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“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Growing pains in the New Year. Part of the good news of the New Year is the opportunity it offers each of us for personal growth and transcendence, and a larger sense of the world we live in.

Personal growth, of course, doesn't come without a price. Always, there are *growing pains* along the way. *Growing pains* are the personal struggle and hard work we engage in to stretch our mind and spirit. They are the process we go through to enlarge our perspective and world view.

At some point, the question comes down to, how big a world do we want to live in? A world where all people are welcome, for example, and where diversity is valued? Or a world where only people like us are accepted?

If we observe the social trends in our country—over the decades and even centuries—the trajectory clearly tilts toward enlarging the circle of our life and letting more people in. We've seen this in extending *the vote* to women in the 1920's and, later, in race relations, culminating in the Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties. And we see it, too, in the recently passed legislation with regard to *don't ask/ don't tell*.

Still, these changes take time; they don't happen over night. In a sense, they are part of a life-process of *growing pains*. On a smaller scale, we see this in our families and community life as well.

Just the same, it is a process we must go through: accepting a new person into the family or neighborhood, or into the church, mosque or synagogue; coming to terms with the reality that, at times, with regard to matters of race, gender equality and sexual orientation, the ways of our ancestors were wrong and small-minded.

Moving beyond our past. Sometimes some of the hardest work we have to do as adults is to rise above the short-sighted ways of our past—with our parents and grandparents, perhaps, in the neighborhood we grew up in, or with the church of our youth. All the time, in our lives, we have stuff to let go of and stuff to transcend and move beyond.

Again, *growing pains*.

The world is always evolving and self-creating, and we along with it—each of us challenged to become a bigger person with a larger view of the world. However, this isn't something that comes naturally to us. We have to work at it.

Our natural tendency as human beings is to group ourselves together and then separate ourselves from others. In this sense, we *identify and separate*.

It may be by the food we eat or the habits and routines we opt for. It may be by our pursuit of the religious and spiritual or the way we view ethnicity and race. Or it may be by our views on education and health care, the way we view the role of government, or by the way we vote.

In all these areas, we *identify and separate ...identify and separate*.

How big a world? The best of our religion promotes tolerance and openness—in the way we embrace each other and in the way we welcome new ideas. Again, how big of a world do we want to live in?

There are enormous consequences to how we answer this question. Small worlds—where everyone is like us and if they're not *like us*, we convert them or throw them out—are forever going to war to make sure their small world remains in tact. They don't tolerate rivals or change; they don't want to grow.

Nonetheless, *growing pains* are good thing. They are how we move forward as individuals, cultures and civilizations. After all, we are not stones. We're human beings, created in the image of the one Creator God. And if there is one constant in life, it is change and the consequent growth it prompts in each of us.

Our challenge in the New Year is to embrace the change that swirls around us with open minds and hopeful spirits—in the omnipresent globalization that surrounds us, in the always-evolving reaches of technology and in the ongoing evolution of our human situation.

How big a world? Big enough so every human being can greet the new day with hope and with genuine prospects for a fulfilling life.