

# Karen P. Eriksen: A New Creation

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

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## A New Creation

I turned 40 in September. My spirit-mother crones tell me that that is a critical age for a woman. I haven't gotten to that part in Gail Sheehey's Passages, so I don't know for sure what it is like for other women. But for me this year has been life changing; it's been revolutionary. The scriptures for today, "If anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation" or the story of mustard seeds being transformed into plants, feel particularly relevant.

I would like to share some of my story, because it has changed my understanding of God. It has also changed my understanding of being up here before you. I stand here unfinished, in process, incomplete. Committed to growing and committed to some new "higher principles," but definitely unsure. This incompleteness is reflective of a new place I have come to, if it can be considered a place at all, and not a road. I used to think I had to have something finished to say, some growth process complete in order to preach. And perhaps traditional notions of preaching are about presenting finished ideas. My sense of Seekers is that preaching is about beginning dialogues. And so, having, as many of you know, chosen to embark on an unconventional life path, I stand before you with many doubts, open to feedback and input, asking you to embrace me in the journey, and hoping that the process of sharing my journey with you will serve as food, nurturance, another idea, or something useful to you or for our community. I hope it can

be part of a recursive process of journeying together.

Last fall, I was introduced to the field of adult development, in particular, Robert Kegan's work *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads*. I suddenly found language for what I was experiencing. I would like to go through the developmental stages briefly, and then talk about my experience of them. I even have "visuals" to demonstrate my new understanding of these stages.

According to Kegan, progression through the stages requires structural change in cognitive functioning, much as Piaget demonstrated cognitive changes in children. His stage one is infancy, when an individual's needs are all they know. Their understanding of other people is only in the context of "need provider." We hope that people don't reach adulthood operating primarily out of Stage One.

Stage two is typical of younger children. Many of you will be familiar with inviting your child to come to the store with you because you want to spend time with her, and she says, "Well, if you will buy me....." Fill in the blank. Those operating primarily out of Stage Two are very conscious of other people, but not of others' needs or feelings, only of other people's constraints on their behavior or rewards for their behavior. These are "received knowers," in the words of *Women's Ways of Knowing*. They understand the world through other people's instructions, consequences, and ideas. While this is an essential stage in childhood, we also hope that people don't reach adulthood still operating primarily out of this stage. When they do, they compose the prison population, the psychiatric hospital population, and those who are not functioning in any reasonable way in our society.

Those operating primarily out of Stage Three are those who have been socialized into some societal norm or external authority. They function conventionally in society, following the rules and norms, living the unexamined life. They

understand that others have needs and feelings, and that others may differ from themselves. In fact, others' needs and feelings are so well known, that they pay sole attention to them. They are thus defined by others. People operating primarily out of this stage consider relationships ultimate. They do not rock the boat. They accommodate in intimate relationships. They go along with the program in organizations. I am saying "they" because I think the choice to be part of Seekers usually represents some position beyond Stage 3, as most of us have chosen to break with the conventions and rules we grew up with. However, according to Kegan and other's research, most adults function primarily out of Stage 3.

What was confusing to me about Stage 3 was that some of us choose to rebel against our parents' conventions during adolescence, but only do it with someone else's conventions behind us. As you know, for me, fundamentalism was the alternative convention I chose for many years. Or fell into. The value of Stage 3 functioning for people and for society is stability and preservation of institutions. The problem, of course, is that preservation of some institutions causes harm. Also, too much stability may make growth difficult or impossible.

Stage 4 represents the challenge to convention and the acquisition of the ability to be self authoring. Those operating primarily out of Stage 4 are reflective, are trying to attend to their inner voice, are attempting to act more and more in line with who they believe they were created to be. There is the belief that there is a SELF to be discovered and honored. Initially, those entering Stage 4 may be angry and rebellious, and determined to stay separate and unattached to protect their SELF. In other cases, people can stay connected and angry. Later in Stage 4, certainty in one's sense of self removes the need to be angry or vocal in declaring oneself.

You have known me primarily as a Stage 4 person. I have

considered the "ideal" in functioning in this community to be acting on God's call on my life by contributing musically. I have considered being true to my SELF and my call and my personal relationship with God to be my ultimate responsibility. I have figured that if there was some connection with other co-journeyers as I lived out that individual call, that was a bonus, but not a necessity. And I didn't really figure there would be very many people to co-journey with. I was content to live with a few close friends, and not be connected with many others. Dick was an ideal partner for supporting me during this part of my life journey. He called himself "the wind beneath my wings," and he truly has been. He supported me in my individual journey, and did not challenge or threaten it.

