

Spiritual Direction through Faith Stage and Cross Cultural Transitions

by

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*A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of [Spiritual Growth Ministries](http://www.sgm.org.nz)
(www.sgm.org.nz).*

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Acknowledgement:

Thanks to Paul Thompson and Jenny McIntosh who read this project and made thoughtful comments and suggestions.

Introduction

James Fowler's Stages of faith have become a valuable way of understanding and appreciating a person's faith journey. He and other writers have acknowledged that development is not inevitable and can be painful and the transition from stage to stage is the time of greatest challenge and difficulty. It's during this period that the support and wisdom of a spiritual director can be of high value.

Finding one's place in an alien culture is also a transition that can be difficult and painful. In negotiating this challenge, once again the support and experience of a spiritual director can be precious

Faith Stage transition is largely an inward event, unmarked by the physical changes that so obviously accompany the bodily events that mark the parallel changes from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Cross cultural transition is usually both an outward and an inward event. In this research project I've chosen to examine cross cultural transition for its own sake but also as a metaphor and analogy of faith stage transition. They have much in common. The experience of finding one's feet in a different culture involves: a profound challenge to one's personal identity; restructuring of basic assumptions; the need to find new community. The Christian believer will acknowledge in all these a spiritual dimension as well. The person making the transition to a new stage of faith will likewise experience this challenge to personal identity, the need to question and re-model basic assumptions and, often though perhaps not inevitably, will need to find a new faith community.

Understanding faith stage transitions as being in some ways akin to cultural transitions gives the spiritual director a model for understanding what may be going on for their directees. The gulf between how I once experienced God and lived my faith and now do so may truly seem as wide as the ocean that separates Asia from America. I even need a different language to describe it. I need to remind myself that my some of my directees still live well and happily in America. Others have embarked on the difficult transition to a new stage of faith. My task is not to yank them along but to discern the movement already going on, provide a map, point out landmarks and at times, to be a safe shelter where the travellers can attend to their wounds and get some nourishment for the road ahead.

A word about me. I've been on the Christian faith journey since babyhood, and am now in my mid 40s. As I've read Fowler's theories and research I've understood it because I've lived and watched others live it.

I'm also a cross-cultural person. Born in India I lived there until I left school. I came to New Zealand, my passport country, but not my home, and lived here for less than 7 years before setting off again this time to Bangladesh. My husband and I worked in Bangladesh for 20 years. In late 1999 we returned to New Zealand with four children and after nearly three years here are starting to feel that we have made reasonable progress in our transition to settled life in New Zealand.

For me spiritual direction has been part of my transition experience for a number of years, particularly in the most recent period of our return to NZ. In addition to my own reflections I've included in this paper comments and reflections from others who have been through these same transitions.

Cross Cultural Transitions

Culture, Culture Shock, And Re-Entry Shock

The common understanding of 'culture' relates to the ideas, customs, skills and thought patterns that characterise a group of people. The travel brochure invites us to 'Experience the exciting culture of ____' and the photographs will show colourful costumes, local dancing and delectable foods. A better definition of culture however is that it is a way of life, the context in which we live, feel and relate, our collective identity¹ Culture is the blueprint that

*"guides the behaviour of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behaviour in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group."*²

An important feature of culture is that, like the iceberg, most of it is under water. In other words cultural patterns and assumptions are largely sub-conscious. For example most people have a concept of 'lateness' and a clear though unarticulated knowledge of its time spans; after how many minutes of delay must you offer a brief casual apology, a more formal sentence of apology, an apology accompanied by a sound excuse? Personal space, patterns of touching others (inter-gender and same gender) topics of conversation, degree and timing of self disclosure -- rules and assumptions about all these are simply 'known' without having to be consciously learnt or even considered. It's only on entering another culture that one discovers these assumptions, usually because they are violated.

There's a certain sense in which people cross cultures all the time. The traveller visits a new and very different country. The teenager changes schools. Someone moves from a small country town to the big city. An executive takes a job with a different company. The Pentecostal believer attends High Anglican Mass. The lifelong teetotaler accepts an invitation to a party in a pub.

Most of these moves could more accurately be described as sub-cultural transitions but my point here is to evoke the feelings that go with them. In each case, to a smaller or greater degree the person involved feels uncertain, tentative, anxious. There are questions: what are the rules? what are the expectations? There are fears: will I fit in? will I look like a fool? There will be stress with its classical fight or flight reactions: bravado or withdrawal.

The greater the differences between cultures the more difficult and prolonged will be the stress of crossing between them. 'Culture Shock' is a well known term and a well researched experience. Recently 'Re-Entry Shock' (sometimes called reverse culture shock) has been highlighted as a subject of research. A person who has lived any length of time in a different culture can expect difficulties and challenges on returning 'home'. Many people in fact find re-entry to their homeland significantly more difficult than entering an alien culture. In referring to cross cultural transition I intend to cover movement in either direction. I will however give some attention to challenges that may be specific to either culture shock or re-entry shock.

¹ H. Douglas Brown *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, p 176

Spiritual Direction And Cross Cultural Transitions

The person entering a different culture not as a tourist but as an intending sojourner or migrant will be challenged on many levels. Various writers have described culture shock as a sense of powerlessness, a lack of control, an inability to predict outcomes, estrangement, isolation, a loss of meaning -- and more³. A person re-entering the 'home' country may feel an even greater, because unexpected, shock. It will help the spiritual director working with this person to have a general knowledge about the dynamics of cross cultural transitions and there are a multitude of useful resources on this subject (see the Bibliography for a brief introductory list.) However, while the scope of spiritual direction isn't limited to the 'spiritual' side of life I'm not attempting to cover in this essay all the practical and pastoral issues that may arise for the cross cultural traveller but to focus on themes of faith and discipleship, and especially the personal relationship with God in a new context.

