

Sermon delivered at Wildflower Church, Austin, TX - July 17, 2005
"Faith as Development:
by Scottie McIntyre Johnson

Back home in Sherman, Texas, I am the director of a Montessori preschool, and I've worked in early childhood education for over twenty years now. In my understanding of my profession as a Montessorian and as an educator of young children, I am very much a developmentalist -- in the way of the great educational psychologists, Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, Arnold Gesell and Maria Montessori herself. I believe that most children go through common, sequential and predictable stages of growth in the various areas of their development -- physical and psycho-motor growth, language, cognitive, social and emotional development. "Stage theory", then, is a concept I understand, a language I'm comfortable with, and I generally agree with this notion. I have seen myself, first-hand evidence of what the stages of early childhood are and approximately when they occur for most children, as I have observed the behavior of the 500 or so, 3 to 6 year old children I've come in close contact with over the past twenty years of working at Belden Street Montessori School.

And so, it is probably natural that I am attracted to the notion that there might also be stages of *faith*, which human beings pass through in a fairly predictable way. I remember reading some years ago somewhere of the research of the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg who wrote on stages of *moral* development back in the early 1980's. But we should be careful not to confuse the development of *faith* or spirituality with moral development. They are not the same thing.

The classic work on stages of faith was also done in the early 80's by James W. Fowler, *et al.*, and reported in the book called, *Stages of Faith and Religious Development*, first published in 1981. Fowler describes seven different, sequential spiritual stages to which he gives the rather intimidating names of "primal faith," "intuitive-projective faith", "mythic-literal faith", "synthetic-conventional faith", "individuative-reflective faith", "conjunctive faith", and "universalizing faith".

I suppose that when I go to divinity school, as I hope to do soon, I will be required to read about and understand what Fowler is attempting to describe with these labels -- as I suspect his book is a standard text in liberal seminaries -- but until then, I am more comfortable with the stages of faith outlined in a much more readable little book published in 1999 by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, called *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up with Has Lost Its Meaning*.

You can see, I think, how appealing that title was to me as a Unitarian Universalist. (And I like his name, too.) Scotty McLennan is, in fact, a Unitarian Universalist minister who served for quite a few years as Chaplain at Tufts University; I think now he is Dean of Religious Life at Stanford; he was a

classmate of cartoonist Gary Trudeau at Yale in the late 1960's and he was the inspiration for the Doonesbury character, the bearded, liberal, activist minister, the Rev. Scot Sloan. In fact, Scotty McLennan looks very much like Trudeau's comic strip character in real life!

McLennan bases his ideas on the work of Fowler in the text I mentioned earlier and also on a collection of writings edited by Fritz Oser and W. George Scarlett in 1991 called *Religious Development in Childhood and Adolescence*.

Scotty McLennan, however, identifies only *six* different stages of spiritual development, which a person might "inhabit" during a lifetime. He believes that few people make it to the sixth and final stage, which he called "the domain of the mystics", but that many people living in our modern world of today spend time in at least three, if not four or five, of these different stages of spiritual understanding over the course of their lives.

Some of the scholars quoted in Oser and Scarlett believe, and Scotty McLennan seems to believe, as well, that these faith stages are universal to all humans, and that they can be described with a certain degree of precision. And that, just like the *physical, intellectual and emotional* developmental stages of childhood, these spiritual stages also happen sequentially, and most of us must reach a certain chronological age before the next stage of faith is open to us.

And, just as with the other types of developmental stages, these faith changes do not happen at exactly the same rate for different individuals. And that, in fact, with spiritual development as opposed to, say, physical or cognitive development, there seems to be a much greater likelihood that, after some point, we will not change at all -- that we may get "stuck at" AND REMAIN PERFECTLY HAPPY in a particular early stage of faith development throughout our entire lives.

During the rest of my sermon today, I am going to ask you to do something I myself find difficult to do. I want you to TRY, as hard as you can, to stop yourself from judging any of these spiritual stages, while I am describing them, as correct or incorrect, right or wrong, or morally good or bad. This may be especially difficult right now, at a time in our world when it is all too clear that individuals can use their own notions of faith to justify horrific actions. And, even putting all that aside, I know how natural it is for us to evaluate things, especially us Unitarian Universalists, but try to put that judging part of your brain in neutral if you can for the time being and consider with me what Scotty McLennan says the usual developmental progression of faith or spirituality looks like.

