

## CHILD AND ADULT SPIRITUALITY

**A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Public Life  
Stanford Memorial Church, University Public Worship  
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This morning I want to speak with you about spiritual development, from childhood to adulthood. The Apostle Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."<sup>1</sup> Jesus is quoted in the Gospel according to Matthew as having said "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."<sup>2</sup> From a New Testament perspective, it sounds as if there may be both advantages and disadvantages to both adult and child spirituality.

As a case study for this sermon, let me tell you about a woman I interviewed and then wrote about in my book Finding Your Religion. I'll call her Donna Radley, although that's not her real name. She grew up in an affluent suburb of Los Angeles, and her childhood prayers had been tidy and polite. She went to Presbyterian Sunday school every week and Bible camps every summer. Her early understanding of what it meant to follow Christ was to be good: "Dear God, please God, thank you, God, I'm sorry, God." In high school she found a boyfriend and began drinking -- as she put it, "doing a few things I didn't want God to know about." She began distancing herself from God, "figuring that if I couldn't see Him, He couldn't see me." As she put it, "I adopted an all-or-nothing philosophy" because "I didn't see any way to follow Jesus and still do what I wanted."

Through college and into her mid-twenties she had nothing to do with religion. She engaged in other forms of behavior she knew would not be acceptable to her church. She experimented with drugs and became sexually active. Donna grew up emotionally and intellectually, but still viewed God through her high school eyes as a strict, moralistic parent. She didn't want Him hovering around telling her what to do and making her feel guilty.

Donna married her college sweetheart soon after graduation. Some years later her husband suggested that they find a church to go to with their children, and they settled on a liberal and open Presbyterian congregation. But, soon she started feeling guilty

in this congregation too. It was focused heavily on social justice, and it seemed as if she weren't writing enough letters to her representatives in Congress and attending enough rallies. Things got worse when after ten years of marriage she decided to take her two kids and leave her husband. It was the most difficult period in her life, a time when she desperately searched for a way to help her cope with her hardships. The adolescent came out in her again, as she explains it: "I crossed faith off my list until further notice... I assumed God would disapprove entirely, and I figured I had enough to do without convincing Him."

Within a year after her divorce, though, Donna began reading about Buddhism and meditating. In this non-judgmental context "there was the feeling of some doors opening." Then a friend suggested she attend Quaker meeting. The services gave her exactly what she needed at first: "just some quiet and an acknowledgment of a presence." Later she felt the desire to add music, incense, communion, and ritual to her worship, and she became a regular at an Episcopal Church. She came away with a feeling of being fed. Soon she began rethinking her adolescent relationship to God as a strict parent. As she puts it, "I began to see not only that my being good wasn't God's chief concern, but that, in an entirely different way, God was good. Not good as in 'behave yourself,' but good. Like pizza and beer for dinner when you're tired and hungry. Like a hot bath, or a great day, or holding your kids: that kind of good. And I wanted more of Him."

Finally with a new boyfriend she started going to Catholic mass. She was transported. Here's how she described it: "I was always amazed afterward! I found the Mass beautiful and powerful, and the presence I sensed there was so different from who I'd thought God was. It was as though I'd had everything upside down. At Mass, God was a mystery, and it seemed we were called not to figure Him out, but simply to experience Him. We didn't go to please Him; we went to feed ourselves...And I began to feel loved."

Looking back, did Donna need to leave the Protestantism of her childhood to become a Roman Catholic? No, in the abstract, but yes, concretely, for her. Protestantism, through her child's eyes, had been judgmental, frightening and guilt-producing. Her adult Catholicism was warm, loving, and liberating. Some childhood Catholics, of course, would relate it the other way around. And there are people, regardless of their tradition, who found their childhood religion to be warm, loving, and liberating, and who spend much of their later life trying to regain some of

that spiritual comfort.

There's been quite a bit of research in developmental psychology over the last 30 years about stages of spiritual development. I originally learned about stage theory from Professor James Fowler at the Harvard Divinity School. I've also been quite influenced by the work of Fritz Oser, George Scarlett, and Sharon Parks, among others. Let me describe some of that research and theory, because I think it's very helpful in putting child and adult spirituality in context.

