

Relinquishing Ego
Thursday, March 21, 2019
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Growing in Christ: Week 1

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God's seed is in us. If it were tended by a good, wise and industrious laborer, it would then flourish all the better, and would grow up to God, whose seed it is, and its fruits would be like God's own nature. The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, the seed of a nut tree grows to be a nut tree, the seed of God grows to be God. —Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) [1]

James Hollis reflects on what it means to “die before we die” like the seed falling into the ground:

In the second half of life the ego is periodically summoned to relinquish its identifications with the values of others, the values received and reinforced by the world around it. It will have to face potential **loneliness** in living the life that comes from within rather than acceding to the noisy clamor of the world, or the insistency of the old complexes. [2] It will have to submit itself to that which is truly larger, sometimes intimidating, and always summoning us to grow up. . . . And how scary is that, to each of us? . . . No wonder so few ever feel connected to the soul. No wonder we are so isolated and afraid of being who we are.

Yet, paradoxically, the very achievement of ego strength is the source for our hope for something better. We need to be strong enough to examine our lives and make risky changes. A person strong enough to face the futilities of most desires, the distractions of most cultural values, who can give up trying to be well adjusted to a neurotic culture, will find growth and greater purpose after all. ***The ego's highest task is to go beyond itself into service, service to what is really desired by the soul. . . .***

During the second half of life, the ego will be asked to accept the absurdities of existence, that death and extinction mock all expectations of aggrandizement, that vanity and self-delusion are the most seductive of comforts. . . . How counterproductive our popular culture [in the United States]—with its fantasies of prolonged youthful appearance, continuous acquisition of objects with their planned obsolescence, and the incessant, restless search for magic: fads, rapid cures, quick fixes, new diversions from the task of soul.

The relinquishment of ego ambition, as fueled and defined by first-half-of-life complexes, will in the end be experienced as a newfound and hitherto unknown abundance. One will be freed from having to do whatever supposedly reinforced one's shaky identity, and then will be granted the liberty to do things because they are inherently worth doing. . . . One can experience the quiet joy of living in relationship to

the soul simply because it works better than the alternative. The revisioned life feels better in the end, for such a person experiences his or her life as rich with meaning, and opening to a larger and larger mystery.

Vocation, even in the most humble of circumstances, is a summons to what is divine. Perhaps it is the divinity in us that wishes to be in accord with a larger divinity. Ultimately, our vocation is to become ourselves, in the thousand, thousand variants we are. . . . As all of the great world religions have long recognized, becoming ourselves actually requires repeated submissions of the ego.

References:

[1] Meister Eckhart, "Of the Nobleman," Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Paulist Press: 1981), 241.

[2] Hollis notes: "A complex is a cluster of energy in the unconscious, charged by historic events, reinforced through repetition, embodying a fragment of our personality, and generating a programmed response and an implicit set of expectations."

James Hollis, Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up (Gotham Books: 2005), 91, 153-154.