

How Mature Is Your Spirituality?

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As a practicing psychologist I am on a daily basis invited to share in the lives of those with whom I work. Indeed, I am called upon to be a guide to assist them in restoring their lives to some sense of order and peace when they are finding themselves in places of great distress.

To do this effectively, I have developed an outline, or more accurately a framework that I use to make an overview of their lives. I use this overview, which I call "Well Balanced Living," to assess strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need attention. The whole topic of "Well Balanced Living" might serve as a service for another day, but in brief it means looking at people's functioning in five major areas of life. The idea is to make sure that proper energy and attention are given to make sure functioning in each of these areas is just right. Where there are deficits or excesses, those become the targets of the therapy process. These five areas of life are:

- **Self-Care:** This area of functioning focuses on how people take care of themselves – everything from biological self-care, like sleeping, eating, basic lifestyle, to emotional and psychological self-care.
- **Vocation:** This area focuses on that area of daily functioning that usually takes the biggest single chunk of time and energy. For most adults, it centers on job and work. For young people, it centers on school and learning.
- **Social-Interpersonal:** This area focuses on how people deal with and relate to other people. These could be cashiers at the supermarket, friends, workmates, family members, wives, husbands or children.
- **Recreation or "Fun:"** This area focuses on what people do to bring refreshment and change-of-pace to daily living to prevent tedious monotony or imbalance.
- **Values-Ethics-Morals-Spirituality:** This area focuses on what principles people embrace to guide and direct their lives in the various areas of daily living.

What I have come to discover is that this last area, which we shall call the area of spirituality for this discussion, is quite often neglected or underdeveloped. In an initial interview, I will usually ask: "Do you go to Church?" A typical response is "Not much now – I used to – Maybe I should go back."

The point is that many adults have a weak or confused sense of spirituality. They have had some background in Church and religion as a child, but more often

than not are drifting as adults. Some of course do have a strong sense of religion and purpose and not only go to Church but practice religious behavior or spirituality in daily living. Others may go to Church, even regularly, but even when they do, they often do not have a clear sense of why they go or really what to do when they are there. They may go for a sense that they are supposed to. They may go to try to give their children a sense that they should somehow have Church and religion in their lives. But again, this area of spirituality is a weak and undeveloped area of their lives.

Without going too far a field for this discussion, I think that there is an important distinction between a sense of faith or spirituality and the practice of religion. Fr. Andrew Greeley, is a Catholic priest who is most known for the numerous novels he writes, usually about Irish-American Catholics in and around Chicago, in which the good guys always win. He states that one of the reasons he writes these novels is to make enough money to fund his first love, namely studying sociology, especially the sociology of religion. He has studied religious practices extensively, especially in Catholics since the Second Vatican Council. He notes that there has been a great deal of upheaval in the Church since the Council, with many people visibly leaving the Church with a new sense of independence.

But when he looks at the data picture overall, most Catholics don't leave. They remain Catholics, even though a purist might quibble about their actual orthodoxy and adherence to formal Church doctrine and practice. In his book "The Catholic Myth" Fr. Greeley describes a TV show interview by Phil Donahue who was pressing him on why it was that Catholics didn't leave the Church in greater numbers in light of the Post Vatican II spirit among Catholics. Donahue noted how Catholics disagreed openly with the hierarchy on central issues such as celibacy, birth control, abortion and numerous other issues, yet they didn't leave. He questioned, "Don't you think it would be better if all these dissenting Catholics left the Church? Wouldn't it be better for everyone if only those who agreed with the pope remained Catholic?" Greeley responded:

"Why should they leave?"

"Because you can't be a good Catholic unless you agree with the pope, can you?"

"You stop being a Catholic," he replied, "only when you formally leave and join another denomination."

"Why don't they just leave?" Donahue demanded impatiently. Clearly he wanted them to just leave.

"Because they like being Catholic."

He threw up his hands in disgust. "What does LIKING have to do with it?"

"Everything."

"All the available empirical evidence establishes that they remain Catholic for the reason I gave Phil Donahue: they like being Catholic." (Greeley, p.3).

The relevant point here for our discussion is that for many, proclaiming a membership in a particular Church is not necessarily an issue of doctrine and faith. For many, their sense of spirituality is instead based on what I will call the "Culture of Religion." People who are raised in a religious tradition are not only imbued with various elements of formal doctrine. They also participate in a religious culture, which after many years, especially childhood formative years, becomes hard-wired into their brains. So it may be that many years later, even if they wander out of their Church or even formally reject it and go elsewhere, their sense of spirituality is still often shaped by the religious culture hard-wired into them.

