

The Six Stages of Spirituality
by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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I trust that everyone has seen the insert in your order of service today, the one that delineates various faith stages and includes a short questionnaire. These come from a book called *Finding Your Religion*, written by the Reverend Scotty McClennan, who is now a UU minister. This work draws upon research by a gentleman by the name of James Fowler, a doctor of developmental psychology who also has a master degree of divinity. Fowler wrote a seminal book on the subject, *The Six Stages of Faith*, back in 1981. In the several decades since that time, that book has been used by many denominations, in pastoral counseling, and by many psychologists to begin to decipher the different patterns of a person's spiritual faith. It's considered by many to be a groundbreaking work.

Now, to return to the reading for a moment, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A person will worship something, make no mistake about it." But it's certainly just as true that different people will certainly worship different things. And surely, one individual will worship a different entity, a different understanding of the divine, as he or she matures.

What we have learned from psychology is that not only what we worship -- what we consider sacred -- will change as we mature, but also how we think. A young child will think very differently than an adult. A good case in point, if you will look at the list, you will see that the earliest stage is considered magic. That is typical of a child between the ages of two and six. Perhaps "magical" is a better way to describe their notion of reality. A child between the ages of two and six tends to fuse the world of imagination with the world of reality. The world of dreams is very much fused in with the waking moment. A good example is my own daughter Celeste. Several days ago, she came up and she kicked me. I asked her why and she said I had pushed her. I was dumbfounded. I asked, "Well, when did this happen?" She said, "Last night when I was dreaming!" (*Laughter.*)

A child between two and six typically imagines ultimate reality -- for lack of a better word, let us call it "God" -- as all-powerful. It's no coincidence that a child also considers their parent or primary caretaker as all-powerful. A certain psychological transference goes on. You depend, as a child, entirely upon the adult. Naturally, then, children at their earliest ages learn, project, and attribute, to what we will call the sacred or the holy, to something that is all-powerful. It is said sometimes that the child's mind is religiously pregnant and that all images, whether received from the media or from words spoken or stories told to a child, all fuse in that child's imagination and contribute heavily to their notion of what is sacred, i.e., what is above and beyond us. As a child grows a little older, they become a little bit more sophisticated in their thinking. Their brain chemistry actually changes. It's wired a little bit differently. We begin to see a certain progression or movement.

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The stages that are described on this sheet are not necessarily clear and distinct from one another. Sometimes they interweave, and a person straddles two different stages of faith. But if you move from that earliest stage where everything is magical, the world is like a magical garden, then you come into the world of what the one author describes as “reality”, where God is described as a cause-and-effect god, or what other authors will describe as the mythic/literal phase. In this phase, the child begins to negotiate his or her way with the world. If they have a distinct notion of a supernatural entity, this is something that they can begin to bargain with, just as earliest children learn that if they cry, it will trigger a certain response in adults, if they say “Please” or “I’m sorry”, they begin to transfer this beyond something they would consider divine. They are introduced to certain stories and symbols and they tend to take these rather literally. If they hear of heaven and hell, those are considered literal places. If they are introduced to the notion of God, odds are that they will conceive of that entity as a person, just like their parents, just like themselves, and so on and so forth. So there is this early initiation in the larger scope of meaning with these symbols, but the child’s mind is still forming and is therefore very literal.

Some of the most delightful stories I have heard come from children during this age. Annie Dillard, in her work *Pilgrim of Tinker Creek*, writes that when she was a young child, she could see the world as something very magical and that she was a participant in that. She would walk down the sidewalk, with chalk, make arrows, and occasionally make signs that said, “Surprise this way! Follow!” She would have a long elaborate trail and at the very end, she would place a penny. That would be the surprise.

In my own religious development, I recall very distinctly that when I was a young child in that particular phase of development, I often prayed. The god to which I prayed was very much a personal entity. I often found it very difficult to pray to God, per se, but I found it very easy as a child to pray to God’s mother. If there were something I needed, I would ask. Or, I might pray to Jesus, whom I understood somehow was God, but the Jesus I always prayed to was somehow always my same age. It was always easier to relate to God as someone of my own size and basically as a classmate.

The third phase, described as dependence, is more typical of a child who has now reached early adolescence. A child grows. Let’s say that he/she attends church. They begin to become indoctrinated, i.e., to receive the revealed wisdom of a particular tradition. They are schooled in specific creeds. They memorize particular interpretations. In that phase, people become dependent upon certain mentors, not necessarily their parents anymore, but the wise elders of the community. Their teachers, their ministers, or other people that they look up to. But it’s very concrete and it’s very rooted in that certain concreteness of scripture and tradition. So they begin to understand themselves as members of a particular community.

