

Costs of Growth and Development

Is the study of the sequence of philosophies a person composes a full realization of the vision of the person as a meaning-maker, even as a natural philosopher? What about the experience of being one who composes meanings, being an “answer” and – as important – being a “question” at those times when meaning decomposes? There is a history to these philosophies which subtends and connects them. The career of the truth is not a cognitive matter alone, but the history of loss and recovery, death and rebirth, painful separation and triumphant liberation. The process conception of personality which a neo-Piagetian framework yields is not a list of consecutive philosophies but a reckoning of the costs to the soul of making and surrendering meaning; not alone the story of successively more true organizations of reality, but from the point of view of being one who develops, the story of successive losses of the very meaningfulness of the world and myself in it. Knowing more about these losses might we not be better company at those times when we are needed most of all to understand what feels like the abandonment of oneself? Who would understand development would seek to understand its costs. Are some of these not to be found in the pain of a world in motion, a pain we do not share, finally, so much as it shares us? Robert Kegan

I have remarked elsewhere on the importance we have come to ascribe to a student’s allowing for grief in the process of growth, especially in the rapid movement from the limitless potentials of youth to the particular realities of adulthood. Each of the upheavals of cognitive growth threatens the balance between vitality and depression, hope and despair. It may be a great joy to discover a new and more complex way of thinking and seeing; but yesterday one thought in simpler ways and hope and aspiration were embedded in those ways. Now that those ways are to be left behind, must hope be abandoned also? William Perry

Growth has not only rewards and pleasures but also many intrinsic pains and always will have. Each step forward is a step into the unfamiliar and is possibly dangerous. It also means giving up something familiar and good and satisfying. It frequently means a parting and a separation, even a kind of death prior to rebirth, with a consequent nostalgia, fear, loneliness, and mourning. It often means giving up a simpler and easier and less effortful life, in exchange for a more demanding, more responsible, more difficult life. Growth forward is in spite of these losses and therefore requires courage, will, choice, and strength in the individual, as well as protection, permission, and encouragement from the environment. Abraham Maslow

It appears that it takes a little time for the guts to catch up with such leaps of the mind. The untangling of hope from innocence, for example, when innocence is “lost”, may require more than a few moments in which to move from despair through sadness to a wry nostalgia. Like all mourning, it is less costly when “known” by another. When a sense of loss is accorded the honor of acknowledgement, movement is more rapid and the risk of getting stuck in apathy, alienation, or depression is reduced. One thing seems clear; Students who have just taken a major step will be unlikely to take another until they have come to terms with the losses attendant on the first. William Perry.