

FOWLER'S STAGES OF FAITH

STAGE 0: Primal Faith

The infant lives in a foundational state of either trust or mistrust, depending on the care it receives and its sense of safety in the world. From this foundation, preliminary images of "God" begin to form that will affect future religious perceptions. This echoes Freud's characterization of a personal God as an exalted father figure that has the power to either protect us or harm us. Freud proposed that a shift in the child's foundational sense of safety vs. vulnerability will inform its future religious ideas

STAGE 1: Intuitive-Reflective Faith

Fowler places this stage between the ages of two and six years, when the child is first able to use speech and symbols to organize thoughts and experiences. It is also the period in which many children begin their religious education. At this age, without the logical processes that allow for discernment or questioning, children simply assume that what they are taught is the only possible perspective. Fowler gives an example in his interview with a six year-old who described Heaven as "a place high in the sky where God lives with the three wise men, baby Jesus and some of the saints."

STAGE 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

A child begins to make meaning of what was previously fantasy. She can re-tell stories, but is not quite able to view the stories as non-literal, or to consider the figurative meanings of the stories. Although this stage is typical for elementary school age children, Fowler's research shows that adolescents and some adults have faith locked in at this stage.

STAGE 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

This begins around age 12 or 13, when children question their own thoughts as part of creating a personal identity and building relationships with the world outside the immediate family. Because these relationships are so important at this age, images of God are, in Fowler's words, "often experienced as friend, companion, and personal reality." Anthropomorphic images of God and the narratives from Stage 2 become more personal and less distant as a person enters Stage 3. God becomes a *significant other* who knows the depths and the secrets of the self, and offers companionship, guidance and support.

STAGE 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

Here, Fowler says, "The person is pushed out of, or steps out of, the circle of interpersonal relationships that have sustained his life to that point." This shift can trigger deeper awareness as the result of a life-altering loss, i.e., any experience that prompts someone to question established beliefs, behaviors and values. Instead of merely seeking comfort and protection, the goal at Stage 4 is to acquire *understanding*.

While this stage can begin as early as the late teens, it can also begin at various times during adulthood, but in adulthood many people hover indefinitely between Stages 3 and 4 because it is more difficult to make changes when relationships, habits, patterns and lifestyles have been firmly established.

STAGE 5: Conjunctive Faith

According to Fowler , people who make it through the previous stages generally arrive at Stage 5 sometime around 35 or 40 years old (midlife crisis). The spiritual crisis that began in Stage 4 has now prompted deeper questioning, which results in a growing awareness of the mystical self. Here, one looks more deeply at the traditions, social conventions and myths that were previously taken for granted.

STAGE 6: Universalizing Faith

Fowler describes Stage 6 as “one in which persons begin radically to live as though what Christians and Jews call the ‘kingdom of God’ were already a fact.” Here, one can “walk the talk” by living in such a way that ideals and actions are harmoniously aligned. It is possible to now see the self as part of a universal collective concerned with the energy of the whole rather than as an individual, autonomous island only concerned with personal, ego-centered needs.

While a hallmark of the previous stage was the recognition of paradoxes, contradictions and divisions, Stage 6 offers a view beyond separateness and dualism. It is a universalized faith rather than a personal one, functioning more in a transcendent reality than in a material reality. This is where mystics and altruistic heroes are found, and, as Fowler explains, “This is where there is access to a quality of transcendence more concerned with personal revelation than with symbols or doctrines.”

In terms of grief resilience and recovery, this stage represents an emergence from grief with a positive outcome that includes a heightened awareness and a peaceful acceptance of the natural ebb and flow of sorrow and joy.

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Loss and Trauma as a Path to Spiritual Awareness:

Applying Fowler's Stages of Faith Development to the Grief Journey

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Stages

Pre-Stage: Undifferentiated Faith

Generally children from birth through about 2 years of age.

At this stage, children experience faith as a connection between themselves and their caregiver. They have the potential for faith but lack the ability to act on that potential. But in this stage, reality is not well-differentiated from fantasy. During this stage, children have rich imaginations and it is important for adults share positive, uplifting ideas of faith.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

Generally ages 3 to 5.

