

Spiritual Growth over a Lifetime

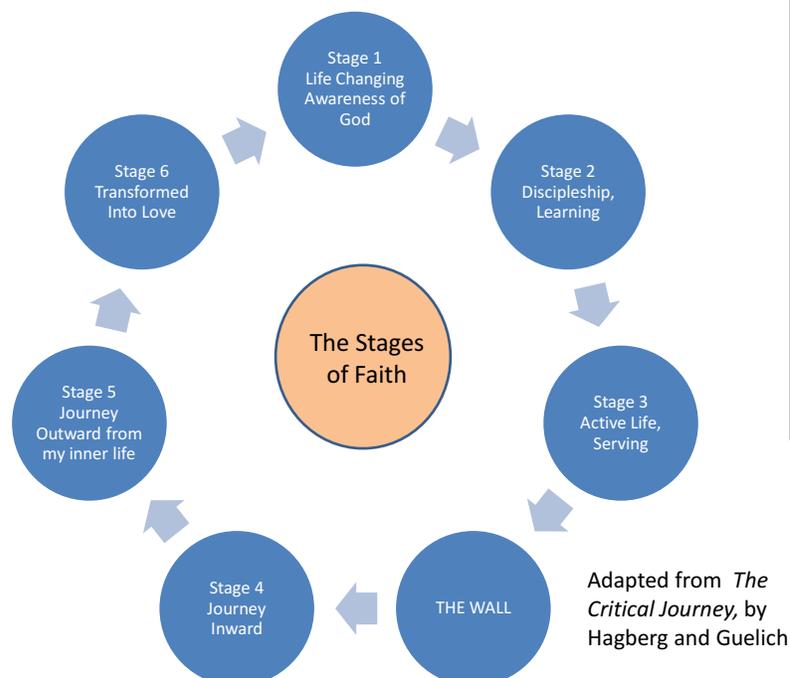
From the moment we discover faith awakening in us to the moment we draw our last breath, we keep growing spiritually. Most of the time we are unaware of how this happens. Usually it is only when we look back at our lives do we notice that we have grown, that we have changed.

The chart below helps explain what goes on when we talk about spiritual growth. **Each stage presents us with gifts for our spiritual formation.** Each stage builds on the other and all are equally important. Although growth is never this linear nor precise, we cannot skip stages. A person in stage 2, for example, can't skip to stage 5. In fits and spurts we move through the stages. And we cycle back through them. We cannot speed this process. We can slow it down, however.

Here's the good news: **God is in charge of our growth.** He starts it and maintains it.

The invitation is to **understand this process and to cooperate** with it. Clarity comes from knowing what is happening to us and what we can anticipate down the road. Comfort comes by recognizing that these stages are normal to most everyone and a part of being human.

The diagram below identifies the stages of faith development. It also shows us that we can cycle through the stages at many points in our lives. For example, spiritually mature people learn something new about God. They go to stage two and three to learn how to take that awareness and live it out experientially. A crisis causes them to look inside. And so on. Nevertheless, **there is at any point in our lives, a stage that we call "home stage,"** a stage more or less characteristic of where you are right now.



Reflect on the stages and on the descriptions below.

What home stage are you in?

What signs of "stuckness" -- if any -- do you see?

What longings do you experience for the next stage?

Who can help you grow?

stages of the journey *adapted from *the critical journey* by Janet Hagberg & Robert Guelich

| STAGES OF FAITH | CHARACTERISTICS | HOW WE GET STUCK | HOW WE MOVE TO THE NEXT STAGE |
|--|--|--|---|
| STAGE ONE: recognition of God "I need God" faith as awareness, recognition and belief | a sense of awe & need for a God and greater meaning in life. | if we stick to a sense of worthlessness or ignorance and don't believe we are really worth "more" | become part of a strong group and find and follow good teachers / teaching that provide direction |
| STAGE TWO: life of discipleship "I want to learn about God" faith as learning, growing in knowledge | meaning and identity come from belonging to a group; learning about our belief system; sense of rightness and security in our faith | if we become rigid in righteousness and following the rules so as to develop a "we against them" attitude; may keep switching churches | recognize we have much to offer our group, and are ready to step out and take risks to serve God and others |
| STAGE THREE: the productive life "I want to do things for God" faith as doing, as serving | developing life and ministry skills as followers of Jesus; growing in the stewardship of our gift mix; added responsibility in service and in love of God and others whether at home, at work, and at church | if we become overly zealous in "our way" or become weary in well-doing; if we are self-centered or view our lives as performance; if we refuse to keep learning | often through a personal crisis we question our faith, God, & the church; we either hunker down and refuse to admit doubt, or we seek people and places where we are free to explore deeper faith |
| THE WALL doubts and uncertainties "Things just aren't working anymore...there's got to be more" faith as wrestling with God | RESISTANCE AT THE WALL: strong egos, self-deprecators, guilt/shame-ridden, intellectualizing, value performance, doctrine-focused, people-pleasers, unwillingness to admit secrets, mental and emotional laziness | GOING THROUGH THE WALL INVOLVES: discomfort, surrender, healing, growing self-awareness, humility, forgiveness, risk, acceptance of self and others, love, closeness to God, discernment, solitude & reflection, opening to others | |
| STAGE FOUR: the journey inward "I need to figure out a better way to cultivate relationship with God & others" faith as rediscovering God, myself, and my life purposes | life or faith crisis, loss of certainties; the things that worked aren't working anymore; search for direction, not answers; pursuit of personal integrity in relationship to God; God is released from the box, sometimes looks & feels like losing faith; moving from "doing" to "being" | if we always question everything and are consumed by self-assessment, become immobilized, don't keep moving; if we refuse to be transparent with trusted others | let go of self-centeredness accept God's purposes for our lives; seek wholeness through personal healing; be willing to commit to whatever it takes; accept desire to slow down and rest and to have a deeper connection with God |
| STAGE FIVE: the journey outward "I am learning to live out of a totally different place" faith as surrender to God's will | surrendered to God; a renewed sense of God's acceptance; a sense of deepening relationships; sense of calling, vocation or ministry; concern and focus on others' best interests; a deep calm or stillness | not really stuck at this stage but others can view you as: seemingly out of touch with practical concerns, careless about "important" things, and not diligent in certain areas | not striving, just evolving growing deeper seeing God in all of life being God's person letting go |
| STAGE SIX: the life of love "I am able to love as God loves" faith as intimacy | living in obedience to God; wisdom gained from life's struggles; compassionate living for others; detachment from things and stress; life abandoned; utter gratitude and deep joy and contentment | not really stuck at this stage but others can view you as: separate from the world, that you neglect yourself and that maybe you're "wasting your life" | |

Further Resources on spiritual growth over a life time

Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life, by Richard Rohr. Jossey-Bass, 2011.

"In the first half of life we are naturally and rightly preoccupied with establishing our identity -- climbing, achieving and performing. But those concerns will not serve us as we grow older and begin to embark on a further journey, one that involves challenges, mistakes, loss of control broader horizons, and necessary suffering that actually shocks us out of our prior comfort zone." (Inside jacket cover)

For Women:

Gift from the Sea, by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Pantheon Books, 2005 edition.

"Drawing inspiration from the shells on the shore, Lindbergh's musings on the shape of a woman's life bring new understanding to both men and women at any stage of life." (Back cover)

Second Calling by Dale Hanson Bourke. Thomas Nelson, 2006.

"I love Dale's insight that midlife offers women a 'holy break' and the opportunity to forge a new identity that is grounded in prayer and is world changing in scope." Endorsement by Lynne Hybels