Disruption To World View

A person's world view, self identity and systems of thinking, acting, feeling and communicating can be disrupted by contact with another culture.⁴ For example

"Every person who lives in a culture is confronted sooner or later with actions that seem to contradict the values of her assumed world. Whether she is asked to wear a veil to protect her modesty, give a "gift" to move goods through customs or inflate the academic grades of relatives of high officials, she is required to fit into a social structure that operates with different rules from those of her own country. Whether he is promised work that never gets done, given directions to a place that doesn't exist, or given servants to wait on his every whim, he must adjust his assumptions and values to the realities of his situation."⁵

It's likely that the Christian believer in this situation will be working through issues such as those described at an intellectual and at an emotional level. The spiritual director can help enormously just by listening. Allowing the person to examine and understand the feelings of frustration, confusion and anger that may arise from these challenges to their world view will help them to move on through the process of adjustment.

I believe that in this situation the spiritual director may be prepared to provide direct teaching and information as well as a listening ear. I don't mean the dismissive response that "everybody goes through this phase" that can leave a person feeling that their concerns weren't heard. But after they have had the opportunity to express their feelings some people find it an immense comfort to be reassured that their struggles are characteristic of the normal transition process.

Loss of Spiritual Props

Along with the assault on previously taken-for-granted assumptions and patterns of acting the cross cultural traveller frequently experiences the loss of spiritual props. The home church or faith community has been left behind. I may no longer be able to worship in my native language. Some people have also lost access to seminars, bookshops, libraries, conferences, Christian radio stations and friends. The degree to

³ Furnham and Bochner, *Culture Shock* p 49

⁵ Adeney *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World*, p 23

which my faith and trust has been dependent on context may quickly be highlighted. At the same time the stresses of the new life often put a strain on Christian maturity. I discover an alarming irritability, low tolerance of others' foibles, anger and resentment -- all faults I had well under control in my home environment. "Why did God bring us here?" I once asked my husband. "We're not achieving anything for the kingdom and I'm not even growing in my own faith -- I'm more bad tempered and impatient, less willing to pray and read the bible ..." My husband agreed with me, which didn't make me feel any better.

Having this sort of self knowledge forced on me can give me a chance to grow and deepen my relationship with God. Here again the spiritual director can help by listening to my feelings and struggles and encouraging me to keep looking out for God's action in my life. There are two parallel dangers. The first is that I may focus entirely on externals, criticising and blaming other people and my situation. The second is that I may become obsessed with my failings, criticising and blaming myself. Either reaction can produce depression. A wise listener can help me to clarify what is going on in both my inner and my outer world so that I can stay in balance.

Theological and Ethical Issues

Ethical and social justice issues frequently offer a further huge challenge for many people crossing cultures. Bribery and corruption may be the biggest issue in some countries. Hideous poverty demands an examination of one's own lifestyle and some people experience painful feelings of guilt, helplessness and anger. People entering or re-entering the West from a poor country may have similar struggles with the apparent wealth of everyone. They may be inclined to be judgmental, angry or envious. Needless to say there are no quick and easy answers but these could well be issues that a directee needs to work through.

Some people may also experience a theological challenge to their belief systems as they first come into real contact with another faith. If I have previously held the simplistic assumption that we (Christians) are right and that makes us better people it can be a shock to encounter thoughtful, moral and deeply sincere followers of another faith. It can be difficult to voice such doubts or even allow myself to think them. To do so feels like a betrayal. An un-shockable spiritual director can be a safe person who won't condemn me for having questions and who will help me to stay anchored in God.

Challenge to Identity

Perhaps the most painful struggle for the cross cultural traveller is that of identity. I vividly remember Warren⁶, a man in his 30s. He had been a successful pastor and a very high achiever in his own country. In responding to a sense of God's calling to missionary work he'd received much affirmation and applause. But when he actually hit the mission field he suffered ignominy at many levels. His past achievements were not known or appreciated. He loved to preach to large congregations -- now in a new language he stumbled to put words together in clumsy, ungrammatical sentences. He was used to being in control -- he was forced to let other people look after him. He struggled to accept that it could be years before he achieved the confidence and competence that would give him anything like the status he had had at home.

With this loss of identity may go a sense of doubt and questioning of God. Did I make a mistake in coming here? Was it really God's voice that I heard?

Where is God anyway now that I'm in this place of lonely confusion?

The spiritual director sharing this turmoil can help, first to understand its causes. The initial reaction may be to blame the new culture, blame it on homesickness and very often to blame fellow expatriates⁷. It may not be easy at first to see that the root cause of my struggle is that my identity is being challenged in this way. But in reflecting on this I may be able to grow significantly, gain a new perspective on myself and on the culture that has shaped me, and come to a deeper confidence in my identity as a person loved and called by God.

In my experience loss of identity is by far the most serious and spiritually significant issue of the re-entry process as well. The pitfall for those returning to their own country or culture is that they may not expect any major difficulties. After all they're going 'home'. But in fact most cross cultural travellers have to make some adjustments and the longer they have been away the more profound these will be. It's not merely that things will have changed in the family, in the church, in the city and in the country to which they are returning. They may not realise the extent to which they have changed in themselves as a result of their cross cultural experience. They are not the same people who went away and this can be deeply disconcerting.

