover the soul. Go into your ground and learn to know yourself there."
(Meister Eckhart)

Awareness is a fundamental principle of holistic psycho-spiritual change and growth. Just what needs to change often seems mysterious to us. Yet, it's hard to change if we don't know the problem or what it is that needs to change. In psychology we believe that an accurate assessment of the problem or an accurate diagnosis is the beginning of successful change and intervention. So a growing self-awareness is crucial. Many people come to counseling or spiritual direction aware that they are not at peace and desire some change or better way of coping with changing circumstances, but may feel stuck or lost as to how to proceed. At times their awareness is strong but often it may be vague and illusive. I have come to believe that the desire to change by reaching out for help marks an important first step. Gradually in a relationship of trust, people begin to listen more deeply to the still voice within that yearns to change in the same way that a flower draws toward the sun to grow and blossom. Indeed much

of therapy and spiritual direction seeks to create an environment that allows the natural impulse for growth and new life to spring forth.

The more we are able to reflect honestly on our lives and patterns of behavior, the more our own self-awareness and mindfulness deepens. The goal here is to see reality as it is, not as we wish it to be, but truly as it really is. As Thomas Merton stated, "there is no spirituality divorced from reality." The more that we come to embrace our truest selves with our strengths and limitations in a more balanced perspective, the deeper and more authentic our spirituality becomes.

Change and growth flow from trusting relationships. In fact, most research on success in therapy has consistently shown that the factor that most contributes to change in a positive growth direction is not the method of therapy, but the quality of the relationship between the client and therapist. To become aware means to slow down and limit the various distractions and noise that keep a person from deeper self-awareness. In this fast-paced age of cyber-technology and information overload, quiet spaces are rare and must be consciously pursued. Solitude is often the birthing place of more intimate connections with self, others and God. Yet this solitude must be actively pursued. Those most fearful of change often avoid solitude for it confronts them with the enemy in the mirror, themselves. Spiritual writers often speak of this process as uncovering the true self and recognizing the false self. Jungian perspectives would speak of the persona or shadow-self that masks our deeper and truer identity. So as we slowly discover our deepest selves, we begin to change and grow in the direction of that which we most deeply value.

The problem is that we often look in the wrong places for how to change and grow. We expect others to change to suit us or wait for situations to get better. Yet how we think about, perceive and process events in life can make a huge difference. For me the first and most crucial step in effective behavioral change is this principle of awareness. This involves awareness of self, others, God and the world around me. How is this awareness developed? This is where

a psycho-spiritual disciplined practice of some sort comes into the picture. The examples are many: from journaling to daily meditations, to liturgy of the hours, to centering prayer, mindfulness practice in daily life and disciplined moments of attention. This can happen in the course of a busy life but demands a commitment to living consciously in the here and now.

For one client, a compulsive overeater, change came when she risked sharing her pain with a trusted other and joined a twelve-step recovery group for overeaters. Another discovered that change meant becoming more honest and aware of her tendency to run into unhealthy relationships with men as a way to avoid being alone. She gradually realized that her pattern only served to keep her from getting to know her deeper self and breaking the long-standing codependent cycle.

Part of awareness is the proper vision of possibilities. One way to discover this is through quiet times, silent spaces and retreat. Without such practice or built-in daily reflection change is difficult to sustain. In deepening awareness there is the opportunity to probe one's defenses, self-deception, and false self in order to uncover deeper truths and respond to the impulse to grow and change in positive directions. Thomas Merton speaks of this positive silence in his book *Love and Living* as "what pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two." It is what Paul Tillich called the "courage to be." In this disciplined creative silence, as we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of our own being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, and the authenticity of our everyday lives. (Merton, 1979).

PRINCIPLE 2: ACCEPTANCE

No real meaningful change happens without coming to acceptance. So once we become more fully aware of our deepest selves, we still have a fundamental choice rooted in our human freedom to deny this awareness or to embrace and accept it and thus pave the way toward meaningful action

and authentic change. Accepting challenges while still feeling fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence is no easy task. We are often drawn to what is familiar, and what is new can be frightening. Acceptance allows us to move toward serenity and peace of mind despite so many changes beyond our control. It allows us to direct our energies to courageously face the challenges of life by changing those things that we can while letting go of what we can't change.

