

Stages of Faith
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Rev. Jeff Liebmann
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Opening Words

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim said, "A young child's mind contains a rapidly expanding collection of often ill-sorted and only partially integrated impressions: some correctly seen aspects of reality, but many more elements completely dominated by fantasy. Fantasy fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information."

In this early stage of faith development, say to a child of four or five, God may be as real as the Cat in the Hat, or the President of the United States; and Hell may burn with flame as hot as the breath of the monster living under the bed or the glare of a disapproving parent.

Time for All Ages
Siddhartha Becomes Enlightened

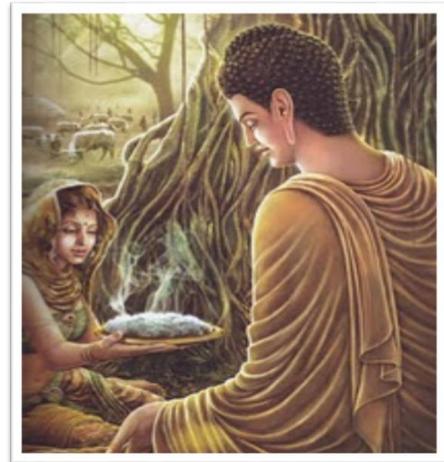
There once was a prince named Siddhartha, whose father kept him closed up in a wondrous, beautiful temple. As a young man, Siddhartha insisted on seeing the people of the kingdom, and so the king staged a parade that would reveal to Siddhartha only the best parts of the city.

But, during the parade, Siddhartha spied an ancient man dying of old age. Knowing nothing of disease and death, Siddhartha left the temple to travel the world in search of knowledge.

Siddhartha met a group of ascetics, fellow travelers who spent every moment of every day in prayer and meditation seeking the ultimate truth. They owned nothing but simple loincloths, ate only leaves and berries, and drank only rainwater. Siddhartha practiced this ascetic life for six years.

Then, one day a young girl from the nearby village saw Siddhartha and offered him a bowl of rice and milk. After Siddhartha accepted the bowl of milk and rice, he realized that going without food would not help him find the ultimate truth. When Siddhartha finished eating, he placed his bowl on the river and said, "If I am to achieve enlightenment, let this bowl float up stream." As his words commanded, the bowl floated up stream.

With that sign of good fortune, Siddhartha sat down under a Bodhi tree and vowed not to get up until he had reached enlightenment. And so, Siddhartha meditated.

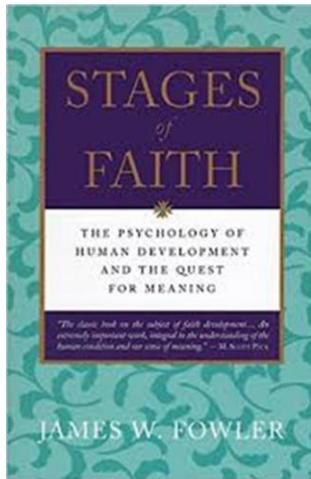


As he did, Mara the king of the underworld, appeared in order to make him quit his search for enlightenment.

Mara set about to distract Siddhartha away from the goal of obtaining enlightenment. Mara sent his three daughters to try and tempt Siddhartha. They danced and sang and flaunted their beauty before him, but Siddhartha knew that if he stopped meditating he would never become enlightened. Mara became angry and sent an army of archers riding on elephants charging straight towards him. Siddhartha showed no fear as the army charged towards him. Instead he called upon the earth and changed the arrows into flowers.

It was then that Siddhartha realized the truth of sickness, old age, and death. He also realized that he himself was being reborn, for he had reached enlightenment. From that point onward, Siddhartha was known as the Buddha, or the Awakened One. For the rest of his life, the Buddha went on to teach people how to overcome suffering.

Reflection Reading From James Fowler's "Stages of Faith"



Puberty brings with it a revolution in physical and emotional life. The adolescent needs mirrors to keep tabs on this week's growth, to become accustomed to the new angularity of a face and to the new curves of a body. But in a qualitatively different way the young person also looks for mirrors of another sort. He or she needs the eyes and ears of a few trusted others in which to see the image of personality emerging and to get a hearing for the new feelings, insights, anxieties, and commitments that are forming and seeking expression...