The reality is that people proceed at different rates and arrive at different levels of personal spirituality and practice. For some, this is highly developed and based on active cultivation of spirituality and religion. For others, it is a tenuous or underdeveloped search, based primarily on the culture of religion roots they obtained in childhood.

With his picture in mind, issues of maturity of spirituality have fascinated me. It is quickly apparent to me that spiritual maturity varies widely in people. And so it seems that the same issues fascinated the Reverend Scotty McLennan who recently wrote a book titled "Finding Your Religion," with which some of you are familiar. Scotty McLennan is a Unitarian Minister himself who serves as the Chaplain at Tufts University in Boston. He too notes the same sense of ambivalence and drifting of many people, especially college students, in their paths of spiritual development. The premise of his book is that developing a healthy, mature spirituality is a vital part of healthy living. If people find themselves drifting, they owe it to themselves to search for meaningful spirituality. He suggests that for some this might mean studying and extracting meaningful spirituality from many sources and teachers, and individualizing it for themselves. For others, the best route would be to align themselves with any of the mainline religious traditions.

But the most fascinating part of his work is his notion of the stages of religious development. He has drawn heavily upon James Fowler's research on the psychology of religion especially as formulated in his book, "Stages of Faith." McLennan postulates that there are basically six stages of religious development which we will look at here to answer our own topical question, "How mature is Your Spirituality?" Indeed as we look at the stages of religious development, I am tempted to draw parallels to Abraham Maslow's model of development through various stages of need fulfillment in a path toward "self-actualization."

A few disclaimers are in order here. In looking at a stage approach to religious development, one runs the risk of oversimplifying religion and faith, and making it look like going through the stages is like climbing a ladder, with the top levels being inherently "better than" lower levels. This is neither McLennan's nor my intent. Indeed, I would in this light re-title my topical question as "Where are you at in your spiritual journey? The advantage of using a stage approach, on the other hand, is to realize that having a sense of spirituality is more of an ongoing journey – a process rather than a finished product. Having stages then gives a bit of a roadmap for understanding that journey.

The stages then as formulated by McLennan are as follows:

- **Magic:** Typical of children between two and 10. In this stage the view of God is as an all-powerful character who can do anything. In this stage, God is sometimes seen as a "Santa Claus" God – one who can see if you are good or bad and fly around the world on Christmas Eve to give you presents if you are good, or lumps of coal if you are bad.
- **Reality:** About the same time children are giving up on a literal Santa Claus, somewhere at or after age 6, God starts to be imagined more as the traditional Guy with the white beard and long white gown of the Bible. Some Santa Claus notions may persist for a while, such as the notion that it is now God and not Santa who rewards or punishes for being good or bad.
- **Dependence:** This stage typically sets in around the junior high ages, roughly coinciding with the onset of puberty. Though influenced by peer pressure there is also reliance on leadership, including in matters of faith, by trusted authorities. God is seen as an idealized parent, often, as McLennan says, to replace real parents who are now seen as flawed.
- **Independence:** This stage appears in the later teen years, roughly paralleling the broader adolescent rebellion against parents, authority figures, and conventional rules. In its most negative manifestation, it takes a form of wholesale rejection of long-held values and beliefs. In more benign manifestations, it takes the form of active questioning and sifting of beliefs and practices. McLennan sees these teens and young adults as turning inward for spiritual centering and authority, frequently expressing the familiar phrase, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." (McLennan p. 23). McLennan sees many such people as becoming "functional deists" at this time. This is the picture of God as the great Clock-maker, who has started the universe running, but who is now largely detached from it, letting it run its own course. People in the Independence stage may fixate on the symbols and institutions of religion, struggling to make sense of them or outright rejecting them. McLennan offers that many adults may be delayed in reaching this stage for many years, resulting in much internal tension between spirituality based on dependence needs at the same time in conflict with independent spiritual assertion.

- Interdependence: This stage will appear in mid to later adulthood. Essentially it involves the reconciliation of tensions between the stages of dependence and independence. It is a step beyond the all-or-nothing, black and white, dichotomous struggles seen in the dependence and independence stages. There is a broader understanding that truth has many facets. There is less of a tendency to ask, "Do you believe in God?" and instead ask, "How do I experience God or the Ultimate reality." There is a broader sense of personal responsibility for spirituality than a reliance on dogmatic truths, or spirituality based on rejecting them.

