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“The individual’s entire life is nothing but a process of giving birth to himself.”

Eric Fromm

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Chapter Eight

To Be Or Not To Be

Insight #8: We have been given the gift of life, and the ability to direct life; we can choose which control centers will be developed and which will be neglected to atrophy and stagnation--which to make the master of our being and which to make the servants.

It has long been a Sorensen tradition to enjoy fresh corn on the cob. The corn is purchased from local growers and hand-picked to insure the ears have young, tiny kernels. The corn is cooked immediately after picking to retain the sugar content. The rule is only the best or none at all.

One summer our family decided that we were wasting a lot of money buying corn when we had eight acres to raise our own. With great anticipation and energy, everyone grabbed for the rakes and shovels and dug the long furrows. We followed the planting instructions on the seed envelope exactly--except for a couple of minor details. We didn’t fertilize the soil first, and we didn’t thin the weaker seedlings as they grew.

We had good reasons for leaving these two little items out. We were so excited to get started with the project that we didn’t want to

go to the store for fertilizer, and we were so pleased when the little stalks began to grow that we didn't have the heart to uproot the "extras." It seemed so cruel.

Well, the plants grew vigorously for two weeks, then they seemed to stop growing. They stayed the same size for over a month. The children kept asking, "What did we do wrong? My friend's corn is over six feet high, and they planted their corn at the same time we did."

I answered, "We didn't do anything wrong; they're just having a hard time getting started. Any day now they'll take off."

They didn't take off, in fact after a few days the stalks started to turn yellow. The children kept asking, "How come the corn is not growing? It's turning yellow!" I responded, "They're not turning yellow; that's just the sunlight on the leaves."

I was into denial; pride was obscuring the view. There's fierce competition between gardeners--egos are always on the line. "You call these tomatoes? You should see ours. Why the vines are over six feet high and the tomatoes are three pounds apiece! You call that corn? Those puny ears! That's the way ours looked when they were a couple weeks old. What? You're still on that old drip system? Haven't you heard about. . ." Finally, I had to admit, maybe we *did* need to fertilize and to thin away the smaller plants after all. One day I walked up and down the rows of corn and thinned away the inferior seedlings--leaving only two of the stalks--the heartiest--every foot or so, then I retraced my steps and scattered chemical fertilizer at the roots.

Within just a few days the leaves began turning green again. Then the stalks started to grow. I was thrilled and amazed what a little chemical fertilizer and thinning would do. We had a hearty crop

of corn that fall--tiny but delicious ears.

The instructions on the seed package were clear: fertilize and thin corn seedlings as they begin to grow so that the healthier ones can prosper, but I didn't want to take the time to fertilize and it seemed so cruel to rip out the tiny plants just when they started to grow, but in neglecting these two steps I stunted the growth of all of the stalks and the ears. Feeding and pruning is a process that increases the quality of the harvest-- in gardens and in people. (Does anyone notice that this story began with "we" and ended with "I"? Are other families like mine? The gardens begin as a family project and end up Mother's project.)

Just as I had the choice to either follow instructions or to ignore them, so each of us has the choice of how to direct our own lives-- whether to nourish or to neglect, whether to prune away negative attitudes and actions or to grow wild--both work together in the "pursuit of Happiness" or in the "pursuit of Hell."

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"Self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin as self-neglecting."
(William Shakespeare, *Henry V. Act II.Sc. 4*)

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The gift of free will

We are given two lives: the life we were born with, and the life we create for ourselves. The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote, in the novel, Anna Karenina, "My whole life (apart from anything that can happen to me every minute of it) is no more meaningless, as it was before, but it has the positive meaning of

goodness, which I have the power to put into it.”

Henry Weaver, explores this idea in his book, The Mainspring of Human Progress.

“Insects and animals follow certain patterns of action. Honeybees, for example, all make the same hexagonal cells of wax. Beavers all build the same form of dam, and the same kinds of birds make the same kinds of nests. Generation after generation, they continue to follow their changeless routines-- always doing the same things in the same ways. But a man is different because he is a human being; and as a human being, he has the power of reason, the power of imagination, the ability to capitalize on the experiences of the past and the present bearing on the problems of the future. He has the ability to change himself as well as his environment. He has the ability to progress and to keep on progressing. Plants occupy space and contend with each other for it. Animals defend their possession of places and things. But man has enormous powers, of unknown extent, to make new things and to change old things into new forms. He not only owns property, but he also actually creates property. Through foresight, imagination, and individual initiative, man develops tools and facilities, which expand his efforts and enable him to produce things which would not otherwise be possible. This is an outstanding difference between man and animal.. .” (pp 20-22)

Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.” Henry Bars said, “I must win and pay dearly for my personality as for my freedom.”