In our own case we left a community in which we were known and valued, a challenging job, and satisfying relationships with colleagues and friends. We exchanged all this for unemployment, the awareness that our skills and knowledge of Bangladeshi language and culture had little value in New Zealand and the depressing sense that no one knew us for who we were - successful, sociable people - but only in that dismal identity of 'returned missionaries'. The search for our New Zealand identity is progressing.

A web site *Interaction International*, dedicated to cross cultural people includes testimonies that demonstrate how significant and helpful it can be to have the right kind of support. One repeated comment touched on the reassurance that 'I am not abnormal'. Providing a map for people who feel lost and confused is one of the most helpful services the spiritual director or counsellor can offer. One young person wrote:

*"Thank you for making a safe place for us to grieve, to work through, to talk about what was on our hearts. Thank you for affirming us, reminding us that we are unique, valuable human beings. Thank you for validating our experiences and listening to our hearts."*⁸

The Alternatives -- Going On Or Getting Stuck

Crossing cultures should not be seen as a negative experience. Almost everyone who has weathered the transition affirms the gains that come from it. As a result of the culture stress process, I gain a new perspective on myself. By examining the degree to which I have been influenced by my own culture I come to understand the culturally derived attitudes and values of other people.⁹ But such maturity is not the inevitable fruit of crossing cultures. Bernard Adeney describes the process of entering a new culture in three stages: *the stranger/guest stage* of initial entry; *the transitional stage*

⁷ A missionary once told me that a new family was due to arrive and she had been setting things in place for them, arranging their accommodation and language study and so on. "I've done everything I can think of," she said, "but I know I've done something wrong. I don't know what - but they'll tell me." Thirty years experience had taught her to expect a certain degree of hostility and resentment from newcomers.

⁹ H. Douglas Brown *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* p185

of relative acceptance by the host and relative adjustment of the new entrant; and *incorporation* where both the hosts and the guest have made a long term commitment to each other. Of the transitional stage he says:

*"The important thing ... is to keep moving, keep growing, don't let relationships stagnate and, as in marriage, stay committed."*¹⁰

Strangers in the transitional stage can remain in that stage until their task is completed and they leave; they can 'become "liminoid", frozen in a more or less permanent stage of cultural distance, akin to alienation'; or they can become incorporated into their new cultural home.¹¹ To the person negotiating the tricky entrance into a new culture the spiritual director can provide the supportive guidance that will help them avoid ship wreck and being stranded as liminoids, continually complaining and resenting 'the locals' and the country.

Faith Stage Transitions

In linking cross-cultural transitions with faith stage transitions I want to focus on parallels and analogies. People who move to another faith stage very often describe this as a journey and use images of a different culture or country to illustrate how this feels for them. In many cases the inner transition to a new understanding of God and the life of faith does necessitate a move to a different faith community, where there will be a different 'culture'.

Stages of Faith

I don't propose to discuss Fowler's Stages of Faith in detail but I will give a very compressed summary of the common Adult Stages. The Spiritual Director may well identify them by the images of God that may be commonly held at each stage.

Stage Two, mythic literal faith is made possible as children between the ages of 6 to 8 become capable of logical thought. They can understand cause and effect, they can appreciate the perspective of others but they are not able to examine their own 'interiority' nor that of others. The yearning of this stage is for self esteem and competence. Adult believers at this stage often appreciate a very literal understanding of scripture and have a liking for clear rules, looking at God as a stern and somewhat remote but loving and just parent.¹²

Stage Three, synthetic conventional faith typically begins to develop in early adolescence. The young person has become capable of abstract thought, and of what Fowler calls 'mutual inter-personal perspective taking'. The task of this stage is to form an identity that conforms with the values, commitments and loyalties of the significant people in one's life. Believers at this stage often express a sense of God in terms of the personal -- God is friend, companion, the One who created, knows and loves me personally and individually. They find their confirmation of selfhood and faith in their church (or other Christian body) community. This is the stage most commonly found among Christian adults

Stage Four, individuated, reflective faith, may start to develop in late adolescence or very much later. In order to move to this kind of faith the tacit values, assumptions and commitments of Stage Three faith must be critically examined. Secondly, the self must struggle to define its identity and worth apart from its roles and relations. In

¹¹ Adeney *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World*, p135

other words, who am I when I am not defined as son/daughter or husband/wife; or by my profession; or apart from my church family? The Christian believer at Stage Four may be a de-mythologiser, critically separating meaning from ritual or symbol. Without necessarily losing the deeply personal images of God that they had at stage three they may amplify these with the concept of God as Truth. Where they once saw their primary calling as the evangelisation of individuals they may add to that, or replace it with a sense of God's call to challenge structures and reform systems.

The development of Stage Five, conjunctive faith may correlate to the passage through mid life, though this is certainly not inevitable. According to Fowler Stage Five is characterised by a growing ability to hold polar tensions in balance, to live with paradox, to be content with mystery, and to be open to the awareness that other traditions and communities also have truths. Believers at this stage may revel in many images of God, including some that would have puzzled or distressed them at an earlier stage of faith. Or they may move into apophatic, image-less spirituality. Many Stage Five people recover or discover for the first time the richness of Christian symbol, ritual and liturgy.

Fowler would argue that a large number of Christian believers 'equilibrate' at one or other of these Stages. Very few in fact go on to Stage Six, universalising faith.

