

GROWING NICE vs GROWING UP

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Read by Ann Kelsey

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I told one of my high school buddies this week that I was giving a sermon. After he finished laughing...he said, Bense, really, what could you give a sermon on? Oh, I know, sins...of the flesh, and the bottle, and sloth, and every other vice.

He's right. I know something of sin, especially after twelve years of Catholic schools—mortal sins, venial sins, confession, purgatory—sin and me—we've been there. I'm imagining Sister Mary Ignatious shaking her head in disbelief and bemoaning the state of religion to see the hellion Benson daring to go in front of a congregation. The fact that it was Unitarian—not a real religion—might give her some consolation, but the Catholic boy in me still feels a little blasphemous standing here.

When Mort asked me to do a sermon, I learned how very persuasive he is. After my hemming and hawing for a bit, Mort said, "Surely you have something you can talk about for 15-20 minutes." Oh, yeah, okay. But after the phone call, I went "gulp".

So as not to totally embarrass myself, I figured I should talk about something I might know through work. I've been in the field of educational psychology and Human Development for most adult work life, but I hadn't ever done anything religious. The closest I'd come was a finding in one study showing some modest positive associations between family religious participation and positive family processes. But even an academic can't talk for twenty minutes on one correlation—and have people listen—not that it always matters.

I was aware though of a typology on stages of faith by an author, James Fowler, who bridged theology and human development. Before talking about his stages of faith, I thought I might give a little bio on him. He got a PhD at Harvard in 1971 and taught at Harvard Divinity School between '69 and '75. In 1977, he went to Emory University in the School of Theology and has been there ever since. His best known work was his book, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Development and the Quest for Meaning, published first in 1980. It is in its 35th printing, and has been translated into nine different languages. In 1994, he won prestigious award with the American Psychological Association. He's currently the director of the Center for Ethics at Emory and is a Methodist minister.

His stages of faith grew out of hearing stories that people told in some workshops he held for clergy and laypersons in the late '60's and early 70's. Some of the popularity of his book may be in the title itself. The stages of faith. It appeals to the journey that many feel and the idea of signposts along seems compelling.

Before talking about stages, I should mention one problem with them—they are categories. Categories can be advantageous if they lead to other ideas and other

understandings. Categories can also be used to pigeonhole, to label, and to cut off thinking. One time when I was working as a school psychologist, I went into a classroom for an observation of a particular student that was referred for special services. It had been raining earlier in the day, so I was wearing a long, beige trench coat. The sun had come out, so I had on a pair of sunglasses. I slipped quietly into back of the room so as not to disturb the teacher and class, and sat in the back, taking notes. The boy next to me looked like he wanted to say something, but I tried not to make eye contact. Finally, with wide eyes, he leaned over and said, “Are you a spy?”

Although I said no, I later realized that I did fit the spy category. I was dressed like a spy, I sneaked around like a spy, and yes, I was even collecting information like a spy. It was a category that fit in some way—but not in others. As we talk about these categories, I am aware of the limitations, but hope, too, that discussing these stage categories might lead to new connections, new understandings.

Fowler identifies six stages, but the first two are primarily child stages. The most fun part of a faith stage typology is finding where we fit in, so I figured I would talk about at the start the adult stages and then talk about how to promote faith development in the child stages.

The first common adult stage is stage 3, that Fowler calls conventional faith stage. The image of faith in this stage is an emphasis on rules and conforming to the expectations of significant others. Approval of others is important and acceptance is a desperate need. To illustrate this, I’m going to use myself as a case study, mostly because I’ve lived with myself for 46 years. I have a little trepidation in using my own case because of the disclosure itself and sense the vulnerability. But the faith stage is really about one’s faith story, so it’s probably the most vivid and authentic way for me to illustrate.

When I was 13, I was pretty much a conventional kid. I was into sports and friends and more sports. My family was different from my peers’. My father had died when I was 5, so my mother was raising me and my younger brother Chris. My older brothers, John and Rich, had been gone from home for five years or so, married and had children. I was very interested in conformity, and losing a father made me different, so I never talked about it.

I had to laugh when I was reminded of Chris’ talk last week about “god” as a personal expression of the mystery. At age 13, my personal expression was about three things—school, sports, and friends. I was about to change schools going into the 9th grade at a new school. I recall praying to God often in that year before starting at the new school. Thirty years later I still remember that prayer, that went, “God, please help me do well academically, athletically, and socially.” Those were my three faces of God, which brings new meaning to the term Trinitarian.

