

## Faith as the Holy Human Ground of Humanity – James Fowler on Faith as our Developing Capacity for Making Meaning in the World

Presentation by David R. Weiss

### Journey of Faith – September 22, 2021 – St. Paul's United Church of Christ

I want to begin with a few words about the larger arc of our Journey of Faith programming since I played a central role in crafting it.

Most of us, maybe every one of us, regard it as more than a tagline when we say on our church website, in our bulletins, and throughout our annual reports that we are a community “journeying together to deepen our faith, seek justice for all, and share God’s unconditional love with the world.” *We aspire to hold those words as the very texture of our shared life.*

But those words aren’t alone in shaping that texture. With two new ministers and several other staff changes since last fall, we’re in a season of vibrant transition and renewal within our congregation. That season is also part of the texture of our shared life. At the same time, we are *also* in a season of precarious tumult in our world: pandemic, economic insecurity, broken health care, political polarization and violence, voter suppression, racial injustice and white nationalism, burgeoning refugees and immigrants, and the escalating crisis of Earth’s ecosystems. This season of deep uncertainty also shapes the texture of our shared life.

So what does it mean to be “journeying together to deepen our faith, seek justice for all, and share God’s unconditional love with the world” ... in the midst of these intertwined seasons? *That’s* the question of personal and communal vocation that will accompany us through this year’s Journey of Faith.

We’ve asked each speaker to join us in *this conversation*, so that across the diversity of their topics—and their lives—we might be invited to look *inward* at our own journey of faith with fresh and maybe unexpected insight as we move into the seasons ahead. Discerning how we might meet this world with faith, justice, and love as companions of Jesus in this vibrant, messy moment.

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Tonight, I want to offer some thoughts for how we understand the faith that moves in our lives.

I “met” James Fowler secondhand as a junior at Wartburg College in 1981 where his then groundbreaking work on Faith Development was central to a textbook I used in a course on religious cults. Fowler’s ideas were so intriguing to me as a religiously-driven psychology major that I used his theory in my senior psychology research project the following year.

Several years later, I used a different text by him in a seminary course on pastoral care. And in the mid-90’s Fowler’s work—by then translated into multiple languages and being taught around the world—played a central role in my unfinished Ph.D. dissertation, which set his theory in conversation with Lutheran theology and Christian ethics. Although I never completed the dissertation, that deep dive into Fowler’s work in graduate school at Notre Dame bore fruit in the seven or eight times I taught my own classes in Faith Development, first at Luther College, then at both Augsburg and St. Kate’s here in the Cities.

In teaching Fowler’s work, both to traditionally aged college students and also to adult learners 30-60 years old in weekend college programs, I came not only to understand his theory better but to appreciate again and again, the insight it offered to so many persons in reflecting on the unfolding mystery of their own lives.

These next two weeks will only be a glimpse into Faith Development Theory, but it may be a glimpse that serves us well as we listen to other speakers throughout the year—and perhaps most importantly as we listen to the shifting texture of faith in our lives. So here we go.

Most of us recognize that we're not the same people we once were. Whether we use terms like "older and wiser" or simply "all grown up," we've put some years between the womb and where we are today. Along the way we've seen our bodies blossom (some of us have even seen them wilt a bit!). Our minds have learned to think thoughts from math to morality that we couldn't imagine at age two or three. Our hearts have learned to negotiate joy and sorrow, to make promises, and to experience heartache in ways that our kindergarten selves couldn't have guessed at. And we've juggled an array of social roles and relationships that our elementary school years just barely introduced us to.

So, we all change. *We develop*. But what about "faith"—does it develop with us? And if so, how? And what *is* faith anyway? Is it simply the sum total of *what* we believe—the official doctrines and personal ideas we hold about God? Or is it somehow different than "what" we believe?

Wrestling with these questions is wrestling with the mystery of our own life. James Fowler is one theologian-theorist that I've found very helpful in thinking about them. After first teaching at Harvard Divinity School and Boston College, he served for thirty years as Professor of Theology and Human Development at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, where he also directed both the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development and the Center for Ethics until his retirement in 2005. He died in 2015.

Fowler published his most significant book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* in 1981. The rest of his career was devoted to refining this work and exploring new ways to apply its insights. By the time of his death in 2015 his book had gone through more than 40 printings in multiple languages. He authored several other books and dozens of articles, initiating an *international* conversation on Faith Development. He received lifetime achievement awards from both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association for contributions to the dialogue between religion and psychology.