Formal operational thinking may first make its appearance in an algebra class or in an advanced biology lab. As it emerges it brings with it the ability to reflect upon one's thinking. It appraises a problem and forms hypothetical explanations. It generates methods of testing and verifying the hypotheses...

From a vantage point on the river bank...one can take a look at the flow of the stream as a whole. One can see and name certain patterns of meaning arising out of her or his collection of stories. A myth...of the personal past can be composed; this represents a new level of story, a level we might call the story of our stories...Much of the extensive literature about adolescent conversion can be illumined...by the recognition that the adolescent's religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith.

Message – Stages of Faith

When I was a teenager, two conflicting forces battled for my soul. On the one hand, I wanted badly to belong to a faith community, a body of people committed to life goals similar to mine and to living the principles that I held. I longed to be inspired by a

message that moved me to action, that helped me understand my purpose in life, that comforted me during hard times, and just got my own creative juices flowing.

On the other hand, perhaps headed by my natural contrariness and resistance to all forms of authority, was my desire to reject ideas held by the majority of society that I saw as outmoded and inconsistent with most forms of available evidence. Behind this driving force was a series of questions, nagging thoughts that nibbled away at the commonly-held beliefs of my friends.

- If God loves us, then why does he allow so many innocent people to die from wars, auto accidents, famine, cancer, floods, AIDS, hurricanes...you name it?
- If Moses got the benefit of a burning bush and early Christians saw Jesus perform one miracle after another, why do I just have to accept religious tenets and the veracity of improbable stories on faith alone?
- Why would God give us brains and the capacity to reason and then send us to Hell for using them?

So, for years I tried one church after another, from Lutheran to Methodist, Presbyterian to Episcopal. I enjoyed singing in the choirs. I found the worship services warming, if not spectacular. The people were generally cordial and, I imagine in time, could have become a solid foundation of friends. In the end, though, I always left with that feeling that I was being sold a bill of goods. I simply could not avoid watching the machinations of that man behind the curtain that made me question the wisdom and gifts of the Great Oz.



Unbeknownst to me, I had entered the fourth stage of faith, according to the model of developmental psychologist James Fowler. Fowler's Fourth Stage of Faith, which he calls the Individuative-Reflective stage, generally occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood, when it occurs at all. During this time, we begin to firm up our personal commitments, lifestyles, beliefs, and attitudes. We begin to ask ourselves questions and to explore answers that no longer conform with roles and meanings that have dominated our childhood – roles and meanings that formed the foundation of our personal myth.

During the process of asking questions and either confirming existing answers or examining new ones, we face this tension between individuality versus being defined by a group. This is a time of demythologizing our lives. Whether or not we retain our previously-held beliefs, our new world views emphasize conceptual meanings over symbols. We look, perhaps for the first time in our lives, with a critical eye at ourselves and our personal ideologies.

Now, of course, many of us know firsthand from our own teen years, especially if we have raised teens ourselves, that such a critical examination of childhood assumptions is not surprising. As Mark Twain said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be

21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” Challenging parental authority ranks high on the list of job responsibilities of typical teenagers, so it shouldn’t shock us that religious beliefs might also come under scrutiny during these years. It would not surprise me if the fledgling seed of Unitarian Universalism was planted in many adult UU’s during Fowler’s Stage Four, which subsequently resulted in a rejection of our birthright theologies.

Now, it is important to remember that many people *never* enter Stage Four and remain perfectly content. They found a God during their third stage of faith development who knows, accepts, and confirms their Self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of that Self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith. Many millions of people across the globe live happy lives, confident in the knowledge that their questions have been answered to their satisfaction, and that any remaining questions are irrelevant, unimportant, or answered only by mysteries beyond human comprehension.

