

Reflection Paper 1: Stages of Faith

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XXX-XX-XXXX

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Diocese of Las Cruces

Course 8, Personal Context of Ministry

3 January 2004

In this paper, I will explore two stages of faith I have encountered in my life of the six delineated by James W. Fowler in his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. I will examine the stages and transitions by highlighting the transitions into and out of each stage, announcing the primary characteristics in my own experience in each stage, expressing how I was ministered to during each stage, and exploring what was helpful or harmful in these experiences. I will then offer some recommendations to other ministry professionals ministering to the people in these stages of faith based on my experiences.

The first stage I would like to examine is the fourth stage, which Fowler calls the Individuative-Reflective stage of faith (174-183). My transition into this stage started with my desire to explore and learn more about God. I bought a book entitled *God's Psychiatry* by Charles L. Allen, the memorable part of which discussed Psalm 23 and the life of a shepherd (13-38). The transition was accelerated by a crisis through which I left the Catholic Church in which I was raised, being told of its evils by well-meaning fundamentalist Baptists in Southern Spain. This conflict between the beliefs I was raised with and this new information, which was either personal opinion/interpretation or parroting what they were told, was intensified by the rhetoric used to ultimately vilify the Catholic Church and its teachings and show how true and right were their teachings from the scriptures, the only authority they claimed, to which they referred as *the Bible*. This bumpy transition abused my emotions so that I became very angry and eventually bitter that the Catholics *lied* to me all those years. The event of being driven from my Church led me to the brink of a decision to either follow and learn of Christ on this unknown path or leave Christianity, not God, behind entirely. I prayed an ultimatum that God give me

some measure of understanding or I would leave Christianity. Over the course of the hour it took me to read Paul's letter to the Romans, my prayer was answered and I knew my path was the bumpy Christian road my feet were set upon.

I was in stage four for about 12 years, between ages 21 to 33. James Fowler said in the video tape in that in light of tension people break out of masks and roles (Faith). The experience of leaving and returning to the Catholic Church instilled in me a desire for truth, believing there was one truth or reality. This desire became an all-consuming obsession of sorts, spending much time reading, studying and learning all I could. During my *Protestant years*, I would study the scriptures an average of three to four hours a day with several scriptural versions, the King James Bible complete concordance, a prime source, and several other resources. After returning to my Church, I added reading Catholic history, theology and spirituality to this litany. During this entire turbulent period, I tried as many different prayer forms as I discovered. I read of religions and modes of thought other than Christianity, breaking from the limitations of reading only popular literature to help me evaluate the beliefs and practices of my own religion. This helped me to reappropriate my faith to make it more mine than in the previous stage when I did and thought as I was told without needing to critically examine or explore belief and practice. My exploration of other ways of thinking was fostered by my time in the military during the same period, having the opportunity to travel to diverse places throughout Asia, Europe, America and Canada. This variety of culture, practice, religion and philosophy enabled me to more fully examine and decide what I thought and believed. I also learned to do two opposite things in this stage: I learned how to listen to others and how to not listen. The not listening was prompted by the relatively closed

stance I had under the influence of the fundamentalist groups of which I was a part. The primary view in this approach was to convert others to your own view using any means necessary. If a person's views could not be answered satisfactorily, one was to not even address them, but to only give, or more accurately, push, them your own version of religion and reality.

I was primarily ministered to by those who were like me. Generally speaking, when Protestant, I was ministered to by Protestants and when Catholic, Catholics. I was ministered to by the high school students I taught in CCD and later adults in RCIA despite the fact they most likely weren't aware of this. A third group who ministered to me were some very humble, generous friends with whom I never discussed the events of my life I am unpacking in this paper. This was never discussed because I found that I received great consolation and joy from helping other people which helped me to smile and appear indefatigably happy and never depressed or sad. The fact of my life was quite different. I struggled mightily with the emotional scarring of my *conversion* experiences in bouncing from Catholic to Protestant and back, quite literally driving me to drink. Some of the greatest help for me were the people to which I was able to minister and I found that in helping and healing others, I received the help and healing I needed. The most interesting source from which I received great help and consolation was from a religion or group outside the sphere of the religious conflict in which I was immersed. This is the reason I sought out other religions and their ways of thinking, praying and conceiving of and expressing reality. Buddhists were particularly helpful to me because, as one friend I knew for a short time expressed the general idea that Christians require some sort of proselytizing or converting of others, whereas Buddhists do not.

