



Cultural Resistance in Youth: Problems and Possibilities

This lecture is about young people and influence, about the influences on them and about their capacity to be humanizing influences in their own right. I will examine this matter from the point of view of the Gospels and of education. My aim is to show how education and the church can be key agents in cultural critique and in fostering a wider awareness of cultural issues.

The Gospels disclose to us a Jesus aware of inner functioning, often called “the heart” (Matthew 9:4, Mark 2:8, Luke 5:22), but even more aware of how social patterns distort and even corrupt human relationships. This Jesus has relevance for the church and, particularly, for young people. My topic here is youth, culture, and discipleship. My underlying concern is how we think about youth, how we think about the world in which we live, and how we invite young people to think about and live in that world. In the first two sections of this lecture I will try to show ways of considering behaviors that reveal what is in our hearts. I will examine various “codes” that shape us: biological codes, interactive codes, and codes of meaning. Then I will consider “contexts” and how they shape what is in our hearts. I will look at three contexts: peer groups, family contexts, and the church as a context.

1. Facing the Social Influences on the Young

A good deal of church writing on youth begins with the young as psychological beings, not as social beings. By that I mean that this writing looks to the young as isolates, struggling with their own internal psychological issues, while it ignores social influences, at least wider, extra familial social and cultural influences. I am not proposing the social over the psychological but both together, with a claim that social influences need special attention. While not dismissing psychology, I find that seeing youth in their social context provides a more astute but challenging approach.

I begin with an example that may at first seem ridiculous. The example is this: In late 1997, reports reaching the West confirmed that the forest fires burning out of control in Borneo and Sumatra for more than six months continued to ravage the rain forests. Indeed many thousands of square miles in

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines were covered with sun-fogging haze from these fires. The reports focused on a single species endangered by these blazes sparked literally by human greed and irresponsibility. The species is the orangutans. The fires had driven the orangutans from their traditional forest habitats and toward villages and plantations where the adult animals were being killed and their young taken as pawns in the lucrative illegal trade in young primates. Conservationists worked feverishly to rescue these young who had not yet learned to live on their own. Scientists said it would take years to train these creatures to live in the wild. The specific skills these juveniles would have learned from their mothers included how to build their nightly nests and how to feed themselves on the 400 varieties of bark, grubs, and fruit that make up their natural diet.

The report on this devastation is striking.¹ The survival skills of such creatures as orangutans are not genetically encoded, as, say, those of birds seem to be. Having evolved over many millennia, these skills are quasi-cultural. They are handed down by parent to youngster, laboriously over time, as the youngsters watch the parents doing what eventually the youngsters themselves must do in order to survive. The young imitate [“ape”] and slowly master the survival behaviors of their elders. Basically the parents are teachers of their young. They teach their young Orangutan-ing skills, behaviorally demonstrating to them *know-how* by means of “*show-how*.” Lacking the show-how leading to know-how, the species itself could collapse and die out.

As I say, this example is potentially ludicrous. My own point, however, is not about apes but about culture, understood as the cultivation of human and humanizing meanings among persons. Does the crisis still threatening young apes in Borneo have any significance for what is happening to our own young? My own answer is no and yes. No: whatever crises are occurring among our own young, the immediate issue is not one of species survival, as in the case of the orangutans. But, yes: the humanizing show-how is crucial for young people. Human beings have found the means of handing on to their young ways of making things, patterns of behavior, concepts, and beliefs. The humanizing show-how is to be done carefully, intentionally. All these means can be grouped under the heading “human constructions.” Ordinarily we could say that such constructions all intend the survival of what is beneficial for the human race. But such constructions can become demonic, and they need to be judged precisely for their humanizing—or de-humanizing—potential. Language is one such construction; laws and norms are other, related constructions. Many, if not most, of these constructs influence us in implicit rather than explicit ways, that is, you “get



them” even when you don’t know you are getting them. [Stunning examples of how customs can be passed on can be found in Barbara Kingsolver’s best-selling novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*.]

