

Six Stages of Spiritual Growth

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Which stage are you in on your spiritual journey? Marjory Zoet Bankson, former president of Faith At Work who has taught regularly at Virginia Theological Seminary, has identified six stages of spiritual growth. She contends that at each stage of life, we complete the six stages of spiritual growth and then begin the cycle again. “I think of call as a spiral path, circling around to start at a deeper place each time, with greater focus and more understanding of how we connect the temporal and eternal dimensions of life,” she writes in *The Call to the Soul: Six Stages of Spiritual Development*.

Stage 1: Resist

In the first stage, we feel anxious and unsettled. We long for change, but we don't know what we want. We feel a visceral response. We resist what's happening, but we're bored with what we've had in the past.

“In the first stage of call, we live with the tension of trusting the universe and being receptive to call, while at the same time being suspicious and drawing back from the call,” Zoet Bankson writes.

For many people, this stage feels like being an orphan. You used to know who and what you were connected to, but now you feel abandoned and alone. You're not sure who you truly are and where you're going. To move beyond this stage, it's important to identify with a larger reality than yourself. It means confronting the reality of evil, of mortality, and our limitations. It means getting ready to step into the unknown.

Stage 2: Reclaim

As we moved into the second stage of spiritual growth, we begin to reclaim the past parts of ourselves that we have left behind. We revisit our past and reflect on what mattered and what didn't. Sometimes this entails entering a dark night of the soul to reclaim parts of ourselves that we have buried.

We reclaim parts of ourselves by being in relationship with others who help us to unearth the buried parts of ourselves and to make sense of our past. Some join a small group or spiritual community to grapple with the questions of finding our hidden gifts and interests.

“Reclaiming parts of our past means having a place to tell hidden parts of our story, to remember secrets of past survival,” Zoet Bankson writes. “Although the basic form of who we are meant to be is inborn, it usually takes someone to draw it out and give us language for what is possible.”

Stage 3: Revelation

At this stage, an event or insight allows us to glimpse a new life, a new birth. We not only see the possibility, but we also see the fear that holds us back. We see a vision, but then we don't know how to make the vision a reality.

We encounter synchronicities and signs that give us clues to a new path and a new way of being that's rooted in who we truly are. To go deeper with this stage, it becomes imperative to learn to listen and to listen closely and wisely.

“Accepting revelation implies that we are willing to be changed, willing to be healed and expanded because we have glimpsed a greater purpose for life,” Zoet Bankson says. “It is a period of being willing to give up our defenses for the sake of call to the mystery of Spirit.”

Stage 4: Risk

Many people get through the first three stages and then they encounter the Poison River. This is a crucial crossing point where you either choose to move forward and grow spiritually or cling to what's comfortable and not change.

Stage four is about action. It's about taking a step in a new direction. This will feel scary and risky, and we'll often have many doubts about whether we should be taking this new path. To many people, this stage will often feel like a life-and-death stage.

“It is in this stage that our call can overcome our fear, take possession of our resources and hopes, and move us into action,” Zoet Bankson says. This is the stage of firsts. We may physically move to a new home. We may quit a job and go back to school. We may start a new business. We may start taking classes in meditation or another spiritual dimension.

Stage 5: Relate

In order to thrive and grow, we need a community that supports our new direction and our new life. We cannot make further progress by going it alone. We need to find others to journey with us and encourage us to grow even more.

This stage may seem like a repeat of stage two, which also emphasizes connection and community, but this stage is different. Stage two focused on helping us reclaim parts of ourselves from our past. Stage five is about finding people who will support us as we take action to change and grow.

“In stage five, we discover our leadership and kinship with others in new ways,” writes Zoet Bankson. “This stage can be exciting and fulfilling because we have a community of people with whom to celebrate—and perhaps also to grieve. In this stage, we discover the complexity of chosen family where we may feel more bonded than we ever had with our biological families.”

Stage 6: Release

“Stage six has a dimension of generativity, of giving our all away to others, of looking for opportunities to pass our experiences on or to let go of them so we can start the soulwork cycle all over again,” Zoet Bankson says. “It is the stage of servant leadership.”

Releasing is about resting. We need to listen to guidance and follow the need to rest before taking a new step. “We can enjoy things in the present, open ourselves to what is, and learn to release what has been dear—with faith that something else is possible,” Zoet Bankson says. “We learn that we do not own anything. Nothing is permanent.”

Stage six is learning the art of letting go. We’re invited to learn this lesson over and over throughout our lives, although each time it feels like something new, sad, and terrifying. It’s about shifting from control to cooperation and trust.

As we travel through these six stages of spiritual growth, it’s important to ask these questions: Who am I? What is my work? What is my gift? What is my legacy? As we grapple with these questions in honest and authentic ways, we discover new ways