

## 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

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Stage	Characteristics	Strength	Danger	Transition
<p>Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (10-21+)</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (13-30+)</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>Has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology)</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>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</p>

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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.

James W. Fowler. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

Stages of faith deal with different domains of knowing than either the cognitive stages of Piaget or the moral stages of Kohlberg. Faith stages arise out of integration of the modes of knowing and valuing. They are not identical with, nor can they be reduced to, either cognitive or moral stages, or to some mixture of the two. Fowler speaks of two types of logic: the logic of rational certainty (impersonal, propositional, demonstrable, and replicable) and the logic of conviction.

#### Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith (0-2)

In the pre-stage called Undifferentiated faith the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with sensed threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infant's environment. Though really a pre-stage and largely inaccessible to empirical research of the kind we pursue, the quality of mutuality and the strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development.

The emergent strength of faith in this stage is the fund of basic trust and the relational experience of mutuality with the one(s) providing primary love and care.

The danger or deficiency in the stage is a failure of mutuality in either of two directions. Either there may emerge an excessive narcissism in which the experience of being "central" continues to dominate and distort mutuality, or experiences of neglect or inconsistencies may lock the infant in patterns of isolation and failed mutuality.

Transition to Stage 1 begins with the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and ritual play.

#### Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (2-7)

Stage 1 Intuitive-Projective Faith is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults.

The stage most typical of the child of 3 to 7, it is marked by a relative fluidity of thought patterns. The child is continually encountering novelties for which no stable operations of knowing have been formed. The imaginative processes underlying fantasy are unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought. In league with forms of knowing dominated by perception, imagination in this stage is extremely productive of long-lasting images and feelings (positive and negative) that later, more stable and self-reflective valuing and thinking will have to order and sort out. This is the stage of first self-awareness. The "self-aware" child is egocentric as regards the perspectives of others. Here we find first awarenesses of death and sex and of the strong taboos by which cultures and families insulate those powerful areas.

The gift of emergent strength of this stage is the birth of imagination, the ability to unify and grasp the experience-world in powerful images and as presented in stories that register the child's intuitive understandings and feelings toward the ultimate conditions of existence.

The dangers in this stage arise from the possible "possession" of the child's imagination by unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness, or from the witting or unwitting exploitation of her or his imagination in the reinforcement of taboos and moral or doctrinal expectations.

The main factor precipitating transition to the next stage is the emergence of concrete operational thinking. Affectively, the resolution of Oedipal issues or their submersion in latency are important accompanying factors. At the heart of the transition is the child's growing concern to know how things are and to clarify for him- or herself the bases of distinctions between what is real and what only seems to be.

#### Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (4-13+)

Stage 2 Mythic-Literal Faith is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning. In this stage the rise of concrete operations leads to the curbing and ordering of the previous stage's imaginative composing of the world. The episodic quality of Intuitive-Projective faith gives way to a more linear, narrative construction of coherence and meaning. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. This is the faith stage of the school child (though we sometimes find the structures dominant in adolescents and in adults). Marked by increased accuracy in taking the perspective of other persons, those in Stage 2 compose a world based on reciprocal fairness and in immanent justice based on reciprocity. The actors in their cosmic stories are anthropomorphic. They can be affected deeply and powerfully by symbolic and dramatic materials and can describe in endlessly detailed narrative what has occurred. They do not, however, step back from the flow of stories to formulate reflective, conceptual meanings. For this stage the meaning is both carried and "trapped" in the narrative.

The new capacity or strength in this stage is the rise of narrative and the emergence of story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience.

The limitations of literalness and an excessive reliance upon reciprocity as a principle for constructing an ultimate environment can result either in an overcontrolling, stilted perfectionism or "works righteousness" or in their opposite, an abasing sense of badness embraced because of mistreatment, neglect or the apparent disfavor of significant others.

A factor initiating transition to Stage 3 is the implicit clash or contradictions in stories that leads to reflection on meanings. The transition to formal operational thought makes such reflection possible and necessary. Previous literalism breaks down; new "cognitive conceit" (Elkind) leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory) must be faced. The emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective

taking ("I see you seeing me; I see me as you see me; I see you seeing me seeing you.") creates the need for a more personal relationship with the unifying power of the ultimate environment.

### Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (10-21+)

In Stage 3, a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook.

Stage 3 typically has its rise and ascendancy in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium. It structures the ultimate environment in interpersonal terms. Its images of unifying value and power derive from the extension of qualities experienced in personal relationships. It is a "conformist" stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and as yet does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective. While beliefs and values are deeply felt, they typically are tacitly held—the person "dwells" in them and in the meaning world they mediate. But there has not been occasion to step outside them to reflect on or examine them explicitly or systematically. At Stage 3 a person has an "ideology," a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it. Differences of outlook with others are experienced as differences in "kind" of person. Authority is located in the incumbents of traditional authority roles (if perceived as personally worthy) or in the consensus of a valued, face-to-face group.

The emergent capacity of this stage is the forming of a personal myth—the myth of one's own becoming in identity and faith, incorporating one's past and anticipated future in an image of the ultimate environment unified by characteristics of personality.

The dangers or deficiencies in this stage are twofold. The expectations and evaluations of others can be so compellingly internalized (and sacralized) that later autonomy of judgment and action can be jeopardized; or interpersonal betrayals can give rise either to nihilistic despair about a personal principle of ultimate being or to a compensatory intimacy with god unrelated to mundane relations. When persons' symbols have been trivialized, or when persons have been absent from the ritual celebrations of shared central symbols, the sacred itself is emptied. When this kind of emptying is widespread in a society—as it is in ours today—the vacuum of meaning and of meaningful symbolic representations results in rampant anxiety and neuroses and in a resurgence of interest in all kinds of occult and spiritualistic phenomena.

Factors contributing to the breakdown of Stage 3 and to readiness for transition may include: serious clashes or contradictions between valued authority sources; marked changes, by officially sanctioned leaders, or policies or practices previously deemed sacred and unbreachable (for example, in the Catholic church changing the mass from Latin to the vernacular, or no longer requiring abstinence from meat on Friday); the encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflections on how one's

beliefs and values have formed and changed, and on how “relative” they are to one’s particular group or background.

Frequently the experience of “leaving home”—emotionally or physically, or both—precipitates the kind of examination of self, background, and life-guiding values that gives rise to stage transition at this point. If the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 does not occur before or during the mid-life transition, its chances of occurring at all decrease markedly. Social fraternities and sororities in colleges often represent conventional ideological communities that in effect substitute one family group for another, making any genuinely individuating move of identity and outlook difficult.

Stage 4: Individuating-Reflective Faith (13-30+)
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The transition to Stage 4 involves two steps: (1) the undermining or interruption of reliance on external sources of authority; and (2) the relocation of authority within the self. Persons sometimes complete the first step without accomplishing the second, which results in anomie.

The transition to Stage 4 may last from 5-7 years or longer. It may be precipitated by changes in primary relationships, such as a divorce, the death of a parent or parents, or children growing up and leaving home. It can result from moving, changing jobs, or from anything which brings awareness that Synthetic-Conventional faith is inadequate.

The movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes. Where genuine movement toward Stage 4 is underway the person must face certain unavoidable tensions: individuality vs. being defined by a group or group membership; subjectivity and the power of one’s own strongly felt but unexamined feelings vs. objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection; self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern vs. service to and being for others; the question of being committed to the relative vs. struggle with the possibility of an absolute.

Stage 4 most appropriately takes form in young adulthood (but let us remember that many adults do not construct it and that for a significant group it emerges only in the mid-thirties or forties). This stage is marked by a double development. The self, previously sustained in its identity and faith compositions by an interpersonal circle of significant others, now claims an identity no longer defined by the composite of one’s roles or meanings to others. To sustain that new identity it composes a meaning frame conscious of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a “world view.” Self (identity) and outlook (world view) are differentiated from those of others and become acknowledged factors in the reactions, interpretations and judgments one makes on the actions of the self and others. It expresses its intuitions of coherence in an ultimate environment in terms of an explicit system of meanings. Stage 4 typically translates symbols into conceptual meanings. This is a “demythologizing” stage. It is likely to attend minimally to unconscious factors influencing its judgments and behavior.

