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Growing Pains

To suffer one's death and to be reborn is not easy (Fritz Perls)

I'd like to tell you why Personal Growth means so much to me, and about my involvement in the setting up of RENASCOR'

First of all, what does Personal Growth mean to me? It has been a doorway out of depression, non-acceptance of myself, into a life full of hope and almost endless possibilities. I used to be, in my eyes, dull, plain and ineffectual, with absolutely no confidence in my own judgement and decisions. Now I can accept myself as a likeable person who can, and does, cope with the demands and challenges of life. Sometimes, I slip back through that doorway, into the old thought patterns of frustration and hopelessness, but this is happening less and less, and I am increasingly able to take firm hold again of my hope, of my strength. To someone else, Personal Growth can be a way through to communication with others, where previously relationships have always been difficult, perhaps even impossible. Or, to someone who has always been secure in relationships, but only in relationships, it can bring the ability to exist alone, distinct from others. It is FREEDOM, freedom to BE oneself, to ACCEPT oneself, to LIKE oneself. It is a voyage of self-discovery, which can be painful, in which one

sometimes seems to be taking two steps forward and one step back, but it brings with it a sense of achievement, of fulfilment, of arriving - or rather of seeing, at last, the goal at which one hopes to arrive. A voyage of self-discovery, and having discovered oneself, that self is freed, empowered to give warmth, caring and support to others.

How did I come to Personal Growth? Until two years ago, I led a pretty ordinary life: I completed (?) my education, found an interesting job, married, started a family. Gradually, after the birth of our third child, I sank into a period of stagnation, vegetation, isolation, frustration, from the worst of which I was rescued by the National Housewives' Register, a number of sessions with a clinical psychologist, a part-time teaching job - and tranquillisers. But it was only when I turned to hypnotherapy (with Geoff M'Cartney, now Director of RENASCOR) that I really started the long hard haul towards recovery. This is not an article on Hypnosis, but through Geoff I first began to resolve my non-acceptance of myself, on his advice I went to a Transactional Analysis weekend, and as I benefited from this first experience of Personal Growth I came to share his strong conviction that there should be a Personal Growth Centre in the North.

And at last RENASCOR came into being, and the growing pains of a Personal Growth Centre can be as agonising, and as rewarding, as the growing pains of an individual emerge from a restricting past. Most of the established Growth Centres seem to be in London, although there are many individuals in the North offering one or another aspect of Personal Growth, such as Bio-energetics, Co-Counselling, Encounter, Gestalt, Massage, Psychodrama, T Groups, Transactional Analysis. (To name them all would be impossible, but to two in particular I owe a personal debt which can never be repaid). Geoff's dream is of a centre in the North offering all these activities under one roof, and this is what, with RENASCOR, we hope to achieve. Why did we choose the name RENASCOR? Personal Growth offers the opportunity to discover oneself, to be born again. We choose RENASCOR - a personal statement that I AM BORN AGAIN. Birth is a frightening experience, a violent expulsion into a strange world. Rebirth may be gradual and painful - the individual, striving to emerge, experiences both the struggle of the newborn baby and the birth pangs of the mother - but oh the wonder and excitement of that new world. Rebirth, renewal, can come at any stage in our chronological life, and can go on as long as we draw breath.

Like a human baby, and like a newly emerging individual, RENASCOR is facing the hazards of life in what often seems to be an uncaring world. The birth took place in May 1976, after a long gestation period. There were all the complications of planning our first programme - providing the events to meet the needs, before we knew precisely what those needs were - building up a mailing list, from those who had been to other groups, or who had expressed an interest - finding leaders with the necessary skills and empathy - finding the right balance of 'chiefs' and 'indians' - publicity. The baby is 'doing well' (our first programme offered four events, the second six, and in the Spring we shall be offering between sixteen and twenty) but is rapidly outgrowing his (her?) clothes. Our mailing list, both of chiefs and indians, is snowballing - one name leads to two more, each of those knows others who are interested - but the

numbers who can attend our events are limited by the size of the rooms. Anyone know of a large country house near Manchester where we can laugh, cry, shout and dance without distressing the neighbours!

