

Coming to James Fowler for Spiritual Direction

The Idolatry of Objectifying God

Experiencing Faith in Dynamic Growth

Spiritual Director (SD): Thank you for coming. Please sit and tell me what brings you to Spiritual Direction.

Seeker (S): I am a young Mom and I would like to bring my children up in the church, but I am struggling with what seems to me to be bad theology that children are taught in Sunday school.

SD: How old are your children?

S: Nine and eleven. I had no problem when they were younger for them learning images of God as a guy with a white beard up in the sky, who is a kind of Santa Claus figure. The messages were about love so I didn't get upset, but these are not the right kind of images to use with young people are soon to be teenagers, who will begin to experience losses and hardships in their lives and most certainly will be questioning their faith. I am afraid that trying to indoctrinate them with creeds that don't make any sense or teaching them the Bible discriminates against gay people will end up causing them to rebel completely against the church when they get older. I love the church and the church I know teaches love and includes everyone.

SD: You have an important insight which is that our spiritual growth is developmental. What works when you are five years old doesn't work when you are ten or fifteen; and actually what works for you when you are twenty-five will not be serving you well when you are forty.

S: Thank you. I recognize that my own spiritual growth has been a continuous unfolding. I have learned to interpret Scripture as coming from God if it expresses love. However, much of the Bible is simply a history of the Jewish people and I view this history and parts of our creeds in historical context and often as helpful allegories or images but not literal truth.

SD: I can't stress enough that faith is developmental. When we look around we see that one of the primary characteristics of God's creation is that it is always changing, always unfolding. Recently we learned that the universe is constantly expanding. Some believe this reflects that God's infinite love is continuing to expand. However, we all get stuck in our spiritual growth at times; our unfolding is never in a straight linear path. Grief, loss, major life transitions can all pause or accelerate our spiritual growth. When our faith is not life giving, we might check to see if we are believing in the same way we did ten or even five years earlier. Maybe we have taken a needed pause in our spiritual growth; or

maybe our we are stuck in beliefs that no longer serve us. This is a question of discernment that often brings people to spiritual direction.

Our external circumstances can cause us to pause. Our spiritual growth may pause because we seek certainty in our lives, especially when the world around us is chaotic and uncertain. It is very important not to judge ourselves or others harshly when our beliefs no longer animate our lives. We usually become unstuck whenever we can experience being loved sufficiently that our faith increases so we no longer fear the uncertainty around us.

Often times we make a mistake by trying initially to discern our beliefs as ideas. The question is often set up -- What do you believe in? This is rarely a helpful inquiry. We come up with thoughts about what we think we should believe or in opposition to beliefs that seem oppressive. A better way to start this inquiry is -- What do my actions in life suggest my beliefs are? This way our inquiry starts from right where we are physically and emotionally, not just as a mental exercise. If we start our inquiry here often we see that we live more out of fear than faith. We may discover a childhood wounding that needs to be released in order for us to get back in sync with the flow of God's love to animate our lives.

But let's get back to your question: how to help children feel comfortable in a changing, unfolding spiritual journey during one of the most formative periods of their lives.

S: Yes, thank you.

SD: We start with teaching them how to use the tools of faith. Perhaps most fundamental is the tool of awareness. For children the age of yours it is a great time to teach them to be aware about how they feel about God, to encourage them to talk with you not only about their ideas about God, but how they feel they experience God. You wouldn't use the big seminary word of epistemology, but you do want to encourage them to explore how they know what they know. For example -- Do they relate experiences of serenity in nature with an experience of God? Do they relate experiences of being loved by their grandparents to being loved by God?

So often parents are afraid to discuss their ideas about God with their children because they fear bringing up the discussion will raise questions in the child's mind and weaken the child's faith. Let me assure you the child will always have questions. But questioning is inevitable for a healthy faith. And we must remember that growth is normally preceded by uncertainty, questioning and at times loss of faith for awhile. Children often have wonderfully simple and intimate experiences of love, beauty and truth and we can help them name the presence of God in their experiences. The idea of God then does not remain some abstract, easily questioned concept, but is a lived experience.

S: You are so right. I have not dared to act on my concerns and talk to my children openly about my ideas and experiences of God.

SD: Tool number one then for all spiritual pilgrims, young or old, is awareness. How can I be more aware of what I feel, think and believe. As we develop our capacities of knowing then we have greater insight into whether we are viewing our experiences in life from merely an ego perspective or whether we experience ourselves as participating in a reality greater than ourselves. A parent's role is to give the child permission for the child's awareness, curiosity and questioning to grow. Trying to pin God down in just one image is idolatry.

S: Wow, I never thought of it like that.