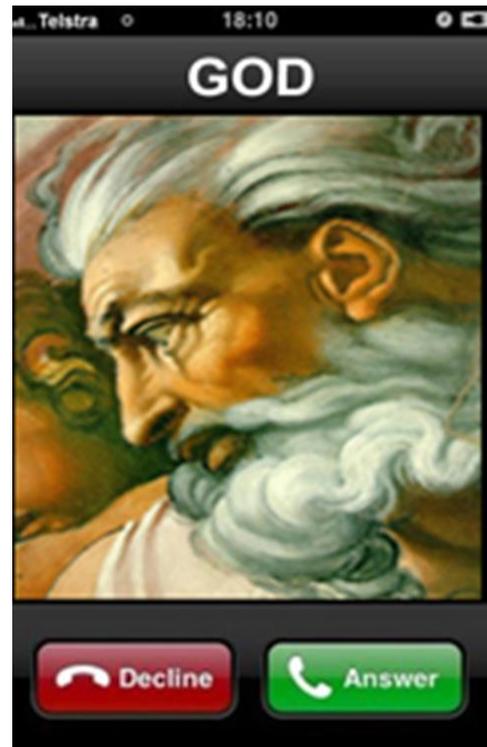
So, while most adult Unitarian Universalists began life in other faith traditions (and consequently recognize the Stage Four conflict well), those raised as Unitarian Universalists from early childhood may also find themselves satisfied with Stage Three development. But, whether we should encourage our young people to “leave the fold,” so to speak, as the Amish do is a subject for another sermon.

Assuming, therefore, that many of us have experienced or are experiencing individuative-reflective growth, what lies next in the model?

Stage Five of Fowler’s model can be viewed as a mature version of Stage Four. Usually occurring during our midlives, the development of what he labels Conjunctive Faith involves a shift away from the easy dichotomy of accepting or rejecting our childhood beliefs. At this time, we re-integrate into our Self much that we suppressed or did not recognize during Stage Four, perhaps embracing a fresh naiveté regarding the power of symbols and ritual.

For instance, we all know Unitarian Universalists who seem unable to let go of their anger and perceived sense of betrayal over the religion of their childhood. In Stage Five, that anger melts away. We look back on our religious journey and objectively retain that which has meaning to us here and now. We perhaps become comfortable with ambiguity and with the sense that we may never have solid answers to some of the big questions in life. We learn to trust our intuition, sometimes even when those impulses run counter to logic or reason.

We must remember that Fowler’s stages are not distinct and separate in real life. We, in fact, revisit stages constantly. For instance, we face Stage Three often in our religious lives when discussions arise regarding troubling moral and legal issues. A fundamentalist Christian, sure of the Bible’s stand on the sin of homosexuality, may face



a crisis of conscience when their own child comes out of the closet. You can each probably well imagine the plight of Unitarian Universalists who are members of the Republican Party, and hold opinions not in line with mainstream UU stands. Likewise, you can certainly imagine the conflicts faced by Unitarian Universalists serving in the military, or working for corporations with less than stellar environmental records. The peer pressure that we can inflict on our own people can stifle open discourse, even to the point of pushing away members who hold minority opinions.



Now we move into the last of Fowler's Stages – Stage Six – what he calls Universalizing Faith, or what many religions would more commonly label “transcendence.” Fowler limits to this stage an exceedingly rare group of people, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Thomas Merton. Stage Six involves the final conflict we face prior to achieving a transcendent state. One recognizes partial truths and the ambiguities of religious wisdom. We understand the depth of reality to which symbols refer. We see injustice sharply defined by an enlarged awareness of what is right and by the possibilities of an inclusive community of humankind.

But, we remain torn by our loyalties. We linger, deeply invested in troubling socioeconomic systems, the alternatives to which seem more unjust or destructive. We want to support institutions and groups that fertilized the soil of our growth as religious beings. We hold onto our own Selves, not yet ready to sacrifice our own preservation for the sake of a more inclusive justice and a broader realization of human love.

Regarding this last point, we should not be surprised that many who achieve this level of Universalized Faith end up as martyrs. But, by their lives and possibly far more so after their deaths, they become a contagious idea that liberates us from our social, political, economic, and philosophical chains.

In the 19th century, a Universalist would likely have equated Stage Six with the universal salvation of the human soul upon death. Transcendence to a Universalist was to literally transcend the human shell, rising to the Heavenly kingdom of God foretold to us by Jesus, who himself showed us how we will all transcend the boundary of death.

But, in the 21st century, modern day Unitarian Universalists may typically expect far more from this stage of faith development. For one, we might expect the capacity of achieving an enlightened state during our lifetimes, so that our efforts to create justice

and to spread unconditional love will bear the ripest fruit. We also might desire to experience and understand the nature of the process of becoming enlightened and gain a sense of the steps by which one achieves transcendence.