Stage 3 is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of important others, and my focus at age 13 on academics, athletics, and social acceptance was all about approval.

Consistent with stage 3, these values and other values and beliefs were tacitly held, not really examined. I was unquestioning about these.

I probably would have stayed in that phase longer, except for one remarkable thing about this Catholic school I went to. Ideas were actually encouraged! There were a few liberal, Jesuit types, some reactionary John Birch Society members, a bunch of young, mostly liberal guys from Scranton University trying to avoid the Vietnam draft through a teacher deferment.

It was actually a religion class that I had my first “ah ha” experiences that “people had different ideas about things, and that it wasn’t right or wrong.” One classmate, Paul Cyr, took different perspectives than ones that were conventional in my grade school—pro-abortion rights, anti-death penalty. I got this idea that his ideas made sense for him, from his perspective, kind of like it was consistent. While there was a certain excitement in this newfound idea, it also made me feel in a confused state. My friends tell me that is a state in which I’ve taken up permanent residence.

And it’s true, the easy clarity began to unravel at age 13. Academically, I realized I was not the best. Socially I was accepted, but often felt awkward and uncomfortable. When I was 15, I developed some back trouble and had to quit track. I immediately joined the swim team—sort of like keeping the same faith, just changing the congregation I belong to. The only problem was the ritual of brutal swim practice at 7 am made me nauseous. I tried to substitute some other school activities for sports, but the central values were shifting. I started to wonder the classic question, “Who am I?” Though we ask that all like long, it may be a particularly salient question in the transition from stage 3 to 4. There is a choice, of course, to retreat back to stage 3 and attach onto some convention, or a different reference group. And I tried, but ultimately couldn’t.

Fowler notes that faith stage transitions can be painful. About a year later, I experienced that. I went to an encounter self-discovery workshop, and one of the adult leaders, Tom, called me down as a sugar coating, distant, superior-acting phony. For a year afterwards, I was in turmoil wondering, Who am I? Who do I want to be? These are essential faith questions in Fowler’s view. During that time, my stage 3 belief system about myself in the world was so shaken that I actually wondered whether life was worth living or not. The personality critique that served as the trigger event seemed overwhelming, in hindsight it was probably rather mild. I’ve been called plenty worse since then. In fact, just last week, Kathryn, our four-year-old daughter, walked up to me and said, “Dad, you’re kind of a loser and kind of not.”

I think she’s on to something.

Stage 4 is characterized by its capacity for critical reflection on the self and ideology. Whereas stage 3 relies on tacit and unexamined belief, the stage 4 is more explicit and reflective. Identity and critical reflection are the hallmarks of stage 4. Fowler sees this stage as less responsive to emotional concerns and more focussed on comparing or justifying world views. The sense of I emerges separate from relationships. People can

gain some critical distance on emotional and faith commitments. One weakness of this stage that Fowler identifies is the tendency to over objectify, and to see thinking only in terms of the system of ideas.

I think I've basically been in stage 4 for my entire adulthood. There was the career indecision dilemma at 25 and some questioning of my assumptions about marriage with marriage and divorce in my early 30's. And my brother Rich's death and the grief and loss that followed raised questions about the meaning and purpose of life. And there are ongoing questions about balancing work, family, friendship, fun, and health. But my system or worldview hasn't changed. It's just refined, crystallized gradually over time.

One of the features of stage 4 is the tendency to try to reduce or collapse polarities. In my professional work, I have a few examples when I've intentionally set out to "integrate" two different positions in the field or have a framework for understanding or interpretation. With the hindsight of Fowler, I realize that these integrations were primarily reducing the tension and developing a combined conceptual system.

There are pulls for me to go further. We visited Jamaica two years ago, and the contrast of the opulence where we were staying, and the poverty all around made me wonder about my "system". More recently, Jane and I saw a play, "Tesler's letters" about the Bosnia/Serbia conflict that made me wonder if what I am doing is what is most important. Then nearly every Sunday there is something in the sermon, or a hymn, or even the doxology that captures and challenges my system. There are moments of recognizing moral beauty, through a reading, a movie or story told that gives me a glimpse of another step. Usually they are brief. And my lack of discipline spiritually and many other ways is a definite impediment.

