

Principles for a mold of an overnight "retreat" for high school students based on Fowler's Faith Development Theory and on some Hungarian Jesuits' experiences at Kurtabérc

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Principles for a Mold of an Overnight “Retreat” for High School Students Based on Fowler’s Faith Development Theory and on Some Hungarian Jesuits’ Experiences at Kurtabérc

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Introduction

Some years ago two Jesuits constructed a style of retreats for high school students at a place in the woods called Kurtabérc (Hungary). We developed the framework of these retreats based on our personal involvement with scouts and with other religious communities, and we used our common sense to make these events a secure place for the youngsters to grow in their spiritual life. I am eager to share my experience, but it is very difficult since we adapted the retreats to the immediate situation and context.

Last year I came to know James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory. By delving into his theory about the growth of the structure of the faith (how and why we believe) — and not its content (what we believe) — my experiences in Hungary were clarified. This theory shed light on how our style could be more effective and why we had certain difficulties. I am eager to share this Faith Development Theory with youth ministers, but it is so complex that it is very difficult to offer an easy application of this practice-based theory.

By struggling with how to transmit the experiences I passed through, and how to transmit the theory in which I grew, I persevered to provide useful principles upon which to build a retreat. I reviewed the retreats of Kurtabérc in light of the Faith Development Theory, and I read the theory of Fowler in light of our high school retreats. Seven principles have arisen through this examination. I present these maxims hoping that they are useful for many colleagues, and we can begin a further discussion about students' spiritual improvement in light of the development of the structure of their faith.

My Focus

If we are to be present to youth we need to use adequate forms of communication appropriate to their developmental stages. Otherwise our message and help cannot reach their hearts. On the one hand, James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory is well-founded, but it involves serious difficulties for application in an everyday pastoral context. On the other hand, the wisdom gained from youth retreats in a Hungarian site called Kurtabérc cannot be imparted easily because our program is too localized and contextualized. As a partial solution, I offer seven principles based on Fowler's theory backed up by my experiences at Kurtabérc. I hope that these principles can be the bedrock to build a retreat structure and content.

To reach my goal I narrow down the topic to overnight mandatory "retreats" for high school students ages 14-16 in a western, Christian context. The facilitation of spiritual growth is important part of our Jesuit identity. So we offer optional retreats for both students and teachers, but some of the spiritual programs are part of the obligatory curriculum. That means the participants in the retreat are not necessarily practicing Catholics and some of them are explicit non-believers. A mandatory retreat needs to help all of these people on their different spiritual roads. I used the word retreat in quotation marks in the title, since we do not organize retreats in the classical, Ignatian sense. But our retreats are louder, more game-based, and interaction-focused, through which we help students to get closer to the transcendent, to meet God. The target group of these retreats is students at ages 14-16. I call them adolescents throughout this thesis even though it is a simplification. The length of these retreats is important as well, since the interpersonal dynamics among adolescents demands time spent together. My experiences are from a European, Christian context. That means for example that people usually have an

anthropomorphic image of God. The principles offered in the third chapter are probably practicable in a different cultural context as well, but that would need further research.

As the title of this thesis suggests, I do not focus on the content of retreats. I do not focus on their detailed structure either. I offer only principles that can be adapted in different contexts and, filling out this mold, I suggest that one can build his or her own structure and content of a youth retreat. I recommend seven principles to help create adequate forms which help reach adolescents' hearts.

Synopsis

I present three chapters to express my recommendations. In the first chapter I recount the theoretical background of Faith Development Theory. First, I make a simple connection between biological growth (development of the brain) and cognitive development (evolution of thinking). Adolescents' biological advancement opens them up to develop the ability of a third-person perspective-taking and formal operational thinking, as I will explain. These new abilities are important for the development of the structure of faith. Then I introduce the theory of James W. Fowler. He examined the development of the structure of the faith in an individual. He offers six plus one stages or styles to describe how one's faith — as a process of conceiving the world or as a process of meaning-making — unifies his or her experience of the world. I focus on Mythic-Literal Faith (Stage 2) and Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Stage 3), because Fowler's findings says that students of ages 14-16 are at these stages almost without exception. Before beginning my main chapter I speak about some of the difficulties with Fowler's theory. I examined a great deal of quantitative and qualitative research of the last twenty years about the theory and I found that to assign a stage to a person is very difficult and inaccurate in an everyday context.

In the second chapter I introduce the retreats of Kurtabérc. Kurtabérc is the place of the overnight retreats of the Jesuit high school in Hungary. It is a cottage in a desolated meadow of the Bükk Mountains. These retreats are structured in blocks. Each block comprises a popular song, a short bridging thought, an immediate experience or exercise of the students, and a reflection on that experience in small groups.

The core of my thesis is the third chapter. I offer seven principles in parallel with the seven aspects of the faith defined in the *Manual for Faith Development Research*.¹ Because of this connection my maxims cover a broad field even though not its totality.

The seven principles are: first, that one's spiritual journey should begin with immediate experience, and only after that should we reflect. Second, we need to take into consideration that adolescents are already able to see themselves from a companion's point of view, but this experience is as yet fantasy-based. Third, as adolescents make harsh differences between those like them and the stereotyped others, I suggest they seek help from others like them, namely from older students of the same school. Fourth, even though the "tyranny of others" is insuperable at Stage 3, we need to help them to be free from group pressure as much as possible in order to allow them to grow. Fifth, adolescents cannot be forced to follow external authorities, but they follow their peer group and a few "trusted others." So I speak about how to become a trusted other to lead them. Sixth, youth at Stage 3 cannot reflect on the paradoxes of faith, nor can they yet cope with these paradoxes. Therefore, in an overnight retreat we need to offer a supportive environment for growth by temporarily eliminating these ambiguities as much as possible. And finally, our target group is open to feel and live symbols even though they often put up resistance to detailed explanations.

¹ James W Fowler, Heinz Streib, and Barbara Keller, *Manual for Faith Development Research*, 3rd ed. (Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld / Research Center for Biographical Studies in Contemporary Religion, 2004).

In the conclusion I summarize my principles and the foundation of these principles. I finish by admitting the limitations of my project and offering points for further growth and discussion.

Chapter 1: Faith Development Theory

Cognitive Development of Adolescence

Throughout our life we go through various biological changes. The biological development from infancy, through adolescences, to young adulthood is evident and spectacular. Parents can bear witness to being astonished at their children's first movements, first steps, first words, first interactions with the outer world. The biological changes in the brain have a strong correlation with the evolution of the child's emotional responses and processes of thinking.

This development of thinking and meaning-making is called cognitive development, or — as Robert Kegan names it — “constructive-developmental” because “it attends to the development of the activity of meaning-constructing.”² Kegan argues that this cognitive development is the master motion in personality, “that the phenomena of several developmental theories are plausibly the consequence of this motion.”³ So the several developmental theories of the twentieth century have a common root and they are in dialogue with each other. For example, Jean Piaget — the central figure of cognitive development — built his development theory upon Erik Erikson's social-emotional theory.⁴ Then Lawrence Kohlberg founded his moral developmental theory based on Piaget's work.⁵ Carol Gilligan criticized Kohlberg, and she tried to improve his theory.⁶ At the same time Robert Kegan focused on the changing dynamics of

² Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴ Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. (New York, Free Press, 1965).

⁵ Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages*, 1st ed., *Essays on Moral Development*, v. 2 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

subject-object.⁷ Meantime James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory broadened the theory of Kohlberg and Piaget.⁸ And Sharon D. Parks criticized Fowler, and she enhanced his theory.⁹

All these theories are comparable as they are convergent and they trace back their roots to the evolution of the brain, to cognitive skills. All of these theories claim that development is a continuous growth toward a higher complexity. They all speak about invariable successive stages of development. The order of these stages is invariable although growth can have "varying speed and varying resting places."¹⁰ And later versions of these theories usually claim less clear boundaries of the steps and they speak more about a curve with labeled points than about strict stages. Kegan offers an easy-to-understand table in order to compare the stages defined by Piaget, Kohlberg, Loevinger, Maslow, McClelland-Murray, Erikson, and himself.¹¹

Formal Operational Thinking

Robert Kegan argues that "a lifelong process of evolution or adaptation is the master motion in personality,"¹² so "if you want to understand another person in some fundamental way you must know where the person is in his other evolution."¹³ My thesis concentrates on James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory, but since its root is in cognitive development we need to analyse adolescents' evolution in meaning-making processes before the analysis of the structure of faith. The main cognitive developmental evolution of adolescence is the transition from the so

⁷ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*.

⁸ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, 1st ed.. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

⁹ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, 1st ed.. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁰ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*

called concrete operational thinking to the early formal operational thinking as Piaget defines in his stages.

Kegan explains that a child at age 10 usually can formulate stable categorical classes and quantitative and numerical relations of invariance.¹⁴ This ability is named concrete operational thinking.¹⁵ Since these students begin to learn classification and inductive reasoning, they become a kind of “young empiricist”¹⁶ as they explore the newly opened up world with curiosity. Kegan says that their “inferences [are] carried on through system of classes, relations, and quantities maintaining logically invariant properties and which *refer to concrete objects*.”¹⁷ This ability makes them capable of simple perspective taking,¹⁸ even though their images of others are still “concrete, literal and immediate.”¹⁹ They can formulate their experience of impulses and perceptions without the ability of reflecting on needs, interests, and wishes.²⁰ And another limitation of this capacity is that these children cannot really understand that their perceptions are strongly determined by their point of view and constructed narrative.²¹

After some years of personal development, youngsters begin to experiment with abstract reasoning “which Piaget calls formal operations.”²² Kegan explains it with a new subjectivity which “can now construe the world propositionally, hypothetically, inferentially, abstractly.”²³ Adolescents can reflect on their needs, interests, and wishes, but they are living in interpersonal

¹⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 55.

¹⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135.

¹⁷ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 34.

¹⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 55.

¹⁹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 45.

²⁰ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 86.

²¹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 52.

²² Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 37.

²³ Ibid., 38.

mutuality without reflection.²⁴ Fowler summarizes the novelty of formal operational thinking with these words:

In formal operational thinking the mind takes wings. No longer is it limited to the mental manipulation of concrete objects or representations and of observable processes. Now thinking begins to construct all sorts of ideal possibilities and hypothetical considerations. ... Formal operational thinking makes possible the generation and use of abstract concepts and ideals. It makes it possible to think in terms of system.²⁵

This new ability allows adolescents to “distinguish between self and the systems of meanings of which [they are] a part.”²⁶ Hence they can have an image of the other’s external and internal self,²⁷ which opens up the possibility of “mutual interpersonal perspective taking.”²⁸ But this new ability comes true through long years of development so adolescents’ perspective taking is still very generalized,²⁹ and they are embedded in their outlook.³⁰

*

Robert Kegan explains that behind every development the moving dynamic is the cognitive development, the evolution of meaning-making. Adolescents are evolving from concrete operational thinking (ability of “empirical” research) to an early form of formal operational thinking (ability of abstraction). When Lawrence Kohlberg analyzes the changes in morality throughout the years of adolescence, he takes into consideration this cognitive development. When Robert Kegan speaks about the mental demands of postmodern life, he explains the cognitive developmental evolution demanded by our context. And when James W.

²⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁵ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 58.

²⁶ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 33.

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 59.

²⁹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 37.

³⁰ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 60.

Fowler reflects on the structure of faith in adolescents, he uses cognitive development theory as a background for his own studies.

James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory

James W. Fowler is a contemporary of Robert Kegan. He worked out his developmental theory in dialog with scholars like Kegan, Jean Piaget, Erik H. Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. Fowler focuses on the development of the structure of the faith throughout one's life. He looks for why and how one believes (structure of the faith) instead of looking for what one believes (content of the faith).³¹ This is the special question that makes Fowler's Faith Development Theory unique.

In 1981 he published the first edition of the *Stages of Faith*³² expounding his theory about the development of the structure of faith. Faith is neither belief nor religion for Fowler.³³ Belief is about the holding of certain ideas,³⁴ but faith is more dynamic. Religion is cumulative tradition, but faith is more personal and deeper.³⁵ Fowler understands faith as a process of meaning-making as he describes it:

Faith is the process of constitutive-knowing; underlying a person's composition and maintenance of a comprehensive frame (or frames) of meaning; generated from the person's attachments or commitments to centers of supraordinate value which have power to unify his or her experiences of the world; thereby endowing the relationships, contexts, and patterns of everyday life, past and future, with significance. [emphasis added]³⁶

³¹ He acknowledges that content is also important as "the structuring operations underlying faith are at best only half of the story of a person's development in faith." James W. Fowler, "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001): 164.

³² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

³³ James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 54.; Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, Ch. 2.

³⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ James W. Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, by Craig R. Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 24.

As faith development is about the development of the ability of this process of constitutive-knowing, so Faith Development Theory (FDT) is in a strong relation with cognitive development. Transition from one faith developmental stage to an other one requires a development in cognitive skills as well. We saw how adolescents gradually discover their new cognitive capacity to take a third-person perspective and to describe their experiences with abstract concepts and ideals. This cognitive development is the base for a development in the structure of their faith as we will see in details.

Fowler differentiates six stages of faith. He intentionally uses the term “stage” in both senses: stage of growth where one’s structure become more and more complex, and stage of theater where one interacts with different circles of people.³⁷ Throughout the stages, one’s social and institutional interaction widens and becomes more complex. As Fowler continues “We become more self-reflective and aware of ourselves as relating to others; we take on many roles and responsibilities.”³⁸

Fowler insists that “the structural stage sequence is sequential, invariant, and hierarchical.”³⁹ That means that nobody can skip over any stage. And there is no regression from a higher stage to a lower one, even though Fowler recognizes the existence of special cases when an “uneven developmental trajectory” can happen.⁴⁰ Yet the stages are not separate steps but a continuous curve, so one can be in the transition between two stages. Another important attribute of the stage sequence is that one does not necessarily go through all the stages finally arriving at Stage 6. Indeed, most people never reach Stage 5 or 6, and many adults never leave Stage 3

³⁷ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Fowler, “Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges,” 171.

⁴⁰ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 22.

either. Because of this, Fowler defines only a certain age before which the beginning of a stage is practically impossible.

The Stages

The six stages of FDT are as follows. Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Faith. Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith. Stage 2: Mythical-Literal Faith. Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith. Stage 5: Conjunctive or Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith. Stage 6: Universalizing Faith.

