

# STAYING WITH THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

BY IAN LOOM

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently I enjoyed an excellent lecture on four stages of human spirituality postulated by the American Psychiatrist, Morgan Scott Peck (1936-2005). I would like to reflect on this model and its relevance to our educational context here at Somerville House.

Peck's writing had a significant impact on the Baby Boomers, the generation preceding my own. His influence continued with Generation X, many of whom are represented in our staff and parent community. Some have probably read one of his publications, and most would have heard about him through school or university.

Not surprisingly, *The Road Less Travelled* occupied the 1984 best-seller lists for weeks, across Australia and the United States of America. It seemed everyone wanted a psychiatrist to unpack the religious and philosophical concepts laid bare by Carl Jung and Erich Fromm in a user-friendly, 'pop psychology' format. By the nineties, the New Age movement accelerated in the West, and writers such as the Australian Stephanie Dorwick and the North American Deepak Chopra picked up where Peck left off. More recently, outstanding writers such as Alain de Botton have brought philosophical concepts into the gritty reality of middle-class dissatisfaction. At the close of the lecture, twenty-five years since Peck's initial publications, I found myself critically reflecting upon Peck's theory of spiritual growth, its impact on our Baby Boomer and Gen X staff and parents, and its usefulness in today's educational context.

## FOUR STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In two publications, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (1978) and *Further Along the Road Less Travelled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth* (1993), Peck develops a theory of four stages of spiritual development.

### STAGE ONE: CHAOS

Peck argues that Stage One of spiritual growth concerns struggle, disorder and recklessness. Here the individual strongly resists a will that is greater than his or her own. Conflict arises between the physical and metaphysical dimensions. The Ego struggles to maintain control at the centre while the Jungian 'shadow' begins to break free. In healthy individuals, stereotypes are challenged and the Superego (for example, parental voices and voices of authority) is put 'in its place'. In unhealthy individuals, there is a decline into patterns of disobedience, diminishing empathy and even criminally selfish behaviours.

### STAGE TWO: BLIND FAITH

In Stage Two, Peck believes that the pendulum swings in the opposite direction. Here an individual surrenders his or her will to an authority figure which helps the individual neatly divide the world into binaries of good/evil, right/wrong and us/them. Young and psychologically vulnerable people may fall into dysfunctional, fundamentalist communities, in which the pressure to be 'humble' and 'serve' may mask controlling and manipulative forms of leadership.

### STAGE THREE: SCEPTICISM AND QUESTIONING

In Stage Three, reason trumps imagination. Individuals must feel convinced intellectually and logically to continue on the same spiritual quest. It is no longer acceptable to believe something based on faith alone. Some Christians become increasingly open to alternative philosophical and religious ideas. Others leave the Christian community altogether and embrace more 'personalised', syncretistic belief patterns.

### STAGE FOUR: MYSTICISM

In Stage Four, individuals recognise that Stages One, Two and Three are a continual part of the pattern of human experience. Acceptance triumphs over reason and imagination. The individual increasingly embraces the mystery and beauty of nature and existence. This phase is largely arrived at during the second half of life, which Jung called the 'Shadows'. Although reason is fully engaged, the individual has identified patterns and themes in nature, and enjoys critical understandings of good, evil, forgiveness, mercy and love. Ideas are not 'projected' negatively onto others because beliefs are deeply 'owned' by and integrated within the individual.

Peck recognises that transitions from Stages One to Two are usually dramatic, sharp and painful. These initial transitions are characterised by difficult, challenging periods and external factors. Transitions from Stages Three to Four are more gentle, 'unconscious' and internally expressed.

Let us reflect further on how this 'pop' psychology model of conversion and spiritual development might be relevant to our spiritual journey at Somerville House.

## STAGE ONE: LIFE CAN BE CHAOTIC

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Individuals continue to face very chaotic periods in life: health crises, unwanted financial problems, forced removal, retrenchment and dysfunctional relationships. Part of the struggle of life is facing up to its very unpredictability. Experiences defy categorisation, and the advice column in *Cleo* magazine (which, interestingly, corresponds neatly with the magazine's product line) will not necessarily 'deliver us from evil'. Perhaps Peck's model reminds us of the need to prepare students for the disruptive nature of some events in human experience – for example, a relationship coming to an untimely end.

## STAGE TWO: LIFE HAS ITS ABSOLUTES

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The law of gravity is very consistent. It is said that we cannot break the law of gravity; rather, the law of gravity will break us. Similarly, the Christian principles of truth, service and generosity are unassailable and clear: some things are clearly wrong, and some things are clearly right. Even though the media have shifted away from the fantasy of absolutely 'good' and 'bad' characters, and towards the reality that good guys are a little bad, and bad guys are a little good, students still need to know that some people are bad and some people *are* good.

I really appreciate those around me who have strong opinions. I admire those who are willing to name, with confidence, what they regard to be good and bad, even if I do not share their view. Generally, those with strong opinions tend to shape our world and culture. Consequently, we should not apologise for having strong opinions. Perhaps Peck reminds us that students need to find a balance between strength of opinion and an openness to the big questions that defy feeble, simplistic answers.

## STAGE THREE: LIFE AND ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

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Reason eventually catches up with every 'believer'. Eventually, the ultimate, and unanswerable, questions of philosophy and religion return to us: Who am I? Why? Why do bad things happen to good people? How do I know what is real? Easy answers from Sunday school will not suffice. Consequently, if an individual's spiritual understanding does not kept pace with his or her intellectual ability, a mismatch emerges, and he or she may come to realise, 'I don't believe this anymore'.

In Christianity, doubt is generally seen as a good thing, as long as it is resolved well. In contrast, disbelief (willing disbelief, despite all the evidence to the contrary) is not. The book of Proverbs provides plenty of excellent advice when it comes to resolving doubt:

1. Seek the wise counsel of good people you admire
2. Seek advice from a few rather than many (to avoid confusion)
3. Carefully research the question
4. Pray about the question, and ask for spiritual insight.

## STAGE FOUR: LIFE AND THE TRANSCENDENT

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The mystical stage, Stage Four, combines elements of Stages One, Two and Three. It recognises that life is about managing the continuing dynamism of chaos, absolutes and questions. The mystic embraces this, and accepts that this is how it is going to be. The mystic is open to learning from all three stages, and does not disavow any one stage as it emerges. Rather than repress the challenge of any stage, the mystic explores how each stage can be integrated into the whole.

I do not consider myself a 'fan' of all of Peck's books, nor do I subscribe to all of his ideas. However, I do find this model useful, and it has caused me to rethink how I respond to strong opinions, disinterest and engaging questions that arise in the classroom.

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Peck led a multi-faceted life as a psychiatrist and a lieutenant colonel. He enjoyed extended periods of time in Japan, New York and Washington. Later in life, at 44 years of age, he admitted he felt frustrated with Buddhist and Islamic mysticism, and made a firm Christian commitment.

The study of the psychology of religion began with William James, and continued to be expanded by thinkers such as Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Gordon Allport, Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, James Campbell and Rudolf Otto. Contemporary leaders in the field include James Hillman, Pascal Boyer and the Australian David Tacey.

An excellent overview of the rise and decline of the New Age movement in the West has been developed by the Australian academic David Tacey in *Jung and the New Age*.

See his outstanding thoughts on putting philosophical ideas into practice. See *The Consolations of Philosophy*, published by Penguin in 2001.

*The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (1978) and *Further Along the Road Less Travelled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth* (1993)

For an excellent overview of the difference between *doubt* and *unbelief*, see *Oz Guinness' Doubt*, Lion, 2001.

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