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BY REV. CHRISTINE LESLIE

One of my all time favorite phrases is one that I only learned in the last year: "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." I don't know who coined this phrase but I think whoever did is saying that we human beings don't automatically grow emotionally and spiritually as a result of changes in our lives. I know this has been true in my life and in the lives of many people I have met over the years. Emotional and spiritual growth and development is something we choose, or do not choose to do, as the case may be, in response to changes in our lives. In fact growth of any kind is simply not a given, and this is especially true of emotional and spiritual growth. Growth and change are not synonymous. How much easier our lives might be if they were.

Facing and dealing with change is often hard emotional and spiritual work. This is true whether the changes in our lives are ones of our own choosing or ones that come unexpectedly and are the bearers of pain and sorrow. We are physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual beings. Each of these aspects of our humanity need to be nurtured in healthy ways throughout our lives in order for us to achieve a sense of wholeness, well-being, and adaptability that is not easily taken from us by the changes in our lives that are inevitable.

In my experience over the years I have found that many people in our culture reach physical adulthood poorly equipped to thrive as emotional and spiritual beings who also happen to be physical and mental creatures, too. In fact, I would dare say that the vast majority of dis-ease many people feel has more to do with the fact they don't know how to meet their emotional and spiritual needs as well as they do their mental and physical ones. Many do very well in getting their mental and physical needs met in healthy ways because we really value teaching people how to care for their bodies, how to read and write, and how to work productively.

Where we fall short is in teaching people about their emotional and spiritual needs and how to meet them needs in healthy ways. When we are supported in the healthy growth and development of our emotional and spiritual selves, we can reach a level of maturity that equips us to deal with changes with methods that are neither self-destructive or harmful to others, and in fact, may the catalyst for deepening and strengthening our emotional and spiritual selves.

I was introduced to all of this when I became a student chaplain at a psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC in 1981. I worked and studied there for a year and a half in a clinical ministry internship program that taught me about family systems and that we do not become who we are in a vacuum. We human beings initially grow and develop physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually in stages that parallel one another and are also dependent on one another. For example, failure to hold a baby will stunt its emo-

## Faith Matters & Growth Matters

tional growth and sense of safety in the world. Some babies fail to thrive and even die when not held and talked to when fed.

Now adult human beings do not die per se when their spiritual and emotional lives are left untended or are poorly tended. However, I link the failure to thrive in many people's lives to emotional and spiritual deprivation. I know for myself that once I became familiar with and understood the critical connections between emotional and spiritual maturity, and what it takes to achieve both, I began to thrive in ways I did not know were possible.

Spiritual maturation is a human developmental process that seems to occur in identifiable stages. These "stages of faith" were first described in a book, "Stages of Faith," by the theologian and psychologist Dr. James Fowler, who teaches at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. This spiritual maturation process involves growing out of an unquestioned acceptance of a second-hand religion into a first-hand spirituality of one's own.

The words "religious" and "religion" come from the Latin word "religio," or that which is meant to reconnect us to The Sacred. As they are used today these words rarely, if ever, connote this for most people. It is the word we use to describe a faith tradition and its belief system; its teachings; its concepts of The Sacred; its rites and rituals; its sacred writings and how we are to interpret same; and of course, its requirements for membership. Being "spiritual," on the other hand, connotes having an intimate, meaningful relationship with The Sacred, and our understanding and experience of it. This relationship makes a qualitative difference for the better in our lives and may or may not be supported by an involvement with a particular faith tradition or religion.

Because "growth is optional," the realization of our sexual orientation is often catalytic for our emotional and spiritual growth in ways that can reawaken our hunger for a meaningful relationship with The Sacred. In fact, I believe it is critical to the well-being of GLBTQ&Q people to develop a healthy spiritual life (that may or may not be interwoven with participation in a faith tradition) in order to thrive as GLBTQ&Q people in a world that often props up homophobia with unfounded religious tenets. This is not easy to do and takes a lot of work. It is work that is worth it. When faith matters and growth matters are allowed to go hand in hand, we are much more likely to face, with grace, courage, and honesty, painful and difficult changes that come into our lives. And isn't this what ultimately matters to all of us after all?

*Rev. Christine Leslie, the first openly ordained lesbian in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is the founder and director of Triangle Ministries, A Center for Lesbian & Gay Spiritual Development near Burlington, VT. She is available for individual and couple counseling, commitment services, grief counseling, workshops, and retreats. She specializes in the integration of sexual-identity formation and spiritual development. Contact her at 802-860-7106 or email her at [revcsl@aol.com](mailto:revcsl@aol.com). Visit the Triangle Ministries web page at <http://members.aol.com/revcsl>*