Fowler introduces these stages in his book *Stages of Faith* with examples, but a better short overview is obtainable in the third chapter of his later book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*.⁴¹ And the most detailed and scientific description can be found in the *Manual For Faith Development Research (Manual)* written by Fowler, Heinz Streib, and Barbara Keller.⁴² I summarize the stages based on these three sources.

Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Faith. This “pre-stage” — as Fowler calls it — is typical of infants. It is important because “the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with sense threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infant’s environment”⁴³ — as Fowler says. Unfortunately this stage is practically inaccessible for empirical research.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith. This stage takes place from around age two or three. The logic is not fully developed, so youngsters at this stage show fractured statements. Their world view is concrete and situational, so they can focus only on themselves. When they show empathy, it is frequently only imitated. They cannot even make a clear distinction between

⁴¹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, Ch. 3.

⁴² Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*.

⁴³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 121.

fantasy and reality. “Physical consequences to the self are the most important criteria for determining what is right.”⁴⁴

Stage 2: Mythical-Literal Faith. This stage occurs at grade school years. Children at this stage already can distinguish between fantasy and reality, so they gain the ability of story-telling. At the same time symbols are understood literally. These children begin to look around and get to know more about other persons. But they simply like or unlike the others, and when the other is different they tend to judge that other. They think that others have the same needs as themselves, so they objectify the others based on concrete and simple reciprocity. Stephen Parker summarizes this stage with these words:

Maturation evokes a new way of knowing and engaging the world. The child gains what Piaget called concrete operational thought. This new way of seeing and interacting with the world and others allows the child to infer intentions and to perceive continuity to actions; justice is concrete and reciprocal. These abilities, held together by means of a narrative, give rise to a faith in which the ultimate environment is inhabited by a cosmic judge (“God”) who guarantees a kind of simple, reciprocal fairness.⁴⁵

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith. This stage arises during adolescence, but we need to talk about the opening point later on. Lots of adults find this stage adequate for their whole life.⁴⁶ Students at this age can use narratives, and not only simple linear stories. They build a fractured system of beliefs, even though they are not aware of having a system. They try to see the world also from the other’s point of view. This perspective-taking is present but still generalized and fantasy based. Students’ identity is based on what they think the others think about them. So interpersonal relations become very important, but they are also trapped in these relations. That means, they follow their peer group. I cite again Stephen Parker’s summary:

⁴⁴ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 41.

⁴⁵ Stephen Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 34, no. 4 (2006): 339.

⁴⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 72.

The emergence of formal operational thought brings other possibilities for construing and relating to the ultimate environment. In this stage, meaning-making and committing to values takes on a more interpersonal dimension not previously available. Self-identity and faith are closely tied to valued others, and thought deeply felt, is unexamined. “God” takes on the interpersonal qualities of a good friend.⁴⁷

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith. This stage cannot be achieved before the mid-twenties. Young adults with the entirely developed formal operational thinking can reflect on their own belief system. They have a critical look that makes their belief system more coherent. But they are also ready for demystification and demythologization.

Stage 5: Conjunctive or Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith. Some adults can arrive at this stage but never before their midlife. This stage is described by the ability to live with ambiguity. Adults can already deal with multiple systems. That leads to a kind of pluralism and committed relativism. With this capacity, adults can follow the tradition and remain open for the new at the same time.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith. Even though this stage can be confused with other stages, it is very rare. Only people like Gandhi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta could reach this stage. And we need to admit that we cannot speak clearly about this stage because it is still far from our personal developmental stage. Adults of this stage have the “felt sense of solidarity or identification with the perspective of others”;⁴⁸ they feel themselves being part of an ultimate environment. So we can describe this stage with the word “inclusive.”

The transition between the stages is provoked by the inadequacy of the current stage. Fowler says that transitions “are initiated by the awareness that our existing structures are no longer sufficient for dealing with the shape and content coming to us from our experience-

⁴⁷ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 339.

⁴⁸ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 40.

world.”⁴⁹ Fowler and the *Manual* do not speak much about the transitions, but this dynamic is similar to Jack Mezirow’s disorientating dilemma,⁵⁰ and Robert Kegan’s theory of the curriculum.⁵¹

Difficulties and Limitations of the Theory

In the last 35 years of the theory, more than 150 dissertations have borne on the research, in English alone. The Faith Development Interview — the main instrument for the measurement of faith development — has been translated into German, Turkish, and Korean.⁵² Fowler is often quoted and his theory is taught from Boston to Hungary. So we assume that Faith Development Theory is a valid model to describe developmental stages, but we need to mention some of its limitations and topics that need further discussion.

Stage of an Individual. The most important difficulty is that we cannot quickly assign an individual to a stage. It is because the beginning of a stage is not well defined, because one spends more time in-between than at a single stage, and because there is no fast and easy method for the measurement of the structure of faith. These questions are so important regarding our topic that I will discuss them in more detail.

Continuous Development. As mentioned, James W. Fowler published his main work in 1981. His theory was born into the modern age, and there is a clear optimism about continuous development in his writings. During the past thirty-five years there has been a shift from a modern worldview to a postmodern one. In our postmodern age, the concept of continuous growth has been forced to yield to questioning for economic reasons, by the information

⁴⁹ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 72.

⁵⁰ Jack Mezirow, “A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education,” *Adult Education* 32, no. 1 (1982): 3–24.

⁵¹ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), Ch. 2.

⁵² Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 61.

technology bubble, etc. We need to ask ourselves whether our faith is strictly monotonically increases. The issue of the growing presence of religious fundamentalism also pushes the limits of the FDT, since we can assume that “a fundamentalist orientation consists of a revival of earlier styles that coexist with later developmental achievements.”⁵³ Fowler recognized this tension and reflected on it in the *International Journal of the Psychology of Religion*.⁵⁴ Reflecting on the same question, Heinz Streib offered the religious styles perspective instead of the stages in that same issue of that journal.⁵⁵

Christian or Universal? Faith is neither religion, nor belief for Fowler — as we saw. Because of this statement, FDT is claimed to be applicable in different religious contexts and even in an atheistic context. FDT speaks about the structure of faith and not about the content of faith. But Fowler, as a member of the Methodist church, founded his theory on the theology of Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr. He claims that “Faith development theory is grounded in a conviction that humans have evolved into an ontological vocation for responsiveness to God. This approach claims that the orientation to centers of value, the construing of meaning as the context for relationships and our life projects, is generic to human beings.”⁵⁶ This statement requires a monotheistic point of view where personal relationship with God exists. In Fowler’s second book, titled *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*,⁵⁷ the pure theory is hardly separable from its Christian applications. For example, the image of God at Stage 2 is anthropomorphic, and Stage 3 is all about personal relation with God. But in the context of a non-monotheistic religion these claims are hard to interpret.

⁵³ Heinz Streib, “Theory: ‘Faith Development Research Revisited: Accounting for Diversity in Structure, Content, and Narrativity of Faith,’” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 15, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 115.

⁵⁴ Fowler, “Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges,” 159–172.

⁵⁵ Heinz Streib, “Faith Development Theory Revisited: The Religious Styles Perspective,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 3 (2001): 143–158.

⁵⁶ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 79.

⁵⁷ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*.

At the same time Fowler continues to insist that development of the structure of the faith is universal and useful for any religion and belief. But there is little research affirming this strong statement. Most of the English research papers on FDT come from a Christian context. Heinz Streib — a scholar who worked with Fowler — undertook research using the Faith Development Interview not only in cross-cultural research in Germany and the United States of America,⁵⁸ but in research on religious socialization of adolescents in Turkey and Germany as well.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, even this last research remains in a monotheistic field. Stephen Parker, in his essay on measuring faith development, gives an account of research on non-Christian people, but he mentions only one non-monotheistic one.⁶⁰ In a later article, Parker mentions that even the dissertations with non-theistic samples “note some problems with cross-cultural use.”⁶¹ Nancy S. Vanlue’s dissertation is a meta-analysis of dissertations on FDT published between 1980 and 1994. She can find but one non-Judeo-Christian research on FDT (published before 1994).⁶² So the universality of FDT begs for further research especially regarding religions without a personal ultimate one.

Family and Social Influences. Another shortcoming of the original Faith Development Theory is that it does not stress enough on either the role of social influences, or the importance of the family. In our postmodern world the importance of the social self is commonly accepted.⁶³

⁵⁸ Heinz Streib, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*, Research in Contemporary Religion, v. 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

⁵⁹ Heinz Streib and Adüm Aygen, “Religious Socialization and Faith Development of Adolescents in Turkey and Germany: Results from Cross-Cultural Research” (XVI Meeting of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values, Ankara, August 27, 2008).

⁶⁰ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 341.

⁶¹ Stephen Parker, “Research in Fowler’s Faith Development Theory: A Review Article,” *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 3 (2010): 241.

⁶² Nancy S. Vanlue, “A Meta-Analysis of the Concepts, Characteristics, and Variables Addressed in Sixty Doctoral Dissertations Highly Relevant to Adult Faith Development (1980-1994)” (Ed.D., Ball State University, 1996), 85.

⁶³ Read for example: James A. Holstein, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Even though the new Manual recognizes that “social and contextual influences on cognitive development are to be considered,”⁶⁴ the detailed description of the stages and aspects does not offer notable or useful help.

Piaget has a “distinctly negative portroyal [sic]”⁶⁵ of the role of the parents. Kohlberg is less radical, but the family is unnecessary for moral development for him as well.⁶⁶ Fowler does not follow this negative image, but still scholars like Heinz Streib miss relational dynamics from Fowler’s theory.⁶⁷ Streib prefers to speak more about self-self, self-Other [sic], self-tradition and self-social world relationships.⁶⁸ And most scholars realize the important supporting role of the family even during adolescents’ struggle for autonomy.⁶⁹ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops proclaims that “families can and should be the most powerful generators of developmental assets.”⁷⁰

Focus on Stage 3 and Stage 4. Fowler focuses on Stage 3 and Stage 4. The descriptions of these stages are more detailed and are the longest ones in his book. Most of the research also examines the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Stage 1 cannot be conveniently assessed, and we have almost no good expression for Stage 6. Even the critiques of the FDT analyze this transition, like Sharon Daloz Parks’s theory.⁷¹ This focus on stages two to four does not invalidate the theory but awareness should be raised when we assess those stages.

⁶⁴ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 13.

⁶⁵ Joseph Reimer, “The Case of the Missing Family: Kohlberg and the Study of Adolescent Moral Development,” in *Approaches to Moral Development: New Research and Emerging Themes*, ed. Andrew Garrod (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁷ Streib, “Faith Development Theory Revisited,” 144.

⁶⁸ Streib, “Faith Development Theory Revisited,” 88.

⁶⁹ See for example: Wyndol Furman and Duane Buhrmester, “Age and Sex Differences in Perceptions of Networks of Personal Relationships,” *Child Development* 63, no. 1 (1992): 104.; Lawrence J. Walker and John H. Taylor, “Family Interactions and the Development of Moral Reasoning,” *Child Development* 62, no. 2 (April 1991): 265.; Jacquelynne S. Eccles et al., “Development during Adolescence: The Impact of Stage-Environment Fit on Young Adolescents’ Experiences in Schools and in Families.,” *American Psychologist* 48, no. 2 (February 1993): 97.

⁷⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Renewing the Vision,” 6, accessed March 28, 2016, <http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/young-adults/renewing-the-vision.cfm>.

⁷¹ Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*.

Sexuality and Intimate Relationships. Even though the center of the structure of the faith is not sexuality, this topic should be mentioned along with personal development. The value of romantic relationships during adolescence increases. Wyndol Furman and Duane Buhrmester found that “perceptions of intimacy and affection are greater during early and middle adolescence.”⁷² Tabitha E. Pineda wrote a training manual for youth ministers on adolescent development and mental health.⁷³ She cannot totally omit the question of sexuality either, and more, sexuality is named as a source for growth and difficulties.⁷⁴ So, adolescents’ quest for intimate relationship is important for their constitutive-knowing, even though Faith Development Theory never explicitly acknowledges that.

Assigning a Style to a Student

The biggest obstacle to the practical application of Faith Development Theory is that we hardly know the stage of an individual. There is no fast procedure — like a simple scale — to assign somebody to a stage, and the only reliable instrument needs a lot of resources. And FDT itself does not offer clear boundaries for the stages expressed in years.

Measurement of the Structure of Faith

Faith Development Interview (FDI). The *Manual* introduces the Faith Development Interview (with the Life Tapestry Exercise). This is a qualitative method that comprises a not-completely-open-ended interview with twenty-five questions to be unfolded.⁷⁵ Usually an interview takes around two hours. Then the transcription, coding, and scoring takes at least five

⁷² Furman and Buhrmester, “Age and Sex Differences in Perceptions of Networks of Personal Relationships,” 112.

⁷³ Tabitha E. Pineda, “Adolescent Spirituality: A Training Manual for Youth Ministers on Adolescent Development and Adolescent Mental Health” (Psy.D., Alliant International University, 2015).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 74 and 92.

⁷⁵ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 63.

more hours.⁷⁶ Even with the help of the Manual one needs “some level of clinical sensitivity and training”⁷⁷ to carry out research.

Stephen Parker compares the different methods and confirms that the FDI is by far the most reliable method even though it has its own limitations.⁷⁸ The FDI’s other strength is that the results can be compared because of the common (or very similar) method. So FDI is the most common research instrument on FDT. Streib found fifty-three empirical studies in faith development (published before 2002), and twenty-nine studies out of these fifty-three used the FDI according to the Manual (another sixteen studies used a variation of this instrument).⁷⁹ I have found several recent studies which used the FDI or its variation such as the dissertations of Brent Russell Petersen (2012),⁸⁰ Winnie Gray White (2014),⁸¹ or the longitudinal and cross-sectional research of Gay L. Holcomb and Arthur J. Nonneman (2004).⁸² But because it is a heavily qualitative instrument, these research studies usually report a small sample (often less than ten). So the FDI is the best documented available method, widely used, and “its validity is clearly adequate for research purposes.”⁸³ But it demands far more resources than a practical pastoral application can afford.

