

## **GROWTH: AN ACT OF THE WILL?**

*Does spiritual development depend on my effort? A reflection on the interplay of God's will and ours.*

Eugene H. Peterson

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The people with whom I grew up talked a lot about "breaking the will." The task of every devout parent was to "break the will" of the child. I don't remember ever hearing it used by adults on one another, but that may be a more or less willful defect in my memory.

The assumption underlying this linchpin in the program for Christian development in our church was, apparently, that the will, especially a child's will, is contrary to God's will. A broken will left one open to the free play of God's will.

Fifty years later, I recall my now-grown-up friends who were enrolled in this school of childhood spirituality and along with me got their wills broken with regularity. By my observations, we all seem to have passed through the decades every bit as pigheaded and stiff-necked as any of our uncircumcised Philistine chums who never went to church, or at least not to churches that specialized in breaking the wills of little kids. Apparently a broken will mends the same way a broken arm or leg does—stronger at the line of fracture.

At the same time, I also recall a lot of emphasis in our church on "making a decision for the Lord" and exercising my willpower in saying no to the temptations that surrounded me in school and neighborhood. I had many occasions to do that, making repeated decisions for Christ as evangelists and pastors took turns sowing doubts about the validity of my last decision and urging me to do it again. My schoolmates provided daily practice in exercising my nay-saying willpower as they offered up the attractions of world, flesh, and devil.

Hung on the wall of my room at home was a framed picture of a three-masted ship with wind-filled sails on a blue background. Under the picture was a verse:

Ships sail East, and ships sail West,

while the selfsame breezes blow.

It's the set of the sail, and not the gale

that determines the way they go.

I could see the picture and verse as I lay in bed. The doggerel embedded itself in me. The picture became a kind of mandala that gathered the energies of will—my childhood yea-saying at the altar calls and nay-saying on the playgrounds—into visual form. Together, picture and verse confirmed with the force of Scripture the capacity of my will to determine the direction of my life, which I never doubted was a life following Christ.

These two approaches to the will, breaking it and exercising it, existed alongside each other through my childhood and youth. It never occurred to me to see them in contradiction, canceling each other out. Nor does it now. But in adulthood I did become puzzled by their apparent dissonance. I set off in search of counsel that had more wisdom than the simplistic slogan (break the will) and doggerel verse (It's the set of the sail) that seemed to serve well

enough as I grew up.

## Our Will and God's

I found, early in my search, that I was not the first to be puzzled. I found a large company of men and women scratching their heads over these matters. I found myself, in fact, in the middle of a centuries-long discussion that is still in progress: To will or not to will?

In a gospel of divine grace, what place does the human will play? In a world in which God's will initiates everything, does our will only get in the way? In a creation brought into being by God's will and in a salvation executed by Christ's will, what is left for a human will?

On the positive side, willing is the core of my being. If my will is broken, am I myself? Am I complete? Am I not a cripple, limping along on a crutch? The capacity to direct life, to exercise freedom is the very thing that needs developing if I am to make a decision for Christ-which I grew up believing to be the most important act of will there is. I still believe that.

Without an exercised will, I am a dishrag, limp in a dirty sink. If I am anemic in will, the imperatives that are staccato stabs throughout the gospel message (come, follow, rise, love) sink into marshmallow piety without drawing one drop of red blood.

But the moment I begin exercising my will, I find that I have put a fox in charge of the chicken coop. That is the negative side. The poor Rhode Island Reds that had been laying so well-humility, trust, mercy, patience, hope-are doomed. It is a heady experience to find that I am in charge of my life and, although I wouldn't think of dismissing God, no longer have the need to depend wimpily upon him.

My will is my glory; it is also what gives me the most trouble. There is something deeply flawed in me that separates me from the God who wills my salvation; that "something" seems to be located in and around my will. I ponder St. Paul: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15), and I pray with my Lord, "Not as I will but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39).

To will or not to will, that is the question.

## Searching the Intersection

I prayed and pondered. I asked questions and read books. I looked around. It wasn't long before I realized I had set up shop at heavily trafficked crossroads.

Not only were God and my consequent spirituality at issue, but also nearly everything that was distinctively human about me-the way I worked, the way I talked, the way I loved. Standing in the presence of these mysteries-work, language, love-I found insights developing and experiences occurring that were convergent with the greatest mystery: God and my relationship to him in prayer and belief and obedience.

The question at the heart of the intersection of God's will and human wills is apparently at the heart of everything. The relation of God's will and my will is not a specialized religious question; it is the question. The way we answer it shapes our humanity in every dimension.

