Life’s Growing Pains

A big smirk spread across my face as I heard the broadcaster on National Public Radio describe a unique feature on the Iowa Farmer Today web site. “Go to this address—www.iowafarmer.com—and you can watch corn grow.” Yes, my ears (no pun intended) heard what—watch corn grow? Where? I imagine in an Iowa cornfield. The commentator explains that every 15 minutes the “cornCAM” updates the picture from a carefully positioned camera in the cornfield.

No wait, it gets better. The commentator pauses, concluding the story by adding that the site has already received 100,000 hits.

Now, forgive my urban roots, but people are watching corn grow? Well, I suppose that is right up there with the parking lot at the edge of the fence in the center of Milwaukee’s Mitchell International Airport, which is often backed up with bumper-to-bumper cars waiting to park and watch planes take off and land. A variation on “stop and smell the flowers,” I suppose.

But seriously, I have been drawn back to the image of corn growing on a web site in what appears to be an interesting juxtaposition of nature’s age-old and painstakingly slow process of growth with modern—or more accurately what philosophers call, postmodern—man and woman’s instantaneous demand for satisfaction. Growth takes more than 15 minutes, no matter how we postmodern folk might try to manipulate the process.

You and I are involved in a life profession that watches nature’s age-old and painstakingly slow process of growth.

We reach out a hand and companion men and women through their changing seasons. We are often the ones holding on to a person and his or her family at the heart of the storm as illness threatens and often succeeds in wreaking devastation on their lives. We sit or stand beside a bed waiting for the last wrinkled leaf of life to fall from the bone-tired tree of a mysterious miracle of one, singularly standing, never-to-be-repeated human life. We hover over an incubator as a tiny, perfectly formed child, the weight of a pound of butter, breathes in the wind of oxygen and life.

Growth, whether pushing out of the ground or out of the womb, whether breaking through a developmental stage or a catastrophic crisis, is slow, painful, unpredictable, and cyclic.
First, growth is oh, soooo, slow.

It takes a village, and a lifetime. My issue is my issue is my issue. I am still the frightened little boy at 46, perhaps a little more secure in my outer resources, but still I can feel that little boy wanting to cry. One of the indicators to me of growth came through the writing of autobiographies for CPE units and committee appearances over the years. My first autobiography was 15 or so pages. My second may have been 12. And so on, until I was able to tell the same story in three or four pages with the same issues, but a little more trimmed from the years of personal insight and growth.

When my dear friend John Philbin turned 70, I asked him what wisdom did he have to offer as he was turning that age. He shook his head and in genuine puzzlement said, “I was just 40, and I turn my back and now I am 70.” Growth is slow, and then one day you wake up and you are 30 years older.

I just returned from Wellesley, Massachusetts, where I was last a parish priest 10 years ago. If one more person said to me, “Oh my, I hardly recognized you,” staring at what was once my head of thick hair, I was going to scream, “What did you expect?” I am even getting tired of my comeback, “What can I say, God is my hair stylist!” Growth is slow, and then one day you wake up and you have little hair left.

You cannot rush growth in 15-minute time fragments, not even 15-year time fragments. I remember so vividly the grief of an old man as the tears washed down the crevices in his cheeks as he talked about how much he still missed his wife who had died 35 years before. I am sure he healed much over those years, but he was still hurting, and still healing, in the retelling of this most significant loss so many years after.

Secondly, growth is painful.

Let the women among us tell of the pain of childbirth, not only in the event itself, but in the years of readying for the possibility, and in the years of recovering from the reality. Jesus himself chose the image of childbirth as the ultimate image of pain into glory.

Every tear shed, every ache felt, every gasp cried, every lip quivering, every forehead frowning, every tongue shouting, every sadness moaning, bespeak the world of pain in all of its seasons. Growth pains both sides of relationships as fathers and mothers lose daughters and sons from infancy to childhood, from childhood to
adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood, from adulthood to the establishment of one’s own cycle of what will be her or his family.

An infant’s unspecified cry becomes a child’s boo-boo, a child’s boo-boo becomes an adolescent’s unspecified sulking, an adolescent’s unspecified sulking becomes a teenager’s rebellion, a teenager’s rebellion becomes an adult anxiety, an adult anxiety becomes a later adult’s loss, a later adult’s loss becomes an even later adult’s death. Growth, in the jargon of contemporary cultural analysis, is summed up in the expression, “no pain, no gain.”

I think of my parishioners, now friends, Steve and Susan. Susan was in our RCIA program. During one time of sharing, she told the story of her meeting Steve before what was to be a second marriage for both. His first wife was in a horrible car accident and lay unconscious in a coma for a very long period of time. Somewhere in the middle of this tragic suffering, Steve met Susan and eventually a relationship deepened into a marriage. A lot of pain gripped them in the grieving and weighed heavily upon them in the adjustment and eventual blending of families. And later, in an unforeseen and unimaginable horizon, these people grew and flowered a new and abundant life of additional children born out of the human struggle of the deep pain of this man, this woman, and their individual children caught in the grip of grief.

Thirdly, growth is unpredictable.

A carefully planted field of corn is drowned in floods. A carefully planned life is drowned in the storm of chronic illness. My good friend Ann grieves the loss of a life that she foresaw in the dreams of a marriage, family, and professional career overshadowed by a special needs child whose special needs take the greater portion of the 24 hours in the marriage, family, and work day.

Abundance comes like sunshine and rain upon an ordinarily dried soil. Marie and Guy had their three daughters, aged 14, 12, and 11, when the so often unpredictable pregnancy shook their family foundation. Not one child, but two. Years later, the parents sit in a living room aglow with happiness as one son sits on his mother’s lap and the other son on his father’s lap. How many hours, I wonder, did worry wrap itself around these two parents as they anticipated the unanticipated? Scarcity blooms wildly into abundance.

Finally, growth is cyclic.

I love the summer. I love the fields and woods and lawns and gardens heavy with green and growth. Each year I seem to notice a
little more clearly the sharp contrast of the landscape of the bare
sticks of winter with the fancy plumes of summer. The dogma of the
resurrection is written year after year in the instruction of the seasons.
The catechumen need not read a book when the catechism lies open
before her or him out of doors.

We too go round and round in the cycle of dying and rising. We,
along with our patients, parishioners, inmates, and clients wake up to
the ease of the morning successes and go down to the dis-ease of
evening failures. We gain a calling from God. We lose a direction in
our decision-making. We gain a sense of self-confidence. We lose
our bearing. We celebrate our accomplishments. We grieve our
losses. We love, we hate. We are we, we become one and alone.

So let’s take a lesson from the cornfields. Let’s watch the corn grow.
It’s so slow, so painful, so unpredictable. But it happens year after
year, in the fields around us, and in the fields within us. Let’s look out
this summer and give praise to our God for the abundance, for indeed
winter is coming, and then again, spring, summer, and the fall. And
the seasons will rise again. And again. ✡