

Michael M. Piechowski\*  
Institute for Educational Advancement

# “we are all cells in the body of humanity”

## Abstract

*The lives of Eleanor Roosevelt, Paul Robeson, and Etty Hillesum give insight into the inner transformation that is the essence of personal growth toward global awareness. Components of the process of personal growth are spelled out. Simple, easily accessible techniques, facilitate the process and empower children in their personal growth.*

If one is to achieve global awareness one must relinquish the feeling of separateness. The first step—a very big step—is to recognize that every person on this earth is a member of the human race and has the same rights. No one expressed it better than Eleanor Roosevelt who chaired the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and whose most cherished accomplishment was the completion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they *are* the world of the individual persons; the neighborhood he lives in...; the factory, or farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity, without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere”

(Lash, 1972, p. 81). *Why isn't this clear to everyone?*

The story is often told how Eleanor Roosevelt grew from an ugly duckling,

intimidated by her mother's beauty and crushed by her own lack of it, into a woman of substance who achieved greatness and won the love and admiration of people all over the world. As a child and as a young person, she was beset by many fears that she gradually overcame. What was her secret? At the age of 48, she was asked in an interview how did she accomplish this transformation. She replied simply, “Little by little. As life developed, I faced each problem as it came along. I took life as it came. As my activities and work broadened and reached out, I never tried to shirk. I never tried to evade an issue...Really, I don't know—” (Lash, 1971, P.378). Almost 30 years later, she revealed more about her inner work of personal growth in a book *You Learn by Living*. She wrote of the courage needed to achieve self-knowledge: “a knowledge based on a deliberately and usually painfully acquired self discipline” (p. 63). Without knowing the truth about ourselves, we are in no position to understand empathetically how others live their lives. Gaining self-knowledge requires persistence because, as she said, we tend to hang a protective veiling

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over our real motives. And the choices we make reveal who we are. She said also that we gain inner strength when we develop the ability to maintain inner calm "regardless of outside turmoil" (Roosevelt, 1960, p. 27).

Quite remarkable is her essay, *The Moral Basis of Democracy*, because she laid out in it principles that are universal and timeless. If we want a democratic society to work, then each one of us must do the work of personal growth: "laws and government administration are only the result of the way people progress inwardly, and that the basis of success in a Democracy is really laid down by the people. It will progress only as their own personal development goes forward" (Roosevelt, 1940 p. 62).

She firmly believed that personal growth must be guided by a spiritual ideal: "If we believe in Democracy and that it is based on the possibility of a Christ-like way of life, then everybody must force himself to think through his own basic philosophy, his own willingness to live up to it and to help carry it out in everyday life" (Roosevelt, 1940, p. 76). The ideal of a Christ-like way of life translates equally into other spiritual traditions and disciplines. Eleanor Roosevelt lived what she believed. But it took many years of inner growth to achieve it. Just as we cannot make children learn to read instantly, so our personal growth has to proceed with patience and perseverance.

Paul Robeson was a multi-talented and multi-lingual athlete, world famous singer and actor. He was the third black student to attend Rutgers College, and was the only black in the years of his attendance, 1915 - 1919. When he joined the football team, he met with hatred from the white boys. He was physically assaulted more than once and suffered a concussion, broken nose, dislocated shoulder, and other bodily

damage before the racial prejudice was broken and he became accepted.

It took Robeson many years of gradual inner growth and repeated exposure to racial discrimination in his artistic life in America and abroad before he became a leader in the protest movement against racial prejudice and all forms of discrimination and persecution everywhere. For a number of years, he avoided politics but eventually realized that he had to take sides. Like Reverend Martin Luther King later, Paul Robeson realized that prejudice, exploitation, and oppression are the same for all whether it is on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, or any other form of discrimination. The words in the *Ballad for Americans*, "Man in white skin can never be free, While his black brother is in slavery," can be applied to all unjust discriminating practices. His father impressed upon him: "Be an honor to the black race." Many years later, Paul Robeson realized that the ideal his father set before him must be inclusive: one must be an honor to the human race (Payne, 1987). His talent for languages helped him develop kinship with people all over the world, as he learned a number of African Languages, Russian, and even some Chinese.

He became committed to universal democratic principles. During the Civil War in Spain, Paul Robeson raised funds to help the anti-fascist forces and went to Spain to sing to the troops. Afterwards, he regularly gave concerts for free to raise funds in support of just causes. From a performer devoted to his art, he changed to a man concerned with the liberation of humanity (Seton, 1958). Although he was known and cherished all over the world, during the McCarthy era his passport was revoked to prevent him from performing abroad and speaking out for human rights.

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Etty Hillesum is another remarkable example of far reaching inner transformation. Her inner growth started spontaneously as a sudden realization of blockage in the inner core of her being. To overcome it she began a self-examination, which became a daily practice that eventually led her to a life of prayer. World War II erupted and her country, the Netherlands, the country of Anne Frank, was invaded by the Germans. Jews were transported to concentration camps. Being Jewish herself, she felt intense hatred toward the Germans, but then she realized that hating made her no different from those she hated. With enormous effort, she overcame her hatred and found inner peace: "Each of us must turn inwards and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others... every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable" (Hillesum, 1981, p. 222).

