

Holy Heroes: Lifelong Learning
Luke 9:1-6, 10-11; Galatians 1:11-24
July 29, 2007

A couple of hunters chartered a plane to fly them into forest territory. Two weeks later the pilot came to take them back. He took a look at the animals they had shot and said, "This plane won't take more than one wild buffalo. You'll have to leave the other behind."

"But last year the pilot let us take two in a plane this size," the hunters protested.

The pilot was doubtful, but finally he said, "Well, if you did it last year I guess we can do it again."

So the plane took off with the three men and two buffaloes. But it couldn't gain height and crashed into a neighboring hill. The men climbed out and looked around. One hunter said to the other, "Where do you think we are?"

The other inspected the surroundings and said, "I think we're about two miles to the left of where we crashed last year."¹

It appears that these guys had not learned from their previous experience! Life is a living laboratory in which we constantly have opportunities to gain new insights, test ideas, and probe the complexities of life. Even our failures can be occasions for learning, if we are open to seizing their lessons.

Lifelong learning requires an attitude of openness. If we think we know it all, we've closed the door. Mark Twain said of an acquaintance, "He died at thirty; they buried him at sixty!" We can die in place by ceasing to grow. "Aging is a process, growth is a choice." Ernest Campbell said, "The failure to grow is a sin against life...The fact that we blow out more candles on the cake with every passing year does not argue that we are growing."

The organic metaphors that describe the life of faith in Scripture imply that God wants us to grow. A *body* grows and matures. *Vines* produce fruit. *Trees* reach ever higher toward the sky. *Children* emerge into adults.

Many people in our society level off so early. "Are you growing?" we ask a friend. "Oh, yes, we had a four-room house before, but now we have six rooms." "And you, friend, how are you growing?" "My last car had four cylinders, this one has six." "How about you, sir, are you growing?" "I should say so. My investments run to six figures now and they're climbing every month." Notice how the question is unanswered. Our *houses* may

grow in size, our *cars* in cylinders and horsepower, and our *estates* in net worth—but what of our very selves? Growth happens from the inside out. It issues from a decision to add life to our years. There is a difference between growing and growing old.²

Several years ago in a commencement address at Emory University, the CEO of Coca-Cola, Donald Keough, compared the human brain to what it most looks like: a sponge. In speaking to the college graduates, he noted how they were ready to step out into the world as full sponges, ready to be squeezed in order to impart information and wisdom to the world. If they squeezed and squeezed to relieve that sponge, one day there would be nothing left. It would be dry and hard.

An alternative would be to replenish the sponge, even as it is being squeezed. Throughout life, we need to keep saturating our minds with new knowledge and information. Approach the world as if it were a limitless curriculum from which you can continue to soak up the new and enriching juices of life.³

Jesus knew that learning is a lifelong adventure. He called into his inner circle men who were established in careers, family life, and faith tradition. He introduced them to a deeper understanding of faith with new interpretations of the old, old story. He sent them out on mini-mission trips to share their new learnings and skills. They returned from the mission field with reports on their work. Jesus took them on retreat to reflect further on their experiences. Their ministry was obviously making a vital impact on the people, for they interrupted the retreat and begged for more.

The apostle Paul experienced a dramatic conversion experience that turned his life around. Once he experienced the powerful presence of the Jesus whom he was persecuting, Paul went to the desert in Arabia for three years. He never tells what he did during that time. He may have started preaching. However, the desert is typically a place for transformation. Some scholars suggest that Paul's wilderness experience was a time for him to unlearn his former ways and learn a new way being faithful to God by following Jesus Christ. His was such a radical conversion that he must have had to wrestle with the traditions and beliefs that were so ingrained in his mind, heart, and lifestyle. There was much for him to discuss with God before he could fully embark upon the mission God had entrusted to him. He needed clarity about his revised beliefs and a passion that would fuel his ministry.

Ongoing learning is as important to our spiritual journey as it is to our roles as global citizens, employees, and parents. There is always more to learn. There is always room to grow.

