

Journal of Salesian Studies

Spring 1998

Volume IX

Number 1

**Institute of Salesian Spirituality
Berkeley, California, USA**

Our Sacred Story: A Changing Story or a Story of Change?

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Introduction

So this is who I am
And this is all I know,
And I must choose to live,
For all that I can give,
The spark that makes the power grow.¹

Each one of us is present to this moment with a past and a future. Time is dynamic. Our lives are often played out between hoping for a future that has not yet arrived and remembering a past that has made us who we are and how we are today. Interestingly enough what has been, we cannot change and what will be is still to be. What is ours is this moment. We are whole in this moment. We are who we are right now. Awareness makes us wholly present, for the now gives us permission to let time interact dynamically within us. It is only the now that holds both the past and the future in tension and allows us to be who we are in the present.

The film, "Titanic," has been the subject of much discussion and reviewing in recent months. It recounts a story based on fact. All those who watch the film know the ending. It tells of a disaster that took place early on in the century. One of the fascinations this film holds is its capacity to blur the distinction between past and present. This is cleverly and powerfully accomplished through close-ups of eyes: those of the old lady, which merge into those of the young lady and vice versa throughout the film. Fusing past and present is achieved through a process of editing that is called "morphing."²

¹ Barry Gibb, Robin Gibb, and Maurice Gibb, "Immortality," in the CD recording *Celine Dion: Let's Talk About Love*, performed by Celine Dion, and the Bee Gees. (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 1997).

² "Titanic" was released by Paramount/20th Century Fox in December 1997. It was directed by James Cameron, who also produced the film with Jon Landau. Visual effects were supervised by Robert Legato, and the "Lead Morph Artist" was Christine Lo. The film cost \$200 million to produce and was panned by the critics,

As the film evolves you become aware that the story is whole, and that “remembering” the past gives incredible meaning to the present, and reflecting on the present somehow makes sense of the past. It is good to reflect just how timely this film is, coming at the end of a century, which is in fact the end of a millennium. As we cross the threshold of the “new” millennium, we do so conscious of the need to take our “remembering” with us and build on the experiences of the past.

Time, as we move toward the new millennium then, is important. Its importance however is very much connected to the meaning of life, to what we begin to perceive as both why and who we are. Sociologists tell us that as people move toward the end of a century, there is a renewed search for meaning, a kind of revival in our need for something beyond, something “more” than what is visible and what seems only viable. How much more is this true of the end of a millennium? Life then takes on a great deal of significance as we approach the third millennium’s threshold. We find we begin to long for a brighter future, a fuller life. One man who captures this longing and alludes to what might happen if we do not find deeper meaning is the ex-president of the United Nations. He welcomed Pope John Paul II to the United Nations assembly with these words:

We have a crisis of the human spirit going on. It is a crisis that is the cause of many of the problems of our time. We need to work in such a way so that people can once again find faith in life.³

An End or a Beginning

Any attempt at making connections between what is happening now, what has brought us to this moment and what needs to happen into the future causes us to begin to look at life in terms of a continuum. Reflecting on life as story, a kind of never ending story, with beginning and end and beginning again gives us a way of unpacking what is happening in our own lives and what we need to work towards facilitating, especially as educators, in the lives of our young people. TS Eliot, the poet, tells us that the story of life unfolds as a journey of exploration. It is, he says, about arriving at the place from which “we started, and know the place for the first time.”⁴

The gospels present Jesus over and over again as one who is journeying towards Jerusalem, where Jerusalem becomes as the gospels unfold, the place

but ended by grossing the largest box-office receipts ever, and winning 11 Oscars, including “best picture.”

³ Boutros Boutros Ghali, “Una spiritualità per il mondo?” in *Note di Pastorale Giovanile*, 30.2 (February 1996): 30.

⁴ T(homas) S(tearns) Eliot, *Little Gidding, Four Quartets*, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 209.

from where he started and from where it all started. The journey to Jerusalem is in the end a journey to deeper understanding and greater meaning. It is a journey about who Jesus is. It is a journey made in faith. It is a journey, above all, of how faith immersed in the events of life makes sense of the human story.

A Personal and Unfolding Story

Each of us has a story, a combination of events and experiences that has brought us to this place at this moment in time. One of the key processes of all human development, is that of attempting to enable us to begin to make sense of this story. This means beginning to reflect and read the events of our lives in the context of a “pattern” in which the image of a God who has always loved us and walks with us and continues to care for us emerges. This seeking a pattern is called faith. In the pattern we discover meaning, we attempt to answer, at least in part the why we are here. It is an attempt to answer because as we seek we come face to face with the mystery that lies within our lives. Seeking the pattern is faith precisely at this point of recognition of the mystery, of admitting that this is it and this is not totally it at the same time. Faith is then continuing the journey acknowledging the pattern of people and events and experiences that shape and mold our lives into who we are. It is to remain open and ready for the God who comes to us through others. The God who continues to come to us through the people and events that surround us. “Faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose.”⁵

Our human spirit seeks to make sense of life’s events, seeks to find meaning, and when it is unable, finds itself in crisis. Such is the crisis facing us today, caused as one writer affirms, by “the central psychological problem for our times, at least for the affluent West. This lies in the repression, not of sex, but of spiritual capacity... the unfinished task is still to fill the vacuum left in the Western psyche when traditional religion lost its hold.”⁶

A starting point therefore in any reflection on our spirituality must be that of touching into our story and seeing it within the context of the larger story of humanity. This is as true for adults as it is for the young. It is essential if we are to attempt to put the heart back into the human person in our times. It is another way of discovering the meaning of our existence. It is the way we come to know “who we are.”

⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco, Harper, 1995), 4.

