

Preparation for Growth as an Adult

In our culture we often see “growing up” as the period from the late teens through the early 20s, when we become adults both in our responsibilities and in our psychological makeup. But growth continues when we are adults. How have you grown and changed over time?

Growth has many dimensions. It often involves the development of our unique skills and talents. Those skills and talents can offer various directions for growth, as we derive energy and enthusiasm in the pursuit of things we are passionate about, or find purpose by serving and giving to others, or become more “in touch” with our true selves. Growth may include the progressive realization of worthy goals and the ability to love, speak and act with compassion. These aspects of growth are similar to Deepak Chopra’s description of “success,” and often involve an adaptation between our “inner” self – skills, talents, emotions, and character – and the “outer” demands of the world.

Growth often occurs at points in our lives when we must adapt to new circumstances. Sometimes the transitions between one phase of life and another are smooth, and we feel ourselves progressing well through our career, our family life or relationships, or even our inner searching. Other times, however, the change is abrupt, and we are catapulted from one life stage and circumstances to the next. Situations involving growth are often places of uncertainty and anxiety as well as opportunity.

In *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, James Hollis writes that the first half of our adult life is often about adapting ourselves and our talents to worldly demands: the tasks are to “separate from ... parents” and “create relationships, career, social identity.” In the second half of life, however, “the agenda shifts to reframing our personal experience in the larger order of things.” We can “reframe” our experiences in many ways. Using our skills in service to others, reflecting on our life stories, considering our lives in a spiritual perspective – all can be opportunities to continue to grow.

Patrick Ussher, citing Buddhism and Modern Stoicism, suggests that “everything in life is a learning process, and, in fact, the process never ends.” Adult learning can involve extending ourselves with travel or starting a new pursuit. Or learning can be directed toward relationships or service – learning how to care. Carol Dweck, a psychologist who developed the idea of the “growth mindset,” says, “Picture your brain forming new connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going.”

Many would agree that the goal of living is to lead a decent human life. Our physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and emotional aspects of growth interact with one another as we seek just how we ought to live our lives to achieve fulfillment, happiness, meaning, peace, and tranquility. Are there areas of your life that dominate your attention and energies? Who are we and how do we fit into the greater scheme of things? Our continued growth is the process we take toward these goals and toward answering these questions.

It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default. *J.K. Rowling*

I want to practice what Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” – a vital corrective to the cynicism that comes when we let life’s hard realities darken our vision and diminish our imagination.

Parker Palmer

The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. *Carol Dweck*

We must pass through a gate of transformation to move From Age-ing to Sage-ing. This enables us to use our life experience to enrich our elder years, face mortality, repair relationships, develop a regenerative spirit and transmit our wisdom to future generations. *Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*

Well, here I am at thirty-eight,
Well, I certainly thought I'd have longer to wait.
You just stop in for a couple of beers,
And gosh, there go thirty-seven years.
Well, it certainly has been fun,
But, I certainly thought I'd have got a lot more done ...
Attributed to Ogden Nash

We're all into this adult thing – except for the spread in ages and stages – each with their challenges and regrets, puzzlements, and wisdom. What have we gotten done? Where are we going? What haven't we done that we'd like to have done? What's the nature of accomplishment for us? Is it work, family, creativity, inner peace, character? Does that change for us over time?
Glenn Turner, UU minister

I am still every age that I have been. Because I was once a child, I am always a child. Because I was once a searching adolescent, given to moods and ecstasies, these are still part of me, and always will be ... Far too many people ... think that forgetting what it is like to ... [be] a three-year-old or a thirteen-year-old or a twenty-three-year-old means being grownup ... If I can retain a child's awareness and joy, and be fifty-one, then I will really learn what it means to be grownup.
Madeleine L'Engle, A Circle of Quiet

Questions to Ponder

1. What do you see as the stages of adult life? What stage are you in now?
2. Think about a time when you (as an adult) went from one stage of life to another. Can you describe a particular experience that marked that time?
3. If you have ever had a “rude awakening” or other sudden occurrence that moved you abruptly into another stage of life, describe that experience and how you changed.
4. What part of your life has most shaped the person you are now?
5. Think about the different stages of life you have experienced and consider whether you have drastically changed from one to the next, or basically stayed the same person, just older.
6. What would you identify as an area for growth in your life now?
7. Consider how being in community, and in particular our UU community, helps you through life transitions and the different stages of your life.

Words of the Day

For the Gathering, reflect on how you have grown recently – socially, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, or in other ways. Consider the experiences that have contributed to your growth. The Words of the Day will be to complete this sentence: In the last 5 years of my life, I have grown by ...