So, what are these FAITH STAGES and their accompanying experiences of God as Scotty McLennan identifies them in his book, in terms much more accessible than Fowler's? McLennan calls them "Magic", "Reality", "Dependence", "Independence", "Interdependence", and "Unity".

Let's look at the first stage first: "Magic". This is the spiritual stage of early childhood and, McLennan says, it usually concludes by the age of ten. The experience of God in this stage is that of an All-powerful God, a kind of magical Super-hero who is responsible for everything -- both the good and the bad -- from providing gifts of much desired toys to causing earthquakes or plane crashes -- or hijackings. McLennan says that this is a fantasy God, similar to Santa Claus on the one hand and, well, God! on the other -- the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament, that is.

After the age of five or six, however, children begin to attempt to separate fact from fantasy in all areas of their lives, and McLennan says they also enter the faith stage of Reality. "Is it real?" they want to know about everything, and they begin to order their world using "scientific" notions of number, time, measurement, and, especially, cause and effect. At this stage, people imagine God as a real person -- in Western culture, often an old man with a long, white beard -- who can be spoken to and influenced. McLennan says that children and persons of any age in this stage of faith development experience a strong cause-and-effect relationship with God. God can be influenced by good deeds, promises, prayers and vows or by the sincerity of one's conversion.

Of course, all these adjacent stages over-lap, and circumstances can cause individuals to go back and forth between one stage and another at different times in their lives. In fact, McLennan describes childhood as "a period of spiritual tension between the stages of Magic and Reality."

The third Faith Stage, McLennan calls "Dependence". He says it usually appears around age 12 or so, and perhaps stems from the physiological and psychological developments, which begin taking place at this time. Puberty, with its dramatic emotional and physical changes, throws the early adolescent into a frightening state of confusion and disequilibrium from which he or she needs relief.

In the Dependence Stage, the young person hungers for a very personal relationship with a benevolent parent God, a God who knows the individual and loves him or her unconditionally. God then helps and directs the young person as an idealized parent would, sometimes almost replacing, emotionally, the actual parents whom the adolescent has begun to see as flawed.

This is the time when Catholic adolescents dream of becoming priests and nuns -- or at least, we used to when I was a kid -- and when my Protestant teenaged friends wanted to leave home to become missionaries in Africa. McLennan reminds us that Jesus himself at the age of twelve stayed behind in the temple, causing Joseph and Mary much worry and grief, but maintaining that he needed to be in "his Father's house", in the house of God, instead of with his earthly parents.

I have asked you to try not to evaluate each of these spiritual stages, and I will try to avoid that myself. I admit it is tempting to me to see these first three stages as something to be gotten through and left behind, especially since they often develop chronologically in most people -- and perhaps they can be seen as immature in some respects.

But I believe, as I said earlier, that we must be very careful to remind ourselves that *moral* development is not the same thing as the development of faith that McLennan and Fowler describe. And, despite the existence of Muslim terrorists and Jerry Falwell, we all know it *is* quite possible to be a good, kind, compassionate, moral adult -- in fact, even to live a life *completely* consistent with every one of our UU Principles, and still have one's faith grounded in the Dependence, Reality or even Magic Stages.

We've all known and probably still know such people, don't we? -- our own mothers or grandmothers, perhaps, or the nun who cared so tenderly for the sick and dying at the Catholic hospital or the favorite Sunday school teacher we had who always encouraged us and helped us feel that we were special or the youth minister who inspired us to care about the less fortunate -- *truly* good Christians or Hindus or Muslims or wise old Orthodox Jews, perhaps, who do as much good for the world and in the world as anyone, while remaining in one of these first three faith stages throughout their entire lives.

And if people inhabiting one of these faith stages live a moral and productive life, if they try to make the world a better place -- *and* if they are happy and content where they are in their own faith development -- who are we -- who is anyone -- to say that they are wrong? There is no right and wrong in development -- there is just where you are at any given time.

Well -- if fundamentalists -- Christian, Jewish, Muslim or otherwise -- seem to be content remaining in one of the three faith stages of childhood, then some Unitarian Universalists seem to positively revel in being stuck in the fourth stage, the stage McLennan calls "Independence" -- which usually first emerges in late adolescence or young adulthood.

