



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

How Do You Encourage Spiritual Growth?

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What consistently gets you here on Sunday morning, either in person or logged on to our livestream? In this moment, since you do find yourself in this sanctuary either literally or virtually, how does it feel in your heart, body, mind, and spirit? What are you already *grateful* for about who we are as a congregation? What is it about UUCF—or Unitarian Universalism more broadly—that keeps you coming back?

In this season of graduations—I would like to invite us to reflect on what it is that we as the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick particularly strive do well. To borrow a metaphor from the philosopher Ken Wilber, “What Is Our Conveyor Belt?” How are we being formed by one another, by this place, and by being together in this beloved community? And how are we forming the children and youth entrusted to our care?

One of Wilber’s particular interests is how we move through various stages of development and growth through life. As individuals and as groups, too, there is the potential to progress in many different domains.

For example, there are stages of *kinesthetic* development—as babies first learn to hold up their necks, then roll over, crawl, walk, and run; Some people reach Olympic levels of kinesthetic development that most of us will never reach.

There are also stages of *cognitive* development, as babies learn to differentiate their sense of self from their environment, then to talk, read, and write — leading all the way up to world-class levels of cognitive development that most of us will never reach, like Nobel Prize-level inventiveness.

Similarly, we can outline the stages of human development into various spheres of the human condition—for example, moral development, emotional development, and aesthetic development.

This morning, I want to invite us to reflect in particular on some proposed stages of *spiritual* development.

Here at UUCF, the first part of our mission statement says that we gather to “encourage spiritual growth.” What does that really mean? What is our conveyer belt for progressing through developmental stages of spiritual growth?

We’re often more familiar, for example, with traditional conveyer belts for *cognitive* development, from preschool all the way through graduate programs to research laboratories and think tanks. Likewise, most of us are familiar with traditional conveyer belts for *kinesthetic* development: from community sports programs all the way through specialized professional training camps. And we have art schools for *aesthetic* development, therapists for *emotional* development, and similar tracks for supporting other aspects of human growth potential.

Too often less familiar are the many ways that communities like UUCF can catalyze our spiritual progress, both individually and collectively, through the various proposed stages of *spiritual* development.

To say more about that, I would like to borrow the theoretical framework of a classic book titled [*Stages of Faith*](#) by the late Emory University professor James Fowler (1940–2015). As with any schema, there are limitations to Fowler’s categories. The names of his stages are a distracting mouthful, but I hope you’ll find the overall developmental arc he traces to be both interesting and useful.

As I take us on a quick tour through these stages, I invite you to reflect on your own personal spiritual journey, and the journeys of those closest to you. What are the factors, causes and conditions that have catalyzed or arrested spiritual growth for you and/or those you know best?

Fowler highlights six potential stages of faith development that span the course of a human life. At birth, Fowler proposes a “Primal or Undifferentiated” stage. Barring any traumatic events, according to Fowler, most of us naturally develop by age three into his “**Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective**” stage of faith? This early childhood faith is

characterized by intuition, imagination, and emotion. Pre-K and Kindergarteners tend to have a fairly freewheeling spirituality, involving a high level of fantasy.

Then, around the time that most children enter first grade, a growing ability to think *concretely* and *rationally* catapults us into **the Stage 2 Mythic-Literal.**” This stage involves a more literal understanding of religious myths, legends, and stories. For instance, a child listening to traditional religious tales *literally* thinks of god as a super-sized human who lives above the sky, something like the famous image on Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling of Adam and God almost touching fingers.

The transition to **“Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional” stage of faith development,** is typically triggered by adolescence. As a child grows and experiences more of the world, the messiness, complexity, and diversity of life itself challenges the simplistic, literal understandings of their childhood faith. Cognitively, adolescents are also better able than egocentric children to empathetically sense what life is like from the perspective of other people.

An increased ability to consider how other people see you often leads to increased *conformity*, what we sometimes call *peer pressure*. As the name “Synthetic-Conventional” suggests, in Stage 3, you begin to *synthesize* the conventions around you. Fowler encapsulates it this way, **“As I see you seeing me, I construct the me I think you see.”**

In other words, instead of looking inward for our particular gifts and graces, our natural tendency in adolescence is, instead, to build our identity based on trends, fads, and how we *think* others want us to be. The tragedy is that most people don’t know what they truly want for themselves — much less what they really want and need from others. So, **to construct your identity on your *perception* of what you *think* others want is to build your house on the unreliable ground of shifting sand.**

Fowler proposes that his Stage 3 of “Synthetic-Conventional” faith development usually begins in the teenage years, but here’s where we have to begin telling some difficult truths: some adults remain in this literal stage for most of their lives.

Importantly, one can continue to develop in many different realms (kinesthetic, emotional, aesthetic, etc.) while remaining at an arrested stage of development in others.

Human development in different domains does not all occur simultaneously. For example, a professional athlete may be at the peak of kinesthetic development, but remain in an adolescent stage in their emotional development. Another person might be incredibly accomplished cognitively, yet have an underdeveloped aesthetic, or be kinesthetically clumsy. Or there are wise spiritual teachers who are legitimately insightful spiritual practitioners, who simultaneously have *underdeveloped* moral sides leading, for example, to financial embezzlement or sexual misconduct.

