

## **What Is Our Conveyer Belt? Building Beloved Community**

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*What consistently gets you out of bed on Sunday morning, and here to UUCF? Since you do find yourself in this sanctuary this morning, how does it feel to be here? I invite you to be fully aware of this present moment. As you do so, begin to consider what are you already grateful for about who we are as a congregation? Why are you committed to UUCF or to Unitarian Universalism? What are your hopes and dreams for our future together as congregation? What is more important, though, than your particular response to any of these questions, is to be fully present to how it feels to be in this room right now.*

This morning is “Commitment Sunday,” which means that our annual Operating Fund “Pledge Drive” here at UUCF is underway. And “Commitment Sunday” is a time when we are all encouraged to reflect on our respective commitments to this congregation, especially whether you feel led to make a financial commitment to help us plan our Operating Fund for our next Fiscal Year, which runs from July to June. We also greatly value the time, energy, and insight that so many of you contribute to our ongoing work at UUCF. All of these different commitments are vital to keep this congregation healthy, growing, and thriving.

In that spirit, I would like to invite us to reflect some this morning on what we are all committing (or committed) to here as we consider the present and future of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick. To do so, I have titled this sermon “What Is Our Conveyer Belt?” as a reference to a chapter in philosopher Ken Wilber’s book *Integral Spirituality*. I find Wilber’s writing helpful, especially in thinking through how to integrate diverse perspectives in our postmodern world, and I would recommend his work to you if you are interested in a further exploration of some of the ideas I’ll be exploring this morning.

One of Wilber’s particular interests is in stages of development. Both individually and in groups there is potential to progress through stages of development along many different lines. For example, there are stages of *kinesthetic* development as babies learn to first hold their neck up, then roll over, crawl, walk, and run — and some people even reach Olympic levels of kinesthetic development that most of us will never reach. There are also stages of *cognitive*

development as babies learn to differentiate their sense of self from their environment, then to talk, read, and write — leading all the way up to world-class levels of cognitive development that most of us will never reach like Nobel Prize-level inventiveness. Similarly, we can outline the stages of moral, emotional, or aesthetic development. This morning in thinking through our commitment to UUCF, I want to invite us to reflect on some of the stages of *spiritual* development.

One framework that Wilber offers for thinking about stages of development is the metaphor of a conveyer belt. He invites readers to consider the “conveyer belts,” so to speak, that facilitates progress through stages of development in the various organizations of which we are a part.

For example, one traditional conveyer belt for *cognitive* development is preschool all the way through graduate program to research laboratories and think tanks. Traditional conveyer belts for *kinesthetic* development are community sports programs all the way through specialized professional training camps. We have art schools for aesthetic development and therapy for emotional development.

This morning I would like for us to consider the ways our commitment to UUCF helps catalyze our progress, individually and collectively, through the stages of *spiritual* development. Perhaps in so doing, we’ll begin to see some more ways of refining our congregation’s conveyer belt for the future. I also apologize if all this talk of a conveyer belt sounds a bit too much like the character of Mr. Gradgrind from Dickens’s novel *Hard Times*. My goal isn’t to get obsessed with perfecting the number of Unitarian Universalist widgets we’re producing here or to make UUCF seem too much like a factory assembly line. Instead, I hope this metaphor of the conveyer belt might be helpful in inviting us to reflect on where all our time, money, and commitment to the congregation is taking us now and the potential for where our commitment could take us in the future.

To reflect on our conveyer belt, I would like to use the lens of James Fowler's classic 1981 book *Stages of Faith*.<sup>1</sup> As with any schema, there are limitations to Fowler's categories. In particular, the names of his stages are a mouthful. But I hope you'll find the descriptions of the stages helpful even if the names of the stages are a bit overwhelming at first.

Fowler highlights six potential stages of faith development that span the course of a human life, although technically he has seven stages because he begins with "**Stage 0, Primal or Undifferentiated**" faith, which lasts from birth through age two.

