

From Anger to Gratitude... Growth in Spiritual Maturity

Introduction

Spiritual maturity is a goal of the disciples of Jesus. We need to grow in our journey with the Lord. Besides growth in prayer – I spoke about that the last time I was here – we need to continue to develop and mature in our attitudes and in our emotional lives and in our intellectual lives. These are part of our ‘spiritual life’. I want to reflect on spiritual growth especially in our intellectual and emotional lives. What do we think about and emotionally respond to the daily experiences of our life’s journey, especially our negative experiences?

I want talk about how to transform our negative attitudes and emotions and grow in Gratitude.

Transformation...

I Letting Go of Anger

Ronald Rohleiser is one of my favorite more recent spiritual authors. In his book **Holy Longing** he offers these insights into ‘spiritual maturity’. (PP 246 ff)
Be willing to carry more and more of life’s complexities with empathy. We are tormented by the insufficiency of everything attainable, which we experience daily. Our lives seem too small for us and our limitations are present every day. Move beyond the cancer of frustration and restlessness.

How many people want to have it their way? Remember that great American anthem... I Did It My Way... and if you don’t want to do it my way, stay out of my way. It doesn’t take too long in life to find out that life seldom goes our way. People of prayer begin to realize that we have to let God be God. We are not.

This is an interesting reflection from the **Big Book** of AA about this.

... Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful.

What usually happens? The show doesn’t come off very well...

Selfishness – self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles...

This is the how and why of it. First of all, we had to quit playing God. It didn't work. Next, we decided that hereafter in this drama of life, God was going to be our Director... He is the Father, and we are His children. Most good ideas are simple, and this concept was the keystone of the new and triumphant arch through which we passed to freedom. (PP 60-62)

Do we really have to have it our own way all of the time? Do we really think we can be in control even most of the time?

We do our best and make the most prudent decisions possible, but life has a way of throwing curves and at times life just doesn't go our way.

Suffering

Rohleiser gives this insight into suffering and spiritual maturity...

Let suffering soften your heart rather than harden your soul. We will be hurt by others. We will suffer humiliation in life. How handle these? Suffering can give us depth of soul. What kind of depth?... understanding, empathy and forgiveness vs resentment, bitterness and vengeance. (Cf AA) Will we die with a cold heart or a warm heart?

Let me share some reflections from a wonderful book I read several years ago... The book is entitled **The Noonday Devil** by Andrew Solomon, a writer for the N.Y. Times. The author describes in vivid detail his own experiences with his deep, deep depression, and how he slowly came to terms with it. His psychiatrist and his medications helped him rise above his depression. He then turned his experiences into an insightful and challenging book. Rather than deny his depression, or pretend he never had it, he shares four lessons, which he learned from his suffering:

- ❖ *When you have been depressed you lose some of your fear of crisis... I made it through one.*
- ❖ *I learned compassion... I know what other sufferers are going through and I want to help.*
- ❖ *Depression at its worst is the most horrifying loneliness, and from it I learned the value of intimacy... I can help others in their loneliness – not necessarily with answers, but with simple companionship.*
- ❖ *The unexamined life is unavailable to the depressed. I learned to examine my life and see the good in it and not take my friends and loved ones for granted. (PP. 436 – 438)*

The author learned the value of adversity and rediscovered the blessing of family and friends and a desire to help others, and not take joy for granted. (P 439)

The author learned that our needs are our greatest assets – we come to know ourselves through adversity – not illusions – and we open ourselves to others in our weakness. This can create bondedness. (P441)

As we disciples of Jesus look at the sufferings of our lives we need also to gaze upon the Cross of Christ. If we don't, we miss God's greatest love story and we are blind to the true work of Jesus on the Cross.

Thru the Cross of Jesus we learn to transform jealousy, anger, bitterness, resentments, frustrations and hatred rather than give them back in kind. If we do not transform them we re-transmit them.

On the Cross Jesus transformed the darkness into light. He transformed hatred and envy into love and forgiveness. He had said 'love your enemies' and now he did not look upon others as his enemies but as his wayward brothers and sisters. He blessed them with his blood. He said, 'Father, forgive them'.

II Baggage

Let me tell the **Tale of Two Brothers...**

Two brothers journeyed down the road of life. One trudged tired and worn. He dragged a cart filled with luggage: suitcases, boxes, and burdens of all sorts. He was drenched in sweat and bent by the load. He wore worry and sadness in the lines on his face. Sorrow weighed heavy and slowed every step.

