

Spirituality of Adults: Invitation to Transformation

I Corinthians 13:11-13, Romans 12:1-2

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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. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:11-13 NRSV

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2 NRSV

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Romans 12:1-2 The Message

What are some ways your mind changed in the last 30 years? 50 years? How has your heart changed? More specifically, how has your faith or spiritual life changed? Your experience and view of the church? Of the Bible? Of the Holy, God, Mystery? Of Jesus? One of the major themes of the teachings of Jesus and Paul and biblical narrative as a whole is change. We may think these are unchanging and static or buried in history. And yet, our texts today are two that remind us that is not true. Remember you are no longer a child. See the world and what matters through the ideas of an adult. Be transformed. If you embrace God's love and grace, you will be changed from the inside out.

As adults, starting in our early 20's, people develop psychologically and physically in different but some predictable ways. Piaget and Erickson are two famous researchers in psychosocial development. As adults, spiritual formation continues to happen. We can be indifferent or intentional, resistant or open. Our July series on spiritual formation throughout life is an opportunity not to simply think about chronological age, but chapters in our lives, or acts in a play or movements in a dance. Many metaphors.

James Fowler offers these descriptions of stages in adult spiritual formation. (1)

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

This stage usually starts in early 20's and can last throughout life. People in this stage start to question their own assumptions around the faith traditions. And people question the authority structures of their faith. Growth is gained by rejecting some parts of their faith while affirming other parts. In the end, the person starts to take greater ownership of their own faith journey.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

This can be people in their 30's or 40's or later or earlier. This stage is when the struggles and questioning of stage four give way to a more comfortable place. Some answers have been found and the person at this stage is comfortable knowing that all the answers might not be easily found. People are also much more open to other people's faith perspectives and a realization that other people's faiths might inform and deepen their own.

What do these look like in real life? In your life? In others? Over the years I have read a series of columns in the journal *The Christian Century* called "How My Mind Has Changed." It is more than that – how people's faith, theology, spiritual life, heart and more have changed. One of the columns that has stuck with me was written by Brittney Cooper in 2021. She is currently a professor at Rutgers University and author. Here are some excerpts:

My twenties ... were an experiment in holding on to certainty long after my peers had... The particular turbulence of my peers were Bush v. Gore, 9/11, the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an economic crash that shook the country to its core. I had grown up with a notion of God as an anchor in the time of storm...

I wore dogma about the neck, literally spending most of college wearing a blue and white What Would Jesus Do lanyard with my keys on it....Dogma, especially the Christian brand, orders the world in a clear ledger of rules and rewards. It puts the puzzle together in a discernible image, undaunted by jagged and misshapen pieces.

But maybe we aren't puzzles. And maybe the goal isn't to fit. Letting go of my investment in a dogmatic,...notion of Christianity is perhaps the biggest change I have experienced in my faith walk of three decades. Instead, I have learned the art of embracing uncertainty, messiness, and divine surprises, in ways that have made my relationship to the divine more thrilling and confounding and scary, but less anxiety inducing and resentment filled.

At age 28, I staged my first act of religious insurrection: I joined a church that wasn't a Baptist church. The earth did not shake. But I'm sure I wobbled in my heels a bit... I remember the day the pastor stood and said that he would no longer preach to people about a fire-and-brimstone God come to punish them for their every sin....He said, "I used to preach God like that,...but I will not preach him like that anymore." I had never seen a

pastor stand up in a pulpit and reverse course, never seen a pastor admit he was wrong and that his ideas about God had changed....

I realized changing one's mind is one of the disciplines of the Christian faith. To change one's mind is actually one of the earliest definitions of the word repentance. It is a definition and practice that we should reclaim... I began to seek a more expansive gospel, one not tethered to rules, regulations...and a God peering from the heavens to police my every thought and move .. I began to see God as unconditionally loving, as the Being who, having created me, was the One most intent on helping me to make my way in the world and to be an agent of change and hope.

Black women cannot afford a self-negating faith. The costs are too high.....

Later in the column ...what if our faith practices were about a willingness to change our minds in ways that allowed us to bend more easily toward love, justice, mercy, and grace for ourselves and the others? What if we modeled the notion that discipleship is about a willingness to change as we come to learn more about what it means to live in ways that are loving and just? (2)

I think she is on to something. This is the invitation for us, no matter our age. A deepening, an openness, a reaching inward and outward. Our church and community is a place where there are opportunities for this every Sunday, every week. Maybe we feel stuck. Maybe we want more head knowledge but also long for another kind of awareness, a deeper kind of experience of Jesus' love and grace and justice. How can we describe this evolving faith?

