

What Did You Learn?

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Scripture text: 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”

Our older son, Spencer, had a summer job working with a landscaper. The job ended when the landscaper returned to his regular job of teaching. This left Spencer with a free week, so he decided to earn extra money by collecting scrap steel and selling it. I thought that was a wonderful idea. It would not only help clean the environment, but he could earn extra money, and be productive.

So last week he collected old lawn mowers, removed the rubber and plastic parts, then drove a truckload of scrap steel to the recycling center. It was hard, dirty work. But after a long day of effort, he received only eight dollars for his efforts and was discouraged. He phoned his girlfriend’s father, with whom he is close, and told him he’d earned only eight dollars.

Then his girlfriend’s father asked him a wonderful question. He asked, “What did you learn from this experience?”

Spencer was very quiet, thinking, then he said, “I’ve learned I have to work harder in high school so I can go to college.”

When I first heard this, I was happy. But I was also a bit mystified, because Joan and I had been telling him this same thing for several years, on an almost daily basis, and now it seemed like a new revelation to our son, something he'd never heard before. Then it occurred to me, he hadn't heard it before. He hadn't heard it. And he hadn't heard it, because his life's experience had not yet confirmed it.

Think how often we expect someone to know something before their life experience has taught them the value or importance of it. Think how frustrated and even angry we become with people whose life experience hasn't yet confirmed something we think they should know. This is especially true in religion when we encounter someone whose beliefs seem irrational, if not dangerous. We wonder how they can believe what they do. How can they believe that? Because their life's experience led them to that, and they'll believe that way until they begin to have other experiences which call their beliefs into doubt.

Maybe you work with someone who is grouchy or combative. Maybe you're married to someone like that! I worked with a man like that once and would work myself into a tizzy wondering why he was so mean. Our boss would talk with him about being kinder. But it made no difference, because his life experience hadn't yet reinforced the importance of kindness.

Then his wife told him, “I no longer love you. You are unkind. I want a divorce.” And she took their children and left.

I quit my job shortly after that to go to college and didn’t see the man for ten years. Then I saw him in a store and he was so gracious I was just amazed. When I got home, I called a man who still worked with him and asked, “What happened?”

The man said, “Oh, he’s changed. He’s a different man.”

Unfortunately, it was too late to save his marriage. But several years later he met another woman and I saw him again a few years later and he’s very happy. All those years we were telling him to be nicer to people, but it fell on deaf ears, because his life experience hadn’t yet confirmed the importance of kindness.

Let me suggest something—each of us has not yet learned an important lesson that hinders our growth, and it is deeply frustrating to the people who love us. It’s never the same lesson. Some of us haven’t learned to forgive. Some of us need to learn a new perception of God. Some of us haven’t learned to control our tempers or language. That’s my hang-up. Joan and I made a deal last week. She promised not to talk on her cell phone while we were on the porch and I promised not to swear while doing home repairs. It’s been much nicer at our home. So my life experience is starting to confirm the importance of careful speech.

But we all do something that causes pain to the people who love us, because we haven't yet learned the importance of what it is we need to learn. It has nothing to do with age. There are children who have learned things some adults have yet to learn. It has nothing to do with age. It has to do with our life experiences and our ability to learn from them. But eventually, when our continued lack of growth in a given area becomes too painful, we will learn the truths we need to learn.

The Apostle Paul once wrote about first knowing in part, but then understanding something fully. I always thought he was talking about dying, then going to heaven and suddenly understanding everything. We go to heaven, God pulls back the curtain and we see the reason for everything. That would be interesting, but I'm not getting my hopes up. Maybe Paul was talking about the gradual growth of our intellect and spirit when we commit ourselves to awareness and maturity.

Most of us were taught that the purpose of human spirituality was to please God. This worldview assumes God isn't pleased and that we had better please God quickly or there's gonna be trouble. That makes no sense to me. But what if we began to understand human spirituality as that life-long endeavor to learn what we need to learn in order to be well and complete and happy.

Carl Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist, writer, and the founder of analytical psychology known as Jungian psychology. You know what he said? He said, “We don’t solve our problems. We outgrow them.” We don’t solve our problems. We outgrow them. Spirituality is the effort to outgrow our problems by paying attention to our life experiences, so we can learn the truths we need to learn in order to grow.

What a great gift that man gave Spencer when he asked, “What have you learned from this experience?” That’s a wonderful question. We ought to end every day asking ourselves that question. Think how different our world would be if everyone asked, “What did my life experience teach me today?”

Here in a little while, we’ll go outside and celebrate our progress toward our new meetinghouse. We’re not there yet, Lane Slaughter is still working his budgetary magic on our building plans, but every day we’re getting closer. We’re all going to have a turn at the shovel. When I get my turn, when that blade bites into the ground, I’m going to pray that Fairfield Friends Meeting becomes the kind of place where folks of every stripe join together to reflect on our lives and reflect on God and that the experience of doing that, the experience of learning from our lives and learning from one another, will not only make us well and whole and happy, but will make others well and whole and happy.

In that spirit of exploration and growth and forward progress, I close with a question: What did you learn this week that helped you become more loving, more complete, more happy? What did you learn from your experience? What problem are you outgrowing?