These are some of our problems. Why, then, do we do it? Because we believe that in every man, in every woman, there lies potential strength to do so much, but this strength is often negated by unresolved problems in the past. We are limited by ourselves, our misconceptions, our 'hang-ups', and through the many and varied activities of a centre like RENASCOR these can be explored and resolved in a safe, supportive environment. Why do we feel that a Personal Growth Centre is necessary for this? Why can't the individual 'go it alone'? There are I think, two main answers to this. One is that many of us find it difficult to accept ourselves, and in a group situation, even more than in the one-to-one relationship between therapist and client, there is the joy and the relief of being accepted by others. Accepted for what I AM, not for what I would like to be, if I were freed from my imperfections, but accepted AS ME. And from this can develop my own acceptance of myself. The second point is this: we have all grown so skilled at concealing from our conscious mind what it is that has caused our hang-ups, that the loving, caring insight of others - of others who ACCEPT us - is often necessary to help us to bring out the bogeys, to face them, and to exorcise them.

On the voyage of self-discovery which is Personal Growth, sooner or later the individual reaches a crossroads, a moment of decision: 'do I go forward or back?' I think that I, personally, have reached that point, and have made my decision - I cannot go back, and whatever the difficulties (and there will be difficulties) I WILL go forward, in my own strength and in the strength I gain from others. RENASCOR is also at a crossroads: we must also grow, and offer what we have found to be good to a wider range of people. There is no standing still.

Some time ago, a close friend who had just gone through a very unsettling experience, asked me, quite out of the blue, to tell her a story. I was completely non-plussed by the request, totally unprepared. She said that she did not want a true story, but I replied that that was the only sort I could tell, and so I would tell her a true story. I'd like to share it with you.

My story was about a woman called Elizabeth. (If you like, change the name to John, and the pronouns to 'he' and 'him'.) She didn't like the name Elizabeth, and often wondered why her parents had chosen it for her. . . but she never asked them. To her it was a dull uninteresting name. Perhaps, if she had asked them, they would have said that to them it was a very special name, with a very special meaning. Maybe they would have said that they chose the name because she was so important to them. so precious to them. But she never knew. . . because she never asked.

Elizabeth went through life feeling dissatisfied with herself; she felt that she was plain, uninteresting. . . There seemed really, to her, not much point in her life, in her existence. She did all the ordinary things - she got married, had a family. To outward appearances she was no doubt a success but always, inside, there was this feeling that

really, she wasn't much good, there was no purpose for her life. Always, too, she hoped that somehow, somewhere, she would meet someone who could help her to become as she would like to be, someone who could help her to become real, interesting. Someone who could help her to be warm, outgoing, a true friend to others.

And then one day, someone she knew slightly happened to leave something behind - perhaps intentionally, she never knew, but in any case there was no way she could return it to them. It was a portrait. . . was it a portrait? A painting? A photograph. . . . And it seemed, somehow, to be a portrait of the person who could have helped her, the person who could have shown her how to become what she would like to be, and at the same time, perhaps inevitably, that person WAS all the things that she would have liked to be: calm, confident, strong, able to cope with the demands of life, able to enjoy life, able to help others.

For a long time, Elizabeth treasured that portrait. She would look at it often, and think: 'If only I could meet that person! If only I could be like that person!' And then one day someone - was it one of her children? a friend? I don't know - someone happened to notice the portrait. They picked it up, admired the frame, and said: 'What a fascinating mirror! Where did you find it?'....

... 'A mirror? Then what I thought was a portrait is. . . my reflection? Then that person is. . . . me? Me? Me!'

.....And that's as far as the story goes. I can't end it. . . . I don't know, yet, what the ending will be. Only Elizabeth knows how, for her, the story ends.

Roy Persons

Reflections on Community

What is a community? What am I doing away from my own country over the Christmas season? What am I doing in England conducting more gestalt groups? Am I just a psychological troubadour? Yes, I did enjoy and felt touched by the work I did last summer with Quaesitor and Community, and the co-therapy with Ursula Fausset. Well then, is community just my hometown, my country, my family? Or is community all the memories, fantasies, and feelings about special people that I carry with me? I have often dreamed of all the people that I love gathering together to live in one geographical location. I suppose that my community is all of the people that I am linked with by heart, no matter where they live. I am really drawn to London this holiday season to embrace and to be embraced with a loving community member.

It has only been recently that I have decided to spend most of my time with only those people with whom I feel in communion. I no longer choose to make my community other psychologists, or gestalt leaders, or through professional societies or any other identity groups. I want a contactful community where the members are