Faith Development Scales and Surveys. Because of the need for a faster grading instrument, different scholars have developed various quantitative scales and questionnaires

⁷⁶ See the examples of Holcomb at Gay Lin Holcomb, “Faithful Change: Exploring the Faith Development of Students Who Attend Christian Liberal Arts Institutions” (Ph.D., University of Kentucky, 2004), 48. Though Pennington claims that 1.5 hour is enough for transcription and coding. Gregory E. Pennington, “The Convergent Validity of Four Measures of Faith Development” (Ph.D., Regent University, 2011), 66.

⁷⁷ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 341.

⁷⁸ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development.”

⁷⁹ Streib, “Theory,” 105.

⁸⁰ Brent Russell Petersen, “Application of Faith Development Theory for Understanding Students’ Transformational Learning as a Result of Bonfire at Texas A&M University” (Ph.D., Texas A&M University, 2012).

⁸¹ Winnie Gray White, “Christian Music Experiences in the Faith Development of Adolescents: A Phenomenological Study” (Ph.D., Liberty University, 2014).

⁸² Gay L. Holcomb and Arthur J. Nonneman, “Faithful Change: Exploring and Assessing Faith Development in Christian Liberal Arts Undergraduates,” *New Directions for Institutional Research* 2004, no. 122 (Summer 2004): 11.

⁸³ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 341.

based on the FDI. Both Streib⁸⁴ and Parker⁸⁵ give detailed analyses of these instruments. The better instruments contain up to forty-eight polar questions, but there are questionnaires with as few as eight questions. Streib declares that these instruments are too brief, that they cannot be used among non-Christians, or that their validity has not reliably tested.⁸⁶ Parker is more conclusive declaring that there is no correlation of scores of these with scores from an FDI.⁸⁷ I found recent researches that use questionnaires like the dissertations of Earl W. DuVall (2014)⁸⁸ or Kimberly D. Anderson (2014).⁸⁹ Both researchers used scales developed earlier, but their results are not reliable. Anderson admits, that even though her results confirmed her thesis, her findings “did not replicate those found by Hart et al. (2010).”⁹⁰ The research conducted by Jonathan T. Hart, Alicia Limke, and Philip R. Budd⁹¹ used the same eight semantic differentials that Anderson used. Another scholar, Gregory E. Pennington, investigated the correlation between the main faith development scales, but the analysis of these questionnaires “did not show statistically significant results when compared to the longer measure of faith development [FDI].”⁹²

I need to highlight here the dissertation of Dennis Wayne Hiebert from 1993.⁹³ Parker does not mention him,⁹⁴ but Streib recognizes Hiebert’s “48-item scale that is significantly more

⁸⁴ Streib, “Theory,” 105–107.

⁸⁵ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 342–345.

⁸⁶ Streib, “Theory,” 105–107.

⁸⁷ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 343–344.

⁸⁸ Earl W. DuVall, “Faith from Our Fathers? A Study of the Relationship between Childhood Father Involvement and Adult Faith Maturity.” (New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

⁸⁹ Kimberly D. Anderson, “The Role of God Attachment Patterns in Relational Spiritual Maturity and Faith Development Among Emerging Adults” (Psy.D., Wheaton College, 2014).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹¹ Jonathan T Hart, Alicia Limke, and Phillip R Budd, “Attachment and Faith Development,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 38, no. 2 (2010): 122–28.

⁹² Pennington, “The Convergent Validity of Four Measures of Faith Development,” iii.

⁹³ Dennis Wayne Hiebert, “Schools of Faith: The Effect of Liberal Arts, Professional, and Religious Education on Faith Development” (Ph.D., University of Manitoba (Canada), 1993).

⁹⁴ Stephen Parker examines the empirical support of FDI in a later article. In the list of the Appendix 1 of that article he mentions Hiebert’s research without any further note. See Parker, “Research in Fowler’s FDI,” 252.

comprehensive than the earlier scales.”⁹⁵ I found Hiebert’s work to be the most accurate scholarly dissertation on a faith development scale. He made eight drafts of his questionnaire because he chose to validate each version.⁹⁶ He asked the help of experts on FDT. He looked for correlation between the results of FDI and the results of his questionnaire as well. Only after eight drafts did Hiebert terminate the validation process “as it had become evident that the clarity of the data produced could not be significantly improved within the structure of the approach taken.”⁹⁷ So even though not even his comprehensive scale achieved adequate reliability,⁹⁸ one can learn a lot from his work about how an honest scholarly questionnaire development should look.

Other Instruments. Nancy S. Vanlue,⁹⁹ Heinz Streib and Stephen Parker found a few research instruments with other methods as well. Streib and Parker mention the same projects with different emphasis.¹⁰⁰ But both Streib and Parker agree that these instruments are not sufficient. Streib proposes necessary and possible revision of the qualitative FDI because of difficulties such as “the possibility that more than one style is present simultaneously within one and the same orientation of a person.”¹⁰¹ (This dynamic can explain fundamentalist revivals.¹⁰² And Fowler recognizes this possibility in his later writings.¹⁰³) But Streib’s proposed method with a narrative analysis of faith development remains an instrument, which demands a great deal of time and labor.

⁹⁵ Streib, “Theory,” 106.

⁹⁶ Hiebert, “Schools of Faith,” 108–114.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁹⁸ Streib, “Theory,” 106.

⁹⁹ Vanlue, “A Meta-Analysis of the Concepts, Characteristics, and Variables Addressed in Sixty Doctoral Dissertations Highly Relevant to Adult Faith Development (1980-1994),” 84.

¹⁰⁰ Streib, “Theory,” 107–108.

Parker, 2006

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “We see a fair number of persons — most frequently though not exclusively men — whose emotional development exhibits arrest at a stage at least as limited as the operations of the Mythical-Literal stage [Stage 2]. At the same time, their cognitive functioning exhibits the selective use of operations that correlate with the Individuative-Reflective stage [Stage 4].” Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 63.

Holcomb and Nonneman. Even though they do not offer a new instrument, Gay L. Holcomb and Arthur J. Nonneman¹⁰⁴ conducted the most serious research on Faith Development Theory in the last decade. Their research has qualitative and quantitative elements, and it has cross-sectional and longitudinal parts. The authors report that “a total of 240 subjects randomly selected from six liberal arts campuses have furnished, over the four-year span of the study, 600 faith interviews”¹⁰⁵ between 1998 and 2002.

Even with all these instruments the measurement of one’s developmental stage in the structure of faith remains difficult. Parker, in his comprehensive review of research on FDT, argues that not even the age/stage relationship is clearly backed by empirical research.¹⁰⁶ Parker’s article has its own limitations,¹⁰⁷ but he examines the validity of FDT comparing all the research on the topic, and the critique he formulates is crucial. Although we need to remember both dimensions of the fact that “it is not always easy to distinguish between an instrument problem and a theoretical one.”¹⁰⁸

Boundaries of Stages 2 and 3

There is no fast and reliable method to assign a faith developmental stage to our students at the retreat. In this case we need to rely on the description of FDT and the statistics of the research without forgetting that each and every student is different.¹⁰⁹

When Fowler describes the FDT, he does not assign exact ages for all the stages, because he concentrates on the description of each stage. Fowler says that Stage 2 (Mythical-Literal

¹⁰⁴ Holcomb and Nonneman, “Faithful Change.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰⁶ Parker, “Research in Fowler’s FDT,” 329–330.

¹⁰⁷ For example it does not make distinction between research in good quality (using second blind coders) and superficial research (coding an FDI within less than an hour).

¹⁰⁸ Parker, “Measuring Faith Development,” 346.

¹⁰⁹ Gary Chamberlain, “Faith Development and Campus Ministry,” *Religious Education* 74, no. 3 (May 1979): 23.

Faith) is possible from elementary school¹¹⁰ and ordinarily we find it in its fullness around age 10.¹¹¹ Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) begins from early adolescence,¹¹² or from puberty,¹¹³ and it remains defining during adolescence¹¹⁴ — according to Fowler. The transition to Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith) can begin “from late teens or early twenties.”¹¹⁵ So our audience — students of ages 14-16 — should have begun the transition to Stage 3, and some of them have reached the fullness of Stage 3 — according to the description of the FDT.

The results of the different research on FDT do not offer clear boundaries either. The *Manual* initiates the decimal fractions of the stages. And we recognize that being perfectly at one stage is rare, and one mostly spends more time in transition than at a clear stage.

When we look at the original sample of Fowler (359 interviews conducted between 1972-1981¹¹⁶), we see that almost ninety percent of the children between ages 7-12 have already reached Stage 2, and some of them are proceeding to Stage 3. Then over eighty percent of the individuals of ages 13-20 showed clear sign of Stage 3 or more.¹¹⁷ So the average developmental stage of our target group (ages 14-16) is presumably around 2.8. Holcomb reports that 32 percent of the 102 freshmen (around age 18) have not reached stage 3.0.¹¹⁸ Twelve percent of these 102 freshmen have not even reached stage 2.5. When Hiebert used the results of the Faith Development Interview to validate his alternative method, he found that only one undergraduate student reached Stage 4, and the other thirteen students were scored between 3 and 3.8.¹¹⁹

Gregory E. Pennington found a little lower results as he states that “the young adults [years 20-

¹¹⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 146.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹² Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 57.

¹¹³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 151.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹¹⁸ Holcomb, “Faithful Change,” 66.

¹¹⁹ Hiebert, “Schools of Faith,” 112.

22] in this sample were overwhelming characterized as persons approaching a Synthetic-Conventional [Stage 3] faith (as noted in the mean of 2.86 on the FDI total scale).”¹²⁰ At the same time Michael Kimmel argues throughout his entire book that “adolescence starts earlier and earlier, and adulthood starts later and later.”¹²¹

This overview of the results of research is not complete and there are real questions about a strict age-stage relationship.¹²² But seeing all these results and difficulties I would accept the definition of Fowler which states that Stage 3 “has its rise and ascendancy in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium.”¹²³ To be more definite, I assume that the mean of the developmental stages of 14-16 years old students is around 2.8. So most of the students are approaching Stage 3, but some of them have barely left Stage 2 yet, and some exceptional one is already on the way toward Stage 4.

¹²⁰ Pennington, “The Convergent Validity of Four Measures of Faith Development,” 63.

¹²¹ Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, 1st ed.. (New York: Harper, 2008), 25.

¹²² Parker, “Research in Fowler’s FDT,” 239–240.

¹²³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 172.

Chapter 2: Retreats of Kurtabérc

In 2011 I began to work and live at the Fényi Gyula Jesuit High School. This middle and high school is located at a poor part of Hungary (Europe) near the Slovakian and Ukrainian border. That time, around six hundred students were studying at the school, and two hundred of them were living in the dormitory, boys as well as girls. Since there is no tuition fee and the quality of education (teaching, environment, community) is high, there are students from Budapest (the capital city) and from tiny villages as well. Some of their parents are doctors, priests,¹²⁴ or judges; other parents are politicians, ministers, or mayors. But there are parents also who are laborers and agricultural workers. Even though this description suggests a heterogeneous student body, we need to admit that — on a bigger scale — our high school is a white, Caucasian, middle-class, Central-European school with a mainly homogenous Western-Christian cultural background.

Spirituality in the School

Religion and spiritual growth are central concerns in the school, since its owner is the Society of Jesus. Every teaching-day begins with a short spiritual reflection and prayer which is led by a group of students. This group is called “Embers” because its members are following the encouragement of Saint Ignatius of Loyola who said: “go set the world on fire.” At noontime, the school’s life stops again for a short prayer inspired by the examen of Saint Ignatius. This prayer is led by different teachers. In the dormitory there are evening prayers in different age groups which are led by prefects (for the boys) or by members of the Embers (for the girls). Students are

¹²⁴ In Hungary the presence of the Eastern Catholic Churches is significant. The priests of the eastern rite can and usually do have big families.

also obliged to assist at Catholic Mass with their classmates once a month, even though around one-third of them are not Catholics. Spiritual growth is encouraged also by means of religion classes of the students' own denominations. There are one-day-long, plenary retreats before Christmas and Easter as well.

Furthermore, we have instituted a sequence of overnight retreats for classes from 9th to 12th grade. Ninth-graders and tenth-graders go up to a place in the forrest, called Kurtabérc. I will present these retreats soon. The three classes of eleventh graders spend a weekend all together at a retreat. There they can freely choose between seven to ten different exercises based on their own feelings and relations with God. During the last year of high school, students must choose their own style of retreat which is organized by different religious congregations, such as Benedictines, Jesuits, Dominicans, Carmelites, Cistercians, Congregation of Jesus. And 12th-graders also have a night together where they pray in silence for each other one-by-one in front of the Blessed Sacrament exposed.

Retreats of Kurtabérc

I arrived at the high school with Bálint Nagy, S.J.,¹²⁵ who became the chaplain of the school. We took on responsibility for the spiritual life of this Catholic school. My focus became the retreats at Kurtabérc.

The parameters of these retreats were given. Students leave the city on Friday morning, and after two hours of hiking, they arrive at the enchanting meadow of Kurtabérc. In the middle of the meadow there is a cottage without gas, electricity, or running water. The nearest public road is over three miles away, and one needs to walk hundreds of yards even for mobile network

¹²⁵ Balint Nagy, "Personal Relationship between God and Human Persons in the Center of Our Human Reality and Christian Theology" (Dissertation, Boston College, 2011).

coverage. They spend the whole day and night around the cottage, and they return to the city only on the early afternoon of Saturday. These boundaries have their own advantages (for example being able to be alone with the class) and their own disadvantages (for example wasting a lot of time preparing our food). We worked within these boundaries as we respected this tradition, and we had a free hand in the arrangement of the program there.

Fr. Nagy and I spent weeks discussing the program, and after each retreat we reflected on the past experience to fine-tune the program. We directed over thirty retreats within three years. Our discussions about the retreats had two focuses: the content and the form or style.

As for the content, we wanted to be faithful to our Catholic identity, but we had to take into consideration that one-third of the students are not Catholic. And even the majority of Catholic youngsters did not have any strong Catholic self-identification. Moreover, every class had students who openly declared that God did not exist at all. So our program had to offer spiritual growth on a Christian base. This means that we tried to offer a personal experience of the loving living God. This experience could help the students to be more themselves and to be more free to love.

As for the style, we knew that traditional teaching was not efficient at ages 14 to 16. We had had wide experience working with adolescents in scout troops, in the community of Regnum¹²⁶ or in the summer camps of the Firefly Community.¹²⁷ So we pooled all our experiences, and the good practices of our predecessors, such as János Ádám, S.J. We did not use any theoretical background such as James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory. But we already knew about the importance of peer groups, about adolescents' struggle for freedom,

¹²⁶ Regnum Marianum [Blessed Virgin Mary's Country] is a scout-like Catholic organization in and around Budapest.

¹²⁷ Firefly Community has founded by a Jesuit about twenty-five years ago in Hungary. It is specialized in Catholic summer camps where a hundred children from all over the country spend a week together living with local families.

about the necessity of authentic leaders. We did not reflect on these, but we used them and more. And when we felt that some exercises were unsuccessful — meaning that the adolescents' hearts were not touched — we reworked the exercise until it became adequate for our students.

The documentation of these retreats and the great arc of this retreat-system would need a separate dissertation. Here I offer only the common principles which we found useful to build up our program. But concrete examples and useful tips will be described throughout the following chapter.

Manipulation or Magic

In the following chapter I offer tips and instruments that can be useful for altering the environment of the retreats. Kurtabérc is out of the regular environment so students can feel themselves more free. At the cottage of Kurtabérc there is no electricity so our Mass is illuminated only by glimmering candles. The unreflected pressure of the peer group is moderated by a healthy group of older students. All these instruments affect students' psychology and emotions. So after the blindfolded Mass (cf. p. 74) or after the students receive the feather fluff (cf. p. 75), they describe an experience of the living God so alive as they have never experienced. Students confirm that God has touched their hearts. But is this achieved merely through psychological, sociological, and developmental instruments? Is the students' experience of God a result of plain manipulation? Is there any place for the Holy Spirit at our retreats?

We manipulate the context of Kurtabérc in the original sense of the greek word: to alter with hands. We do alter the environment so as to produce an effect on adolescents. We consciously offer the adolescents an environment and experience where they can get closer to themselves and to God as well. We try to prepare the conditions in order to help the students to

be like good, arable soil. Then the content of the retreat becomes seeds we sow. Our human efforts to prepare the soil and sow the seeds are very important. But growth comes only from God, not from us. The retreats of Kurtabérc are similar to tillage. We, human leaders, work a lot, and our effort and sweat is remarkable, but God's almost-invisible work is much more important. She is the real leader; she gives the necessary growth; she is the one who touches our hearts.

All the exercises and circumstances of these retreats are very important, but are not sufficient. The retreats of Kurtabérc are worth nothing without the active participation of God. But God was with us always.

Limitations of our Experience

Since our retreats at Kurtabérc were quite successful, their exercises can be used as examples. But this claim is not a fact which is scientifically based. Even though we organized over thirty retreats of this style, we did not do scientific research on these events. A scientific reflection on our experience is almost impossible for several reasons. First of all, we do not have a third-person view of our program. We built it ourselves so we are biased. Another issue is that there are too many variables which need to be checked against each other in order to ground any detailed implications. In this thesis I claim a correspondence between our best practices and faith development. But I do not keep a check on other important environmental factors of our retreats. These factors could be the connection between the weather and the retreats, the biological differences between girls and boys, the specific personality of the leaders, and even God's personal intervention. Also each class is very different, and every class has some special issue which makes any scholarly correct comparison impossible. On the other hand, our experiences are not heterogenous enough to claim a universal validity. We worked always with students from

the same school, where the tacit tradition of the school is determinant. We worked always at the same place in the mountains, so the enchantment of the place can override some of our mistakes. The two leaders of the retreats were always the same persons, so our personalities could overcome some defects of the theory. And finally, a last issue with our experiences at Kurtabérc is that its effectiveness cannot be measured. Participants claim that they had life-changing experience at Kurtabérc. And some of the students preserve for long years the bracelet or feather fluff they received at the retreat. But these feedbacks are hardly measurable in any scientific or scholarly way.

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Hundreds of students were touched by God during the retreats of Kurtabérc. We prepared what we could in order to help students and God to meet. And they did meet. We learnt much about adolescents and their developmental needs. Since I would like to pass along our experiences, I offer seven generic principles on which to build a retreat.

Chapter 3: Seven Principles

Introduction

James W. Fowler's updated Faith Development Theory teaches us much about the structure of faith of adolescents. It explains how youngsters receive teachings and education from adults and from their peer group about God. It speaks about the origin of their morality and social perspective taking. It describes their logical developmental stage and their inability to deal with complex ambiguities. And it also describes the role of symbols in the life of adolescents. But to determine one's developmental stage is difficult, as we saw, and the practical consequences of the theory need detailed discussion.

In this main chapter of my work I offer a bridge between the theory of Fowler and the incarnated practices of the retreats at Kurtabérc. I offer seven principles derived from my reflection on Fowler's theory as a data sheet or specification of adolescence. The aim of this chapter is not to offer step-by-step instructions to adolescents but to offer principles which can be applied by the reader in various contexts.

Preliminary notes

To define the principles, I used mostly the *Manual for Faith Development (Manual)*,¹²⁸ but I have also consulted practical suggestions of other scholars. For example, I critically reviewed Gary L. Chamberlain's suggestions for practical application in a high school context.¹²⁹ I also analyzed the possibilities offered by Charles M. Shelton in a Catholic context of

¹²⁸ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*.

¹²⁹ Chamberlain, "Faith Development and Campus Ministry."

adolescence.¹³⁰ Finally, I defined the seven principles in parallel with the seven aspects of faith development research defined in the *Manual*: form of logic, form of social perspective taking, form of moral judgment, bounds of social awareness, locus of authority, form of world coherence, and symbolic function.

This parallel is deliberate but not strict. I use the seven aspects as a brace to cover the different aspects of the structure of faith as widely as possible. I do not claim that I cover the full sample space. And because of the nature of the seven aspects, my seven principles are not in order of importance and are probably not equal in weight. To verify claims such as equality or order of importance, there is a need for further discussion and research.

The seven principles I offer cannot be separated entirely from each other. They put light on the somewhat different sides of the same structure of faith. They correlate and converge. This convergence is detectable at all the stages of faith, and it is evident above all when we analyze Stage 3, the Synthetic-Conventional faith.

One of the central and returning topics of this Stage 3 is the role of the peer group, the role of the community. I analyze the seven principles and offer examples from the perspective of community. There are several reasons to do this. First of all, during an obligatory high school class retreat, we work with entire classes and we hardly have enough time and opportunity to work with the students individually.¹³¹ Second, the center of the development toward Stage 3 is the opening up and struggle for community of the peer group. Finally I believe with Fowler that “there is no selfhood apart from community; no faith apart from community; no destiny and no vocation apart from community.”¹³²

¹³⁰ Charles M. Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality: Pastoral Ministry for High School and College Youth* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983).

¹³¹ This does not mean that personal relations are impossible and are not important. It means only that our focus and locus of main work remain always the group as it is.

¹³² Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 113, 58.

I have already mentioned different theories on which that this thesis is built. Piaget's cognitive development, Kohlberg's moral development, Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages, Kegan's subject-object theory, Robert Selman's social perspective taking, and Mezirow's transformative learnings differ indisputably from Fowler's theory. But the connection between these theories is not only evident but also explicitly recognized by Fowler in most cases.¹³³ In the description of the proposed seven principles, I use the language of these theories simultaneously. I do not want to neglect the differences,¹³⁴ but all these theories underline the validity of the practical use of the seven principles.

I also deviate a bit from Fowler's language by using adjectives for stages such as early, strong and late. These expressions are not used by Fowler himself. But in the writings of Fowler he admits that the stages are not steps with harsh edges, but develop more like an unbroken curve with name tags at special points. The *Manual* also suggests that subjects never have clear stages, but they receive fractions of points as well. So one spends much more time in between stages than resting in a clear stage. This continuous development gives reason for the usage of early, strong, and late stages. And since students of ages 14-16 are around Stage 2 and Stage 3, the distinction between an early Stage 3 and a strong Stage 3 is useful and necessary.

Seven principles

The seven principles I offer are as follows: first, I argue that one's spiritual journey should begin with immediate experience and only after that should we reflect. Second, we need to take into consideration that adolescents are already able to see themselves from a companion's point of view, but this experience is still fantasy-based and generalized. Third, since adolescents

¹³³ See for example the fictional conversation among Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg: Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, Part II.

¹³⁴ See *ibid.*, Ch. 10 for details.

make harsh difference between those like them and the stereotyped others, I suggest we ask help from others like them, namely from older students of the same school. Fourth, even though the “tyranny of the they”¹³⁵ is insuperable at Stage 3, we need to help students to be free from the pressure of the group as much as possible to allow them to grow. Fifth, adolescents cannot be forced to follow external authorities, but they follow the peer group and a few trusted others. So I speak about how to become a trusted other to be able to lead them. Sixth, youth at Stage 3 cannot reflect on the paradoxes of faith; nor can they cope with these paradoxes yet. Therefore in an overnight retreat we need to offer a holding environment for growth by temporarily eliminating these ambiguities as much as possible. And seventh, our target group is open to feel and live symbols even though they often put up resistance to detailed explanations.

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These seven principles are in harmony with adolescents’ developmental stages, or more precisely, with the developmental structure of the youngsters at ages 14 to 16. Building up a retreat based on these principles can offer a possibility to youth to be able to comprehend our message about God, but it does not promise such a success. The seven principles are necessary but not sufficient.

1. From immediate experience to reflection

One of the goals of the retreats of Kurtabérc was to prove to the students that they are loved. In one experience we explained to them that their conflicts with their parents are not because their parents do not love them. We explained that different people understand and give love in different ways such as words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time,

¹³⁵ Fowler borrows this expression from Sharon Parks as Fowler recognizes it at: *Ibid.*, 135.. But in his recent writings he uses this expression without further mention of Parks. See Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 62.

or physical touch, as Gary Chapman outlines in his *Five Love Languages of Teenagers*.¹³⁶ But after the explanation adolescents still had a vacant look. Then we asked them to look for examples when two different people have difficulty because of the difference in their love languages. But their looks remained vacant. Then we asked the help of our older students, and they presented short sketches with various situations. And finally some understanding was glimmering in the eyes of our students. With strong efforts they begin to understand something about love languages. So, this was not the most successful exercise. But why?

The main characteristic of adolescents going toward Stage 3 is the new capacity of formal-operational thinking, as we saw in Chapter 1. They have already been able to put classification and inductive reasoning in to operation.¹³⁷ And now their thinking “begins to construct all sorts of ideal possibilities and hypothetical considerations. [...] Formal operational thinking makes possible the generation and use of abstract concepts and ideals. It makes it possible to think in terms of system.”¹³⁸ This new ability suggests that youngsters should be able to understand the concept of love languages in our exercise. But this new ability is still in an early stage. They experiment with deductive thinking but not in a systematic way.¹³⁹ This explains their struggle with the love languages and it explains how they began to understand the concept when older students offered live examples. Adolescents can understand hypothetical considerations, but they cannot reproduce new ones. Students can deal with immediate experiences and thereafter, they can reflect on them.

So the basic component of our program always contains an immediate experience followed by a kind of reflection on it, even if that reflection is not necessarily verbally expressed.

¹³⁶ Gary D. Chapman, *Five Love Languages of Teenagers: The Secret to Loving Teens Effectively*. (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2012).

¹³⁷ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135.

¹³⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 58.

¹³⁹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 32.

In our best practice we build our system based on blocks lasting three hours each. The core of each block is an immediate experience. We presume a late Stage 2 and an early Stage 3. These students understand concrete cause and effect, but they do not deal easily with systems, and they definitely cannot yet reflect on systems.¹⁴⁰ An immediate exercise offers a clear cause-effect experience, it does not reflect on system, and it demands only a little abstraction. The exercise should be as concrete as possible to help all the students, even those who have not left Stage 2 yet. (And even though there are students who are already exploring formal-operational thinking, they find it easier to internalize these immediate experiences.)

This exercise can be a well-known practice of trust in pairs. Or it can be the surprise when they receive a feather fluff while they are blindfolded. Or it can be an expression of their relation with the ultimate One through clay, color or toting a heavy log. The most important thing to offer is one, clear, and simple experience, and only after that can we reflect on it. First, they have an experience that points to the presence of God and then they can be drawn to recognize it as such. This method is also backed by the fact that adolescents focus on personal relations as we see in the next principle.

At the end of each block, the reflection usually comes in the form of small-group discussions. The main aim of the group is to help personal reflections. That means there is no need for strict consensus in the topics. In this sense, these group-meetings are more like (faith-)sharing-groups and conversations. The leader of the group makes sure that everybody has time to speak, and the leader also offers helping questions, when the discussion dies down. These questions focus on the concrete effects that the exercises had on the students.

¹⁴⁰ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 60.

Then we try to help them to go toward a deeper reflection about their interiority, their feelings, their relational experience. The non-polar questions (questions beginning with interrogative words such as when, which, who, etc.) are always preferred, since students cannot answer those with one word in order to find a way out of the discussion. Adolescents tend to answer in short sentences, especially when they do not feel themselves fully accepted. They are frequently ready to answer in three words such as “I liked it,” “It was interesting,” or “I felt nothing.” In these cases the leader of the discussion should encourage a longer reflection asking the students to describe that in more details. Or the leader can ask further questions about how this experience was different from other experiences of the day, or ask a student to compare his or her feelings about the experience with his or her feelings about other experiences.

Charles Shelton — in his book about pastoral ministry in high school¹⁴¹ — offers further questions and strategies with explanations. Regarding reflections on immediate experiences, he offers questions such as “What does this say about you?” or “Why do you think the group does it that way?” or “What does being a Christian have to do with your thinking about all these issues?”¹⁴² These questions can be useful but with strong limitations. Since Shelton assumes that adolescents have already arrived at a strong Stage 3,¹⁴³ the fact is, only a few adolescents are arriving at Stage 3. Students who are still far from Stage 3 will struggle with the questions offered by Shelton. Questions reflecting on their belief systems and on anything beyond their experience of the moment are strongly discouraged since those questions will not be adequate before Stage 4.

Adolescents frequently give “shallow” answers to these reflective questions. That can be because of the inadequacy of the questions. It can also be caused by the overwhelming presence

¹⁴¹ Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 75–78.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

of strong introverts who prefer to reflect inside their heads. But awkward silence can happen during a sharing even with the most adequate guide to reflection. One possible solution is the preparation for the event, because even the best and easiest exercise can be unsuccessful if the group is not open and prepared for that. (For the role of group pressure see the fourth principle.) For this reason, it can be useful to begin each block with games and music. These double-faced games help the students to calm down, to concentrate, so as to be emotionally ready for the next hours. But these games also have another goal since the topic of the games is somehow connected to the main topic of the block. Then we can listen together to a selection of popular music that is somehow related to the topic. This second introduction tries to help the students to have an open attitude. And it also counterbalances our over-verbalized culture. As a third aim, it helps to introduce the topic in a way that is understandable at Stages 2 to 3.

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Working in youth ministry we need to take into consideration that adolescents have barely gained the capacity of formal-operational thinking. They are learning to recognize systems, but they cannot reproduce one. They can carry out experiments but only with limited numbers of variables. Adolescents have genius but limited capacities, so using immediate and close experiences is always a better approach toward helping them to grow in faith. Reflection is an important way to deepen an experience. But we should never forget that adolescents around Stage 3 need more personal relational experience than the intellectual reflections of Stage 4. So the best practice begins with warming up games, continues with immediate relational experience, and finishes with self-expressions about their own experience.

2. “I see the me *I think you see*”

The life of adolescents is full of stress. They see the limits of their formerly-perfect parents and teachers. So they struggle for freedom from traditional authorities. They struggle for the acceptance of their peers as well. They even open their deep-self if they feel that necessary to be able to be part of a group. Meanwhile they are also terrified that those others will judge them when they see that deep-self. Adolescents strive for personal relationships, and they are terrified of those relationships at the same time. So how can one help them?

With their new ability for analyzing hypothetical considerations, adolescents begin to deal with the perspectives of the others. Students at Stage 2 already realize that others have a different point of view, but they can realize only external differences. They do not construct the interiority — “the feelings, attitudes, and internal guiding processes” — of others, self, and God.¹⁴⁴ And they think that others have the same needs and desires as themselves. Yet adolescents at Stage 3 reveal a deeper experience of the others’ interiority. They open up for a mutual perspective taking.¹⁴⁵ They begin to recognize and to try to understand the interiority of others, the feelings and emotions of others. They can answer the question “How do you think she feels about that?”¹⁴⁶ But this ability develops slowly so — in an early Stage 3 — adolescents’ mutual perspective taking is still limited, stereotypical,¹⁴⁷ and fantasy-based. They imagine only how that other feels about something. And they are not aware about that, so they believe their image of the interiority of other is the reality.

This misunderstanding of the other’s feeling is a natural part of adolescents’ development. To grow in healthy humanity or in their relationship with God, they need to

¹⁴⁴ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 60.

¹⁴⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153.

¹⁴⁶ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 37.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

practice their new ability of third-person perspective taking. This capacity can be exercised in the fields of self-self, self-other, and self-God relationships.

Self-Reflection

Adolescents are committed to discover what others are thinking about them (and they treat the findings as truth). So to describe themselves as they think their mates see them is easier for them than a verbalized self-reflection. Because adolescents are making progress in perspective taking in the context of significant others, writing letters can be a success.

We ask adolescents to write a letter to God about their own feelings, presence, relations, or anything else. And if they do not want to write to God (because they do not believe, or they are so angry with her now, etc.) they can write to the blessed Virgin Mary,¹⁴⁸ to a friend, or to anybody who is significant for them. They can write and/or draw anything. We promise that nobody ever reads their letters. The only thing we ask is that they express themselves to that person. They can stand, sit, or lay down to dissolve the classroom-like pressure. And we ask them to scatter in the meadow so they can work freely alone. For the first ten minutes we switch on soft background music to help them become immersed in the writing; then we switch off the music to make them get into the deepness of silence and a kind of personal solitude.¹⁴⁹

They receive an envelope to write “the address” on it. But we never send these letters to the addressee because those letters speak more about the adolescents and their relations than about the addressee. When they address the letter to a third person, they *imagine* the interiority of that person. For example, if a youngster focuses on shame and sins when writing a letter to God, it shows that the youngster is focused on the dualism of good and bad, and imagines God as a

¹⁴⁸ Even though the special importance of Mary, mother of Christ, is a very Catholic notion, the idea of writing a letter to someone who is like a perfect mother is adaptable in many contexts.

¹⁴⁹ About the role of solitude and adolescents in the Catholic context, see Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 122–125.

policeman. But that letter does not speak about the absolute realness of God. So this exercise helps adolescents to express their newly-explored interiority without the not-yet-possible formal reflection on it.

After this exercise there is a sharing in small groups, as we described at the previous principle *from immediate experience to reflection*. Group leaders offer questions such as what they discovered about themselves in the writing, what they discovered about the addressee, whether they had enough content to write. It is natural to ask what it felt like to write the letter, but this question usually needs other support since adolescents tend to say only “it was fine.” So with this writing and the reflection on it they can get closer to their real self. And before the evening Mass they place all those letters before the altar. This act becomes a symbolic offering that says to God that God sees what we are, and we thank you that it is fine to be like this.

Verifying the Interiority of Others

There are also games to help them to grow in recognizing the interiority of others. We use games with minimum double meanings. Those games can help the group to calm down, or to release the pressure, but there can be hidden teachings as well.

For example, there is a game called “the gate of emotions.” All the students but three of them create a circle hand in hand. Those three need to leave until we decide which pairs in the circle will represent the three gates for the three students. The three can return and their task is to find out where their gates are. Nobody can say anything and the only means of communication is the eyes. Those who do not become part of a gate need to look into the eyes of the three with refusal and anger. Those who are part of a gate needs to look into the eyes of the three with invitation and love. The circle is silent and still. Only the eyes speak. And the three inside the

circle go around looking into the eyes of their classmates one by one. The task is not easy for adolescents but usually they succeed within three attempts. This is only a short game and not a life-changing experience. But through these kinds of games they learn to concentrate and more, they practice to recognize the emotions of others. They practice seeing the other's emotional expression as it is and not only as they think it is. We cannot eliminate their need to see themselves in the light of others, but we can help them to have a more realistic image of how others see them.

Seeing Themselves with the Eyes of God

In our high school, every student has an image of the ultimate One since our school and our cultural-context is based on Christianity. It does not mean that all of them consider themselves as believers or even that these images of God are explicit.

As Stage 2 is characterized by reciprocity of mutual exterior needs, students' images of God are generally "constructed on the model of consistent, caring, but just ruler or parent"¹⁵⁰ such as a policeman or a strict father.¹⁵¹ Toward Stage 3 this image slowly is being dismantled and replaced by a more personal relation, if any. To help adolescents toward a more adequate and realistic image of God we need to stress the possibility of a personal relationship with God, instead of stressing God's anger and rules. Since adolescents easily identify with their relationships, they can identify themselves with their relationship with God. So there is a strong link between self-esteem and the image of God. The more we communicate the unconditional acceptance of God, the more their self-esteem can be healthy. Adolescents' image of God cannot be modified through teaching since they are not capable of reflecting on their belief system, as

¹⁵⁰ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 61.

¹⁵¹ The dominant masculinity of the image of the ultimate one probably comes from the historical-cultural context.

they will be able to if they reach Stage 4.¹⁵² We need to help adolescents to have a tangible experience of a confirmative personal relation with God. Any prayer, any song, any activity needs to reflect the loving personal presence of God instead of the rules of an external judge. The rules and law of a certain religious community remain important but cannot be communicated as a list of commands. The rules should be based upon a personal relation for adolescents to accept them.

There are two difficulties remaining with this approach. First, we need to reflect on whether the relation with the peer group or the relation with ultimate existence is the stronger one. Second, even though students have an image of God because of our cultural context, every class has a student who explicitly declares that there is absolutely no God.

Image of God in the Community. The answer to the first question is that the pressure of the immediate peer group is almost always stronger than the growing personal relationship with an ultimate One. Sometimes we see an exception when for example a girl in the class publicly declares her special relationship with God instead of with the group's common belief. But that declaration does not mean inevitably that she has overcome the peer pressure. It is possible that she identifies herself with another peer group, like a parish community, instead of identifying herself with the class. So her motivation and structure of faith remains the same: her beliefs are in tune with the peer group that is important for her. The consequence of this dynamic is that we can never separate working on the group's common beliefs and the group members' personal relationship with God.

Those Who Do Not Believe Anymore. The presence of explicit non-believers is also a challenge. We find in every class some students who say that God does not exist at all, even

¹⁵² Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 153.

though they also come with a Christian background from their home. From the first glance they can be seen as youth who are on the road toward Stage 4, analyzing, criticizing, and demythologizing their own faith.¹⁵³ But this is usually not the case. In all of these cases we have found that they have suffered through a quite harsh negative experience.¹⁵⁴ This experience can be stronger than the growing peer pressure of common believers. But even though we can see this experience as a disorienting dilemma, in the lack of a strong-enough holding environment — which “involves the legitimation of conflict and disagreement and the exploration of skills to articulate those disagreements as well as to resolve them”¹⁵⁵ — this is not the first step of transformative learning.¹⁵⁶ The content of faith of these students can change, but the structure of their faith usually does not develop faster, and it is possible that the structure of their faith gets stuck at Stage 2 for years.

Leaders of youth ministry need to deal very wisely with these situations and students. First of all they need to build an environment where they can freely express their non-belief. The process of their long healing cannot begin without allowing them to recognize their actual state of faith. Their strong statements usually are not reconcilable with the common faith of the group. When there are too many of these struggling students in a group, or when they are the influential ones in the group, they can confuse the whole group, or they can even change the common belief of the peer group. (We need to remember that they do not do this as a conscious rebellion against the leaders or the system.) Another wrong conclusion comes when the group cannot support this student with his or her new behavior and the group expels the student with harsh judgemental generalizations which is a common characteristic of their age. When open discussion about

¹⁵³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁵⁴ For example, one day one of our students arrived home, and he found his mother had been shot to death by his own father.

¹⁵⁵ Chamberlain, “Faith Development and Campus Ministry,” 321.

¹⁵⁶ Mezirow, “A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education.”

God's existence is inevitable, it is better to speak about who God is, instead of mere intellectual arguments. Shelton describes this approach in his 10th suggestion about adolescents' spiritual growth.¹⁵⁷

We developed our own approach to deal with these students and situations. We always allow them to express verbally that they do not believe at all. But we never begin a conversation to persuade them or to form an opinion of them. We listen to them, we say thanks, and we go on. So doing provides a clear and strong sign for both the student and the whole group. We communicate that the student has his or her right to be in our group, there is nothing wrong with him/her. We declare this statement from an authoritarian point, specially for those at Stage 2 who are quicker in judgment. But we do not over-speak it, so it becomes also a tacit sign that his/her opinion is not that of the whole group. It is a difficult balance but these are the students who need the most help.

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Children approaching Stage 3 are exploring their new ability to see the world from the other's point of view. And they slowly learn to recognize the interiority of their mates as they are looking for their own identity. They begin to see themselves as they think others see them. And they identify themselves with this image and with the relation, even though they very slowly recognize that the image others have about them is not the same as the image they think that others have about them. Peer pressure becomes dominant and that can lead them toward a personal loving God, and toward self-destruction and depression as well. Peer pressure cannot be avoided in this age-group but we can take it into consideration and can use it, and — at the same time — we can help them to slowly become free.

¹⁵⁷ Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 163–165.

3. With the help of those like them

Younger students (Stage 2) follow rules. They go to Mass. They do not cheat. They pray. On the one hand it is easier to deal with them than with adolescents. On the other hand they do well only for reciprocity, for a win-win situation¹⁵⁸ and not for inner motivations. They do not cheat, so that they would not be punished. They pray and go to Mass, so God will be benevolent with them. Educators and teachers of religion are trying to teach them the importance of inner values. Then, with adolescence, youths finally recognize the importance of interpersonal values and relations.¹⁵⁹ So they begin to internalize values, but adults lose their power to define what the values are and what are not values. There are always students in the retreat who look as though they do not listen and understand us. In the worst scenario we have trouble with the group as a whole. They do not collaborate, they become sulky, and the more we force our plan the more they resist. So how can we offer our values to these students?

There are various problems behind these situations. It is possible that the students have not reached Stage 3 yet. Or they are around Stage 3, but their peer group, whence they bring their values, is not the class we are working on. Or sometimes our values, the ones we try to transmit, are in contrast to the values of the class as a peer group. Let me explain the problems and offer some solutions.

Personal Resistance

The Negotiators. Most of the exercises demand paying attention to each other, need ability to concentrate, and sometimes ask for total silence. We ask students to accept these needs so that we can work all together for the retreat, for the class. But some students are at early Stage

¹⁵⁸ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 42.

¹⁵⁹ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 61.

2, so they have still not opened up to the community. Their focus is on their immediate mates and teachers and they think only about reciprocity. They think: “I will be silent only if you offer me something,” even though they cannot always express it so clearly. We can try to argue, that the common good of the group is the need for silence, but they do not really care. We can accuse them of selfishness, but their form of moral judgment is not yet developed enough to understand.

The best way to deal with students at Stage 2 is to recognize their stage: their morality is based on personal reciprocity with our authority, so we can try “to resolve conflicting interests by exchanging favors or services, or by making sure that everyone gets the same amount.”¹⁶⁰ If we have a good relationship with them, we can ask them to be silent for the sake of our relation: “Please be silent now, because it would make me happy. (And it will easier for you when I’m happy.)” If our relationship is not so established yet, or the student is really at an early Stage 2, we can offer a real deal: “If you keep quiet, then you (and all the group) will have more time to play soccer.” (Be aware to offer something that is close enough in time.) This negotiation can be seen as unworthy. But remember, we can help them grow only by taking into consideration their place of development. Demanding recognition of longterm values of the community can be impossible for some students at early Stage 2.

Struggling Partisans. But sometimes the personal resistance of a student is not based on his or her early developmental stage. Sometimes there is a student who resists participating in our exercises. This student makes a stand not only against us, as authority, but also against the whole group. This case is relatively rare because the pressure of the group is so strong that only those can resist who are already leaving Stage 3, or whose values are in a very strong conflict with ours and whose peer group is not the class we are working with. So this kind of resistance

¹⁶⁰ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 41.

can be a sign of an achieved personal freedom toward Stage 4. If such is the case, we should be delighted with that. But this case is almost impossible. Much more common is that a single student's resistance is a sign of Stage 2, or a sign of a too heavy, disorienting dilemma. That means they have experienced such a shock or disrupting situation that questions their very system of beliefs and processes of meaning-making.¹⁶¹ Theoretically that can be a push for further development, but more frequently it causes pause in personality development for long years.

Empowering a Minority

Usually peer pressure forces the assimilation of those who are the odd ones out. The absorbing dynamics of the peer group at Stage 3 can be handy as an obstacle for our retreats, because adolescents mostly unconsciously follow the law and values of the peer group. An adult cannot be a model for the group when he or she firmly condemns the group's main attitudes. But single group members follow the current of the group. The group's honored interpersonal values are laid down by the dominant members of the peer group. These people become dominant because they hold most of these values. This fact can be seen as a vicious circle, especially in the cases when the group backs "values," such as drinking of alcohol without limit, taking drugs, or humiliating others during initiations.

Adolescents seem to choose the group but the group has chosen them. As Fowler explains, "despite their genuine feelings of having made choices and commitments, a truer reading is that their values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them."¹⁶² But the peer group is not always a well-defined group of youth. Even

¹⁶¹ It can be a sudden death of a parent, or eye-witnessing heavy violence or murder, or sexual abuse, etc.

¹⁶² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 154.

more, students can be members of different peer groups like scouts, choir, gang, football team, class, altar-boys, etc. And in our media-governed, western context, media itself can become a kind of super peer group.¹⁶³

So in the difficult situation of a behaviorally challenged peer group, a leader can begin to work with a segment of students who can be part of another, healthier group. Empowering this healthier minority in the main peer group can slowly heal that whole community. A teacher should not favor unduly, but small extra care can help. One should not put a student on a pedestal, but an open confirmation helps the self-esteem of the minority and it can be a clear sign to the others about acceptable values.

Older Helpers

Another possible solution is to “import” healthy and dominant members to the peer group. For all of our retreats we invite older students to help us. There is a lot of work around a retreat, so they can be quite useful. They have simple tasks during preparation such as photocopying papers, buying new pencils, etc. They also have practical responsibilities during the retreats such as preparing the room for Mass, distributing the lyrics, etc.

But these older students have three other important roles as well. They have to lead sharing-groups, and they have to become like the group members. Most of all they become examples and models. Chamberlin also suggests the help of older students because “younger students could benefit from hearing the faith stories of the older students who are themselves models.”¹⁶⁴ These older students are only two or three years older than the students on retreat, and they are in good standing. They also come from the same school, and they know each other

¹⁶³ William C Spohn, “Conscience and Moral Development,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 128.

¹⁶⁴ Chamberlain, “Faith Development and Campus Ministry,” 316.

since the school has only about six hundred students. These older students can somehow become part of the class, part of the peer group. So we have five or six peer group members with positive values and that can shift the entire group to a direction where we can help them to grow. When the class as a group is not in the mood to be open to our proposed exercises, these students can help us with their commitment to open up the group. They become models themselves, preserving the freedom of the students.¹⁶⁵ Since adolescents tend to follow the (tacit) values of the peer group instead of the (pronounced) values of the leaders, the help of these older students is essential.

But there are strong difficulties and limitations with the help of others like them. First, we can only shift the mood of the class but we cannot reverse their attitudes. Second, we need to choose and prepare the older students properly.

The teachers of religion can help to choose these privileged older students to come with us to the retreat. These students need to be relatively strong in faith, but they need other qualities too. They need to have a skill (or have the seed of a skill) for leadership, speaking honestly, being trusted, and being acknowledged by the current class. Some students cannot be chosen, even though they are very committed to Christianity, because they are disdained by the others based on their strange piety. There are other very good students with strong leadership skills and deep Christian background, but some of them may struggle with their faith in those specific months of the retreat. So they cannot be chosen for the honor of being helper at our retreats.

After inviting these older students, they need to receive special education and preparation before and during the event. We organize two sessions before the retreat. One is to learn about leading sharing-groups, and one is to learn the specific details of the retreat. Then, during the

¹⁶⁵ An adult's personal faith-sharing can easily become normative for adolescents, especially in late Stage 2.

retreat, we have several short sessions to check out the difficulties and feedbacks, and to prepare for the next programs. This formation demands strong commitment both from the students and from us. Students sacrifice their free afternoons and a full weekend for the retreat even when there are busy times at the school. It is a noble gesture to offer a compensation like asking their teachers for an exemption from an oral exam. But since these students are much closer to Stage 3, their main motivation is not reciprocal one-to-one benefit, but more the common good of their community. So they value more a big sharing after the retreat where the leaders of the retreat express their gratitude with signs and symbols, and the students feel they are being listened to about their struggles and positive experiences.

But there is an important condition here. Even though our helper students' average developmental stage is higher than that of the class, they are still on the long road toward Stage 3. They have strong needs and there are important inner dynamics to take into consideration as a leader. First of all they need to feel part of a group, a community. So the educational sessions with them should contain community-building elements, such as sharing, games, or chatting about school life. Still more, they need enormous amounts of clear confirmation. To lead a sharing-group is a complex balancing task and these students are only beginners. Their expectations about these group-sessions are influenced by stereotyped fantasy, but the reality is much tougher. And finally, when something does not go as well as they expected, they almost always blame themselves. So as leaders of the retreat we need also to help these older students to grow. We assure them again and again that they cannot make big mistakes, and all the responsibility is ours. So we try to build a safe environment in which they can explore the skills we know they have. But it is not enough to state these positive feedbacks out loud; somehow they need to feel that we accept them and that they are good just as they are.

Working with older students is not easy. But it has a lot of benefits in the long term. It is useful to the growth of the retreatants, of the older students, and even of the leaders.

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Adolescents open up to their peer group and they unconsciously follow the law and values of their peer group. As an external authority we do not have great influence on the direction of the group. But with the help of older students we can slowly shift some values of the group. We cannot harshly manipulate the peer group, but the open presence of model older students can help to open up the whole group to continue the road toward a higher stage together. Even though this practice can be seen as a kind of manipulation, both the retreatants and the older helper students are going toward a deeper freedom, even though they still cannot reach that at Stage 3.

4. Help them to be free

Working with youngsters, we frequently ask for their own opinions. And even though they seem usually pretty confident that they offer their own thoughts that is not usually the case. Younger students accommodate their answers to what they think is expected by the leader. And older students filter their own answers to match the tacit demand of their peer group. In both cases they are not really aware of these muzzling pressures. So how can we help adolescents find and accept their real selves?

All of us have experience of adolescents' struggle to separate from their parents and to become more free with their peer group. This dynamic begins at Stage 2 and becomes significant throughout Stage 3. But there is another side of this dynamic. As adolescents become more and more detached from their parents, they become more and more attached to their peer group. As

Fowler says: “In [Stage 3] one is -embedded- in her/his faith outlook, and one’s identity is derived from membership in a circle of face-to-face relations.”¹⁶⁶ Hence the group’s norms are appropriated uncritically by adolescents.¹⁶⁷ Their identity is based on being accepted by the peer group, so they follow all the rules. But they have no ability to reflect on these systems and their image of others and the group is highly constructed and imagined. In other words, adolescents follow the tacit, undefined rules of their peer group.

Empowering Individuals. The “Tyranny of the They”¹⁶⁸ is so strong toward Stage 3 that it is impossible to break it, but we can soften it. During one of our retreats we offered various exercises based on the students’ personal feelings about their relation with God. They had the freedom of choice but we had to realize that they were choosing exercises mainly based on what the majority of their friends chose. So the next time we asked them to write down their choice on a slip of paper. Then we divided them into groups based on their written preferences. That demanded more time and organizational skills but it was a success: the students had deeper experiences since they were more likely to choose what their heart needed.

This force of conformity appears in most of the exercises. For example it shows up in the exercise of recalling an event of being loved. When we intend to help adolescents to reflect on their relationship with God, first we offer an exercise to reflect on personal relations they already have. We ask them to look for moments when they felt they were loved by their parents, or a close friend, or a classmate. So we remain within the bounds of their social awareness. And we ask them to look for concrete moments, not for general experiences about relations. The relation in focus should be about positive emotions, preferably about being loved. This focus is not

¹⁶⁶ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 60.

¹⁶⁷ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 62.

derived from the structure of their faith but it is leading us to the core of the content of our faith, to the unconditional love of God.

Some of our students are much closer to Stage 2 than to Stage 3. These students try to find events that they think the leader of the exercise would like to hear. To overcome this obstacle, to help them to be free, to find their own answer, we have two possibilities. First, we can describe the exercise in a generic way so that they cannot imagine the “right” answer. But the drawback of this method is that they cannot find any positive relations because the description of the exercise is not concrete and immediate enough. The other possibility we have is to describe the exercise with a lot of different examples, so they have an image about the exercise but without the pressure of our point of view. This method demands five or more examples to help them feel free. For all of our students, it is important that we promise that they do not need to show their examples to anybody. That promise helps to ease the pressure of guessing what the leader wants to hear (for students at Stage 2) or what the classmates want to hear (for students at Stage 3). We also ask them to find three examples of relationships, so they do not need to focus on finding the “right” one. (This also helps us to make visible if somebody does not care at all about the exercise.) Later on we ask them to strike out two out of the three examples since we have time to deal with one only.

When everybody has a real example of a positive relation within the bounds of their social awareness, we continue the exercise recalling that particular event with our imagination. (The development of imagination as the ability of story-telling and differentiating between reality and fantasy is also important.) We are recalling the event using all five of our senses and we try to recall the feelings as well.

This exercise is a hallway to enter the recalling of our relationship with God. In principle, this exercise is adequate for the stages of our students. But it is not the most effective exercise since we do not begin with an immediate experience but an experience mediated by the memory of a personal history. It would be more adequate if we could base the exercise on a current loving experience, but it is not sure that all the members of the class can find a positive relation in the class itself.

Another exercise where there is a big need to set students free is the sharing at the end of the retreats. We are sitting in one big circle and each of us shares an important moment he or she has experienced. In this exercise they have a big — even though tacit — temptation to mention the event they think that is acceptable to share. So, once again, we ask them to write down or, even more, to draw that experience on a piece of paper. (In our over-verbalized culture it is always a good idea to express ourselves in any non-verbal way. Self-expression through symbols is especially valuable.¹⁶⁹) Even though they can peek at the answer of their neighbor, it is a better way because when we begin to share they have no real chance to change the answer they have chosen.

Using Peer Pressure. Adolescents are not able to free themselves from the peer pressure. But this is not merely an obstacle. There are situations when we can use that for our own intentions. For example, when we share our feelings in a big circle we can benefit from peer pressure. We always work with older students from the school. They can be a bridge between us, the adult leaders, and the students. They are an important help for us, (even though we have to take into consideration that these students are also around Stage 3 only). So our older students begin the sharing. Then the depth of their sharing becomes a point of reference for the others. So

¹⁶⁹ “Symbols provide the adolescent with a chance for self-expression that moves beyond the intellectual sphere.” Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 157.

this “manipulation” helps the other students (specially the younger boys) to go deeper and share something real.

The aid of the older students is helpful in other situations as well. During a special Mass each student receives a personal blessing but this special event makes the Mass quite long. Adolescents are not always good at waiting silently for half an hour in a dark room illuminated only by candles. When some boys begin murmuring, this disease spreads out fast. So before the Mass, we ask our older students to spread out among the younger students. Their active silence helps their neighbors to be silent and so we cover almost the entire room with silence. This small thoughtfulness helps all of us to have a deeper experience.

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The most significant demand of adolescents is the tacit and somewhat generalized demand of the peer group. Youth toward Stage 3 open up for their peers but they are more comfortable reflecting on relations with their family and friends. Peer pressure cannot be broken for many years but it can be softened or re-wired. Adolescents need a peer group that transmits the sense of self-worthiness instead of the more common judgments and bullying. We need to help them to build a stronger self-esteem based on God’s unconditional and eternal love. But patience is essential because it will be a very long process throughout all their young adulthood.

5. Be one of the few trusted others

It is a common experience that adolescents do not follow adults any more. They seem to rebel against authority. They claim to have their own opinions and thoughts, even though they usually follow the flow of their group. As a response some teachers try to exercise their power more, but that leads only to more conflicts and alienation. Other teachers give up and begin to

teach but they do not educate any more. Is there any way that an adult can be an example and leader for adolescents? What do youngsters think about authority and how do they choose — if they choose — a person to follow?

Traditional Authority

A retreat needs teachers with their authority. Students at Stage 2 recognize the authority of those who are placed in roles over them with the necessary power, with “the conventional symbols of authority.”¹⁷⁰ They know their needs and they are capable of negotiating with authority.¹⁷¹ Despite this negotiation, it is relatively easy to work with them. As a leader of the retreat, appointed by the school, one can give orders and students comply (after some negotiation in the name of reciprocity). The main challenge in helping these students is to be patient with them, because they are far from personal internal authority. These students can learn and they also can be formed by the teacher but their motivations are simple. At Stage 2 they are ready for “simple fairness and moral reciprocity,”¹⁷² but they are not capable of interior motivation.

Students around Stage 3 follow the rules of the peer group, but when the law of the peer group demands something terribly wrong (for example bullying) the situation needs a powerful external authority. This authority will not affect immediately the students’ inner life, but in seriously dangerous situations (bullying, humiliation, etc.) it can stop the violence. The retreat is part of the school program, so the teachers have the legal potential for issuing penalties in accordance with the regulations of the school.

¹⁷⁰ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 48.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 60.

Becoming a Trusted Other

Because of the primary dynamics of people at Stage 3, adolescents have a tendency “to select authorities on the basis of feelings, appearances, or tacit images.”¹⁷³ They follow those who are followed and recognized by the peer group (or the significant people in the group),¹⁷⁴ and who share interpersonal values¹⁷⁵ (such as trustworthiness, honesty, idealism) and personal charisma,¹⁷⁶ and all of these are validated through external appearance. In other words, they follow those adults who have personal charisma, and who are accepted by the dominant members of their group. But the adult who leads the retreat should not be a teacher (institutionalized authority). Students at this stage struggle with double-roles and they cannot easily deal with a situation when the external forum (the regulating power of a teacher) and the internal forum (unconditional acceptance of a spiritual guide) merges into one role. The next principle, titled as “Be Unambiguous,” explains this in detail.

Personal Charisma. Being responsible only for the program of the weekend (and not for the discipline), one can become influential, if he or she has “interpersonal values” recognized by the group. These are values such as trustworthiness, honesty, attention to the person, listening to and recognizing the students’ truthfulness, consistency (between preaching and living), reciprocal respect, openness of one’s own deeper self.¹⁷⁷

As we saw, adolescents examine the existence of these values based mostly on external signs. For example, when they see the leader sitting next to them and looking into their eyes while he or she is listening to them, then they will recognize the existence of the value of

¹⁷³ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 49.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 61.

¹⁷⁶ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 49.

¹⁷⁷ But an adult should not put his/her problems on the shoulders of adolescents as they will cause them to stumble or fall. But this openness is very important for the youngsters.

listening. Because of this underdeveloped capacity of recognizing the real emotions and inner acts of others, the leader needs to take care to project these values, and not merely to have and live them. It is also important to know that one cannot fake these values for an extended time, even though adolescents examine mostly only the external signs. But at an unconscious level they definitely notice and recognize a fake and they immediately refuse any trust. To reap a student's trust demands availability, acceptance, authenticity, vulnerability.¹⁷⁸ This involves spending a long time together.

One can imagine that this is too difficult a task: a leader needs to be almost perfect to be followed by adolescents. Although this difficulty is real, recognizing openly our own mistakes is a big value for adolescents. As Shelton explains, “[the] adult who is both aware of his or her own personal limitations and comfortable with them will often be an attractive figure to the adolescent,”¹⁷⁹ and this opens up the way “for the adolescent's own personal self-acceptance.”¹⁸⁰ At the same time adolescents need a relatively simple holding environment (explained in the next principle), so their developmental level must always be taken into consideration¹⁸¹ when one adult opens up his or her limitations.

With all these values and one's personal charisma, one still possesses only the possibility of being followed. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition. A leader needs to be accepted by the peer group, which means he or she needs to be accepted by the dominant persons in the group. One needs to build personal relationships with the dominant members of the group to achieve this. It takes time and needs a lot of wise decisions.

¹⁷⁸ Shelton sums up these values: Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 15–20.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Being Recognized by the Influential Members. In the tradition of Kurtabérc we organize a small tea party with the influential members of a class some days before the retreat. We ask the homeroom teacher to choose six students from the class who are the most dominant ones. We do not ask for the most religious or Catholic ones but the for influential students. We also ask the homeroom teacher to choose them so that the whole class can be represented, and so that the six students have various backgrounds through cliques or friendships. We invite them for an hour of conversation during school hours. (They can omit a class, so they are ready to speak with us. It is a good basis for openness.) During this 45-minute session we are sitting around a small table in an informal room drinking tea and discussing the class. We ask them about the needs of the class, about its difficulties and cliques. We ask them how much time the class could pray in silence, and what kind of games the class likes. We show an interest in and an openness to their class. We promise to take into consideration all that they tell us. So they not only open up to speak to us about their difficulties (also their difficulties with their own teachers) but they become enthusiastic over the retreat. And since we win them over to the retreat, we win the whole class over to the retreat. It takes time, but this preparation is absolutely worth that: the class is awaiting the weekend, they are speaking about it, so their hearts are preparing for something.

But this “magic” can cut both ways. They open up and trust that we will make a retreat adequate to that specific class. We do have to be truly interested in the class during the conversation and that is not always easy in the midst of the rush of the school. And we do have to be truly open for changes in the program even though only for small changes. But we do so and it is worth it.

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To be able to facilitate changes in adolescents, one needs to become one of the few trusted others, to become a powerful faith model and example of one who has a sense of identity and who is faithful to his or her own visions.¹⁸² It cannot be possible without interpersonal priorities and without spending a lot of time with them. It takes more work particularly with the dominant students because of the dynamics of a peer group. On the one hand it is a difficult task because one needs to possess a lot of different qualities. But on the other hand it is easy because one needs but to love all the individuals in the class. Students have critical minds and they notice all the external mistakes. But students are also sensitive and they deeply appreciate when somebody takes care of them.

6. Be unambiguous

We all know those young adolescents who ask question after question, who discover all our logical mistakes, who always have a last “but why?” They can be disturbing because we feel they are provoking us. Or they can inspire us as we feel they are very interested. But the truth, we find out later, is that it is neither provocation nor curiosity. Older adolescents can cause more inconvenience since they have sharp-eyes and they see not only our logical errors but our personal inconsistencies as well. We try to say we are sorry, and we try to explain the difference between our ideals and our effort to live up to such standards. But they are not convinced and they return to the same questions. How can we deal with these “provocations”? How can we explain the complexity and paradoxes of the faith to our adolescents?

¹⁸² See Chamberlain, “Faith Development and Campus Ministry,” 316.

“Provocateurs”

Students of Stage 2 explore the newly opened-up world with curiosity. They tend to make “empirical” experiments to control and predict objects and events.¹⁸³ They are good at arguing and challenging any teaching or knowledge, but only based on concrete and superficial perception. As Fowler says, “the meanings are *trapped* in the narrative.”¹⁸⁴ They cannot really understand that their perceptions are strongly determined by point of view and constructed narrative.¹⁸⁵ During a traditional religion class these students are the ones who ask a lot of questions, who demand more details. They can follow a linear explanation of one part of the faith during a class. They offer valuable feedback to us, the teachers, since they are good at finding our logical loopholes. These students’ critical remarks are not mere provocation but are signs of their logic’s appropriate functioning and of their discovery of this function. We need to take care to use clear language, understandable reasoning, and not to use obscure paradoxes. A valid belief system is very complex because it has a strong relation with real life, which is also complex. But for students at Stage 2 the complexity should be simplified (but not reduced). This task can be difficult. These adolescents do not like answers such as “it is mystery, deal with it,” because they concentrate on their new ability of logical-empirical reasoning. But on the other hand they cannot follow St. Thomas Aquinas’ merely logical proof of God’s existence, because their logical ability is still not complex enough. For this reason it is important to be as unambiguous as possible when we teach and live the Good News.

¹⁸³ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 52.

¹⁸⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 137.

¹⁸⁵ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 52.

The Paradoxes of Our Faith

Older adolescents toward Stage 3 live in a system of ideology and worldview but — as Fowler describes — their beliefs and values “typically are tacitly held — the person ‘dwells’ in them and in the meaning world they mediate.”¹⁸⁶ As a consequence, they tend to exclude and neglect everything and everybody who contradicts their system. Confronting them with the limitations and simplifications of their system is necessary to grow to a Stage 4,¹⁸⁷ but since they are at a very early state of Stage 3, this confrontation does not help them yet, and they are still not capable of such a critical examination.¹⁸⁸

This implies that there are strong difficulties in teaching a Catholic point of view about controversial topics such as the Holy Catholic Church with its sinful members whom they know, or the doctrine of “Outside the Church there is no salvation.” And of course almost any question about sexuality, contraception, abortion is controversial and difficult to explain in an unambiguous way. But adolescents around Stage 3 have a system of belief even though it is tacit. When they listen to our teaching or they experience God, they unconsciously try to place into their system this new truth or experience. But it is not rare that they experience a discrepancy between their system and the new teaching. Sadly sometimes we “preach water and drink wine” and youths abandon the thread of the conversation.

It is important to know that adolescents around Stage 3 strive for consensual answers based on interpersonal values. So copy-pasted answers from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* do not help. Answers worked out with dry logic are not convincing for them. But an answer without logical foundation cannot fit in their tacit system, so they cannot soak it up. In

¹⁸⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 172.

¹⁸⁷ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 62.

¹⁸⁸ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 54.

other words, an understandable answer about faith: 1) should more or less fit into the youth's belief system; 2) it should reflect on mutual interpersonal values such as accountability, dialogue, listening, respect, honesty, etc.; 3) and it should be relatively simple. To translate our faith's answers to the language of our adolescents is very difficult. But when one struggles to find a right "translation" of an element of our faith, he or she can ask for time. Admitting our limitations fosters our relationship with adolescents instead of undermining them.

Multiple Roles

Clarity is important not only in the context of teaching and law, but in the context of one's perception of the whole world. For example the field of roles can be full of ambiguity. As Robert Kegan argues, our postmodern age demands the ability to live with multiple roles but that is not a possibility either at Stage 2 or at Stage 3. Adolescents are members of various groups, and they can have different roles in those groups. They show their different "faces" in the school, at judo lessons, and at home being babysitter for their own brother or sister. They not only wear masks, but they are struggling to find their "real" identity derived from their peer groups. But there are too many peer groups at the same time.

As Stage 3 is characterized by interpersonal relations, another difficulty with multiple roles occurs when a student needs to relate to somebody who has various roles and powers. Students have a hard time with adults who are teachers in the morning (representatives of a strong authority) and youth ministry leaders in the afternoon (personal escorts in spirituality). Teachers try to put emphasis on their relations to be one of the few trusted others instead of being an external authority. But this dynamic always contains tension. For this reason the principal of a school should never have a spiritual role even when he is a Jesuit. The separation of roles helps

both youth and adults, because the challenge of multiple roles could help people to grow only if they are already at a strong Stage 3. In all the other cases this challenge can cause a temporary pause in personality development.

For this reason during a retreat we need to try to make as simple a situation as possible. At Kurtabérc we push the situation toward one unique peer group since there is nobody else with us and students have almost no connection with the world-outside. When we make small groups for discussions and sharing we use semi-random selection. That means, most students are randomly assigned to the groups, but we watch not to put together strong cliques or strong enemies. Sometimes the class has very strong cliques and discord, so we give up random selection, and we ask the homeroom teacher to pre-assign all the students. The arrangements of the small groups is quite sensitive, especially because group-sharings are led by not-so-experienced youth leaders. As a preparation, we speak with the homeroom teacher and with the opinion-leaders of the class before the retreat in order to have some sense about the class and to know the few names of the students with difficult relations.

We also offer single roles to deal with during the retreats. Following Shelton's thought about adult-adolescent friendship, we recognize the irrelevancy of early adolescent-teacher friendships, and we build upon the positive values of friendship between youth ministers and adolescents.

Usually the homeroom teacher is with us because he or she knows the class better and she or he is the responsible for the class and its personal development. But we ask this teacher to work in the background, coordinating the meals, the cleaning, and the heating. This teacher does not participate in the deeper, small-group conversations. And if it is necessary this teacher uses

his or her power of disciplining in the name of the institution. So the teacher has the role of external power to organize our life in order to work with the meals and disciplines.¹⁸⁹

The leaders of the event — in our situation they are two Jesuits — are responsible for the spiritual part: the program, the experiences, the spirit. They are aware of not using authoritarian power but being absolutely accepting and open for the students. We make it clear that students can say anything to us without personal consequences at the school, even though it does not happen under the seal of confession. When there is a problem — such as when a window is broken — we do not step in, but we ask the teacher to intervene. Even though thereafter we have a private conversation with the teacher, in order to show the students only one, unambiguous world view about good and bad, and God.

The Older Helpers. The unambiguity of roles is more difficult in the context of our older helper students. They are very important in the dynamics of the retreats of Kurtabérc, but they are always struggling between various roles. On the one hand they are leaders with real responsibilities, even though we give them only limited, and adequate responsibilities. They need to lead a sharing-group, trying to assure that everybody has the possibility to speak. They are also ready to help us in our needs, such as sharing papers, preparing tables, and being examples of listening. But on the other hand they are normal high school students. They have friends in the class, and they are friends of each other. They are also in the long quest of meaning-making and belonging. They are never equal with us, the adult leaders.

This duality should not be underestimated, even though we have not found a clear solution. Shelton suggests that the solution is by reflecting on their several roles because it can “encourage the adolescent to show more uniform behaviors across the many roles and

¹⁸⁹ A small remark here is that the teachers are also in the midst of development, so they need adequate support and tasks as well.

experiences.”¹⁹⁰ In Kurtabérc we counterbalance the challenge of unambiguity with extra doses of support. Older students have as little responsibility as possible and, even when they make a mistake, we assume the consequences. We also meet these students multiple times a day to check our progress and more importantly we ask them about their feelings and difficulties. When the stress is too big, or the class is too difficult, we change our process so as to help our helpers be themselves, be a kid going toward a strong Stage 3.

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The development of fully formal-operational thinking takes long years. So before Stage 4, youth cannot reflect on their belief system. They are already good at arguments, but interpersonal values and the influence of peer groups are more important. Research says that the majority of adults never leaves a strong Stage 3. This is not a problem when Stage 3 is adequate for them. But our postmodern context frequently demands Stage 4 and demands the ability to deal with complex systems and multiple roles.¹⁹¹ Unfortunately our western context already demands these abilities from our adolescents. In a retreat and in religious education we need to create a holding environment with as few ambiguities as possible because there are more than enough challenges for adolescents already.¹⁹²

7. Bring forth symbols

Our life, and especially our religions, are full of symbols even though we do not always reflect on them. Christian liturgies use very complex and multi-layered symbols such as bread, light, water, genuflecting, making the sign of the cross, incense, etc. Sometimes symbols touch

¹⁹⁰ Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 76.

¹⁹¹ See Kegan, *In over Our Heads*, Part IV.

¹⁹² Fowler speaks about apocalypse and the eclipse of childhood. See Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 202, 221.

us without any further explanation (at Stage 3¹⁹³). Sometimes we de-mythologize those symbols by over-analyzing them (at Stage 4¹⁹⁴). Sometimes one makes the next step after the critical view and one “distrusts the separation of symbol and symbolized”¹⁹⁵ (at Stage 5). Adolescents feel the power of the symbol and they can be easily touched by symbols as we see in the following excerpt from the *Manual for Faith Development Research*:

The use and appropriation of symbols is more open and multi-leveled at Stage 3 than it was at Stage 2. The literal interpretation of Stage 2 is replaced by a sense of the power of the symbol to evoke an emotional response. ... This is the stage of the “first naivete,” a pre-critical openness to symbols. This stage does not usually attempt to de-mythologize or to translate the symbol into conceptual meanings. In fact, persons at this stage may even resist the idea of analysis of a symbol.¹⁹⁶

A good usage of symbols is fully embodied, and as such it touches all the five senses. But as Ronald L. Grimes says, “[w]ords overwhelm most of our ritual silences and obscure most of the tactile, gustatory and kinesthetic aspects of liturgy.”¹⁹⁷ Unfortunately, Christian rituals tend to use speech and vision only, even though we can find counterexamples. We need to try to offer the students a “sense of God” through all five senses to make a tangible experience. Most rituals use the senses of hearing and sight. But how often do we use symbols that can be touched or smelled? And there is a fifth sense also. That one is taste. We taste God when we “eat God” in communion. Communion is the heart of Christian life, but we do not use our ability of tasting in any other Christian symbol. Why?