The stages may be described. But the transitions between stages are more difficult to pin down, and it's the transitions that are the crisis points where the spiritual director can be of help. Steven Ivy quotes Robert Kegan, a colleague of James Fowler:

"Kegan has stressed that the stages or styles of world construction are not the essential concern for those called upon to help others. Rather, the transitions between stages are frequently the occasion for pain, struggle, and hope. Transitional experiences call upon the person to give up a former way of experiencing the world and risk movement to another world view which is not yet visible

*During transitions the tension between falling forward and falling backward may be a source of pain...."*¹³

In his article, Ivy, following Kegan, uses words like *appraisal*, *assessment* and *diagnosis* for the purpose of *appropriate intervention* and *pastoral care*. Such words don't quite fit the normal understanding of the purpose of spiritual direction which is rarely concerned with intervention. However the spiritual director who is familiar with the concept of stages of faith and recognises signs of transition will be better able to help directees deal with the tensions involved.

James Fowler discusses the factors that make a person ready to transition to the next stage of faith:

from Stage 2 to 3

This transition doesn't occur until a person becomes capable of abstract thought. If it doesn't occur at this developmental stage (early teens) it may be stimulated in later life by 'the implicit clash or contradiction in stories that leads to reflection on meanings'. Previously accepted authorities may be seen to be in conflict (for example 'the Bible' and 'Science')¹⁴

¹³ Stephen S. Ivy *A Faith Development/Self Development Model for Pastoral Assessment*. Reproduced in *Faith Development: Resources for those on the Journey*, by Alan Jamieson and Jenny McIntosh, published by Wellington Central Baptist Church, 2002. p 116.

from Stage 3 to 4

Stage 3 faith may begin to break down when the person 'leaves home' -- emotionally or physically, or both. For some people this event results in

*"the encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflection on how one's beliefs and values have formed and changed and how "relative" they are to one's particular group and background."*¹⁵

Clearly this description applies with particular relevance to cross-cultural travellers.

Fowler suggests that the ideal period for transition from stage 3 to 4 is in the early to mid 20s. The transition can be considerably more difficult if it occurs in the 30s or 40s. In either case it may be protracted for five to seven years or longer. It is even possible for a person to equilibrate in this transitional period and not complete the movement to Stage 4.¹⁶ Steven Ivy names this the period of 'Idealising Consciousness' and sees it as a stage in itself.¹⁷ Whether a person is able to move forward may depend very much on the sort of faith community they belong to. Some churches or fellowships nurture people engaged in critically evaluating their faith, others repress them.

from Stage 4 to 5

Stage 5 faith is rare before mid-life. Signs of transition may be a new awareness of paradox, a yearning for deeper meaning, recognition that life is more complex than my previous systems allowed. Fowler admits his difficulty in describing Stage 5 faith in any definitive way, preferring to give examples and analogies.

In theological seminary I learned methods of studying scripture that involved things I could learn to do to texts in order ... "to crack them open like a nut". Not until I was in my thirties, undergoing spiritual direction in the tradition of St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, did I begin to learn a method of working with scripture that breathed more of the spirit of Stage 5. Instead of *my reading* [of the text] ... I began to learn how to let the text *read me*...¹⁸

It's in the movement toward Stage 5 faith that many people seek spiritual direction for the first time. As Fowler's example shows the spiritual director can often give the tools and the map for the person on this road.

The following discussion will focus mainly on the struggle and stress involved in the transition between Stage Three and Stage Four, and between Stage Four and Five and on how the spiritual director can offer support to persons engaged on this journey.

Change

Growing in faith, becoming more mature in Christ -- the words sound entirely positive. But it is important to remember that in moving from one stage to another something is lost and left behind. In fact it could well be this sense of loss and uncertainty that propels me to seek the help of a spiritual director. I recognise disturbing changes in my spiritual world. I become anxious about what has happened

¹⁵ Fowler *Stages of Faith* p 173

¹⁷ Ivy, *op.cit.* p 118

or may happen to my faith. I turn to a spiritual director for guidance and reassurance. The recognition and enjoyment of what I have gained may come later.

Why should a person move to a different stage of faith anyway? Fowler identifies three broad categories of sources and types of change: developmental change resulting from normal maturing processes; reconstructive change; and change as response to 'intrusive marker events'.¹⁹

Developmental change may lead to a changing stage of faith as a person matures physically and cognitively. Children under the age of 10 or 11 are simply not capable of the kind of abstract thought that would enable them to have Stage 3 faith. Having such a capacity however doesn't by any means guarantee that a person moves into Stage 3 faith, or beyond it. People who are developmentally adult -- physically, cognitively and emotionally mature -- may yet stay at Stage 2 or 3 indefinitely. If they move on to another stage of faith it will be for different reasons.

Reconstructive change covers personal change including transformation, breakdown, conversion and re-direction. This is the area of responding to our woundedness and sinfulness, the scar tissue resulting from what we have had done to us and what we have chosen to do. Fowler describes this:

"With whatever degree and sources of fallenness and befallenness that mark our lives, sooner or later many of us come to times when the stories we are living get stuck.... At such times we find ourselves in need of space and help to do deconstructive and reconstructive work in our lives."²⁰

Change as response to intrusive marker events. Such events can be positive and predictable -- marriage, the birth of a child, career achievements; or they can be shattering shocks -- illness, accident, or some catastrophic loss. Whether positive or negative such events can precipitate a person into the kind of crisis that results in moving to a different stage of faith. The experience of crossing cultures may be one such marker event.

Spiritual Direction And Faith Stage Transitions

Disruption To World View

More grey, less black and white. Fewer clear cut polarities, more in between. More questions, fewer answers. Less confidence that I am right, more awareness that I could be wrong. These sorts of comments come from people who have moved to a new stage of faith. It seems that with maturity comes the understanding that the world is a more complicated and difficult place than I had previously realised.

