

# The Christian Story & The Stages of Faith Development: Varied Perspectives both Glorious & Troubling on the Faith Journey

**Reflections by Toni Cook ~ Sunday, December 16, 2007**  
**Based on the Stages of Faith proposed by James W. Fowler**

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



ADVENT means “coming into being.” This is a time of year when Christians reflect on our spiritual journeys, the process of be-coming more one with BEINGNESS itself.

So let us talk –with certain trepidation—about the process of becoming or the process of spiritual growth and faith development.

James W. Fowler—a noted theologian, university professor, human development theorist, and United Methodist Minister—suggests that faith is perhaps very different from what we usually assume it to be. Today we shall reflect on his book, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning. He writes that *Faith is our relationship with life itself*. And he talks about faith as something not be grasped but rather as a dynamic process of growth in our relationship with life. So, in this context, faith is a verb; it is the perpetual motion of opening one’s heart and mind and soul to life.

Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg expands on this understanding of faith in her book: “Faith, Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience.” She writes:

One day a friend called to ask if we could meet for tea. Knowing that I was writing a book on faith from the Buddhist perspective, she was confused and wanted to talk. “How can you possibly be writing a book on faith without focusing on God?” she demanded. “Isn’t that the whole point [of faith]?” Her concern spoke to the common understanding we have of faith—that it is synonymous with religious adherence. But the tendency to equate faith with doctrine, and then argue about terminology and concepts, distracts us from what faith is actually about. In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely. This faith is not a commodity we either have or don’t have—it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.

This journey of faith, this learning how to unfold into our own experience of life, this slow melting into the fierce heat of living, is inherent in every spiritual path and thus in the Christian spiritual path.

No matter where we are in our developmental processes – no matter what our education or cognitive or psychological or social or spiritual development – we can all experience a profound depth at the heart of reality. Christians call this the Presence of God.

As we mature--and this often happens not because of our good intentions but in spite of them--as we mature and experience the continual cycles and growth that open us out and in, some scholars

believe we can map these dynamic processes. James Fowler, M. Scott Peck, Carol Gilligan, Evelyn Underhill, and Ken Wilber have all proposed theories of spiritual development. No theory can ever define human becoming. But theories can be tools for self-reflection and maybe even tools encourage us when we feel that we are the only ones in the world who experience these life transitions. And on level, each life is unique. Yet we share so many commonalities on this human journey.

So, let us take a look at James Fowler's Stages of Faith Development as specifically applied to the Christian faith. However, Fowler believes that faith development is not confined to one religious tradition or any religious tradition rather it represents a trajectory of human maturation. And even though there is a temptation to consider this maturation as a totally linear and upward projection, which is the more masculine way to view the world, we can integrate this approach into a more wholistic worldview. We can embrace both Beingness itself (our inherent Divine Perfection that just 'is') and the call to Becoming (Divine Perfection as a dynamic process that manifests in and through our humanity as an 'infinite evolving'). Thus we can consider Fowler's Stages as perspectives on this dynamic process that hurls us in many directions and infinite ways as we develop: "deep and wide" as the old song goes. So let us buckle our seats and relax our hold on our egos as we reflect on these stages. For it is the natural tendency, at least for me, to want to identify myself with the stages that seem most evolved. So maybe we could allow a little honesty to infuse our listening as we realize that every stage of development still includes all previous stages (and that imbues us with depth and richness); and, that as we grow, one aspect of our psyche may develop beautifully while another just refuses to develop. We are complex beings. And at any point in life, no matter where we are in our various developmental processes, we can experience the fullness of spiritual reality. It is not so much that the Divine unfolds or develops in us, but rather that we unfold in God; the whole span of our lives is lived in God. Anyone who has ever looked into the eyes of a newborn child, knows they are looking into the eyes of infinite spirit as we bow before the sacred that is tangible. The poet Wordsworth wrote about this in "Ode: *Intimations of Immortality.*"

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises with us,  
Our life's Star...cometh from afar.  
Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home.*

So, with humility, I present these reflections that certainly may not do justice to Fowler's work, but nonetheless, may become part of our own spiritual work in this Season of Advent, this holy season of becoming.

[Note: As each stage of faith is described, a short narrative will be presented to represent one possible perspective of that stage of maturation. All six stages will tell the story of a person who remains a Christian throughout their many developmental processes. However, the Christian perspectives presented do not represent the many possible Christian perspectives that could be expressed at any stage. Also, many Christians, as they mature, find that another spiritual path better meets their needs. Thus, this presentation does not advocate that the only way to develop is to remain within one's tradition. This presentation of stages of faith development is just one possible scenario of spiritual development.]

