

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

January 24, 2017

A recent *Laptop* suggested some ways in which we might examine our own spiritual growth as we begin a New Year, and in reflecting on that question I've been reminded of James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*.¹ I've written about this before, but it does me good to be reminded of this very helpful schema, and perhaps it will be of help to you, too.

Fowler's research identified seven different and progressive ways in which humans approach questions of meaning across the life-cycle. While each stage has its own season of ascendancy, the first stage, "**Infancy & Undifferentiated Faith**," is actually a pre-stage largely inaccessible to research, and the last stage, "**Universalizing Faith**," is attained by only a very few people, who usually end up as martyrs.

This means that nearly all of us spend our lives in some portions of what Fowler calls stages 1-5. While normal development moves almost everyone from stage 1 into stage 2, it's possible for faith development to be arrested anywhere along the way from stages 2-5, such that persons remain in that stage for the rest of their lives.²

Interestingly, *Fowler's research suggests that a large proportion of the differences we see in human worldviews is attributable more to persons being in different faith stages than to anything else (no matter what their "religion" or "politics").*³ Let me try to summarize the processes of Fowler's stages and then show how an idea known as "moratorium" fits this sequence.

Infancy & Undifferentiated Faith (an unnumbered pre-stage; years 0-2). The basic and necessary strength to be developed this stage is "basic trust" growing out of parental nurture and care. If parental absence and/or failures result in "basic mistrust" instead, then seeds of isolation or excessive narcissism are planted and begin to take root. The transition to Stage 1 begins with the convergence of thought and language, making possible the use of rudimentary symbols in speech and play.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (The Age of Magic, years 2-7). Stage 1 is an imitative phase in which children are influenced by the visible faith of the primary adults in their lives. There is relative fluidity of thought processes, with fantasy unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought. In this stage, imagination is born, together with the beginnings of self-awareness.

¹ The ideas in this *Laptop* are adapted from James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); and from Guy R. LeFrancois, *Adolescents* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981), p. 134.

² Fowler's word for such arrest is "equilibration."

³ There is also evidence that individual congregations have "modal faith stages," and therefore attract persons with similar modes of "faithing." See Randy Simmonds, "Content and Structure in Faith Development: A Case Examination of James Fowler's Theory" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986).



Because of the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy, this is an age both of “positive magic” (think Disney) as well as unrestrained images of “bad magic” (think “night terrors”). The transition to Stage 2 begins with the arrival of the beginning of what is known as “concrete operational thinking,” which allows distinctions to begin to be made between what is truly real and what only seems to be real (think Santa Claus).

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (The Age of Story, years 4-13+).⁴ As children enter Stage 2, they begin to experience life in a somewhat linear fashion rather than in the more episodic experiences heretofore. This means that story and narrative now become their major way of making sense of life, and consequently this is the season in which children most love to have stories read to them, and later, to read the stories themselves.⁵

Still lacking the ability to understand metaphoric thought, children understand symbols as literal and one-dimensional. The transition to Stage 3 begins as children begin to experience “formal operational thought” processes and thus begin to understand stories in deeper ways. Further, the development of “mutual interpersonal perspective taking”⁶ creates the possibility of and the need for the development of a more personal relationship with God. (In Baptist life, the last part of Stage 2 is frequently the age at which first confessions of faith are made, and that confession often leads to the “moratorium sequence” I’ll discuss later.)

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (The Age of Conformity, years 10-21+). As children move into middle school and the “age of chumship,” their primary relationships begin to extend beyond the family for the first time, and their faith must now provide coherence to a more complex life experience. Because “mutual interpersonal perspective taking” is strongest in this stage, this is a conformist stage acutely tuned to the expectations of others in the absence of a sense of self sure enough to maintain an independent view.