Barring any traumatic events, most of us continue naturally around age three into "**Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective**" faith. This early childhood faith is characterized by intuition, imagination, and emotion. Next, the growing ability to think concretely and rationally that arises around the same time most children enter elementary school is precisely what catapults many into "**Stage 2, Mythic-Literal**" faith.

Instead of the freewheeling fantasy characteristic of "Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective," "**Stage 2, Mythic-Literal**" involves a more wooden, concrete understanding of myths and stories. For example, a child listening to traditional religious stories may well *literally* think of God as a super-sized human, who lives above the sky.

The transition to "**Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional**" faith is triggered by adolescence. As a child grows and experiences more of the world, the messiness, complexity, and diversity of life challenge the simplistic, literal understandings of childhood faith. Cognitively, adolescents are also better able than egocentric children to empathetically sense what life is like from the perspective of other people.

For better or worse, an increased ability to consider how other people see you often leads to conformity in an attempt to seem less different or strange. In Stage 3, as the name "Synthetic-Conventional" suggests, you begin to synthesize the conventions around you. Or, as Fowler's cute jingle goes, "**As I see you seeing me, I construct the me I think you see.**" In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> I have been working with Fowler's *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* periodically since a weekend retreat in college on this topic more than a decade ago. The notes I used for this sermon are not keyed directly to page numbers in the text, and my brief summary of the stages is combined from notes from the book, retreat notes, and subsequent lectures. So I recommend the original text for those interested in more information and details.

instead of looking inward for our particular gifts and graces, our natural tendency in adolescence is, for the most part, to build our identity based on trends, fads, and how we *think* others want us to be. The tragedy, of course, is that most people don't even know what they truly want for themselves — much less what they really want and need from others. So, **to construct your identity on your perception of what others want is to build your house on shifting sand that is often unable to withstand the storms life brings.**

I mentioned earlier that “Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional” faith usually begins in the teenage years, but unfortunately many adults remain in this stage of faith development for most of their lives — even as, at the same time, they may continue to develop kinesthetic, emotionally, aesthetically, etc. This dynamic of different levels of development in different areas within the same person helps explain professional athletes, who may be at the height of kinesthetic development, but who are essentially adolescent in their faith development. Similarly, one could be incredibly accomplished in cognitive development, but have an underdevelopment aesthetically regarding an appreciation for art and beauty. Or there are wise spiritual teachers (who are legitimately insightful spiritual practitioners), who simultaneously have *underdeveloped* moral sides leading, for example, to sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>

And although some individuals and groups do experience an arrested development in Stage 3, the movement to “**Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective**” faith does begin for many people in early adulthood. As we enter our twenties or thirties, many people “leave home” either literally or metaphorically — that is, their primary source of authority moves from outside the self (their friends and family) to *inside* the self. They begin to “individuate,” to become autonomous individuals; they separate from the herd and take individual responsibility for reflecting on who they are and what they are able to do in the world. This shift is vital, but difficult, which is why some never fully enter this stage. For some this change begins as one goes to college or leaves home to start an independent life. For others, an unexpected “train

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent example of high levels of spiritual development and low levels of moral development in the same person (beyond the now well-documented example of the Roman Catholic Church Sex Abuse Scandal), see “**Zen Groups Distressed by Accusations Against Teacher,**” available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/zen-buddhists-roiled-by-accusations-against-teacher.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/zen-buddhists-roiled-by-accusations-against-teacher.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

wreck” of sorts forces their hands: a death, an illness, an accident, a loss, a divorce can lead to a situation where one’s childhood theology — often the dominant theology of one’s friends, family, and community — is no longer adequate.

Whereas stage four “early adulthood” faith is characterized by independence, freedom, and a sense of limitless, untapped potential, Stage 5 faith is the equivalent of a mid-life crisis, when many slam full force into their weaknesses, limits, and mortality. To enter into a mature **“Stage Five, Conjunctive,”** “both/and” faith, we must learn to embrace paradox, diversity, and irreconcilable differences. At this mid-life stage of faith that we have the potential to recognize and live out the paradoxical truth of the unity that lies underneath our surface diversity — a unity that does not insist on uniformity.