### **Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Faith**

This is a pre-stage of faith development, a time before language and conceptual thought are possible. The infant is forming a basic sense of trust, of being at home in the world. The infant is

also forming pre-images of God or the Holy, and of the kind of world we live in. On this foundation of basic trust or mistrust is built all that comes later in terms of faith.

## **1. Stage One: Intuitive/Projective Faith or the Self-Absorbing Mirror**

The first stage usually occurs between the ages of two to seven. Trust is placed in what a child sees and hears from parents or guardians. A child in this stage is absorbing all the taboos and beliefs from the family around them. A child mirrors back the beliefs they see or hear, all the while assuming that everyone understands things exactly as they do. Imagination runs wild in this stage, often uninhibited by logic. Experiences and images that occur and take form before the child is six have powerful and long-lasting effects on the life of faith both positive and negative. The advantages of this stage are the birth of imagination and the growing ability to grasp and unify one's perception of reality. However, Stage one is also dangerous, in that the child's imagination can be filled with unrestrained images of terror and destruction from the unconscious, and the fertile minds of young children can be exploited by enforced taboos and indoctrination. The transition from this stage begins as cognitive thinking develops, and the world expands beyond parents and family.

### **1<sup>st</sup> READER**

***My parents say I came to them straight from God. I sometimes hear a heavenly voice and have a spirit playmate. But stories of God sometimes scare me. God is big and knows everything. Then my parents hold me close, and that's all that matters. They tell me stories of the baby Jesus and I feel safe. I would like to see the manger and give the baby Jesus a present. It would be fun to hear the animals talk on Christmas day and hear the angels sing. I love Christmas.***

**SONG** –“Away in a Manger” – verse 1

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.  
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay, the little lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.*

## **2. Stage Two: Mythic/Literal Faith or the Literalist**

This stage is found mostly in children age 8 - adolescence, although one can maintain this state for a lifetime. The gift of this stage is narrative. The child learns powerful stories that grasp his or her experiences of meaning. However, only literal interpretations are possible. What is written is what is true. For example: Adam and Eve were the first humans, they actually did live in a historical garden called Eden, and they actually ate a forbidden apple. These stories and explanations offer a sense of comfort, for they tell us who we are in the world, and why things happen. The deeper symbolism of the stories is not understood, although the stories may touch the child at a deep level. The wild imagination of stage one is now harnessed, and linear thinking becomes normative. Stage two persons have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe, and their images of God are almost always anthropomorphic. A person in this stage is being both carried and trapped “in” their own religious narrative. Stage two can be dangerous because the relentless belief in reciprocity forces the individual into a strict, over-controlling perfectionism; and their religious system will without doubt be legalistic (but even more so if that is what they are taught). The transition from this stage begins as contradictions in stories leads to reflection.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> READER**

***I love the Christmas tree and the presents. But I know Christmas is really about Christ. He came to tell us about the love of God. If I am bad, I pray to Jesus, and he forgives me. But I have been wondering something: if Santa Claus is not real, is Jesus real? If there are no flying reindeer, are there angels? It's not good to think about these things. Jesus loves me,***

***this I know, for the Bible and my church and my parents tell me so. He was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Day and his father was God and everyone who believes in Jesus will go to heaven. I like that and I like the church, especially at Christmas.***

**SONG** –“Jesus Loves Me” – verse 1

*Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so  
Little ones to him belong, we are weak but he is strong*

### **3. Stage Three: Synthetic/Conventional Faith- The Loyalist**

The third stage usually arises in adolescence. However, Fowler feels that most people stop their faith development here, and never move beyond it. Stage three is when trust is shifted from stories and explanations and is now placed in the need to belong to a group, and the need for approval. Contradictions in stories and beliefs might be seen, but the need for approval and belonging deadens that insight. The need for safety, security, and answers is what can be trusted, and so questions are silenced and conformity wins. Faith is an inseparable factor in the ordering of one's world. One finds one's identity by aligning oneself with a certain perspective. Those who differ in opinion are seen as "the Other," as different "kinds" of people. Religious authority figures are seen as bearers of truth. Rules abound and are followed. The transition from this way of thinking usually begins, if ever, with some experience that shatters the individual's trust in an authority figure, group, or set of beliefs. A contradiction emerges that cannot be reconciled or ignored. Self-reflection opens awareness that cannot be stifled. This stage is marked by the beginning of formal operational thinking. That simply means that we now can think about our own thinking. It's a time when a person is typically concerned about forming an identity by pulling together one's valued images and values. One of the hallmarks of this stage is that it tends to image God as extensions of interpersonal relationships. God is often experienced as Parent, Friend, Companion, Beloved, and Personal Reality. The true religious hunger of adolescence is to have a God who knows me and values me deeply, a God who can affirm my identity and worth in a world where I'm struggling to find who I can be. Dangers in this stage include the internalization of symbolic systems to such a degree that one does not even trust one's own reason because Divine authority is 'out there.' Furthermore, while one can enter into an intimate relationship with the Divine, one's life situations may drive one into despair. And unfortunately, this has been a factor in the large rate of teen suicides. Big questions challenge someone in stage three, such as contradictions which challenge innate convictions and reason. But this opens the door to growth.

