

As we continue our journey through the faith stages of life, last Sunday morning we looked at young adulthood. A key dimension of the faith transition from adolescence to young adulthood is the idea of “moratorium,” and I promised to describe how moratorium works in this column.

As I'm sure you know, the idea of “moratorium” has to do with the suspension or delay of something. This discussion will probably be easier to follow if you print out the last page of this *Laptop* so you can compare my comments to that table as we go along.

James Fowler's hugely important book, *Stages of Faith*,<sup>1</sup> 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 particular stage for the rest of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

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”).<sup>3</sup> Let me try to summarize the processes of Fowler's stages and then show how moratorium fits this sequence.

**Infancy & Undifferentiated Faith (an unnumbered pre-stage; years 0-2).** As we've noted, the necessary strength to be developed this stage is “basic trust” growing out of parental nurture and care. If parental 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, opening up 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.

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 concrete

---

<sup>1</sup> The ideas here 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.

<sup>2</sup> Fowler's word for such arresting is “equilibration.”

<sup>3</sup> 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).

operational thinking, which allows distinctions to begin to be made between what is truly real and what only seems to be real.

**Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (*The Age of Story, years 4-13+*).**<sup>4</sup> 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 now becomes 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.<sup>5</sup>

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”<sup>6</sup> creates the possibility of and the need for the development of a more personal relationship with God. (In Baptist life, this is frequently the age at which first confessions of faith are made, and that leads us to the “moratorium sequence,” but we’ll come back to that 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 in 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 without a sense of self yet 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 transition into Stage 4 or a retrenchment into holding previous beliefs more rigidly and non-reflectively.<sup>7</sup> For those who do transition to Stage 4, this movement has two stages: the undermining or interruption of reliance on external sources of authority and the relocation of that authority within the Self.<sup>8</sup>

**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.

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 spiritual things unseen. Even in the best

---

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

<sup>6</sup> “I see you seeing me. I see you seeing me seeing you seeing me. I attempt to become the person I think you see.”

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Technically, this is called a transition from an “external locus-of-control” to an “internal locus-of-control.”

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 sterility and "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"!  
In order to do that, we've got to run quickly through Stages 2-5 once more.

The key foundational concepts underlying moratorium in the sense of faith development are "crisis" and "commitment." "*Crisis*" here has to do with "existential crisis" in that it has to do with clashes of meaning and authority that catapult one 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 table 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*.<sup>9</sup>

---

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

**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 usually 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 in 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 the faith crises that will almost surely come 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. 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.”

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,”<sup>10</sup> a “second naïveté”<sup>11</sup> 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, once again. I hope that at least from time to time these excursions take you into places that deepen your walk with God!

Dave



---

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> See Mark Wallace, *The Second Naïveté* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996).

# ***The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know***

**O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

## **Week eleven: God's Phone Number**

*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know*  
(Jeremiah 33:3).

In Jeremiah 33:3, we find one of the most amazing promises in the entire Bible. An old friend calls this God's phone number. The line is never busy. Your call never goes to voice mail. He always answers—and He answers in a way that far exceeds our most optimistic expectations (Ephesians 3:20).

Prayer is one of the awesome privileges of the Christian life. Jesus said, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer"* (Mark 11:17). Before it is to be called a house of Bible teaching, a house of evangelism, a house of discipleship, or a house of social action, His house is to be called a *"house of prayer."* It is also of interest to note that the disciples asked of Him, *"Lord, teach us to pray"* (Luke 11:1). They never asked Him to teach them to preach or to evangelize or to organize or to mobilize. The only thing recorded that these faithful followers requested was that they be taught to pray. They observed Him for three years. They saw the intensity and frequency of His own personal prayer life. They knew that if they could capture the essence of prayer, they would be well on their way to preaching or doing any of the other ministries needed to be performed.

As we dial up God's phone number today, let's join the disciples in this request: *"Lord, teach us to pray."*

### **WHAT IS PRAYER?**

Prayer is the talking part of our relationship with God.

### **WHY DO WE PRAY?**

It is prayer that makes God real to us.

### **WHEN DO WE PRAY?**

We pray *"without ceasing,"* always in conversation with God (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

### **HOW DO WE PRAY?**

We confess our sin, give thanks for God's forgiveness, praise God for His mercies, and intercede for others in the Name of Jesus.



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

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.