Nourish or Neglect

We were endowed with hearts that feel, minds that think, spirits that aspire, but it is our choice to either give more life--by nourishing--or less life to each of these attributes. When we volunteer to help at the local hospital, we develop the attributes of the heart: compassion, sympathy and service. Listening to great music nourishes the heart. Playing with little children, the angels of the earth--feeling their tenderness and sensitivity, nourishes the heart. Joining with friends to clean up a widow’s yard nourishes and gives life to the heart. Learning a new idea or reasoning through a problem nourishes the mind. Every time we create a landscape in our yards, compose a piece of music, or express our feelings on paper we are about the business of taking charge. Every time we venture out to meet someone new, to share ourselves, to risk rejection, we are becoming.

My nephew Garrett captured this vision at the age of eight, when he wrote:

I used to be dumb, but now I’m rad.

I used to read little books, now I read big books.

I used to not be able to know times tables,
but now I do.

I used to draw bad, but now I draw good.

I used to be in preschool, but now I’m in second grade.

I used to watch Sesame Street, but now I don't.

I used to have hardly any money, but now I have thirty or more dollars.

I used to be rad, but now I'm awesome.

Master, Servants and the Upside-down Man

We also have the choice which control centers will be masters and which will be the servants. There's the football star who neglects development of the mind in order to excel at the sport. The woman who spends hours applying makeup with no thought to inner beauty. There's the scholar who spends hour after hour hovering over books--giving life to the mind--but is socially inept. There's the doctor who knows human anatomy, but has little human empathy. There's the woman who feeds upon cheap romantic novels hour after hour until tweaked emotions of the heart take control over clear reasoning of the mind.

There's the man who nourishes the sexual passions with pornography and allows this center to become the master, to rule and reign over heart, mind and soul. In neglecting the heart, mind and spirit, and allowing what's below the waist to take control over what's above the waist, he becomes the *upside down man*--ruled by his genitals.

The endowment of free will--or free agency--allows us to choose whether to nourish or neglect. If we stop giving life to our mind, it becomes dull. If we stop giving life--or blood--to muscles, they atrophy. If we stop giving life to the heart, it hardens like wax. If we refuse to be connected to the life-force of God, souls droop into a comatose state of dormancy. Piece by piece the control

centers deteriorate, surrendering to the forces of stagnation.

The Conscience and the Principle of Pruning

The principle of pruning in order to produce a quality crop is not only an important part of gardening, it is an important part of directing our own lives successfully and happily. Pruning back some corn stalks produces heartier, healthier corn. Pruning the rose bush produces more roses, and better quality roses. Pruning the apple tree produces more apples, bigger apples and tastier apples.

In humans, pruning gluttony allows the freedom of enjoying a great meal; pruning disorganization sets us free to find what we want when we want it; pruning out false ideas allows us freedom to think clearly; pruning the powers to love and mate, to keep them from becoming powers to use and hate, gives us the freedom to love ourselves as well as others. Pruning works for corn, apples, and people, but only people have the choice whether to prune or to grow wild.

How do we know what needs to be pruned away from our lives? The Creator provided counsel through prophets and scriptures and an inner light--the conscience--that's a guide in the "pursuit of happiness." This is a control center that's designed to be *the* control center. It's a protection to the spirit. It's the peace/sorrow mechanism in the same way the pleasure/pain mechanism is a protection for the body. It's a sense, a feeling of fairness and direction, a guide to know what is wrong, and it is also a guide to what is right and good. The conscience or still small voice acts like a compass leading us to truth, integrity and happiness. It whispers counsel to our souls--what needs to be pruned away and what

needs to be nourished. If we use the guide merely to gauge what is ethically right and wrong, we will miss out on the glorious higher purpose leading towards our best selves, our unique selves!

By being honest with ourselves, and staying in tune to our inner guide we instinctively know what is right--not just what is morally right but what is personally right. In this sense, our conscience guides us to ourselves--our divine selves. This is all so natural. We are children of God, when we stay connected to that life and strength we naturally grow and become more and more what we were created to become; we instinctively sense our unique gifts and talents. Following his destiny, Mozart created masterpieces of music. Martha Stewart inspires beauty in creating beautiful homes and gardens. The immortal Bob Hope shares his gift of humor in this dark and dreary world. Abraham Lincoln broke the chains of slavery with his gift of leadership. These are men and women who were right to themselves and right for the world. I believe, this is the higher purpose of the ever-so-gentle inner guide! This is my religion, short and simple: stay connected with the Creator and bloom and grow forever.