As the circle of influence expands in high school, tensions and contradictions between authority sources (parents, teachers, church, textbooks, media, etc.) can precipitate either the beginning of the transition into Stage 4 or a retrenchment into previous beliefs now held more rigidly and non-reflectively.⁷ For those who do transition to Stage 4, this movement has two stages: (1) the undermining or interruption of reliance on external sources of authority; and (2) the relocation of that authority within the Self.⁸

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (The Age of Self-Discovery, years 13-30+). As young adults transition to Stage 4, their self-awareness becomes less and less a composite assembled from external sources and more and more the result of critical reflection on their own identity (Self) and worldview (ideology; faith). In the face of competing worldviews, young adults become more and more aware of their own views and more and more willing to examine and to discuss them with trusted others. These transitions are usually precipitated by going away to college, military service, or moving away from parents and establishing one’s own household. Where none of these triggers takes place, this transition is frequently stillborn.

⁴ The plus sign indicates that this is a stage in which persons can equilibrate and not move beyond it in terms of the ways in which they make meaning.

⁵ C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* can become major faith-development resources in this stage.

⁶ “I see you seeing me. I see you seeing me seeing you seeing me. I attempt to become the person I think you see.”

⁷ **Differences of perspective in Stage 3 are experienced as differences in “kind” of person, and for those who never move beyond Stage 3 in adulthood, it is this experience of “difference” that leads to much of the conflict in the world.** *Persons who have accepted their beliefs rather than having chosen them are more inclined to defend them than to discuss them.*

⁸ Technically, this is called a transition from an “external locus-of-control” to an “internal locus-of-control.” Stay tuned for the “moratorium” discussion.

As we'll see shortly, the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is the primary season for moratorium, and there is some danger that the self-reflection that is the strength of this stage can lead to an excessive confidence in the conscious and rational mind and in those things that "can be measured," with consequent disdain for realities unseen.

Even in the best of times, persons in Stage 4 have only minimal awareness of unconscious processes; but for those who transition to Stage 5 (numbers grow smaller with each stage), the eventual awareness of images and energies from one's deeper self, combined with a sense of the "flatness" of Stage 4 understandings, signals a readiness for new dimensions of meaning.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (The Age of Maturity, years 35+). By mid-life, some persons develop sufficient self-certainty and spiritual anchoring to accept the reality that Truth is more multidimensional than any single theory or account of Truth can grasp. With this awareness comes a new capacity to see and to gladly serve the meanings of one's own faith while recognizing that those meanings are inevitably partial and somewhat relative apprehensions of Transcendent Reality.

Conjunctive Faith is able to both welcome and to integrate the deeper voices of the unconscious, and Stage 5 persons frequently become both more altruistic and less "tribal" in their motivations. For a very small number of persons, their increasingly unified experience of the Transcendent takes them into Stage 6.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (The Age of Martyrdom, years 50+). Persons in Stage 6 become much less creatures of clan and tribe and much more connected to humankind as a whole. Ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition, Stage 6 persons are so committed to the Vision that possesses them that they become heedless of self-preservation and frequently become martyrs for the Visions they incarnate.

Well, if you've stuck with me this far, you're now ready to understand "moratorium," but in order to do that, we've got to run quickly through Stages 2-5 once more. . . .

The key concepts underlying "moratorium" in faith development are "crisis" and "commitment." The "**Crisis**" here is "existential crisis" in that it has to do with clashes of meaning and authority that catapult the pilgrim into a wilderness of uncertainty. "**Commitment**" has to do with one's allegiance to systems of meaning, and more particularly, to one's personal relationship with the Divine.

If you'll look at the tables at the end of this *Laptop*, you'll see that crisis and commitment are now paired with some new terms related to several of the stages of faith: "identity *molding*"; "identity *foreclosure*"; "identity *moratorium*"; "identity *achievement*"; and "identity *transcendence*." Here's how that works

Identity Molding. In Stage 2, which is essentially childhood, personal identity is being molded through interaction with one's parents, as is one's perception of God. Indeed, for good or ill, we have no other lens through which to form our first conceptions of God save that of our interactions with our parents.