The other brother had no cart – no burden to drag along. His hands were free and so was he – to laugh, dance and sing. He greeted people with a smile and offered a helping hand. He walked along with childlike awe and drank in every scene. He learned of things new and old – discoveries around every turn. He grew in skill and ability from the challenges he faced. All-in-all he walked the road with joy and peace and graciousness.

What luggage did the first brother drag?

- The first brother carried a heavy burden of anger.
"I'm upset. I've been wronged and I won't stop until I make them pay. They've got to make this right."
- The second brother seemed quite content. *"I carry no grudge,"* he said with a smile on his face. *"All people have problems, just like me. I try to understand them and I pray for them."*

- The first brother had given himself a lot of unforgiveness to carry. He also had a heavy burden of blame to drag along. *"It's their fault,"* he repeated. *"I'll never forget and I'll never forgive. I'll never release this thing..."*
- The second brother shrugged his shoulders, lifted both hands, and said, *"Freely I'm forgiven, freely I've been given, and so freely I set free!"* then he added, *"I know they've harmed me and hurt me, too. But I pray, "Father in heaven, who loves all, forgive them for what they do."*
- The first brother carried many other burdens in his luggage as he trod life's road... worries and fear, prejudice, nagging self doubts, critical attitudes, gossip, self-pity and selfishness...
- The second brother trusted God and God's love for him, tried not to judge people's hearts, didn't pass on gossip, and recognized God's many blessings in his life – for which he was grateful... he tried to reach out a helping hand to others when he could... Not too much baggage there.

How much baggage do you carry thru life?

What are some of the contents of your baggage?

III Forgiveness

Ronald Rolheiser also talks about forgiveness.

Forgive those who hurt you, forgive your own sins, forgive the unfairness of life and forgive God for not rescuing you. The goal: to die with a forgiving heart.

Don't be like the older brother in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

The older brother thinks he has been treated unfairly by his father who forgives his younger brother after he had spent his inheritance and dishonored and shamed the family name... something very important in the 'honor culture' of the time of Jesus.

The older brother will not forgive his brother nor his father. He carries resentment, hurt, anger and bitterness in his heart. He is in bondage... and for what?

The father still loves him.

He inherits his portion of the family property.

His brother's portion is gone.

Notice the dialogue. His father comes out to him – he won't go inside. His father comes out to him and the older brother says: *'That son of yours...'* The father reminds him, *'that brother of yours...'*

Will the older brother carry these feelings as his baggage thru life? Will he be able to experience the freedom and forgiveness and largess of heart of the father?

Once again as we gaze upon the cross of Jesus we hear Jesus' powerful words, *"Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."* Jesus forgives even his enemies... he no longer looks upon them as his enemies but as his erring brothers and sisters. He does not forgive them because they are his enemies. He forgives them **because of who he is** – their brother and shepherd.

May I tell one forgiveness story that I have experienced?

While I was working in our retreat center in Riverdale in the Bronx we had several N.Y.P.D. retreats during the year.

On one of those retreats a New York policeman shared his story with the 70 cops attending.

Steve McDonald was a young N.Y.C. policeman and the father of a young child. He came into the conference room in a wheelchair.

Here's his story...

On tour one night a young Puerto Rican shot him.

He awoke in the hospital paralyzed from the neck down – a paraplegic for life.

He shared how he began to pray and ask God that he not live a life full of rage and anger and bitterness and fantasies of revenge.

His life would be tough enough without such rage and unforgiveness.

He prayed to God to help him forgive the teen.

He prayed long and hard, he said.

And God heard his prayer.

After his sharing there wasn't a dry eye in that room, those tough cops were so touched by his story... inspired.

Not only that, but today Steve visits high schools and community groups around N.Y. City to spread his story of forgiveness. He was even invited to Northern Ireland to tell his story. How our violent, revenge-soaked world needs stories like Steve's.

How we need to hear such stories to help us to be forgiving in our lives, with God's help.

Let me just add that to forgive someone who hurt us does not mean we are going to be their best friend again, it doesn't mean we are going to trust them again, it doesn't mean that we pretend that we were not hurt. The memory of the hurt doesn't go away. But we pray God to help us let go of the bitterness and anger and resentment... We might even need the help of a counselor... God can help us through counseling if we need it.

(I have a conference on 'Forgiveness' on our website, www.stpaulofthecrossmonastery.com. Go to the link 'Prayer and Worship', go to the link 'Sermons, Talks and Reflections', to the link 'From the Desk of Fr. Don Ware', go to the link 'Retreat Conferences', to the conference for the year 2015-2016... the talk 'Mercy as Undeserved Forgiveness'.)