A final word about these constructions. Most of them are actual physical constructions, like buildings or physical instruments. Most physical instruments need explicit, even written instructions on their use. Think of standing in a kitchenware store with a friend who holds up a gadget and asks, “What is this thing for?” On the other hand, many instruments have implicit instructions built in to their very design.

Take guns as an example. By the very way they are made, they have implicit norms for their use attached to them. *Encoded in their very design is how to use them*. However, lacking explicit norms, they become lethal. So when the U.S. National Rifle Association says, “Guns don’t kill people; people do,” they misstate the human situation and reality. People don’t exist as abstractions. They are formed by the kinds of words they use and the way they speak of various subjects. People are formed by the objects they take into their hands, as well as by the permissions given by their society. Such things are what we mean by culture.

When two seventeen-year-old males in Ireland—where handguns are not available the way they are in the United States—get into a hot dispute over an important issue, say about the sexual habits of their immediate ancestors, the encounter has quite different import. The only objects in *their* pockets are their hands, but the outcome might be different in a U.S. city, where each teen might have in pocket a gun as a means of resolving disputes. The technological artifact, the gun, and the permissions given by numberless depictions of men with guns, brings to even a fairly mild encounter in New York City a deadly character it might not have in Ireland. While guns isolated from human agency don’t kill people, people armed with guns tend to see a dispute through the lens of the gun. To use a somewhat frightening metaphor: this particular object leaks or bleeds special meaning into the event.

At this point I want to state a personal conviction of mine. Much training for pastoral work and especially for youth ministry ignores the importance of the objective world we live in, how we speak, how we name things, what things we say are funny and what are sad or horrible, and so forth. I am saying that this training tends to give over-focus to the inner-psyche world of the young—the psychological world of inner struggles—while in effect pushing the material world of ways of speaking, of using objects, of spending time, and so forth, off to the side, leaving that world largely unnamed

and basically undiscussed. And so when the shootings at Columbine High School took place in April 1999, there was a lot written about the psychological situation of the killers. For example, did they have dysfunctional homes, etc. But I found almost no discussion of what videos they watched, what TV shows they preferred; what magazines they read, etc. In some university youth ministry courses, you could get the impression that if you don't master the theoretical positions of Erik Erikson, you know little, and if you do, you know everything needed. Naming the chief struggles of the young as the inner-psychic ones is not fully helpful for understanding young people. Why? Because the chief struggles of the young are not the inner-psychic ones.² That is not to deny inner struggles their proper attention; it is just to say they are important but not most important. Actually they can't be understood at any depth apart from how they are related to the social. The situation of young people cannot be properly understood without attention to how social and cultural forces such as the media, educational institutions, parents, or the church, affect them.

And so I come back to the humanizing show-how question: Who tells the young how to be human and what is inhuman, say in the coming together of the sexes? Do TV sitcoms or "romantic" films do more effective [but not more helpful] telling than those who might be expected to have deeper human concerns about relationships. Here I refer again to Jesus who knew what was in their hearts and called attention to it. My question for all who love the young is: Who will whisper to them the secrets of humanization? Who has their attention and about which matters? From a religious point of view, who will whisper to them the wisdom about how to conduct a life that Jesus disclosed to us? What are the conditions under which they can even attend to that wisdom? What tools for wisdom have been put into their hands? A principle: Where the problems created are cultural, the solutions will also have to be cultural—whispering an alternative way of imagining life.

When teachers or ministers hear someone like me talk of such dilemmas, they tend to come down with an educational migraine or an instructional rash, especially if they suppose the burden of change falls on them. I am saying otherwise. Like people in ministry, educators can be change agents if they are willing to consider the other agents of change out there. They can't work in isolation.