And although some individuals and groups may experience arrested development in their spirituality by remaining in Fowler’s Stage 3, movement toward **Individuative-Reflective” “Stage 4**, may begin for many people in early adulthood.

Entering our twenties or thirties, many people “leave home” – either literally or metaphorically. Their primary source of authority gradually moves from outside the self (from friends and family) to *inside* the self. They begin to “individuate,” to become autonomous individuals. They separate from the mindlessly imitative herd and take individual responsibility for reflecting on who they are and what they are able to do in the world. This shift is vital for continued spiritual and moral growth, but also, difficult to do, which is why some people keep spiraling back into the conformity of the Synthetic-Conventional stage of development.

For some people, individuation begins as one goes to college or leaves home to start an independent life. For others, an unexpected “train wreck” experience of sorts – a death, illness, accident, loss, divorce, or a change like coming out of the closet – can lead to a situation where one’s childhood faith or theology no longer feels useful or consistent with one’s experience of the world.

Whereas Stage 4 “early adulthood” development was characterized by independence, freedom, and a sense of untapped potential, **Stage 5, “Conjunctive”** faith is the equivalent of a mid-life crisis, when many of us are confronted by our limits, finitude, and mortality. To enter into a mature “both/and” worldview, we must learn to embrace paradox, diversity, and irreconcilable differences.

Finally, according to James Fowler's research, there is "**Stage 6: Universalizing**" faith, which reflects the living saints and wise elders whose lives call us to become more than we thought humanly possible. These "Stage 6" sages are universalizing because they reach beyond their tribes to embody the boundaryless compassion, generosity, and wisdom that is the core of human potential. Examples might include The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Thich Nhat Hanh, and more. All of these figures are flawed human beings, as we all are, however high our levels of spiritual or moral achievement. We all have underdeveloped domains, even our heroes.

Ken Wilber's books actually go beyond Fowler's Stage 6 to trace further possibilities for spiritual growth; I'll be leading a Tuesday night class on that domain this fall, starting in late October, if you are interested in learning more. For now, I'll limit myself to Fowler's framework, as we consider our congregation's "conveyor belt" for encouraging spiritual growth.

As is typical in most Unitarian Universalist (and other theologically liberal) congregations, we here at UUCF are quite skilled and experienced at equipping individuals to live more fully into the "Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective" phase. If someone comes to us wounded from the pressures to conform to various dogmas, **we are well-practiced in serving as a catalyst for individuals maturing from childhood and adolescent stages of faith into what could be called "adult" spirituality.**

Our UU institutional diversity as a big tent includes Atheists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Pagans, and more—which makes us a natural conduit for helping individuals transition into Stage Five, "Conjunctive" faith. Structurally, having not just one source, but [Six Sources](#) (all of the world's religions balanced with the insights of science) makes our default position more "both/and" than "either/or." Your simple presence regularly, amidst the religious pluralism of this congregation, functions to encourage a "both/and" perspective.

At our best here at UUCF, we are not merely a collection of individuals; we become **greater than the sum of our parts.** Collectively, we have greater potential than any of us do in isolation. In such transcendent moments, we get a taste of what Fowler labeled Stage 6, "Universalizing Faith."

I am grateful to be with all of you on this journey. In more theologically conservative faith traditions, there can often be significant conflict when someone raised in a Stage 3, “Synthetic-Conventional” faith leaves home and/or goes to college. Many people have tragically had the experience in adolescence and early adulthood of feeling that they had to choose *either* their more-literal religious tradition *or* new spiritual perspectives they are learning in college and out in the world; thinking it isn’t possible to have both.

In contrast, as Unitarian Universalists, we are part of a broader theologically-liberal tradition which is deeply committed to *both* spirituality *and* science, reason *and* religion —and the ways that they can mutually inform one another and keep each other accountable. There is power in a congregational conveyor belt that encourages us to learn, grow, question, and seek—throughout our whole lives. And I’m proud to be committed to a congregation and religious movement that encourages lifespan religious education and spiritual exploration.

I hasten to add that, as with all levels of human development, spiritual growth **rarely falls in a linear progression. It is rather more like a spiral** in which you experience aspects of previous stages even as you begin to experience glimpses of the stages to come.

The same spiraling dynamic is true for us (or any group) that collectively invites us to be more aware during various seasons of our individual and collective lives together, whether we are spiraling **back toward the individualism of Stage 4 spirituality, or spiraling forward toward the beloved community of Stage 6, “Universalizing” spirituality.**

As Unitarian Universalists, we are skilled at reassuring individuals that our intentions are always to operate by *persuasion*, not coercion — and that we defend each individual’s right to follow their conscience. That remains profoundly true and important.

Part of what is keeping us growing spiritually as UU congregations are the covenantal late-comers to the scene: our *Seventh Principle*, added in 1985—“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”—and the

proposed 8th Principle, currently in the process of being added formally—
“Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions”; **these are some of our spiritual growing edges, and perhaps our greatest catalysts for encouraging spiritual growth.** Far from splintering us apart into atomized spiritual individualism, they have the potential to keep drawing us ever closer together toward the diverse beloved community we dream about. I am grateful to be with you all on this journey.