

John Wesley Comes to Spiritual Direction

Understanding Stages of Faith and Structures of Faith Spiritual Direction for a Church

Spiritual Director (SD): Come in Mr. Wesley. Please sit down and make yourself comfortable.

John Wesley (JW): Thank you. Thank you for agreeing to see me.

SD: Well, I must admit I was surprised to get your letter requesting time with me. What brings you to Spiritual Direction?

JW: Well I am coming not so much on my own behalf, but on behalf of the method, or church if you will, that has been created in my name. As you know I have been a loyal member of the Church of England all my life. I have also been a church member who has felt that the ritual and structure of the church has lost its vitality for many members and that for others it has simply become a social belonging community, which has nothing to do with deepening one's faith. So most of my life I have spent trying to vitalize people's faith journey exhorting them to become accountable to their faith in ways that might motivate them to work for the abolition of slavery and prison reform.

SD: Yes, your ministry has been quite extraordinary in producing this huge group of itinerant ministers who have fanned out across Britain and the United States entreating people to have an experience of Jesus Christ and do social justice work.

JW: Yes, it is almost beyond my imagination how the spark of my own spiritual journey ignited this flame of enthusiasm that spread like wildfire. But now that I am in my mid-80's, I am sensing a call to a deeper understanding of the fruit of my faith journey. I have always been about calling people to a deeper, fuller experience of Christ, and yet it appears that while those itinerant pastors have ignited a great revival of religious faith, my efforts have also ended up creating this new church of Methodism, which has gradually gathered all the institutional baggage of what I have spent my whole life trying to lead people beyond.

SD: So you have seen the new church you inspired become more of an institution just like the Church of England, whose form and practices you rebelled against as too stale and static.

JW: Correct. I come to you today because as I approach the end of my life I need to get some clarity in my own mind about how a church should look that is dynamic and creates a vital experience of Christ, that transforms people from petty self-centeredness to loving, giving pilgrims working for the kind of social justice Jesus taught.

SD: You are coming to Spiritual Direction on behalf of a whole church. Asking the question— How does the Christian church grow in the future to provide a vital and transformative experience for people?

JW: Yes, I would like to understand how people in different places in their faith journeys can thrive together.

SD: Wonderful inquiry. To understand the answer we must first understand stages of faith and structures of faith.

JW: What do you mean by stages of faith?

SD: A stage of faith is a viewpoint from which the world is perceived. You might also call it a level of consciousness. We all have a learned perspective from which we see the world.

JW: I understand. In the Christian faith the idea of metanoia, or repentance, is to change our way of seeing, or to see from a new viewpoint or perspective. Understanding what our perspective is and being willing to surrender it so our way of seeing will be transformed is absolutely fundamental to growth as a Christian.

SD: All faiths have some teachings that correspond to this, that encourage growth to a new perspective of understanding the world. In future times James Fowler will write insightfully about these stages of faith and Ken Wilber will study them cross-culturally and determine that the same stages (ways of perceiving reality) exist regardless of the religion, whether the faith is Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam or any other major religious tradition.

JW: I have experienced this first hand with a good friend, who I find often sees a situation entirely different from me. He is a good person but his viewpoint is different and his conclusions are very different. We see the same need for revival and social justice. We both agree on this goal but to get there I see how important it is to support the monarchy, to have a sense that our nation is about something greater than ourselves, but from his perspective the monarchy is an impediment and has to go.

SD: Would it be helpful if I review with you the major stages of faith or levels of consciousness?

JW: Yes. Please note the good points and, as best you can, the shadow side of each perspective.

SD: The first stage we should consider is the Mythic stage. The Mythic stage is characterized by a strong patriarchal structure and focus on being a member of an exclusive group. If you are within the group you have to believe the group ideology. Everyone outside of the group is wrong. This is the tribal stage for the Jewish people described in The Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The strength of the

Mythic stage is that those within the group learn how to care for and love other people in the group. What was so exceptional about the beginning of Christianity was that it cut across tribal cultures for the first time in human history. A group identity developed with people of different tribal and ethnic backgrounds. You had pluralism within the group, but at the Mythic stage there is still attachment to the old tribal pattern of the group itself being exclusive.

