

“Stages of Faith”
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This is the final sermon in an occasional series that I started last fall on the topic of Faith. The last sermon I did in this series, I talked about the new militant atheist who are defending atheism and are making the argument that religion is just simply harmful to human society. That human society is just going to have to grow out of religion if we're going to survive. I talked about Sam Harris's book "Beyond Faith". Some of the arguments in that book are really quite compelling but here's the main argument I have with all the new atheists. They base their views on science and reason, which is proper. But there is one science that they obviously don't know about, and that is the science of faith. The fact is that faith has been studied and we know that faith is a matter of growth over a lifetime. It is a matter of development, and to say that humankind simply has to give up faith and grow out of it, is like telling us as a human family that we need to walk before we have crawled. There are people at all stages of faith. People grow from one stage to the other, and so at any time in human civilization, there will be people at every stage of faith. This is based on the work of James Fowler, a developmental psychologist and Presbyterian minister at Emory University in Atlanta. His research is based on hundreds and hundreds of interviews across several cultures. He talks about six stages of faith that he's identified from the people that he's interviewed and these stages transcend and include the previous one. So it's important that you don't think of this stage, faith development, as a ladder, because it is more like a concentric circle. If someone was in stage four, most of the time, it doesn't mean they are in stage four all of the time. They would be in stage three, two or one at certain times in their

life; all the other stages in ways of faith are available to them. There is usually a challenge that challenges people to develop into the next stage of faith. Now, it is important if you are going to study faith to have a clear definition of what faith is, and Fowler does. Fowler defines faith as a person's ultimate concern; and it varies what a person's ultimate concern is. It can be God as seen in a religious context or tradition, or it can be a political ideology that is that person's faith; it can be hedonism or materialism. Any of those could be a person's faith, could be a person's ultimate concern. Because Fowler uses the older and more powerful definition of faith, not as something people believe but as something people trust. So your faith is what you trust in this life the most, what your ultimate trust is.

Like I said it could be an identified religious tradition, it could be something else. Fowler talks about Presbyterians who are really hedonists, and that is their real faith; Catholic's who are really materialists and that is their faith. Your real faith is what you ultimately trust. This is based on stage theory which was originally pioneered by Piaget's theory of cognitive development, a big pioneering ground breaking study. By Erik Erikson in his stages of psychosocial development, and Kohlberg and Gilligan in their stages of moral development. What all these state theories have in common is the way we develop as human beings, whether cognitively, morally, psychosocially or in terms of faith. We start out egocentric, wound up in ourselves, not seeing reality beyond our own means and desires and because the world impinges on us we grow to be ethnocentric. We learn the mores, the rules, the laws and the expectations of our society and most people stay there for the rest of their lives. But there are some people who move on to world centric faith and the understanding that there are ways of seeing beyond that of our society, that there are people who have valid needs and concerns that see the world differently and that they are all part of our human

family. And that is basically the movement from selfishness to selflessness. That is the quest and the journey of faith.

Oh God, how are we to approach you? To some you are the warmth and safety of a parent's arms. Fowler in his more recent years has realized that there is a stage before stage one, he calls it stage zero, or primal faith. This is faith that is preverbal. What he's noticed is people in their preverbal life develop a basic trust or mistrust of the universe based on how well their parents, their primary caregivers have responded to them very, very early in life. People who have not had that sense of trust have to work really hard to heal from that very early experience and people who have had that good enough parenting and that basic trust are able to more easily move on and develop.

It's interesting that the way he found this out was to ask people about, first, their idea of God, whether God was benign or good; or someone or something to be scared of. He went back to talk about parenting, and early attitudes.

Oh God, to some you are full of awe and fear to be placated by magic and ritual. Stage one begins around the age of two. It arises with language. Fowler calls it intuitive projective faith. This faith is taught; it's caught from family, relatives, and people close to the child. Family rituals, family taboos are internalized, as one psychologist puts it, "unencumbered by reason". Because abstract thinking has not developed, fact and fantasy are the same. Parental authority is truth. It is what mom and dad say that's truth. That's what a child at this age has faith in. If there is a view of God, it's probably that of the old man in a white beard. This is because it's hard for children at this phase to see God as anything but in personal terms. There is little distinguishing between fact and fantasy.

Our God, to some you are found in legend seen as history, truth seen as eternal and rules seen as inflexible. Stage two can start anytime between the ages of seven and twelve with the development of abstract thinking. Fowler calls it mythic literal faith. Here the thinking is black and white, right and wrong, very clear, no doubt. This is the stage of the little fundamentalist which is appropriate for a seven year old, and necessary for a seven year old, and necessary for all of us to go through. But unfortunately people do get stuck there for life. Unlike psychosocial or cognitive development, people can survive and stay at this level of faith and it can be a very difficult and painful level of faith if people do get stuck there because there is a belief in the necessity of perfection. If you believe that truth is truth, and right is right, wrong is wrong, black is black, white is white and there is no gray area in between, then you need to be perfect. Nobody is perfect. Or, you give up in despair and think that you are going to hell forever, that you're irredeemable, and that you are a completely worthless human being. So there is a price to be paid for getting stuck in this level of faith, but luckily most people do not get stuck there, most people do move on.

Our God, to some you are found in a place of worship, a tradition of faith passed on by ancestors, the gathering of brothers and sisters in the faith. Stage three is synthetic conventional faith. It starts after the ability to see things from other person's perspectives and develops around age twelve and later. This faith, while stage one faith is caught, stage two faith is taught, stage three faith is bought. This is where either you buy, or you don't buy a religious or political or faith ideology. But, you decide to buy into it or not, based on what people like us believe, what people like us do. The identity here is in the group association. We know that this is important for teen development, that peer bounding. There is little room here for doubt. There is, unlike in stage two, recognition that there are other faith

identities in the world, but they seem like the other, alien, foreign, not too interested in that. The majority of the population, according to Fowler find a permanent home in stage three faith.

