

Little By Little

08/13/17

Zechariah 4:10 -- Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin...

Sometimes we wonder at why things take so long. We get impatient; we tire; we lose interest; we become frustrated, and sometimes move into depression or despair because things aren't moving at the pace we think they ought to move.

We can have this attitude toward personal or romantic relationships, toward world peace, as we heal from injuries or "diseases" of the mind, emotions, and body, and toward our changes in weight, intelligence, and as skills develop and lessons are learned, and with our spiritual progress.

We often times want things to go faster, and yet God seems to be pulling us back, controlling our growth rate. Yes, God could instantly transform us; has even promised that we are changed in the twinkling of an eye. But God is transforming us slowly, thoroughly, and eternally.

In Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, is a piece of dialogue that reveals many a secret:

"How did you go bankrupt?" Bill asked.

"Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually, and then suddenly."

This is such a profound concept that it should be labeled The Hemingway Law of Progress. This is how God works in Creation and in us: gradually, and then suddenly.

It is like the ‘overnight sensation’ who had been working hours a day, practicing her musical instrument for many years until someone finally noticed. They called her an overnight sensation – like she just woke up one morning and could play Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto Number 3.

Gradually, and then suddenly ... like the porch floor in the back, the squeaking goes ignored until your foot goes through the floor boards. Or Jack’s Valley Road slowly developing pot holes until your axel breaks as you drive over one. A weed starts in the garden and is overlooked until one day you have more thorns and thistles than vegetables and flowers.

It is what happens as we age. The years go by gradually; almost imperceptibly when we are young, then all of a sudden – we’re old.

This is how God works. We grow very slowly in whatever requires a transformation, including our spiritual development. Part of the reason is that spiritual growth is difficult to grasp. We sometimes need to experience life lessons 30 or 40 times before we actually get it ... really get it, not just recognize it.

This is also true with weight loss or muscle development or learning the piano, or how to embroider. It takes practice.

We’ve heard that expression: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. But that’s not quite correct. It’s easy to get to Carnegie Hall: take a cab to 57th Street and Seventh Avenue

in Manhattan. Piece of cake. The real question is: how do you get invited to perform on the stage of Carnegie Hall? Now **that** takes practice.

Sometimes we don't progress because we have so much to unlearn. My voice teacher told me that I had to forget everything any of my former teachers had taught me. She told me, "Never sing again." What she meant was that I had a particular impression of what I was to do in order to sing, and it was causing me pain and discomfort.

There is no pill, prayer, or principle that will instantly undo the damage of many years. Ephesians 4:22-24 teaches us: *So get rid of your old self, which made you live as you used to — the old self that was being destroyed by its deceitful desires. Your hearts and minds must be made completely new, and you must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy.*"

So with the help of Christ we 'take off the old self and put on the new'.

We also progress slowly in pretty much everything because growth requires change, and change requires us to let go of something. We have to let go of the old way, and often we move into fear – even if what we are giving up is destructive, unproductive, and self-defeating. It is still familiar, and we have a tough time letting go of what is familiar.

Another reason we progress gradually is that good habits take time to establish. We can't claim to be kind unless we are habitually kind. We can't claim to be following the precepts of Christ until we are habitually loving others, showing compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

It is great that we can do it occasionally; but we still have more progress in front of us until they are habitual thoughts, words, and actions.

So what do we do? We continue one step at a time; small increments; little success by little success. In Genesis 12, God spoke to Abraham. He told Abraham to leave his country, his family, his household, and go to where God will tell him. So Abraham left, not knowing where he was going, not knowing what he was supposed to do when he got there. He just listened to God and followed the instructions.

In the Bible, as in life, rarely does God ask someone to do something, and then provide all the details, all the steps involved, and the final result. When God asks something of someone, rarely are they given enough information to analyze and assess the nature of the request, and determine if this is something they can do, so that they can make a decision as to whether to go or not.

I have yet to wake up to the theme of Mission Impossible running through my head, then hearing God's voice boom: "Good morning, Patrick. This is God, and this is your mission, should you choose to accept it."

No, we are asked – or given a vision or feeling – of the first step to take. Then after that step is taken we are given another step. Only until we have taken those two steps are we given the next step. Through this process our faith, awareness, and responsiveness are developed.

If God has nudged us in a direction, and we don't comply, we are not getting anywhere by asking God for something else. Erwin Lutzer stated: *Obedience to revealed truth guarantees guidance in matters unrevealed.* We need to follow God's lead into the Light before we can make progress into the areas that remain unlit. Our trust, confidence, and commitment to God expand as we move forward with small steps.

There's a song that describes this well. It is a children's song written by Ron Hamilton, entitled Little By Little. [Sing the song.]

So there it is. The solution to all things: little by little. I read that the literal translation of Proverbs 4:12 is "As you go, step by step I will open up the way before you." As we progress, we see more. "Walk a mile, see a mile." When we drive at night, we do not see the entire journey; we see one bend in the road at a time, until finally we reach our destination.

Of course as we grow in God-awareness our small steps can also grow. When we are ready, God will lengthen our stride. Psalm 18:36 -- *You enlarge my steps under me, And my feet have not slipped.* So we eventually can take larger and larger steps, and

gradually things start moving faster. As the basics are learned our mind more quickly grasps the more difficult concepts. As we leave our money in the fund, the interest compounds; as we stay the course we become stronger and in better shape, until suddenly ... we've lost those 15 pounds; we've acquired our Bachelor of Arts Degree; we've learned to play the piano, or guitar, or the sweater is done because we've learned the skills of embroidery.

There is one more thing to consider: and that it may not always be appropriate to take small steps, one at a time. We may have heard the expression: How do you eat an elephant? "One bite at a time," would be the answer based upon today's lesson.

Another solution, at times, especially if it is an enormous feat we face, especially when the elephant can grow old and spoil before we have finished it; especially when we grow tired of eating elephant every single day of our lives, the solution is to enlist help.

We are limited to what we can accomplish when we rely solely upon ourselves. So instead of eating the elephant one bite at a time, why not have an elephant barbeque and invite the entire community. Carve the elephant into family size chunks and spread it around so everyone can enjoy the feast. Some people can bring their own barbeques; others bring salads and fruits, and side dishes. Let's have a party – now that is how you eat an elephant. This is how barn-raising happens. There is an unspoken rule that if the community helps raise your barn you will help the community when it is time to raise someone else's barn. It is a mutually agreed upon party.

We don't have to do it all ourselves. We don't have to face the darkness and the hard times alone. We can talk, share, confide, and ask for help. Perhaps there is nothing anyone else can do except be there by your side, or pray for you, because this is something that you have to learn and accomplish for your growth. But you can have advocates and friends and people who are better trained in certain areas giving you advice and encouraging you. I believe that most things are easier with two people. Even if it is painting a wall: one paints, the other leads the cheers. One writes the book, the other reads and provides positive feedback.

We can get by with a little help from our friends.

I pray that we can find the courage to face our challenges, and not be so overwhelmed that we abstain from trying. One step at a time, moment by moment, one hour at a time, one day at a time. Karen Salmansohn said, "Anxiety happens when you think you have to figure out everything all at once. Breathe. You're strong. You got this. Take it a day at a time."

Little by little will meet most obstacles. Confucius teaches: *A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step*. When it gets too much, call Über, take a cab, get help. When the situation calls for it, let's have a party and invite people to share in the opportunity. But let us put God in charge and know that the plans He has for us or good, perfect, and are intended to prosper us, and not harm us.

Let us pray....