Hailed by students and colleagues alike as a wise, gracious presence as scholar, teacher, and friend, someone whose learning was led and shaped by curiosity and compassion, he is a most worthy conversation partner for us at the start of this year's Journey of Faith.

Fowler's understanding of faith has its intellectual-theological roots in Protestant Christian theology. He was shaped foremost by the great Reformed theologian H. Richard Niebuhr and the great Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich. From them he drew the notion of faith as the centering-integrating energy of our lives. Faith is that which draws us together in response to something or Someone in which we invest our highest value and to which we pledge our greatest loyalty.

For Niebuhr and Tillich faith was *not* automatically focused on God. Our lives are replete with competing values, and, writing in the shadow of Nazism, both theologians knew that virulent nationalism could—and did—win uncompromising loyalty from many. Clearly the form of a life pledged in loyalty to the Führer of the Third Reich varied infinitely from that of a life pledged in loyalty to the God of the Bible. But Niebuhr and Tillich were adamant that the same dynamic of faith—as faith—is at play in our lived response to that with which we are "ultimately concerned."

Fowler drew on the work of Wilfred Cantrell Smith, a scholar of world religions, in viewing faith as naming a "quality of the person not the system." What Smith meant by this was that in his study of religious persons around the globe, he came to perceive that there was a quality to

their lived engagement with life that was *prior to and deeper than* the varied beliefs of their particular tradition. He called this quality “faith.”

Smith wrote: “Faith is deeper, richer, more personal [than religion]. It is engendered and sustained by a religious tradition, in some cases and to some degrees by its doctrines; but faith is a quality of the person, not the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbor, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension.”

Based on this understanding of faith, Smith reported that he found quite *similar* forms of faith across very *different* religious traditions—and vastly *different* forms of faith within the *same* tradition. Thus, he found Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Christians whose basic orientation to life was remarkably similar despite the vast differences in their specific beliefs. And he found within a single tradition, persons whose basic orientation to life varied as widely as night and day.

So these three persons—Niebuhr, Tillich, and Smith—form the theological core of Fowler’s view of faith, which is filled out, as we’ll see, with insight from psychological theorists on human development ... and ultimately through interviews with thousands of subjects.

In its shortest form, Fowler views faith as **(1) universal (2) meaning-making (3) activity involving our (4) whole person.** Let me unpack each of those claims, even though for Fowler they’re woven together into a single cord.

1. Faith is UNIVERSAL because it is something *every human being* does. We are, each one of us, driven by an instinctive desire to perceive meaning in our lives and in the world around us. Fowler would say this drive—and our response to it—is the *sine qua non* of humanity: it is the quality that makes us human. (Literally *sine qua non* means “that-without-which-not”; in other words, for Fowler, faith is the-quality-without-which-we-are-not-human.)

2. Faith is all about MEANING-MAKING. For Fowler “faith” IS the response we make to the universal hunger to find meaning in the world. It is living in relation to a *transcendent point of reference* so that we construe the events of our lives, the relationships in which we live, the values that we embrace, as falling within a context, a story, *larger* than ourselves.

3. Faith is an ACTIVITY. Fowler views faith as our *lived engagement in life*. While we often regard “faith” as offering our intellectual assent or loyalty to a certain set of ideas/beliefs, if we look to the saints and mystics, those who *exemplify* faith, we notice that for these persons faith *isn’t* the affirmation of ideas but a lived engagement with life grounded in a deeper (really beyond-words) experience of Holy Mystery. Thus, Fowler says, faith is clearly something we *do* with our life, not a set of ideas in our heads.

4. Finally, faith involves our WHOLE person. When we make meaning, we use our mind and our heart, our thoughts and our feelings, our moral reasoning and our relationships—we draw on *every* facet of ourselves. Faith is the activity in which we draw together all of who we are in establishing/creating our fullest self.

Two other claims follow closely from this way of approaching faith.

First, for Fowler, as for Smith, faith is deeper than and *distinct from* particular beliefs. Beliefs can help name, express, describe, and even nurture our faith. *But our faith is the posture with which we meet life before we put any words to it.* So, Fowler can “unhitch” faith from specific religions and look at it as a quality of human living. This allows him—and us—to use his theory appreciatively in

encountering persons in other religious traditions as well as encountering persons at the other ends of our own religious tradition.

