

What is Faith?

According to James Fowler (1981) faith is ...

... the dynamic, patterned process by which we find life meaningful. (p. 4)

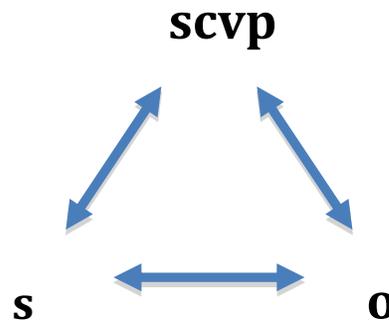
... a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. (ibid.)

... a verb; it is an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life. (p. 16)

... always relational; there is always another in faith. (ibid.)

... a relational enterprise, triadic or covenantal in shape. (p. 18)

This triadic relationship is diagrammed thus:



Where "s"= self; "o"= other; and "scvp"= shared center(s) of value & power. (p.17)

Fowler agrees with Ernest Becker:

Homo poeta Ernest Becker calls us, man the meaning maker. We do not live by bread alone, sex alone, success alone, and certainly not by instinct alone. We require meaning. We need purpose and priorities; we must have some grasp on the big picture. (p. 4)

This concept of the "big picture" is in large part the result of the interaction between the three actors in the triad above. Regarding the "shared center of value & power," Fowler elaborates:

The centers of value & power that sustain our lives. The persons, causes and institutions we really love and trust, the images of good and evil, of possibility and probability to which we are committed - these form the pattern of our faith. (p. 4)

The centers of value and power that have god value for us, therefore, are those that confer meaning and worth on us and promise to sustain us in a dangerous world of power. Here we are back to [Paul] Tillich's insistence that faith is the relationship to that which concerns us ultimately. (p. 18)

Fowler's Stages of Faith



Undifferentiated Faith

In the pre-stage called Undifferentiated faith the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with sensed threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infant's environment. Though really a pre-stage and largely inaccessible to empirical research of the kind we pursue, the quality of mutuality and the strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development.

The emergent strength of faith in this stage is the fund of basic trust and the relational experience of mutuality with the one(s) providing primary love and care.

The danger or deficiency in the stage is a failure of mutuality in either of two directions. Either there may emerge an excessive narcissism in which the experience of being "central" continues to dominate and distort mutuality, or experiences of neglect or inconsistencies may lock the infant in patterns of isolation and failed mutuality.

Transition to Stage 1 begins with the convergence of thought and language, opening up the use of symbols in speech and ritual play.

(Fowler, 1981, p. 121)



Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

Stage 1 Intuitive-Projective faith is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults.

The stage most typical of the child of three to seven, it is marked by a relative fluidity of thought patterns. The child is continually encountering novelties for which no stable operations of knowing have been formed. The imaginative processes underlying fantasy are unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought. In league with forms of knowing dominated by perception, imagination in the stage is extremely productive of long lasting images and feelings (positive and negative) that later, more stable and self-reflective valuing and thinking will have to order and sort out. This is the stage of first self-awareness. The “self-aware” child is egocentric as regards the perspectives of others. Here we find first awareness of death and sex and of the strong taboos by which cultures and families insulate those powerful areas.

The gift or emergent strength of this stage is the birth of imagination, the ability to unify and grasp the experience-world in powerful images and as presented in stories that register in the child’s intuitive understandings and feelings toward the ultimate conditions of existence.

The dangers of this stage arise from the possible “possession” of the child’s imagination by unrestrained images of terror and destructiveness, or from the witting or unwitting exploitations of her or his imagination in the reinforcement of taboos and moral or doctrinal expectations.

The main factor precipitating transition to the next stage is the emergence of concrete operational thinking. Affectively, the resolution of Oedipal issues or their submersion in latency are important accompanying factors. At the heart of the transition is the child’s growing concern to know how things are and to clarify for

him- or herself the bases of distinctions between what is real and what only seems to be.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 133-4)



Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

Stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Symbols are taken as one-dimensional and literal in meaning. In this stage the rise of concrete operations leads to the curbing and ordering of the previous stage's imaginative composing of the world. The episodic quality of Intuitive-Projective faith gives way to a more linear, narrative construction of coherence and meaning. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. This is the faith stage of the school child (though we sometimes find the structure dominant in adolescents and in adults). Marked by increased accuracy in taking the perspective of other persons, those in Stage 2 compose a world based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity. The actors in their cosmic stories are anthropomorphic. They can be affected deeply and powerfully by symbolic and dramatic materials and can describe in endlessly detailed narrative what has occurred. They do not, however, step back from the flow of stories to formulate reflective, conceptual meanings. For this stage the meaning is both carried and "trapped" in the narrative.