This is the stage of preschool children in which fantasy and reality often get mixed together. However, during this stage, our most basic ideas about God are usually picked up from our parents and/or society.

The cognitive development of children of this age is such that they are unable to think abstractly and are generally unable to see the world from anyone else's perspective. Faith is not a thought-out set of ideas, but ***instead a set of impressions that are largely gained from their parents or other significant adults in their lives.*** In this way children become involved with the rituals of their religious community by experiencing them and learning from those around them.

Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience, but the symbols in those stories are seen as one-dimensional and literal. Moreover, beliefs, moral rules and attitudes are also held literally. Thus, God is an anthropomorphic being in the sky; heaven and hell are viewed as actual places.

The person in the second of James Fowler's Stages is also more able to take the perspective of another person but his view of reciprocity is also rather literal. "If I follow the rules, God will give me a good life." "If I pray, God will grant my wish."

A person may begin to grow out of this phase when he encounters conflicts and contradictions in the stories he is interpreting literally and begins to reflect on the real meanings.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

Generally ages 6 to 12.

Children at this age are able to start to work out the difference between verified facts and things that might be more fantasy or speculation.

Their source of religious authority starts to expand past parents and trusted adults to others in their community like teachers and friends. They generally accept the stories told to them by their faith community but tend to understand them in very literal, concrete ways.

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Faith becomes the stories told and the rituals practiced. Later in this stage children begin to have the capacity to understand that others might have different beliefs than them.

A person will normally move into the third of James Fowler's Stages around puberty but many adults never move beyond this second stage. People stuck here are usually self-centered and often find themselves in trouble due to their unprincipled living. If they do end up converting to the next stage, it often occurs in a very dramatic way. *[This is the stage in which many people remain.]*

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

Generally starts about the age of 13 and goes until around 18.

Most people move on to this stage as teenagers. At this point, their life has grown to include several different social circles and there is a need to pull it all together. When this happens, a person usually adopts some sort of all-encompassing belief system. However, at this stage, people tend to have a hard time seeing outside their box and don't recognize that they are "inside" a belief system. Authority is usually placed in individuals or groups that represent one's beliefs, such in the church leaders, in the government, in the social group.

Religious concepts are what Fowler calls "tacitly" held - the person is not fully conscious of having chosen to believe something. Thus the name "Synthetic" - beliefs are not the result of any type of analytical thought. Any attempts to reason with a person in this stage about his beliefs, any suggestion of demythologizing his beliefs is seen as a threat.

The name "Conventional" means that most people in this stage see themselves as believing what "everybody else" believes and would be reluctant to stop believing it because of the need they feel to stay connected with their group. It turns out that most of the people in traditional churches are at this stage. And in fact, Fowler comes right out and states that religious institutions "work best" if the majority of their congregation is in Stage 3.

Unlike previous stages, people at this stage are able to think abstractly. What were once simple unrelated stories and rituals can now be seen as a more cohesive narrative about values and morals. With abstract thinking comes the ability to see layers of meaning in the stories, rituals and symbols of their faith.

At this stage people start to have the ability to see things from someone else's perspective. This means that they can also imagine what others think about them and their faith. People at this stage claim their faith as their own instead of just being what their family does. However, the faith that is claimed is usually still the faith of their family. *[This is the stage in which many people remain.]*

When a person cognitively realizes that there are contradictions between some of his authority sources and is ready to actually reflect realistically on them, he begins to be ready to move to the fourth of James Fowler's Stages.

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Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

This stage usually starts in late adolescence (18 to 22 years old).

In Individuative-Reflective faith, what once was tacitly held becomes explicit. This is the tough stage, often begun in young adulthood, when people start seeing outside the box and realizing that there are other “boxes”. They begin to critically examine their beliefs on their own and often become disillusioned with their former faith. They start to question their own assumptions around their faith and faith tradition and along with questioning the authority structures of their faith.

