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Presentation Transcript
A Case for Personal Growth
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Who can tell me what yield sign looks like? What shape is it? It's a triangle, but it's upside down. What color is it? Yield signs were, originally, yellow with black letters. Now they are white with a thick red border and red printing – and they have been that way since 1972! Why does our mind do this to us? Right after I learned that they were red and white, I went out and drove my car and they were all over the place! Even now, when somebody says, "Yield sign," to me, I think yellow and black first. But now I have to correct myself because I know that that was only that way for a short time after I got my driver's license.

Here's how it works. Daniel Seigel, in his book, *The Developing Mind*, likened the human brain to a sophisticated predictor. See that piece of pie and that dessert cake? Will it taste good? Girl sees a good-looking guy. Will he like me? He's got a water balloon. What's he going to do with it? Almost every kind of input that we get, we go back in our memory bank and we try to find something similar to see what might happen with this next one that's coming up.

I imagine you've seen films of brain surgery, where the surgeon touches a place in the brain and the heavily anesthetized, but conscious, patient starts talking about something that happened in the past. So the brain stores experiences in neuro networks. When it tries to predict the answer to the question, "What does a yield sign look like?" it begins to search the memory networks for an image of a yield sign. And it *starts* with our earliest memory first. Remember? We learned that in the presentation on *Understanding Human Behavior*. That's why most people who got their driver's licenses before 1972 see a yellow sign with black letters, even though they may have seen thousands and thousands of white with red letters since then. And that's also why a person, who was loved and attuned to, and treated with care and respect as a baby and a small child, tends to think, when he or she grows up, that life is going to be generally good and they won't have to worry too much. And they can more easily have faith in God and everything positive because, any time they come to an unfamiliar situation, they go back and try to find something that matches that. And if it is positive, they're going to tend to think positively about the present-day situation.

It's also why, by the way, it's hard for us to convince others of something new, because we all tend – when somebody is arguing with us or trying to make a case, like I am today

– we go back to our earlier experience for evidence. I *knew* that sign was yellow and black. I absolutely knew that – until I saw five or six of them. See? So we all tend to be sure of things like that *aren't* true because, for us, it used to be true – or seemed true.

So why am I telling you this? Well, it's because I'm going to state an opinion that you probably don't, currently, believe. It's sort of like a challenge. Now, it's *not* an in-your-face challenge. It's a *seems-to-me* kind of challenge. So you're welcome to agree or not, but just remember the sign. Just remember the sign while we're talking about this. Are you ready for it? Here it comes.

It seems to me that the Church of God has an intensely negative view of human nature. And that view has caused the church to have a negative view of personal growth – to think that it is not possible to grow or change – especially when it comes to our own personal situation. And this is ironic, because, on the one hand, we say that we are people of faith, and hope and God, and that God has placed each one of us in a process called sanctification, where He is turning us into something else – something good. So there's the challenge. Why do I hold to it? I'm going to give you four reasons today why I believe like I do.

The first reason is named Eugene. I've talked about him before. When I met him he was eight. He was having incredibly long tantrums at home – the kind of tantrums that you couldn't do for five minutes without being completely exhausted. I mean, he really knew how to pitch a world class tantrum. And they could go on for hours. He refused to do any school work. He was bullying kids at school. He'd been diagnosed with ADHD and bipolar disorder, which is a major incurable mental illness. His environment was that he lived in three homes every week. He lived at his mother's, he lived at his father's and he lived at his grandmother's – which is his father's mother.

In his mother's home, in the last few years, there had been three different boyfriends and a number of their siblings that were always contentious with Eugene – probably a lot of that his fault. His two bio-siblings were both abused by their fathers. They lived in the home, too. The abusive fathers were not Eugene's father. His brother, along with another boy, abused Eugene. Both of them are in an in-treatment facility right now because of what they did to him. Eugene's mother is seldom home when he's home because she works from early afternoon until the wee hours of the morning. So she's gone by the time he gets home from school. She is with him from the time he wakes up until the time he leave for school, which isn't very long, every morning. He sees her every other weekend. The rest of the time he's left with her current boyfriend and their children – some of whom abuse and resent him.