The main Catholic symbols have a special characteristic also: they are sacramentals. Sacraments are tangible signs of the living God among us making “present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”¹⁹⁸ This means that liturgy not only communicates and proclaims but “in

¹⁹³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 163.

¹⁹⁴ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 63.

¹⁹⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 187.

¹⁹⁶ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 56.

¹⁹⁷ Ronald L Grimes, “Modes of Ritual Necessity,” *Worship* 53, no. 2 (March 1979): 140.

¹⁹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1804.

it we actively act in order to be acted upon.”¹⁹⁹ The rituals we organize in a retreat should be open to becoming sacramentals, an efficacious presence of God. Even though the following examples have psychological, sociological, and cognitive developmental scientific background, these rituals are not simply legerdemain. These symbols cannot become efficacious without God’s immediate work. But at the same time these symbols are not mere magic either. Because “they ask faith of participants, and human effort to live the grace of each sacrament is essential for its effectiveness.”²⁰⁰

From Friday morning until Saturday afternoon we present a wide range of symbols at Kurtabérc. Here I offer an explanation of the following three symbols and rituals: the strip door, blindfolded mass, and the feather fluff.

Some rituals in the examples are related to Christian liturgical events such as a house blessing, or a Catholic Mass. An interesting side-effect of these rituals can be that students get closer to the original ritual because at Stage 3 even “the interpretation and appropriation of symbols is often strongly influenced by trusted authorities and by group or communal norms.”²⁰¹ An everyday Mass can be difficult to be understood, and can be boring for students. But after this special blessing, students get closer to the liturgy of a house blessing. And after the blindfolded Mass, adolescents can remember it during everyday’s “gray masses.” Even though it works also in the other direction: “when persons’ symbols have undergone trivialization, or when a person has absented him- or herself from the ritual celebrations of shared central symbols, the sacred itself is emptied.”²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Grimes, “Modes of Ritual Necessity,” 134.

²⁰⁰ Thomas H. Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, TX: Thomas More Association, 1998), 129.

²⁰¹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 57.

²⁰² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 163.

The Strip Door

Twelve strips of ribbon hang from the top of the door. They do not block the way since you can get through without any sensation. But the strips are there even when you do not care. It is the same with God.

The retreats of Kurtabérc take place in a small house in the middle of the woods. In the very beginning of the retreat, just before entering the house, we install God's strip door. We explain very briefly that the strips symbolize God's presence: we will get so used to it that we will not even realize God's presence. This presence is so tender that we need to focus in order to feel it. But God is there even when we do not care. And we do not care since we regularly forget about this presence. But that is not wrong, only human.

We created a ritual for the installation of this door. We wait in a semicircle outside the building. The priest blesses the door, asking God to make us feel her presence. Then the priest, wearing alb and stole, leads a proper blessing of the house, sprinkling holy water and praying in each of the rooms. In this way we give the door a special importance. And we connect the specialness of the door blessing (which has value now for the students) with the strangeness of Catholic tradition of blessings (which can be far from the students' understanding).

During the retreat we do not focus on the door often. But we try to make playful reminders saying: "Hey, watch out when you go out, there is a God in the hallway," or we stop under the door for a short moment greeting God whispering: "Hi, God, thank you for being here." Through these small acts we make the students reflect on God's presence without forcing them and without condemning them because they forgot it.

There is a last surprise with God's tender door at the retreat's end. As a final blessing we gather around the door and our older helper students cut the ribbons into pieces. Every

participant receives a piece to wear like a bracelet. In this way we extend the symbol of God's presence to their everyday life. They usually wear it for weeks if not for months. The bracelet becomes a sign of being part of a community, a common experience. But on top of that the bracelet makes each of them remember that God is present, even when we forget about the Lord.

Blindfolded Mass

This ritual is a regular Catholic Mass where the retreatants are blindfolded. Instead of a homily, through a special one-by-one blessing from the priest the students get back their sight. We never fully explain what this ritual symbolizes; we do not even explain it for ourselves. But “it works” in the sense that students are touched and they meet with the loving God.

During this Mass there is no light in the room, only candles are flickering. Since the room is small we are sitting around the altar in one big circle. At the beginning everybody blindfolds himself/herself except the priest, and they are asked to wait in peace until something happens. The Mass begins as usual, but “accidentally” the first song is about the blind Bartimaeus and the gospel is also from Mark 16:46-52. There is no homily, or we can say that the homily is the students' experience of receiving back their sight. There is a deepening background music while the first student is led to the priest. The priest puts his hands on the student's head. The priest whispers a blessing audible only to the student. Then he unfolds the scarf and asks the student whether he can give a hug.²⁰³ Finally the student is asked to help a blindfolded classmate to approach the priest for the blessing — without saying anything.

This ritual makes the Mass long. And students of age 14-16 are not good at waiting a half an hour in a dark place. The blindfolded people can have strong feelings like impatience and fear,

²⁰³ Since there was no scandal of sexual abuses in Hungary, this question is absolutely normal in this situation. But we should take into consideration that a student in this emotionally touched situation can hardly refuse.

and the sighted ones can experience boredom or the wish to share their experience. Because of these difficulties, preparing the students is very important. Before the Mass, throughout the day, students listen to the story of the clown and the blind girl,²⁰⁴ they have time to calm down and to use up their energy. And they experience blindness in various exercises as well. These preparations are crucial to make the students open and ready to experience God through this uncommon experience in the context of a common Mass.

The Feather Fluff

A feather fluff is so light that often you cannot feel when it touches your palm even when you concentrate hard. Again, it is a symbol of God's soft presence, and more: it is a symbol of God's personal gift.

The students wear coats and boots since they have been asked to be ready for a walk outside. They are waiting in a circle when we ask them to close their eyes and open their palms. "We will go around, and some of you will receive something, but not all of you" — we say. It is a white lie because we give a feather fluff to all of them. A feather fluff is so light and we are so careful that most of the students cannot feel the fluff touching their palm. Then we announce: "Those who felt receiving something, it is time to open your eyes." There are always five to seven students opening their eyes. It is not a problem at all, but the feelings of those with closed eyes are more important. We continue after a short minute: "Now everybody else, you can open your eyes." And they realize that they have received a beautiful small feather fluff even though they thought that they have not received anything. At this moment anybody can feel the relief that God is in the room.

²⁰⁴ Johannes Mario Simmel, *Doch mit den Clowns kamen die Tränen* (Munich: Droemer Knauer, 1987).

But once again, we do not over-explain the symbol. We say only that God's gifts are similar: sometimes we do not realize it; sometimes it is not big at all; sometimes it is easy to lose, but God is always giving. And we ask them to leave the room one by one for a half-hour walk. They receive a personal blessing in the corner, then they follow the path indicated by Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."²⁰⁵

We do not ask them to meditate on the psalm. We do not ask them to hold the feather fluff along the road. But they had no time to put down the fluff. And they read the signs because they are curious enough. Students are then walking half an hour alone in silence with a feather fluff. The experience is working in each of them, and they meet God, even if not everyone realizes it.

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We all want to help our adolescents to know more about themselves and about God. We all want to help them not only to know but also to meet with God. In Stage 2, "the use of symbols and concepts remains largely concrete and literal."²⁰⁶ But around Stage 3, "symbols provide the adolescent with a chance for self-expression that moves beyond the intellectual sphere."²⁰⁷ At first naive,²⁰⁸ students uses and understand symbols. Through living symbols they can experience God's personal loving presence.

²⁰⁵ Psalm 23:4 (ESV)

²⁰⁶ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 60. See for examples: Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 138.

²⁰⁷ Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 157.

²⁰⁸ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 57.

Conclusion

James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory helped me understand the dynamics of adolescents' interiors. This theory speaks about how adolescents' faith structure developed throughout the years. As they gain the ability of formal operational thinking (the ability of generation and use of abstract concepts and ideas), their mind takes wings.²⁰⁹ They reveal a deeper experience of the other's interiority,²¹⁰ and they begin to recognize and to try to understand the interiority of others, the feelings and emotions of others.²¹¹ Since interpersonal values become important for adolescents, they tend to "to select authorities on the basis of feelings, appearances, or tacit images."²¹² And through this new mental capacity of abstraction, they are also opened up for a multi-leveled understanding of symbols.²¹³ On the other hand, they fall into the tacit captivity of their peer group. Their identity is derived from the group.²¹⁴ That has strong consequences, such as the norms of this group are appropriated uncritically by them,²¹⁵ and generalized others can be harshly judged.²¹⁶

The knowledge of these dynamics can help to understand adolescents, but not all of them have arrived at this stage of development yet. Most of them are just in the midst of transition from Mythic-Literal Faith (Stage 2) to Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Stage 3). Unfortunately, there is no fast and reliable method to assign a student to an exact stage. The Faith Development Interview is by far the most reliable method,²¹⁷ but it demands a more resources than our

²⁰⁹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 58.

²¹⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153.

²¹¹ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 37.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹⁴ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 60.

²¹⁵ Fowler, Streib, and Keller, *Manual*, 46.

²¹⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 152.

²¹⁷ Parker, "Measuring Faith Development."

practical pastoral application can afford. There are other instruments for measurement as well, such as questionnaires with eight to twenty-four questions, which are easy to use, but they are not reliable enough. Without a handy instrument we need to rely on the results of different qualitative research. They claim that adolescents of ages 14 to 16 have an average of 2.8 score according to the Faith Development Interview. That means they have not reached the fulness of abilities described in the previous paragraph.

When we organized thirty retreats at Kurtabérc, a charming lonely cottage in Hungary, we did not know about these characteristics of adolescence. We pooled our prior experiences, and we used our horse sense. We learnt by experience throughout long years, and then last year I learned the theory. Fowler's Faith Development Theory explains both our achievements and our troubles at Kurtabérc. And now, as I will return to the practical field of that high school, I can work on a better retreat which is more adequate to our students' developmental stage. And that adequacy can open paths to the hearts of the adolescents.

I offered seven principles to achieve this adequacy. 1) Providing immediate experience to adolescents can help them to exercise their mental capacity of reflection. 2) This reflection and all our reasoning should be clear-cut and free from paradoxes in order to match adolescents mental capacities. 3) Since adolescents identify themselves with the image they think their peers see of them, we should help them to make this image more realistic. 4) A healthy group of students can, like yeast, turn the mood of the whole group. 5) The tacit force of a peer group can even help us, since we cannot break the peer pressure. 6) Adolescents do not follow traditional authorities anymore, but there is a way to become a trusted and followed other for them. 7) Adolescents usually appreciate symbols, and these can lead them to a deeper experience of themselves and of God.

Limitations and Further Directions

I believe in the usefulness of the bridge between theory and practice which I offered throughout this thesis. But that does not mean there are no limitations or difficulties I need to acknowledge.

First of all, my knowledge about practical applications is not backed by scholarly research. I lived through those experiences, and even though we fine-tuned each retreat, we have never had a rigorous reflection on our experience. So the seven suggestions of this thesis can be only a starting point for a bigger work at best. I stand for the offered practices, but they need further research before I could claim a global validity for them.

The validity of my experiences is jeopardized also by the sameness of the retreats' space, time, and audience. We always worked with the same team, same school, and at the same place. The student body with all its variety was homogenous on a large scale. A further step in validation of my proposals should be organizing retreats based on the same principles but changing some environmental variables one by one. For example I should organize the same kind of retreats for the same school but at another place and time-slot. After that I should organize this kind of retreats in other Hungarian high schools as well. This net of new experiences could offer hints for the real validity of my claims.

The new experiences ask for new instruments for measurement as well. On the one hand, the success of a retreat or an exercise at the retreat should be measurable. This needs defining the criteria, scales, and proceedings. But this success will always remain subjective to a certain point since the most important story happens between the students and God. And there is no reliable method to measure relationship with God. On the other hand, we should also be able to measure the faith development of adolescents in an easy, fast, and reliable way. Unfortunately the Faith

Development Interview has no low-cost, and reasonable alternative yet. I believe that in our computerized age we can develop a new instrument for faith development measurement. A computerized questionnaire could dynamically generate questions based on an individual's previous answers. That could throw a bridge over the content of faith (which can be easily measured) and the structure of faith (which is hidden behind the content).

Structure and content of faith can hardly be separated. Faith Development Theory and my whole thesis concentrates on the structure, the inner structure of the process of constitutive-knowing. But the structure is visible through the content, so I could not neglect the fundamental content of our Christian faith such as God's unconditional personal love. James W. Fowler struggles with the same difficulty. When he speaks about FDT's adaptation for practical youth ministry he speaks about the content almost as much as about the structure of faith.²¹⁸

Because the content and structure of faith are inseparable, the universality of the FDT and therefore my suggestions needs further proof. Fowler claims that his theory does not belong to any specific religion, but it is about faith as a process of constitutive-knowing. In a similar way I tried to build a bridge between theory and practice without sticking to one specific religion and denomination. But neither I nor Fowler could fully succeed with this separation, and I could not offer practical suggestions independent from Christianity. So a concrete next step could be a strictly Christian adaptation of FDT. Fowler has already put his theory in a Christian vocational context²¹⁹ in 1984, since he comes from the Methodist Church.

These limitations and necessary, concrete successive steps are important. I am still sure that my seven suggestions can be useful in a different context, but I openly recognize that this thesis is only a strong starting impulse for further and more serious work.

²¹⁸ Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 223.

²¹⁹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*.

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We all want to help our adolescents to know more about themselves and about God. We all want to help them not only to know but also to encounter God. This goal cannot be reached without taking into consideration their personal developmental stage.²²⁰ James W. Fowler's Faith Development Theory provides a system to recognize the style of faith in our students. My whole thesis speaks about how to create an environment and program where adolescents have the chance for a deeper spiritual life. All these preparations are necessary, but human arrangement is not enough. The other — and most important — part is to invite God, and to be like the five wise virgins: waiting for the bridegroom. And at the past thirty retreats of Kurtabérc the Groom always came.

²²⁰ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 113.

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