

## Fixed vs. Growth Mindset

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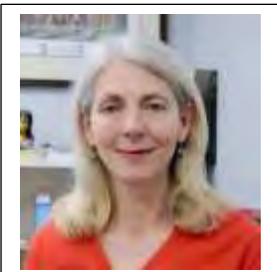
Unificationists all desire to live for the sake of others, become tribal messiahs to our loved ones near and far, and reach out to our families with the message of love and hope that inspired us decades ago.

After going through so many crises and phases as a movement, many of us feel an urgent need to reflect on what works and doesn't work in terms of nourishing and growing our roots — whether that involves community activism, event planning, or reaching out to our second generation.

To move forward, the first gen, in particular, need to develop what is popularly known today in education pedagogy as a “growth mindset.” This is in contrast to a “fixed mindset,” but more about that later. Let me explain what the two are and how a growth mindset might be applied to our

unique faith community.

“Growth mindset” is a term coined by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck to explain how children learn. The latest research shows that the brain is far more malleable than previously believed. Research on brain plasticity reveals how connectivity between neurons can change given new input and experiences. Medical cases of stroke and brain damage have demonstrated in surprising ways how neural networks can grow new connections while at the same time strengthen existing ones.



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What this proves is we can increase our neural growth by the actions, choices and decisions we make. Asking questions, using problem-solving strategies, even experiencing failure and trying again all serve to help a child learn. Studies have shown that when educators can change student mindsets from *fixed* (“I can't do this, I fail at this”) to *growth* (“I can keep trying, step-by-step”), then motivation and achievement is increased. But why stop with children; aren't adults strengthening their brain connections as well?

In her 2006 book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dweck describes a growth mindset as one that “thrives on change and sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a springboard for growth.”

On the other hand, “a fixed mindset creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over.” With a fixed mindset, one is never good enough. Sound familiar? Perfection becomes the proverbial carrot on the stick that can never be reached no matter how many goals one fulfills externally.

“Do you become defensive, angry, or crushed instead of interested in learning from the feedback? Do you feel envious and threatened, or do you feel eager to learn? Accept those thoughts and feelings and work with and through them. And keep working with and through them,” Dweck adds.

She fears educators will use the term “growth mindset” as just another buzzword. “But the path to a growth mindset is a journey, not a proclamation. If we watch carefully for our fixed-mindset triggers, we can begin the true journey to a growth mindset.” At times, all of us get “stuck.” This state of mind applies not only to Unificationists. Far from it. We are often the most diverse, creative, wide, and far thinking people I know.

I felt inspired that True Father was always “mixing things” up — he himself was a good example of a growth mindset. Although he was certainly influenced by his cultural Korean background — one that is very homogenous — he was constantly traveling the globe, learning from other religious perspectives, and adapting to changing times.

Look at True Mother: she is doing the same. She has incorporated many changes into our movement's practices while holding true to her core values and beliefs. But on both scores she has garnered criticism. Some members have balked at all the innovations while others want to see more. As a wise leader said to me recently, it's up to us, finally, to create the movement we want, but to do that we need to be able to grow, that is *go*, forward.

Most of us were evolving and following in True Father's wake, but what about now? The thought patterns and coping skills we employed in the past have, in some cases, fossilized our thinking. We keep

trying the same old strategies, applying worn out phrases to new circumstances, and not growing either as a movement, in some cases in our marriages, or even as individuals.

Perhaps a fixed mindset is our comfort zone; stepping out from that can be unsettling, frightening even. Whether exercising our physical muscles, sparking our synapses, or confronting long-entrenched views, this requires the pain of growth. Facing our problems, discussing them honestly, and moving forward can be tremendously difficult. The key word here is honesty.

I interpret a growth mindset to mean giving ourselves permission to be open to various perspectives, listening to others' viewpoints whether those views be related to religious dogma or politics, and finding new ways to reach out to others in meaningful communication without affixing judgment or labels. The fixed mindset in an organization (and it's true for many groups where people tend to think along similar lines) oftentimes is exemplified by characteristics that are more cult-like in dynamic. An example would be overzealous proselytizing that is not unconditional because there is a numbers quota to fulfill. Another is repeating hackneyed phrases ascribing little thought to the meaning behind them. Ironically, these self-defeating behaviors produce the opposite result to what we are trying to achieve: unconditionally loving hearts and the resultant blossom of relationships.



The consequences of a fixed mindset? Guilt and negative self-talk. These emotional patterns are unhealthy baggage carried over from a former church era — a time when we were “heavenly soldiers” who slept in sleeping bags, ate McDonald’s, and possibly alienated some of our families after leaving “our old lives” behind.

Unfortunately, we are at risk of passing on this negative self-talk and its accompanying pressure cooker thought process to the very ones who have the ability to bring us to a new level of growth — our adult children. Far too many of our second generation are alienated from our core beliefs, without really understanding what those are due to an inability to express them in a natural, loving and embracing way. My personal goal with everyone I encounter at this point in my life is to move away from labels and into the realm of love. Personal confession here: this has been lacking for way too long.

Moreover, a top-down fixed mentality in an organization manifests as a dearth of voices, whether in the form of suggestions on how to improve our practices or in the form of feedback concerning our family’s realistic and oft-painful situations. A growth mentality in an organization — or a classroom — means students, or followers as the case may be, are engaged in the process, learn from doing, address mistakes, and adjust accordingly. There is ongoing fluidity and a dynamic flow. There is give and take (sound familiar?).

Finally, a growth mentality helps us understand and relate to our ever-changing society and all of its challenging dynamics. To name just a few: relating to gay youth struggling in our communities, helping to understand and embrace those with mental health or addiction issues, and addressing the lonely situations of widowhood and divorce. We are long past the point in our church development where we can just dismiss these challenges as “spiritual problems.” Where once such emotional, mental and family problems were held at bay, they are now in our very midst.

As I envision it, a growth mentality would mean having a two-way communication between “leaders” and “followers,” and engaging in honest reflection about what works and what does not. We are all trying to move towards an ideal that we still miraculously — and with God’s grace — believe in. Now it’s time to get real as well.

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