

LOGOS UNIVERSITY

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Book Review

Of

The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith

By

Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich

Janet Hagberg is an artist, mentor, and healer. Her calling is to invite people into the inner spiritual life through her writing, art, poetry and the sharing of her own story. She carries out this calling with compassion, vulnerability, and humor.

In her writing and her life, Janet is a bridge; a caring connection between people of differing religious traditions, and between people of different races and creeds.

Janet is the recipient of several awards including the Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award from the University of Minnesota. She has a BA, an MSW in Social Work, has all coursework completed for a Ph. D. and is a certified spiritual director as written at janethagberg.com.

The Critical Journey is a description of the spiritual journey—our response to our faith in God with the resulting changes that follow. The book addresses the following issues: the struggle to find meaning and wholeness, the crisis of values and identity at mid-life, the quest for self-actualization, the healing of early religious experiences, and questions about the spiritual journey (xxi-xxiv).

The authors have two objectives for writing the book: First, to aid you in understanding your own faith journey by helping you discover where you may be along the way and recognize where you've been. Second, to appreciate where others are on the critical journey at similar and different stages. Hagberg describes the various phases of our spiritual journey and illustrates how people act and think in those phases (xxiv).

Janet Hagberg described seven stages of faith in a person's spiritual life that she and Robert Guelich uncovered fifteen years before publishing this book. As a result of feedback, observations of friends and colleagues, and their own experience as spiritual directors, these findings were confirmed (xv).

The Critical Journey gives permission and provides a road map for exploring the inner world—and the Wall—for the first time. The material in this book has been used by Fuller Seminary and Bethel Seminary for many years, while several other colleges and seminaries have recently incorporated it into their curricula (xvii).

To better understand the faith journey model, picture the model as a circle in which God is at the center, rather than a linear progression, that could imply “higher is better” at different stages in the faith journey (xvii).

The stage theory is a helpful model for us to understand our faith journey better. The idea of movement through stages or phases within the life of faith has a long history in the Church (6). Writers and believers like Augustine, Aelred of Rievaulx, Julian of Norwich, John of

the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius Loyola are examples of leaders in stage theory.

There are seven stages of a person's spiritual life: Recognition of God, The Life of Discipleship, The Productive Life, The Journey Inward, The Wall, The Journey Outward, The Life of Love (7). The Wall is not listed as an actual Stage in the book but is referenced to as a stage at janethagberg.com.

Each of us has a *home* stage (some report two home stages of equal intensity) where we operate most of the time and which best characterizes our life of faith (9). Some times it can be challenging to identify a home stage if you are in transition from one stage to another.

I appreciated the author's use of the analogy of a journey to describe our life of faith. A journey implies more than a quick trip. It's the summation of our life of faith and the lessons learned, and the stops made along the way of life. It's an opportunity to pay close attention to where we have traveled and recognize what we have seen and learned along the way (5).

Journeys suggest movement. We may stop along the way to rest, visit friends, or take a tour to learn more about a particular place, but we are still traveling. However, there are times and locations on our journey when we can get stuck.

I found Janet's explanation of getting stuck very insightful. She explained we get stuck in the mud because we are unwilling to reach out for help to resolve an issue or we can get too comfortable and decide to sit down rather than keep moving or we allow fear to hold us captive. If we stay stuck too long, we can get trapped unconsciously (9).

When we are stuck too long, the stage becomes a cage for us, where we stop growing in our faith. Sometimes people get stuck early in life and do not even realize they are stuck. Having compassion for them and their journey is the most forgiving response for those who are stuck (10).

I loved Janet's explanation of the journey when she said, "The whole point of being on a journey is learning to love our self with our imperfections as God does (10)." We are all in a process or a path along our life journey and need to realize that we all go through messy seasons where we are not proud about or comfortable.

In the first three stages, our faith or spirituality takes expression in ways that are prescribed by external standards, like our church or pastor. Stages 4 through 6 represent a difficult personal transformation and re-emerging that requires a rediscovery of what faith and spirituality are all about. They are stages of inner healing to spiritual wholeness that are unique to each person (11).

A crisis has a way of helping us get unstuck by providing the energy to make us uncomfortable and begin moving. A crisis can also knock us off balance, making us afraid, vulnerable, and ripe for change (13). If we can learn to embrace the pain and lean into the discomfort, we have the best chance to grow.

Moving from one stage to another always confuses because there is a time of limbo during the transition from one stage to the next. The time of transition can be both exhilarating and exhausting. This transition that leads to transformation is an emotionally rocky road (15).

Each of us has our own story of how we have walked through the Stage of faith. My story is unique to me, and one that I continue to write as I grow in my relationship with God.

I experienced Stage One, The Recognition of God, on the day I surrendered my life to God and realized my sense of depravity without Him. It was the first time in my life that I felt spiritually lost and needed a Savior. Growing up in a Presbyterian church, we went on family vacations with the Pastor, but I never knew I could have a personal relationship with God or had any need for forgiveness.

My family started looking for a church and ended up at Rockford First Assembly in Rockford, IL. It was there that my spiritual life began. I was eleven years old, in children's church, when the leader taught on the Second Coming of Christ. The thought of being "left behind" was frightening and awakening at the same time. It was then that I came to grips with how lost I was without Jesus in my life and made a decision that day to follow Him.

I began Stage 2, The Life of Discipleship while attending Rockford First Assembly. I went to their private school from sixth to twelfth grade. During my years at private school, much of my spiritual foundation was laid.

My spiritual life began to grow as a young adult under the ministry of Jeanne Mayo. Jeanne is a dynamic leader and speaker and was extremely instrumental in my spiritual growth and development. It was under Jeanne's leadership that I began my two-year ministry internship and completed my Certification of Ministry and received my License to Preach through Global University while I gave spiritual oversight to our college students under Jeanne Mayo.

