

Growth Experiences

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I was devastated. The *first* time I had gone before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the body that credentials Unitarian Universalist ministers, they had told me they did not feel I was ready – they felt I had some important formation still to do. They recommended I do a full time internship. The internship had gone exceedingly well – I felt prepared, confident, ready to be credentialed. And so I went before them for a second time, expecting all would go well. It didn't. I was devastated.

A week later, I gathered up my inner resources and went to attend the district conference, where everyone asked me how it had gone, and I had to relate the story over and over. It gave me an unwanted insight into post traumatic stress disorder as I relived the ordeal again and again.

A colleague of mine, who had seen many of my ups and downs, who had been on the turtle track to ministry with me, listened with an empathetic expression on her face. I knew she believed in me, in the minister I was – not just the minister I *might* become. An older woman who retired from a rich career in social work before moving into spiritual direction, she is the calmest, most grounded person I have ever met. Unflappable. As I sobbed out the end of my story, she gently put her hand on my arm and gave a gentle squeeze. “Its an AFGE” she said. “An AFGE?” I asked. “What's an AFGE”

She shook her head as she looked down, but I caught an impish smile on her face. My eyebrows creased in confusion.

“Another Freakin' Growth Experience, my dear.”

Only she didn't say “freakin”

Ahh, the unwanted “growth experience”. I had grown up hearing the phrase. Anytime

something didn't go as I had hoped or planned (which was often), my father would tell me it was a “growth experience”. Now an adult, ten years into ministerial training, who had been sure that the light at the end of the tunnel was near, I suddenly felt as though the light was actually a train about to run me over. I was sick to death of growth experiences. I had had more than my share, thank you very much.

The truth is, I learn from experience, the hard way. When I was 16, I failed my drivers test the first time. It was, I was told, a growth experience. It felt horrible at the time. I took a defensive driving course and then eventually passed the test.

When I was 20 I failed a class in college. It had been a rough semester and my mind simply could not process the content of the advanced computer science course. It was embarrassing, but when I took it one year later, I aced it and wondered how I had not gotten it the previous year. It was a growth experience.

Heck, I was even engaged to someone else before John and I started dating. Growth experience!

And I now have the rare honor of having gone before our ministerial credentialing body three excruciating times. So I am familiar with growth experiences. I am *very* familiar with growth experiences. When my friend and colleague put her hand on my arm and shared with me what AFGE stood for, I just groaned. Really? Another?

But here is the thing about these experiences: cliché or not if they don't kill us, they really *can* make us stronger. We really can grow as a result. But! It depends a lot on our attitude. Buddha said that life is suffering, and we recognize that it is through suffering that we grow – when the status quo is comfortable, most people don't feel like shaking it up. So if we can find a way to embrace these ubiquitous growth experiences, then perhaps we might... you know...grow :)

When I failed my drivers test the first time, I could have just decided not to bother. But I didn't – I used it as a learning opportunity. I was embarrassed and humiliated. But I didn't stay

there.

When I failed the class, I went back and retook it. Of course, I had to if I wanted to graduate, but still, I learned that failing a class did not mean that I, myself, was a failure. And, just for the record, my computer science grades may have generally been poor, but I did quite well in seminary!

That previous serious relationship? Well, I definitely learned about myself, and about what kind of person I was looking for in a spouse.

And of course, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee – those were in some ways the most difficult growth experiences. But a few years out, this is what I can tell you: I would not be here before you today if they had not pushed me so hard; pushed me to figure out who I was, what my gifts and my growing edges are. Pushed me so hard to confront some things that I really didn't want to confront. Without those experiences, I would not have been a good match for this church. And I really, really like where I am right now.

Growth experiences. They can cause us to curl up and retreat into a cave. And goodness knows that is often my first reaction. But to stay in the cave denies the nature and necessity of AFGEs. We grow because we learn something from the experience, not because we hide in the cave for the rest of our lives. And if we do end up *staying* in the cave, then it may be that we need some professional support, because it is not where we were meant to stay. Retreat to temporarily, regroup and regather our strength from, perhaps, but not stay.

Henry David Thoreau famously wrote that he went to the woods because he “wanted to live deliberately.” He wrote “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die discover that I had not lived.” He didn't stay in the woods forever, but he allowed the experience to teach him. If we stay in the metaphorical cave, or even the real woods, for too long, we run the risk of discovering that we have not lived. Better, I think, to get used to AFGEs, to even embrace them.

To live is to grow. It is to make mistakes: spill milk, tear cloth, leave jade plants out in

the frost, and precious papers in the rain, and to live is to learn from each of these experiences. That sometimes means making it through some unpleasant times. It means making it through some AFGEs.

In her poem, Nancy Shaffer reminds us that we need the gift of starting over, beginning again. And we do – oh, we really do. But just as a person can't put their toe into the same river twice – for both the person and the river have changed – so to do we not start over as exactly the same people as before an AFGE. We don't just pick up where we left off – we mourn, we learn, we expand until it feels like we just can't expand anymore. And then we find a new normal.