Finally, according to James Fowler’s research there is **“Stage 6, Universalizing”** faith. Ken Wilber’s *Integral Spirituality* goes on to identify stages beyond Fowler’s “Stage 6,” but for this morning we’ll stick with Fowler’s framework for considering our congregation’s conveyer belt for faith development. For Fowler, “Stage 6” represents the living saints and wise elders, whose lives call us to become more than we thought humanly possible. These Stage 6 sages are universalizing because they reach beyond their tribes to embody the boundary-less compassion, insight, and wisdom that is the core of human potential: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Aung San Suu Kyi, Nelson Mandela and Thich Nhat Hanh. (All of these figures, of course, despite their high levels of spiritual or moral achievement, have other areas that were underdeveloped if you study their biographies.)

Having briefly surveyed Fowler’s Stages of Faith, I would like to reflect on the implications briefly using Wilber’s metaphor of a conveyer belt. As is typical for most Unitarian Universalist congregation, we here at UUCF are quite good at helping individuals own the power of “Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective” faith. If someone comes to us wounded from the pressures to conform in earlier Mythic-Literal or Synthetic-Conventional stages, **we are well equipped and well-practiced in serving as a catalyst for individuals maturing *from* childhood and adolescent stages of faith *into* what could be called “adult” stages of faith.**

Our institutional diversity — which ranges from Atheism to Paganism and Christianity to Buddhism — makes us a natural conduit for helping individuals transition into Stage Five,

“Conjunctive” faith. Simply being here amidst the religious pluralism of this congregation is an important component of our conveyer belt of faith development. And at our best here at UUCF, our Conjunctive stage of faith results in us not merely being a collection of individuals, but instead **something greater than the sum of our parts**. And we end up experiencing heights collectively that are greater than any of us would likely achieve individually in isolation. And that potential is a large part of why I am increasingly committed personally both to this congregation and to the larger Unitarian Universalist movement.

I’m relatedly grateful for all of you in this congregation, especially those of you who work with our children and youth. In more conservative faith traditions, there can often be significant conflict that develops when someone raised in a Stage 3, “Synthetic-Conventional” faith leave home and goes to college. Many people have tragically had the experience in earlier adulthood of feeling like that had to choose *either* their religious tradition *or* the new perspectives they are learning in college or out in the world; they get the sense that it isn’t possible to have both. In contrast, Unitarian Universalism (as well as fortunately a number of other progressive faith traditions) teach that you can have *both*: you can continue to your faith development *and* simultaneously embrace the best of modern scientific knowledge. There is a power in a conveyer belt that encourages children to learn, grow, and question for their entire lives. And I’m proud to be committed to a congregation and religious movement that encourages lifespan religious education.

But perhaps at this point it is helpful to say that **faith development is rarely a linear progression. It is more like a spiral** in which you experience aspects of previous stages even as you begin to experience glimpses of the next stage. And the same dynamic is true of us (or any group) collectively: our progress of development is less linear than like a spiral. And as I said earlier, our religious pluralism here at UUCF makes us naturally comfortable in Stage Five, “Conjunctive,” “both/and faith. And when I consider that from the perspective of Wilber’s Conveyer Belt, the question I would invite us to consider is **do we spend more time spiraling back toward the individualism of Stage 4, “Individuative-Reflective” faith or do we spend more time working collectively toward the Beloved Community of Stage 6, “Universalizing” faith?**

Along these lines some of you may recall seeing an article in the winter issue of *UU World* called “The End of iChurch.”<sup>3</sup> The iChurch in the title has the ironically lower cased “i” of the iPhone, iPod, or iPad. It’s ironically lower-cased, of course, because those devices — despite the ways they do legitimately connect us through social media — can also contribute profoundly to the narcissism of upper-case “I” individualism. But an un-ironic, upper-case I-Pod, I-Phone, or I-Pad probably wouldn’t sell as well!