The person must be willing to interrupt their reliance on external authority and relocate the source of authority within himself. Fowler calls this the formation of an “executive ego,” which is not a bad thing, like the other kind of ego. It just means the person is more able to govern himself without the need for rules from the outside.

This is often the time that someone will leave their religious community if the answers to the questions they are asking are not to their liking. Greater maturity is gained by rejecting some parts of their faith while affirming other parts. In the end, the person starts to take greater ownership of their own faith journey.

In this stage meanings in stories are separate from the symbols themselves, so the stories are demythologized. Loss or demythologization of the symbols can result in grief and guilt in some cases, and the process can take up to seven years to complete. But in the place of the literal symbol, the person gains the ability to make comparisons and whatever meanings they retain are explicitly held (and thus more authentic in that they are personal.)

The strengths of this stage lie in the capacity for critical reflection (and the willingness to face truths that may cause distancing from comfortable thought patterns and thus pain.) But a weakness of this stage is that the person may put excess confidence in the rational, conscious mind, thus ignoring unconscious forces that become more prominent in the next stage.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

People do not usually get to this stage until their early thirties.

This is the point when people begin to realize the limits of logic and start to accept the paradoxes in life. They begin to see life as a mystery and often return to sacred stories and symbols but this time without being stuck in a theological box. There is a more comprehensive interpretation of symbols. (I.e. God is not a literal being, heaven and hell are not literal places).

This stage is when the struggles and questioning of stage four give way to a more comfortable place. Some answers have been found and the person at this stage is comfortable knowing that all the answers might not be easily found. The strong need for individual self-reflection gives way to a sense of the importance of community in faith development.

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People at this stage are also much more open to other people's faith perspectives. This is not because they are moving away from their faith but because they have a realization that other people's faiths might inform and deepen their own. They can recognize the partial truths that any given religious tradition might offer.

According to Fowler, when the person in Stage 4 becomes ready to attend to the "anarchic and disturbing inner voices" of the unconscious mind he becomes ready to move on to Stage 5. Such a move is unusual before mid-life. Here the person begins to expand their world beyond the "either/or" stance of the prior stage toward a "both/and" orientation where the answers (and the power of the rational mind to figure them out) are not so clear.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

It is a rare person who reaches this stage of faith.

Few people reach this stage. Those who do live their lives to the full in service of others without any real worries or doubts.

James Fowler describes people at this stage as having "a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us." People at this stage can become important religious teachers because they have the ability to relate to anyone at any stage and from any faith. They are able to relate without condescension but at the same time are able to challenge the assumptions that those of other stages might have.

People at this stage cherish life but also do not hold on to life too tightly. They put their faith in action, challenging the status quo and working to create justice in the world. People like Gandhi and Mother Teresa as examples of people who have reached this stage.

Resources

- <http://www.exploring-spiritual-development.com/JamesFowlersStages.html>
- <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html>
- <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/167602.shtml>