2. Looking at Potentially Positive Zones of Influence

Jerome Bruner, in his recent book *The Culture of Education* points out how the passing on of any knowledge or skill involves what he calls "a subcommunity in interaction."³ "It is principally through interacting with



others that children find out what the culture is about and how it [the culture] conceives of the world.”⁴ Education as a work of cultural interaction demands what Bruner calls “intersubjectivity.” By that word he means the ability of humans to understand the minds of others and to grasp the significance of the settings in which words, actions, and gestures happen. To this I want to add that more and more in a time of fractured attention, ministry to youth (and any age group) is a *ministry to attention*, that is, fostering the ability to stare, to consider, to ponder, to wonder, to quiet oneself enough to be thoughtful. In my view the major academic obstacle most students face is this ability to pay attention. And so when Bruner focuses on intersubjectivity, he is talking fundamentally about attention.

Education takes place in situations. That’s a way of saying education is a cultural activity. It is also a way of seeing intelligence as not located in single heads but as distributed within a community and its environment. One powerful indicator of the truth of this insight: Research has shown that a person’s chances of winning a Nobel prize in science are sharply increased by one’s having worked in a laboratory in which an earlier prize winner had worked. Apparently, particular habits of work, the kind of encouragement offered, the atmosphere of creative research established, the allocation of research money (once in place) can offer a zone fostering the sort of creativity but also the specific procedures needed for world-class scientific inquiry. Bruner’s basic point is to pay attention to the *conditions* under which influence works, because that influence can also be negative. Put a promising young scientist into a lab where sloppy procedures are used, and she will likely become a lesser scientist for having worked there.

Of course, I want to pay attention also to the conditions of the local church for their positive or negative influence on discipleship. What weight do these conditions have in the face of the wider social influences that come from consumer capitalism and its powerful electronic communications. People we never see are telling us stories that shape our spirits. The less we think about this influence, the more powerfully it influences us.

By way of conclusion here, I will consider briefly three potentially humanizing zones of influence among the young: peer groups, the family, and the church. I wish to draw more critical attention to each of them.

Peer Groups

Most are aware of how crucial peer groups are for young people—but equally for adults. Our peer groups define for us what topics are conversationally acceptable and even how certain topics are talked about. It is very

difficult to help young people reconsider the way they think about and talk about the opposite sex, when these ways of talking take on “natural” patterns of conversation. Young men regularly trade myths about how young women think, talk, and act, about what they want, and so forth. Young women have their own myths too.

What is of interest to me as a teacher of an undergraduate course in marriage is how new ideas can in a sense be taken on by young people—in a sense accepted—but without ever interrupting the actual conversations or ways of speaking in peer groups. In class new understandings emerge that never actually interrupt the conversational codes among peers. In my view, the new codes will die unless they influence these everyday interactions. So as a teacher I try to get out into the open the common codes and try to ask explicitly whether we are willing to question them or behaviorally contest them. “Will you object when your friends talk of the opposite sex as parts of their bodies?” is often the way I put the question. *The crisis of friendship in late adolescence is about this very matter.*

Youth ministry religious talk sometimes stays confined to the youth ministry sessions without spilling over to everyday practices, which include conversation. When convictions shouted around the altar are not permitted in any way to be whispered among one’s friends, they are in effect as dead as an ancient language found only in books. So the actual codes of speaking are untouched. And one’s way of thinking is also untouched. Even worse is the situation where the convictions struggled with and accepted by the young themselves via conversations in youth ministry groups are *never* broached in the pulpit.

Family

I offer a single thought about this highly politicized matter. And it comes from a comment on a despicable 1995 film *Kids*, by a well-known writer. She claims the family meal is “the core curriculum in the school of civilized discourse” and that it provides “a set of protocols that curb our natural savagery and our animal greed, and cultivate a capacity for sharing and thoughtfulness.” She suggests that in the film, we may be seeing what happens to the first generation in history not required to participate in that “primal rite of socialization.”⁵ She is not idealizing meals, which can be occasions of verbal and even physical brutalization, though they tend on the whole to do something quite other. “Like the Passover seder or the Communion bread, the ritual of nutrition helps to imbue families, and societies at large, with greater empathy and fellowship. However, all rituals



involve, to some degree, a sacrifice, and the home meal requires genuine sacrifices of time and energy, large expenditures those very traits it nurtures—patience, compassion, self-discipline.”