Our God, some question you. They seek the evidence of your existence, or the proof of your nonexistence. Strong in reason or determined in truth seeking, they seek proof. Stage four, is individualized reflective faith. According to a conversation I had with James Fowler, is where most Unitarian Universalist have their home. It usually starts in the thirties, or later, although some people in their twenties get to this place. This is where people start to really question the group think that has been the subject of their earlier faith, the content of their earlier faith. They want it to make sense according to their own reason and their own life experience and everything is subject to critique at this stage. The symbols are demythologized. “Well, we know why this ritual happened, because that happened early in the 5th century B.C., so that explains it.” People here are in danger of disillusionment as well as over confidence in ones own critical faculties. The argument of the new atheists are arguments from stage four faith. And I am quoting Fowler here, “This stage is not a comfortable place to be, and though it lasts, it can last for a long time, those who stay in it do so in danger of eventually trusting nothing and no one, but most, after entering this stage sense that not only is the world more complex than his or her stage three mentality would allow for, it is still more complex and numinous than the agnostic rationality of stage four allows”.

Our God, to some you are the great mystery, full of meaning, we seek to open to you in your many and varied guises. They seek to live the truth, more than to know the truth. All of life and truth is their study and their delight. Stage five faith, cognitive faith; it is unusual

for people to spend a lot of time in that place, although most people in moments of grace and blessedness find it sometimes. What it takes to live in stage five is to be comfortable with not knowing, with not nailing the truth down, to live with ambiguity and openness to experience. It takes a certain fearlessness, a comfort with paradox. At this point people sometimes return to their former symbols, rituals and myths, but they see them in a larger context, with layers and layers of meaning that hadn't been available to them before. It is not a literal appropriation of myth and symbol and ritual. It is one that happens with an understanding and a curiosity about and respect for other myths, rituals and symbols. Knowing that ones own rituals and symbols and myths and faith tradition is incomplete, not just other peoples and all point in the same direction. There is in this faith a urging for oneness, a deepening of spiritual practice and finally a struggle between the natural instincts of ordering one's life around self preservation and surrendering one's life to aligning it with a transcendent unity than one's senses and becomes more and more real.

And finally, Oh God, a blessed few simply live and breath you, living out of the great mind and the big heart knowing that there is a oneness and wholeness that is their density and yours beyond time and death and the space between the stars. Universalizing faith is the final phase that Fowler has identified in his study and it is exceedingly rare. Because at this stage people have just given up on self preservation, because their identity is with all of humanity and beyond another person's welfare is as important as their own, the welfare of the world is abidingly important. People sacrifice for truth and justice, sometimes in a rather dispassionate way. Being a transforming presence for all that encounter them is the hallmark of somebody in this stage. People sense that they are in touch with something powerful. These folks see beyond any kind of parochialism and tribalism and they reject it. They are

one with reality. These are the great souls of humanity. Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Mother Theresa. But they are still human. They still have great imperfections and because they are so fearless in their quest for truth and justice can leave behind huge blind spots.

What does all this mean about the faith; journey of each of us. What does it mean to the mission of our beloved First Church? What does it mean for the mission of Unitarian Universalisms in this time and this place? What does it mean for our relationship with our family and friends, and what does it mean for our own religious journey? Here's the important point. Everybody at whatever stage, until you get to about stage five, thinks that their way of having faith is 'the way' of having faith. People do not recognize that we all have to go through all the stages, you cannot skip one. So there have to be fundamentalists and there have to be fundamentalist churches and for those folks that is part of their faith journey and their spiritual growth. How would that change your relationships to certain family and friends? Do you really believe that? Now, we have to respect people at all stages of their faith. We don't necessarily have to vote them into high office, but we do need to respect them.

Ken Wilbur, who is a transpersonal psychologist and takes seriously all of the stage theories, says that 70% of this world is fundamentalist. Now, if we let the world, if we let that situation continue like that, it doesn't hold well for us. The good news is that faith development happens, that it's the natural human tendency towards wholeness and greater integration. The problem is that most religions are stuck in stage two, or (mostly) three. What's good about the faith and religious traditions of humanity is there also is within them the spiritual technology to transform. Those are hidden within all the great religious traditions, personal growth, and personal transformation, the dedicated spiritual practice

which include following the ethical precepts of universal love. It is part of all the universal traditions. It is not the way most religious communities practice. The problem is, if people want to grow beyond stage three, they think they need to leave their religious communities behind and that is a lonely world. There are people, Fowler found, at all stages, in every religious tradition. So there are people in fundamentalist churches, who, if they knew of our community could be able to embrace their emerging sense of critical thinking and questioning that is part of the growth that has to happen into stage four and beyond. People don't make the leap into stage four because they don't know a religious community exists that takes their questioning seriously. Religion can be about one of two things. It can be about conventional faith, conventional living, adjusting more happily and contently to the way things are. Or it can be about personal transformation, spiritual practices that transform the individual and transform the way things are. Those spiritual practices are helpful at any stage of faith and are essential to move into the higher stages where more and more the happiness and the well-being of the other becomes as important as our own. We have this environment. As imperfect as it is, it is a way for people to grow. Other churches are about saving souls, and souls need to be saved. People need them. We are about growing souls, about welcoming souls, when they are ready. Let's always have our arms open. May it be so.

Amen.