### **3<sup>RD</sup> READER**

***I have been reading a book that says Jesus was not born on December 25<sup>th</sup> but probably sometime in the spring. There is no documentation of his actual birth day. But December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen to celebrate the birthday of Jesus because it was an ancient holiday that celebrated the re-birth of the sun. That works for me. I believe everything fits into God's plan. And I believe God has a plan for me. I pray every day to know the will of God. I really feel a sense of God in my heart and I know that I am loved; yet there are so many things I don't understand that trouble me. My neighbor, who is a Muslim is a very kind man, but our minister says my Muslim neighbor will burn in hell because he doesn't accept Jesus as his personal savior. And I trusted my minister. Then this terrible thing happened last month: our minister was caught cheating on his wife. I thought our church was the only true way until that happened. Of course, everyone knows that Jesus is the only perfect son of God. I sure need Christmas this year to feel that God is with me.***

**SONG** –“What Child is This” – verse 1 (no refrain)

*What child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?*

#### **4. Stage Four: Individuative/Projective Faith- the Searcher**

Individuals can enter stage four as early as 17 but often don't make the transition until their 30s or 40s, if at all. However, young people are evolving sooner than ever before, so it is hard to put an ages on these stages. Stage Four is a time of angst when the person faces difficult questions of identity and belief. During this time, individuals begin a radical shift from dependence on other's spiritual beliefs to development of their own. Authority shifts from an external source to authority within oneself. It is during this process, that we, as individuals, choose our own beliefs, values, and relationships. We examine our own experience to discover what is right and true us. And thus we often see the world through the lens of our personal truth. We place ultimate trust in the path, the search, and the questions. We face the fact that following our own path often means disappointing others, risking failure, and/or challenging societal norms that define one as valuable. This means letting of deeply held beliefs to which one's worth and value have been attached. It is a time for configuring the self from the inside out. It a working out of one's own salvation or path of wholeness. Stage Four is also concerned about boundaries: where I stop and you begin; how I decide what groups I can be part of and how I can be part of any group while maintaining my own integrity. This is a stage of de-mythologizing—which can be a form of literalism if we believe that everything that is not proven to be literally true is therefore literally false—yet demythologizing is an important process of subjecting every previously unquestioned to intense and sometimes reactionary critical scrutiny. This is the stage of the individual's psychic undoing as one's cultural and religious paradigms begin to crumble and existential anxiety sets in as there is nothing that is certain anymore except one's own existence. Thus disillusionment reigns. This stage is not a comfortable place to be and, although it can last for a long time, those who get stuck in stage four can become nihilistic and distrustful of everything and everyone. But most people, after entering this stage, sense that life is far more complex than the mere tearing down of beliefs. There is more yet to be realized.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> READER**

***I question the inconsistencies in my religious tradition. We teach that God is love while at the same time we teach that the only people who will go to heaven are those who have had a particular born-again experience of Jesus. I don't understand how a God who loves everyone would condemn most of the human race to eternal hellfire. Certainly, people cut themselves off from God through their actions and choices because we have free will. But eternity is a long time to pay for bad choices. Eventually—even in life beyond this one—wouldn't everyone want their souls to be healed and united with the Divine One? How could God whose eternal "yes" called forth creation and danced in the eyes of the Christ Child—how could this God also shout an eternal "no"? Also, I've found passages in the Bible that affirm universal salvation for all people. I believe that is true because I believe God is love. That is what Christmas is all about. Love comes to us every day in every being. The Divine Light revealed in Christ burns within all our hearts. And because of that, I am having a hard time with some of the words of the Christmas carols and I am depressed that Christmas has become so complicated for me. I think I might become a Buddhist or a Sufi or a Kabbalist. But then I would miss Christmas.***