During these years and in this season, we experience neither any sense of existential/faith crisis nor any significant level of commitment to the Divine. Because it is possible for faith development to become arrested in this stage, persons can and do continue to grow in their intellectual and professional experience across the years while never moving

beyond whatever initial impressions of God they formed in childhood. It was of such folk that J. B. Phillips wrote his famous little book, *Your God is Too Small*.⁹

Identity Foreclosure. For children who grow up in homes of faith and/or who are connected to a faith community such as our own where there is an emphasis on “personal relationship with God” and on “salvation,” later childhood and adolescence frequently bring about an experience we might call “identity foreclosure.” While foreclosure is often a negatively-valenced word, it is not so in this case.

As children or youth reach what Baptists call “the age of accountability,” an age of awareness of personal sinfulness and culpability that varies rather widely from child to child, we encourage them to “make professions of faith” and to experience being “*born again*” (John 3:3). Assuming that these are self-motivated and Spirit-led decisions relatively free of parental or adult pressure, these are appropriate and helpful beginnings of a deeper life of faith.

And, while such commitments are certainly to be encouraged, it’s important to realize that such professions of faith are really being made toward the God of one’s parents, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” When children and youth make such commitments, they are affirming the significance of their relationships with their parents and with other spiritually-focused adults, and they are affirming what they understand to be faith in “their parents’ God.”

It is because such commitments are being (appropriately and importantly) made in the years prior to the experience of significant faith crises that such decisions are called “identity foreclosure.” The faith of Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, remains “outside” oneself and is not yet fully transformative of character in the ways envisioned by the New Testament. Persons whose faith development stops here have “accepted” their beliefs rather than having “chosen” them (see footnote 7).

Identity Moratorium. When the existential crises common to late adolescence and young adulthood arrive, whether brought about by street experience, work, war, college, illness, or by many other precipitants, it is quite commonly the case that young people pull back from their previous faith commitments for a season. While such withdrawal excites considerable anxiety in parents and grandparents, *the truth of the matter is that the season of moratorium is a necessary incubator of personal faith that will “go the distance” and be sufficient for all of life.*

The season of moratorium is an in-between time during which young people need to be encouraged to search out and to examine the competing Truth claims in the world for themselves. Rather than trying to shut down such questioning, wise parents and other spiritual mentors will provide safe environments within which such questions may be raised and various methods of response may be tested.¹⁰ This season represents the “interruption of external authority” referred to above, and often lasts for several years.

Identity Achievement. The second and final movement of the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 faith comes as young adults recommit themselves to God and to personal faith. Unlike the commitment made in childhood, this later commitment is not to “my parents’ God” or to “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” but to “*my Lord and my God.*”

⁹ J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (1961, New York: Touchstone, 1997).

¹⁰ It is generally the failure to provide such safe space that results in the “falling away” of young adults during and after their college or military experiences.

Representing a commitment that is made in the face of existential crisis, the commitment that represents “Identity Achievement” is the necessary “relocation of authority within” mentioned above. In years gone by, such recommitment was often solemnized through public “rededication” experiences, and it seems to me that such marker events continue to have significant value.

Identity Transcendence. For those persons who transition to Stage 5’s Conjunctive Faith in mid-life, there comes a certain transcendence of identity in which persons become open to Truth from many traditions while remaining fully committed to their own. For those who become convinced that “all truth is God’s truth,”¹¹ a “second naïveté”¹² is born through which a new openness to that which is “other” develops. In my own experience, persons in this situation have been some of the most winsome persons I have ever known.

Well, that’s a lot to digest, but perhaps these ideas will help you see more clearly where you are on the Journey of Faith, and may help to understand your/our children and grandchildren as well.

Dave



¹¹ See Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

¹² See Mark Wallace, *The Second Naïveté* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996).