The new capacity or strength in this stage is the rise of narrative and the emergence of story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience.

The limitations of literalness and an excessive reliance upon reciprocity as a principle for constructing an ultimate environment can result either in an overcontrolling, stilted perfectionism or "works righteousness" or in their opposite, an abasing sense of badness embraced because of mistreatment, neglect or the apparent disfavor of significant others.

A factor initiating transitions to Stage 3 is the implicit clash or contradictions in stories that leads to reflection on meanings. The transition to formal operational thought makes such reflection possible and necessary. Previous literalism breaks down; new "cognitive conceit" (Elkind) leads to disillusionment with previous

teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory) must be faced. The emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective taking (“I see you seeing me; I see me as you see me; I see you seeing me seeing you.”) creates the need for a more personal relationship with the unifying power of the ultimate environment.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 149-50)



Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

In Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith, a person’s experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook.

Stage 3 typically has its rise and ascendancy in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium. It structures the ultimate environment in interpersonal terms. Its images of unifying value and power derive from the extension of qualities experienced in personal relationships. It is a “conformist” stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and as yet does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective. While beliefs and values are deeply felt, they typically are tacitly held - the person “dwells” in them and in the meaning world they mediate. But there has not been occasion to step outside them to reflect on or examine them explicitly or systematically. At Stage 3 a person has an “ideology,” a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it. Differences of outlook with others are experienced as differences in “kind” of person. Authority is located in the incumbents of traditional authority roles (if perceived as personally worthy) or in the consensus of a valued, face-to-face group.

The emergent capacity of this stage is the forming of a personal myth - the myth of one’s own becoming in identity and faith, incorporating one’s past and anticipated future in an image of the ultimate environment unified by characteristics of personality.

The dangers or deficiencies of this stage are twofold. The expectations and evaluations of others can be so compellingly internalized (and sacralized) that later autonomy of judgment and action can be jeopardized; or interpersonal betrayals can give rise either to nihilistic despair about a personal principle of ultimate being or to a compensatory intimacy with God unrelated to mundane relations.

Factors contributing to the breakdown of Stage 3 and to readiness for transition may include: serious clashes or contradictions between valued authority sources; marked changes, by officially sanctioned leaders, or policies or practices previously deemed sacred and unbreachable (for example, in the Catholic Church changing the mass from Latin to the vernacular, or no longer requiring abstinence from meat on Friday); the encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflections on how one's beliefs and values have formed and changed, and on how "relative" they are to one's particular group or background. Frequently the experience of "leaving home" - emotionally or physically, or both - precipitates the kind of examination of self, background, and life-guiding values that gives rise to stage transition at this point.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 172-3)



Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

The movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective faith is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes. Where genuine movement toward Stage 4 is underway the person must face certain unavoidable tensions: individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership; subjectivity and the power of one's strongly felt but unexamined feelings versus objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection; self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern versus service to and being for others; the question of being committed to the relative versus struggle with the possibility of an absolute.

Stage 4 most appropriately takes form in young adulthood (but let us remember that many adults do not construct it and that for a significant group it emerges only in the mid-thirties or forties). This stage is marked by a double development. The self, previously sustained in its identity and faith compositions by an interpersonal circle of significant others, now claims an identity no longer defined by the composite of one's roles or meanings to others. To sustain that new identity it

composes a meaning frame conscious of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a “world view.” Self (identity) and outlook (world view) are differentiated from those of others and become acknowledged factors in the reactions, interpretations and judgments one makes on the actions of the self and others. It expresses its intuitions of coherence in an ultimate environment in terms of an explicit system of meanings. Stage 4 typically translates symbols into conceptual meanings. This is a “demythologizing” stage. It is likely to attend minimally to unconscious factors influencing its judgments and behavior.

Stage 4’s ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology). Its dangers inhere in its strengths: an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self over-assimilates “reality” and the perspectives of others into its own world view.

Restless with the self-images and outlook maintained by Stage 4, the person ready for transition finds him- or herself attending to what may feel like anarchic and disturbing inner voices. Elements from a childish past, images and energies from a deeper self, a gnawing sense of the sterility and flatness of the meanings one serves - any or all of these may signal readiness for something new. Stories, symbols, myths and paradoxes from one’s own or other traditions may insist on breaking in upon the neatness of the previous faith. Disillusionment with one’s compromises and recognition that life is more complex than Stage 4’s logic of clear distinctions and abstract concepts can comprehend, press one toward a more dialectical and multileveled approach to life truth.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 182-3)

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith



Stage 5 Conjunctive faith involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4’s self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality. This stage develops a “second naïveté” (Ricoeur) in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings. Here there must also be a new reclaiming and reworking of one’s past. There must be an opening to the voice of one’s “deeper self.” Importantly, this involves a critical recognition of one’s social unconscious - the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one’s nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like.

Unusual before mid-life, Stage 5 knows the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts. What the previous stage struggled to clarify, in terms of the boundaries of self and outlook, this stage now makes porous and permeable. Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are "other." Ready for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self and outlook (including new depths of experience in spirituality and religious revelation), this stage's commitment to justice is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation. And with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others' generating identity and meaning.

The new strength of this stage comes in the rise of the ironic imagination - a capacity to see and be in one's or one's group's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality. Its danger lies in the direction of a paralyzing passivity or inaction, giving rise to complacency or cynical withdrawal, due to its paradoxical understanding of truth.

Stage 5 can appreciate symbols, myths and rituals (its own and others') because it has been grasped, in some measure, by the depth of reality to which they refer. It also sees the divisions of the human family vividly because it has been apprehended by the possibility (and imperative) of an inclusive community of being. But this stage remains divided. It lives and acts between an untransformed world and a transforming vision and loyalties. In some few cases this division yields to the call of the radical actualization that we call Stage 6.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 197-8)



Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

In order to characterize Stage 6 we need to focus more sharply on the dialectical or paradoxical features of Stage 5 faith. Stage 5 can see injustice in sharply etched terms because it has been apprehended by an enlarged awareness of the demands of justice and their implications. It can recognize partial truths and their limitations because it has been apprehended by a more comprehensive vision of truth. It can appreciate and cherish symbols, myths and rituals in new depth because it has been apprehended in some measure by the

depth of reality to which the symbols refer and which they mediate. It sees the fractures and divisions of the human family with vivid pain because it has been apprehended by the possibility of an inclusive commonwealth of being. Stage 5 remains paradoxical or divided, however, because the self is caught between these universalizing apprehensions and the need to preserve its own being and well-being. Or because it is deeply invested in maintaining the ambiguous order of a socioeconomic system, the alternatives to which seem more unjust or destructive than it is. In this situation of paradox Stage 5 must act and not be paralyzed. But Stage 5 acts out of conflicting loyalties. Its readiness to spend and be spent finds limits in its loyalty to the present order, to its institutions, groups and compromise procedures. Stage 5's perceptions of justice outreach its readiness to sacrifice the self and to risk the partial justice of the present order for the sake of a more inclusive justice and the realization of love.

The transition to Stage 6 involves an overcoming of this paradox through a moral and ascetic actualization of the universalizing apprehensions. Heedless of the threats to self, to primary groups, and to the institutional arrangements of the present order that are involved, Stage 6 becomes a disciplined, activist incarnation - a making real and tangible - of the imperatives of absolute love and justice of which Stage 5 has partial apprehensions. The self at Stage 6 engages in spending and being spent for the transformation of present reality in the direction of transcendent actuality.

Persons best described by Stage 6 typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for the transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. In their penetration through the obsession with survival, security, and significance they threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence. Their enlarged visions of universal community disclose the partialness of our tribes and pseudo-species. And their leadership initiatives, often involving strategies of nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being, constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance. It is little wonder that persons best described by Stage 6 so frequently become martyrs for the visions they incarnate.

(Fowler, 1981, pp. 199-200, quoting from Fowler & Keen, 1978)