IV Gratitude

Now I want to turn our attention to 'spiritual maturity' and Gratitude.

Gratitude springs from the awareness that we have been touched by our God... or we have been 'graced'.

Many times gratitude is difficult in our culture...

Many have very high expectations of life and what they want to get out of life. Self-fulfillment, being in control and having things our way lead to a sense of entitlement. We deserve to have it our way and if we don't get it our way, stay out of our way.

Our culture is a culture of contract. We contract for goods and services and we expect they will be delivered on time. If they are not, we become frustrated and angry and hit the phone or the internet or even Facebook.

When we don't get what we expect we are entitled to we get dissatisfied... we get irritated, grumble and become restless.

Many people don't realize how few people in the world have it as good as we do. Many people don't realize how blessed we are. We don't realize how we have been gifted.

As we begin to get God-consciousness, as our spiritual lives develop, we begin to see things differently. Gratitude becomes a posture of life... gratitude to God and

gratitude to others in our life for who they are and what they have given us. We begin to recognize the ‘giftedness’ of our total existence. This is how we begin to view our world.

There is a beautiful story I want to share with you now. This story has touched my heart.

Girl in wheelchair – gratitude

A friend recently shared a story with me that touched my soul, and I wanted to share it with all of my friends. A few months ago, a young, beautiful, healthy college student, suddenly and without warning, lost control of her body and was paralyzed from the neck down. Her friends sent prayer requests to everyone they knew. A few months later, the girl recovered.

When she returned to school, her friends noticed that her smile was brighter than before; it was almost as if she had seen Heaven. There was a visible change of attitude; she was kinder, happier, and paid attention to people more than ever. She started sending emails to her friends and family expressing her love and gratitude for all they have done for her. She sent emails to her parents, thanking them for all the sacrifices they made for her since she was born. Although everyone loved the change in her, they had to ask her what caused this change in her. She explained that when she had been immobile in the hospital and thought she would never walk again or would maybe even die, that the most painful thing was the regret she was feeling that she had not lived her life fully. Now that it seemed to be too late, it all seemed so clear that she had not loved enough, used all opportunities to serve. She suddenly knew that all the grudges she held, and all the time lost thinking about those who had wronged her and how to avoid those she didn't like, had been a waste of her precious life. She thought about how much time she spent being mad and miserable for all that went wrong, and how little time she spent rejoicing for what went right! In her remorse, she begged God in prayer to give her a chance to live again so that she could make things right, and God heard her prayers.

As we grow in prayer and our spiritual lives develop we begin to realize more and more how blessed and gifted we are by loving God.

Jessica Powers, a wonderful Carmelite nun and religious poet who is now dead, penned these words in her poem ‘The Mercy of God’.

*I rose up from the acres of self
That I tended with passion and defended with flurries of pride.
I walked out into the woods of God's mercy,
And here I abide.*

Are we still consumed by the 'acres of self'?
Do we realize how have you been blessed by God's mercy?
Do we give thanks for it?

Here's another story:

Once upon a time there was a very wise man who was on his way to a village on the other side of the mountain to teach, to beg, and to call more disciples to follow his way. He intended to take a shortcut over the mountain pass to save time. But immediately the people and his friends said, "No, don't go that way. The pass is filled with bandits lying in wait for you and if they find you don't have money or jewels they will kill you brutally.

The wise man couldn't be bothered with such warnings, and he continued on his way. Well, no sooner had he climbed high into the pass when a notorious bandit appeared, bearing down on him with sword in hand and shouting, "Your money or your life!"

The wise man looked up at the man astride his horse, pulled out his empty pockets and said, "I guess it's my life, since I have no money."

As the bandit moved toward him, sword in motion, the wise man stopped him in his tracks:

"You know the rules. If you take my life, then you must at least grant me a last wish!"

The bandit stopped. "Alright. What do you want? Make it quick old man."

The wise man said, "My wish is simple and has two parts.

First, see that great tree over there and the limb that extends far out over the path? Cut it off!" The bandit grinned and in seconds the limb lay on the ground.

"Alright old man, what is the second part?"

The wise man turned toward him and said very quietly and steadily, "Now put it back on again."

The bandit was speechless and then started laughing uproariously. "You are the stupidest man I've ever met! No one

*can put a limb back on a tree after it's been cut off! Insane!
You're idiotic."*

*The wise man looked at him and said, "I am not the one who is
stupid. You are. Anyone can destroy. Any child without
knowledge can cut things up. Anyone can main, kill, mutilate and
undo reality. It takes no power or intelligence whatsoever."*

The bandit was caught off guard.

