

## Potential beyond the moment

By Theodore Hengesbach  
NC News Service

Greg Barton raced for the gold in the solo kayak event in the 1984 summer Olympics. I found his story especially moving.

Barton was born with club feet and even after 12 operations this condition could not be fully corrected. So he turned his attention from sports which required leg and foot coordination to one that demanded upper body strength — kayaking.

Although Barton missed the gold, he is a model of how to turn defeat in one area into an asset in another.

As a teacher and adviser of adults returning to complete their college degrees, I meet individuals who set great goals for themselves and who often achieve great results.

Some start with real handicaps, having to turn around an earlier history of failure, academic probation and even dismissal from the university 10 or 20 years ago. They go on to perform in acceptable, even outstanding ways.

Then there are people like Lynn Thompson and Harry Spigle, both recent retirees. Thompson came to see me two years ago about taking a painting course. He felt this would be a good way to fill his time.

It soon became clear that he had earned many college credits

in the past and that he was close to completing his bachelor's degree. So instead of just a course in painting, he enrolled in a variety of courses. Within a year and a half he finished his degree. At the 1983 commencement exercises, he led the procession of students into the hall.

Spigle had been taking college courses sporadically since 1938. His final course toward a bachelor's degree was one in poetry which, he told me, "opened up a whole new part of my life."

It provided him with the skills, practice and encouragement to put his personal experiences as a World War II soldier into poetic form. At 66 Spigle became a published poet. In the university's fine arts magazine featuring the best student work, three of his poems are prominently presented.

Both Thompson and Spigle discovered a potential they didn't know was there. I also know a woman, a college graduate, who was willing to begin all over to obtain a graduate degree in business. To fulfill the mathematics requirement, she took a precollege course in algebra. After three attempts over a two-year period involving heavy weekly homework assignments, she gained the requisite B.

She is an example of someone who can learn skills in a completely new area.

Christian life reveals a similar pattern. Faith calls Christians to achieve their full potential. The life and words of Jesus invite Christians to expand their horizons. His words encourage people to live in new, undreamed of ways.

The New Testament offers a perspective on life's meaning — on life's enrichment and fulfillment. Think of the Rich Young Man in the Gospel.

According to the scripture account, the Rich Young Man was a good man, searching to become better. When Jesus told him that he should sell all that he had in order to be perfect, the rich man turned away. He departed in a sad state.

But his sadness does not indicate he did something wrong by departing. Rather, the Rich Young Man's sadness resulted from his inability to search in a new and different way for fulfillment — to move beyond the potential he had already achieved.

*(Hengesbach teaches at Indiana University, South Bend.)*

control. It is one's reaction to those circumstances that can be controlled.

Obviously, too, we often feel unequal to the task of our ongoing development. Only God creates effortlessly. For God's human co-creators, it is a challenge, frequently a difficult one.

Strength comes from the realization that people are co-creators, working with God.

No one was ever more conscious of his weakness than St. Paul. Yet, he wrote: "I willingly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me...for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

Yet Paul goes on to say, "In him is the source of my strength. I have strength for everything" (Philippians 4:13).

*(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)*

## FOOD...

### ...for thought

Whenever people make a new beginning in life, they tend to be hopeful and apprehensive at the same time. It's no wonder. For at the beginning point, who can see the end result?

Perhaps this is why a man and woman get nervous on their wedding day. Each partner's destiny is about to become intertwined with the destiny of a spouse, the destinies of children they eventually hope to have, the destinies of new relatives and friends.

Years later the couple may look back on their lives and realize how much they have grown and changed. Undoubtedly they will find that the course their personal development took was strongly influenced by life together — what they learned from each other, what they suffered together, what they achieved together.

It is similar with other points in life when people make a new beginning: the first day in college, the first day in a new neighborhood, the first day in a new job, the first day in a new parish. In each case, a person is stimulated by the new situation and, perhaps, jittery over the roles that new people — teachers, co-workers, neighbors, parishioners — will play in his or her life.

Will these new people foster or frustrate one's personal development.

Your potential as a human being doesn't mature in a vacuum. Instead, fulfillment unfolds in the midst of real life.

—Other people help to draw out your hidden potential.

—Unanticipated developments point toward aptitudes and talents you never thought could be yours.

Many adults could testify that they discovered new dimensions of their personal potential when they were 35 or older.

All this points to one reason why the church places such importance on the community dimension of its life. People are always searching for fulfillment. And they contribute to each other's fulfillment in important ways.

The members of the Christian community are people who in many ways can foster the potential within each other's lives.

The sacrament of confirmation focuses in a special way on the value and the potential of each person's life. When youths are prepared for confirmation today, they often are asked to undertake a project in which they serve the needs of other people.

In this way, the church says in effect to its young people: "You have gifts and talents for serving others that you have, as yet, barely imagined. With God's Spirit, your potential is truly astounding."

### ...for discussion

#### SECOND HELPINGS

"Sixty Ways to Let Yourself Grow," by Sister Martha Mary McGaw, CSJ. "Have you really jumped into life or are you still shivering on the shore?" Sister McGaw, a veteran journalist, asks readers in this small lively book. It is a book of ideas, each one presented in brief form. It might be used by individuals to stimulate thinking and prayer. The author offers advice for making some changes in life. She urges readers to think about "how your presence has an impact on the world." She suggests: "Invest your whole self in whatever you do...You'll never know how much good you are able to do until you let yourself go." Sister McGaw writes: "You're not finished. You are growing...The materials of life are all around you. You can use them to grow...This very moment is your unrepeatable chance to become the person God created you to be." (Liguori Publications, One Liguori Dr., Liguori, Mo. 63057. 1984. \$1.50)

1. Did you ever have an experience that helped you realize you had potential — a talent, a gift, an aptitude — that you had never recognized in yourself before? What was the experience?

2. What role do you think other people might play in helping you develop your potential?

3. What steps would you recommend to another person who sought advice on how to develop his or her potential as a person?

4. Is there a sense in which a community — a parish, a school, a youth group — has potential precisely as a community?

5. In Katharine Bird's article, what does Father Edward Braxton consider a key way to bring out the hidden capabilities in people?