I like the way Richard Rohr frames adult spiritual formation. He writes:

An evolutionary faith understands that nothing is static. The universe unfolds, our understanding of God evolves and deepens, and our moral development surely evolves as well...Paul seems to be intuiting the same wisdom—as we love more deeply, we will behave differently (1 Corinthians 13:11–13). I like the language of Ken Wilber in describing the evolution of moral and spiritual development. He offers four major stages or four shapes of transformation: **Cleaning Up, Growing Up, Waking Up, and Showing Up.**

Cleaning Up This stage reflects the moral preoccupations of the culture. It is very superficial and reflects our not-so-grown-up culture's values of various "purity codes." ... Any preoccupation with our private moral perfection keeps our eyes on ourselves and not on God or grace or love. This stage is mostly about the need for early impulse control and creating necessary ego boundaries—so you can actually show up in the real and much bigger world.

Growing up refers to the process of psychological and emotional maturity that persons commonly undergo, both personally and culturally. We all grow up, even if inside our own

bubbles. The social structures that surround us color, strengthen, and also limit how much we can grow up and how much of our own shadow self we will be able to face and integrate.

Waking Up refers to any spiritual experience which overcomes our experience of the self as separate from Being in general. It should be the goal of all spiritual work, including prayer, sacraments, Bible study, and religious services of any type. The purpose of waking up is not personal or private perfection, but surrender, love, and union with God.

Showing Up means bringing our heart and mind into the suffering and problems of the world. It means engagement, social presence, and a sincere concern for justice and peace for others beyond ourselves.... Showing up is the full and final result of the prior three stages— God’s fully transformed “work of art.” (3)

Waking up, being more aware of our experiences that deepen our experience of the Holy, of Christ presence, of the source of love. Paul wanted those early followers of Jesus to see more clearly what God was doing in them and among them. Don’t get stuck. Stay open. Be willing to be changed and to see yourself and world differently.

I learned to see differently on our vacation. We went to see the Barnes Art Collection in downtown Philadelphia. Their tag line is “See art differently.” I did not know what to expect. As we entered the first gallery the huge wall had at least 15 different pieces. None were labeled. Various styles and artists. We could use our phones for a description. A very unusual way to look at art. And there was gallery after gallery of the walls covered with a variety of art.

Then we went to hear the talk. This is what we learned. the early 1900’s, Albert Barnes was a brilliant doctor, scientist who made his fortune with a particular compound. He later became an art collector in. He developed a whole approach to education and art appreciation. He believed that individuals, regardless of background, could learn and apply principles of aesthetic appreciation, not only to visual arts, but also to what they perceived in daily life.

The Barnes method provides a structure for observing certain qualities, and then also provides a language to describe them. When a work is so exquisitely balanced in its particular elements— light, line, color and space— it yields a harmonious result, a resonant “Ah!”

These principles are hard to describe in such a way that a novice can understand them. Thus in Barnes’s approach the student must do the work of looking at paintings and then looking some more. Slowly, the student starts to observe beyond his or her own personal reaction to the subject content or the historical basis for the work, and begins to see as an artist sees. Dr. Barnes believed that art had the power to improve minds and transform lives.

Each person who looks at an ensemble was invited to see the whole collection and individual paintings. What is similar? What is different? How am I reacting to the each one and the collection? Seeing, responding, reflecting, deepening. Aha moments.

We as a church are a place and community where we are invited to see differently, to deepen our experience the Holy One, the Cosmic artist and be transformed and to show up for others. Amen.

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

2) Brittney Cooper. "Why I Came Back around to Repentance." *The Christian Century*, 21 Nov. 2021, www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/why-i-came-back-around-repentance

3) Richard Rohr, "The Four Shapes of Transformation," *cac.org*, 1 June 2021
<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/four-shapes-of-transformation-2021-06-01/>

4) For more information on the Barnes Collection and the Barnes method, see
<https://www.thecollector.com/who-was-albert-barnes-art-collector/>
<https://www.barnesfoundation.org/about>