⁶ David Toolan, *Facing West from California’s Shores* (New York, Crossroads, 1987), 286.

Unfolding the Story with the Young

Many have the impression today as we look at our world, that we are looking into an alien world, with rules, values and beliefs that are in constant flux. What is most problematic to us is the process of making the connections. We want to find the order of things. Looking at the world of the young this sense of alienation is magnified. We struggle to know and understand what the young believe and know, and how they come to believe and know what they do. There is a need to begin to vision what is the anthropology of the young today. To discover this we need to study the totality of the human condition of being young today. We need to study and befriend present day youth culture, since this is the cumulative set of ideas that provide for society's answers to the basic problems of living facing the young. This same youth culture is also an indication of the way ahead, the way the times are changing. Ministering to the young today calls us in life, but in their life and their story. We need to love what they love, and show them that we do indeed "love what is pleasing to the young."⁷

While we stand apart from them we are only observers of their life and their story. We are observers who far too easily become people making a judgment on them. We stand within the story of religion, born to it or having come to it; either way we have found in our faith a universal story that makes sense of our personal story. From within, events are read and understood in a certain way. From within the Christian story we know life has meaning and purpose. Young people today are not within that Christian story. Immersed in the immediacy of the moment, they see only the now. In their young eyes the past belongs to someone else, it is not their past, and the future is a little frightening. A major connection has been lost and will remain lost for as long as there is no one to assure them that there is meaning in the old and the new and the now. For them, it is the now that needs re-assurance in their lives.

So the story unfolding for them is a *now* story and therefore a new one. It is new precisely because it is their story and not ours. We need to accompany the journey young people make in attempting to find meaning in the story of their own lives. We need to accompany their growth in discovering the presence of God in their day to day existence. We need to assist their own unfolding stories so that they might perceive the meaning and learn to answer the important questions life raises for them. We need to help them say *yes* to their lives. We need to help them say *yes* in their language, even if that language seems to be a little foreign to us.

A first step in this process is to begin to unpack the changes going on around and within us. It is to seek the common plot that emerges from these changes. Only in this way will we be able to understand the struggles and achievements that are part of our day-to-day existence. Only in this way can we

⁷ St. John Bosco, *Letter from Rome, Constitutions of the FMA* (Rome: Institute FMA, 1982), 450.

hope to see in the pattern of these events and relationships the *never-ending* story of God's love for each one of us.

A Common, Cultural Story

Culture is a "set of symbols, stories (myths), and norms for conduct that orient a society or group cognitively, effectively and behaviorally to the world in which it lives."⁸

Culture is the way we live our lives and the way we shape our lives; it is an exclusively human experience. It is important because it is about our lives and shapes the story of our lives. We are all living within a culture, but to uncover its significance in our lives we need to allow ourselves to be surprised and awakened into awareness of it. For "culture can be an unrecognized presence"⁹ precisely because it is the main influence on how we see ourselves so well concealed in its impact. "The way we live or work shapes how we think and feel and in turn how we think and feel becomes a powerful reinforcer of how we picture our possibilities of changing this world or not."¹⁰

The word culture has a double significance. Its more subjective meaning refers to the way the human person develops and grows to independence through relationships with others and through his or her commitment to transform the world. The second and more objective meaning centers on what the first paragraph has described: the complex symbolic (language, art, ideas) world of relationships to society, nature, ideas, values, the aims and purposes of the way people behave.

Implicit in the twofold meaning is the umbrella term "life." Life in effect is the raw material that the culture both within and without people shapes and nurtures and leads to some kind of expression of themselves and the society in which they live. For this reason it is both about a certain historical context or geographical environment as well as being about the larger human story which sees cultures relate and inter-act and influence one another.

Culture, like life itself, can never be considered static. It too unfolds through time and in the way people live and act upon one another. Culture, as life itself, sets its own pace that at times is furious and at other times is hopelessly slow. Culture, within its dynamic of change, offers to our human story the possibility of real developments in the quality of the way we live. In effect the elements that make up a culture are the different standpoints people have regarding the way they live and interact within their lives.

⁸ Don Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 95.

⁹ Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols* (London: Darton, Longmann, Todd, 1997), 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

Editing the Story

The first of these standpoints with regard to life could be seen as the *functional approach*. This is a primary or base level of culture. The functional approach dominates the natural world through technology. Here culture includes the instruments, techniques and knowledge that people make use of within a determined social and cultural setting to serve their own ends and further their own development.

The second approach is more *relational and society oriented*. Here culture is an amalgam of human organizational structures and of the laws and principles that regulate our living in the context of the family, of groups and of society as expressed through the local community or government. Social activities, human rights, politics, the relationships between the different social forces, both conscious and unconscious are all elements of this cultural perspective.

The third cultural approach is at the level of *ideas or meaning*. This approach includes a certain vision of the material world. It would be the image a society has of itself, the meaning that society gives to its social relationships, the way it reasons and legitimizes its structures and the laws that assure it coherence. This approach would include above all a reflective interpretation of human existence, something that would give meaning to human activity, to work, to knowledge, to the joys and the sorrows implicit in existence, to life and to death. Essentially this is an understanding of meanings which aspire to the absolute, even if this, inevitably, remains imprisoned within the human condition.

Culture in this third scenario is the image people create of themselves, of their place in the world, of their moral calling, of their destiny and of their hopes and aspirations. At this level religion is an integral aspect of the culture and as such an excellent expression of it. Indeed throughout most of human history, cultures have been rooted in religious consciousness. A central crisis of culture today comes from the split between culture and religion over the last two centuries or so, a split to which many have given the title *secularization*.

