

The Challenges of Change and Growth

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"Growing up is hard to do. No one ever tells you that growing up is hard to do. But, growing up is hard to do."
These are some of the words of the 1965 teen-age pop song by Ginger and the Snaps. It is an intriguing song because the lyrics capture what each of us has felt at various times in our life — growing up is hard to do!

To grow, to change what is familiar, is indeed "hard to do". It is an uncomfortable process because we may lose our reliance on the behaviors, habits, and/or relationships that have often become second nature to us. Old behavioral patterns and habits, even old relationships, provide a psychological structure that gives meaning, continuity and predictability to our lives.

Humans struggle to maintain a sense of psychological structure – to have both continuity and predictability. We crave the internal regulation that consistency and continuity provide. We strive to have an idea of what is going to happen in the future.

Eric Berne called these cravings and strivings "structure hunger" and referred to them as a "psychological need" (1963, p.221) involved in how we organize our perception of experiences (Berne, 1972). Berne also identified two other "particular needs" (1966, p. 230) --- stimulus hunger and relationship hunger. These three "hungers" or 'psychological needs" constitute a Transactional Analysis theory of motivation (Erskine, 1998). These non-conscious hungers are the motivations determining physiological, affective, cognitive and behavioral responses to all of life's situations.

Berne wrote that the unique function of structure hunger is to establish equilibrium (1964, p. 18). We crave equilibrium, stability, continuity and predictability; we crave these types of mental structures. Therefore, change is "hard to do". To change is a challenge; change is an uncomfortable process because it may destabilize our sense of equilibrium; we may lose our reliance on the behaviors, habits, or relationships that have often become second nature to us. It is a challenge to relinquish our personal perspectives, frames of reference, or script beliefs because these mental structures maintain psychological equilibrium.

These psychological structures provide the sense of equilibrium that biologists refer to as *homeostasis*. Homeostasis is a biological and physiological principle that describes the tendency of a living organism to maintain equilibrium and stability. One way to understand homeostasis is to appreciate the delicate balance required in riding a bicycle; when gravity pulls the bicycle too much to one side, the person balances by shifting weight to the other. Homeostasis involves a balancing of the organism, a return to the familiar. When forces in the external environment stimulate change too quickly, there is an innate reaction that counteracts pressures to change (Wolman, 1973). Homeostasis is the opposite of change and growth; it is a continuing balancing to maintain equilibrium. Growth and change is a challenge because human beings are pulled by two opposing forces: homeostasis and *physis*.

Not only is growing-up hard to do, it is also inevitable. We are constantly changing, growing, and evolving in one way or another. Change is always occurring, even if we do not want it. We cannot avoid change and growth. We may struggle with the opportunities to grow and we may make desperate attempts to resist change but there is always an innate pull to grow. The human organism, in fact all living organisms, is always in the process of change, growth, and evolution while simultaneously attempting to maintain equilibrium.

Physis is a Greek word that describes the source of our internal thrust to grow. The word *physis* refers to the vitality and psychic energy that is invested in health, creativity, and the expansion of our personal horizons. In a recent article in the Transactional Analysis Journal, Bill Cornell summarized Berne's writings on *physis* and described *physis* as the inherent "capacity to challenge the forces of acquiescence"; he related it to our sense of "aspirations" (Cornell, 2010, p.244).

Physis is an internal thrust for health and growth, the urge to do something different and novel, the aspiration to

be fully our selves, and to have choice about our own destiny. Fritz Perls referred to this urge as that which fosters "excitement and growth in the human personality" (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). St. Cathrine of Sienna described the power of physis when she reportedly said, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire" (Chartres, April 29, 2011).

It is because of physis that education and psychotherapy are possible and it is because of homeostasis that education and psychotherapy are necessary. Without homeostasis we would constantly be expanding, changing and growing beyond our capacity to maintain equilibrium. Without physis we would stay with the familiar, maintain old patterns or even stagnate.

The challenge to growth --- the challenge faced by the professionals working in the fields of psychotherapy, education, and organizational development --- lies in our capacity to help our clients' and students' balance the twin forces of physis and homeostasis. This challenge requires that we, in our human resource work, account for two opposing internal forces: that we respect the unique way our clients and students make sense of their worlds, how they organize their experience, how they manage to stabilize themselves, and how their behavior may seem to be the best choice possible in a given situation; **and, also**, that we foster their vitality, spontaneity, creativity and aspirations. Our professional challenge is to foster growth.

"Change" has been an important word in Transactional Analysis. "What do you want to change?" "How will you and others know you have changed?" These and similar questions reflect the emphasis on change that has been central to Transactional Analysts. When I was first attracted to TA in 1969 it was because the therapeutic focus was both on understanding one's self and the opportunity to change old attitudes, behavior patterns, and life scripts. Indeed, my TA psychotherapy in workshops with David Kupfer supported the changing of my former behaviors of shyness and passivity into a new life position of being responsible for my own feelings and interactions with others. Change was, and still is, central in the practice of Transactional Analysis. However, when I see and hear TA being practiced, I wonder if too much attention is paid to overt change and not enough attention to the person's unique way of making meaning, attempts at self-regulation, and history of interactions with others. What do you think?

