

“Growing in 2018”

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I Samuel 2:26 *“And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.”*

Luke 2:52 *“...and Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”*

Our life is often typified by a series of defining-moments of personal growth, moments of epiphany in which we “wake up” suddenly to a new reality. When we are young perhaps we touch the hot tea kettle and then never touch it again, or as in my case the electrical outlets. I remember when I first learned how the exchange of money for goods or services looks. I told my mom that I wanted to have a garage sale. I must have only been five years old. She simply laughed it off and said what a cute idea, not thinking anything else would happen. Then while she napped that Saturday afternoon, I carted off every toy I had to the front of the house where by the time she awoke I had given more than half of my belongings away. For the longest time I couldn’t understand why she was so upset, but after explaining it to me over and over again I finally realized that a “garage sale” requires that I was to receive something in exchange for my toys—preferably money. Once I learned the value of money, then I knew I needed it. I remember a few months later taking it from a neighbor friend. I quietly walked off with her “minnie mouse” piggy-bank and took it to the nearest store. The owner would remember decades later how as a little boy I brought something filled with coins that obviously didn’t belong to me just so I could get a small piece of bubble gum. He refused to help me open it. Years later he would say, “I didn’t want to get caught up in helping you steal from someone else.” I didn’t quite understand my crime yet. My mom tried to explain it, though. Finally, I think I understood and apologized to my neighbor friend. But such lines of right and wrong can be momentarily blurred. I remember later as an eleven year old helping my older neighborhood friends Jimmy and Harley start a bicycle repair business. We needed parts. So, 14 year old Harley led the way as we scoured nearby garages whose doors were left open and storage closets whose doors had been left unlocked, anything that was open or not chained down in Harley’s opinion was “begging to be taken.” So we took, or at least I followed, complicit in the crime as my friends freely took bikes and bike parts at will. I never said a word but I knew in my heart that this logic wasn’t right. Epiphanies, moments of raised consciousness. Our life is often marked by them. What has 2018 brought me as far as “learning moments”? What has brought you?

One of my personally biggest moments finds itself steeped in my recent trip to the Civil Rights trail of the South. While on that trip, I had several epiphanies, no doubt. However, one of them occurred when we rolled up to the historically black college Tuskegee University in Tuskegee Alabama. Not only famed for the Tuskegee Airmen from WWII that trained here, and for Washington Carver’s amazing developments in agriculture, but it was Booker T. Washington, the founding president of the famous institution of learning that stirred within me an immediate posture of awe. Here was a man, born into slavery in nearby Franklin County. Worked a plantation as a boy growing up, just south of Roanoke. Saw the horrors of oppression and when his emancipation came, sought to right the wrongs of an ill society. He walked 500 miles by foot, working odd jobs in the towns he stopped in, making it all the way to Hampton Institute where he begged the president of the college to let him work as a janitor and enroll in classes. He worked hard, so hard in fact that he impressed the leadership of the school and was

eventually granted a scholarship to complete his studies. He then became a school teacher, returning to Franklin county to teach in the very school where he himself had learned to read a few short years earlier. Now, this is a tenacious young man with a vision to see his people as a truly freed people. Not only free physically from the chains of slavery but free mentally and socially. He said when a government official arrived to their plantation and read to them their emancipation order, his mom had “tears of joy” streaming down her cheeks. The moment she had long prayed for had finally arrived. However, the seriousness of care for their family “seemed to take possession of them.” This seriousness of drive for change propelled Mr. Washington to eventually lead one of the greatest intellectual institutions in the South. He saw a future where people of color could rise above the prejudice of the society that surrounds them. The realization of such now finds itself resting on the future you and I create together. While at a campus bookstore there at Tuskegee, I found a small anthology of poems put together by Claude McKay, credited as the first poet from the Harlem Renaissance. I opened it and began to read a prayer titled “Invocation”:

‘Ancestral Spirit, hidden from my sight
By modern Time’s unnumbered works and ways
On which in awe and wonderment I gaze,
Where hids’t though in the deepness of the night?
What evil powers thy healing presence blight?
Thou who from the dark and dust dids’t raise
The Ethiop standard in the curtained days,
Before the White God said: Let there be light!
Bring ancient music to my modern heart,
Let fall the light upon my sable face
That once gleamed upon the Ethiopian’s art;
Lift me to thee out of this alien place
So that I may be, thine exiled counterpart,
The worthy singer of my world and race.”

There is something courageous about this poem. It is a reconnection to religion lost by colonization and despair, displacement and subjugation. There is a refreshing spirit within its plea to retain one’s authentic self in the midst of a world seeking to simply conform it to its own doctrine of belief. When scripture says the prophet Samuel grew up in stature, and in favor with both God and the people—this is not small feat. Likewise, in Luke’s description of Jesus’ most formative years, he says, “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with both God and humankind.” In both we see a bridging of two worlds: The divine and human. Somehow the prophets of old were able to stand the gap, work through the machinations of religious oppressive control and find unity between what is divine and what is human. Jesus’ conclusion was clear. In John 4, he told the Samaritan woman at the well that religion is in

effect obsolete, for “God seeks those who simply worship in spirit and in truth.” I hope that 2018 has allowed you time and space to find that which is true for you. Honest reflection. Genuine soul-searching. In this way 2019 will be the year of spiritual renewal and manifestation through thought and deed, driven by authenticity and absolute love.

So, I ask you to pause and reflect. We will take the next minutes to think back on our year—and search out our learning moments. Our epiphanies. And confront our true selves... the part that makes us reach beyond mere emancipation and turn toward a deeper, toiling effort to see radical change in the world around us—to stand in the gap between divinity and humanity. To be a conduit of love, not despair. Hope, not discouragement. Peace, not war.