

Scott Peck's Theory of Human Spiritual and Emotional Development

From David Schemelzer's Book – Not the Religious Type (p18 – 27)

Stage One – The Criminal Stage (Corresponds to the toddler years)

Toddlers are cute and loving in the broad sense, they don't care about you. They can't. That's just not the stage they're at. As they're throwing a tantrum over a toy they've been denied, toddlers rarely stop themselves to say, "But your know, this isn't the most important thing in the world, and I haven't once asked how you are doing today Daddy. Has it been a good day for you?"

You could make the case that people who get stuck in the criminal stage are often best served by two institutions: jail and the boardroom. Jail for the obvious reasons. In stage one our lives are chaotic, which can feel horrifying. Without boundaries (something provided by good parents), we just grab for whatever we can. Jail is the ultimate boundary, which explains why some criminals can be model prisoners, but when they are released, they go on an immediate crime spree and get thrown to everyone's relief – back in jail.

But high functioning stage 1 folks can often be quite effective businesspeople (or politicians or, God forbid pastors). Because they are relentlessly focused on winning on getting what they want, whatever it takes.

Stage Two – Rules Based (Corresponds to the ages six or seven)

Now you care what Mommy and Daddy think, what they want, what the rules are. My oldest son had a memorable transition to stage 2 even as his younger brother was firmly in stage 1. My wife, Grace, and I are occasionally in quite expressive spiritual circles which means that we've been in worship meetings where folks would, say prostrate themselves, lift their hands, or even dance. Our oldest would survey the crowd to see whatever the appropriate behavior was and then he would warily imitate it. Meanwhile, his brother would be taking laps around the room or heading for the stairs to the stage. The oldest would try to maintain whatever pose he'd taken while through the corner of his mouth, spitting out his brother's name trying to get him to shape up. Finally we'd say to him, "That's not your job. We're the parents here. We'll take care of it." And he'd shoot us a look to the effect of, "Evidently not very well."

Two institutions might best serve stage 2: the military and the church. The military, again, for obvious reasons. It has famously been a transitional institution for people coming from chaotic backgrounds. It's where they find discipline and boundaries. But it was the church part that grabbed my attention. Peck argues that most churches are stage 2. They exist to tell people the rules, to set the boundaries of life. He takes great pains not to judge this. He emphasizes that whatever spiritual things happen at these churches are undoubtedly completely real and that, to his mind, the teachings there are effectively true. The heart and soul of America and most countries are right here in stage 2. These are the good people who get things done and raise strong families. The larger point rests, rather, in how this and other stages interact with each others. So let's go on for a moment.

Stage Three – Rebellious (Corresponds to the teen years)

At this stage, the healthy kid begins to question the rules she has been taught in stage 2. Why are they the be-all and end-all? What's behind these rules? Often the answers the teen gets are non-convincing, particularly if the world around her is stage 2. Then she's most likely to hear, "Quit being such a smart aleck!" that and not much more. This often hardens the teen into stage 3 and the wars begin between her and all things stage 2.

The institution that seems best to support stage 3 is the university. Periodically we hear cries of alarm from conservative circles that universities are monolithically liberal. And according to Eck's theory, of course that's true and always will be true. Universities are filled with eighteen to twenty-one year old, - who as a group - are transitioning into stage 3.

Whole societies, at the broadest level, can also reflect these stages. So, stereotypically at least, the Bible Belt might reflect stage 2. And, meaningfully to me, Cambridge, Massachusetts - dominated by universities - would be stage 3 central.

Again, to recap what we have said so far:

Stage One – Criminal

Stage Two – Rules – Based

Stage Three – Rebellious

As we said, Peck was most concerned with the way that the stages interact with one another. Stage 2 is an important but often embattled stage. On the other hand, in stage 2 religious communities, there's the assumption that anyone outside of the community is stage 1, a lawbreaker who need to find God - meaning: to keep the rules of life. Stage 3 is especially threatening to stage 2, because folks in stage 3 are seen as a unique kind of lawbreaker – they're rebellious libertines!

In this way of thinking – forgive me if I'm offending any political sensibilities, and I'll happily hastily backtrack if we ever chat about this – the Republican party would be stage 2 and the Democratic party, although perhaps not intuitively, would be a blend of stage 3 and stage 1.

Stage 2 and stage 3 each heap scorn on the other, but there's a different feel to their scorn. The scorn coming from stage 2 toward stage 3 might be reflected in the use of the word liberal as a self-evidently shameful thing, as so obviously shameful that you don't even have to say why it's so shameful. And on the other side, if you were to take a drive in my city you would see hundreds of ant-Republican bumper stickers that all boil down to how obviously idiotic and beneath contempt stage 2 people are, leading one to wonder if the Republicans are standing in for the stage 2 parents of these drivers.

A fascinating and unexpected corollary in Peck's thinking – central to his experiences with his patients that led to formulation of his theory in the first place – is the observation that stage 3 is a spiritual advancement from stage 2. And yet there's every possibility that – if you believe in such things – in stage 2 you would go to heaven and in stage 3 you will go to hell. As the saying goes, stick that in your pipe and smoke it! Peck's theory explains the contempt stage 3 folks often feel toward the stage 2 faith they've left behind, that strange brew that often comes out as something like, "I don't believe in God, but I'm still more spiritually advanced than your are."