**SONG** —"Joy to the World" — vs. 3

*No more lets sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground  
He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found,  
far as, far as, the curse is found*

*[Note: we picked some of the most offensive words of any Christmas Carol with this verse of Joy to the World.]*

## 5. Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith- the Seer

People usually enter Stage Five around age 35 or 40, although it may happen much earlier or later or never. We realize absolute answers cannot be found. But we have come to trust the Mystery. This stage is called conjunctive faith, which refers to a maturing of faith. What the previous stage works so hard to get clear in terms of boundaries and identity and reason, Stage Five moves beyond with a growing sense of paradox and transcendence and Mystery. In Stage Five, one begins to recognize that the conscious self is not all there is. I have an unconscious. Much of my behavior and response to things is shaped by dimensions of self that I'm not fully aware of. There is a deepened readiness for a relationship to God that includes Divine mystery as well as Divine intimacy realized both in the interior of the soul and in communion with all beings. The old images, stories, and symbols we walked away from are revisited, re-interpreted, and renewed but without the literalism. Symbolism rather than certainty is celebrated, and mystery is relished. Peace is made with one's past, and the unconscious is brought to light. There is a new openness to the strange and the other. And sometimes a completely different spiritual path connects more fully with some persons while others find that a completely new perspective on their own faith tradition lights a fire in their souls. The demythologized world of stage four is now re-sacrilized, literally brimming with the Divine. It is also imbued with a new sense of justice that goes beyond justice defined by one's own culture and people. Stage Five is a time when a person is ready to look deeply into the social unconscious—to challenge the myths and taboos and standards that we once accepted. And as we examine those, we're ready for a new kind of intimacy with persons and groups that are different from ourselves. We are ready for allegiances beyond our tribal gods and our tribal taboos. We embrace a bigger picture of reality and connectedness. Stage Five is a period when one understands that truth has many dimensions which have to be held together in paradoxical tension. Persons still rely on their own views while expanding their own views in dialogue with other points of view. It is not easy to live on the cusp of paradox, and due to its radical drive towards inclusivity, the mind struggles to assimilate and integrate faster than it can work through its cultural and psychological baggage. It is an overwhelming, ecstatic stage in which one is radically opened to possibility and wonder. Stage five begins the terrifying surrender to the Divine, which transforms the personality and infuses it with the vision and the courage to serve others.

### 5<sup>th</sup> READER

***I have been on a long spiritual search. I have studied Christian Mysticism, Buddhism, Islam, Sufism, Hinduism, Astrology, and the Kabbalah. I have taken meditation classes and Yoga classes, I been through years of psychotherapy, and I've even consulted psychics. It's all been helpful. Yet there is still a warmth and spirit that draws me into the heart of Christianity. It may be because it's part of my conditioning. But that's okay. All I know is that something in me comes alive when I think of Jesus. So I have studied progressive Christian theologians and been nurtured by Christian mystics. I am finding freedom in knowing that the Christian scriptures are not literally true because I am finding a deeper truth in the stories of Jesus than I ever realized. However, my spiritual path cannot be defined by any doctrine or even by my 'self.' My experience of life is always expanding. And my notions of 'self' are constantly being blown to bits. This is painful and freeing. This continual transformation—if you could call it that—does not originate with me, rather I seem to both originate from and dissolve in the vastness of this experience. It is like a great surrender to Universal Community. It is still somewhat frightening and seems strangely crazy. Yet as the inner and the outer become One, I cannot hold back from giving more of myself to others, economically, politically, socially, emotionally, spiritually. And I am becoming more of an activist than ever. I'm still trying to work it all out, but the Divine***

***pouring forth itself into human life is a powerful metaphor for my experience. So I cherish Christmas this year in a special way.***