Second, because faith involves the whole gamut of our human capacities, it *develops—alongside and in sync with those capacities*. So, for instance, we know that the cognitive ability of children develops across time. We know that our emotions and our skills for moral reasoning develop. We know that our capacity for being in mature relationships develops. And—because faith uses all these capacities and more to make meaning—faith also develops.

Drawing on the work of development theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Erik Erickson, and others, Fowler identified specific aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and symbolic development that we employ in weaving meaning out of the threads of our experience. Each of these aspects develops as we grow, sometimes from birth to maturity, sometimes across the whole of our lives.

Because there is a good body of independent research that measures these aspects of human development from childhood into adulthood, Fowler devised interview questions that revealed patterns in how these *different developing capacities work together as individuals perceive meaning*. He was able to “map” the ways individuals (ranging from little children to elderly persons) fashioned meaning in their world. He found recurring ways that these capacities are more or less “packaged” in six over-arching patterns—he called them stages—that unfold across a person’s lifetime.

Each “stage” is focused on the same task: enabling faith. But each stage shows remarkable consistency in how it coordinates these different developing capacities to help us make meaning.

One analogy for this is a calculator. Imagine the first toy calculator you might give a toddler: BIG keys, simple functions—plus, minus, multiply, divide. Now take a basic household calculator: besides the keys being smaller, you probably add in a percent function, a square root, and maybe a memory key. Finally, imagine a calculator with a full set of “scientific” functions. Each calculator is doing math. But the complexity of math they’re able to do increases with each model.

Or consider boxes of crayons. A baby’s very first set might just be 3 big egg-shaped primary color crayons, perfect for tiny fingers. Then there’s the basic box of eight colors; followed by boxes of 16, 24, 48, 64, 96, and the big box of 120. Each box is for the same purpose: coloring. But each successive box increases the range of hues available to color the world with nuance.

Ultimately, Fowler identified three broad eras of “faithing,” with two distinct stages in each era. We’ll unpack the stages a little further next week. But I do want to get them “on the table” tonight before I offer some concluding thoughts. These are Fowler’s Faith Stages.

**Stage-Pattern “0” – Primal Faith (birth - ages 2/3).** This “pre-stage” isn’t part of Fowler’s six-stage theory because his method of interview research doesn’t work until children can speak. But because we are invested in meaning-making from the moment we’re born, he surmises that our capacity to feel/know meaning in our lives at this point is bound up with whether we are well-loved and whether our basic needs are well-met in our first years, whether *trust* emerges in our disposition toward life. At this age, the “transcendent” power in our lives is manifest in the quality of care and love we receive. These first experiences set the earliest tone for our faith, whether it will be built on a sense that the “Out There” loves us, neglects us, or hurts us.

**The Pre-Conventional Era:** Fowler groups Stage 1 and 2 together as “pre-conventional” because at these stages we make meaning largely without much reference at all to the groups around us. Think of the unique “fashion sense” shown by little kids when they dress themselves. They dress in a “pre-conventional” way, without reference to what others might think.

**Stage 1 – First Faith (usually @ages 3 - 7/8).** Our imagination is utterly uninhibited at this age; we can “believe” anything, so our meaning-making is often quite “magical.” We appropriate the stories of our faith tradition as episodes only (without any interest in their order ... and we can listen to them endlessly), but they become our first building blocks of meaning. The symbols and rituals of our traditions have almost unlimited power: who we notice being included or excluded affects us deeply. The “quality” of our faith hinges on parents, caregivers, teachers.

**Stage 2 – Childhood-Storied Faith (usually @ ages 6/7 - 11/12).** Here we develop the capacity for narrative thought (the ability to arrange episodes within a larger narrative)—and we can find meaning through over-arching storylines. We sort through fact and fantasy. We often become tyrannical about rules. We’re eager to learn the story of our own “tribe”: to learn that *I am Christian*, or Muslim, or Hindu, or African-American, etc. Our first inklings of group belonging occur here. God tends to look a lot like our parents, only bigger and more powerful. Which can either be a good or not so good thing.

**The Conventional Era:** Fowler groups Stage 3 and 4 together as “conventional” because here we make meaning by giving primary importance to the *conventions* (the expectations and norms) of the groups that matter most to us. Initially this means family, then peers; later on, it means the institutions (workplaces, churches, political parties, etc.) we choose to affiliate with.