- As a child I knew that bad things happened but there was always a happy ending, wrong was punished, goodness rewarded. God was part of that, big and strong, stern, but kind and helpful.
- As a teenager I discovered that people let you down, that moral choices aren't always simple, that adults can be hypocrites. But God was there, the loving Father who wouldn't let me down, who would always make his will plain for me, who gave me such love and joy through the company of my Christian friends.
- As a young adult I was dismayed to discover that I no longer agreed with some of

¹⁹ Fowler *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* p 101

my 'gurus'. When people pronounced 'the Bible says' or 'the Lord has told me' part of me felt sceptical and cynical - and another part was horrified at myself for having doubts. God seemed distant and uninvolved, but I still wanted a relationship with him.

These very abbreviated sketches of my own experience show how each new stage of faith involved a change in my world view and a new understanding of God. Earlier stages generally see God as transcendent, often his judging aspect more felt than his loving side. (I use the masculine pronouns advisedly; maternal images of God are rare in this stage.) Later stages see the immanence of God and know the mystery of love

In a long article describing his past and current journey of faith Hugh Morrison writes of

"... my growing disaffection with faith, either as I understood it, or as it was being expressed around me. I increasingly felt like I was sitting further and further out on the margins of evangelical/charismatic Christianity".²¹

It seems to me that Hugh's description matches well with Fowler's phrase quoted above: 'a time when the stories we are living get stuck', a time therefore for deconstructive and reconstructive personal work. Hugh writes of eventually having turned a corner; one reason he did so was

"the help I have received through spiritual direction. I have had a listening ear which has been non-judgmental and which has given me some tools for assessing both the past and the present."²²

He has come now, he says, to relate to God primarily as Creator and as Incarnation -- and not as the 'spectacular interventionist'²³ of a previous stage of faith.

I clearly remember moments of my own experience -- moments which I was aware of being transitional -- though I wouldn't then have thought in terms of stages of faith. The first was when I was about 14, staying away from home and missing my family. In a few minutes of prayer I became aware of God's tenderness and love in a way that enabled me to call him 'Father' -- the word described something new in my experience of God. I had moved from my childish awe and fear to something more personal.

Another transitional moment occurred as part of a guided retreat. I was preoccupied with a personal dilemma and my focus was on 'finding the will of God' in order to do as I was told. From that experience of struggle in prayer, aided by the support and wisdom of my spiritual director, I came to a new insight and image of God based on Jesus' words: 'I call you not servant but friend.' That insight as I now see marked a leap forward into quite a profound change in my understanding of my relationship with God.

²¹ Hugh Morrison *The Journey Away and the Journey Back* published in Reality Magazine, October/November 2002, p 34. Quoted with permission.

²³ Morrison, op. cit. p 37

Loss Of Spiritual Props

Moving to a new stage of faith frequently means that what I once found helpful no longer works for me. The Bible Reading notes no longer hold my attention. In church I feel that I've 'heard it all before'. The leader I trusted turns out to have feet of clay. Former patterns of prayer seem completely lifeless. In my discouragement I may react by abandoning outward trappings of my faith, and maybe my relationship with God as well. Or I may begin a panicky search for substitute churches, leaders, books that will do for me what my old props used to do for me. In the process I'll probably become more disappointed. Hugh Morrison again:

"Prayer and praying became increasingly problematic. Parts of the Bible seemed to become redundant. (I see now that what I was really questioning were biblical interpretations that assumed the normalcy of God's miraculous intervention in everyday affairs. Aspects of church worship (certain songs and words used to describe God) became meaningless. I was left with an increasingly shrunken view of God and how I was meant to relate to God in my every day life."²⁴

As in cross cultural transition experience, here again are the parallel dangers of focusing on externals, blaming other people for my difficulties; and focusing on my failings, blaming myself for no longer enjoying what once nourished me so well.²⁵ In this struggle a spiritual director can offer concrete help. As ever, listening to the account of my difficulties comes first. Then I may be reassured to know that I'm not unusual; other people have experienced these struggles without losing their faith or being punished by God. My spiritual director can tell me about different ways of prayer, perhaps introduce me to journalling. He/She can help me to watch for where God may be active in my life beyond the places and people I've usually looked for him.

Ethical And Theological Issues

Do one's personal theological beliefs change as faith moves into a different stage? Not necessarily, but often the answer is yes. The person who had everything 'sorted' in youth may in middle age hold some doctrines much more lightly or have relinquished them altogether. A particular stance on creation or an inflexible understanding of biblical inerrancy may be left behind. So may a 'liberal' interpretation of scripture that rejects the possibility of miracles. Some people would say their basic beliefs are still as they always were, but they express them in a different way.

Ethical judgements are connected to stages of faith also. The black and white, right over wrong dichotomy based on 'the bible/pastor/youth leader says' of Stages 2 and 3 will be examined critically at Stage 4. As a result a person's views may change and they may find themselves no longer subscribing to the 'party line' on issues like abortion, or homosexuality, to name two particularly thorny items. Political opinions may change for similar reasons.

The role of the spiritual director is not of course to form people's judgements or shape their theology but may include giving permission for change and doubt. Directees may want to talk through the process of re-forming their ideas, especially if such

²⁵This attitude of self blame is encapsulated in a once popular Christian wall poster: *If God seems far away, guess who moved???*

ideas are leading them into conflict with the mainstream of their current church, or causing disruption in relationships. They may be experiencing deep pain: the pain of being rejected for their beliefs in some cases, or the pain of feeling themselves pushed to the margins, no longer a part of a group that has been family to them. They may be wearing the label 'back-slidden' or 'rebellious'. They may be feeling like traitors part of the time, and like freedom fighters at other times. In this transition from conformity to knowing and owning their own convictions the support of the spiritual director can be a lifeline

Identity

World-view, spiritual support structures, personal theology and ethics -- all of these feed into the concept of 'identity'. 'Who am I' is probably not a conscious question until the early teenage years. The answer for most of us will initially be given in terms of the groups we belong to. I am a member of this family, one of this gang of friends, part of this church fellowship. I share my beliefs and values with the people who are important to me. My environment of identity is my culture, in fact I don't really separate my identity from my culture.