Having worked with many recovering persons caught in the throws of addictive patterns, coming to acceptance is often a long and painful process that may include many relapses into old behaviors despite one's best intentions and desires. What factors help us to grow to accept our present reality and move forward toward positive growth and change? One principle of meaningful acceptance is a willingness to embrace our limitations and to ask others for help. For example, in addiction dynamics, no real meaningful change happens in one's recovery until a person hits bottom in which they become "sick and tired of being sick and tired." This is often the point at which the pain of continuing the addictive cycle becomes so great that it trumps their fear of change.

Acceptance implies a fundamental shift in perspective from blaming others to taking responsibility for oneself. As long as I look outside of myself to criticize, blame and react to others, I fail to take responsibility for my own thoughts, feelings and behavioral actions. To grow in acceptance allows us to discover who are our real friends and support. They are loved ones, be they spouses, family members, religious community members, counselors or spiritual guides who have the courage to challenge and confront us to grow to be our best selves. While I would like to say that I welcomed those changes prompted by trusted others, the truth is that I often viewed their promptings as intrusive and reacted defensively. At times, I would even blame the person calling me to change rather than face my own imperfections. This is where the relationship with self is crucial. Change involves growth in self-esteem and self-acceptance. Unless I can accept my

own weaknesses and failings, I will be hindered in my efforts to change and grow. This is where many people get stuck. It's not enough to have supportive others, we must feel good about ourselves and our abilities. This is what psychologists often refer to as self-efficacy.

PRINCIPLE 3: ACTION

"Every life is lived toward a horizon, a distant vision of what lies ahead. The quality of our action depends heavily on whether that horizon is dark with death or full of light and life." (Parker Palmer)

The fruit of one's awareness and acceptance becomes manifest in acts of truth, justice and love. The choice before us is to change and grow in the direction of life and love but we often choose death out of fear and trembling. William Bridges (2003), a leading author in the study of transition and change, aptly points out that every change starts with an ending and moves toward a new beginning through a wilderness of liminality he calls the neutral zone. What makes it hard to act in the disciplined movement of change is the fear of letting go of what was familiar. This demands some grief, letting go, and entry into the wilderness and liminality that mark all transitions. The bridge from the familiar to the not yet demands faith and hope in the promise of new life. This psycho-spiritual journey is often too overwhelming for people whose past wounds have blocked their ability to trust.

"He who moves not forward goes backward." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Positive change and growth involves taking some action and not standing still. Indeed to stand still is to move backwards. Even letting go is a process that demands some action. Many clients I have worked with in therapy often wonder why they keep repeating the same patterns over and over again. Often when we explore why change didn't happen or happen as expected it was because they failed to

take some action or follow up with some homework assignment or commitment. The truth is that change demands disciplined practice and new behaviors. One person described his regression every time he returned to his mother's home by saying, "Even though I'm a grown man, when I return to see my mother, I feel and act like I'm five years old." He found it hard to take suggestions on setting boundaries with his mother for fear of offending her and then complained every time he went back to visit. His resentment just grew more intense. It was only when he gradually came to react differently and limited his visits that he was able to experience change in the relationship.

"Some people change when they see the light, others when they feel the heat." (Caroline Schoeder)

Sometimes we are drawn to action through insight and illumination and sometimes because it just hurts too much to continue our resistance and old patterns. Some changes have happened in our lives as a way to avoid pain, further hurt or suffering. At other times what is moving us to change is our higher aspirations and vision of who we wish to be. In other words, at times we change because we are sick and tired of the same old behaviors or we desire to be more real and authentic in line with our deeper values. In many cases both motivations may be operating where the person desires both to avoid the pain of hurtful relationships while also seeking healthy and whole relationships in line with his or her higher aspirations.

One client shared with me how he grew to become more assertive by making the connection with how his past painful experiences of abuse blocked his capacity to trust and led to patterns of reacting to life rather than being proactive and taking responsible action. This reactive pattern limited his capacity for more intimate relationships with self, others and God. As he grew more to trust and share this pain and its impact in the present moment he came to embrace and own his grief and seek active healing. The problem with our past wounds is that they often block us from growing, yet the good news is that

the combined effect of deepening awareness, willing acceptance and creative and persistent action help to foster psycho-spiritual change and growth in the direction of our deepest call to love.