Fowler says many people that arrive at that stage find comfort therein and never leave that stage. But, of course, some people do rebel. They continue to grow and at some point find themselves no longer comfortable with the community, no

longer comfortable with all the received creeds and they wrestle with this, struggle with this. Eventually, they find themselves divorcing themselves from that particular community and at that point, they have achieved independence.

Given the fact that most of us are past early adolescence, I've skipped some of the things, which are hallmarks of those early stages. Let me read several things about the independent stage.

This is primarily a stage of angst and struggle, in which one must face difficult questions regarding identity and belief. Those who pass into this stage usually do so in their mid-thirties to early forties. At this time, the personality gradually detached from the defining group from which it drew its former identity. (That's academese for "community".) The person is aware of him or herself as an individual and must, perhaps for the first time, take personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. This is a stage of de-mythologizing, where what was once unquestioned, is now subjected to critical scrutiny. Stage four is heavily existential, where nothing is certain but one's own existence and disillusionment reigns. This stage is not a comfortable place to be, and, although it can last for a long time, those who stay in it do so at risk of the danger of becoming bitter, suspicious characters who trust nothing and no one. But most, after entry into this stage, sense that not only is the world for more complex than his or her stage three mentality would allow for, it is still more complex and numinous than the agnostic rationality that stage four allows.

In that phase, there is much angst. There is much conflict. You begin to question your mentors. You begin to question all that you were taught to hold sacred. Certainly, some institutions will rush in and try to bolster their defenses. They will remind you that, in this community, there is only one valid interpretation of scripture, or that there is one particular person who knows the truth, and you must follow. If they begin to feel that you are becoming more rebellious and that you will not trust human elders because you have learned that these people are fallible, then they will interject other devices so that you will internalize the teachings of that particular church. A classic example is the teaching or the movement, 'What would Jesus do?' Here you can no longer quarrel with a real human being but are pit against the very ideal – which, conveniently for the tradition, is also absolutely remote. You cannot argue with Jesus. This may satisfy some, but certainly not everyone. And so one still struggle and attempts to make meaning. You attempt to define your experience of being religious.

Those who achieve independence typically have wrestled with the great issues, have fought with the authority figures in their life, and have struck out on their own. I have read some scholarship that suggests millions upon millions of people in this country are in that phase. People blundering, attempting to achieve a certain level of spirituality, spiritual meaning, spiritual relevance, but don't really have a compass. They are only aware of themselves and are not aware of communities such as this to support them. It's a pity. It's an anguished time, but still they struggle.

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I remember that several years ago I was talking with one of my sisters. She made the remark that when she was a child, her perception of my dad was that he was essentially very godlike. She believed that while he did not have superhuman powers, he did have incredible connections, especially in the business world. As she grew older, she discovered that much of what she believed about my father was illusion and she was horribly disappointed. When she realized that and came to terms with it, then she achieved a certain level of independence. In my own journey, I probably also fostered similar notions about my dad. What I discovered in seminary during a class offered by Wendy Donoger, when she was discussing Jungian and Freudian psychology, is that at a certain age of adolescence, people who are wrestling with issues relating to their parents will, in effect, strike out on their own and achieve independence, often diminishing the importance of their parents. That has certain ramifications theologically. As I was listening to Wendy speak, I had an epiphany. I realized that when I was 17 or 18, while I was making a very self-conscious effort to achieve independence within my family and self-identity, that I accomplished two things with one fell swoop: in my own theology, I banished God the Father; and in my own family life, I similarly shrugged off the authority of my parents, particularly that of my dad. These two things went hand in hand. As I mentioned, this appreciation -- how those certain things came together: one's family life and one's religious development -- was an epiphany for me.

Let us return to the list of faith stages. The fifth phase is called interdependence. If you read the description, the key word is 'paradoxical god'. People who arrive at this stage of faith begin to understand that the world is very complex, is very strange and that many competing ideas coexist side-by-side. People in this next phase, interdependence, are not unduly troubled by that. They don't have to go back and fight their battles to prove that certain scriptures were wrong, that certain ministers or parents were fallible. They've achieved a certain sense of calmness. They've achieved peace within themselves and with the world at large. The paradoxes no longer trouble them. They accept it for what it is. Their questions are, "Do you find a spiritual community important to you at the same time that you maintain a distinctive faith?" Often people that I've encountered will say, "I have an eclectic faith", or "I've learned from various sources. This feeds me, but I'm also fed by the community." The next question is, "Do you experience spiritual power in religious symbols and myths that you can also analyze objectively?" Again, there is a certain paradoxical tension where you can encounter people who say that they follow a Buddhist path or perhaps an atheistic path or any other variation, and you can learn from them, understand their symbols, and allow them to inform you without being threatened by them.

