

## IN MEMORIAM

### James Wiley “Jim” Fowler III (1940–2015)

**I**nstead of mailing Christmas cards to relatives and friends, our family sends an annual Epiphany letter through email. This year, with a pang of sadness, I deleted Jim Fowler’s address from our mailing list.

I was not under the illusion that he had been reading our letters. I had heard that Jim was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, a rumor that was confirmed when I read his obituary, and I had not heard directly from him for years. I was not among his closest friends; I had been one of his graduate students while we both were at Emory University in Atlanta. Yet I felt a connection with him, which he recognized and helped nurture—to my great benefit—and so with affection I kept sending him news of how my family and I were doing. Much could be (and already has been) written about the contributions that Jim made to the fields of pastoral theology, developmental psychology, and ethics in professional contexts; the arc of his academic and ministerial career; and the awards and accolades he deservedly garnered. His book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) is now a classic text that has found widespread acceptance and generated vigorous discussion and debate among scholars and practitioners alike. I sensed that he relished both responses equally because they meant that he was doing relevant work and making a difference.

Rather than belabor what others will say more eloquently about these aspects of his legacy, I beg your indulgence as I take a more personal path. In the fall semester of 1993, I had

just begun my doctoral studies at Emory. With a mixture of awe and dread I enrolled in Jim's seminar entitled Faith and Selfhood, and immediately my classmates and I plunged into a flurry of dense readings punctuated by weekly meetings where we took turns presenting our summaries and critiques, followed by rapid-fire conversation. My peers spoke easily and expertly about Derrida, Levinas, and all things postmodern, but I felt adrift.

One afternoon, at some point in this ongoing dialogue that I barely understood, I finally asked a question that was fueled by exasperation and frustration: "We've been talking a lot about these ideas and concepts, but how would we translate this stuff into something that would matter to my neighbor, Mr. MacDuffie?" I was referring to an elderly African American retiree who lived with his wife in a small, worn, yet well-tended house next door to me. I could not envision what benefit our philosophical reflections would have on his family or the working-class neighborhood in which they had lived for decades.

My query did not go far. As I recall, there was a brief silence and then we pivoted and pursued another thread of argument. I was demoralized. I did not feel like I belonged in the academy. I did not speak the same language.

After that session, I was leaving the classroom when Jim asked if we could talk. I felt intimidated and worried about what he might say, but of course I consented. I don't remember much except for one statement, gently delivered in his rich, deep, warm voice: "You're asking the right questions, Peter. Don't lose that pastoral side of yourself; that's what we're really here to do." He smiled, we said our goodbyes, and he left. My heart soared, and my resolve found new life.

In the years that followed, Jim graciously agreed to serve on my dissertation committee, and we had several conversations in which we wound up talking about our families as much as about my research. He was encouraging and curious about my young son, whom he had met—and, of course, as someone who had been influenced by both Piaget and Erikson, he was eager to hear how Adam perceived the world. And Jim was pensive when speaking about his mother's increasing dementia; he was familiar with my

ministry in continuing care retirement communities and he knew about my father's strokes and rehabilitation, and I intuited that he sought human empathy and collegial consultation. I did my best to offer both. One of my happiest memories occurred when I received my doctoral hood and, along with other family and friends, both Jim and Adam congratulated me with hearty laughter.

After I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, I corresponded with Jim occasionally and with decreasing frequency after he retired in 2005. I now know why. Since his death, I hear his voice ringing forth with clarity and insight in his writings and in my recollection of his teaching and mentoring.

I mourn Jim's death and celebrate his life and ministry. I trust that he is held in the loving and sustaining embrace of the Compassionate One whose memory never fails as well as in the memories of those who were touched by his spirit and influenced by his scholarship.

I count myself fortunate to have experienced both aspects of Jim in my own life.

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