My transition from stage four to five, Conjunctive Faith, started with crisis, as St. Paul expressed, that I read while I was still in the midst of stage four,

...the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do...I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Rom 8:19, 23-24 KJV).

With these words came my realization that I received my “sacrament of defeat,” as James Fowler put it in his interview (Faith). I noticed that even though I was extremely successful in my accomplishments at work, in my teaching and standing in Church amongst priests and parishioners in the parish and dioceses of which I was a part, in various sports, in my physical conditioning, had a depth of background in my areas of interest and profession and had many friends, there were contradictions in my life which would not go away. Everything in my life, while in equilibrium in one sense, was unsettled. I fell in love with a woman I frequently chatted with in a Catholic chat room, yet this woman was married, or more accurately stated, trapped in the form of marriage that never had the substance or sacrament. My Church informed my faith that a man could not marry a divorced woman unless she first received an annulment. Consideration of marrying a woman who was planning to divorce was like standing at sin’s door, ready to knock. Yet what I knew internally to be the right thing to do was to remove her from her harmful situation and welcome her into my life and home where I could protect her and be a father to her child. I was being called without any doubt in my heart by God. We did everything as best we could, but there was great contradiction with the apparent teaching of the Church and in the eyes of some who decided to cast their judgment, as if that had meaning to me. This crisis precipitated a choice I had to make, an equilibrium I

had to reach. How could I reconcile the apparent dichotomy between the choice I made to love and the teaching of the Church I also loved? My solution was that I did not have to settle for one or the other. I began to see that both could simultaneously exist at the same time in the same person. At the same time that I found a dichotomous view to be not useful and even harmful, I was more open to new views coming from sources other than my Catholic or Christian faith and found these new understandings helped me be me. This new individuation did not require me to dismiss anything that I did not appropriate simply for that reason. It allowed me to accept things unchallenged and then to pick them up and look at them when I was ready. I was not threatened by other ideas or beliefs because I knew my faith and that which I believed. Being more settled in my beliefs, I could consider everything without fear of corruption or tainting of my present faith. I had no internal mandate to have to convert another, but could share the lessons and wisdom I had learned and could listen, be open and learn from others.

I was ministered to in this stage by most people with whom I came in contact. I found that being more open as well as more distant from and healed of the emotional scarring from being a religious Church hopper has helped me to see value, worth and lessons I can learn from all people of all ages, economic backgrounds and education levels. I find that the people I minister to, minister to me at the same time. They teach me as I teach them and I have come to a profound respect for the gifts that God has given each person.

In these stages of faith as identified by Fowler, I want to now explore the helpful and the harmful in my experience. The first thing I find to be harmful or an impediment to the growth of the persons in these stages is to actively mandate actions or activities and

to make judgments in these areas. I generally recoil when someone tries to tell me what I must do, as if they have no respect for me as a person to recognize and do what is right. I have equally found it harmful to be told of the evils of a group or teaching. Doing such to me as a young adult Catholic caused me serious emotional scarring which did a certain amount of damage and is a very negative way to form a person into who he or she is to become. I believe it has been markedly helpful for me to critically examine my own faith, belief structure and content which gave me the freedom to explore my faith when and how I needed to instead of having someone else give me a faith with which I did not have to grapple. The one who struggles to grasp and understand their beliefs come out stronger for the experience. Another thing that was helpful was the unassuming, humble people whom I was fortunate to know. They simply accepted me for who I appeared to be and listened to me as such. They didn't try to make or remake me in their own image and likeness. This brings up another thing that I found unhelpful, those with preconceived agendas who only wanted to talk to me to convert me to their way of being, thinking or believing, showing no respect or concern for my own experiences or knowledge before they came to know me.

Finally, I would like to offer some recommendations for those who minister based on my own experiences and lessons in life. Instead of trying to put the love of God into those to whom they minister, as if we can force a square peg into a round hole, I believe ministers should pray the love of God into them. I have found the most growth and success in praying for those to whom I minister and would highly recommend it. I believe it is a minister's job to listen and deal with people where they are at instead of trying to remake those to whom we minister into carbon copies of ourselves. This means,

by extension, that we show respect for all to whom we minister because they are children of God like us and are endowed with a variety of gifts that God has given to all as He chooses. This brings me to another important issue. The minister, I believe, ought to remain humble and give any credit or glory to God and not think it was the prowess or greatness of self that brought about the successes. Finally, I believe that ministers ought to permit and bring out the questions of the hearts of the people to which we are ministering. I believe this is important in order to allow people to appropriate their faith so that it is theirs as they wrestle with issues of faith and applying this faith in the world in which we live.

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