Whenever I paid attention to what was happening in my life that was beyond biology-beyond, that is, getting fed and clothed-this strange issue of will was involved, and in a way not at all obvious or simple. Always other wills were involved in ways that defied simple alternatives of either asserting my will or acquiescing to another will.

The three areas of experience where I have paid particular attention are common to all: we all work; we all use language; we all love and are loved (even if only intermittently).

### Work: Negative Capability

I entered the world of work at an early age in my father's butcher shop. This was a privileged world, this adult world of work, and when I was working in it I was, in my own mind anyway, an adult. When I was five years old my mother made me a white butcher's apron. Every year, as I grew, she made another to size. To this day, I picture the linen ephod that Hannah made for the boy Samuel cut on the pattern of, and from similar material as, my butcher's apron.

I was started out on easy jobs of sweeping and cleaning display windows. I graduated to grinding hamburger. One of the men would pick me up and stand me on an upended orange crate before the big, red Hobart meat grinder, and I in my linen ephod would push the chunks of beef into its maw. The day I was trusted with a knife and taught to respect it and keep it sharp, I knew adulthood was just around the corner.

"That knife has a will of its own," old Eddie Nordham, one of my dad's butchers, used to say to me. "Get to know your knife." If I cut myself, he would blame me not for carelessness but for ignorance-I didn't "know" my knife.

I also learned that a beef carcass has a will of its own-it is not just an inert mass of meat and gristle and bone, but has character and joints, texture and grain. Carving a quarter of beef into roasts and steaks was not a matter of imposing my knife-fortified will on dumb matter, but respectfully and reverently entering into the reality of the material.

"Hackers" was my father's contemptuous label for butchers who ignorantly imposed their wills on the meat. They didn't take into account the subtle differences between pork and beef. They used knives and cleavers inappropriately and didn't keep them sharp. They were bullies forcing their wills on slabs of bacon and hind quarters of beef. The results were unattractive and uneconomical. They commonly left a mess behind that the rest of us had to clean up.

Real work always includes a respect for the material at hand. The material can be a pork loin, or a mahogany plank, or a lump of clay, or the will of God, but when the work is done well, there is a kind of submission of will to the conditions at hand, a cultivation of humility. It is a noticeable feature in all skilled workers-woodworkers, potters, poets, and pray-ers. I learned it in the butcher shop.

"Negative capability" is the phrase the poet John Keats coined to refer to this experience in work. He was impressed by William Shakespeare's work in making such a variety of characters in his plays, none of which seemed to be a projection of Shakespeare's ego. Each had an independent life of his or her own. Keats wrote, "A poet has no Identity . . . he is continually . . . filling some other Body." He believed that the only way real creative will matured was in a person who was not @#!\*% -bent on imposing his or her will on another

person or thing but "was capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable searching after fact and reason." Interesting: Shakespeare, the poet from whom we know the most about people, is the poet about whom we know next to nothing.

Adolescents are workers bent on self-expression. The results are maudlin. Simpering songs. Sprawling poems. Banal letters. Bombastic reforms. Bursts of energy that run out of gas (the self tank doesn't hold that much fuel) and litter house and neighborhood with unfinished models, friendships, and projects. The adolescent, excited at finding the wonderful Self, supposes that life now consists in expressing it for the edification of all others. Most of us are bored.

Real work, whether it involves making babies or poems, hamburger or holiness, is not self-expression, but its very opposite. Real workers, skilled workers, practice negative capability—the suppression of self so that the work can take place on its own. St. John the Baptist's "I must decrease, but he must increase" is embedded in all good work. When we work well, our tastes, experiences, and values are held in check so that the nature of the material or the person, or the process, or our God is as little adulterated or compromised by our ego as possible. The worker in the work is a self-effacing servant. If the worker shows off in his or her work, the work is ruined and becomes bad work—a projection of ego, an indulgence of self.

St. Paul's description of Jesus, "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7), is often cited as the center point in the work of Incarnation, the making of our salvation. Kenosis. Emptying is prelude to filling. The Son of God empties himself of prerogative, of divine rights, of status and reputation in order to be the one whom God uses to fill up creation and creatures with the glory of salvation. A bucket, no matter what wonderful things it contains, is of no use for the next task at hand until it is emptied. Negative capability.

I now see that all the jobs I have ever been given have been apprenticeships in the work of God. What I experience in kitchen, bedroom, workshop, athletic arena, studio, and sanctuary trains me in the subtleties of negative capability. I will to not will what I am already good at in order that what is more than me and beyond me, the will of God, can come into existence in my willing work.

Language: The Middle Voice

Five hundred miles farther west and ten years later, another strand of experience entered my life, sat alongside the butcher's knife for a few years, and then converged with it to provide insight into the nature of the praying will.

For four years, minus vacations, I made a daily descent into a basement room in MacMillan Hall at the foot of Queen Anne Hill in Seattle. Light came uncertainly through Venetian blinds from shallow windows high in the walls. I was learning Greek. I puzzled over many strange things those years under the soft-spoken patience of my professor, Winifred Weter.

I puzzled longest over the middle voice. It was a small class, five of us I think, and I was the last to get it. In a class that size slowness is conspicuous, and I was unhappy with my growing reputation as the class tortoise. Then one day, a winter afternoon of Seattle drizzle, the room filled with light, or at least my corner of it did. We were about two-thirds of the way through Xenophon's *Anabasis* when I got the hang of the mysterious middle voice.

When I speak in the active voice I initiate an action that goes someplace else: "I counsel my friend." When I speak in the passive voice I receive the action that another initiates: "I am counseled by my friend."

When I speak in the middle voice, I actively participate in the results of an action that another initiates: "I take counsel."

Most of our speech is divided between active and passive: either I act or I am acted upon. But there are moments, and they are those in which we are most distinctively human, when such a contrast is not satisfactory: two wills operate, neither to the exclusion of the other, neither canceling out the other, each respecting the other.

At the time I thought only that I had nailed down an illusive piece of Greek grammar. Years later I realized that I had grasped a large dimension of being and a way of prayer. I was the slowest in my class but by no means the only person to have difficulty coming to terms with the middle voice.

My grammar book said, "The middle voice is that use of the verb which describes the subject as participating in the results of the action." I read that now, and it reads like a description of Christian prayer-"the subject as participating in the results of the action." I do not control the action; that is a pagan concept of prayer, putting the gods to work by my incantations or rituals. I am not controlled by the action; that is a Hindu concept of prayer in which I slump passively into the impersonal and fated will of gods and goddesses. I enter into the action which was begun by another, my creating and saving Lord, and find myself participating in the results of the action. I neither do it nor have it done to me; I will to participate in what is willed.

True spirituality features participation, the complex participation of God and the human, his will and our wills. We do not abandon ourselves to drown in the ocean of love, losing identity. We do not pull the strings that activate God's operations in our lives, subjecting God to our assertive identity. We neither manipulate God (active voice) or are manipulated by God (passive voice). We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it (middle voice).

Prayer takes place in the middle voice.

Now comes a most fascinating sentence in my grammar: "Nothing is more certain than that the parent language of our family possessed no passive, but only active and middle, the latter originally equal with the former in prominence, though unrepresented now in any language, save by forms which have lost all distinction of meaning." No passive! Think of it: back at the origins of our language, there was no way to express an action in which I was not somehow, in some way, involved as a participant.

But the farther we travel from Eden, the less use we have for the middle voice, until it finally atrophies for lack of use. Eden pride and disobedience reduce us to two voices, active and passive. We end up taking sides. We either take charge of our own destinies (active voice) or let others take charge and slip into animal passivity before forces too great for us (passive voice). The gospel restores the middle voice.

We don't have enough (or any!) verbal experience in this third voice. But no friendship, no love affair, no marriage can exist with only active and passive voices. Something else is

required—a willingness that radiates into a thousand subtleties of participation and intimacy, trust and forgiveness and grace.

At our human and Christian best, we are not fascists barking our orders to God and his creatures. At our best, we are not quietists dumbly submissive before fate. At our best, we pray in the middle voice at the center between active and passive, drawing from them as we have need and occasion but always uniquely and artistically ourselves, creatures adoring God and being graced by him, "participating in the results of the action."

And to think I got my start in learning this during that long winter of Seattle rain while reading Xenophon!

Love: Willed Passivity

After another decade and a few years into marriage, I was surprised to find myself at the center of what has turned out to be the richest experience yet in my will and God's will. I had supposed when I entered marriage that it was mostly about sexuality, domesticity, companionship, and children. The surprise was that I was in a graduate school for spirituality-prayer and God-with daily assignments and frequent exams in matters of the will.

(What I have learned in marriage can be just as well, maybe better, learned in friendship. The unmarried have just as much experience to work with as the married. But since my primary experience has been in marriage, I will write of it.)

In marriage two wills are in operation at the same time. Sometimes, and especially in the early months of marriage, the two wills are spontaneously congruent and experienced as one. But as time goes by and early ecstasies are succeeded by routines and demands, what was experienced as a gift must be developed as an art.

The art is "willed passivity." The phrase sounds self-contradictory, but it is not. It converges with what I started out learning in my father's butcher shop and continued in Professor Weter's Greek class.

Willed passivity begins with appreciating the large and creative place that passivity plays in our lives. By far the largest part of our life is experienced in passivity. Life is undergone. We receive. We enter into what is already there. Our genetic system, the atmosphere, the food chain, our parents, the dog—they are there, in place, before we exercise our will.

"Eighty percent of life" says Woody Allen, "is just showing up." Nothing we do by the exercise of our wills will ever come close to approximating what is done to us by other wills. Most of life is not what we do but what is done to us. If we deny or avoid these passivities, we live in a very small world. The world of our activities is a puny enterprise; the world of our passivities is a vast cosmos. We experience as happening to us weather, our bodies, much of our government, the landscape, much of our education.

But there are different ways of being passive: there is an indolent, inattentive passivity that approximates the existence of a slug, and there is a willed and attentive passivity that is something more like worship.

Paul's famous "Wives be subject to your husbands. Husbands love your wives, as Christ

loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:22-25) sets down the parallel operations of willed passivity.

An earlier sentence establishes the necessary context, apart from which the dual instructions can only be misunderstood. The sentence is: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21).

Reverence-en phobo Christou-is the operative word: awed, worshipful attentiveness, ready to respond in love and adoration. We do not learn our relationship with God out of a cocksure knowledge of exactly what God wants (which then launches us into a vigorous clean-up campaign of the world on his behalf, in the course of which we shout orders up at him, bossing him around so that he can assist us in accomplishing his will).

Nor do we cower before him in a scrupulous anxiety that fears offending him, only venturing a word or an action when explicitly commanded and at all other times worrying endlessly of what we might have done to offend him.

No, gospel reverence, Christ reverence, spouse reverence is a vigorous (but by no means presumptuous) bold freedom, full of spontaneous energy. This is the atmosphere in which we find ourselves loved and loving before God. Willed passivity.

Paul teaches husbands and wives how their wills can become the means for love and not the weapons of war. He counsels willed passivity in both marriage partners as an analogy of Christ's willingness to be sacrificed. Love is defined by a willingness to give up my will ("not my will but thine be done"), a voluntary crucifixion.

Marriage provides extensive experience in the possibilities of willed passivity. We find ourselves in daily relationship with a complex reality that we did not make-this person with functioning heart and kidneys, with glorious (and not so glorious) emotions, capable of interesting us profoundly one minute and then boring us insufferably the next, and most mysterious of all, with a will, the freedom to choose and direct and intend a shared life intimacy.

And all the time I am also all those things, also with a will. When we are doing it right, and not always knowing how we are doing it right, the two wills enhance and glorify each other. We learn soon that love does not develop when we impose our will on the other, but only when we enter into sensitive responsiveness to the will of the other, what I am calling willed passivity.

If the operation is mutual, which it sometimes is, a great love is the consequence. The high failure rate in marriage is the sad statistical witness to the difficulties involved. We would rather operate as activists in our love, commanding our beloved in actions that please us, which reduces our partner's options to indolent passivity or rebellion. No ambiguities in either case. But also no love-and no faith.

"I no longer call you servants; I call you friends," said Jesus (John 15:15). This is the model by which we understand our growing intimacy with God. Not as abject, puppy-dog submission, and certainly not as manipulative priest-craft, but as willed passivity, in imitation of and matched by the willed passivity of him who "did not count equality of God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6-7).

## Willfulness or Willingness?

Gerald May, in his book *Will and Spirit*, distinguishes between willfulness and willingness. Every act of intimacy, whether in work or language or marriage or prayer, suppresses willfulness and cultivates willingness. There is a deep sense of being involved in something more than the ego, better than the self. The "more" and the "better" among Christians has a personal name, God.

One of the qualities of will in its freedom is knowing the nature and extent of the necessities in which it works. Unmindful of necessities, the will becomes arrogant and liable to hubris (which the Greeks saw as inevitably punished with tragedy) or timidly declines to couch-potato lethargy indistinguishable from vegetation.

Humble boldness (or, bold humility) enters into a sane, robust willing-free willing-and finds its most expressive and satisfying experience in prayer to Jesus Christ, who wills our salvation.

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