This article on “The End of iChurch” is from a longer essay by Fred Muir, who has been the minister of the UU Congregation in Annapolis, Maryland for almost 30 years. Fred cares deeply about the past, present, and future of Unitarian Universalism, and to adapt Fred’s work into Fowler’s terminology, Fred is concerned that **our rightful love of our First Principle (“The inherent worth and dignity of every person”)** has unintentionally kept us spiraling backward into the isolated individualism of Stage 4 faith instead of committing us to the hard work of Stage 6: building the Beloved Community.

In considering how we might build a better conveyer belt that would help us move more consistently in the direction not of iChurch, but of Beloved Community, Fred highlights a neglected sentence in our Unitarian Universalist Bylaws. We UUs often list our Seven Principles and Six Sources (as you can see on the back cover of your Order of Service), but often missing is a final sentence that is found in the version of the Principles and Sources found in the Bylaws: **“As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”**<sup>4</sup>

We are skilled as Unitarian Universalists at telling the story of iChurch, of reassuring individuals that our intentions are always to operate by *persuasion*, not coercion — and that we

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<sup>3</sup> Fredric Muir, “The end of iChurch: To build Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism needs a new narrative” (Winter 2012), available at [http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/279318.shtml?utm\\_source=f](http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/279318.shtml?utm_source=f). This article is a brief excerpt. **The full original lecture is recommended to appreciate the full context of Muir’s observations and recommendations: “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice,”** available at <https://uuma.site-ym.com/page/BSE2012/?>.

<sup>4</sup> To read the UUA Bylaws, visit <http://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/bylaws/articleii/6906.shtml>.

defend each individual's right to follow the dictates of his or her conscience. That story of iChurch is profoundly true and important.

But Rev. Fred Muir points out the power of telling an additional story — a narrative that leans toward our more recent Seventh Principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.” He invites us to consider that just as individualism helped us become experts at iChurch, so too might the practice of covenant help us become better at building the Beloved Community.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, there is a distinction between creed (which emphasizes “we believe”) and covenant (which emphasizes that around which “we unite”).

Remember the final line that is often missing from our Principles and Sources: “As *free* congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.” The parallel movement is that as *free* individuals we have the opportunity here at UUCF — and in all our UU congregations — to enter into covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support. In so doing, we retain the liberty to follow our conscience, but that story of individuality doesn’t have to be the only story we tell or the only goal we set. Through committing to this congregation and in committing to improving our surrounding community and world, we have the opportunity to become more than the sum of our parts. We have the opportunity to see what might emerge from committing “our mutual trust and support.”

Earlier during the meditation, I invited you to reflect about what gets you up, awake, and here to UUCF on Sunday mornings instead of relaxing at home. And sometimes people are simply looking for “a bit of inspiration, sanity, and community on Sunday mornings.” And some Sundays that is enough. And that’s ok. But I hope I’ve given you a glimpse this morning of how much more is also possible.

On this Commitment Sunday, after spending eighth months here as your minister, I can say without hesitation that I continue to be committed to this congregation. I told the Search Committee that if selected to be your minister, I had every intention of staying at least 7-10 years if not longer, and that continues to be the case. (I’m not sure if I’m ready to sign-up for the Fred Muir 30 year-plan as he had done in Annapolis...let’s not get ahead of ourselves.) But as I told

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<sup>5</sup> On the distinction between creed (“we believe”) and covenant (“we unite”), see *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* (Skinner House Books), 40.

the Unitarian Universalist Association's Regional SubCommittee on Candidacy when I met with them this past Tuesday in Boston, part of what interests me most about being a parish minister is that there is no way to know in advance what is possible. I'm profoundly curious about what it is possible for us to accomplish here together at UUCF, and I'm grateful for all that we've accomplished together so far.

So I invite you to consider, what is your commitment to UUCF? What is our conveyer belt? And how might we make we improve it? And together — through a covenant of mutual trust and support — how might we contribute to the work of building the Beloved Community?