This is the time when the young adult begins to defy family traditions, social conventions and traditional organized religion to seek spiritual authority within. This is the stage when people may say, "I'm a very spiritual person, but I'm not religious." McLennan says that in the Independence stage, God or Ultimate Reality is perceived as impersonal and distant or even non-existent.

Independence may be a time for demythologizing religion, for searching for the historical Jesus, for example, for reading sacred texts as literature. People in the Independence stage *love* to study comparative religion, comparative mythology, because the similarities in the stories and rituals across time, space and cultures, point to the conclusion that *none* of these world religions is *true!* Unitarian Universalism is a welcoming and comfortable place for those in the Independence stage, and many of us can probably recognize ourselves as

recently having been in or as still being in, the Independent stage in the development of our own spirituality.

Great emotional upheaval sometimes occurs in families, in the churches we left behind, and in the prevailing culture because of the stress between the Dependence and Independence stages. And, in fact, many adults, certainly in this religiously conservative nation of ours, never do reach the *Independence* stage of faith development.

I would venture to say that most of us in this room could relate painful experiences precipitated by this tension. Close relationships between one person in the Dependence and another in the Independence faith stage are often difficult, at best. "Dependents" make us "Independents" angry or frustrated; we "Independents" either scare the dickens out of them or make them sad.

But I'm here to tell you that there is a stage of faith where this stress can roll off your back like holy water off a rabbi's raincoat! It is the fifth stage which McLennan calls Interdependence, and it usually doesn't happen until folks are well into their adult years.

Some have called it "a second naiveté" because it is a time when religious symbols and rituals and even concepts, which were rejected during the Independence stage once again become meaningful to the individual. McLennan says that in the Interdependent stage, God or Ultimate Reality is experienced paradoxically -- for example, people in this stage may find comfort and value in praying while at the same time believing the Divine to be an unknowable, impersonal force in the Universe.

Adults in this faith stage may go back to reading scripture, including the holy texts of their own childhood traditions, finding many levels of beauty, inspiration and *truth* there. Like the Independents, they also love to study comparative religion, comparative mythology, but to the Interdependents, the similarities in the stories and rituals across time, space and cultures point to the conclusion -- not that *none* of these religions is true, as the Independents feel -- but that *all* of these world religions are true, according to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the word "truth". Interdependents are quite open to dialogue among different religious traditions because they realize that "true" does not always mean "factual", but that real truth is multidimensional.

Unlike the Independents, the Interdependents may not be afraid to pick a particular religious path for *themselves* where they feel most comfortable or most inspired. It might even be the rejected religion of their childhood -- perhaps some who identify themselves as Christian or Jewish UUs may be in the Interdependent stage, having come to terms with the hurt from and anger toward their previous religions that they felt while they were in the Independent stage -- or it may be a completely new path for them, such as Buddhism or neopaganism. But even though they may concentrate on their own path,

Interdependents always realize that there are other paths for other people, which can also lead to the summit.

The final faith stage he describes, McLennan calls "Unity". People at this stage feel connected with the Divine most of the time. God as a paradox melts away into undivided unity. These rare people see God in everything and everything in God, all the time. Practically speaking, they possess an unconditional compassion and an unlimited vision of community, which goes beyond all human tribalism, beyond even an affinity with all *living* things, to an experience of oneness with the entire universe. Albert Schweitzer, Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and of course, the Buddha, are examples of persons who seem to have reached the sixth faith stage of Unity.

Have you ever heard or read the Dalai Llama speak of the Chinese take-over of Tibet? There is absolutely no anger or hatred in his words, no talk of retribution, revenge, or even "justice". There is only a hope and a prayer that enlightenment might come to those who murdered his countrymen, sacked his monasteries, and drove him and his followers into exile. Unity is a rare stage of faith, indeed.

Well, as a professional developmentalist, I find all of this very interesting, but so what? Why should you care? What value for you might there be in identifying these faith stages and in embracing the very notion of developmental stages of faith, of spirituality? If we use this information in a judgmental way, as I tried to warn against earlier, if we take the listing of the stages in an order to imply that the later stages are good and the earlier ones are necessarily bad, we are missing the point.

In all honesty, I have to admit that I do see the stages as sort of a hierarchy with the later stages being more mature stages of development that I aspire to, but if we use these notions to pat ourselves on the back and say that we are more developed than *they* are -- then we probably aren't!

For why and how does an individual move from one faith stage to another anyway? By the grace of God, some might say. Or, if you prefer, call it luck.