Her extensive diary reveals how she applied her will and used her insight in working out this transformation while fighting depression and despair. In time she felt she was gaining ground: "I no longer go to pieces under the strain of my disparate feelings" and "I sometimes feel like a post standing in a raging sea, lashed on all sides by the waves" (Hillesum, 1981, p. 41). The survivors who knew her in the transit camp at Westerbork, described her presence as luminous. She helped others in their chores at the camp and did everything to lift their spirits. She died in Auschwitz.

What these remarkable people have in common is a highly individual, but profound inner growth. They are inner seekers who realized on their own how to do the work of inner transformation. They affirm that everything we need is within us. This inner work can be viewed as the struggle between the lower and the higher self, between that which is narrowly self-

centered and that which is devoted to realizing one's potential with compassion and consideration for others.

Dabrowski has developed a detailed picture of the processes involved, especially how the troubling and conflicting aspects of this often difficult growth may give the appearance of an unstable mind, but are in fact the unavoidable consequence of basic reorientation and restructuring within one's psyche. He called it positive disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964; Mendaglio, 2008). Many gifted people going through this process found affirmation and validation in Dabrowski's theory. Many counselors and therapists working with gifted adolescents and adults, found the theory of great help. But could one be prepared in advance, gain the necessary tools, so to speak, and find oneself less disoriented by the process? Psychosynthesis offers such tools as I will explain shortly.

Personal growth is not part of the school's educational mandate. In today's world the pressure on gifted young people to achieve maximum development of their talents, and to be ready to compete, is constantly increasing. But to develop one's talents and neglect personal growth can be psychologically detrimental. On the other hand, if one puts personal growth first, then within its context, developing one's talents will be fully attended to. (Grant & Piechowski, 1999).

There are perhaps several difficulties for not allowing the time and space for personal growth of school children:

- 1) The lack of practical knowledge of how to do it,
- 2) Reluctance to give the power of self-determination to children, and
- 3) The fear of an open expression of feelings and emotions.

If we desired to balance the two opposing emphases on talent and the self, how would one go about it?

Techniques for fostering personal growth are readily available (for instance, Shallcross & Sisk, 1982; Ferrucci, 1982; Fugitt, 1983; Wilson, 1994; Davis, 1996; Siccone & Lopez, 2000). They are simple in practice and don't take much time. They can be easily incorporated into daily schedules. At its most basic, personal growth is about focusing attention, becoming aware of self as capable of choices and decisions, engaging the will to act on one's choices and decisions, being aware of the consequences of one's choices and decisions, being aware of different aspects of one's self, being aware of the two-way nature of relationships; being

aware of feelings and emotions in oneself and others, being able to accurately recognize emotions. It is easy to see that fostering personal growth intersects with broad notions of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2000). Table 1 outlines the elements of personal growth. Practice of psychosynthesis exercises develops these elements toward personal integration (Ferruci, 1982; Piechowski, 2006). The ultimate goal is to realize one's Transcendent Self. Global awareness is gained along the way.

I used to teach an undergraduate course in personal growth based on psychosynthesis techniques. A shortened version was offered numerous times to gifted high school students. Among the benefits from

**Table 1: Elements of Personal Growth**  
(Piechowski, 2006)

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**MOVING FORCES**

Choice	awareness of one's choices and their consequences (benefits or burdens)
Will	the executive faculty of the self, not imposed but freely applied to act upon one's choices
Attention	allocation of psychic energy
Concentration	the skill of focusing psychic energy
Entelechy	in exceptional individuals a vital force guiding the person's life, imparting a vision of its purpose and a sense of destiny; the self's developmental agenda

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**SELF COMPONENTS**

Relationships	to the self, others, the natural world, and the Supreme Being
Subpersonalities	attitudes and motives expressed in sets of behaviors and emotions as cohesive entities
Inner Authority	the wise part in oneself; an inner compass that points toward choice and direction aligned with one's true self
Synthesis	bringing together subdivisions of personality that tend to act as separate, often conflicting selves; reliance on the wise part in oneself; growth toward the Transpersonal Self

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**MEANS**

Self-acceptance	openness to feelings and emotions and ability to express them genuinely by various means
Self-evaluation	setting goals and assessing achievement; recognition of inner strengths and qualities
Centering	silence and solitude Guided imagery for relaxation and restoration; centering exercises and meditation
Self-identification	dis-identification from body, feelings, desires, thoughts, identification with the Transpersonal Self

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taking the course, students named visualization skills, better people skills, gains in will power, gains in inner strength, quitting bad habits (e.g., smoking), resolution of past emotional conflicts, understanding anger, curing insomnia, enjoyment of solitude, etc. (Piechowski, 2006).

In the long term, attention to the self and inner growth improves a person's self-management and emotional well-being and promotes positive relationships with others. The latter is the first step toward global awareness. Continued inner growth raises consciousness until we realize our common humanity with all people—the end of feeling separate. Peace Pilgrim was another remarkable inner seeker who dedicated her life to “peace among nations, peace among groups, peace among individuals and the very, very important inner peace...because that is where peace begins” (Peace Pilgrim, 1982, p. 25). When we reach the higher viewpoint of non separateness we will know that “we are all cells in the body of humanity” (Peace Pilgrim, 1982, p. 18). Realizing that there will be no more reason for war.

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