



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

Guide to Whole Person Development – PART 5 THE SPIRITUAL SELF

What gives meaning and purpose to your life? Fr. Alfred Delp once remarked, **“When through one man a little more love and goodness, a little more light and truth come into the world, then that man’s life has had meaning.”** Another Jesuit priest, Pedro Arrupe, advised, **“Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quiet and absolute and final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love; stay in love, and it will decide everything.”** Both quotations speak of personal conviction that overflows into life choices—in other words, a spirituality that informs one’s daily living. The search for meaning is a perennial quest of humankind; the theme of classic books, movies, and music; and an integral characteristic of the spiritual self. The focus of this newsletter is the spiritual self.

Early in his life James W. Fowler (1940-) became interested in how people differed from each other and how their faith developed throughout their lifetime from childhood into adulthood. He combined theological insights with extensive interviews, asking people to describe their faith. He also drew on psychological theories of human development, including Piaget’s description of how children develop the capacity to think and reason; Erikson’s stages of physical, psychological, and social development; and Kohlberg’s observations on developing moral reasoning. Pulling together these perspectives, Fowler was able to describe six stages of faith in the book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981). Since then Fowler has continued to research faith development at Emory University, where he is director of the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development.

D. Andrew Kille, Ph. D., (revdak@revdak.com) teaches, lectures and writes on psychology, spirituality and the Bible. He offers the following descriptions of stages of faith and suggestions for cultivating spiritual development:

It is in the special relationship between an infant and caregivers that the earliest foundations of faith are established. She is fed and warmed; he is carried and cuddled. Children who are deprived of loving touch and reliable care become withdrawn and find it difficult to connect with others as they grow. Our first experiences of God are linked to our parents, and we form our first images of God as infants. During this first year or so, the most important thing a parent can offer is a sense of safety, dependability and love, providing an environment in which the child can develop the capacity for caring and attachment to others. Fowler calls these vital first years of development the time of primal or undifferentiated faith. Although it is foundational to later faith development, it does not have structure or content. The first real steps toward faith development begin as the child begins to develop language and thinking.

STAGE 1: INTUITIVE/PROJECTIVE FAITH

As he or she begins to learn and tries to make sense of the world, the child may construct fanciful explanations or imaginative connections between experiences. Faith is immediate—not always filtered through thoughts or language—and it can look strange and wonderful. Columnist Dave Barry described a conversation between his four-year-old daughter and her Jewish friend. “What’s ~Jewish?” she asked. Her friend wasn’t sure,

except she knew that all her family was Jewish and they all lived in Miami. The girls concluded that “Jewish” meant “from Miami,” which led Barry’s daughter to wonder if she, too, was Jewish. They had taken two small pieces of information and connected them as best they could. This is why children of this age often make adults say “Aw, how cute!”

This first stage is called intuitive because it is based not on reason or logic, but on immediate experience

and leaps of intuition. It is projective because the child is self-centered and projects his or her viewpoint on the outside world. The development of imagination is the strength of this stage, as well as the danger. Children engage in magical thinking—they may believe that their thoughts control events around them, leading to feelings of guilt. Fantasies of danger or threat can be so real as to cause terror. **SUGGESTIONS:** Encourage imaginative play. Gently correct their misconceptions, but don't overreact to their mistakes. Don't single them out for blame—they take it very seriously. Be aware that they can become seriously frightened or guilty about things that seem trivial.

Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith

Around the age of eight, the child starts to distinguish between what is "real" and what is "pretend." He or she becomes fascinated with stories—family stories, Bible stories, any stories. She begins to tell stories about herself and her experiences. All these stories are taken very literally, as children at this age are concrete thinkers. They tend to be rigid in their thinking and strict in their understanding of rules and customs. They are not yet able to stand aside and reflect or critique. The strength of this stage is the gift for storytelling; the danger is perfectionism or a desire for control. **SUGGESTIONS:** Encourage them to tell about their experiences—what they did at school, what they heard at Sunday School. Read to them and tell stories about the family, about their own early childhood, and about the world. Let them know they are loved even when they aren't perfect.

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith

During adolescence, children become aware of others and peers become very important. They find that other people have different ways of understanding themselves and the world, and that even their own self-understandings may conflict with each other. They must decide which values will guide their lives. They also

become very sensitive to the opinions of their peers. Faith at this stage, then, is synthetic because it involves piecing together a coherent sense of one's self and commitments and conventional because community values and attitudes are highly influential in shaping that faith. Faith at this stage is deeply held but is not very self-reflective. People know clearly what they believe, but may have difficulty saying why. The strength of this stage is the development of a personal sense of faith. The danger is that desire to please others can keep the child from seeking his or her own integrity. **SUGGESTIONS:** Recognize that the young person is forming his or her own faith and that it will most likely be different from the parent's own faith. Talk with your child about your own faith journey, how your own faith has grown or changed.

Adult Stages of Faith

Many adults stabilize at stage three. It is not necessary for everyone to move through all the stages; for many, stage-three faith is entirely adequate. Others, because of their experiences, personalities or relationships, do not find stage three faith to be adequate. Fowler describes three more stages that may develop in adulthood. **Individuative/Projective Faith** is characterized by critical reflection on one's own values and commitments apart from community attitudes and leads to a more personalized (and sometimes contentious) outlook. In the fifth stage, **Conjunctive Faith**, the individual acknowledges unconscious depths and integrates all that has gone on before. The person may re-engage a faith community they had left during stage four, but at a deeper and more flexible level.

Universalizing Faith, the final stage, describes people whose faith permeates every dimension of their lives and serves to link them fundamentally with the whole human family. Fowler considers this stage to be very rare and points to such examples as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa. Others suggest that it may be more common, seen in those quiet "saints" whose profound faith enables them to open their hearts to all.

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