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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