Staying true to ourselves generates a self-respect that stands above any other honor that this world can bestow. Self-mastery--whether in diet, exercise, study, sexual passions--creates self-respect. A commitment to love and honor one's fellow men creates self-respect. A clear conscience is the very center of self-respect.

It's not easy to prune back those parts of ourselves that are stifling our growth and freedom--especially when we are disconnected from the Creator and spiritually weak. There's the tendency to go with the flow, to take the road most traveled. If the

gardener were to tell the rose bush as he approached it with the shears, “O.K. Today’s the day you’re going to be cut back,” the bush would cry out, “No, no, leave me alone. I’m growing just fine.”

The Gardener Within might whisper, “Maybe you ought to quit smoking; it’s damaging your lungs. You can hardly walk anymore, let alone run.” We might be inclined to say, “Hey, I’m not hurting anyone but myself. Besides, I’ve been doing it for so long that I’ve already wasted my lungs. It’s not going to make any difference. . .My friends won’t want to hang out with me anymore if I quit. . .What will I do with my hands when everyone else is smoking? I’ll be a total loner. . . Everyone’s going to die of something. Why not lung cancer?”

When the Gardener Within says, “No, don’t do it. Don’t take advantage of her in that way. You’ll feel bad about yourself and she’ll feel bad about you and herself. She needs your love and protection. Protect her, dear son. Choose to love in this world that has forgotten how to love. Above all, don’t use the word love to penetrate her heart simply to penetrate her body. It is a mockery. You were created to love, remember?”

There might be the tendency to respond, “What makes me think I could give up what I’ve been doing for years? Hey! She wants what I want too, she just doesn’t want to admit it. I refuse to be disciplined! I want my way now! I want what I want now!”

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Sexual exploitation, using other humans for sexual gratification, is self-destructive, other-destructive and socially destructive.

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Refusing to be pruned produces a bad crop--for corn and people. It's not easy to maintain a healthy self-respect when you're licking the last of the chocolate chip cookie dough, but it's impossible when you are stalking a warm body purely for a night's entertainment. There will never be a way to hurt others without hurting oneself in the process. On the other hand, there will never be a way to give respect and honor to others without also bringing respect and honor to oneself.

Summary

What a tremendous power we have over ourselves! We can choose which control centers will be developed and which will be neglected to atrophy and stagnation--which to make the master of our being and which to make the servants. Every day we face this choice: to nourish or to neglect, to become more what we were created to be, or to become less.

These control areas to satisfy (stomach), to bond in intimacy (sex), to reason (mind), to feel (heart), to aspire (spirit or soul), to be empowered (agency), and to guide (conscience) offer a bright contrast to the idea that man is simply animal and that life is nothing more than an experience in time.

Roots of a tree go deep into the earth and pull water and nutrients that sustain life. We too need to be connected to the source of life--the Creator. We can feel the rejuvenation when the soul feeds and fills with spiritual strength--hearts become full and overflowing with love, tenderness, sympathy, goodwill, confidence, self-love, peace. Praying and meditation nourish the soul, and keep us connected with God and the divinity within ourselves. Minds are quickened and enlightened. Souls are magnified with inner

strength, integrity, and courage. Staying connected with the Creator provides us with the power to overcome our tendency to hurt ourselves and to hurt others.

Plants that are hearty and healthy are disease-resistant; humans that are spiritually healthy are also more disease-resistant. Women who are happy with themselves and are about the business of becoming are not as likely to fall for love at any price. Men who are alive emotionally and spiritually are not likely to fall into the dead mans' disease of exploiting women. Next, we journey to the vision of soul-bonding love.

Notes on chapter eight:

1. A.C. Green, a basketball star with the Dallas Mavericks, is 33 and has never married. He promotes the cause of abstinence. He said in a recent magazine article, "I am still a virgin. Abstaining from extramarital sex is one of the most unpopular things a person can do, much less talk about. From a sheer numbers standpoint, it can be a lonely cause--but that doesn't mean it's not right.

"I abstain as an adult for the same reasons I did as a teen--the principle doesn't change, or the feeling of self-respect I get. My fellow ballplayers do not tell me, "You are crazy"--it's more that they think I'm being unrealistic. It's ironic, but the guys who are parents--and especially the guys who have daughters--tend to look at sex before marriage a lot more carefully now. U.S. News & World Report May 1997