JW: Yes this exclusive in-group focus was true of the Old Testament Jewish culture and the Christian Catholic culture up to the time of the Reformation.

SD: The next stage is the Enlightenment stage. The term Enlightenment is a term applied to the age in which we are living. It is exemplified by scientific thinking and discoveries during our time, such as Alessandro Volta devising the first chemical battery, as well as in the new political theory of democracy seen in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. Applied to individuals, the Enlightenment stage is the stage when individuals begin to rely on their own reasoning and inquiry into the meaning of their faith. They withdraw their dependency on a group theology or a group text read literally. For many people when they first break out from Mythic stage group thinking into developing an individual understanding, this experience really does seem like Enlightenment. The gift of this stage is that one is beginning to actually question and form ideas about one's own beliefs. The shadow side of this stage is its ego self sufficiency. The ego understanding of what one believes seems like the only understanding possible. The shadow side of the Enlightenment stage is this reliance on ego self sufficiency will in the modern and post-modern cultures of the 20th and 21st centuries lead to devastating world wars and nihilism.

JW: I have always been excited about the scientific discoveries of our time and convinced that science is simply showing us more deeply the extraordinary workings of our Creator. And the Enlightenment perspective is what helped me break free of the stale dogmatism of the Church of England. But please go on.

SD: The next stage is the Egalitarian stage. And while we see great people of all eras have moved through all these stages, it will not be until the late 20th and early 21st centuries that we see the development of the Egalitarian perspective become widespread in first world countries around the globe. This perspective is what will allow a deep look at racism for the first time in human history. This perspective is what will allow cultures to overcome rigid ideas about sexual identity and gender orientation. In the academy it is what will lead to the deconstruction of white, imperialist interpretations of history.

The gift of this stage is its outlook of treating everyone equal. The shadow side of this stage is an indulgence in the idea that all beliefs are equal. If a person stands for nothing because everything is equal, then that person doesn't believe in anything and consequently is vulnerable to being convinced of anything. The Egalitarian stage of consciousness in post modern culture has a shadow side that leads to moral ambivalence and in a paradoxical way a lack of real tolerance. That is you can only be

tolerant of another faith, if you stand firmly in your own faith. If you are wishy-washy about all faiths or don't hold to any faith, then you can't be open and tolerant of another faith, because you have no meaningful perspective to be tolerant from.

JW: My experience is belief is only transformed when it is firmly held and tolerance only arises when one knows where one stands. I understand what you are saying, please go on.

SD: The next stage is the Integral stage. At the Integral stage one has learned to include the gifts of each of the preceding perspectives and transcend the limitations of those stages. At the Integral stage one has learned to include this deep experience of caring about others found in the Mythic stage. In the Integral perspective one has incorporated the importance of individual inquiry and exploration of faith guided by reason found in the Enlightenment stage. In the Integral stage one has also learned to incorporate the fundamental idea of the equality of everyone found in the Egalitarian stage. And as all the true and valuable ideas of the preceding stages have been incorporated, the limitations have been transcended. In other words, the exclusivity of the Mythic stage has been discarded, the ego self sufficiency of the Enlightenment stage has been discarded, the lack of any value being more important than another of the Egalitarian stage has been discarded in favor of what is valuable, what is true, good and beautiful.

At the Integral stage one has learned to rely less on one's ego self sufficiency, and one's intellectual capacity, and more on one's connection with all things from being connected to the ground of Being, that source of everything that we experience in presence-ness and being-ness, and in the experience of Love that comes from this connection with God. The experience of being transformed so that we experience being connected through our ground of Being with Christ in everything is the quintessential Christian experience of conversion or metanoia.