But how, when we are in the midst of one of these oh-so-lovely AFGEs, how do we get through them? Certainly, there are the psychological supports so many of us need: friends, family, church. But I think that it also helps to understand that there are different types of AFGEs, or, to rephrase, to understand that growth experiences come in different shades. Ronald Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, identifies two different types of challenges: technical challenges, and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are the type of problems that we may already know how to respond to. They are not necessarily easy, and they are not unimportant, but they are considered technical problems because the necessary knowledge about them is there. Our car breaks down; we either know how to fix it, where to look to learn how to fix it, or know to take it to a mechanic. If we are spending more than we bring in, we know we need to find a way to balance our budget. We may have to learn *how* to do this, but when the problem is clear and the solution is clear, we are facing a technical challenge.

But usually, growth experiences are not *technical* challenges, though sometimes they present that way. My failing the drivers license test was an AFGE *not* because of my driving ability (which was the technical problem), but because I had to learn something about myself. I had to learn that I could get back up again. And then I had to do it. This is what is called an

“adaptive” challenge.

When we are facing an adaptive challenge, even to wrap our heads round the problem we need to grow and learn and change. And *then*, to work towards a solution, we require even *more* growth, learning, and innovation.

For instance, the first time I visited the MFC, it was a technical challenge – they told me to go do a full time internship and become immersed in ministry and in the life of a congregation. So I did so. Technical challenge addressed. Or so I thought.

The second time I visited the MFC, I had addressed the technical challenge but I had not realized that there were some adaptive challenges that needed addressing as well. The result of that second visit was that they did not come up with a solution for me. None of us were even clear on what had gone wrong in the interview, – we just all seemed to agree that something had. So I had to figure out *first*, what was the real problem and *then* I could begin to learn ways to address it. It was really hard work. It was an adaptive challenge.

The third time I saw them, well, that was just plain relief. I'm not sure they ever had someone do a little dance after they shared a confident, passing result, but I did one. And I learned that I don't give up easily.

We all have AFGEs in our own lives – some we negotiate successfully (*phew*) and some that hurt and ache and remind us more of that caterpillar struggling to come out of the cocoon. Do you know that story – about the child who saw the caterpillar trying to emerge? The story is that a child watched as a butterfly began to emerge from its chrysalis. The butterfly twisted this way and that, obviously struggling. The child, thinking she would help the butterfly, gently slit open the chrysalis so that the butterfly could just crawl out. But instead, the butterfly died – its heart did not get pumping enough for it to pump its wings up. The struggle of emerging from the chrysalis was a necessary part of becoming a butterfly. So too is the struggle of a growth experience a necessary part of being human.

I know several of you are going through some oh-so-lovely “growth experiences” right

this very moment – maybe spending some time in the cave hiding out, venturing out carefully as you try and figure out where you go from here. Struggling to emerge from your chrysalis. Are the issues technical challenges – do you know what to do and just need to do them? Or are they adaptive – are you struggling even to figure out what the problem is, much less how to deal with it? The thing about AFGEs is that there is a reason that they aren't called Aggies :)

This congregation is also going through a growth experience. I think only time will tell the nature of it – I hope it does not leave too many of us cursing. But we are currently dealing with both technical and adaptive challenges in several different aspects of our life together.

Technically, we are balancing our budget and trying to fill out our ministries and committees so that we have a strong volunteer structure in place for the coming year.

We are working on adaptive challenges as well – the changes in our budget, though we don't know their precise nature yet – will call for new ways of doing things, new ways of being. From what I have heard, the pledge drive has gone very well – you have been generous. And though we will still have some difficult decisions to make, they are nowhere near the difficulty they would have been had you *not* been generous. Thank you. But still, we know we aren't going to be able to do things “the way we have always done them” - we are going to have to innovate.

Now, particularly for these adaptive challenges, we may find ourselves stretching. Moaning and groaning with all the changes, the lack of clarity – the newness. It might be tough. It might, at times, feel like failure.

But it doesn't have to be. And I am confident it won't be. The fire did not kill this congregation in 1985, this will not kill us now. Instead, I suspect that just as my own growth experiences formed some of my strengths, this congregation will struggle, moan, groan, adapt, and a beautiful butterfly will emerge at the end. We will know better not just who we *want* to be, but indeed, who we *are*.

No one said growth experiences were easy – which is a good thing because I would

have a word or two for that person. They aren't easy. But they are a part of life. Whether in our own personal lives, or the lives of this congregation, when we are in the thick of a growth experience, it may seem overwhelming, scary, impossible. But it doesn't have to be. Its probably "just" an AFGÉ. And we will make it out stronger, wiser, more aware of who we really are – as individuals, or as a church.

I have been there, I know. And I know someday I will be there again, just as we all will be. We may as well take a deep breath and make peace with it, since growth experiences are a part of life.