

Exploring the Four Stages of Personal Growth

Introduction and Today's Topic

Hello everybody, and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. Today I'm here with David Lowry.

Hey Don, how are you doing today?

I'm doing great, and we've got a great subject today. Why don't you tell them about it?

The Four Stages of Personal Growth

I am excited to discuss the four stages of personal growth. You can chart out the way we think as we go from being young to a little older in life, which I think our listeners will find quite fascinating. Interestingly enough, each of these stages has its definition of happiness.

And to be fair, this isn't something we created, okay? Brian McLaren, a Christian writer, has written about the four stages of faith. We borrowed from that because it made so much sense to understand how people develop over time, how their thinking changes, and so on if they allow it to happen.

Absolutely. And by the way, we encourage everybody to buy every single one of Brian McLaren's books; he is a fantastic writer. And for those of you who maybe had faith at one time or another and don't have it now, or you're not sure what you want to do with it, Brian McLaren is your writer because he really spells out the good, the bad, the ugly, and the hopeful. So, he calls it the four stages of faith, but like all good conceptions and theories, Don and I have spent a lifetime studying theories of growth way too much, way too much; like all of these good conceptions, they apply more broadly than just one subject area.

We think you're going to find where you are in this. And you're certainly going to recognize where some of your friends and family members are as we talk about it today. So Don, what do you say? Are we ready to get started?

I think we are. But before we do, please like, follow, download, and share our Peaceful Life podcasts with friends, family, and anyone who could use a helpful hand. It only takes a moment, and it would be a really great help to us.

To get us started, let me lay out a mind map so folks can see where we're going from start to finish. Then, we'll take it from the front and walk through each stage.

All right, let's do that.

Stage 1: Simplicity

The first stage we're going to be talking about is called simplicity, and it's a dualistic type of thinking. We'll explain more about what that means. Then, out of simplicity, as we grow and develop in our lives, hopefully, we will understand that the world is much more complex in many ways. This leads to more pragmatic thinking and can be very helpful. In fact, it's a very useful way of living, but it's just the second stage. The third stage is perplexity, where we get into this critical relativistic; what's the word I'm looking for here?

Yeah, when somebody asks you something, you say it depends.

Yeah, yeah, right, right. Thank you very much. And then the fourth one is harmony, that's an integral, holistic way of processing the world, our place in it, and what our role is. So with those four in mind, David, let's get started with the first one, simplicity.

Simplicity is where we all start out. And it's very helpful to us that we do we see the world in terms of good, bad, black, white, you're with me, you're against me, you're my enemy, you're my friend, the world is very binary.

Yeah, very right or wrong.

Very right or wrong. And, Don, the only way to be happy in your dualistic binary world is to have the right answer. You may notice that some people who are in these right wrong mentalities, they'll pressure you to believe the way they believe. They'll beg you to change your mind. *You don't know what you're doing. You'll either go to heaven or to hell.*

If a problem comes up, they have to have the right answer. The problem, of course, with the dualistic thinking is that sometimes, there are very complex situations that a simple answer doesn't solve. Like immigration. That's a complex problem. And we could argue that problem for days and years and so forth. In fact, our country has done just that. If there were a simple solution, trust me, we would have done it a long time ago. But to hear some people talk, we could fix this problem overnight. And under a dualistic, right, wrong, do this or do that, you're absolutely right.

In fact, Don, I can precisely guess your age to show you how this works.

Really?

You're over 50. Did I get it right?

You could've got a little further out there, but okay, 50.

But here's the deal: in a categorical world where you're either one thing or another, the categories are quite broad; so we can say you're above 50 or you're under 50, and you'll be right. You can get the right answer.

There's no room for me to be gray. No gray areas. We've referred to this before as either-or thinking.

It's either or thinking. Getting the right answer will make you happy and the only thing left to do when you have the right answer is convince other people to accept your right answer. And, of course, there's a good amount of condemnation for those who haven't found the right answer or who disagree with you.

Let's be fair. When people are young and learning from their teachers and parents and so on, their world is pretty simple. They basically are replicating one way of thinking or seeing things and so forth. And we expect as they get older to outgrow that. And yet quite often as adults, sometimes we fall into that same track, don't we?

We do. Let me give you a few more examples before we go. When you're young, you have precise ideas about what good parenting is like, right? Like, *I'm not going to be the same kind of parent my mom and dad were. I am going to parent this way!* Right? Well, guess what? My kids are now saying, *I'm not going to parent like Lowry did. We're going to do it all differently.*

Make their own mistakes.

Make their own mistakes. I was raised in West Texas. Abilene, Texas. I went to high school, where there were gun racks in the cars of pickup trucks in the parking lot, and young men would bring their rifles to school, right? Can you imagine that? That's the world I grew up in, and I never thought about it.

When I lived in California, where there were millions of people all put together, and some of them would shoot at you on the highway in road rage and things like this, suddenly, my view about guns and gun control became more nuanced, right? Because the world became a little more complex to me.

For many people who are embedded in simplicity or simplistic thinking, life is a lot like a war. There are sides, and I want to be on the right side—I want to be on the winning side, right? It's important to be a part of the right true

group. So, one must pick carefully. But then you also have to defend that group, and that defense becomes very one-sided.

One last thing we'll say before we move on to the next one is that authoritarians love this group. Because authoritarians love people who believe things ought to be a particular way, there is no compromise or discussion about it. Sadly, people who are attracted to authoritarian groups often feel that it's perfectly okay to kill other people who don't believe in their authoritarian values.

Stage 2: Complexity

Let's go on to the second one, called complexity.

Complexity is all about pragmatism, success or failure rather than right or wrong. It's about achieving goals and, of course, the right goals, but being successful. It's about being free and independent—all those things a highly pragmatic person would appreciate. Almost everything is doable or possible.

When you are in this group, you realize, well, now, right and wrong don't cover everything. What covers things is whether they work. It becomes more of an ends-and-means discussion. What does it take to get something to work?

You may not have the best product out there, but you have a good enough product, and people will buy it, and you say, Okay, let's not *spend any more money on this because we're just wasting it, right?* That's a workable solution. You discover you can set a goal and the mindset that *if I can visualize it, I can probably achieve it*. It's sort of a youth mindset where the world is full of potential.

As we are talking here, I'm thinking about what we've mentioned several times: Richard Rohr's work. That's R O H R for our listeners. Richard Rohr is an excellent writer, but he talks a lot about the first and second half of life. Looking at this idea of complexity, I see myself and most of my friends in

that area in my 30s and 40s. I was wise enough to see that life wasn't simply Black and white. But it was more about winning; I wanted to be on the right side, but I was okay if somebody else didn't agree with me necessarily; I needed to be validated in this process, that I be seen as somebody who is, succeeding at the goals that were of expected of me and so forth.

You're very pragmatic and like a chess player in this complexity stage. *What does it take to be successful?* For instance, I became a faculty member, and there are these ranks you go through. There are assistant professors and associate professors, and one school that I taught at had four different layers of associate and four different layers of assistance and so forth. It took about 20 years or so to get up to that full professor level where you were topped out. So, you plot, and you think and use strategy to get where you want to go, and you have a plan and work the plan.

I don't know that most of our listeners know this, but I'm retired from the United States Air Force. It's been a long time since I was active duty, but I am very career-minded. *How do I make the right moves? What do I need to do to get promoted next?* Those things were really important and pragmatic activities on my part. It's been almost 20 years since my son-in-law entered the Air Force, and he's now a lieutenant colonel, and I'm very proud of him. But when he was a first lieutenant, he asked me what I thought he should be looking at in his career. And I said, one of the mistakes I made is I spent a lot of time and energy worrying about my career and trying to do the right things and make sure that I was going to the right schools, that aid your promotion and jobs, and so forth, right? And I told him, If I was going to give you any advice, it would be to find the job you enjoy, do it the best you can, and have a good time at it as much as possible. And the rest will take care of itself. And sure enough, he's told me many times throughout his career that his approach has worked really well for him, and he's been able to do some really interesting things that mean a lot to him.

I think this is where a lot of people wind up. They stop at complexity because they're very goal-driven. This is the top of their food chain. Those

who've made it to the top fully believe in this system. It worked for them, and they believe it can work for anybody. And Don, in one of the shows, you talked about men and women who write books on success like a Fortune 500 company, and it's like *this is what I did to bring this company out of the doldrums and make it a success. It is today. And this will work in your life. It works in all situations.*

You could too.

And you can too.

Stage 3: Perplexity

Well, David, let's move on to the third area, which is perplexity regarding this critical relativistic dynamism.

Sure. In perplexity, suddenly, you're realizing that it is true that it can be a raging success and still be miserable, right? Just because you get promoted to General or made full professor with all the rights and privileges thereto appertaining doesn't mean that I'm happy or had a fulfilled life.

Achievement doesn't necessarily bring you happiness, and suddenly you begin to realize that all those things you strove for so hard were just a stage of life you were going through. it was A mere passage of time. And sometimes, no matter how hard you work, you're not going anywhere further. So, we develop this critical way of looking at things. And when I use critical, it's not in the sense of criticizing. It's when you suddenly begin to see the system's flaws and realize, *oh, now I get it. This is how it works.*

You realize that it's relativistic. It depends. Some people were amazing successes at one place, and they go to another place, and fall on their face, and vice versa. We become more discerning. Also, we begin to loosen up a little bit.

Yeah, I think so. And I believe you said the answer is no. I was about ready to say the answer might be maybe. It's the recognition that I don't know and the recognition that we don't know, the limitations of our knowledge. When we think about the perplexity of life, when we're at a point where we realize how little we can actually understand in the moment what's happening, or why it's happening, or how it's happening, we actually can gain a great deal of strength and wisdom from that.

When you are in this perplexity stage, you begin to see the failings of systems. I love my country, but you will never find me defending everything that we do because I can't. I'm too honest, and I care too much for my country not to own our mistakes. I want us to be better.

I have had a great life, but I have some regrets. If I had the knowledge I had today back then, I would do things differently. We look, see our mistakes, both ours and other people's, and maybe become a little more compassionate. We realize that we're all doing the best we can. And even when we do the best we can, we screw up and make mistakes. Being my best me I know how to be sometimes can be insulting to another person. I don't intend to be, it's just that I've got work to do.

Let me be clear about something here. David is not an alcoholic, but David, you know, quite a bit about Alcoholics Anonymous and so forth, and one of the steps has to do with recognizing that you have a problem.

Recognize you have a problem.

The ability to recognize these things speaks to the perplexity of life and the recognition that these things are, in many cases, interrelated. There may be a cause or a reason for it, and yet at the same time, that cause or reason does not ultimately have anything to do with the direction you need to go in your life.

Before I talk about this last stage, I want to mention that sometimes People in one stage can be very critical of others in the other stage. Maybe I'm

living in perplexity and harmony as a senior these days, but my grandchildren are living in simplicity. Sometimes, as we move up the scale, we are critical of people down the scale. And sometimes people down below look at us and go, oh my goodness, these people don't have a clue. We have to be careful not to think that because I have now moved to this other stage of life, I am so much wiser and better than somebody else.

We put a lot of faith in leadership or authoritarians in our lives. We must align to fit in on the right side, whatever that right side is. But when we get to the integral, holistic side under harmony, we recognize that all people are fallible, just like you and me.

Stage 4: Harmony

Our last stage of life, which we want to discuss, is harmony. In this harmony stage, we are integrating, holistic, and looking for ways to make the world a better place.

We're interdependent.

We're interdependent. We realize that, hey, if I poison the planet, we all go down the tubes. Right? We understand that we all suffer if I anger somebody on the road and they get so flustered that they bump into somebody. It's not only my life, but it's their lives. And maybe it's somebody else's life that could become involved.

We begin to see that we're not as independent as we think but depend on one another. I had the great fortune of having a doctorate degree. I'm not saying that to brag or anything. I'm just saying it's been a great blessing that I could have one of those. But I did not do that on my own. I had people who had studied for years and years and years who were my teachers and, before them, their teachers. It's built on the back of science and a country that values education and puts money towards it. We are all tied in together, and that's just one system. I couldn't do what I did by myself.

Yeah.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

So, let me go over the four again, just to keep everybody together: simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony. David, let's talk for just a few minutes about what this means. What should a listener do with this information?

When we start off with a simplistic way of being, we want to hold things tight, right? We want to have control. There's a phrase I've used for years. I call it the enigma of control, an enigma that just means it's hard to hang on to, right?

We perceive ourselves as having some control, but we often don't. But with simplistic thinking, we're kidding ourselves into thinking we're on the right side. We know the right information. We're set for life, right? And generally speaking, life shakes that loose a bit.

Then we become more complex. We focus on, okay, so I can't know it all, but there are these concepts that if I follow the script, if I do all the shoulds in my life, then ultimately, I'll be okay. I'll be able to succeed and have all the things I think life is supposed to give me if I do those things.

In complexity, we find out that sometimes we do all the right things, and it doesn't work out right. So we move to perplexity, where we recognize that control is a bit of an illusion. Maybe in some sense, we still want to hang on to some control, but here, we recognize that others have valid ideas, ways of being, and so on. And so we learn to accept that and let go a little bit more.

But in our quest for peace, we really need to focus on trying to develop greater levels of harmony to be more integrated in our thinking and awareness and be more holistic in the way we approach life, which means letting go and recognizing that what we have control over really is the way we think. From that to a certain extent, how we respond to a greater world.

This is a beautiful explanation of Dr. Brian McLaren's Four Stages of Faith, which Don and I have co-opted for this program Four Stages of Personal Growth. Once again, we encourage you to read Brian McLaren's books. They apply in all areas of life, not just your faith and religion, but your ongoing personal growth and search for happiness and meaning in life. And so we encourage you to look at that.