When we become aware of both the pain of old unhealthy habits and the desire for becoming more real and whole we are setting the stage to accept and embrace all of who we really are but also take the necessary action to become the persons that we wish to be. As the famous Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu said, "If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading." This is the challenge of genuine growth and change. In fact there is a well respected principle of change that uses the acronym of **GROW**, which is as follows:

- **GOAL SETTING:**
Clarifying the goal, breaking it down into manageable steps
- **REALITY:**
Considering where you are now and what is the gap. What resources can you tap into?
- **OPTIONS:**
Considering the different options to reach your goal
- **WAY FORWARD:**
Deciding on an action plan and sticking to it. Celebrating success and adjusting the plan as necessary.

OBSTACLES TO GROWTH AND CHANGE

Now that we have reflected on awareness, acceptance and action as three principles of psycho-spiritual change and growth, I will explore some of the key obstacles that seem to block that process of positive change and growth. Change doesn't come easily and to improve we must continually embrace change. There is a law of physics that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Two of the key barriers to growth and change are **denial and self-deception** that cloud our awareness and create a sort of blindness. A common way this is done is by blaming others for my situation. In psychological circles we might say the person has an **external locus of control**. A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes

of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation). In other words, what blocks my awareness and responsiveness is a **misdirected attention that lets me off the hook**. If I can lay the fault outside of me (external locus of control), then others need to change, not me. As Meister Eckhart said, "Why do you look without for that which is within?"

The maturing person embraces change and growth as a natural part of life and takes responsibility for one's choices and responses to life. Victor Frankl, survivor of Nazi concentration camps and the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, has reminded us that we always have a right to choose life, even in the midst of the most unspeakable horrors and death. Yet we know that **we can often resist change, become lazy or irresponsible, look for excuses, procrastinate, and get caught up in various other fears and defenses**. Indeed change takes us out of our comfort zone and we often feel threatened that we will lose something. The more we face change, the more the resistance we feel and the harder it is to change.

Another of the common barriers to personal growth and development is **past failures or wounds**. Often our past failures or bad events in our lives get in the way of personal growth and development. It is natural for our minds to dwell on such events, but only by moving past them can we truly grow as people and in our careers. Those negative incidents and wounds from the past must be put aside or healed in some meaningful way so we can accomplish our goals. This is no easy task, especially with victims of abuse or other traumas. Healing and change may be slow and arduous.

Fear is a major obstacle to change and growth and the one I hear people report most often in one form or another. We fear the unfamiliar and the new and cling to old habits and ways of being. We may fear a loss of self, for each major life change and loss calls forth a challenge to relearn our world. There is the powerful fear of ridicule and shame that makes us want to hide and escape. For some others it is the fear of success. Whatever the fear, the only way to

overcome it is to become more aware of it, embrace it and courageously take some action one day at a time to face it head on. This allows us to continue the process of growth through a gradual process of risk-taking actions. We expand our limited comfort zones and become more able to cope with life's changes. What change teaches us is that when we go with the flow rather than resist we grow and develop and when we resist we stunt our growth. Acceptance tells us that fear will always be there as long as we are alive.

Another key obstacle is a **lack of mentors or role models** who can assist us in the process of growth and change. Many twelve-step recovery groups witness to the powerful impact of having sponsors as mentors who with years of previous sobriety can model and guide newcomers into recovery through their own example of how they are changing one a day at a time. We all need people to rely on to share with and to learn from. Perhaps you want to identify a particular person to be a change partner who you see as accomplished in an area you desire to grow in. Accountability to another may be helpful. It is a key action step and found in relationships with formators, spiritual directors, counselors, coaches, mentors and other guides.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In sum, we are called to a generative vocation to embrace love and life to the full. This call is one that demands a deepening intimacy with self, others and God. An intimacy that, as Erik Erikson notes, allows us to meet the demands for change in ways that don't compromise our personal integrity. This growing intimacy assists us in being able to embrace life's many changes and challenges. Here courage and perseverance are key. Keeping our eye on the goal and not losing heart is crucial. Remembering what was driving us initially and recapturing the vision of love can keep us from giving in. Teachers, mentors, counselors and spiritual directors committed to our psycho-spiritual growth and positive change can assist us greatly on the journey by cultivating an atmosphere of care and openness that allow the seeds of deeper awareness, acceptance and action to be watered and to blossom.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Kevin P. McClone is a licensed clinical psychologist and director of the institute for sexuality studies located on the campus of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has worked for more than twenty years in the teaching, counseling and health care fields.