Lots of us have heard of the "identity crisis" and the other inner crises, largely emotional, that psychologist Erik Erikson wrote about. He postulated eight stages during the human life cycle, from childhood through adolescence and adulthood into old age.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, many know about the work of another psychologist, Jean Piaget, who explained that there are standard stages of cognitive development for all human beings.<sup>4</sup> Some have learned about the research of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg on stages of moral development.<sup>5</sup> Yet, for reasons I don't fully understand, the stages of spiritual development aren't common knowledge along with the stages of emotional, intellectual, and moral development.

Around universities like this, I've run into people who say their college education has convinced them of the folly of spirituality and religion. It's all superstitious nonsense, they explain -- illogical, senseless, and useless. But, often a closer analysis reveals that these individuals' spiritual understanding hasn't kept pace with their emotional, intellectual and moral development. Some ask how any mature, educated adult could possibly think that there's an old man with a beard looking down at us from the sky. Well, I certainly don't, I explain. And that's not the way most religious adults understand God. Many critics still look at God through the lenses of childhood, when they were last involved with religion. This isn't to say that there aren't mature, conscientious atheists who live fulfilling lives without a belief in God. Of course there are. However, there are also some deeply conflicted adults, whose spiritual side has been freeze-dried in childhood or early adolescence, often after their Jewish bar or bat-mitzvah or their Christian confirmation or other coming of age ritual. Some of them, otherwise intelligent and capable, can then be drawn to the rigidities of authoritarian religious leaders and unequivocal teachings. Involvement in a "cult" -- a psychologically destructive group like the one I discussed here last week -- becomes a significant risk for them. Others reject religion entirely, without realizing that a spiritually mature person can

fit what he or she knows logically, scientifically and practically into a rich life of faith.

I find it useful to speak of six stages of spiritual development, which I call Magic and Reality during childhood, Dependence and Independence during adolescence and early adulthood, and Interdependence and Unity during late adulthood. Very few of us ever reach Unity -- the realm of the mystics -- and many of us stay happily at an earlier stage like Dependence throughout our lives. No judgment should be implied of what's better or worse.

Children between the ages of 2 and 12 generally move from a magical perception of the world to a reality-based one. That is, a world full of fairies and demons, superheroes and villains gives way to one where the child's primary question becomes "Is it real?" Is there really a Santa Claus, a tooth fairy or an Easter Bunny? One's experience of God also tends to shift from an all-powerful God, who directs everything, to a cause-and-effect God, who can be influenced by good deeds, promises and vows. Before she was a teenager, Donna Radley was convinced that she could influence God by saying "please," "thank you," and "I'm sorry."

In adolescence, one becomes deeply affected by peer pressure and can be easily swayed by the leadership of respected older people. At this time in the life cycle, God is usually imaged as an idealized parental figure, unconditionally loving, although sometimes deeply judgmental. Donna Radley had this second image, feeling judged when she found a boyfriend and began drinking in high school. She began distancing herself from God as from a strict parent because she was doing things she didn't want God to know about. She somehow figured, just the way she might with her own parents, that if she couldn't see God, He couldn't see her.

In the Independence Stage, for many occurring during college, one begins to find spiritual authority within, instead of relying on peers and respected elders. At this time it's very common, natural, and understandable for the individual to say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious," not wanting to be part of any institution or under anyone's control. If one doesn't become a conscientious atheist or agnostic at this stage, God usually becomes distant and impersonal, described as Spirit or Natural Law or Life Force or Energy in the universe, but not as a person who answers prayers. Donna Radley's move to Buddhism and Quakerism in her thirties rings of the Independence stage. There was no judgmental God for her anymore, and "presence" was enough of a definition of the divine. Even the positive experience of the music, incense and ritual of the Episcopal church she started

attending was a far cry from the severe parental God who disapproved of so much of her life.

In the Interdependence Stage reached later in adult life, there's an expressed need for community again, within which to place one's fully-evolved sense of self. God or Ultimate Reality is experienced paradoxically, so that many people at this stage during crisis or celebration can pray to God the person, even though they intellectually understand the divine to be an impersonal force in the universe. One can live with ambiguity and paradox at the Interdependence stage, while also looking for religious community, seeing the short-comings of trying to go it completely alone. Donna Radley ended up taking classes for a year and becoming a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

The sixth stage, reached only by the very few of us who are mystics, is that of Unity. They tend to see God in all things, and all things in God. They speak of having a direct experience of God, or of becoming fully enlightened, and ironically they can usually talk more easily with mystics of other religious traditions than with non-mystics within their own tradition.