**Stage 3 – Adolescent-Conforming-Belonging Faith (usually @ ages 11/12 - 18/20).** In this stage our peers, parents, and teachers carry *lots* of weight in how we make meaning. Interpersonal relationships are so important that our worldview is largely unexamined, we make meaning *through* our primary “reference” group without even realizing it.

**Stage 4 – Owned Adult Faith (usually @ ages 22 - 30+ ... if at all).** Here we complete the work of stage 3, resulting in a faith pattern that is often *very* examined, very strongly held, and often a bit presumptive. In this stage we have a tendency to “resolve” messy issues too quickly and too confidently, erasing all complexity. This is sort of the summit of selfhood.

*For plenty of folks, stage 4 (or even 3) is where meaning-making tops out. Just as many of us have never wielded the strength of full-functioned scientific calculator, nothing guarantees that we reach the maximum faith development.*

**The Post-Conventional Era:** Fowler groups Stages 5 and 6 together as “post-conventional” because here we make meaning with a full awareness of society’s *conventions* (expectations and norms), but we’re no longer bound by them. Hence, *post*-conventional. Meaning is made with reference to principles and values that are more universal than a particular group. In a sense this era is the “bonus round” of meaning-making; Fowler found hardly anyone who reached this before their mid-thirties, and most persons never do.

**Stage 5 – Seasoned Faith (usually @ ages 35+ ... if at all).** This faith reflects full wisdom and maturity; we don’t need a neat/tidy worldview but can tolerate lots of shades of gray. We display a *deep* openness to others who are really *other*; a sense of humility; a felt interdependence.

**Stage 6 – Sainted Faith (usually @ ages 40+ ... if at all).** This stage exhibits meaning-making with nothing held back. Fowler calls it “universalizing faith” because here the self sort of merges with all that has being (God, Universe) and acts in deep solidarity with all that suffers and yearns for liberation. This is the faith of saints and martyrs.

Those are James Fowler’s “Stages of Faith.” Of course, there’s *a lot more* to each stage, and I’ll point out some other interesting things next week. But this is sufficient for you to sense the basic contours of his theory.

Before I close this first presentation, I want to mention FIVE final important insights now that we have the big picture in front of us.

The first TWO have to do with the “normative” edge to Fowler’s theory. This is the power of a theory to suggest what is the ideal or best way for things to be. Fowler was adamant that his theory was NOT meant to “grade” anyone’s faith. But there are two distinct—almost opposite—ways that Faith Development Theory *does* make normative claims.

**The first is with respect to the person.** Fowler said that each Faith Stage *does* align best with a particular age range. This point is best made using clothing as an analogy. At any given age, you move best in clothes that are the right size for your body. Drape a kid in adult clothing and they’ll only be able to move clumsily. This doesn’t happen very often—typically our capacities unfold pretty much in sync with our age—but it can happen. Sometimes cognitive development outpaces social or emotional development. Sometimes family dynamics drive kids to take on social or emotional roles long before they’re ready for them.

When any facet of our development gets delayed or rushed our meaning-making gets knocked off balance, too. So, Fowler’s theory *does* suggest that it’s normative—ideal—for each Faith Stage to appear in sync with its own appropriate developmental era in our lives. Each stage takes a turn at being “best” for us as we grow.

But there is **a second sense in which Fowler’s Stages are normative.** Instead of using the person as its reference point, this sense uses “objective reality.” Now, if you ask which Faith Stages best grasp the full “meaning of life,” that would be the post-conventional Stages 5 and 6. (For Fowler the main difference between Stages 5 and 6 is not so much *what* they apprehend about reality but how *intensely* they experience it and how all-encompassing of a response they evoke.)

In this *absolute sense*, Stage 5/6 Faith is normative; it offers the best and truest vantage point for sensing the fullness of reality. While many of us would be reluctant to demonstrate the courage of a martyr or the radical simplicity of a saint, we wouldn’t say it’s because *they’re* “mistaken”; we’d say it’s because *we’re* not quite ready ourselves to live *that* fully. We *know* it’s a higher, more holy way of living, even if we aren’t ready to go there ourselves. One key implication of this sense of “normative” is that the adequacy of any other faith stage is in part a measure of how much it anticipates, reflects, or is open to the view from Stage 5/6. The lower stage-patterns are “healthy” to the extent that they allow/encourage us *to grow beyond them*.