His bio-father is ill. He walks very gingerly and wears dark glasses. Eugene tells me that his father isn't much fun, because he never wants to do anything and always wants Eugene to stay home and take care of him. So, in that family, he has to kind of be the caretaker.

His grandmother is probably the best of the lot, but he only stays there one day a week. So there are three sets of rules in three different homes. That's always confusing to him.

All three vie for his favor, so he's alternately being spoiled beyond measure and then mistreated out of frustration over his non-compliance.

So he lives in a state of kind of hyper-vigilance, kind of mixed with entitlement. He never knows what is going to happen next, so he's constantly anxious – and, I would say, that that is pretty much without respite. When I first met him, he wouldn't even make eye contact. You could barely hear him when he talked. You could surround him with toys and he couldn't think of anything to do. He didn't know how to play. When he did play – or try to – it was really repetitive and non-imaginative. If we tried to play a game, he had to make sure he always won, which he used two different techniques to cause that to happen. One, he changed the rules in his favor or he'd cheat. I think he gets lost in the shuffle at home. I know people have forgotten to take him to school. Of course, he never protests about that. In fact, I think, sometimes, he tries to hide so they'll forget about him. Sometimes they've forgotten to take him to doctors' appointments. They forget to bring him to therapy, sometimes. The impression I get, for the most part – at least, in some of those homes – is that he is an afterthought.

To further complicate things, most of my efforts and the efforts of people at school that work with him – the social worker and the counselor and teachers – is one of frustration. I've tried to engage the family in long-term, parent training. We've sent people into the home to try to make sure that the rules are the same at each place. But that all goes by the wayside. We're resisted, pretty much, on those issues. They expect somebody else to fix the child. There is really nothing wrong with Eugene. He's only responding normally to his circumstances. He doesn't have bipolar disorder. He doesn't even have ADHD. It is all caused by anxiety. So, for me, it's been me and Eugene alone in the office for forty-five minutes a week, week after week, for several years. Sometimes I talk to the school social worker and touch base, but mostly not. I mean, they do what they do at school, which is good for him, and I do what I do. We do try to work as a team, but there isn't too much to do since the family is not engaged so much. Eugene is in special ed because of behavior problems and refusal to do his work.

Now, when I've told this story to most church people, they become very sympathetic about Eugene's plight and some wonder out loud if he'll ever survive to be a normal person with a normal life. They wonder if he's going to be in jail, or turn into some kind of gangster or something. Some have wondered if taking him away from his parents and putting him with a mature, older couple that could parent him better might be a better solution. But under our laws, that can't happen. And really, none of us who are involved with Eugene wants to take Eugene away his parents. We all just want them to *love* him and to learn *how* to take care of him. And since that's not happening, we hear his story and we're unsettled by it. Some of the people in the church that I've told this story to think that he's going to turn into an abuser and wind up, like I said, in prison. And that could happen. It's happened to lots of children.

Let's go to the present moment. Right now Eugene has just finished the fifth grade. He's going to pass on to middle school. He did fairly well on his grades this year. He's, pretty much, doing his homework. He's going to go into regular ed in middle school. He's hasn't bullied anybody for about a year. He hasn't had any huge tantrums. He gets upset, like anybody else, but it's not that two-hour-bouncing-off-the-walls thing. He's been

making some friends at school. The last session we had included a game of Nerf basketball. We always start out playing H-O-R-S-E and it usually ends up in either a pillow fight or a tickling match. Sometimes he goes to the pillows because he's behind, so I started doing that, too, when he's ahead of me – just to try to normalize everything. He likes that. He even makes up games for us to play now, like a normal kid. He uses his creativity to change things and be creative in his play. Social abilities and creativity are growing. If you talked to him today, you would never know what kind of an environment he comes from, because he is a normal fifth-grader.