There is a realization that there are more questions than there are answers, and that that is OK. Such people likely realize that they are on a journey rather than having arrived at a safe place. At their best they will be able to sift between the elements of their spirituality based on their religious cultural experiences hard-wired into them, and tenets of belief, faith, and morals that they have examined and incorporated into their own personal spirituality.

- Unity: This sixth stage is one that McLennan observes is largely "populated by mystics." (p.26) And is one which many if most of us may never reach. This is a much harder stage to describe because it is a place of experience rather than definable principles or beliefs. God or the Ultimate Reality is not a Being detached from us and our universe, but is rather pervasive throughout us and all reality. God is both transcendent and immanent. Those of you who participated in the Wonderful Wednesday discussions on Marcus Borg's visions of the "God We Never Knew" will recognize the term "Panentheism" here. The experience of God or the Ultimate Reality is beyond the trappings of language, dogma, ritual and symbols. Aside from a broader experience of trans-denominational community, People in this stage may have mystical or "peak experiences." People like Ghandi, or the Dalai Llama, or Thomas Merton, or Mother Teresa are individuals whom we might see as being able to reach this state, however briefly.

Fr. Thomas Keating, a Trappist Monk for over 50 years and the founder of the more recent school of centering prayer was asked about this level of spirituality in an interview. He pointed out that in his 50 years of being a monk, he was able to reach such states only a "handful" of times.

Interestingly, there are more recent articles in the popular press, including Newsweek Magazine, describing a new branch of medicine called "neurotheology." This research is focusing on what is going on in the brain when people are in such a state of spiritual experience. The suggestion is that mystical experiences are really nothing more than forms of neurological activity reached by individuals at certain times. Some researchers even describe them as forms of seizures.

In any case it doesn't matter to the people in this stage. They have an experience of Unity that transcends denominational and dogmatic boundaries. They have been able to synthesize elements of faith and spirituality into a meaningful whole for themselves.

My topical question still stands? How mature is your spirituality? or more properly, "Where are you at on your own spiritual journey." Most of us are members or seekers at this Unitarian Community. Most of us have indeed arrived here from different traditions. I have previously stated my view that one way to describe the Unitarian Church is as a refugee church of individuals from other religious traditions. In the book "Growing Up Catholic [which incidentally is one of many that provide an excellent insight into the culture of religion that we discussed previously], there is a section describing other denominations. In this section, titled "Protestants and other sundry sects" there are descriptions of numerous Protestant denominations. Congregationalists (or members of the United Church of Christ) are described as "Vaguely Christian, extremely liberal. Apparently little or no doctrine. Excellent youth programs (known as Youth Fellowship), leaders of which may be members of any denomination, agnostics or even secular humanists." The section then goes on to describe Unitarians as "Like Congregationalists, only more so. They know what they don't believe but have difficulty determining what they do believe. Can't even decide if crosses belong in their churches." A footnote by the Catholic authors states "that Protestants are not so sure that Congregationalists and Unitarians are Protestant, but we are." (p. 122, 123).

There is unfortunately perhaps more than a grain of truth in these observations. Are Unitarians nothing more than people who never made it out of the Independence Stage and who congregate to feel unity in the rejection of other doctrines and spirituality? Perhaps some are, but I think most of us are more than that. I would hope that we are seekers who are at least actively working in the Interdependence stage, following a lifelong, never finished journey.

Tom Owen-Towle, in his book "Freethinking Mystics With Hands" writes of Unitarian-Universalists, quoting Rev Burdette Backus. He writes:

"We sometimes hear it said by some of our own members that you can believe whatever you please. Actually we are confronted with a paradox: we are not free to believe what we please, we are free to believe what we must!"

Tom Owen-Towle goes on to say:

"In short, to be a Unitarian Universalist requires one to shun intellectual laziness and spiritual shoddiness. We cannot rest easy with the faith we inherited. We must grow our own, revising it continually during our lifetime. We are blessed, perhaps cursed, with a faith as large as the universe, as diverse as human nature, and as complex as it is simple."

"The open mind is a clogged mind if it never changes. Whenever we 'arrive' in our spiritual quest, we ossify and turn, like Lot's wife, into useless pillars of salt." (p. 72,3).