In our quest for continued growth, it is helpful to recognize our own learning style. Some of us are active learners; using our hands and feet in service is the venue in which our faith is fed. Others are reflective learners who spend time in quiet prayer, reading the scriptures, and listening for God's call. Some are sensing learners who like to know the facts and history behind the biblical stories and church traditions. Others are intuitive, imagining the possibilities and meanings in a situation as a way of finding insights. Many are visual learners who learn best by seeing things. Others are verbal learners who get more out of hearing or reading words. We have become such a visual culture that most of us are very attune to visual communication. How many of us watch television? Our visual culture is one reason we showed a DVD during the message last Sunday, to use a style of learning that best fits many people in our world today.

Recognizing our own learning style we can immerse ourselves in activities that fit that style and nurture our preferred way of learning. In the community of faith, we represent varied styles of learning. Thus, not every part of worship will speak to us; hopefully some part of the whole service speaks to everyone gathered. When one part is not speaking to you, bless those who are being touched by God in those moments. This is one way in which we can practice being respectful of those who differ from us.

To be intentional in our growth, it is helpful to have a learning agenda. Consider how we want to have grown in a year from now. What do I want to learn? What new behaviors do I want to practice? What new skill do I want to cultivate? Then go back and figure out what steps you need to take in order to get there.

I remember one woman who set her learning agenda as reading a biography on each president from George Washington to Bill Clinton, who was in office at the time. Book clubs are popular. Perhaps someone who learns through dialogue with others will feel a calling to start a book club at the church, reading novels to discern spiritual and theological themes, and reading nonfiction on biblical and religious topics. Even the Harry Potter books have great spiritual and theological depths to probe! It is often helpful to learn with others to keep us accountable and to hear other perspectives.

Too often Christians are content to swim on the surface of the faith, resting on the waters passively soaking in the sun. We miss out on the wonders that lie below the surface. If we took the challenge of snorkeling, better yet scuba diving deep into the spiritual depths, we would find such rich treasures that will only enhance our lives.

Anglican theologian W.H. Vanstone once observed that the church is like a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end.

Most of the wisdom is found in the deep end, among those who have taken the time, and cultivated the habits and disciplines, to learn to swim in deeper waters. Vanstone was particularly concerned about shallow spirituality in churches, but his comments are true of all aspects of our lives. If we are to continue growth and live life to its fullest, we need the kind of sustained learning that leads us into the deep end of the pool, into the depths where treasures are buried.⁴

Even the unintended experiences and challenges of life offer opportunities for growth and development. Instead of pushing away problems and resisting them, we can embrace them. We might ask what valuable lesson this problem has to teach us. Perhaps it is an opportunity to grow in patience or listening. What do our problems reveal to us about those things with which we struggle, such as greed, envy, forgiveness, or carelessness? In naming our problems and thinking of them in a softer way, a genuine desire to learn from them may grow.⁵

My friends, how are we growing? What are we learning? How are we intentionally deepening our spiritual lives? What venues inspire our learning? Godly leaders and disciples of Jesus Christ are anxious to continue probing the rich treasures of faith and life.

There is a wonderful anecdote about the Spanish Painter Francisco de Goya who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He lived through terror, revolution, invasion and counter-terror, all the while painting the protagonists of these systems. Then he retired from life. Or so it seemed. But when he was in his 80's Goya painted a self-portrait which reveals an ancient man propped up on crutches, with a great mass of white hair and beard all over his face. But in one corner of the painting, Goya added an inscription, something not found in any of his other works. The inscription simply reads: *I am still learning!*⁶ May that be our motto as well.

¹ Anthony de Mello, *Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 40.

² Ernest Campbell, *Campbell's Notebook*, Vol. VIII, No. 3, July 1988.

³ Homiletics Online, retrieved July 26, 2007.

⁴ L. Gregory Jones, "Swimming in the deep end," *Christian Century*, July 5-12, 2000, p. 730.

⁵ Dr. Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff ... and It's All Small Stuff* (New York: Hyperion, 1997) p. 184.

⁶ Rev. Don Shelby.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA