

# Stages of Faith in Our Lives

by Daniel O'Rourke

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In our search to find purpose and meaning we go through different stages in our lives. Most people navigate this on-going search through religion, but religion does not have to be involved. All of us, religious and non-religious, seek meaning and purpose -- and this seeking evolves as we age.

James Fowler in his 1981 groundbreaking book, "Stages of Faith -- The Psychology of Human Development" interviewed more than 5000 people at different periods in their lives and identified six stages of faith. When Fowler, a developmental psychologist, speaks of "faith" he means the way individuals make sense of the world as they struggle to find meaning. Such "faith" is not "belief" and not necessarily religious.

Dr. John Testerman, MD, at the Seven Day Adventist Loma Linda University says these stages are "different lenses through which we view the world as we travel through life." These stages, however, are not inflexible. Individuals can and do wander back to the preceding or forward to the following stages.

In this column I rely extensively on Testerman's March 1995 article in "Adventist Today." There he states that transitions from one stage to another "occur when, in response to new experiences or life crises, our old way of seeing the world collapses and" we build "a new faith structure."

The first stage is THE MAGICAL WORLD of preschool children. These children experience the world through their imagination, intuition and feeling. Logic does not inhibit them. They live in a magical, egocentric world full of wonder.

Stage 2 is THE CONCRETE FAMILY -- a phase in which myths are taken literally. In it children from 6 to 12 "see the world through the lens of story -- a concrete, literal, narrative world of family and tribe, ritual and myth. They begin to identify with a faith community, which may be religiously, politically or culturally defined, and to locate themselves within its Master Story." That story tells them who they are.

For Christians the story is the Jesus story with its virgin birth, the star at Bethlehem, the crucifixion and resurrection. For those who center their lives on patriotism it is the national story with the romanticized myths of the Puritans and Native Americans, Washington and the cherry tree, and Lincoln altruistically freeing the slaves.

“Stage 2 collapses,” Testerman observes, “when teenagers use their newfound power of abstract thought to deconstruct their previous concrete understanding of the world.” Typically churches attempt to counteract this stage with religious education and bible study.

Stage 3 is the FAITH COMMUNITY. In this stage adolescents see the world through their peer community. Unconsciously, they incorporate their values and ways of thinking from their peer subculture. In Stage 3, “We are immersed in the thought system of our faith community like a fish that does not perceive the water in which it swims.”

Stage 3 commonly “continues as the adult faith stage of most people in our churches and society.” We do not question these culturally accepted ways of thinking because they have become part of us. Nor do we question their authoritative sources, such as the Bible, Church hierarchy, or military and political leaders, who dogmatically bolster our worldview. Stage 3 and its group-based identity provide cohesion for the group but also cause conflict. For “it is hard to deal calmly and rationally with issues which touch on one’s identity.”

When the traditional answers stop making sense, Stage 3 falls apart. Stage 4 is RATIONAL, RADICALLY PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS about life’s meaning. “Stage 4 is a continuation of the rational examination of belief that begins during Stage 3.” In Stage 4, however, young adults question “not only individual beliefs, but also the whole previously unquestioned traditional and authoritative bases of belief.” They step back from their own faith heritage and examine it through the lens of reason. They “compare it to other faith traditions, throw out the parts that don’t make sense, or even abandon it altogether.”

Roman Catholics speak of cafeteria Catholics where people take what they want from the menu of beliefs and reject what to them is unreasonable. The institutional church condemns this approach, but as my niece told her mother. “You can get a good meal in a cafeteria -- if you just make the right choices.” Cafeteria Catholics are in Stage 4.

“Stage 4 collapses when we run up against the limits of rational thought and the search for certainty ends in failure” or frustration. Stage 5 is THE WORLD OF PARADOX, a numinous and mystical world. To people in Stage 3, Stage 4 sounds like a loss of faith. “To those in Stage 4, Stage 3 looks like unthinking traditionalism and Stage 5 like mystical mush.”

“Stage 5, which may begin at mid-life or later, is in some respects similar to Stage 1.” We look at life again through the lens of imagination and intuition and live in a universe of mystery, wonder and paradox. Reason “is no longer the primary tool with which we attempt to apprehend ultimate reality” or life’s meaning. In Stage 4 we assumed authority to ourselves through reason. In Stage 5 confronted by reason’s limitations, we return to myth, symbol and feeling, which recapture the super natural (two words) dominance they held in our consciousness as children.

Stage 6 is rare. It is SELFLESS SERVICE AND RADICAL COMMITMENT. Individuals in this stage “identify deeply with all humanity, and therefore tend to spend themselves in service of worldwide issues of love, justice and brotherhood.” Think: Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Heschel, Thomas Merton, or the Dali Lama.

Our physical, intellectual and emotional lives are not static. Neither is our faith life. As it develops and changes it goes through distinct stages. Fowler helps us understand this. As we experience it in our own lives, it should not frighten us. Rather we should embrace it.

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