It occurs to me that in our principles and purposes, we do speak about interdependence. So many people will say, "I'm probably somewhere between stage four and stage five, or firmly in stage five." That is certainly one of the messages we project repeatedly in our religious education and from this pulpit. We do believe that all life is interdependent, and therefore, most of us begin to lean in that direction, as far as the way we think.

The sixth stage, unity, is sometimes described as universalizing faith. It's said that in the previous stage, interdependence, a person begins to glimpse a unifying view of reality, but feels torn between possibility and loyalty and may even neglect to act on one's own new understanding out of regard for self-preservation. In this final stage, any such apprehensions dissolve, and one becomes an activist for the unitive vision. According to Fowler, there are very few examples of this type of person. He mentions people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Jesus, and the Buddha. People who were so absorbed in their worldview, that they, in effect, ceased being individuals, ceased feeling themselves as egocentric, but gave themselves fully to a religious view of the universe, in which they were participants, but participants in god.

It is often said that such people are mystics, people who have experiences where they feel an intense unity with all creation. Some people embrace that and seek a secluded life. Others feel that intensity but are compelled to engage in social action to bring other people closer to a better life. There is no one single true path of people in that final phase, but it is true that people do feel that all reality is interconnected, and that each individual is part of that creation and that you are called to serve in some capacity.

The interesting thing, or one of the interesting things that I found about this notion of faith stages, is that it does not make any claims whether or not there is such a thing as god. It does not say there is a god or goddess; nor does it say such does not exist. It is merely a vehicle to describe how we come to understand our relationship with other people and the universe. As such, I think that it's a very useful device, but I would also caution people, because there are some hazards when you adopt this type of scheme or any other that is similar.

The first hazard is that sometimes we forget that we have changed. As I've mentioned before, children think a certain way. They think about things differently. They are wired differently from adults. This changes. Every moment that we have lived, every dream that we have experienced, every conversation that we have had, contributes to who we are today. Nothing is ever lost to the mind.

There is also a hazard that sometimes you will look at a stage like this, you will look at questions like this, and you will identify yourself of where you. Let us say that you identify yourself as in stage four. People are competitive in very many aspects of their lives. People, when they have different stages such as these, can see that there are six levels and when they are only at stage four, will want to leap ahead, and leave behind where they are. Well, if unity is the final goal and that's the best because it's the last, then somehow I must do something to rush and embrace that last stage of faith. But, a faith journey is not a goal; it's a journey. You cannot rush. You can be aware of where you have been. You can be aware of where others say they have journeyed to, but you can't necessarily pluck yourself out of one phase and plant yourself into something better, something more gratifying, and something you can brag about to all of your friends.

It's also true that if you look at these developments, you might be tempted to associate past congregations or different denominations with different levels of faith stages. Perhaps you belong to a congregation where most people seem to belong to a very dependent phase. Perhaps they were following the lead of a particular minister, or perhaps they were even in an earlier stage where they were very literal about the creeds. You might think fundamentalist, there. So you might begin to dismiss other denominations, other churches, and other people as belonging to an inferior stage than yourself. That's not how it works. We must believe that each individual is precious and on a faith journey. Regardless of whether the majority of a particular congregation may be said to belong to one particular stage of religious development, you cannot extrapolate that one religion is necessarily better or worse, depending upon where certain individuals might be.

What to do with this information? I offer this to you as a gift. It's a gift to you to take stock of where you are, where you have come from, to remember who you were, what you have passed through in your life, how your relationships have changed, how your understanding has changed. This is a very old process. I'll remind you of what St. Paul wrote in one of his letters, "When I was a child, I thought as a child. I spoke as a child. But now I see as through a glass darkly." I think that at the end of this traveling, most of us will still see as through a glass darkly. We will have a sense that there is something significant at work in the universe, whether we assign it a name. Whether we describe it by words such as 'god' or some other word, is irrelevant.

I think that the key thing is to be aware that we are on a pilgrimage. It's an individual one, but we are not in isolation. There are others on the path beside us. Our strength, certainly in this movement, is that we are aware that we are seekers after truth, after meaning. We do not have to suffer this journey alone. We are called as a people of faith to share our journeys and in doing so, to inspire one another, to guide one another, and to listen to one another.

Where will we end up? Will we end up in the phase described as independence? Interdependence, unity? I don't know. I'm still working on my own religious journey. Most of you are likewise still working on your own religious journey. Let us honor these journeys. Let us trust one another. Let us share freely and openly, so that wherever we end up, we will always hold in our hearts a sense of sacredness for life, the Universe and ourselves. So may it be.