If we psychotherapists, counselors, educators and facilitators of organizational development stress the necessity for the client or student to change attitudes and behaviors, than we may create a paradoxical situation. Instead of fostering growth we stimulate a homeostatic reaction wherein the person will remain entrenched in his or her old patterns of thinking and behaving while superficially appearing to change. The more we emphasize that the person **must** change the more the person may unconsciously continue old attitudes and behaviors.

I have been impressed by Arnold Beisser's paradoxical theory of change (1971). It is a simple theory that may be obvious in your own life. The theory states that psychological growth occurs when we, and others, appreciate *who we are*. A person will not truly grow if coerced or pushed, even if that coercion is from one's self. Many people who come to therapy insist on changing some behavior or relationship pattern. They want to become different than they are. When pushed to change, even if it is from our self, we become resistant. That resistance is a non-conscious urge to maintain homeostasis and equilibrium. Paradoxically, if the other person is interested in our phenomenological experience, sensitive to our affect and respects how we cope with life's situations, then they foster our own desire to grow. Psychological growth is paradoxical: when we accept people as they are, rather than urge them to change, the person's inherent desire to grow ---physis--- is stimulated.

The practice of Transactional Analysis may be much more effective in fostering psychological growth if we make the students' or clients' phenomenological experiences and relational-needs central in our working relationship. We foster psychological growth when we understand and demonstrate appreciation of our students' or clients' various affects, styles of attachment, ways of making meaning, potential for shame, and personal aspirations. When we honor our student's, client's, colleague's, friend's, and family member's way of being in the world --- to paraphrase St Cathrine of Sienna --- we help the other to be what he or she is meant to be so that they can bring the fire of their physis energy into the world.

I would like to share a story about my personal reaction to a demand for change and the resulting psychological growth that I experienced. My experience was not a homeostatic reaction like the one that Arnold Beisser

describes in the paradoxical theory of change; it was the opposite, it provided a sudden impetus to grow. When I was in the midst of my training as a teaching and supervising clinical Transactional Analyst, I attended a training workshop. The leader of the workshop used a lot of behavioral confrontation; confrontation was prominent in the practice of TA in those years. He confronted me on some behavior (I know longer remember what it was). I was hurt and shamed. I could feel myself cowering inside and becoming ready to adapt. Then, a unique feeling of positive energy surged within me. I surprised everyone in the group and myself when I jumped up and shouted, "Don't try to change me until you know me!" As I sat down I turned to the women next to me and said, "And if he really knew me, he may not want to change me."

My jumping up and shouting something so bold was a great moment of psychological growth for me, a far more important change than mere behavior the group leader was requiring. I stood up for my own integrity. I expressed my own experience. I was being fully myself rather than cowering or adapting. It was a self-actualizing experience that has stayed with me all these years. It was not the kind of change that the workshop leader was demanding but it marked a turning point in my life.

This important experience of self-expression has influenced my professional life as well as my personal life. I practice, write about, and teach the importance of knowing our client's or our student's phenomenological experience prior to making explanations, interpretations or engaging in behavioral or attitudinal change. I am frequently saying to myself, "I know nothing about this other person's experience". Therefore, I must inquire and inquire over time to learn and really know what it is like to live his or her life. When we truly understand the other person then perhaps we will not be invested in having them change. Instead, we validate and appreciate them *as they are*. This is what Carl Rogers meant with the concept of *unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1951). Our genuine interest in the other people, valuing them for *who they are*, and our continued inquiry into their phenomenological experience is the highest form of what Claude Steiner calls a "stroke" (1974). It is the application of our Transactional Analysis philosophy: I'm OK and You're OK.

I have tried to keep this personal experience in mind when I am working with clients whose attitudes or behaviors are confusing or irritating. With difficult or inconsistent clients it would relieve my discomfort if I made a confrontation or insisted on change, but I most likely would stifle the client's growth. I know that pressuring them to be different will only produce superficial changes at best. If I am to be effective in facilitating their psychological growth, I need to be sensitive to *who they are* and help them appreciate the function of their behaviors, attitudes, and relational patterns. This requires really knowing and valuing the person's phenomenological experience, patterns of attachment, and modes of coping. Such interpersonal knowing and attunement can be uncomfortable and upsetting to our personal equilibrium because valuing the other person's way of being in the world may alter our frame of reference. Carl Rogers reflected this altering and upsetting process when he wrote, "If I am to facilitate the personal growth of others in relation to me, then I must grow, and while this is often painful it is also enriching" (1961, p.51).