SD: Once you have given your child permission to think and to feel freely about God and the implicit knowledge of the strength of your faith, you have given them a container for their faith to grow in. You can be sure the culture will challenge their beliefs. But your gift to them is a safe container where their own curiosity can let them explore. Then their own experiences will validate their understanding of God, they will rely more and more on their own inner knowing and not some abstract teaching. Our spiritual curiosity in its purest form is in reality our longing for God and God's longing for us.

S: So I should try to tell my children what my ideas and experiences of God are like?

SD: You might tell your children about how your ideas about God have evolved and in this way you would be reinforcing the idea that change in our spiritual understandings is a natural part of our maturing spiritually. Most importantly you could share your experiences of God and this would re-affirm to them the importance of recognizing the reality of their own inner experiences of God.

S: What kinds of things should I share?

SD: Share what is real for you and your child will feel the strength in the authenticity of your sharing. One of my friends had a grandfather who was constantly sharing his experiences of God. Here are a few I remember: He would see a beautiful sunset and remark there was God; or he would see a horse galloping across an open field and exclaim with delight there is God; or he would enjoy the blue plate special at the local restaurant he frequented and say God was nourishing him in the meal. Basically anything that pulled him out of a limited ego experience of his life he experienced as God. His experience of God was not an esoteric mystery. He found God as that added mystery of beingness in objective reality and he took the time to name it.

S: I see the importance of giving my children examples of my experiences of God and a perspective of an open mind but how do I actually help them form meaningful beliefs?

SD: For the most part we don't form our religious or spiritual beliefs on the basis of what we are told or information we are given, but based on our experiences. Spiritual readings can help put in words the meaning of our experiences and this is very helpful, but it is the experiences themselves that are the source of meaning. Information about bird habitat and climate change is interesting. This information per se does not give us a belief that we should go out and do things to save bird habitat and recycle. It is our

actual experience of seeing and hearing birds at our feeder and experiencing their beauty and goodness that makes us believe we must work to prevent loss of bird habitat and slow climate change. Our animating beliefs about birds come from experiencing them.

S: What kind of experiences should I expose my children to?

SD: Look at where you experience God and let your children share in those kind of experiences. For example if you are an artist by vocation or inclination and your child has that characteristic create the setting for your child to experience the mystery of creativity in art and music that comes from God. If your child loves being outdoors create opportunities for them to experience the mystery of love and relationship with nature and non-human living things experienced by being in the natural world. If your child has a gift for caring take them with you to do volunteer work at the soup kitchen. In other words allow your child to find God in where their interests and gifts naturally draw them. And then help them name and treasure the reality of how this expression of Spirit is interacting in their lives.

S: You are saying I don't need to teach them church doctrine. I just need to let them experience and name the mystery that gives meaning to being alive while interacting with God's world.

SD: You are saying it better than me. God is not a thing but this unseen reality that infuses all of our interactions in the world. If you help your children become aware of this reality, they may surprise you. They may naturally be more tuned into the mystery of God's presence than we are in our often jaded, ego driven lives. Church doctrine is a way to try to describe ideas that we only actually know through experience. We grow through awareness of our experience of God not church doctrine. Creeds help us celebrate common experiences of Christians over the centuries, they do not create the experiences.

S: I see what you were saying earlier. It is when I think of God as a thing that I fall into idolatry.

SD: We know from the Bible that God is love. Love is not a thing, it is an intimate connection, it's an experience. Just as creation is an unfolding experience, God is both the unfolding cause and the effect of reality.

S: You are making me think I should examine my own beliefs about God.

SD: We all start off thinking of God in terms of our primary object relations growing up - our parents, or principal caretaker. And because all parenting is to some extent inadequate, as it must be for us to leave the innocence of infancy, we learn to think of God as supplying the love, affirmation and mirroring we did not get or got inadequately as a child. In the best of worlds this makes God into a gentle, loving parent. But that only suffices in the first half of life because we are still objectifying God, seeing God as a thing, a better parent. At some point to continue our spiritual growth we must

experience God not as a thing. As the mystics would say, God is not this, not that. God is this beingness, this love that we are participating in all the time. If we look, not for a thing, but into our inner capacities for knowing to experience love, harmony, truth, goodness, beauty, etc. (any of the essential qualities of being) then we begin to find God.

S: The mind seems to always want God to be a thing.

SD: Yes, that is because the ego mind thinks we are a thing. Since the ego mind operates dualistically, it wants God to be a thing. When we become spiritually mature we realize that we too are not a thing. Rather we see that we are a part of the ground of being. Once we experience our beingness reflected back from participating in the beingness of God, we intuit immediately the truth of our being made in the image and likeness of God.

S: Thank you so much for your help.

SD: You are most welcome. We can learn a lot from children and young people. So often their spiritual gifts of awareness and curiosity are sharper than our adult ones and as they learn to internalize and treasure the gifts of their own experience then they become natural teachers for all of us.