

## On Growing Up

February, 2013

Toastmaster Speech #6 – Vocal Variety

One of my favorite scenes in world literature is in the opening chapter of “The Poor Little Rich Girl”, by Eleanor Gage, published in 1912. Gwendolyn (the poor little rich girl) has been anticipating her 7<sup>th</sup> birthday for days, happily crossing out each day on her calendar until there are no more days blocking her little girl 6-year-old self from the 7-year-old grown-up she expects to become on her 7<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The night before her birthday, she carefully measures herself against the mirror in her bedroom and makes a line on the glass to show how tall she is.

She can hardly wait until the next day, when she can measure herself again and see the difference, the space between the lines that she knows will be there, conclusive evidence for anyone to see that now she has grown up!

Then at last – it’s her birthday! And finally, she gets a private moment to measure herself again...and she is shocked to see that there is no difference at all between the lines! Not a smidgen! She hasn’t grown up at all!

You know the feeling? Maybe it wasn’t quite so literal for you, but was there some age when you expected to hit the magic number and finally feel like a grown up?...only to find, on your big milestone birthday, that you woke up feeling not a whit different than you did the day before?

What does it mean to grow up?

To me, growing up does not mean that we stop being a child. The child that we were on the day we were born, we still are on the day we die, no matter how long we live. The spirit that lives inside our bodies looks out at the world through the same eyes throughout our whole lives.

I view growing up as a process of taking upon ourselves more and more responsibility for this spirit, this child.

No matter how far we come on our journey, no matter how much of the road lies behind us, the farther we come, the farther we can see the road stretching out ahead. There is no end. The more we know, the more we know we don’t know. So if we think we have arrived, it’s only a measure of how blind we have become.

Growing up is not a destination. It’s a process.

I think of this process like I think of caring for plants in a garden. The spirit that comes into the world when we are born is like the seed of a specific plant. We are

not blank slates, who could become whatever the gardener wishes we were. We arrive with particular requirements for achieving our particular potential.

If I'm a water lily, I will not grow well in the desert. If I need a lot of room to grow strong roots but try to emulate the kind of plant that likes to grow in clumps, I will not thrive.

Howard Thurman, a great African American educator and minister, is quoted as having said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

We're challenged to figure out the nature of our own particular spirit seed, and what we need in order to come into our own full flower or fruit... We're challenged to figure out what gifts have come into the world through us, and in what ways we take most joy in sharing them... This is how we come alive.

Of course, for many of us, learning how to care for ourselves is difficult. The people who cared for us when we got here may not have had the capacity to understand our nature or our needs, may not have had the resources even if they understood.

The natural tendency is to treat ourselves as we were treated. It's hard to notice that there's any other way. If we grew up feeling constantly criticized and now struggle to feel good about ourselves, the tendency is to criticize ourselves for feeling bad. We don't realize that there are other ways to encourage needed change.

If experience has taught us to feel anxious in certain situations, we're likely to talk to ourselves in ways that shame and judge us for our fear, and so make ourselves feel even more inadequate and afraid. Do you ever talk like this to yourself?

What we need is to acknowledge and accept our feelings and our fears, then figure out what would help us to get past them, so they don't limit our choices and block off pathways to fulfillment in our lives. Yes, as Dr. Susan Jeffers wrote, we have to "feel the fear and do it anyway"; but we need to do this with compassion for ourselves, not by beating ourselves into obedience. We can't build a sense of safety and confident courage with a whip.

On her 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, the poor little rich girl thought there was something awfully the matter with her. She wiped the marks off the mirror, hoping no one would notice the shameful truth about her, no one would realize that she was not growing up.

Lots of us are trying to hide in some way, feeling ashamed that we're not who we think we should be.

But I think of it like this: We are here as aspects of the light of God on Earth.

To grow up is to take responsibility for filling out the contours of our potential selves - for full-filling ourselves, so that God's blessings can flow through us into the world and be shared.

All us children are here to grow toward the Light, to give form to Spirit, to embody some aspect of the light of God on earth. I think that this is what it means to grow UP.