So how did that happen? You can't say it happened at home. And since neither his social worker, nor his counselor, nor I could *make* anything happen in the home, what we did was, we tried to support him emotionally as he had to deal with his difficult situation. We tried to normalize his feelings about all of that – all that frustration and anger. We helped him learn to cope with all those things – his environment. We taught him, as much as we could, how to stand up for himself and *demand* that things change for himself. We did all that we could to increase his sense of self. So we were working with the healing part of his nature to help him cope with the situation that he was in.

Now I go to supervision three times a month and I presented this case to different supervisors for several years. A number of different therapists have listened to this case. And all the therapists there know what to do for kids like Eugene. It's not just something that a few people know about. And here's what it is: the therapists know something that Church of God people don't seem to know, and that is that the human mind is *designed* to self-heal from that kind of trauma. And if you know how to activate that healing process, most children and adults can recover from bad childhood experiences. So the reason I say that we don't know that is because of all the negative things people say when they hear this case. They think he's doomed. He's *not* doomed. If he continues to get good care, and good therapy and good support, he's going to be okay, I think.

Okay, that's the first reason. The second reason is Natalie. Natalie is a fifteen-year-old girl that came into my office sometime ago with her grandmother, whom she lives with. She lives with her grandmother and grandfather. Her mother is a drug addict – not a recovering drug addict, but a drug addict, who has behaved very irresponsibly toward Natalie and her other children. So they came in and sat down for the first time and I said, "Who wants to tell me why we're here?" And they looked at each other. When that happens, usually the adult starts to talk. This time the fifteen-year-old started to talk. She said, "I go out of control a lot, and have huge rages, and I'm making life miserable for everybody in my life that I love. And I know that, eventually, that is going to make *me* miserable and I'm going to wind up lonely and isolated. I don't want to keep doing that and I don't want to end up that way." Wow! Fifteen! Pretty incredible, isn't it?

So let's just take a time-out here right now. Let's go to Galatians 5, verse 19.

Gal. 5:19 – *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious – sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. I left out some after "fits of rage."*

Fits of rage. That's what this girl has, right? An act of the sinful nature. Do you think it's a good thing that she wants to overcome fits of rage? I think it's a really good thing. Don't you? It is! It's not only good, it's essential. But how many people in the church do you know that have fits of rage? Well nobody, of course, except, perhaps, me, and my mate, and my parents, and my kids. I mean, everybody gets upset, right? There are a few people that aren't wired that way, but most of us will have fits of rage from time to time. And what have we done about it as members of the Church of God – people who are involved in God's process of sanctification, have the power of the Holy Spirit at our beckoned call? Well, the first thing we do really well is, we feel *really* guilty about it. But that doesn't do anything, does it? Then we pray – maybe. And praying is always good, but somehow we still wind up with fits of rage, even though we pray. One of the things people tell me is, "Well, I try not to get mad so much," but that doesn't always solve the problem either.

This child has fits of rage because she was traumatized repeatedly from a very early age. We're using a kind of therapy that rapidly activates the healing process for her. She has to watch some lights go back and forth in front of her face while she holds a traumatic memory in her mind. When we start that, she reminds me of a Nascar driver, buckling in for the race. Boy, she hunkers into that chair and grabs the arm rests, gets really serious – her brow furrows up – and the lights go on and her eyes are just tracking that light back and forth really, really well. Because of her *quality* as a human being – her determination – she's getting really excellent results. The first abuse that we targeted was when she was two years old. Her mother's boyfriend gave her two raw eggs and told her to hold them out at arms length – a two year old – she was still in diapers – and told her to hold them out there, and if she dropped them or put her arms down, she was going to get a beating. So, if you think about the yield sign, we can think about her in the present moment. Anytime somebody tries to give her any kind of directives or exert any authority over her, she just gets tripped out. And that is because she is going back to memories like that and predicting that it is all going to go bad for her. And all the anger that goes along with that.... If you think two-year-olds don't get angry about mistreatment, think again! All that anger is triggered by authoritarian kinds of things in the present day. So, very reactive.