I am not suggesting that Transactional Analysts avoid attending to and exploring the need for change in our clients' and students' lives. Change may well be necessary; clients and students come to us for help in changing many aspects of their lives. However, I am suggesting that we take the time to know our clients and students prior to emphasizing change as the most important reason for our being together. I found that attitudinal and behavioral change occurs when we attend to the psychological functions of the person's behavior. Discomforting patterns of relationship, script beliefs, and old behavioral patterns become entrenched in a person's life because they serve important psychological functions such as self-regulation, insurance against stress, relational-orientation, or distraction from one's problems.

Because old patterns of relationship, script beliefs or behaviors serve a function in a person's life, growth often occurs in small increments. In the personal story I related, it appears that I made a rapid change in behavior and, at a behavioral level, I did. But, that change was based on the foundation of an effective Transactional Analysis psychotherapy that allowed me to express my feelings and needs, to have my ideas accepted and validated by a significant man, and to appreciate that the function of my shyness and passive behaviors were to control other people's reactions. For most of us change occurs in small increments. We need time to contemplate whether our behavior or script belief is a problem; then we need additional time think about how to change; then we need time for trying out new ways of perceiving or behaving; then we need additional time to sense our success and/or to recycle back through each of the previous steps prior to lasting change. I find it

effective to normalize clients' incremental steps of change.

In the book *Life Scripts: A Transactional Analysis of Unconscious Relational Patterns*, Jim Allen (2010) illustrates the co-creative process that Carl Rogers described --- a process of both client and therapist growing in relationship. Jim tells an intriguing story of an eighty-year old man who was challenged to grow because of the quality of accepting relationship that Dr. Allen offered. The client had been depressed most of his life. Jim accepted him as he was and engaged him in social activities, such as skiing and playing the piano together in Jim's home. Jim went beyond the framework of traditional Transactional Analysis psychotherapy. As I read this case presentation, it became clear to me that the support for this man to grow psychologically came from Jim's acceptance, emotional involvement, and willingness to co-create with the client a therapeutic space that allowed the client's hopes and dreams to come true. Jim supported his client's aspirations by providing the quality of relationship that stimulated physis -- the client's biological urge to growth. In talking to Jim it is also clear that his client had an enriching personal impact on him and how he currently views psychotherapy (Personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Jim Allen's case illustrates how growth is fostered through contact-in-relationship. This is probably the most fundamental reason why relationship is such a central need for all humans. The process of psychological growth, or of self-actualization as Rogers (1951) phrased it, requires contactful interaction with others. In the therapeutic relationship, as in education and organizational development work, "there must be this sense that each person can impact the other". That the competent therapist will have an impact on the client goes without saying; the whole purpose of therapy, after all, is to help the client to grow in some way. The reverse is also true -- the therapist must be capable of being impacted by the client. If the therapist is attuned and appropriately involved, he or she will almost automatically be affected by what the client says and does and feels" (Erskine, Moursund and Trautmann, 1999, p. 141). As therapists, teachers, and consultants, we need to allow our clients and students to impact us, to change us in some fundamental way, and to challenge us to grow both personally and professionally.

Will Transactional Analysis change and grow? The answer is 'yes'. It has changed considerably in the 50 years since Eric Berne published *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* in 1961 and it is continuing to change and develop. There are a number of concepts that have withstood the test of time and there are also new concepts and methods being developed around the world. Berne outlined a very useful set of theories; he wrote very little about methods. He left it to future generations of Transactional Analysts to expand and develop the theory and methods. The variety of presentations in recent TA conferences is a tribute to the development of TA theory and practice.

The original meaning of evolution refers to the unrolling of a scroll --- a scroll that is always being written as it unrolls. TA theory and practice is not in its final development. It is like that unrolling scroll; it is continually being written. If we pay attention to our errors, listen to our clients and students, question why and how we make our interventions, we open the possibility of creating new concepts and methods. Come join with me in this exciting Challenge to Grow. Growing-up professionally is NOT hard to do; it is an exciting challenge.

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Abstract

This article describes the internal struggle between physis –the urge to grow and develop -- and homeostasis. The human organism is always in the process of change, growth, and evolution while simultaneously attempting to maintain equilibrium and homeostasis. It is because of physis that education and psychotherapy are possible and it is because of homeostasis that education and psychotherapy are necessary. The paradoxical theory of change is described and presented as a challenge to the practice of Transactional Analysis.

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There is a dialectical paradox embodied in the concept of homeostasis. While it is tempting to view homeostasis in contrast to growth and change, it is also valuable, I think, to recognize that homeostasis is , paradoxically, not at all static. It is an ongoing process of change that self regulates within boundaries, a lot like the dynamic balancing act involved in riding a bike. And, conversely, growth and change involve retaining and reshaping existing structures and processes, so they contain elements of continuity. The dialectic is really a multi-lectic, with interlocking and mutually interacting dialectical elements at every level, and the successful therapist is an accomplished navigator of those interpenetrating feedback loops and synthetic breakthroughs- someone who "dances with the dialectic," Tom Sanborn, May 11, 2011