Now, before going on to Peck's stage 4, it's worth qualifying this for a moment. Stage 3 folks are indeed spiritually advanced in one limited sense, but not in all senses. Let's say a godly, faith-filled, stage 2 seventy-year old, someone who has given her life to loving God and loving others, was walking through one of Cambridge's many town squares and ended up in a conversation with some snarky, stage 3 nineteen-year-old. Who is more spiritually advanced? Obviously in any meaningful sense it's the older godly woman but Peck's point is that there is, nonetheless, a sense in which it's the cocky kid. Hold that thought.

Stage Four – Mystery

What stage 3 people usually don't realize is that there is a stage 4, that there actually are answers to the questions they have been asking. You might call this the mystical stage. Here, one suddenly realizes that most of the things we were taught in stage 2 are, in fact true, but in a much richer and more mysterious and deeper sense than we would have, or could have imagined.

So let's take this spiritual truism from the biblical tradition: "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Stage 2 reads this as; Okay, as of today at 3 p.m., I did believe in Jesus, so I can take it to the bank that I'm going to heaven whatever happens. I believe!

Stage 4 on the other hand might well say: Wow, that's one profound statement. I think I believe, but what does believe actually mean? Am I believing now? What might that look like? And saved. Saved in some meaningful sense now, or just saved after I die? Paul, after all, says a little later on in the Bible that what matters isn't any outward religious thing we do (circumcision, for instance) but a transformed life, a life that's being saved. Is my life being transformed by my belief? (Or perhaps it's not the belief that's transforming me but Jesus himself, in some sort of direct, mystical sense.) Wow! How?

You can see that stage 4 (mystical) is a stage filled with uncertainty to the same degree that stage 2 (rules-based) is by definition filled with certainty. Or, to put it differently, stage 4 is about questions; stage 2 is about answers. In this way of thinking, stage 2 looks at truth from the outside, as if it were a book that can and must be mastered. Stage 4 looks at truth from smack-dab in the middle of it, as if truth is everywhere and will take a lifetime just to begin to traverse (which is the joy of it).

Stage two folks tend to look at stage 4 folks with profound suspicion: They seem to be saying the same stuff, but every word out of their mouths is slippery. Why won't they just "stand on the truth"? What kind of tap-dancing cowards are these people.

If there's anything to this theory of Peck's, perhaps you've guessed how it saved my life. I entered faith from stage 3. So when I went to resolutely stage 2 churches, I was baffled. It wasn't that I disagreed with anything they were saying (even though, from what I understood, I often did disagree with some of what they were saying); I rather wondered why these things were worth saying at all. The things they talked about struck me as heady, as abstractions that I perhaps didn't have any quarrel with, but I kept waiting for them to tell me something that would call me into the profound but hopeful and life-changing mystery that I seemed to be entering. Instead, I found their whole purpose was to remove all mystery, as if mystery was the enemy and certainty were what we were looking for.

Perhaps you'll have guessed, as well, why so many Cambridge folks have found this stage 4 approach to be so significant. Many great people have been commissioned by vibrant, Bible Belt churches to come here and start a new church in the heart of paganism. These churches are often faith filled but they almost always stay quite small. If Peck is right, stage 2, by definition cannot reach those in stage 3. Stage 3 people, rightly are never going back. We often meet folks who grew up in stage 2 churches, who lead youth groups there, and who then went to college (that home of stage 3) and lost their faith. When they find their way back with us, what they realize is that – to their surprise – they never quit believing in God. What they quit believing in was stage 2.

Now perhaps to belabor this point, you might think this would mean that my gang is somehow a lot headier than the average stage 2 church. Which speaks the "plain truth" and not that blah-blah-blah mystery stuff. Strangely enough, it's just the opposite. My friends and I find ourselves telling a lot of stories and very few truisms. In this stage 3 central, this intellectual capital, you would think we'd be advised not to trumpet things like, supernatural healing, but we do. And perhaps some further consideration will help explain that of course we do

Stage 4 is about life transformation, about a God who actually does stuff that we very much want done in our lives, a God who navigates his way through all the evil and pain in the world to somehow triumph in the end, both in our moment-to-moment lives and in the world itself.

So. That said. But in the end, the bottom line isn't about this stage-theory stuff, however insightful or helpful it may be. Peck has given many folks I've met the same sigh of relief that he gave me, the perspective on what our spiritual journey has been, what it needs to be, and why we can safely ignore a good deal of well-meaning but inappropriate-for-us spiritual advice. But then, with gratitude, we file all of this until it's next needed.

Because the bigger story is about this unexpected God, this arresting life changer, this profound mystery who is mysterious primarily because of his profound desire to be known, to be walked with, to be drunk into our thirsty spirits, to be lived. That was the God I stumbled smack into on that most pivotal of nights.