I want to focus on this particular element. For while Fowler's model is informative and useful in an overarching, academic sense, his description of faith development provides no model for how we can go about the work. Quite the contrary, Fowler focuses primarily on the end result of Stage Six, rather than the nature of the journey one takes while engaged in what likely requires years, if not decades to achieve.

One might assume, for instance as I do, that in seeking to become enlightened, one experiences brief glimpses of transcendence first. Over time, these moments grow into longer periods and, with the aid of discipline and spiritual practices, might eventually come closer to achieving permanence. What, then, does a glimpse of transcendence look and feel like? Well, I would guess that each of you here today have a notion.



Have you ever heard a piece of music that took you somewhere out of time and space? Have you ever walked in the sun or rain, and felt surrounded, no inundated by pulsing life around you, so that you truly felt a part of some greater life force? Have you ever looked into someone else's eyes and "seen" them in a way immeasurable by any camera or scope? These are moments of transcendence.

Within these walls, perhaps you have had this same sensation. You sing a hymn and feel your words join with others to become a choir, something more than just the sum of the

individual voices. You stare at this chalice flame and the universe becomes that flicker of yellow and red. You hear words spoken and suddenly some thought becomes instantly clear in your mind and your body floats in the realization of epiphany. In meditation and prayer, you reach out to others in the room, to the thousands of others in sanctuaries across the country also engaged in solemn worship and become a particle in an organic whole brimming with ecstasy and love.

In all likelihood, these moments were unexpected, chance accidents bringing together external sounds, sights, and sensations with your own internal feelings, emotions, and thoughts. But, are these truly accidents? For, do we not come here on Sunday mornings hoping for just such ecstatic moments? Do we not all yearn to feel that bliss every Sunday and other times throughout our hectic and stress-filled weeks?

Of course we do. For the theist, these moments are the direct interaction with God, with the Divine. For the agnostic, they are flickering seconds that motivate the spiritual quest, that hopefully help us find deeper meaning. And, for the atheist, these may be real sparks of tangible affect, forces and fields we do not yet understand, but that offer us glimpses of truths beyond the power of reason alone to comprehend.

We only know that these tiny pieces of transcendence possess great power and that we want to experience them again and again. We may not feel them every Sunday morning; we may only experience the sensation rarely or on certain special occasions.

But, whether you believe in God or not, whether you believe in a life after death or a plane of existence beyond this one, you sense that these moments of transcendence somehow hold some sort of key to knowing. You perceive these flashes of transcendence as more than just “good vibes,” but a palpable connection with something beyond yourself.

Our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning calls us to explore this frontier of sensation. It demands that we blaze trails into this unknown area of our universe, this reality of religious affect in our worship. In the coming months and years, let us together explore these realms of transcendence in our worship, in our daily lives, and in our service to creating a just world – a community of humankind.

Prayerful Reflection

Spirit of life and love that we know by many names, be with us as we enter an attitude of reflection, meditation, and prayer.

By whatever name, we all seek escape from the trivial, deliverance from the mundane. We long to be rescued from the pain and loss we suffer in life, perhaps hoping to recover some preconscious state of bliss, of unity with all existence. If you believe in an afterlife, then you seek salvation, a place...a state that transcends this often cruel physical plane. But, perhaps you come here on Sunday mornings to find salvation in the here and now – moments of filling wholeness, of tingling ecstasy, of transcendence in this life.

Sometimes, those moments come as lightning flashes, with distinct beginnings. They may dwindle just as quickly, as the brilliance fades from our vision. But other times, transcending moments well within as an awesome quiet whose beginning we cannot sense. We hope to sustain these moments of bliss, of pure joy. We yearn for that never ending heartsong that will become the music of our lives.

It is there. It has always been there...Waiting, just waiting for you to open your lips and fill your soul. That slow dawn of transcendence lies ready to begin when your heart sings in gratitude and love. Blessed by, Amen, and Let it be so.

Closing Words From Dogen Zenji



Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great...The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water. Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water. You cannot hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of water does not hinder the moon in the sky...Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky.