

Faith Types: Spiritual Paths to a Full Life
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Here we are, a room full of people with different stories about our faith journey here, to this room, to this expression of faith.

Our personalities differ. So do our ways to meaning-making, to the Spirit of Life, to the Divine.

While reading for this sermon I discovered a number of ways to assess faith and its growth.

A classic study is that of James Fowler and his book *Stages of Faith* – a thirty-year-old study in the maturation of faith, analogous to the maturation of the individual body.

As a baby we develop – or do not develop – a sense of trust and safety about the universe. The world will provide for us, or it has abandoned us.

As school children we see the world in absolutes – fair or unfair, good or bad. Deities are almost always anthropomorphized – God, or the Gods, or the ‘Goddess is seen with a human face and human, though exaggerated, attributes.

As a teen we focus on our development as individuals and on the role of authority in our lives. We may willingly submit, or begin to question, the powers-that-be. But, as Fowler tells us, “Any conflicts with one's beliefs are ignored at this stage due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fowler's_stages_of_faith_development; accessed 18 October 2012.

As an adult we may begin to notice the inconsistencies in our chosen faith. These days a young adult may choose to remain with the religion of his or her birth, or may list themselves as a “None” – distancing one’s self from any organized religious body.

But, Fowler contends that we may go on, in our mid-life, to acknowledge the paradox that is faith. Faith becomes a complex, multidimensional concept that incorporates many interdependent truths. Many paths lead to truth, and to the fullness and wholeness of living one’s life. Symbolism, myth and ritual help lead us to the depth and breadth of reality. Both my readings – on the nature of God, written by a Unitarian minister, and on the nature of religion, written by a French atheist – come from this stage, this mixture of the certainty and ambiguity of truth.

The final stage in Fowler’s hierarchy is “exceedingly rare.” [Fowler, 200] People in the final stage have reached a place of enlightenment in which few find themselves. They find themselves living lives of total commitment to the greater good. Think: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama.

Fowler’s stages of faith look at one person, and note how that person “grows” in faith. Fowler’s concept is a hierarchy – one stage is better than another. It is an interesting guide. But, I am wary of a guide that privileges one faith stage over another. Part of me says it’s a true analysis and that I, of course, can situate myself on one of the higher rungs. Another part of me screams: “Hubris!” Undue pride, bordering on arrogance. No way to meet an increasingly diverse religious world. No way to greet those in another, “lesser,” stage. No authentic platform from which to launch interfaith appreciation and cooperation.

Another way to “type” faith is to see how the various cells differentiate. Put labels on the various ways we express our faith. John Mabry writes about these classifications of faith expression in *Faith Styles: Ways People Believe* [2006].

Mabry envisions a circle of styles, starting with the traditional believer. The traditional believer posits an all-powerful and all-knowing transcendent Divinity, a hierarchical world in which everyone has his place, the literal truth of scriptures, and – quite possibly – a world other than the natural world. We all know folks who are traditional believers. We know few Unitarians who are.

Liberal religionists see the line between the divine and the human as not so stark. Liberal believers see themselves as partners with the Divine in the creation of the world – a world of love and justice. Belief in scripture is tempered by reason and experience. Science is valued. Questioning is accepted. We see Unitarians in this group.

Mabry labels atheists and agnostics as Ethical Humanists or Religious Agnostics. Ethical Humanists eschew supernaturalism. For both groups, nature and science, personal experience and reason are the yardsticks by which to measure truth. “Life itself dictates our ethical responsibilities and gives our lives shape, direction, and meaning.” [Mabry 36] Both groups are active in causes to improve society and to protect the environment. Lots of UUs here.

Mabry also presents us with a group he calls Spiritual Eclectics. These folks may see the holy everywhere. Spiritual Eclectics find wisdom in a variety of scriptures and teachers. They may also look to popular culture for wisdom. Their ultimate values include equality, peace and justice issues. Eclectics may meditate, do dreamwork, write poetry or journal, practice yoga or tai chi or a martial art; they may garden, they may knit – all as part of their spiritual growth. All paths are honored.

In practice – and Mabry does not cover this – Spiritual Eclectics may find themselves more drawn to one particular, more delineated practice – Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Wicca. Loads of Unitarians in this category.

Mabry’s book gives us some insight into how people in the same faith tradition may truly have different ways of believing. Think of Catholics or the Protestants or the Jews or the Muslims you may know – some very traditional, some very liberal. Back in Duluth, the nuns back at the College of St. Scholastica could be characterized as Spiritual Eclectics – seekers who invite a wide variety of faith styles into their spiritual practice.

Mabry’s classification system most certainly starts from a place of traditional belief. Other groups are offspring. Some may be heading toward the Black Sheep part of the faith family.

The more we read, the more we may sub-categorize our faith type. Unitarian Universalist theologian Peter Richardson among others builds a framework of spiritualities around the Meyers-Briggs psychological typing schema. [introvert/extrovert, sensing/intuitive, thinking/feeling, perceiving/judging]

Finally, there is the way our spiritual self resonates and thrives with our religious practices. What feed our spirits, our souls? What enriches us? Enlivens us? Gives us the strength to go out and do what needs to be done?

So, another way we might look at our spiritual type is to understand our spiritual preferences, the ways we experience something that lifts our spirit. One way to discern our spiritual preference is to look at what happens here on a Sunday, and figure out which practices float our spiritual boat, and which practices disturb us in some way.

Are these Sunday services each an individual delight to you? Or are you just waiting for the coffee and cookies? Do certain words that I use grate on your sensibilities – words like God or worship or prayer? Or do you long for those words to be used more often? Which kind of Sunday service – or which parts of the service – brings you the most satisfaction? Which are most annoying?

Theologian and pastoral counselor Corinne Ware, in her book *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, asks us a series of questions so we may discern, delineate our preferred spiritual style. What makes us feel connected, energized yet at peace with ourselves, whole? [This exercise can be done individually, or it can be done with an entire congregation in mind.]

Let me ask you:

Do you prefer a planned and orderly service about an important topic? Do you want the service to begin and end on time? Do you privilege scholarship, careful thinking, discussion? Do you really appreciate when I footnote a sermon, fill it with facts and figures, bring in stacks of resources for further study? Do you read ahead in the hymns to see if you agree with the theology of the words?

If so, you have what Ware calls a **Head Spirituality**, an intellectual, thinking kind of spirituality that “favors what it can see, touch, and vividly imagine.” [Ware 37] Yours is the spirituality of **the Thinker**, the Sage.

Do you prefer a deeply moving service? Is it important to you that you get a hug from someone on a Sunday? Do you long for singing that warms the heart, words that evoke the Spirit’s presence, feelings that express your soul’s yearnings? Do you want the preacher to move you emotionally? Do you want to be moved to tears? Do you truly appreciate Joys & Concerns? Should a sermon speak to the problems of our daily lives and relationships? Do you want worship to be about personal renewal and transformation? Do you want opportunities in church that will build relationships?

If so, you have a **Heart Spirituality**. You prefer an affective, heartfelt sort of spiritual experience. You love music and testimonials, stories that witness to the transcendent in life. Yours is the spirituality of **the Lover**, the Feeler, the Charismatic.

Another set of questions:

Are silence and simplicity important to you? Do your spiritual moments have an element of timelessness to them? Do you feel most spiritual when you can empty your mind of distractions and simply be in the presence of the Holy? Do you long for the meditation, the quiet period in the service?

Do you “want to be alone” and wish you could be alone more often? Does chant or rounds or an almost hypnotic, rhythmic sound inspire your soul? Is ritual important to you? Do you want places of retreat? Do you want access to places of quiet beauty? Do you feel that, though we can welcome Ultimate Reality or God or the Divine into our lives, we can never really know it?

If yes, yours is a **Soul Spirituality**, the spirituality of **the Mystic**. You honor simplicity, quiet, humility, letting go of everyday crises and chatter, involvement with the awe-inspiring.

A final set of questions:

Is the Sunday service primarily a time for you to prepare for service in the outside world? Are your life and work your prayer – the most important parts of your spiritual path? Do you really like the UU slogan: *deeds, not creeds*? Do you see songs as ways to mobilize and inspire us to greater effort and dedication? Do you feel that what we do is our “faith,” that what we do speaks louder than words? Do you believe that supporting political and social actions, establishing justice and equity in our society, is your most important function as a member of this congregation? Do you wish this congregation were more socially active? That we gave members more opportunities to engage in social justice issues? Do you believe that church is a place “to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable?”

Ah, then my friend, you have a **Hands Spirituality**. You are **the Activist**, you are in Service to the Greater Good, the Common Welfare.

Each of these types of spirituality is more important to some of us, and less so to others. You may find that one aspect weighs much more heavily than another; or that you resonate with two or more types of spirituality.

And each of these types has a dark side, a possible negative – ultimately unhelpful – path.

If you are predominantly a **Head Spirituality**, a critical thinker, you may move toward simply being a critic, willing and wanting to argue with all. You may lapse into dogmatism.

If you are a **Heart** type you may become over-emotional, take on other people’s emotions, worry unduly about how other’s feel – lose your emotional boundaries.

If you are a **Soul** type you may draw into yourself, isolate yourself, become detached from the world and indifferent to its problems.

And if you are live a **Hand Spirituality** you may become fixated on one of society’s problems, make others feel guilty that they are not doing enough, feel overly guilty yourself, become a bit of a moral fanatic.

But Ware’s system is “designed to affirm our gifts and to reveal our differences, not to evaluate the maturity or worth of any particular spiritual style.” [Ware 45] Balance, moderation, wholeness, personal growth are the hoped-for outcomes of becoming aware of one’s own spiritual type and tendencies, as well as other’s spiritual preferences.

We have all these types here: head, heart, soul, hand. We UUs, we want to do it all.

This is why we gather together on a Sunday. To nourish our own spiritual path. To be open to our neighbor’s spiritual path. To receive support, and to give support on our journeying.

We are journeymen, apprentices in this steep-learning-curve enterprise we call Life. Life comes with some internal and external guides, but no definitive roadmaps, user guides, troubleshooting tips. We learn these lessons along the way. We come here, to this place,

as teachers and as students of Life. Life with a big “L.” We come to be gifted and to gift. To give and to receive. To question. Wonder why. Wonder how we are to get up and face another day. We come to celebrate. We come to mourn.

We say: I’m rooting for you. We say: We’re all in this together. We say: Love is stronger than hate, stronger than death. We say: You are strong, stronger than you think. We say: “Fly bird of hope, and shine, light of love, and in calm – in open minds, in embracing hearts, in hands that work, in souls that sigh – may all find tranquility.”

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed be, and Amen.

Reading #1: “The Most Famous Liberal of All” Forrest Church (in *God and Other Famous Liberals: Recapturing Bible, Flag, and Family from the Far Right*; pp3-4)

Who is the most famous liberal of all time? It simply has to be God. No one is more generous, bounteous, or misunderstood. Not to mention profligate. Take a look at the creation. God is a lavish and indiscriminate host. There is too much of everything: creatures, cultures, languages, stars; more galaxies than we can count; more asteroids in the heavens than grains of sand on earth. Talk about self-indulgence, in the ark itself, if you take the story literally, there must have been a million pairs of insects. We may not like it, but that’s the way it is...

In the early middle ages, one school of mystical theologians, Dionysius principal among them, argued that, given the limitations of our knowledge and our vocabulary, the best way to describe God is by saying what God is not. Following Dionysius we can turn things around and say with great confidence that God is not *illiberal*. God is not miserly, parsimonious, penurious, or stingy. God is not narrow or rigid. Neither closefisted nor tightfisted, God is never spare when giving change.

God is also not God’s name; God is *our* name for the highest power we can image. For some the highest imaginable power will be a petty and angry tribal baron ensconced high above the clouds on a golden throne, visiting punishment on all who don’t believe in him. But for others, the highest power is love, goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself. Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion.

Reading #2: “Wisdom without Doctrine” Alain de Botton

Attempting to prove the non-existence of God can be an entertaining activity for atheists. Tough-minded critics of religion have found much pleasure in laying bare the idiocy of believers in remorseless detail, finishing only when they felt they had shown up their enemies as thorough-going simpletons or maniacs.

Though this exercise has its satisfactions, the real issue is not whether God exists or not, but where to take the argument once one decides that [God] evidently doesn’t....

It is when we stop believing that religions have been handed down from above or else that they are entirely daft that matters become more interesting. We can then recognize that we invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues which impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away when we have been nudged to perceive some scientific inaccuracies in the tale of the seven loaves and fishes.