**SONG** –“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

## **6. Stage Six: Universalizing Faith – The Universal Spirit (Enlightenment)**

Stage Six, which few seem to enter, is called Universalizing faith because one becomes an activist for the universe. Persons begin to radically live as though the "kingdom of God" or "Ultimate Oneness" was already a fact. While in the previous stage, one glimpses this unitive view of reality, one still feels torn between possibility and loyalty, and may even neglect to act on this new understanding out of a regard for self-preservation. In stage six, any such apprehensions dissolve and one becomes an activist for universal compassion. These people experience a shift from the self as the center of experience. Now their center becomes a participation in God or ultimate Oneness. A reversal takes place. This person trusts completely the universality of all life. They give themselves over completely to a Unifying force. They are propelled by an inclusiveness of community, a radical commitment to social justice, and a selfless passion for a transformed world. Reaching this stage is rare: examples possibly include Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and even Mother Theresa whose long struggle with her faith never kept her from keeping faith with her experience of God calling her to dedicate her life completely to those in the greatest need. These are persons who in a sense negated the self for the sake of affirming God or Ultimate Reality. And in affirming God they became vibrant and powerful selves for all beings. In Buddhist terms, they are Bodhisattvas. In Christian terms, they have been completely transformed by Christ-consciousness. They are at one with the fullness of the Divine in its infinite manifestations. For the veil of illusion has been lifted, and everyone is seen as the face of God. This is such an intense reality for stage 6 persons that they are no longer concerned about the normal ego needs of survival, security, propriety and significance. Thus they are glaring challenges to the many compromises the rest of us make every day. And their leadership, that often involves strategies of nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being, constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance. In this stage, both the universal and the particular matter. Everything matters, yet without attachment. Life is both loved fully and held loosely. Stage Six persons feel at home with persons at any of the other stages (including the various stages within themselves) and from any other faith tradition for they are one with the One.

### **6<sup>th</sup> READER**

***As the inner spiritual path of Christianity opens to me, I feel more connected to every Sacred Path. I know that I will never completely understand the meaning of life. But, more importantly, I am experiencing more fully what it means to be alive. This Christmas, I am still a Christian. But I am not attached to Christianity as a tradition; if it dies, it dies; if it lives, it lives. For it to live, it needs to evolve. What is important is that Jesus reveals to me my own Divinity and the Divine Light within all life. He connects me to the best part of myself and others. And there is a profound peace in that realization. When I let go of my fears, even for an instant, a joy rises up that opens my heart to everyone. As Christmas comes this year, I pray that my life becomes more poured out for others, more abandoned to expressing peace and justice for all beings. No matter where this leads me, I will follow my heart into this world of hunger and suffering and war, into this world of beauty and love and compassion. But it really will not be 'me' that does anything, rather it will be the Oneness that is all and all: the IAMNESS. This Christmas, I will sing the Christmas carols—though not all the words – as I humble myself before the awesome reality that Emmanuel, God-with-us, means everyone is the face of God.***

**SONG** –“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” new words

1. O Come, O Come Emmanuel  
And bring to us renewal  
Awaken us and set us free  
To realize our divinity

*Refrain* Rejoice, Rejoice  
Emmanuel  
O God, with us  
Our hearts indwell

## **Introduction to Stage 7**

Recently, I had the privilege of meeting James Fowler. [He was honored by Ken Wilber at the Integral Spiritual Conference 3.] He said that, at this point in his life, the most important thing is love – love for his children and grandchildren – and love for the earth that sustains us all. When he wrote his book, he described 6 Stages but realizes that the process of growth is unlimited [and therefore unlimited stages are possible]. Thus he has proposed at least a Stage 7. Rollie Stanich of the Integral Spiritual Center spoke to this possibility.

### **7. Stage Seven – Unitive State of Oneness – Complete Enlightenment**

There are no words for this stage. It is beyond words and yet it is from this place that all words, all life, all light and darkness arise. There are so many glorious and troubling perspectives that arise and return to the Great Mystery. There really are unlimited stages and states of spiritual growth. Life is an eternal adventure of transformation. That is the meaning of Advent, for Christians. This season, we honor the life-force revealed in Jesus, the force of BECOMING fully One with BEINGNESS itself. Throughout the whole span of our lives, we continue to unfold in God and God in us until there is no longer ‘God’ and ‘us’ for “all is in all.” Emmanuel. Namaste.

## **SOURCES**

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## **SCRIPTURE READING**

### **John 14:12**

“The person that has faith like me, the works that I do, she/he will also do, and even greater than these.”

## **WISDOM READINGS**

***Sharon Salzberg***

“The tendency to equate faith with doctrine, and then argue about terminology and concepts, distracts us from what faith is actually about. In my understanding, whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely. This faith is not a commodity we either have or don’t have—it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.”

***James Fowler***

“Faith, rather than belief or religion, is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief. Faith, classically understood, is not a separate dimension of life, a compartmentalized specialty. Faith is an orientation of life, of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions. Faith is our relationship with life itself.”

***Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi***

“At one point, religions used to talk about a product. The product was virtuous behavior; the product was faith, hope, and charity. People had a notion that there was something to get—a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. That fit the old paradigm of the Middle Ages. But there’s been a switch now. People are interested in the process. It’s alive.”