*The wise man continued, "What takes power, real power, is to be
able to heal, to bring life, to restore, to stand in the breach, to
undo the evil and the destruction that you've done in the past.
That takes real power, imagination, and creativity.*

*What you've done takes nothing at all. Anyone can do what
you've done.*

*They eyed each other for a long time. Then the bandit got off of
his horse, laid down his sword at the wise man's feet, knelt in
respect before him, and humbly asked, "Teach me that kind of
power.")*

We who are grateful to God for God's many gifts begin to realize
that life is not about how much we can get out of life...
life is about what we can bring to the table of life.
Life is not about 'me'... it's about 'us'.

In our gratitude we can bring life to our world.
Remember the Prayer of St. Francis.

We have this kind of power, don't we?

We can bring compassion and forgiveness and joy and life and
affirmation into our world... and experience life by doing this.

Just stop and think for a moment...

Our power of speech,

Our power of affirmation,

our power of forgiveness and compassion,

our encouragement and helpfulness.

We can bring blessings into the lives of others.

Life is not about what we get from the table, it's about what we bring to the table...

A Story

Heaven and Hell

Hell... Picture a circle of people sitting side by side, so close to each other that their shoulders are touching. In the center of this circle is a big pot of delicious looking and smelling stew. The scent of it makes you want to try some right now.

The folks in the circle have a large wooden spoon with a long handle taped to their right forearms. They are yelling at each other angrily, they looked lean and hungry... there was no happiness there. The problem was that because they were so close together they couldn't get a spoon of the delicious stew into their mouths. They would bump into each other when they tried to feed themselves.

This is truly hell.

Heaven... Picture a circle of people sitting side by side, so close to each other that their shoulders are touching. In the center of this circle is a big pot of delicious looking and smelling stew. The scent of it makes you want to try some right now.

The folks in the circle have a large wooden spoon with a long handle taped to their right forearms. These folks are happy and joyful, smiling and joking, and well fed.

What's the difference... ah, then you notice it. Each person is dipping his or her spoon into the stew, and then feeding each other. They are taking care of each other first.

Is life just about us getting ours, running in the rat race, getting a bigger piece of the pie, searching for happiness and meaning and success and recognition?

I suggest that happiness is an inside job.

Happiness is us recognizing that deep down we are loved by God... we are a son or daughter of God.

Remember...

*I rose up from the acres of self
That I tended with passion and defended with flurries of pride.
I walked out into the woods of God's mercy,
And here I abide.*

Happiness happens when we bring mercy and blessing into the lives of others.

In this context I want to once again return to Ronald Rohleiser and his reflections on Blessing and Cursing others.

Elements of blessing (and cursing)...

1. *See and admire someone... positive regard... gives the vibe that I am glad you are here, you bring something into my life **vs** looking at someone and thinking, 'you're an idiot, who do you think you are, you think you've got talent... you don't – you're full of yourself.*

We try to deny joy, suppress life, squelch exuberance and shame enthusiasm. (Body language can get both of these attitudes across.)

- 2. Speak well of someone, saying something genuinely positive to someone **vs** our being threatened by their energy and withholding positive words = cursing subtly, or saying something negative or using biting, sarcastic humor.*
- 3. Giving away something of our own life so that someone else can have more life (eg... sponsoring, mentoring, giving some time, just a phone call, sharing experiences and wisdom) **vs** cursing which demands that you give something that will build up my own life. I want your admiration, your obedience, your submission*

(The Holy Longing by Ronald Rohleiser, pp. 203ff)

How do you bless others: family, friends, neighbors, fellow workers? Are you a person of blessing?

Conclusion

I have attempted to talk about spiritual maturity. The last time I was here I talked about growing our prayer life – a necessity for spiritual maturity.

This evening I have attempted to look at spiritual maturity as a transformation in our lives from anger to gratitude.

We need to let go of our anger. So many of us carry baggage thru life... the baggage of hurts and resentments, sadness and regrets, anger and disappointments.

Can we unpack this baggage and let it go into the loving arms of God?

Can we learn from the Cross of Jesus?

Forgiveness is a key to ridding ourselves of our baggage. Forgiveness is not easy... It is a challenge, but also a healing art.

As we make this spiritual journey we begin to arrive at our destination of 'Gratitude'.

What is it?

Why is it important?

How does it affect our spiritual lives?

Can we become people of gratitude...

people of blessing who bring God's life and light into our world?

People who continue the mission of Jesus?

People who bring the Joy of the Gospel to our journey?