Stages of Faith

Stage 1: The Age of Magic (2-7)	Little distinction between reality and fantasy
Stage 2: The Age of Story (4-13+)	Identity Molding <i>No Crisis/No Commitment</i> “Your God Is Too Small”
Stage 3: The Age of Conformity (10-21+)	Identity Foreclosure <i>No Crisis/Commitment</i> . . . to Parents’ Faith
Stage 4: The Age of Self-Discovery (13-30+)	Identity Moratorium <i>Crisis/No Commitment</i> Identity Achievement Rededication—to one’s own faith
Stage 5: The Age of Maturity (35+)	Identity Transcendence <i>No Crisis/Commitment</i> Openness to <u>Truth from many traditions</u> while being committed to one’s own; openness to <u>one’s inward journey</u> ; altruism on both personal and global levels

Adapted from James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); and from Guy R. LeFrancois, *Adolescents* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981), p. 134.

JAMES FOWLER'S STAGES OF FAITH

Stage	Characteristics	Strength	Danger	Transition
Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith (0-2)	Really a pre-stage; largely inaccessible to research	Basic trust and the relational experience of mutuality	Failure of mutuality in either excessive narcissism or patterns of isolation	Begins with the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and play
Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (2-7)	Imitative phase in which the child is influenced by the visible faith of primary adults; relative fluidity of thought patterns; fantasy is unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought; first self-awareness	Birth of imagination; feelings toward the ultimate conditions of existence	Unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness; reinforcement of taboos and moral or doctrinal expectations	Concrete operational thinking; distinctions between what is real and what only seems to be
Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (4-13+)	Episodic quality of faith becomes more linear; story becomes the major way of giving unity to experience; symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning; relationships are based on reciprocal fairness	Rise of narrative and the emergence of story	Excessive reliance upon reciprocity can result in perfectionism or in its opposite, an abasing sense of badness embraced because of mistreatment, neglect or the apparent disfavor of significant others	Clash of stories leads to reflection made possible by the transition to formal operational thought; emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective taking creates the need for more personal relationship with God

JAMES FOWLER'S STAGES OF FAITH

Stage	Characteristics	Strength	Danger	Transition
Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (10-21+)	Experience extends beyond the family; faith must provide coherence in the midst of more complex experience; a “conformist” stage acutely tuned to the expectations of others without an identity sure enough to maintain an independent view; differences of outlook with others are experienced as differences in “kind” of person	Forming of a conception of one’s own becoming in identity and faith, incorporating one’s past and anticipated future in an image of the ultimate environment	Expectations and evaluations of others can be so internalized that later autonomy of judgment and action can be jeopardized; interpersonal betrayals can give rise to nihilistic despair	Contradictions between authority sources lead to critical reflections on the “relative” nature of beliefs and values; transition involves the undermining or interruption of reliance on external sources of authority and the relocation of authority within the self
Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (13-30+)	Identity is no longer defined by the composite of one’s roles; self is aware of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a “world view;” minimally aware of unconscious factors influencing judgments and behavior	Has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology)	Excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought; a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self fails to interact appropriately with others	Awareness of anarchic and disturbing inner voices; images and energies from one’s deeper self and a sense of the sterility and flatness of the meanings one serves signal readiness for something new

JAMES FOWLER'S STAGES OF FAITH

Stage	Characteristics	Strength	Danger	Transition
Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (35+)	Sufficient self-certainty to accept that truth is more multidimensional than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp; integrates into self much that has been unrecognized or suppressed; more open to the voices of one's "deeper self;" altruism becomes more motivating	Development of the ironic imagination—a new capacity to see and be in one's or one's group's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial, and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality	Paradoxical awareness results in paralyzing passivity, giving rise to complacency or cynical withdrawal	This stage remains divided. It lives and acts between an untransformed world and transcendent loyalties. In some few cases this division yields to the call of the radical actualization that we call Stage 6.
Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (50+)	Heedlessness to self-preservation; frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate; ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition			

Source: James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp.119-213.