Scotty McLennan similarly challenges all of us to pursue a spiritual path to achieve healthy balance in our lives. He writes:

"To find one's religion, it's not enough just to open one's mind and think deeply. Each of us must also open all of our senses and experience the world. Religion grows from the heart as much as from the head, and it cries out to fuse body and mind. Faith, as a divinity school professor of mine used to insist, is an orientation of the whole personality, a total response. It's not just belief – the holding of certain ideas – which is a function of the mind alone. Beliefs can be expressed in propositional form, to which the adjectives "true" or "false" may be attached. Faith, by contrast is the opposite of rejection and despair. It may or may not include beliefs, but it is much larger. It is the ability to experience the universe as meaningful. Having faith means that our lives hold together and make sense at a deep level, rather than seeming ultimately awry, askew or absurd. Therefore, your religion is something you not only think about but also dance, sing, eat, paint and sculpt. To find your religion you must engage all of your senses. You should feel it as well as explain it, hear it as well as see it, taste it as well as smell it." (pp. 94,5)

I will give you now a sequence of excerpts that in my view illustrate various positions in spiritual journeys. The first is a dialog between Charles Templeton and Billy Graham. Charles Templeton was a soulmate of Billy Graham in the early days of their parallel evangelical ministries. Templeton eventually took a different path, entirely, as described in his book "Farewell to God." In this excerpt he writes:

"All our differences came to a head in a discussion which, better than anything I know, explains Billy Graham and his phenomenal success as an evangelist."

"In the course of our conversation I said, 'But Billy, it's simply not possible any longer to believe, for instance, the biblical account of creation. The world wasn't created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It's not a matter of speculation; it's demonstrable fact.'"

"I don't accept that,' Billy said. 'And there are reputable scholars who don't.'"

"Who are these scholars?' I said. "Men in conservative Christian colleges.'"

"Most of them, yes,' he said. 'But that's not the point. I believe the Genesis account of creation because it's in the Bible. I've discovered something in my ministry; when I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the Word of God, my preaching has power. When I stand on the platform and say, 'God says,' or 'the

Bible says,' the Holy Spirit uses me. There are results. Wiser men than you and I have been arguing questions like this for centuries. I don't have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of each theological dispute, so I've decided, once and for all, to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God's Word."

"But Billy,' I protested, 'you can't do that. You don't dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It's intellectual suicide."

"I don't know about anybody else,' he said, 'but I've decided that that's the path for me.'" (pp7,8)

Tom Owen-Towle writes of the ongoing questioning path that he recommends to Unitarian-Universalists. He writes:

"So, we Unitarian Universalists hold our beliefs with care and responsibility, with fervor yet lighthearted-ness; we are editing our odysseys continuously. When Emerson was an old man he preached for nearly two years as an interim minister at the East Lexington, Massachusetts, church using the sermons he had delivered as a young man at the Second Church in Boston. It is reported that as Emerson read the sermons, he would now and then pause, look up, and with a smile say, "I no longer believe that," and go back to reading his text. Such is the nature of Unitarian Universalist religion. It is an unfolding faith in which we often adjust or abandon yesterday's tenets."

"Examples abound. A lifelong layperson says: "I started as a Universalist Christian, followed by agnosticism, then naturalistic theism. Now at the close of my journey "I'm a religious humanist, yet I never had to leave Unitarian Universalism. Hallelujah!"

"And one seventeen year old writes: "Growing up Unitarian Universalist is like searching for your head, finding it, picking it up, screwing it on, having it fall off again and again, with hopes of a tighter fit next time!" (pp 87,88).

Personally, my roots and culture are in the Catholic Tradition. In addition to that I have the experience of a monastic culture hard-wired into me. Though my personal theology may be far beyond traditional orthodox limits, these experiences still serve to guide my own spiritual journey. If I had to say – I'm probably hovering in the Interdependence stage, but not without residual flirtings back into the Independence stage. I can't say that I've had any mystical experiences, or seizures, just yet.

So where are you at in your spiritual journey? I hope that you are not complacent and ossified, but that you continue to explore, develop and expand your own personal spiritualities. Echoing McLennan, I challenge you to dance, sing, eat, paint, and sculpt your faith, whatever it may be.

Exhibits

- ***Faith Stages***
- ***Faith Development Interview Guide***

Recommended Reading

Borg, Marcus J., *The God We Never Knew*, HarperSanFrancisco, A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1997

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Greeley, Rev. Andrew, *The Catholic Myth*, A Touchstone Book, Published by Simon & Shuster, New York, NY, 1990

McLennan, Rev. Scotty, *Finding Your Religion*, HarperSanFrancisco, A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1999

Owen-Towle, Tom, *Freethinking Mystics With Hands*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1998

Templeton, Charles, *Farewell to God*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, Ontario, 1996