**The third key insight** is that, while the first three faith stages unfold very predictably (they’re pretty much driven by our own natural development, which happens more or less ... naturally), with Stage 4, *everything changes*. Whether we reach this stage and whether we grow beyond it is driven more by the richness of our life experiences than by the growth of our brains and bodies.

In fact, some adults end up trying to make meaning at Faith Stage 2—and they do so rather neurotically as they attempt to navigate life with skills sorely inadequate to the challenge. Adult life is just too complex for stage-pattern 2.

Much more often, though, adults “settle” at Stage 3; or they “flirt” with Stage 4 but drift back into Stage 3. Because in many ways our culture, entertainment, and economy are all geared for this *not-quite-mature* type of faith. Ads appeal precisely to Stage 3 Faith by pressing all of our “conventional” buttons. While it’s great for selling stuff, it isn’t healthy *for us*—either individually or as a society—over the long term. Stage 3 Faith simply isn’t well-suited to deal with complex problems like a global pandemic, racial justice, or climate change, but it does “serve” big business (and some churches) well. There *are* organizations with vested interests that would rather see a

large portion of our population make and spend money (and maintain loyal memberships) at Stage 3 rather than reach Stage 4 and actually “grow up” and become thoughtful citizens.

Still, plenty of adults do reach Stage-Pattern 4. Corporate executives and college campuses are well-represented here. A smaller group of folks reach Stages 5 or 6 (probably including some who reach these final stages “under the radar,” unnoticed by the rest of us). Fowler says every healthy adult is *capable* of at least a Stage 4 Faith, but many never reach it. He suspects that *under ideal conditions* (good parenting, good education, rich life experience), *many* of us could make it to the beginning of Stage 5 Faith. We’re “wired” with the potential for high-level meaning-making, but we live in less than ideal conditions.

**The fourth insight** has to do with specific beliefs. In general, specific beliefs or values aren’t tied to specific stages but they *are held differently* (or for different reasons) in each stage. Most children echo the beliefs and values of their parents (whether conservative, moderate, liberal, or progressive) even though they don’t hold those beliefs in the same way. Each stage uses beliefs a little differently. But virtually any belief or attitude (like overt racism *or* vocal support for LGBTQ persons) can be held at Stages 1-3, *because in these stages our beliefs and attitudes are largely uncritical echoes of the persons (and books and communities) who have influence over us*. And, at Stage 3 our beliefs and values will shift to follow the peer group that has most influence on us.

It isn’t until Stage 4 that we truly *choose* beliefs and values as our own. That’s still a wide-range of beliefs and attitudes that we could hold (including some pretty reprehensible ones), but many of us will, in fact, “think ourselves” out of less nuanced positions by the time we reach Stage 4 (if we reach it at all). And because Stages 5 and 6 presumes the capacity to make meaning by listening to and incorporating the voices *of others*, these stages radically “filter out” unhelpful beliefs. Racist attitudes, for instance, can’t be sustained at Stage 5. In fact, Fowler discovered that by Stage 5, people no longer spoke about hell; it simply wasn’t useful in how they made meaning.

Bottom line: beliefs can *either* foster *or* stifle faith (meaning-making). Sometimes ancient beliefs offer rich soil for faith today. And sometimes we find we must choose new beliefs because our faith demands that of us. Neither is always right or always wrong.

**Fifth, and finally**, Fowler felt that *all persons* move through these stages regardless of their religious tradition. Every baby—whether their family is Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jew, etc.—is born into “primal faith” and moves into Stage 1, then into Stage 2 and so forth. But Fowler also recognized that within each tradition there are some strands (some sects, leaders, communities, texts, hymns) that are more conducive to reaching higher stages ... and there are others that tend to hold people back. Sometimes people move from one temple/church/mosque/synagogue to another, or from one denomination to another, or from one tradition to another, because they’re tired of “banging their head on the ceiling” in a place that won’t let them grow any further. It’s likely that many of us here at St. Paul’s UCC—if we didn’t grow up UCC—came here carrying a few bruises from banging our heads against the ceiling of other traditions.

I find Fowler’s portrait of faith as a living, dynamic, developing capacity for making meaning to be very helpful looking at our own lives. His work offers insight into the dynamics at play in how each of our personal stories has unfolded, both outwardly and inwardly—whether that dynamic has expressly included religion or not. We all seek to fashion meaning, and when we understand faith in this way, it helps us better understand religious traditions, family systems, societies, and—not least—ourselves.

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4200; last revised: 2021.09