JW: You have given me a wonderful description of what I understand to be Jesus' perspective. He certainly had all the gifts of these early stages and had transcended their limitations. And, of course, his level of consciousness was even higher—that is why we call him divine and human.

SD: The mystics describe even higher stages of consciousness, but I can't help you much understanding them since I have not yet experienced them.

JW: Tell me about this idea of structures of faith and how, if at all, they overlap with stages of faith.

SD: What we see in the beginning of new, progressive Christian communities is that they develop a structure or capacity of inquiry into the meaning of faith. They are focused intensely on intellectual inquiry and trying to understand and overturn simplistic or erroneous interpretations of the Bible, and to understand how literalism of the Bible, which arises in the 20th and 21st centuries as a way to provide security in a post-modern era of doubt and uncertainty, has taken us off course from understanding Jesus'

message of how to be transformed. The early history of Methodism reflects this Enlightenment focus on new ideas and questioning and developing new understandings of the meaning of what is actually true and meaningful in Christian theology.

JW: Yes, it has always been my hope that a renewal of faith would lead to people of faith working for social justice, which is in reality simply the expression in community of love as Jesus taught. As I have said before, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" I have seen much good work among those most oppressed come from this heartfelt work for justice.

SD: The outpouring of social action by Methodism has indeed been impressive. Shall I go on to look at the second structure that evolves?

JW: Yes, please do.

SD: The second structure that evolves in Christian communities is a Social structure or the social capacity of the faith community. In a progressive community people still ask questions, but the focus of the community becomes the social fabric of the community, of creating social opportunities for people to get to know each other and like each other. The development of the social capacity creates a sense of security for those in the community that is largely experienced at an unconscious level, but it's what holds the community together. This social structure within the faith community will become an important antidote to the anxiety and insecurity suffered later in postmodern society.

JW: Yes, social support is so important. Jesus gathered his team of twelve friends before he ever began his ministry.

SD: Often people who come to a progressive Christian community do so because they have become disenchanted with what seems like a superficial social, white middle-class culture of a mainline church, as occurred with you with the Church of England. However, it is very easy for the mainline disenchanted to form a new community and unconsciously re-create a similar social belonging culture, which can end up being the same sort of static social fabric of the mainline church or even a social club or civic club. Though it thinks of itself as a new better version of church and can feel progressive for those who created it from the inside, from the outside it begins to look self satisfied, and maybe self-indulgent. If a progressive Christian community remains unaware of how it has become socially static, no longer actively reaching out into a wider community, then it will stop growing.

JW: I have seen this happen with some Methodist churches that started off growing rapidly and now spend all their time, like my Church of England, trying to find someone to tune the organ and raising money to repair the roof.

SD: The third structure or capacity that develops within a thriving faith community is a Faith structure. Within a faith community, over time, a group of people, maybe only two or three initially, emerge who wish to really deepen their faith. They want to live from

their faith, rather than simply hold ideas about their faith. This group senses that there is something more than developing an intellectual understanding of faith, or learning to understand Scripture or belonging to a faith social group. There is something deeper that they seek in their own faith journey and they look to their faith community to help them find a structure to assist them to grow further in their faith.

JW: Yes, it is the experience of a deeper level of faith that Methodism calls sanctification.

SD: As in the previous structures and capacities, here we see overlap with the stages of faith. Usually the people who are interested in a deeper Faith structure within their faith community, have moved to the Integral stage of their faith. A faith community attuned to this need responds with a structure to help those seekers move to a deeper experience of faith. It is what emerged in the group of friends that your brother Charles gathered about him that led to the method of this group being called Methodism. It is what led to the groups of inner seekers that you described in your writings as Bands made of of just a few people, who walk together in their faith journey and help hold each other accountable. The focus of these small groups, or Bands, are on contemplative practices, learning what are the personality blocks to deeper faith, rituals that deepen an experience of the sacred and other non-intellectual, more heart and body based experiences of faith.