As we move towards the end of one millennium and the passage to a new one it is becoming evident if we begin to look around us that culture is emerging as the approach to reality which is a far better way of interpreting what is happening around us. Culture also suggests an approach which is holistic, far more so than the dualistic oppositions of capitalism and communism.¹¹ Culture gives us the possibility of looking at what is really happening to the place of religion within life itself. It is the right approach for the moment.

Culture is like a tool that enables us to understand the continuous changes being made to the text of human life. It is an approach that facilitates our reading of what is happening in our lives and the lives of the young. It is

¹¹ Gallagher, 1-9.

also at the heart of much of the division between peoples according to Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, who writes, “the Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant dividing line”¹² between peoples. So what are these changes that create so much tension between peoples and how do we begin to understand and interpret them?

Lenses for Interpreting the Changes

From a *sociological* standpoint Margaret Archer sees culture as a “shapeless, seething and shifting thing.”¹³ She sees transformation of culture emerging at times from ideas or the intellect, as in the case of the Enlightenment, and at other times from social conditioning and structure, as in the case of the Industrial Revolution. For her, cultural systems of value and meaning come into existence as a result of historical interactions on a social level. She stresses that a different future can be forged through forms of “cultural agency”, as a result of the reflective ability of human beings to fight back against their conditioning. She sees cultural change as highly complex but even within this complexity claims it is possible to counteract the dominant culture and help create alternative forms of culture.

In terms of *theology* Walter Ong (see Figure 1) reads the changes through the transition from oral cultures to that of the writing and printing revolutions and then to the electronic media of today. In each of these cases, he claims, the arrival of a new technology of communication had a major impact on the culture itself.

When writing ousted the older oral culture it “transformed human consciousness”, introducing “division, and alienation” but also “highly interiorised stages of consciousness”.¹⁴ Then when printing allowed knowledge to be localized, the eye took over from the ear as the chief contact with reality. Oral cultures were naturally more community based. The written word is more objective, impersonal and solitary. These changes challenged the mediation of religious faith. The new dominance of the visual caused a depersonalization of culture and the privatization of religion. In this cultural situation, the truth of religious revelation can be dismissed as insufficiently objective and its nature as a relational and spoken word remain neglected. When Ong turns his attention to the twentieth century he talks about the “second orality” where he sees the world of electronic communications having retrieved the lost

¹² Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): 31.

¹³ Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: the place of culture in social theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), xv, xxii.

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy, the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 78, 178-9.

dimension of the voice. This shift has had an even greater impact because it moves from interior to interior. It is, Ong claims, a question of culture which has gained a new contact with personal interiority and mystery, and hence the question of God. In three stages Ong traces a journey from traditional oral culture, through modernity to post modern openness to the spiritual dimension. His standpoint offers great hope for the present times and for faith, if we but learn to seize the day.

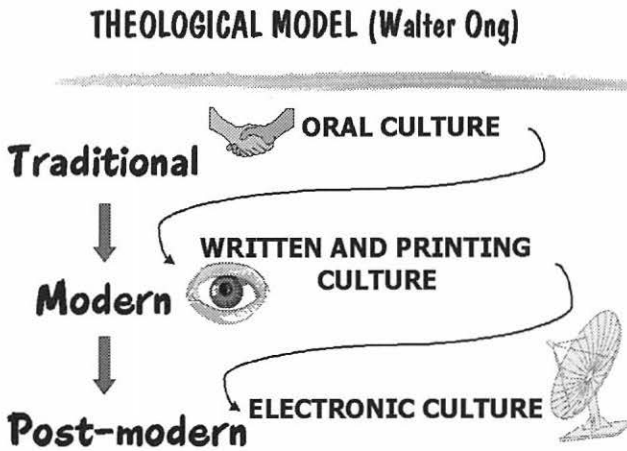


Figure 1 - A Theological Lens

The *anthropological lens* presented by Mary Douglas throws even more light on the situation with regard to cultural transition today and the implications of that transition for faith and specifically for the faith-life of our young people today.¹⁵

Mary Douglas is a contemporary cultural anthropologist who did most of her initial field work in Africa in the 1950s. According to her, differences in culture are rooted in how people learn to perceive their social relationships with one another. She cites four factors in this:

- the acquired way I perceive my place in society,
- the social context and its dominant patterns of interaction,
- my individual behavior choices,
- the forms of religious vision typical of different cultures.

¹⁵ Gallagher, 28.

A child's story begins as he or she starts to assimilate the social assumptions of the "tribe", and gradually the self comes to view the surrounding world with a particular slant, which in turn shapes his or her expectations of others. Douglas insists on a cultural analysis that gives pride of place to the individual's way of responding to the surrounding world, but in addition she stresses the connection between these different perceptions of the self in society with various forms of religious and non-religious visions of existence. How the individual experiences these interactions involves an implicit choice concerning what Douglas calls a cosmology.

She is especially known for her four models of cultural difference and change and how the variations between different social contexts and cosmologies can be understood in terms of what she calls *grid* and *group*. (See Figure 2) This is a flexible and simple way of describing how people live with different built-in interpretive schemes of how to act in relation to others. It provides a method of categorizing cultural differences and cultural change.