3. Stages of Faith Development

CHART

Summary by Tracey E. Herzer © 2009 traceyherzer@gmail.com

James Fowler – Stages of Faith Development

Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development

Level	Approx. Ages	Name	Characteristics
Stage 1	3-7	Intuitive-predictive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First awareness of self – egocentric; hard to see other perspectives • Birth of Imagination, unrestrained by logical thought • Highly imitative stage where children can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primarily related adults (parents, etc.) • Programs that use wonder & imagination (like Godly Play or Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) are very successful with this age
Stage 2	6-12	Mythical-literal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to this stage happens as the child becomes more capable of concrete operational thinking • Can use logic to justify thoughts, but not yet able to think abstractly • Fascination with private worlds of fantasy and wonder (ie – Narnia, Harry Potter, etc.) although in the perception of this stage, symbols are one-dimensional and must refer to something specific • Story, drama & myth help give coherence to experience – telling their “story” helps discover sense of self and place in the community • World based on reciprocal fairness and immanent justice
Stage 3	12+	Synthetic-conventional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition often comes when children notice contradictions in stories (ie – Genesis creation vs. evolution) leading to questions/reflection • Experience of the world extends beyond family • Many things compete for attention: family, peers, school, media, etc. • Faith must help them synthesize values and conventions – to provide a coherent orientation in the midst of competing ideals • Faith as a vehicle for creating a sense of identity and values • Many adults get stuck here
Stage 4	Late Teen- Early Adult	Individual-reflective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition often comes with “leaving home” – emotionally, physically or both – causing us to examine self, background & values • Understand and accept a higher level of commitment to ideals and responsibilities – Intrinsic responsibility (not enforced by others) • High degree of self consciousness • Sense of self develops outside of specific roles • Conceptual meanings transcend Symbols – “demythologizing stage” • Capacity for critical reflection on identity
Stage 5	Adult 30+	Conjunctive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Truth is discovered from a variety of viewpoints • Second naiveté – symbols regain their power; can appreciate myth, story, ritual (own and others) because they have grasped, in some measure, the depth of reality to which they refer • Reclaiming & Reworking one’s past • Commitment to justice; oriented towards others
Stage 6	Adult	Universalizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This stage is rarely achieved • Person becomes totally altruistic – incarnation of the principles of love and justice (like Ghandi, Jesus, Mother Teresa, etc.) • Feel an integral part of an all-inclusive sense of being. • Often more honored or revered after their death

3. Stages of Development

Look What I Can Do

Kindergarten (2 to 6 Years)

Children these ages are beginning to notice more about the world around them and they are full of curiosity and questions. They are beginning to be aware of their place in their family and of how they fit into the larger world around them. They are learning to take responsibility for their actions and have the capacity to respond in a loving way to others. Helping children of this age know that they are loved just as they are helps to inspire confidence in their own abilities.

1st, 2nd, 3rd Graders (6 to 9 Years)

Children these ages are changing dramatically. They are energetic, curious, imaginative, open and enthusiastic. They are developing friendships and what it means to be in relationship with one another. They still need adult help and reassurance but also need time on their own to explore new ideas and concepts. They are developing the ability to talk about and explain their ideas. Children of these ages need a lot of physical movement and activities that are broken into short segments. They are beginning to understand how and why things happen and to see other viewpoints. Help them become masters of their own lives by giving them multiple ways to explore the same idea or concept.

4th & 5th Graders (9 to 11 Years)

This is a time of budding intellectual curiosity. Children of these ages move from being brooding and worried to happy and relaxed. They are looking for the “why” of things and are beginning to enjoy research and deeper exploration. They still enjoy adult encouragement and recognition and need adults to be lighthearted and empathetic. Their coordination is improving and still need lots of movement and activity. They can concentrate for longer periods of time but still need a variety of activities. Help them to develop stronger relationships with others by encouraging them to look past their own personal world and out into the bigger world around them. Also give them opportunities to challenge your explanations so that they develop the capacity to think for themselves.

Uniteens (11 to 14 Years)

Preteens are going through huge physical and emotional changes. They can be unpredictable and hard to read as they swing between childhood and adulthood. They are making an attempt to move into adulthood but can still be drawn to things in their childhood. Preteens are excited to be moving into the teen years but also scared of the unknown. They are exploring who they are and their peers are very important to them. We can help them by providing lots of opportunities for them to interact with their peers because their peer opinions are beginning to be of more importance than those of their teachers or parents. They are becoming more concerned with their personal appearance and need time and space to discover who they are and what is important to them. While they challenge authority they can also be open to guidance from adults who are not their parents or teachers.

Y.O.U. (14 to 18 Years)

Teens are going through rapid changes and continued growth spurts. They face a lot of temptations and constant peer pressure. They spend a great deal of time worrying about how others view them. They are beginning to want to be treated as adults. They have the ability to think through problems on their own and want to be respected for who they are. Their emotions are often mixed, sometimes feeling like an adult and ready to assume more responsibility and sometimes feeling like they can't handle anything. They need healthy outlets for all of the emotions they are experiencing and to be around adults to offer guidance, support and love.