Dave Tomlinson²⁶ describes his perception of the 'evangelical' culture of Britain. He includes not only theological beliefs but values, codes of behaviour, standards of dress, styles of marriage and parenting and much more. How fair or accurate he is in his observations isn't the point; the fact is that Christian sub-cultures do exist, their rules and standards can be strictly applied -- and like every culture, much of it is invisible and only becomes evident when violated. The cultures have their own theology but also their own leaders, their own heroes, their own taboos and their own ideals. In some cases they assume or even impose a certain type of politics. They have their own music, their own preferred writers and speakers, even their own dress code.

Many believers as they grow up in faith find that they have also outgrown their Christian culture. Spiritual direction can help them discover their own individuality.

Some of the Christian sub-cultures are controlling and destructive. People who have formed their faith identity in such a culture may be deeply wounded in the process of leaving. The spiritual director may have to help them come to terms with hurt, anger, a sense of betrayal and guilt. There may also be loss and sadness as relationships are altered or destroyed

In working on my sense of identity, answering the question 'who am I *now*?' I need to know that my present story links up with my past. I believe that this is where a spiritual director can be of greatest help. To tell and re-tell my story is good, but better still to have a listener who can help me to make the connections, follow through the threads of continuity, see my present as the fruit of my past, with all its complexities. There is a danger in moving on: that present pain may poison the memory of what once was valuable and so prevent me going with grace and freedom into something new. The spiritual director who understands the theory of faith stage development can help directees to see that they don't need wholly to reject their past or the people they once were in order to become the person God is now calling them to be.

Going On Or Getting Stuck.

In using the phrase 'faith stage development' Fowler lays himself open to charges of elitism and promoting a sort of hierarchy. He recognises the criticism and wants to maintain that each stage is right for its own time. More, each stage has both its strengths and its weaknesses. No one can be forced into transition any more than a human can be told to 'add a cubit to his height' as Jesus pointed out.

But by the same token, people need to be given room to grow and permission to change. Misunderstanding and intolerance of differences can put barriers in the way of growth. (Labels such as 'liberal' or 'mystical' do this most effectively.) As in cross cultural transitions it is possible to remain 'liminoid', frozen on the edge of growth. I suspect that it's the liminoid people who may end up abandoning their relationship with God. Old ways and structures no longer nourish them, but they have not been able to step into the new.

Hannah Wild and Jennifer Ward in their book *Guard the Chaos* use the model of change put forward by Paul Ricoeur. He uses the terms orientation, disorientation and reorientation. From the secure sense of identity in the orientation stage we are propelled into disorientation -- a period characterised by tension: the pull back to what has been lost and the pull forward to a new life and identity. Their point is that

"... for a new identity and a future that incorporates the past the grieving process must be entered into in all its stages. Most significantly there can be no leap from [orientation] to [reorientation], from the moment of loss to the new future."²⁷

Transition involves 'chaos'. But chaos isn't always negative. To people struggling with the chaos and tension of transition, the spiritual director can offer the biblical imagery of wilderness. The wilderness is a place of loss, confusion, nostalgia for the past, loneliness. At the same time it's the place where God speaks, fearfully and tenderly. In the desolation there is hope and promise.

Helping The Person In Transition

The spiritual director working with a directee who is crossing cultures or moving toward a new stage of faith will of course use the traditional arts of spiritual direction, primarily focused listening. The following section suggests some ways of working that may be particularly useful for the spiritual director, and also some possible pitfalls and problems

Dreams

For some people the chaos period of the transition experience is marked by disturbing dreams. The spiritual director with the skill to help interpret dreams has a real gift to offer. In my own case I was assailed by frequent nightmares. My spiritual director helped to take the terror out of them by examining them with me. As things improved for me she helped me to see how my dreams connected to day-time life with messages of reassurance.

²⁷ Ward and Wild *Guard the Chaos* Darton, Longman and Todd 1995. p 16

Images

Helping the directee to describe his/her feelings symbolically or in terms of a landscape may be very useful. Marion had an experience which caused her profoundly to doubt God -- as she described it : 'either God doesn't exist or he hates me'. The spiritual director invited her to describe any images that went with these feelings. She described being paralysed with terror in a pitch black landscape, knowing that any step she might take might plunge her into a bottomless abyss. It was a bleak and apparently hopeless picture but describing the feelings in terms of a physical landscape made them a degree less overwhelming. By objectifying her feelings she was able to step outside them for a little and gain a sense of control. The simple, but deeply comforting insight that she gained from this exercise was that she need not take a step, she could simply stand still, waiting was a positive action.

Some directees may not want or be able to visualise an inner landscape but will be able to find a physical object which will help them describe their feelings. Warren, mentioned above, showed us a jigsaw puzzle. His confusion was symbolised by its many pieces, the gift he received from doing this exercise was a renewed commitment and energy to keep working with God to put the puzzle together.

Rituals

Cross cultural transition differs from faith stage transition in that it can often be anticipated and planned. The spiritual director working with a person who intends a move to a new culture can help them prepare for it. Celebrations and rituals of farewell and closure are important, not just for the person who is leaving but for the people who are letting them go. People I've interviewed affirm that a good ending has freed them to make a good beginning in the new country.