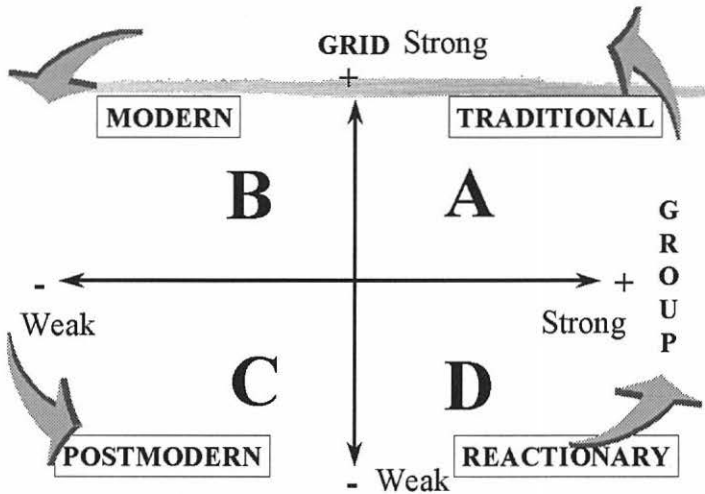


Figure 2 - The Fourfold Culture Lens

The category *group* concerns pressure: the experience of having no option but to consent to the social demands of other people. At the weakest point no demands are being made on the individual. He or she is free of pressure. This means he or she is alone. When pressures and counter-pressures completely balance out, the point of indecision would be here. It is the moment before conversion and commitment. Towards the right the person is increasingly bonded with people. *Group* applies to the tendency towards the maximum personal control.

A child starts far along the line to the right, since a child is completely controlled by others and low in the line of grid: as the child grows he or she may be progressively freed from personal pressures and progressively indoctrinated in the prevailing system. If the child is clever at internalizing the categories and their implications, he or she can turn them to his or her own defense against personal tyranny. The child can even use them to tyrannize. To allow for this, we can extend the horizontal line from zero to the left. On this side the individual has escaped pressure from other people. He or she is exerting pressure on them.

The category *grid* instead, is the system that looks at order, classification; it is the symbolic system. Social relations demand that categories be clarified and orientations given. Order is the basic requirement for communication. When people put pressures on one another with regard to order (rules) then a process of mutual reinforcement is at work. The point of weakness on the vertical grid would mean absence of classification. The zero would represent a blank, total confusion with no meaning whatsoever. Absence of norms would be anomaly, the suicide's doubt. It would be the mystic's moment of dissociation when all classifications are in abeyance. It could also represent the child's first undifferentiated awareness. The extreme of the weakest point is the world of private thought.

The vertical line represents the range of *grid* influence, from zero presence at the bottom to strongest at the top. The horizontal line represents the range of *group* control, from zero at the left to strongest at the right. Four squares emerge from different combinations of grid and group. The whole offers a flexible model for identifying four quite different cultural formations. Mary Douglas maintains that "Culture is nothing if not a collective product"¹⁶ and she approaches it through different patterns or fields of relationships that make up a community.

The "traditional model" (A) an example of which might be the typical "Catholic culture" of the decades before Vatican II, should not be interpreted as automatically a domineering or unhappy culture. Within this square there can be flexible and humane forms of authority and secure social roles. When this happens the culture offers a set of supports for the individual that most people are looking for even today. This is the natural culture that through the ages has provided a home for human beings and given them a religious cosmology with which to confront the dilemmas of existence. Traditionally our Catholic schools were about the task of creating this culture; indeed this could be another way of describing what is sometimes elusively called "ethos."

The "modern model" (B) moves away from a stable culture where religion is part of the very fabric of life to a "more free floating and individualist culture where the language of religion undergoes severe challenge."¹⁷ This is

¹⁶ Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1988), 60.

¹⁷ Douglas, 65.

essentially a competitive society, and “ego-centered categories of behavior” abound.

Role definition comes from success as an individual, relationships and alliances become fragile and fleeting, and pragmatism, pluralism and materialism prevail. Even religious forms become more ego based, as God becomes a source of peace and comfort for the self. Here the tendency is to foster “personal religion” called upon to meet the needs of each one to be fulfilled personally. This marks the beginning of a more secularized form of religion.

In the third culture type, the “post-modern model” (C), such secularization of religion is intensified. There is a lack of structure and support system. Isolation and lack of communication between people are typical of this model. In respect to faith, secularist indifference becomes dominant. Here the very question of ultimate meaning fades into silence or unreality. This structureless existence would, at first glance, seem to be a disaster area for Christianity. Some, however, would read the lack of structures as providing a cultural terrain that is free of clutter where Christian communities could be built from below. This could be true for some, but the majority find here an empty space leading to cultural desolation, where drifting dominates and people remain without the supportive building blocks on which to construct an encounter with religious revelation. What emerges is an “anchorless form of spiritual searching of the New Age variety. Without some belonging to a *group* or community links with the *grid* of other people, this model can easily become secularized, unchurched, narcissistic and lonely.”¹⁸

In the “reactionary model” (D) with the weak *grid* and strong *group* characteristics the tendency is to cocoon the tightly knit group away from the surrounding world in order to preserve the group. Allegiance to authority is paramount and is usually accompanied by a rigid asceticism. Non-conformity is anathema. Extreme examples of this “cult” cultural model have emerged in the last few years of this millennium.¹⁹ Douglas would affirm however that wherever collectivism outweighs individual choices and imposes various roles on its members this cultural form emerges. It is a very distinct sectarian form of culture.

Our present story then is a complex one. There are no easy answers. The complexity is enhanced by the changes going on around us. Many of us have the impression of living in between two worlds, one that is setting and the other that is emerging. We are on the threshold of a new era. The old one is identifiable; of the emerging one we can only perceive and snatch glimpses. One of the signs of this new era is complexity. The challenge complexity

¹⁸ Gallagher, 30.

¹⁹ Such examples as the “Heaven’s Gate” sect or even the group which planted poisonous gas in the Tokyo underground system immediately spring to mind. The move within organized religions to a certain fundamentalism also enters into this cultural model.

throws at us is to stay with the story as it unfolds and not pre-empt the ending. To leave it aside because it is too complex would be a travesty of our belief in God's presence in life itself. To leave it aside would be to let the story continue without us, it would be to step outside life and become less than human.