JW: Your outlining these three structures or capacities of a faith community has been very informative. This third structure is what I have talked about as the capacity for inner spiritual work provided by the Bands. It is in this last structure that you call the Faith structure where I have found people most on fire with their faith and open to pursuing God's means of Grace, or those spiritual practices that are most likely to open the opportunity for God's Grace to move the believer forward and deeper into the experience of Christ within.

SD: Yes, the deeper part of the faith journey is one that we must do by ourselves, but we cannot do alone. You were prescient in your seeing the need for small groups, or Bands, as a structure for the deeper work of faith to go forward.

JW: When two or three or more members of a faith community begin to really live from this deeper Faith structure and Integral stage of faith it vitalizes and energizes the whole community. These people provide an embodied sense of love that attracts others into a deeper experience. In Christian terms this third structure is the path of a Band's work.

SD: What leads faith communities to fail most often is that they get to the stage of emphasis on a social structure and began to falter in their growth. You saw this with the Church of England and it will be seen dramatically in 20th and 21st century mainline churches.

In order for a community of faith to be successful it needs to nurture all three structures within it. It cannot give up the initial inquiry structure if it is going to continue to grow.

New people need to feel they are invited in and welcomed to have a deeply skeptical and questioning view or an agnostic view of their faith. Next we all need community. The third phase of our spiritual journey usually begins when we are jarred by great suffering or great love and realize our own efforts to grow ourselves spiritually are inadequate, that something vital to have a life of joy and love is missing.

JW: I am not myself drawn to the questioning stage at this point in my life, but I see how it is important to have a structure in the church that nurtures those at this stage.

SD: And, of course, the social structure of the faith community needs to continue to be vibrant and find a way to absorb new people so that they feel welcome. There's always a tension between creating a vital inner sense of community and one that doesn't feel exclusive when new people attend. It takes effort and desire for the community to create an atmosphere where newcomers don't unconsciously feel like outsiders.

JW: I understand the importance of the social structure provided by the church. Often it seems to me this is all many of my friends in the Church of England want out of church.

SD: Most important is the last structure or capacity a faith community develops. This is the Faith structure which allows individuals to go deeper so that they can begin to live from faith and not from their ego self-sufficiency, which is the norm for most people living in the security of the social structure provided by a faith community.

JW: I understand. Another weakness, which I see that has emerged, has been a part of the success of Methodist preachers. As Methodist preachers have become more and more successful in preaching they have become seen as external authorities that hold the secret of faith and participation in Bands has declined. People have begun to look outside for what is going to save them rather than looking deeply within to discover God is already there. Now it is clear to me that what has brought me here on behalf of the Methodist church is to realize that its preaching success in spreading excitement about the Gospel has also diminished its effectiveness in building the most important capacity of a church, a structure to allow people to go deeper in their faith.

SD: Your insight has made our time together worthwhile. And I hope that this overview of the structures or capacities that develop within Christian communities, and the challenges these structures bring has been helpful. In order to thrive a faith community must be proactive in shaping all three essential capacities.

JW: This overview has been so helpful to me. It is something I realize now I knew intuitively. Methodism has created societies and classes as the needed social structure and created Bands as the Faith structure. But until you described the overlay with the stages of spiritual growth, I didn't see how important they each are and how when a leader of a church grows spiritually he or she will naturally outgrow the need for an inquiry structure and will outgrow the need for a social structure that that is superficial, but the faith community itself must still focus time and energy on all three capacities. A church where all its energy goes into a social structure, like that part of the Church of

England I have been most critical of, becomes stagnant. Yet at the same time I have remained a member of the Church of England, which shows how strong the social bond is.

Thank you for taking the time to see me. This has been very helpful

SD: You are most welcome. It has been my privilege to be a part of a journey into a deeper understanding of how important it is for Christian communities to nurture all three capacities to respond to the needs of people at different stages of faith. But most importantly, the need in the twenty-first century will be to focus proactively on the needed third stage of deep faith development.