Stage 3, The Productive Life, took place during my internship with Jeanne Mayo as I began to pour into the students and continued during my first full-time youth ministry position in Decatur, Georgia at The Assembly of God Tabernacle, where for four years I was employed.

After leaving Georgia, God opened a ministry opportunity for me in Orlando, Florida with Alex Clattenburg, at Church in the Son. It was there my ministry experience

grew and developed as Pastor Alex was very instrumental in shaping me as a leader. I enjoyed fourteen years of ministry growth and development at Church in the Son until I transitioned out.

In 2001, while working full-time at Church in the Son, I pursued my real estate license to create additional income for my growing family. While my expenses continued to increase, my church salary stayed the same. So I began to sell real estate on nights and weekends and started to make a nice additional income where I felt like I could finally breathe and live a little.

During the early 2000's, my family was able to move into purchase our dream home, in a gated community with swimming pool, four-wheelers and newer vehicles. Everything was going perfect, maybe too perfect when my Pastor asked me to choose between the ministry and real estate. Ughhhh.

Life was good. Everything was starting to come together. During this time I was able to acquire over two million dollars in real estate investment properties and was beginning to live the dream and was looking forward to a bright future and a secure retirement for my family and me.

Choosing between real estate and ministry was where I hit The WALL. It killed me even to consider giving up what was working so flawlessly. I was finally enjoying the financial breathing room and lifestyle that many don't experience. The dream of economic freedom was coming into clearer focus. I could not understand how something so good could be so wrong that I would be asked to give it up.

After much prayer and wrestling over the weekend, I decided to give up real estate. It was an incredibly “ballsy” decision because it meant taking a substantial pay cut. I made more money selling real estate part-time than I did as a full-time pastor.

I believed that if God was calling me to make the sacrifice and I was willing to obey, He would more than make it up to me in some other way. So I quit selling real estate unless I was selling my personal property but was allowed to purchase investment properties.

Around 2006, I purchased two spec homes in South Florida that were supposed to be big money makers as “flips.” Unfortunately, the builder of one house took off with my money and left me with massive debt and an empty lot. The other home was built but would not sell and would only rent for half the mortgage amount.

This new investment venture in South Florida ended up costing me \$2,500 per month and began to bleed me financially, rather than feed me. Coupled with my loss of real estate sales income that I walked away from, the financial pressure was mounting.

When the real estate market started to collapse in Florida, my investment properties would not sell, and the rental rates I was collecting began to plummet. There were months when I was writing ten thousand dollar checks trying to stay afloat, hoping and praying the market would turn or property would sell.

This whole real estate challenge threw me into stage four, The Journey Inward. I prayed, confessed, believed, cried, begging, and pleading with God to save me from financial disaster. I kept feeling like I hit “rock bottom,” only to find the floor collapse

beneath me. I soon realized I was “free-falling” through what felt like multiple floors of the high-rise building of my life. Just when I thought I hit rock bottom. I would drop again.

As I sat at the kitchen table, paying my bills, the sum of my worst fears came upon me. I was broke! I had no more money left in my account. I could no longer by more time to save myself. Financially we were done. My money was gone, but my debts continued to grow.

As I went to bed that night, I told my wife, "We are done." All the money was gone. For the first time, I didn't have an answer, a prayer, a hope. My emotional tank was just as empty as my bank account. The banks froze all my credit lines, so I literally could do nothing.

That was the longest night of my life. It was actually the first time in my entire life I felt hopeless. I felt like I had nothing to live for. I felt a wave of depression and hopelessness come over me that was suffocating. I couldn't talk, pray, or think. All I could do is moan and sigh as I lay in bed.

After much prayer and counsel, I decided to file Chapter 7 Bankruptcy and start over. This season was equivalent to spiritual death. I felt as if I had died a hundred times over. This season was not "the dark night of the soul." It was a dark eighteen months or more. During this time I could hardly think, pray, or read my Bible. I loved God, but I was experiencing the closest thing I know to the Job effect, and it SUCKED!

I battled thoughts of fear, insecurity, and anxiety as I tried to process all the “crap” I was walking through and trying to figure out what I did wrong, what I could do different, and where God was in all of this mess. The devil was also quick to take advantage of the opportunity and try to make me feel disqualified from ministry. The devil is a liar!

Post-bankruptcy, I began Stage 5, The Journey Outward. God started the process of re-building and re-establishing us. My story of coming through the storm has been used to encourage many business people and pastors.

I found out that life goes on even after the most traumatic seasons of life. I recognized that although I lost everything that represented financial success and security, I learned a valuable lesson. The most important stuff in life is not stuff. Fortunately, after “the financial dust” settled, I was still standing, hand-in-hand with my wife and kids.

Unfortunately, two of my close friends had not learned that lesson and ended up taking their lives when their financial world collapsed. I am so thankful to God for preserving me through the storm and grateful for my wife and kids for being such huge supports along with my church family and friends.

Ten years later, I am enjoying Stage 6, The Life of Love, as I lead my church in Farmville, Virginia. It is here that God is using me to reflect His love to those around me and help them navigate the difficult seasons of life.

After reading this book, I have come to realize the importance of grief recovery, divorce recovery, and addiction recovery ministries. I recognize the missed opportunities

that I have encountered as real people with real needs have tried to navigate the challenging moments of their faith journey and unfortunately couldn't find the help needed in the church.

My prayer is that God will help us to start those ministries that will help people better navigate the difficult seasons of life. I highly recommend this book to ministry leaders to help us all better understand the people God has called us to shepherd and lead.