A Very Human Story

So the story is our life. The life of all those around us, the life of all those who believe in life. We are called to grow and develop as our human story unfolds. Theories regarding the development of the human person abound. They shed light on our human story. They do not dictate how that story unfolds. Each one unfolds in the living of it.

Eric Erikson²⁰ recognizes stages in the human story where each change or new life situation brings out a new development or "chapter" of the personal story. Erikson's scheme follows a linear model. He depicts eight transitions of growth within the human person that he calls *crises*. The result of each crisis has a potential positive or negative outcome. His overall story plots a sequential course beginning in the infant oral stage when trust is counter opposed with basic mistrust. At the infant anal stage autonomy is pitted against shame and doubt; in the phallic stage initiative and guilt are in balance; industry and inferiority as the child enters the new world of school. Identity and role confusion are the contenders at puberty; intimacy and isolation at young adult stage; generativity and stagnation at the middle adult time; and integrity struggles with despair as the final chapter of the life story unfolds.

Erikson's theory in effect notes major issues to be faced along the way of life's journey. "In this way it provides an easy outline from which we can discuss various questions regarding meaning and value in terms of life."²¹

Interestingly enough Carol Gilligan argues strongly against the *maleness* of Erikson's model, even while acknowledging that he did recognize that the sequence is different for the female.²² She claims that Erikson does not go far enough in treating this difference, his outline remains unchanged despite the differences noted by him. For Gilligan intimacy is fused with identity in the development process as the female comes to know herself through her relationships with others, while for men identity precedes intimacy and generativity. This is due primarily to the fact that male identity is forged in

²⁰ Eric Erikson is still considered one of the leading figures in the field of psychoanalysis and human development. Author of many classics on the subject, perhaps his work entitled "Identity, Youth and Crisis" published in 1968 is particularly relevant in this context.

²¹ Daniel A. Helminiak, *Spiritual Development: an Interdisciplinary Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 46.

²² Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 11-13.

relation to the world and female identity awakened in a relationship of intimacy with another person. This seems important to note here, as it points in the direction of a development of the human person which has different emphasis for men and women. "The significance of gender to the understanding of young people's spirituality cannot be understated. In terms of a developing self-identity, gender ideologies in a religious context can have powerful and far reaching social and psychological consequences, and many have yet to be examined as issues in their own right."²³

Erikson's theory, with Gilligan's amendment, does provide a fairly simple outline of the major personal issues to be faced as the human story unfolds. Its usefulness lies also in the fact that these major issues focus on ideas of meaning and value about existence, which are extremely important factors in any discussion on youth spirituality today. The key values Erikson presents in his crisis pattern are generally considered to be religious. Meaning in life and value for life, which is a major thrust in Christian spirituality today, is seen in this model as developmental. Such a developmental pattern helps us unlock where expectations and presumptions sometimes impinge on the individual's freedom to respond in true liberty to life and to the God of life.

There are others who have a different outlook on human development. Daniel Levinson²⁴ proposes four main eras of male life, with periods of transition between each. Levinson's idea is informed by the dream. This dream orders the seasons of man's life; it is a vision of glorious achievement whose realization or modification will shape the life and character of the man. Once again Gilligan reacts strongly to Levinson's position as very much a male model,²⁵ and one in which relationships, whatever their particular intensity, play a relatively subordinate role in the individual drama of human development.

Levinson however does take up the task of presenting a female model in a later study.²⁶ He brings to the fore the same basic framework for development, "we have found that the framework holds for human beings generally," he writes. He then goes on to say that the study "has generated and utilized a gender perspective—a framework for understanding how women and men differ in life circumstances, life course and ways of going through the developmental periods."²⁷

While on the one hand he sees the lives and personalities of women and men becoming more similar, he acknowledges that we are still in a period of transition and therefore in a period in which we have to recognize those differences. To fail to do so is to lose something of the richness contained

²³ Diane Collier, "Gender Issues," *The Way Supplement*, 90, (1997): 105.

²⁴ Cf. Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978.)

²⁵ Gilligan, 151-153.

²⁶ Cf. Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, (New York: Ballantine Books 1996.)

²⁷ Levinson, *Seasons of a Woman's Life*, 414.

within the human story itself, the richness that says; in our being male and female, difference makes for wholeness.

While the long term evolution of human society may be leading to a reduction in gender splitting and an increase in gender equality what emerges is that the Levinson study of women's development reveals a great deal of hardship, anguish, stressful or traumatic experiences and difficulty in personal relationships. Is it, one is left asking, that women actually feel these problems more, or that they are confronted with more problems, or at least greater confusion? In the context of our reflection on how the human story unfolds particularly in the lives of our young people there has in this day and age to be an awareness of gender differences. Indeed Levinson concludes his book with the following prophetic statement: "the ideas of gender equality and adult development are now in our cultural awareness and have been tentatively placed on our cultural agenda. They also evoke great anxiety and run counter to our traditional ways of thinking. Despite our individual and institutional reluctance to examine them more deeply, we must make the effort to find and smooth a path for the generations of daughters and sons who will come after us."²⁸

Others, such as Piaget and Kohlberg have added their story map to the search for an understanding of human development. In Piaget's work it is the final stage that is the integrating experience of the human story. Kohlberg also added a final stage to his interpretation of the human story through moral values. His ultimate stage entails recognition of life's ultimate meaning and is the epitome of moral maturity. This seventh stage has been criticized by different authors as far too rational and therefore not accepting the place of some form of self-transcendence.²⁹

If human development is about the unfolding story of the person as he or she moves to wholeness, then the question arises as to when young people are ready to "choose to live for all that they can give." When do they come to own their story as "uniquely theirs" and how does this impact on their lives? If the young never appropriate their story how can they find meaning? Is meaning not then a result of finding, acknowledging and honoring "who I am"?

What the human story theorists point towards is that the human person grows through a pattern of trying to make sense of life, of composing meaning, of ordering relationships, and then to an activity which transforms being, knowing and doing. In the pattern one *chapter* follows on another. In life it is never that simple. As the chapters evolve or develop the person experiences a central dynamic of struggling to find meaning in the unfolding story. It is, I believe, in this struggle to find meaning that the element of the transcendent "comes to meet us" on our journey. To this struggle then and to this dynamic we are going to give the term *faith* and *spiritual*.

²⁸ Levinson, *Seasons of a Woman's Life*, 421.

²⁹ Cf. Paul J. Philibert, "Conscience: Developmental Perspectives from Rogers and Kohlberg," in *Horizons*, 6 (1979) 1-25.

A Story of Faith Unfolding

“Faith—the activity of seeking, composing and being composed by a meaning both ultimate and intimate—cannot, of course, be reduced to psychological processes, but the recognition and understanding of such processes can enhance our appreciation and respect for what concerns human beings most intimately and ultimately,” writes David Bakan.³⁰

At the beginning of the 1980s, the ground-breaking work of James Fowler³¹ and the faith development theory he describes gave us a new insight into the struggle within our story. Fowler’s work sets faith clearly as part and parcel of the human story. For Fowler faith in the human story is intrinsically linked to the search for meaning. In this way the young child needs the support of a trusting environment in the same way as the adolescent needs the stage of rebellion for his doubts to be negotiated. Genuine faith however is an adult, a “who I am” attainment, and one that is chosen many times, over and over.

Fowler claims that faith is best understood as a verb and not as a noun. Faith is an active dynamic process, a relational process about who or what I have *set my heart on*. Faith, Fowler claims, “is a person’s way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose.”³² For Fowler it is firstly about a commitment to others and then, about a content of what one believes and values. His faith story is a good story. It explains for established religions that faith is not just gift but also process. What Fowler does not do is give us insights as to why there seems to be a movement away from seeking faith through established forms of religion. It was not his task to do this. The problem is that while our discussion remains with the unfolding faith story it risks alienating the vast majority of young people who come to faith, in whatever way that they see faith, not from the established stance, of outside in, but from the more experiential one of inside out.

An Unfolding Spiritual Story

We have a language problem today. The word religion has come to mean *religions*. It has been made into a noun denoting established and institutional forms of what once were the stories of ultimate meaning. So a religious person who is Christian is one who has discovered that his or her human story makes sense within the larger story of the life of Christ. The word *spiritual* however is used to denote sensitivity in people regarding one another and their world and the question of meaning and ultimate meaning. Many of those who

³⁰ David Bakan, *The Duality of Human Existence* (Chicago, 1966), 4-5.

³¹ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

³² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 4.

work with young people today know that this sensitivity does indeed exist among the young. The way they express this, in terms of ecology issues, of justice and peace, of solidarity with those who are poor or abandoned, and of an unjust and unequal economy is not always what organized religion seems to be about for them. Sometimes the system gets in the way of the ideal in an institutional form of religion. What sets out to bring more humanity to humanity at times splits humanity in two. Life is what is important. For young people life is about caring for the earth and those who people the earth. So they will participate in their life and the life of those around them. The pattern of their story moves from life to meaning to something beyond. It is a spiritual pattern before it is a *religious* one.

Perhaps then young people are actually asking that we assist them in unearthing the spiritual story within their human story. The spiritual story is a *heart* story that is knocking on the doors of the *head* stories of organized religion. Much of the literature emerging in the area of contemporary spirituality speaks about the need for a feminine model of spirituality. Looking at men and women and their spiritual lives can give us a great deal of insight into what the young are pointing towards in their dissatisfaction with the models that seem to have lost meaning for them.³³

In trying to describe the spiritual journey that unfolds in the life of men and women it is good to make a sexual distinction (see Figures 3 and 4).

Setting out on their journey young people move on a path that is diametrically opposite, while the young man is ascending, the young woman is descending and acknowledging limitations.³⁴ This concept is difficult to understand especially in the more male dominated organized religions. The openness on the part of young women to the gospel and to spirituality is far greater than that of the majority of young men. Most youth ministers today would confirm such a stance as their prayer groups have a greater female than male membership. The point however is disputable.

³³ In this field the work of Richard Rohr has something to tell us. He works at delineating a pathway of spiritual journeying to protect the male species from apparently moving out of the picture. In the wake of books on feminine spirituality filling up the shelves of the bookshops, Richard Rohr set out on a voyage of reclamation. He describes a pattern that has much in common with all the theories that have gone before. What is interesting in his analysis is that he acknowledges in his desire to "reclaim" male spirituality that there are two very distinct journeys made by men and women.

³⁴ Cf. Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos, *The Wild Man's Journey* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996).

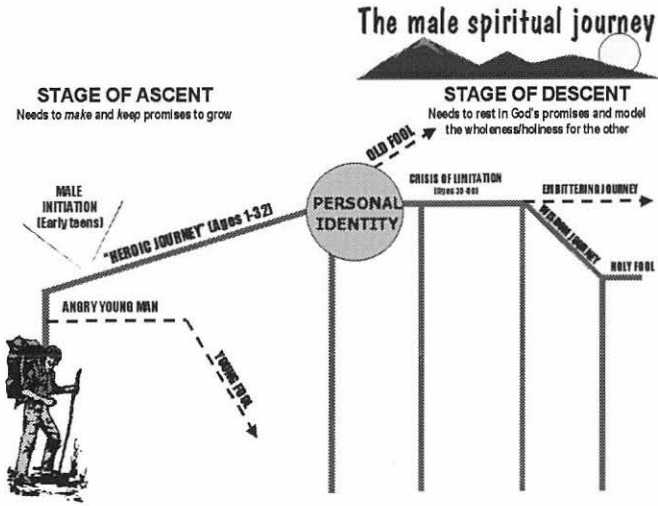


Figure 3 - The Male Spiritual Journey

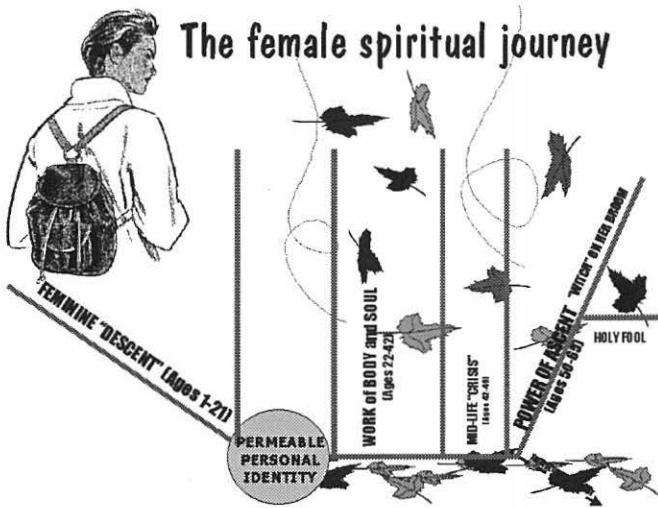


Figure 4 - The Female Spiritual Journey

Realistically speaking, we need also to acknowledge that the emphasis on sexual differences can lead some into a reactionary claiming of their right to be the same as. Such moving towards an equality of opportunity can bring about

an equality of being which ignores the differences in the name of justice. If this is the case then it could be argued that there is no equality at all. This cautionary note is made to point out that in our present day and age and with some young women in particular, the ascent is happening alongside their male counterparts. Even more reason that they be encouraged to shape their spiritual searching around their identity, remembering Gilligan’s caution that for the young woman identity is forged very strongly in relationships and through intimacy. Educators of the faith of young people, those who minister to them need to have a sense of differing needs and differing struggles in both young men and women as they move towards personal awareness and identity.

In looking at the development of young women and young men, it is important to understand that they travel along different paths towards the same goal. In mid-life they typically experience what can be called a “role reversal.” While mid-life is not a theme of our considerations here, it is good to keep in mind the “whole journey” as we deal with young people so as not to short-change either men or women in their development (see Figure 5). The differences must be honored so that all can grow to fullness.

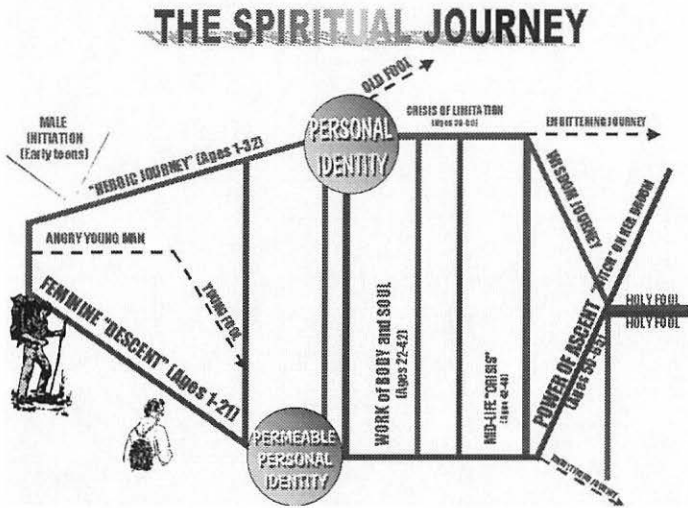


Figure 5 - The Male and Female Spiritual Journeys

What is immediately striking in the two road maps is the important place the spiritual journeying of these stories gives to personal identity, to *who I am*. The story needs a main character. The person who is alive and seeking life in its fullness is that main character. The story is at once personal and universal. The way it unfolds is unique to each person. The plot however needs a framework. It is to be seen if the “established” religions can and will provide a

meaningful framework for the next generation. The traditional religions have provided this framework in the past. The present seems to be calling forth something much more flexible and much more integrated than ever before. If the old and tried faiths dig their heels in a reactionary holding on to what has been, then the stories will unfold in their own way, one never really finding its place within the other's story. This is the far more poignant dilemma facing us today. It is not a question of which story is right. Rather it is about how far we are willing to listen to the story of the other, how far we are willing to let the other's story unfold at length without feeling threatened or feeling the need to answer the questions we think are being asked.

“No Longer Does our Faith Depend on Your Story!”

In this day and age of multiform technological communication, the art of storytelling seems to have been left, not to those interesting and very aware editions of human nature who instinctively know how to hold their listeners as they relate stories. The art of storytelling has been consigned to the film directors, their camera crews and to their technicians in the editing studios. After all, these are the people who are part of a huge industry and are the experts in making the films they say what they went to say in the most realistic of ways. Recently I watched a film called “187.”³⁵ It is a horrendous story of educational idealism turned sour. It is a realistically violent film. It is so realistic and so unnerving in its portrayal of adolescent gang members that I found myself asking, “but are there schools really like that?” What I was really asking was, “is this portrayal true to life, or true to the message the film wants me to hear, a depressing and de-moralizing one of inevitable hopelessness, of ‘cinema of the absurd’?”

I suspect my dilemma is not that far removed from the questions many people involved in education today ask themselves. The stories of the past which inspired the young, where are they now? Is it that we no longer need their inspiration? Is this the reason they seem to be fading into unreality? I do not know the answers to these questions. However I carry within me a growing intuition that the answers to these questions have the ability to unlock the apparent tension between the young people of our world today and their relationship to the Christian story which is soon to celebrate its two thousandth birthday.

In the Gospel of John, at the end of the story of the Samaritan woman, the people ask Jesus to remain with them. He stays a couple more days before moving on once again. The story tells us that “many more believed because of

³⁵ The film “187” starred Samuel L. Jackson. It was directed by Scott Yagemann, and produced by Bruce Davey and Steve McEveety for Warner Bros. The film was released in 1997.

his message” and they turn to the woman and say, “No longer does our faith depend on your story!”³⁶

Intrinsic to the scene is a profound insight regarding the nature of belief in the message of Jesus. They meet him as person and no longer need to depend on the stories about him. Having met him and heard his words, witnessing to the faith by others becomes less important. They are now in a position to grow in their own personal knowledge and relationship with him. It is this process that I would like to present as a kind of model of contemporary youth spirituality.

Some might argue that there is no youth spirituality. Countless films and newspaper articles could be cited as material to endorse such a statement. This younger generation could be called a *soul-less* generation. Before consigning the vast mass of young people today to this apparent wilderness, however, the real significance of words like spirituality and *soul-less* need to be unpacked.

There is a new spirituality emerging in our world. Today the Spirit is “calling us forth with an outrageously creative freedom, and with surprises that baffle and confuse—particularly those of sturdy faith and solid convictions. Everything in the spiritual landscape is becoming permeable and porous once more.”³⁷ Amid all the anxiety within organized faiths for reclaiming what seems to be lost, could it be that we are really missing the point? Could it possibly be that the young are trying to tell us something? Could it be that they are pointing us toward a new spiritual horizon? A spirituality that seeks to trust the young and their inherent goodness must surely begin to view them not as the great and misguided rejecters of the faith. Surely a youth spirituality, which sees the young as heralds as well as disciples, as leaders as well as followers must needs sit up and pay just a little more attention. Their discomfort with some elements of traditional belief must be weighed against their need for space and time and relationships, their need for meaning and help in making their lives meaningful. They seek, above all, a spirituality that facilitates their ability to discover who they are and live happily in that discovery. Therefore the first step in any reflection on youth spirituality is to try to unearth what is happening around us, for young people are indeed a tangible sign of what is happening at the heart of human living.

“After a long winter of crisis and silence what is emerging is an intense cry for spirituality. To use the word spirituality today is however to talk about stabilizing a personal identity, which is given meaning and organized around Jesus Christ.”³⁸ The word identity may seem strange in the context of religious vocabulary. Identity is not a traditional *church* word. The word

³⁶ Jn 4:41-42.

³⁷ Diarmuid O’Murchú, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (New York, Crossroads, 1997), 19.

³⁸ Riccardo Tonelli, *Una Spiritualità per la Vita Quotidiana* (Leumann-Torino: Elle Di Ci, 1987), 23-24 (translation mine).

identity comes to us from the science of education. It cannot be denied however that to speak about the need to integrate faith and life is today to speak about identity. It is within the search for identity that young people will discover the innate spirituality in the world and in the life around them. Identity is the way the person relates to the world. In a world that is in harmony and stable, with established points of reference, the relationship between identity and the world is easy to establish and moves in a clear direction. "In a time of complexity and profound and rapid changes such as our own, organizing personal identity requires a capacity for reflection in order to be aware of the over-abundance and disharmony of external stimulus."³⁹

Identity is the fruit of the exchange between the personal story of every individual and the cultural contributions furnished by the outside world in which the story is written and lived out. When the people turn to the Samaritan woman and tell her that they no longer need her story, what they are in fact saying is that they have met Jesus and in the meeting have made sense for themselves of their own lives. They are beginning to re-organize their lives, their identity around the figure of Jesus. Their story is taking on a new meaning, it is not changing in substance, but it is making more sense.

This is the process of growing in faith. This is the way to begin to live a deeper existence. This is the way the unfolding story of life finds its plot and its passion and its excitement. Young people need to be led into this process. To be led, they first need to be listened to. Their story is a part of the larger story; if it were not so then our hope would be diminished. We, too, need to begin to listen and read and envision the larger story in their unfolding lives, always conscious of guiding them, of enabling them to find in us the "place" where they can find themselves, and the community to sustain that process of discovery.

Their story has something to say to us today. It speaks of a spirituality that must be re-shaped and move toward a whole and human living and being in the world. Their story points to a spirituality that demands our caring for the earth. It asks us to move from the rational values of the head in favor of the feminine approaches of the heart. It is a story of joining in partnership with one another, reaching beyond the barriers, which divide people from people and party from party. We need to learn interdependence for our human story to survive. These are the elements of the emerging spirituality. They are elements as Christian as the beatitudes of the gospel. They are already present albeit in embryonic form in the young people of our world.

The call today then is to honor our story. It is a precious story. It is a unique story. It is sacred story, a truly "holy" story. It is a story to be lived in the presence of the one who has lived it before us and has made it holy. As we live our story we are called to give it meaning. We are called to discover its meaning as characters and events connect and weave a pattern of hope into a

³⁹ Riccardo Tonelli, *Per la Vita e la Speranza* (Roma: LAS, 1996), 111 (translation mine).

world crying out for such hope. Let us listen to the story of the young. Let us honor the story of our young people and help them find meaning and hope, the “spark that makes the power of the meaning grow for them.” Let us draw them to the point where indeed their faith no longer has need of our story, for their own unfolding story is a living belief in the goodness of life for all.