I personally haven't been in the Dependent stage for a very long time now, but my youngest brother, who is over 50 years old now, still very much wants and needs Jesus to be the Good Shepherd watching over him and his family. Why is he in Stage 3 while I am in Stage 4, hoping to reach 5?

I don't know for sure, of course, but maybe it happened because our father was a religious free-thinker, and as his only daughter, I was "Daddy's girl" -- he adored me and I adored him. And as the oldest child, I identified more closely

with him than did my brother, who was youngest in our family and his mama's baby.

Maybe it's because I went off to the University of Texas to school while my brother stayed at home and didn't go to college at all. Maybe it's because I got to Austin in 1966, and stayed there for eleven years while the Beatles and Woodstock, and Vietnam and Kent State, and Watergate all happened while my brother spent those years at Brenham High School.

Maybe because, just after graduating, he married his high school sweetheart, a local girl who to this day plays the organ at St. Peter's Lutheran Church where she was baptized as an infant -- while I married my husband, Jim, a student of ancient Greek and Latin who was working on a PhD. in Classics at UT when we met.

Maybe it was because I minored in English in college and fell in love with Emerson and Thoreau and William Ellery Channing even before I knew what a Unitarian Universalist was. Maybe it was because I majored in drama and was exposed to all the wonderful and outrageous diversity and creativity was, and I'm sure still is, rampant in the UT Department of Drama.

Maybe it was because Vatican II happened around that time, which angered and frustrated me, as Roman Catholic young adult, because they changed all the things that I loved about the church -- like the Latin Mass -- and changed none of the things I disagreed with -- like no birth control and no women priests.

Maybe it was because the wife of my favorite professor in the Drama Department happened to be a member of 1st Unitarian Church of Austin, and she told me about this new, to me, free and open religion that intrigued me enough for me to look into it back in 1970.

Probably it was the accumulation all of those factors and experiences, but who knows for sure?

I know it was *not* because I'm any smarter or kinder or more diligent or more creative than my brother is. I'm not; he is a wonderful person, a good person, a *moral* person/ The circumstances of his life were just different from mine, and because of our experiences, I developed into an Independent while he, to this day, remains in the Dependent stage. It's through no fault of his and no credit to me that we are each in the faith stages we are in -- that's just where we happen to be. Because of our temperaments, personalities, our experiences. Because of luck. Or by the grace of God, if you will.

Mahatma Gandhi, himself no doubt one of those rare 6th stagers, wrote:

Our prayer for others must not be “God, give him the light that Thou has given me,” but “Give him all the light and truth that he needs for his own highest development.

If we can take our awareness of Fowler’s and Scotty McLennan’s stages of faith and use it to help us be *more* understanding and *more* tolerant and *less* critical and *less* judgmental of those who happen to be in a different spiritual stage than we are, *then* we will be using them in a way that is consistent with our Unitarian Universalist belief in the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” After all, we don’t qualify our First Principle by saying that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every spiritually Independent or Interdependent person, now do we?

In fact, I have come to believe that each of these faith stages -- Magic, Reality and Dependence, as well as Independence, Interdependence and Unity -- has a particular *positive* sensibility about it, a special joy it offers to those who are living comfortably in that stage. My maternal grandmother lived to be 92 and never left the Magic stage. She was the kindest, most benign person I have ever met -- child-like in the best sense, I would say -- I don’t think she ever harmed a soul in all those 92 years. And, I believe she was perfectly served by and happy with her child-like faith until the day she died.

How unfair and disrespectful it is to judge one stage from the viewpoint of another! Let’s try not to do it any more, o.k.? I know I’m trying -- difficult though it often is -- to be much more understanding and respectful of the adults I know who are still in the first 3 faith stages, then I have sometimes been in the past--because that’s just where they are.

I’m really trying not to condemn people out of hand just because they are religious fundamentalists. Despite the actions of some, “Fundamentalist” does *not* necessarily equal “bad person”. Some people who operate from the perspective of the Magic, Reality, or Dependence, are, in fact, better people than some Independents. I suspect that Scotty McLennan would want us to use our knowledge of the stages of faith he describes to help us be a bit more generous in our assessments of “every human being”.

And perhaps a real understanding and a true appreciation of *all* the faith stages, is itself an indicator that we ourselves are growing into the next higher level of spiritual development. Care to join me in Stage 5, anyone?