Most college students find themselves either in the Dependence or Independence stage of faith development. The tension between these two stages can cause considerable stress and strain, I've found, not only internally for individuals but between people. For example, there was a Protestant student I knew several years ago, whom I believed was at the Independence stage, who explained that he no longer felt comfortable or welcome at most Christian services. He saw Jesus as a great historical teacher and exemplar, but not as identical with God and not as his personal Lord and Savior. When he expressed these thoughts, he got in arguments and felt excluded by many other Christian students. Institutional religion generally seemed rigid and judgmental, pietistic and moralistic to him. Rejecting dogma and doctrine, he said, [Quote] "There's a river of spirit deep within each of us that can't be named, that's completely non-denominational, and that doesn't require any labels like 'God' and 'Jesus.'" There's no one right way to find that river and get into its flow."

I wouldn't be surprised if this same Protestant, though, years from now, opens up to his Christianity and accepts much of the dogma and doctrine of his once-rejected faith. That doesn't necessarily mean that he'll re-enter the Dependence stage. The Interdependence stage, which usually people don't reach until their mid-thirties or forties, if they ever do, has been called a "second naivete"<sup>6</sup> because religious symbols become sacred once

again and are found to have new power. Like the onion-peeling effect of discovering symbolic depth in great literature, adults at the Interdependence stage are able to read scripture, for example, simultaneously at the literal, allegorical, historical, conceptual, poetic, and inspirational levels.

Religiously, people at the Interdependence stage are also open to dialogue between different religious traditions because they understand that truth is multi-dimensional. Any particular religious symbol, myth or ritual is necessarily limited and incomplete, bound by the follower's personal experiences. This is not a purely relativistic approach, however, as it is in the Independence stage. Interdependence people know the value of picking a particular spiritual path and being part of a particular spiritual community.

In conclusion I want to emphasize that there's beauty and there's truth at all stages, just as there is within a wide variety of religious traditions. Spiritual development is a process, just like the rest of human growth during the life cycle.

Would you give up your twenties because someone claims its better to act as if you're forty? It can work the other way, too. Would you condemn someone in their sixties for not acting as if they're forty? Maybe certain people would in the youth culture of America, where it seems best to be forever young. Ideally, though, one should savor each era in one's life fully. How unfortunate it would be not to appreciate the distinctive gifts of each age and the particular perspective each offers. And how unfair and disrespectful it is to judge one period from the viewpoint of another.

For some reason, religion is often perceived through non-developmental lenses as something you either have or you don't. It's like an on or off button. Then, once you have it, it's never supposed to change or "you've lost your faith." Looked at developmentally, though, religion is a process, not a product. It's a journey, not a destination.

There's certainly no need to leave one's childhood denominational home, like Donna Radley, as one passes through different faith stages. Some people find it to be a developmental necessity, while others stay quite happily within their tradition as they grow and mature. Many people, though, become fearful that they're losing their faith entirely as they move from stage to stage. Their spiritual outlook and their understanding of God change so significantly, and they aren't prepared for it. Others who are spiritually stable -- having stayed at a particular stage for an extended period -- can be made very uncomfortable,

sometimes to the point of defensiveness, by what they see as the unsteadiness of their friends and loved ones.

The ideal, from my perspective, is both to realize that some things are hidden from the wise and intelligent while revealed to infants, and also to realize that for many of us, when we become adults, we put an end to childish ways. I wish for all of us that we might find resting places at all stages, where we can learn, as from one who is gentle and humble in heart, and where we'll find our yoke easy and our burden light.

## NOTES



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1. I Corinthians 13: 11.
  2. Matthew 11: 25.
  3. See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: Norton, 1950) and Identity, Youth, and Crisis (New York: Norton, 1968).
  4. See, for example, The Origin of Intelligence in Children (New York: Norton, 1963) and The Early Growth of Logic in the Child (New York: Norton, 1969).
  5. See, for example, Moral Stages (New York: Karger, 1983) and The Psychology of Moral Stages (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).
  6. James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 197, quoting Paul Ricoeur.