In fact, it takes courage to look inward to discover oneself, and to declare oneself, because frequently one's SELF is not conventional. Frequently, we must separate ourselves somewhat from our families of origins or old friends in the process of discovering who we are and in developing the courage to act on who we are. Kegan indicates that the demands of modern life require people to function at Stage 4, but that most people do not.

Now the visuals. This tube represents relationship or community. In stage 3, you can see that there are lines separating individuals, as though each has some distinction. However, a person operating primarily out of stage 3 would not consider separating him/herself from the pack, or finds him or herself emotionally reactive to the pack.

The stage 4 person separates him/herself from the pack. [cut off the two ends]. Has a sense of not being part of the pack. Chooses many times to consider the pack not there. I remember asking Dick at one point why we were spending so much money rescuing people in other countries. If they wanted to kill each other, why not let them and spend our money on people in the states who are dying from drugs, alcoholism, and poverty.

While at this point that question seems rather callous, it clearly reflects a belief that we can live separately from one another and not let ourselves be affected by those we don't want to be affected by. In the words of Kegan, however, the relationship is prior to its parts.

*Imagine a glass cylinder or tube that is open at each end lying on its side. Inside the cylinder is a marble. We are going to push the cylinder so that it is rolling, and we wonder out of which of the cylinder's two ends the marble will escape. As we discuss this, it is perfectly natural for us to distinguish between the two ends or openings of the cylinder. ... If we pay a lot of attention to these two openings, we could conclude that what the cylinder really is, is two openings connected by a glass tube. We could see the glass tube as the connector or relater of the two ends. Although this is an unfortunately static, reified image of a relationship, the tube is, in a sense, the bond or link between the parts, the two ends. The parts 'have a relationship' to each other and the tube defines it. But it would make just as much sense to say, 'Wait a minute! The cylinder does not connect the two openings. There wouldn't be any openings without the cylinder. The cylinder has the openings, not the other way around. The relationship has the parts. The parts do not have a relationship.'* [Kegan, R. (1994). *In Over Our Heads*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 313]

So, a Stage 5 person realizes that the two ends of the tube do not exist without the tube itself. One cannot speak of the SELF as separate from others, because the SELF doesn't exist without others. Further, "truth" is not a function of one's own view or the others' view, but is socially constructed in community and in relationship. Now, here's my only Father's Day reference: When I mentioned "constructed reality" to my father, the scientist, he looked at me as though I was crazy! It will be interesting to see his reaction to my Father's Day

gift – a book on postmodernism called Reality Isn't What It Used To Be.

Now I can hardly claim to be a Stage 5 person, only to have had a taste and perhaps be in transition to Stage 5. And many of you may now be asking "what's wrong with Stage 4?" And others of you, who are further along in your development, may be saying "Of course" to what has been to me a profound discovery. And there is of course always a problem with viewing things hierarchically, because it implies something better on top, and less openness to the value of things not on top. A further problem is that from Stage 3, there is no way to even conceptualize what Stage 4 would look like or feel like. If we haven't gotten there, we don't know that there is anything else, so we can't feel a lack. I am sure this rings some familiar bells for many of you. For me, it has certainly been true.

As I said, this new place has been personally revolutionary. I have used the metaphor that I was perfectly content living in my house with the 8 foot ceilings, and then someone came along and blew the roof off, and there is a whole sky out there. And I want to fly. I find that I have reclaimed my passionate, energetic side, a side I had demoted, calling it superficial, while considering the quiet, introspective, internally peaceful place the "real" place to try to always be. I now find that passionate and energetic doesn't have to mean uncaring or unconnected with people. Previously it was one or the other, show biz or "real," passionate or caring. In fact, Kegan says, *"Passion is its own purpose. Passion can be a bit disdainful of reasonableness and productivity. And passion is among the most sacred and fragile gifts the gods bestow on us. It is fragile before our devastating embarrassment and impatience. And it is sacred because it promises the possibility of new life."* [p. 354]. I think this is what Seekers means by "call."

I now find that my life feels more integrated, that there is

less separation between my personal and my work life. Carolyn and Meg chided me the other night about talking about heavy stuff on a Friday night. But there no longer seems to be a contradiction in that for me. However, if I am appropriately self-reflective, I might want to hear what they say, and be open to what it means to us in relationship.

I do feel more open to other people, more loving, more connected, more exhilarated. I feel less complete, and more sure that life is lived in relationship; that each encounter is exciting because I never know what gem will come from it. It seems that there is more to be gained in the process of this connecting and collaboration than there is to be gained on my own. I feel more confident and more open to waiting and being in process, not having a road map to tell me how it will all turn out, less like I have to determine how it will all come out, and more like we will co-construct our experiences and our learning and our faith together. I realize, as many of you may have long realized, how important this community is, how committed we need to be to community.

