

**William M. Finnin, Jr.**  
**Faith is a Verb! Faith Development as a Process of Growth Across the Life-Cycle**

William M. Finnin, Jr., Th. D. Southern Methodist University

Human beings develop coherent and meaningful life perspectives as a result of living in community with others. We are social creatures in extremis, not isolated atomized islands of rugged individualism flung out in space. Not on your life! Despite the "herd activities" our students dream up for comfort against the anxieties of loneliness and separation, we individually construct the meaning that sustains us, both as individuals and as members of communities.

James Fowler (Emory University) suggests that as human beings each of us develops "faith." Faith is a universal human phenomenon. Faith involves progressive and cumulative processes essential to "making meaning." We all make meaning or we die! both a spiritual death and a physical death as well in the absence of faith. We demonstrate and affirm the meaning we make in the particular shape and content of our life's commitments. Some but not all of us express our deepest "faith commitments" in our identification with religious communities, through religious language, and in ordered thought about the meanings we make and apprehend.

The research of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, the insights of John Westerhoff and the recently published work of Sharon Daloz Parks (Harvard) broadly support the conceptualization of "faith development" as on-going processes of journey, discovery, change, and rediscovery. These occur throughout and across the life-cycle. Daloz Parks argues that the character and complexity of faith, and its various modes of interacting with the larger world, are discernibly and identifiably different at various points in the life-cycle.

Such developmental foundations of how young adults discover core values and negotiate worthy commitments that shape their identity are key to the crafting effective programs for nurturing leadership, acquiring life-skills, forming religious commitments, and engaging in healthy community life. The meaning we make -- within our individual hearts and minds, among our peers, within our larger institutional and societal settings -- constitutes the faith that either sustains us or frustrates us in our living in the world.

This boils down to the simple affirmation that faith cannot be fully understood as a system of beliefs. Faith is not a personal codification of principles. Faith is not an exhaustive set of propositions about the nature of "absolute truth." Each of these structures speaks to "faith" as a fixed destination. When faith is so understood we miss its dynamic essence. In such conceptualizations faith is objectified, rationalized, and the process itself of its formation becomes set, sometimes in stone.

Faith is a verb not a noun, and its voice is active not passive. Faith shapes, recasts,

composes and recomposes meaning. It is the process not the product of critical living, the passionate commitment that compels artists to create, writers to write, theologians to speculate about God's nature, and lovers to love. Faith is more akin to the journey itself than the destination, more like the process of baking in which ingredients find their way into a batter than the loaf that emerges from the oven. Yes, faith is a verb constantly energizing those who might possess it even as it reshapes and reformulates their essential natures.

As persons who live and work with, care for, cry for, and share joy with students, we observe the formation of faith at an early stage of a person's life. Let me suggest several phases, not stages, for developing faith. For the sake of differentiating various tasks I have called them by these names: Given Faith, Affiliational Faith, Questing Faith, and Owned Faith. First let's look at "Given Faith."

### Given Faith

At even the earliest stages of life, in infancy and into childhood, we are shaped by our relationships with our world: with parents and home, with familial values, with their sense of who we are and the place we have in their lives. In these beginnings, we receive from a relatively small and closed community of others the values, frameworks and structures for constructing meaning, for putting our lives together. Thus, we learn to be open to or anxious about, comfortable with or fearsome of new experience, change, and flux as those most intimately associated with us greet the world.

The outlooks we possess in these earliest days often mirror the outlooks and perspectives of those who care for us, who shape our world, and who define our values. The circles of primary relationships at this point in our lives are small and bounded, typically by family. If we are fortunate they may extend beyond the nuclear family and embrace the cross values of multiple generations. This is a time of receiving the interpretive framework for navigating in the world from those around us, from those who love us. Don't fret that we'll probably contend with these values and perspectives later in life, at this stage of our growing, they are the "given" of our journey. Our faithing at this point in our lives mirrors the faith we see, observe, and sense in our primary relationships of home and family.

### Affiliational Faith

As circles of relationships expand beyond family, our values and structures of meaning diversify and expand as well. School and religious fellowships, peer group friendships, media, along with other elements of social life, our cliques and in-group associations, influence the closely defined realms of "given faith." Our world and the meaning we make of it expand. Conflicts develop. They are inevitable and, moreover, they are essential. Dissonance marks growth.

The power of friendship, the urges we remember for acceptance, for the protection of group where I don't have to defend myself constantly, these are the gifts of affiliational faith. Remember feeling like a stranger in your own home? Recall ever feeling distant from

your family and much closer to families of others than our own? I've often thought it wise to trade teenagers at some point in the developmental process. Values often collide within families and between families and other loci of value as our affiliations beyond home become more complex. College students often arrive at their new collegiate home squarely established in this "mode" of making meaning. Though they may never admit it, they yearn for the warm cuddly environments they left behind, whether in school locker room or the comfort of their own room at home. While each may claim uniqueness, the authority of reigning social norms presses toward conformity, predictability, and acceptance. This cohort is caught between the ruggedness of lonesome pilgrimages and the insatiable passion to live in the herd...a cross between Horatio Alger and Ionesco.

It's the beguiling lure, the crucially important quest for acceptance during this period...early adolescence some would place this need at a zenith...when the need for the comfort of the community transcends other urges to establish singular identity. Is it any wonder that greek letter organizations do so well in some college and university settings? They market ready to merge-into affiliationally satisfying groupings. Same for some campus ministry programs...where being accepted is a strategy for recruiting. Not a critique, just an awareness that such groupings play important roles in providing contexts for the emerging structures of meaning in young adult lives.

### Questioning Faith

Adolescent years are for good reasons known as times of "stress and storm." Tensions between originating communities of meaning and more ranging external sources of faithing give rise to the conflicts of young adulthood. These conflicts serve essential and useful purposes in shaping selfhood: they enable emerging young adults to establish their own identities and to confirm or disconfirm values that will support them into their futures.

Many are the novels of young adulthood wherein the emergent personality struggles with the values of his or her past, contends with demons of parental prizing, and enters a dark night of wandering in search of credible worth...both external to be prized and internal to be celebrated and owned. To quest in faith is to launch out, away from apparent safety nets of meaning and predictability, searching for new platforms on which to erect new constellations of meaning. Perhaps in a political forum or in contexts of radical social service. Some find the counter-cultural off-putting and seek the safety of the culturally baptized norm...choose a business degree...but even there some launch into unexplored terrain and find themselves the pioneer, the adventurer, the entrepreneur, a Don Quixote-esque figure whose causes are just but often unwinnable.

Questioning is a time of setting off from safe harbor, for jettisoning the baggage of parental control and seeking new sanction in the settings of common value among peers and fellow travelers. The "grail" to which the quest is directed depends upon both questor and setting for that search. A disaffected urbanite seeks the sanctuary of a hippy commune and discovers self in planting, weaving, working leather. Alternately, one afloat upon a sea of acid seeking ultimate meaning in chemical blessings discovers in a new religious community, Hare Krishna, a fulfillment never imagined and this without psychotropic

assists through chanting the Names of God and eating prasadam and sharing beatific gifts through books with others who might harbor similar longings.

The quest of Questing Faith takes many forms and knows no fixed time frame for working out life's twists and turns. Here the operative sense is movement, growth, and sensing wonder in the search.

Questions of self-worth, of uncertain vocational horizons, of "worthy dreams" hold often-frightening prospects for negotiating meaningful personal discoveries that extend and frame future. These compound with issues of relational intimacy [who is worthy of my love and commitment? Am I worthy of another's love and commitment?], challenges to authority, matters of personal discipline and focus, and invitations to loyalties far beyond the family system. Is it any wonder that confusion and chaos, inconsistency and tentativeness often mark this period of growth?

In the crucible of these years young persons often commit themselves with passion and intensity to values and causes which transcend individual claims and evoke commitments that seemingly nullify any scintilla of ambiguity or tentativeness. Beneath often assured and calm externalities, the struggle often rages to bring personal values and cultural norms into creative tension and to negotiate meaningful commitments. This period of "questing" -- this intensified search for meaning, for validation of trans-personal values, of confirmation of self and social worth -- takes place not only in the classroom and laboratory but wherever young adults find themselves in religious life communities, off-campus living groups, in social and recreational settings, in the work place and "on the road". This can be a period of necessary social experimentation, boundary-testing, intellectual stretching, emotional strain, and spiritual struggle.

### Owned Faith

As young adults develop the capacity to make commitments --- to ideals, causes, ideas, values, professions, and to other human beings --- they shape the prospects of their futures. Owned faith is but a way of addressing the transitional state toward what may be called "adulthood". This transition sets the stage for a growing awareness in which we accept that "our way" of understanding the world, "my way" of understanding ultimate claims of meaning, "our way" of understanding purpose in life is not the only way of such understandings. A person whose perspectives on life are "owned" can stand confidently and without defiance before others who share different perspectives and even different basic foundations for life's meaning. Owned faith does not require all others to be "like me" to possess corresponding value and worth. The stance of owned faith is one of confidence without arrogance. This perspective allows for a broadly constituted community of diverse insight and yet, within the midst of such diversity, one can live confidently within one's frame of meaning. Owned faith empowers persons to choose "the more difficult complexity over the easier simplicity," even while it moves beyond simple tolerance of difference to that point where truth and value hold multiple promises.

## Summary

Faith is a universal human phenomenon. All humans create meaning. Meaning-making develops across the life-cycle and is both cumulative and progressive. There are no short cuts or end-runs. Development can be arrested by trauma, unresolved emotional tension, or intellectual conflict. Movement from one "stage" to another almost invariably involves conflict, struggle, confrontation with personal and social boundaries, suffering, and pain.

Against this theoretical backdrop we who mentor young adults in their faithing, as they put their worlds together in meaningful fashion, have the graceful privilege of witnessing the process of meaning-making first hand. We have the opportunity to share in that most intimate process of nurturing healthy selfhood and emerging faith. I consider it of measured importance that we seek to understand the importance of intellectually vibrant, emotionally healthy, theologically informed, and spiritually whole patterns of encouragement and support for these who stand before us as emerging young adults.

## Sources Referenced

Fowler, James. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. 1981.

Palmer, Parker J. *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Harper. 1993.

Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2000.

Rankin, Robert. Ed. *The Recovery of Spirit in Higher Education: A Danforth Foundation Project*. Boston. Seabury Press. 1980.