

# Stages in Spiritual Development and Prayer

About forty-five years ago, a psychiatrist named Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief which people commonly experience when facing death or recovering from the loss of a loved one. Since we are all in a sense “terminal,” these stages are in some ways also typical of our spiritual lives in general -- and they shape how we pray.

**Denial.** This stage might also be called “Innocence;” it corresponds to a very young and somewhat naïve stage in spiritual development; it may also characterize the stage which follows from a profound spiritual conversion experience at any age in life. In this stage we have a tendency to overlook reality. We are unaware, or choose to ignore pain or suffering; we pray as a child does for all the good things we desire, believing that everything is possible, and fully confident that God will answer our prayers if we are patient and persevering.

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**Anger.** This is the next stage in our spiritual life; it is the stage we realize that, despite our confidence and prayers, bad things happen – even to good people like ourselves and our loved ones. All is not well; in addition to anger, we may feel shocked or betrayed by God. We wonder “Why is this happening?” “Where is God in all of this?” We may be tempted in this stage to give up and stop praying altogether.

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**Bargaining.** More typically, people decide at this stage that they haven’t been praying enough, or haven’t been praying the right way. We assume that God wasn’t aware of what was wrong, that we have not done enough to attract God’s attention or merit God’s favor. We may change the way we pray; try different styles of prayer; we start praying all the harder, assuming that the more we pray the more likely God is to answer our prayers.

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**Depression.** This stage corresponds to a kind of spiritual disillusionment. We are surprised, disappointed, even disoriented because our prayers have not been answered – our “bargain” with God is broken. Our spiritual “depression” arises out of anger and disappointment directed at ourselves (we’re not good enough to merit God’s attention) or at God (God is a capricious and arbitrary God who apparently cares about some people but not about others). We may find it very hard to pray at all during this stage, which spiritual writers sometimes call the “dark night of the soul.” Words fail us. We don’t know what to say, or what to pray for. When we pray we may do so simply out of habit, without much conviction, and only out of desperation.

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**Acceptance.** The alternative to depression is acceptance, or what spiritual writers call “awareness.” When we reach this stage, we learn to rely on a different kind of prayer – a more quiet, reflective, contemplative or meditative kind of prayer. We stop “praying” in the conventional sense, and immerse ourselves in the silence, the unknown, waiting as patiently as we can for God to speak and act.

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At this stage, prayer is a kind of surrender to what we can't fully understand or appreciate, and yet, at the same time, an expression of our conviction that in the end all will be well. Under these conditions, we are growing in our ability to accept our own limitations, the still unfinished nature of creation, and the consequences of human sinfulness. We are learning, slowly and painfully, that we are not in charge and if we're cautious, we'll refrain from telling God what to do. This is the time when we simply pray for "all necessary graces," and leave the specifics to God.

When we reach the stage of acceptance or awareness, our unspoken prayer is always first of all an expression of our confidence that God is already at work in the world fixing what needs to be fixed -- in God's own way and on God's own schedule.

When we get to this stage, Fr. Richard Rohr says, "the things that used to bother us don't bother us quite as much. The things that used to defeat us no longer defeat us. The things we thought we could never surrender to, we now can."

At this stage, our prayer most closely resembles the Blessed Virgin's response to Gabriel: "I am the servant of the Lord...let it be done to me as you say" -- a prayer not so much of resignation, but of acceptance.

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**Stages of Prayer.** The stages in spiritual growth and prayer outlined above generally occur sequentially over the course of a lifetime, although when a person leaves one stage and enters another may differ widely from person to person and may depend on a variety of circumstances in each individual's life.

Certain events may "restart" the cycle at different times in our lives. For instance, a important conversion experience or unexpected blessing may bring a person back to the stage of innocence and denial; a tragedy or trauma may cast a person back into anger and bargaining.

As a general rule, spiritual writers say, we must reach a certain age, level of experience and spiritual maturity before we are capable of acceptance and awareness.