I can't say that I really understand the next stage, though there are glimpses of it. Fowler describes it as a dialogue characterized by openness and mutuality. Stage 4 questions focus on the definitions of conceptual systems and identifying one's own system of meaning. Stage 5 reflects the pluralism of meaning systems. Not just awareness of multiple views, but appreciation of the pluralism and embracing it. In contrast to the interest of stage 4 on "explanation", stage 5 seeks understanding. A person at stage 5 is less interested in defending a world view or interpreting differing views into a compatible framework. They have a sense that reality is complex and ambiguous.

My mother, who goes by Edie, just recently turned 82. She is Catholic to the core, she attends mass daily. I always assumed she was anti-abortion, but recently she said something like, you "can't always know the circumstances that people are under". Fowler would probably say you could find stage 5 with varying political views. The crucial thing here is that her presumptive system of values and ideas were secondary to recognizing individuals.

Fowler Mentions the mystery of being, and awareness of the limitation of human understanding as characteristics of stage 5. Edit has opinions, she's a dyed in the wool liberal, but they seem at a second layer for her, not really part of her identity. It's as

though the system of beliefs is subordinated to something more paradoxical. She does not seem too concerned with achieving closure on concepts or ideas. Instead there is this paradoxical emphasis on both person by person by person and our common humanity.

There is emotionality in Stage 5, too. After some prompting from me, Edie described the moment of the Eucharist. Her description was filled with a wonder and emotion that I could only relate to by analogy. It is as though the Eucharist represents for this culmination of humanity, mystery, the divine. Stage 5 can appreciate and cherish symbols, myths, and rituals in new depth because it has been apprehended in some measure by the depth of reality to which they refer.

Stage 5 also has a very person-to-person orientation. Edie has this uncanny ability to make others feel comfortable. I can't tell you the number of people who meet her who say how special she is and feel a special connection to her. We might both clean up the dishes after a meal, but I have the sense that there is a different purpose and different meaning as she goes about such routines.

I was surprised to hear Edie volunteer that she is still learning. That is a laudable value that most people would check "yes" if asked. But there was a humility in her statement, as if to say, by 82 I should have figured this stuff out, but I'm still learning and wondering, and I guess that goes on forever. When Jane called her saint Edie recently, she said, "Oh, no, not me, no, I'm so flawed." Stage 4 has the answers, Stage 5 is a second naivete, with fewer answers and more questions.

One paradox that I think of as Stage 5ish is the symbol of the kingdom or queendom of God. It is the paradox of the dream of what can be and yet the living of that dream in its potential right now. The kingdom that is already here and yet not-yet fulfilled. Our doxology says it so beautifully, the good that yet shall be. There is moral beauty to that.

There is a stage 6 in Fowler's typology, but I don't understand it, and really don't know of case examples. Fowler mentions Ghandi, King, Mother Theresa, and other famous examples. They take a universal perspective, equal regard accorded to each human being. Loving ones enemies, and awareness of the limits of language in pointing the way. There is a tendency to express concerns in story, parable, metaphor, poetry. There is a felt sense of coherence. Unlike Stage 5, there is a heedlessness to self-preservation in stage 6. They may have an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality, offending our parochial perceptions of justice.

Besides adult faith, many of us here are also concerned about faith development of children either as a parent, a grandparent, or a member of the community that involves children. The two child stages that Fowler elaborates are Stage 1 mostly children under seven and Stage 2, children older than seven. These early stages are strongly influenced by cognitive developmental process, so they tend to be age related.

Stage 1, which is under seven years old is characterized by imaginative or intuitive thinking. This is the age that children "believe in" Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter

bunny. This is a stage characterized by role play, make-believe, exploration, learning through play. So, parental encouragement or curricula that provide children with opportunities to invent, explore, make up are faithful activities. If children are encouraged to combine stories, images, to use their imagination, art, those are ways to help them explore faith. I love the encouragement children get in the RE program here. Our three children, aged 4, 6, and 8, show the increasing sophistication of symbolism. One time we told Anna, when she was five that the “go now in peace” was for children and we were saying they should live in peace. The next time that we sang that, she leaned her head back and beamed as if soaking in the warmth and love of the fellowship. Just last week, too, her younger sister Kathryn, who is now four, was singing to herself after the services. “Go now in peace, fa la la la.” There is something that they “get” at a symbolic level that encourages.