My conceptions of God have changed also. [use the tube again]. This was me at Stage 3, being determined by the church in which I worshipped, being responsive to external authorities in the church, and belonging to churches which required that. In Stage 4, I believed that having a relationship with God or with particular people, or with a community was a choice. I could make it or unmake it. If it worked for me I would stay. If it didn't, I would leave. Moving ahead from Stage 4, or at least what I perceive as moving ahead, I now believe that regardless of my perceptions, I am in community. God is having a relationship with me that exists regardless of my recognition of it. The holes cannot exist without the tube. That nothing I do is done in isolation, regardless of whether I recognize the impact on other people.

Peter Bankson said that his reading of the Pentecost scriptures indicated that we would learn something new about

sin. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it, particularly given the timing in our conversation of his telling it to me. But I resolved to stay open. Kathy Higgins said in the same conversation that the sin was not her new life choices, but was not staying connected with God, because of her fear of condemnation for these new, less conventional, life choices. I have also come to a new – albeit not final – idea about sin. [use tube again]. I think the sin is pretending that this relationship is a choice, that it is not there regardless, and choosing at times not to recognize that it is there and not to allow it to impact us on a moment to moment, day by day basis. It's pretending that the holes can really be separate from the tube.

Peter also said in that conversation that when I was not in this current place, I would not have been open to hearing about its existence. Perhaps he is very perceptive about me. On the other hand, his comment brings up the question of what is to be our relationship with or responsibility to each other vis-a-vis these developmental stages, particularly as they impact our faith. Do we just try to understand each other, where the other is? This, in and of itself, may be a real accomplishment. I find my new understanding of people to be freeing. I find myself more willing to meet people where they are, instead of separating myself from them because they are not where I am. After all, we each need to go through the developmental stages. And these stages are like Piagetian stages: a person can hardly be blamed because their neurotransmitters are not in place for a different level of functioning. And yet, even saying that sounds elitist, like taking an "I'm better" position, "so I will understand where you are not yet." And that is a problem with any hierarchical system. I don't know what to do about that yet except to be reflexive, and continually dialogue about an understanding that may be more useful. Perhaps that is another stage of development.



I can say that the adult development people have done research which indicates that people at higher developmental stages have better relationships, are more adaptable, and are better counselors. That doesn't mean that everyone should aspire to that. Or that those at higher developmental stages should claim the moral high ground. But at this unfinished place, I would like to take a stand – albeit, a stand I will try to stay open to changing – that the most loving thing we can do is not just to merely understand where different people are developmentally. The most loving thing we can do is to serve as each other's transitional people by optimally matching and mismatching where the other is. Matching means responding to and supporting people where they are. Mismatching means challenging them to take a step forward. For a person operating primarily out of Stage 3, this would mean reflectively listening to their understandings about norms and standards for living, while at the same time asking them what they think about their potential choices, or how they feel – in other words, Stage 4 questions to stimulate self-authoring thoughts. Asking this of a Stage 2 person doesn't work, and only brings frustration to both people. As another example, for a person operating primarily out of Stage 4, support or matching might mean really hearing them as they declare themselves, their beliefs about God and sin and relationships. Challenge or mismatching might include urging them to hear others and see their part in the community even as they develop themselves. For a Stage 3 person, this type of challenge would only encourage them to do the codependent thing and lose their sense of self. It is not loving, I believe, nor helpful, to expect someone to be where they are not, or to be able to leap ahead two stages, when this is probably not possible. Each stage is indeed becoming a new creation, is indeed as transforming as the change from mustard seed to plant. Each change forward is worthy of celebrating, and that celebration shouldn't be slighted.

I believe God meets us where we are and optimally matches and

mismatches us. I think that is the reason our perceptions of God change, our interpretations of the same scriptures change, and the requirements we feel from God change. This is perhaps the reason why I find problematic fundamentalism's notions of preaching from the pulpit about the "truth" for my life, the interpretation of a particular scripture, or any other prescription.

While what someone else has discovered may be "truth" for me at some point in my life, and I can remain open to its possibilities, it may not be helpful now. While I don't know what faith tradition Kegan espouses, he says this about God.

*"The Jewish mystics say that God makes human beings because God love stories. This is quite a modest stance to give an all-powerful, all-loving God. Even God, the mystics are saying, does not know how we are going to come out, so why should we wish for greater control or need it? Better perhaps for us to emulate this kind of God, whose pleasure in us comes not from our obedience to God's laws and regularities, however subject we may be to them, but from God's sheer fascination with how we will live. For a God like this one, we ourselves are the objects of passionate engagement, endlessly let go of and recovered for a purpose God himself (or God herself) may not yet know." [p. 355].*