Well, as we processed that image – for about twenty minutes – when we got done – her mind went from one thing to another, to another that she thought about – remembered about – related to that experience, I asked her to go back and tell me what she got when she started thinking about this. Her brow furrowed and, after a bit, she got this question mark on her face, and then she started to giggle. She said, "I can't find it. It's gone! Is it supposed to work like that?" I said, "Exactly like that." And I said, "You're going to find you're not getting so angry as we go through these things." We've been working on that for six weeks or so. Her grandmother reports seeing a reduction in her anger and reactivity already.

What is interesting to me is that many of us have had fits of anger for years. Why aren't we interested in doing everything we can do to rid ourselves of the fruits of the flesh? There are people that know how to activate that healing process. There are lots of them. The people that come into my office *know* that that can happen for them – not because I tell them, but because they bring that with them when they come in. So it is curious to

me, since I know a fifteen-year-old who is dead serious about it and doing all she can to change, and she's not even sure there is a God. So that's Natalie.

My third reason is Ralph. Ralph is nice looking, neatly dressed guy. He's articulate. He's intelligent. He's educated. He's friendly. He told me in our first session that he had been – since he was fifteen – been sexually promiscuous. I was thinking about how much he has berated himself all these years and was just thinking about how useless it is to tell him to get control of the problem. That's what he has been trying to do all his life and it hasn't worked. As we explored his past, he told me of a time – when he was a small child – when he was left with a teenage babysitter. She molested him and made fun of his – and I'm wanting to be deliberately obscure here – she made fun of his lack of manliness. He was a little kid. Though *he* can't connect that event with his compulsion to expose himself, it seems obvious that that is, at least, part of it. You know, "Look at me. I'm normal." Right?

So week after week, we've been working on that. It's interesting to notice a change that has come over him. At first he came and talked about how afraid he was that he would get caught. Weeks later, he began to think about how much it would hurt his wife, if she knew about it, and what he might lose there. Sometime later, he broke down and wept out of remorse for the harm that he had done to his victims. And most recently, he's been reading his Bible. I'm not kidding. I didn't say anything about it. He's been reading his Bible and has wondered aloud what God thinks about what he has done. Isn't that a lot of progress morally – from thinking about getting caught – without any concern for victims – to higher moral principle. It's kind of interesting. As we keep talking, he reports that the compulsion is gradually becoming less intense. My supervisor tells me that it's possible that he can see complete remission for that behavior. So here's a guy – driven to work on his compulsion, first by fear, then by threat of loss, then by guilt, then by a desire to connect to God.

We have a lot of people in the church who suffer all kinds of compulsions. We have compulsions from promiscuity, to porn, to compulsive ritual – handwashing and that kind of thing – to all kinds of control issues. What can we do to overcome these problems? Well, praying is good – vital, even. But God wants *more*! He's the one who does the changing, but we have to *participate* in that. We have to do what *we* know to do. We have to know that there is the possibility of change. The carnal nature – the sinful nature – all the cases I've mentioned – all these people – have acts of the sinful nature in their lives, and they all came from mistreatment. That's how it starts out.

My fourth reason is Angie. I talked about this girl at Lexington just a few months ago. She is the rich girl whose father ignored her. She has anything anybody could want, except for her father's love. Because of that, when she came to counseling, she brought deep doubts about herself, her worth, her ability to relate to men, her ability to be a loving person, her ability to be loved by others. She was also having fits of rage. She was withdrawing and isolating herself – no friends at school or anywhere. No friends. A teenager with no friends. When you're a teenager, you're hard-wired to make friends. Yet, she had not accomplished that developmental task. ...fighting with her older sister, terrible insomnia and nightmares, extremely irritable, depressed, anxious, in the past had cut herself, had been bulimic, had had suicidal thinking. She's compulsively germo-

phobic – always washing, showering, changing clothes – I mean, to the point that her hands are red. Her father has never attended any of her school functions. He calls her names when he's angry and swears at her. She was placed with a nanny early on, because her parents were so busy making money. Once she got attached to the nanny, they dropped the nanny without even consulting her about it. So the one person she was really attached to was gone. So she has become rather distrustful and dismissing in her life. You make one mistake with her and, I imagine, she terminates the relationship.

When I laid out this case to the leadership folks in Lexington in December, some of them wondered if she would ever recover from this deep wound to her heart. A number expressed a deep and, I think, appropriate sympathy. Some of them commented, "You'd like to take somebody like that home to give her the care that she deserves." You know, she is such a great kid, in a lot of ways. She has really high moral standards. She gets good grades. She has a sense of empathy when she's not upset. Nobody expressed any belief that she could pull out of that without a change in the family. I asked people, "What do you think needs to happen here?" And everyone of them said, "You need to get to the parents. Until the parents change, she's going to stay the same." The parents never expressed any interest in coming in to talk about the situation. I would have tried to do that if she were fourteen, but she's as good as gone. She's leaving home to go to college soon, so the thought was and best practice indicates that we need to get her ready to do that.

One day she mentioned that she was on her way back from her grandmother's funeral and her father almost broke down and cried. I asked her, "What did you do then?" She said, "Well, I was in the back seat sobbing uncontrollably." And I said, "So which is it? Do you hate your dad? Or do you love your dad?" She thought about that a minute, and said, "I guess I hate that I love my dad." You see, I'm allowed to challenge her in this way, because, for months, I've been there with her, been present, listened, passed her the Kleenex box, and patted her on the back, and hugged her, and tried to reinforce the fact that she could be a normal person. So I said, "Let me tweak that just a little bit and you can see if it fits. You *love* your dad, but you hate the way he's hurt you." Now isn't that more of a godly position that we're shooting for? Right? You love the sinner, but you hate the sin. Well, from there it wasn't much of a step for her to realize that her father, perhaps, is more wounded than she is – that he withdraws from her the same way she withdraws from others, because he, also, has been deeply hurt and can't allow himself to get close to anybody.

So that was a big turning point for her. The second turning point came a week later. I said, "We're going to be ending your therapy in about six weeks or so. You're going to leave for Mexico to do your humanitarian thing, then off to college. What's it going to be like for you to be done with all of this?" She said, "I'm glad I did this, but I'll be relieved that I don't have to cry so much anymore." And I said, "What will it be like not to see me anymore?" She said, "Oh, my parents taught me not to get too close to people that I won't be seeing again." I said, "So you won't be hurt, right?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, you know, eventually, we all leave and everybody leaves us. There is this thing called death, you know. And people move away and different things happen. So that really sounds to me like a really lonely way to be in the world. You never get close to anybody because you're going to be separated from them. You could make a really good

case for never getting too close to anybody.” She said, “Maybe my parents don’t teach me that. Maybe that’s what I do.” I said, “I think, maybe, you’re right. I’m not going to demand you do anything or even ask anything of you, but you might want to consider opening up your heart just a little bit and letting me in. It would be good practice for you.” So a month later – she’s almost done with the therapy – she’s like a different girl. She couldn’t even call me by my name before. It was too personal. Now she calls me Bill. On the day she jogged to the office, she wouldn’t give me a hug – too sweaty, too germy, too dirty. Now she does. I once told her she was like a prickly little porcupine – her favorite animal, by the way. Don’t you love the unconscious? Now she’s more like a real person.

Well, her father is just as grumpy and cool as before. I just love this – this waging a campaign to worm herself into his heart. She knows that she’s going to be saying goodbye to me in a few weeks, but she has allowed herself to miss me – I think is how she would put it. So she knows that it is okay to love her dad now. I said, “What’s this plan you have?” She said, “Well, I carry on a conversation with him where I say one sentence a week. I’ll say, ‘Love you, Dad,’ and walk away. Or I’ll sneak up behind him and give him a hug and then turn and walk away before he has a chance to say anything. It’s driving him nuts!” She reports that she’s sleeping better. She’s not so anxious. She’s not worried about her family’s problems, more relaxed, not depressed, a lot more positive about herself. She’s found the ability to let go of small things, so she’s not fighting with her family members so much. I’ve noticed, too, that she’s taking a decidedly positive view of her future, which used to be really dark. Oh, I want to back up to this not fighting about small things. I said, “How is it that that happens?” She said, “Well, that serenity prayer, where you have wisdom...” “The wisdom to know the difference” is the key line there. “There are some things you can change, some things you can’t, and to know the difference.” She said, “I know I can’t change my family and that I have my own things to work on.” So she’s put all that stuff in perspective. We didn’t really talk that much about that, but somehow all of that is falling into place for her.

Not long ago, I was speaking to a church group and I used this same girl as an example. A woman commented to me later that she wished she could overcome some of her negative attitudes like this girl in the example. One of her friends was standing by listening, and she chimed in with, “But problems like that don’t often get fixed. We have to suffer with them.” So do you see why I have a negative view of the church’s attitude about change? I had just gotten through telling this story to her – like I had you – it’s like holding up the yield sign for forty-five minutes right in front of her face – red and white – but she still thinks it’s yellow and black.

When we talk about road signs, it’s not such a big deal to think it’s yellow – when we’ve been looking at a red and white one for thirty-five years, like I have. But we’re really not talking about signs today, are we? We’re talking about what’s true and what’s *not* true in the spiritual realm of God.

We know that Christians have the Holy Spirit – spiritual power to change – but I’m not even talking about that today. I’m talking about what God has built into *every* human being. Did God build in us the capacity to overcome deeply rooted wounds, or did He not? Well, the truth is that He has. And does He know how to activate that mechanism in

us? And can He lead us to that? Yes, He can! When we are lead there, we can change. The truth is that, anytime we get ready, we can take advantage of that mechanism.

I just don't see where our present day attitude fits in with Paul's statement that through Christ he could do all things. That's Colossians 1:16. I remember a scripture about truth. It's in 2 Thessalonians 2:9. It doesn't directly relate to our situation, but maybe it does also, in some ways.

2 Thess. 2:9 – *The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan, displaying in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason, God sent them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie, and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth, but have delighted in wickedness.*

That's a pretty powerful scripture, isn't it? It has intentionally negative outcomes for those who spiritually allow themselves to continue to see a yellow sign when they knew good and well it is red and white.

There are some people who do suffer some major mental illness. And that is that there is something actually wrong with the genetics or their brain biology. So no drugs, no therapy is going to completely cure those problems. But these are the people, I believe, that Jesus talked about when He said He would come to heal the brokenhearted. For even about the worst thing that could happen to people in the mental health realm, there are encouraging words for us in the scripture. But most of us do *not* have those kinds of problems. Most of us have the kinds of problems that I cited today. All of the examples cited have problems with roots and relationships. Those problems can be reduced and, in a lot of cases, even eradicated, if we know what to do.

It's so encouraging. As I work with my clients – especially the younger ones – I realize that, if they can work hard and see amazing results, maybe I could do some more work and root out some of the problems I have. Some of them are so inspiring!

Albert Adler – a famous psychologist – said that when he used the word *encouraged* he was using it in the etymological sense – *en* – add – *courage* – to add courage. And when he used it he said it meant to add enough courage to take action – to cause someone to do something. It's that kind of encouragement that I hope to leave with all of you today. There *are* things we can do with most of the problems we have, even though they might seem hopeless to us. So you see, in this case, the sign is *not* yellow, it's red and white. It's *never* been yellow. It's been red and white all along.