However not every move can be anticipated. Someone may have to leave the host country suddenly because of illness or political turmoil. Refugees don't usually have a chance to plan their departure. Sometimes what was meant to be a short trip away is extended indefinitely. I didn't say goodbye because I thought I'd be back so soon. The spiritual director helping a person in this sort of situation may be working with unfinished business, unresolved relationships. It may be appropriate to help them plan and carry through some sort of ritual or celebration to mark this experience and help them gain a sense of relinquishment and completion. Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild have created a simple 'Rite to leave' which is designed for group use but which could be adapted or just used to suggest ideas which might be incorporated into a very personalised ritual.²⁸

Teaching

While the primary focus of spiritual direction is listening, there are times when it's appropriate and essential to give some information. Telling people (or reminding them) about what is known about grief and bereavement, about the disorientating effects of crossing cultures, about the stages of faith, can both reassure and resource them to deal with what they are going through. In planning for and living through our return to New Zealand I found the chart (Appendix 1) of The Transition Experience²⁹ a very great help towards understanding what was going on for us. Though the pain was deep and sometimes almost unbearable it was a consolation to know that we were not abnormal. And it helped when we were in the 'chaos' period to look hopefully for

²⁹ Devised by David Pollock. Reproduced in Burt & Farthing *Crossing Cultures* p 45

signs that we might be beginning to find new identities in New Zealand. I've now come to see that this chart may be equally helpful to understanding the faith stage transition experience.

Such teaching may be offered directly, or by suggesting useful books, or by pointing the directee to a workshop or seminar, or by putting them in touch with others who have gone through the same sort of experience.

Scripture

Occasionally a spiritual director may sense that a passage of scripture would be helpful to the directee. The psalms with their heart-felt declarations of grief, joy, rage and wonder may be the first resort. The majestic promises of Isaiah 40 and the following chapters speak to people who feel themselves to be in exile. The book of Ruth is also the story of Naomi who returned to her homeland after a long period in a different culture. Job's story describes people in different stages of faith and shows how faith can change. In the New Testament the stories of Jesus calling his disciples may be the apt word for people who feel confused and purposeless. The theme of journeying and pilgrimage is strong in the book of Hebrews and it links back to the great story of the Exodus. Of course scripture should never be offered as the glib answer to every problem but its astonishing power to comfort, provoke and enlarge our spirits should not be forgotten.

Possible Pitfalls: Transference And Parallel Process

The spiritual director needs always to be aware of the danger of confusing what is going on in their own life with what they are attending to in the directee.

"Spiritual Directors ... are not immune to carrying over (or transferring) unfinished business from their past lives ... to their dealing with people in the present."³⁰

This may be a particular snare when working with people who are experiencing transitions I've been through myself. A personal example: I found myself becoming utterly exhausted after directing a woman who had recently returned to NZ from missionary work in Asia. Hearing about her grief, anxieties, and sense of God's absence brought back to me my own very similar struggles. I had to be careful that I was listening to her story, not hearing mine told through her lips. I had the advantage of profoundly understanding her perspective but that could have made me more anxious to heal her grief for her, solve her problems for her and generally fix up her relationship with God. In this case there was a fine line between offering teaching as described above and offering solutions. She needed a map, she didn't need me to show her a short-cut. The same consideration may apply to the spiritual director supporting a person towards faith stage transition.

Superficiality

While the theory of faith stage transitions is a tremendous help toward understanding what may be going on in their own or another's journey spiritual directors need to avoid applying it over-enthusiastically. A quick diagnosis and labelling of a person's condition can be a way of dismissing the completely individual nature of their faith and their relationship with God.

Cultural Blindness

Culture is nine tenths unconscious assumption. It's very difficult therefore to get rid of cultural blinkers when working with a person from another culture or who has significant cross-cultural experience. Another personal example: a spiritual director was working with me during one of our periods back in New Zealand rightly discerned that I was seriously stressed and suggested it was too soon for us to return to Bangladesh. Her unconscious assumption was that living in NZ must be easier and less stressful than living in Asia. But in fact Bangladesh had become our home to the extent that it was living in NZ that increased my stress levels.

'Cultural' assumptions made by the spiritual director also apply when the directee has a very different denominational background. One Protestant young woman was very taken aback when her Roman Catholic director suggested she enter into a prayer dialogue with Mary. The director needs to remember that what is familiar and comfortable to me may seem wildly exotic to my directee -- and vice versa.

Conclusion

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976) defines transition as *passage or change from one place or state or act or set of circumstances to another*. Transition is defined as movement, not aimless movement but a progression from one position to another. Transition implies a time component, the time spent in the *passage* -- the word gives a picture perhaps of a corridor connecting two rooms but separate from both of them.

I have frequently used images of travelling, and especially of travelling though unknown territory to describe the experience of transition. The word is also used to describe one of the stages of childbirth. Labour begins when the cervix starts to dilate. Birth occurs when the mother pushes her baby out into the world. In between the stage of dilation and the stage of expulsion is the period named transition. It may be brief or it may go on for what seems like forever. It's a time of confusion even for the well informed mother because the breathing patterns practised for the first stage no longer work so well. Feelings of unreasonable anger or complete exhaustion are common. In this period the birth giver needs the anchoring hand and the loving encouragement of a companion. The midwife know the process and understands what is going on for the mother, but also knows that every woman is different and every transition unique. Margaret Guenther uses the image of midwifery to describe spiritual direction.