At age six, Anna is a late stage 1 and she has this beautifully developed, imaginative theology. (She didn’t get it from Jane and me, because we are kind of mute on the subject—mostly because we don’t know what to say.) One day I jotted down her responses as I asked her about God. Anna said, “After the cloud, after every cloud, he lives. He’s where people go when they die in heaven and they see God and they get born again, but they don’t have to die to come back, you could be in a different body. And you can get born again, and again and keep on going, on and on. I think that one side he’s a boy and the other side he, she’s a girl. He’s like a boy like you and a girl like me. Jesus is just a regular person and he’s the son. He’s trying to make peace on earth and he had to go up to heaven to make peace there. He’s a boy, but he could be a girl. He just turned himself into a boy when he came down. God is a spirit or something like that. I could be God. Anna and Kathryn could be God. You can be a spirit if you die, you’re a spirit on earth, and it’s just inside you on earth and everybody is a spirit. Yeah, a napkin is a spirit that can’t smell or taste, but it can see and hear and feel. And it can see it’s spirit when you open it up and you can feel it, I can.”

Anna’s theology is developed like a banquet and a fine dining experience. By comparison my theology is like a side order of beef jerky.

In my view, Stage 1 faith is fostered by nurturing and encouraging representations and imaginations about faith.

Stage 2 faith development occurs at an age when children are ripe for learning, the elementary school years. There is an amazing growth of skills, reading, games, physical activity, playing music, learning rules. Children are very productive and a sense of competency is important. They love to achieve things, to invent, and to construct. There is a reverence for spiritual issues that begins. Our daughter Grace, who is age eight, says, “I don’t think we should say God when we are just talking, maybe we should say the great one except when we pray, we could say God. That would be okay.” It is a time of learning and rituals that mark those achievements, the first communion, the bar mitzvah, confirmation, all typically occur in this phase. They love to hear and tell stories that are literal and concrete.

There is a linear, narrative emphasis that makes stories very powerful at this age. Stories provide a unity and coherence and reading and hearing stories are wonderful learning tools at this age. Issues of fairness, justice, reciprocity are important.

So, there you have it. Those are Fowler's stages. Before closing, I should mention a couple of issues.

What is faith in Fowler's view? Fowler defines it as what is important to you, what do you fear/trust, what are you committed to, what are your hopes self/future/others? It is the centering values, a verb. It's not your beliefs but what you believe in, what you hold dear, what you are loyal to. It is the orientation of the total person, the hopes, strivings.

Can evil exist at any stage? Do high level spiritual individual do bad things? Fowler explicitly makes the point that individuals at stage 6 are not perfect and have blind spots. And really evil is possible at any stage. The metaphor of Lucifer as an angel who went bad is a metaphor of a highly developed spiritual being that made an evil choice. Some notorious cult leaders whose heinous acts I won't dignify by saying their name, might be stage 4 in faith development, and playing on the need for approval and acceptance of stage 3 members. Conversely, good acts exist at every level. A little child can at times be more compassionate and giving than an adult. Even so, there is probably some greater ratio of good/bad acts at a later stage. As one modern philosopher said, growing we do it every day...each day we grow, we grow a little nicer and a little friendlier, too. Some of our more erudite members may recognize that the philosopher, who happens to be purple is a dinosaur named Barney.

Can one function at various faith levels? Most of us operate at various stages throughout a day, not just at the highest stage. I, for one, am usually functioning at Piaget's lowest cognitive stage, sensory-motor. I look at food, grasp it, put in mouth, and chew—not too high level. In spiritual development in some ways, I'm still at stage 3 concerned about approval, most often in work, in ways too closely aligned with my identity.

Are there blocks to spiritual development? I think most of these for me have to do with personal blocks. Children provide a great excuse. I need a house, a minivan, a remote control, an income. Usually, I'm focused on the means, teaching a class, cleaning up after dinner, driving the kids to schools, writing a research report. So, often I'm not focused on the end, the why. I might do the very same things, but with more sensitivity, more compassion. I might focus on the joy of learning rather than the assignments to students, the appreciation for the cleaning up process as part of the web of life that makes me notice when Jane comes in the room. I might sing with the kids on the way to school if I weren't preoccupied with my tasks ahead.

Are the stages necessarily hierarchical, necessarily sequential? I don't think Fowler intended for the stages to be interpreted this way. He says, "try to imagine the whole process as dynamically interconnected...the spiral movements in part overlap with each other, though each stage addresses it at a new level of complexity."

May it be so, that in our journey through faith and life, be part of the good, that yet shall be.