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challenges

## No Escape from Finitude

Life stories, true life stories, involve a struggle from the start. We have complex relationships to work out with the members of our family. We are marked by our early experiences for the rest of our lives, even though changes occur in the way we perceive events, imagine ourselves, understand others, and choose to act at various stages of our life. As our life goes on, changes become more and more difficult.

### Human Authenticity Calls for Struggle

People hope to grow in sensitivity and responsiveness to true values, but such growth is not inevitable. There are human failures and mediocrities. Continuous development varies with people's roots, their opportunities, their good fortune, their adroitness in avoiding setbacks. People can come to recognize harmful,

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dangerous, and misleading satisfactions for what they are and drop them. They can choose not to let discomfort, pain, and privation obstruct their pursuit of true values. They can discover values they had previously overlooked. They can move beyond mere personal tastes and interests to benevolence and beneficence towards others. They can disdain rationalizations, open themselves to things as they are, and help themselves and others to become what they should be.

This is a matter of creative tension struggling towards personal integration. Various conflicting claims and urgencies divide us. Our human relationships cannot be free of all constraint or ambiguity. Our authentic personal development needs questions and problems no less than answers and solutions. In fact, every answer and solution prepares us for the creative tension of further questions and problems. We develop when we are steadily oriented toward goals which strain our personal resources and are truly worthwhile.

### Tension between Desires and Limits

We experience a tension between our desires and our limits. Desire, imagination, and inquiry would seem to have no fixed limits; a corollary of the absence of limits would be the absence of any need to choose. We learn from experience which desires are impractical and to be dismissed. False or exaggerated ideals, desires, and plans could lead to negative consequences, and so we deliberate about what actually can be implemented. We settle on a possible course of action and proceed.

Such a decision implies the acceptance of limits. As G.K. Chesterton wrote: "Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When

you choose anything, you reject everything else. . . . If you become King of England, you give up the post of Beadle in Brompton.”

Goods chosen imply goods renounced. Our decisions ratify and increase our limitations. Our commitments imply our acceptance of limitation. Our desires, hopes, dreams, and ideals strain against that limitation, but limits remain even when our desires are fulfilled. Jesus Christ, the paradigm of Christian faith, never sought exemption from limits, decisions, or death. Christian faith is lived in the concrete realities of finitude and resists flight into illusion. With no escape from finitude, it relies on God’s will and grace.

Our actions are sustained by desire of some kind. We seek to attain something we deem good, straining against limits. Changing ourselves or our situation implies an ideal which differs from our present reality. This ideal must have come to terms with lim-

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its; if not, it would remain an empty dream. Christian faith does not believe that the tension between desire and limits should be resolved by eliminating desire. A contemporary theologian says: “For Buddhism, the supreme perfection is to kill desire. How distant the men of the Bible, even those closest to God, seem from this ideal! The Bible is, on the contrary, filled with the tumult and conflict of every form of desire. . . . Desire is essential and ineradicable.”



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### The Challenge of Serious Decision Making

Often our reluctance to make serious decisions and choices is less a fear of suffering than a secret dread that permits few illusions or certainties about what will follow. We share with Hamlet the tendency to indefinite postponement; we might, with Heyst in Joseph Conrad’s *Victory*, choose drift. Even that fails. Heyst elects something that is not there to elect: security by withdrawal and passivity. Persons who choose to ignore the demands of their circumstances choose what is itself a form of death. Our very needs become known to us as inner tensions, and the way we strive to fill them requires choice. A good choice relieves the tension. Other needs will become evident later, and other choices can attend to them.

If our inner tensions imply our need for new decisions, our decisions demand awareness and strength. The lack of such strength makes us pathetic. On the other hand, strength is of no use if we are not aware of alternatives. If decisions are to be fully free and human, all that one knows must come into play, and one’s willingness to detect self-deception. The Second Vatican Council gives expression to the inner tension within which our decision making takes place:

The truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labors are in line with that more basic imbalance rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself, many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature, he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways. On the other, he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life. Pulled by manifold attractions, he is constantly forced to choose among them and to renounce some. (GS §10)



### **Fear of Insignificance**

There is a tension at the heart of every human life story, which Ernest Becker describes as the fear of insignificance. This tension reflects the human nature at the heart of the life story. As a contemporary author puts it: “Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity.” At the same time, “man is a worm and food for worms.” He lives in the tension of his duality. His inner self enjoys freedom of thought, imagination, and the endless reach of symbolism; his body limits, however, determine and bind him. This tension is aggravated by the fact that we are not living among ideal persons in an ideal world. From the aggravation of our basic predicament, we often seek pseudo-solutions to avoid having to face the tragic aspect of life. Rousseau taught the French Revolution that people were good and institutions evil, so reorganize the institutions, and people will be able to be good. He assumed that, by their own unaided efforts, people could create institutions to resolve all their tensions and conflicts.

### **Development within Limits**

Some lives are more integrated than others; some are more full of conflict. We can search for our own true story only within certain limits of possibility and probability. The recognition and acceptance of these limits is, in fact, the only way to the realization of our true story—the story most appropriate to our authentic possibilities. Tensions are aggravated when we try to be what we cannot be, when we pretend to be other than we are. They are aggravated at the social level when a political ideology engenders in the masses a passionate hope for a utopia

without the means to attain it. Both individuals and societies can miss their true stories through self-deception with regard to their true and limited possibilities. Detachment from self-interest and bias is difficult to achieve. We sense the gap between our possibilities and our actual moral achievements. Awareness of our moral inadequacy creates a tension which we often attempt to resolve through rationalization, a “cover story” that is out of joint with our experience. Guilt, rationalization, and self-deception imply the painful experience of moral finitude in our aspiration toward values and our true possibilities.

### **Creative Crises**

The personal crises of a life story are often turbulent, but they do not necessarily have the disintegrating effect of severe mental illness. The powerful emotions which erupt from a personal crisis can signify a personal liberation from false beliefs and lead to a more productive life. One can emerge a stronger and better person.

Some hardship, suffering, or mental anguish is the lot of everyone. These things are potentially creative; they can help individuals improve the quality of their inner self. Economic prosperity and a good educational system are no guarantee of personal morality, character, and maturity. People grow by passing through such critical periods as coming of age, getting married, the birth and raising of children, and the advent of bereavements, old age, and dying. Frustration, too, may assist personal development, for character and personality are achieved through overcoming difficulties with patience, intelligence, and persistence. Getting all we want when we want it does little towards personal development; it even seems to preclude personal growth.