

I know the theme for tonight's talk is Before and After. Rather than talk about the two end points, Before and After, I want to focus on the transition between Before and After which I will call Growth.

Many years ago, I became friends with a psychiatrist who I held in very high regard. He told me that the single most important objective anyone could hold in life is the constant need to grow. One can look at some of the great fiction of the 20th century such as the Rabbit Angstrom novels by John Updike and Herzog by Saul Bellow and not find too much support for growth as an objective.

In the first of the Rabbit Angstrom novels, the reader meets Rabbit also known as Harry, which is the name I will use in this talk, who is a 26 year old kitchen gadget salesman. His life already appears to have peaked when he was a basketball star in high school. He is married and the father of a two year old son. His wife is pregnant. Dissatisfied with his life, Rabbit abandons his family and moves into a hotel. He has dinner with his old high school basketball coach and two girls. He goes off with one of the girls and begins an affair with her. His wife moves back to her parents' house.

Harry subsequently attempts to reconcile with his wife. The reconciliation fails with devastating consequences. His wife gets drunk and accidentally drowns her new born daughter. At his daughter's funeral, Harry proclaims his innocence in her death. He then returns to his girl friend and resumes his affair but learns that she is pregnant with his child. He is unwilling to divorce his wife and leaves his pregnant girl friend.

Growth appears to be the antithesis of Harry's life. He takes no responsibility for any of his actions and simply abandons all of his moral obligations. At best, Harry appears to be

ethically stunted. At worst, he regresses to total self-absorption, the exact opposite of any growth and simply disregards those whose lives he has impacted. His life reflects regression to a totally self-centered state, the exact opposite of growth.

Herzog reflects dysfunction, not growth. As the novel begins, Herzog is emerging from an acrimonious second divorce. His career as an academic has stalled. He is in a relationship with a vibrant woman, Romana, but that relationship is crippled by Herzog's fear of making a commitment. The novel, however, ends on an upbeat note. He has dinner with Romana and makes plans to fix up his house which remains structurally sound but in need of repair, a metaphor of his relationship with Romana. While the ending contains a kernel of hope, there is little concrete sign of growth in Herzog's character. He makes little effort to acknowledge his responsibility in the failure of his earlier relationships. As a result, he does not grow from those experiences. He can only hold the unrealistic expectation that the next go around will be better without actually examining the cause of the failure of his earlier relationships and growing from his past experiences.

The central characters of the novels by both writers reflect confusion more than any other attitude as the result of shifting cultural norms. None of the characters of both writers finds a sense of satisfaction and completeness when the novels end. There is no growth partly because the characters lack a sense of purpose as a result of moral disarray.

One has to look to the great novels of the 19th century to find personal growth as a theme in a fictional character's development. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to take one example, describes how one of the central characters, Dorothea, enters into a marriage with Causabon, thinking that his life's long work, the *Key to All Mythologies*, reflects his intellectual curiosity

and scholarship, aspects of his character in which she hopes to share. Eventually, she realizes he has no intellectual curiosity and his academic scholarship is nothing more than small minded pedantry. More importantly, Causabon does not view his marriage to Dortha as one of equals. Instead, he sees her role as being his secretary and subordinate. Fortunately for Dortha, Eliot has Causabon die off freeing Dortha to develop a new relationship with Causabon's cousin, Will Ladislaw. But before Causabon leaves the scene, he becomes so suspicious of Dortha's relationship to Will, reflecting Causabon's total self-absorption, that he inserts a provision in his will which disinherits Dortha if she marries Will. Outraged by Causabon's lack of faith in Dortha's loyalty, she abandons any further work on Causabon's life's work. Eventually, she marries Landislaw, giving up any interest in Causabon's estate. Both Dortha and Will grow in their relationship and base their marriage on mutual respect and understanding. Their happiness depends on the relationship they develop and not on material worth, or social recognition.

Another example of an author's focus on a character's growth is War and Peace. I will focus on one of the central characters, Natasha Rostov. When the reader first meets Natasha, she is vivacious, engaging and romantic. She enters into a long term engagement with Prince Andrei, who is bright, ambitious but emotionally austere and somewhat forbidding, Natasha's polar opposite. During her engagement with the Prince, she has a brief affair with Anatole Kuragin. When Andrei learns of the affair, he breaks off the engagement. Andrei fights in the battle of Bordino against Napoleon's forces and is seriously wounded. Natasha learns of his injuries and devotes herself to his care. Andrei, through Natasha's care, softens his attitude towards her and forgives her for her affair with Kuragin. Both the characters develop and grow. Natasha's devotion to Andrei reflects her new understanding that love is defined as a commitment to a

relationship, not a self-indulgent romance. Andrei's forgiveness of Natasha reflects an abandonment of the rigid standards by which he judged relationships. The growth shown by both characters allows them to deepen their relationship and further their commitment as a true meaning of love.

So as we start this new year let us renew a commitment to personal growth as an objective on which we can all agree.