"As a faithful midwife the director can see patterns and form in seeming formlessness. More importantly he knows that the time of transition has a beginning and an end, and that the directee will emerge from it into a new level of clarity....Transition is a time of surprises; the director can help by pointing out signs in unexpected places."³¹

For those in transition the spiritual director may be midwife, guide, anchor, interpreter. In order to be effective they need to have some idea of the pattern of labour, the landscape of wilderness, the language of the travellers. This project has tried to offer a starting point.

³¹ Guenther *Holy Listening* p 104

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<http://www.tckinteract.net>

<http://www.transition-dynamics.com>

The Transition Experience

	INVOLVEMENT	LEAVING	TRANSITION	ENTERING	RE-INVOLVEMENT
RELATIONSHIPS	<p>committed</p> <p>responsive</p>	<p>distancing</p> <p>loosen ties relinquish ties disengage</p>	<p>chaos</p> <p>initiate relationships isolation self-centred exaggerated problems</p>	<p>superficial</p> <p>observer uncertain of trust risk taker exaggerated behaviour</p>	<p>committed</p> <p>belonging involved concern for others conforming behaviour</p>
SOCIAL STATUS	<p>belonging</p> <p>part of in-group reputation position knowing</p>	<p>celebrations</p> <p>attention recognition farewells closure</p>	<p>status-less</p> <p>unknown lack of structure special knowledge without use</p>	<p>introducing</p> <p>marginal search for mentor uncertain errors in response</p>	<p>belonging</p> <p>known knowing position secured</p>
EMOTION	<p>intimacy</p> <p>confirmed secured</p>	<p>denial</p> <p>rejection resentment sadness guilt</p>	<p>anxiety</p> <p>dissolution of ego ambiguity grief from loss instability dreams disappointment panic</p>	<p>vulnerability</p> <p>fearful ambivalent depression psycho-somatic problems</p>	<p>intimacy</p> <p>secure affirmed</p>

Appendix 2

It seems to me that the story of the Exodus provides a fascinating account of a physical journey that can be understood as both faith stage transition and cross cultural transition.

The following is my interpretation of Exodus in the terms of the Transition Chart. It's not meant to be taken too seriously but I think it's suggestive and it may be helpful.

In The Period Of Involvement

	INVOLVEMENT	
RELATIONSHIPS	SOCIAL STATUS	EMOTION
committed	belonging	intimacy
responsive	part of 'in-group	confirmed
	reputation	secured
	position	
	knowing	

The Israelites were committed, they belonged, they had a clear place in the society in which they lived. Admittedly it wasn't a positive identity: they were slaves, oppressed and cruelly treated. They had security however, 'pots of meat and all the food we wanted' as they later remembered. (Ex 16:3).

Their faith at this time was in a just God who might have pity on suffering, yet a God who was distant, the God of their ancestors, but not the God with whom they had a personal relationship.

In The Period Of Leaving

	Leaving	
distancing	celebrations	denial
loosen ties	attention	rejection
relinquish roles	recognition	resentment
disengage	farewells	sadness
	closure	guilt

This was the time for the Israelites to disengage from Egyptian society. It involved changes in the relationship that brought pain (the Egyptians treated them worse than ever!) It involved celebration: the Passover which marked the end of the old life and the start of the new. It involved farewell: the Egyptians showered them with rich gifts as they left.

At the same time it involved the tug back to what was known and secure: 'It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.' (Exodus 14:12).

For the Israelites at this stage God spoke and acted through his servant Moses. To follow Moses was to follow God.

In The Period Of Transition

	Transition	
RELATIONSHIPS	SOCIAL STATUS	EMOTION
chaos	status-less	anxiety
initiate relationships	unknown	dissolution of ego
Isolation	lack of structure	ambiguity
Self-centred	special knowledge	grief from loss
exaggerated problems	without use.	instability
		dreams
		diappointment
		panic

In the wilderness the Israelites no longer have the identity of slaves in Egypt, but nor have they entered the promised land.

This is the chaos period of instability, panic and ambiguity. It's during this time that Yahweh initiates the Covenant with them. God still speaks mainly through Moses, but he speaks as 'the One who brought you out of Egypt'. They had experienced God's intervention for themselves. Now he was demanding from them individual obedience to the 10 commandments.

In The Period Of Entering

	Entering	
RELATIONSHIPS	SOCIAL STATUS	EMOTION
superficial	introducing	vulnerability
Observer	Marginal	fearful
uncertain of trust	search for mentor	ambivalent
risk taker	uncertain	depression
exaggerated behaviour	errors in response	psycho-somatic
		problems

Moses and the priests confirmed the Covenant (Exodus 24). Then began the period of learning what it mean to have the identity of living in covenant with Yahwah. The Israelites made errors in response -- they created for themselves the Golden Calf. They needed a mentor, and in Moses' absence they found one in Aaron. They were alternately rebellious and afraid. But they were gaining more experience of what their God was like. The were becoming a community of people with a common story and a commitment to a common Law, revealed to them by God.

In The Period Of Re-Involvement

	Re-involvement	
RELATIONSHIPS	SOCIAL STATUS	EMOTION
committed	belonging	intimacy
Belonging	known	secure
Involved	knowing	affirmed
Concern for others	position secured	
conforming behaviour		

As they settle in the Promised Land the Israelites have fully adopted their new identity as the People of the Covenant. 'God rescued them from Egypt and initiated the covenant. But by the end of the book of Joshua the people are ready to make a free and adult choice to follow Yahweh. 'We will serve the Lord because he is our God,' they declare at Shechem. (Joshua 24:18)