Stage 4’s ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology). Its dangers inhere in its strengths: an excessive confidence

in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self overassimilates “reality” and the perspectives of others into its own world view.

Restless with the self-images and outlook maintained by Stage 4, the person ready for transition finds him- or herself attending to what may feel like anarchic and disturbing inner voices. Elements from a childish past, images and energies from a deeper self, a gnawing sense of the sterility and flatness of the meanings one serves—any or all of these may signal readiness for something new. Stories, symbols, myths and paradoxes from one’s own or other traditions may insist on breaking in upon the neatness of the previous faith. Disillusionment with one’s compromises and recognition that life is more complex than Stage 4’s logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts can comprehend, press one toward a more dialectical and multileveled approach to life truth.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (35+)
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Stage 5 requires a knower capable of dialogue and with sufficient self-certainty to grant the known the initiative. This requires trust in the trustworthiness of the known and a willingness to accommodate knowing to the structure of that which is being known. Stage 5 accepts that truth is more multidimensional than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp, and comes to terms with the fact that the conscious ego is not master in its own house.

Stage 5 involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4’s self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality. This stage develops a “second naïveté” (Ricoeur) in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings. Here there must also be a new reclaiming and reworking of one’s past. There must be an opening to the voices of one’s “deeper self.” Importantly, this involves a critical recognition of one’s social unconscious—the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one’s nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like.

Unusual before mid-life, Stage 5 knows the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts. What the previous stage struggled to clarify, in terms of the boundaries of self and outlook, this stage now makes porous and permeable. Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are “other.” Ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook (including new depths of experience in spirituality and religious revelation), this stage’s commitment to justice is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community, or nation. And with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others’ generating identity and meaning.

The new strength of this stage comes in the rise 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. Its danger lies in the direction of a paralyzing

passivity or inaction, giving rise to complacency or cynical withdrawal, due to its paradoxical understanding of truth.

Stage 5 can appreciate symbols, myths and rituals (its own and others') because it has been grasped, in some measure, by the depth of reality to which they refer. It also sees the divisions of the human family vividly because it has been apprehended by the possibility (and imperative) of an inclusive family of being. But this stage remains divided. It lives and acts between an untransformed world and a transforming vision and 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+)
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Persons best described by Stage 6 typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words and extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. In their penetration through the obsession with survival, security, and significance they threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence. Their enlarged visions of universal community disclose the partialness of our tribes and pseudo-species. And their leadership initiatives, often involving strategies of nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being, constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance. It is little wonder that persons best described by Stage 6 so frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate.

Living with felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world, Universalizers are often experienced as subversive of the structures (including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival, security and significance. Many persons in this stage die at the hands of those they hope to change. Universalizers are often more honored and revered after death than during their lives. The rare persons who may be described by this stage have a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us. Their community is universal in extent. Particularities are cherished because they are vessels of the universal, and thereby valuable apart from any utilitarian considerations. Life is both loved and held to loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition.

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Overall, there is a movement outward toward individuation, culminating in Stage 4. Then the movement doubles back, in Stages 5 and 6, toward the participation and oneness of earlier stages, though at quite different levels of complexity, differentiation, and inclusiveness. Each stage represents a widening of vision and valuing, correlated with a parallel increase in the certainty and depth of selfhood, making for qualitative increases in intimacy with self-others-world.

Transitions from one stage level to another are often protracted, painful, dislocating, and/or abortive. Arrests can and do occur at any of the stages. Each stage has its proper time for ascendancy in an individual's life. Conversion is a significant recentering

of one's previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action. Conversion, understood in this way, can occur in any of the faith stages, or in any of the transitions between them.

1. Stage change without conversional change (p. 285-286)
2. Conversional change without faith stage change
3. Conversional change that precipitates a faith stage change
4. Faith stage change that precipitates conversional change
5. Conversional change that is correlated with, and goes hand-in-hand with, a structural stage change
6. Conversional change that blocks or helps one avoid the pain of faith stage changes