Lest my point seem overstated, I note a telephone poll conducted in November 1990, surveying the eating practices of families with children under eighteen living with them.⁶

To the question, “While you are eating dinner, is your family also usually watching TV or talking?” 56% said “talking,” while 27% said “both watching and talking” and 15% said “watching TV.”

To the question, “In the last seven days, how many evenings did most of your family eat together?” The results were: 0 or 1 evening: 10%; 2 or 3 evenings: 15%; 4 or 5 evenings: 21%; 6 evenings: 8%; 7 evenings: 46%.

However some of us know families who consider eating together the central familial event of the day, the moment of processing what has been going on, a key interpretive moment for considering the significance of various events of the day, the time for talking about ourselves to those who love us. I know others who regularly gather around their dinner table with their children and a variety of adult friends, with the intention of letting the children see and hear adult interaction on issues that interest them: world affairs, justice issues, religious matters. They believe that what children overhear is every bit as formative as what they are explicitly told and instructed.

Religious Groups—the Church

Gathering with others to worship God and to remind ourselves of the kinds of commitments we are called to by God’s presence and goodness is another way of interrupting and contesting the kind of self-indulgence the consumerist culture convinces us is “right and proper” for us. This ability to stop and ponder and pray, to willingly interrupt business as usual, is one of the many features of Islam some of us admire. Gathering with those who live out in their everyday lives the inconvenient religious alternatives to the consumerist culture, offers a powerful alternative vision of life’s purposes and possibilities.

Notice here that I am speaking about the living out of commitments in a coherent and visible way, not about the continual announcing of commitments that just about nobody actually lives. The young are very quick to sniff out and reject that sort of scam. Some young prefer a truthful hedonism to a religious asceticism that refuses to admit it is only an idea—or worse a religious cover-up of lived values. There are some religious groups that are unbelievable because their lives don’t square with their doctrine. What they

mumble around the altar is not what they are interested in implementing at work or in their homes.


However, I know of no more powerful antidote to the false promises of a consumerist society than that of finding a religious group of persons who live faithfully and wisely in today's world. They gather regularly to remind each other they are not nuts for thinking and living the way they do. When the one they try to imitate in their behavior is the Galilean Jew, Jesus, their gathering can be powerful. It brings happy news to the poor; a blissful word of their immanent release to captives; restored sight to the blind; and the announcement of a year in which all debts are forgiven [Luke 4: 18-19].

Bruner's notion of distributed intelligence implies a possible dark side as "distributed obtuseness or deafness."⁷ There could be conditions that lend themselves, not to elegant inquiry but to sloppy science, and these conditions spill over from particular persons of sloppy habits to a community of persons working in conditions that become, if not hostile to science itself, then at least hostile to a certain level of astute scientific inquiry. Each side of this "distributed intelligence" equation has obvious implications for churches. Living in a community whose praxis is embodied in acts of healing carried out in its social and civic environment fosters one sort of "distributed discipleship," whereas living in one whose praxis is reduced to a weekly ritual of self-affirmation cut off from acts of civic healing produces a quite different sense of discipleship.

I have met young people who name their life-in-church as limited to the "practice of doctrinal expertise." Or, "I feel I am saved" could seem to be the whole thing for them. Signs of the kingdom of God being established even in small ways as signs the bread is rising—these don't carry much weight. Any deeper skills of discipleship have been denied them at least implicitly. Such young people joyfully waltz away from ecclesial affiliation altogether, unaware of what an ecclesia is meant to be. They had languished by the Pool of Siloe, where, inches from transformation, no one assisted them into the healing waters. Over twenty years ago I was asked to give some remarks about youth ministry to a group of about forty Roman Catholic bishops, and I said to them something I thought they would probably object to—but not one did. I told them I thought that a community of lived fidelity to the gospel was the greatest religious gift one could give a young person.

There is reason for hope. I find in many young people intuitions that many of the promises of the consumerist society are false. They are not starry-eyed but simply thoughtful. When they meet others willing to own up to the same intuitions, they are on their way to reconsidering their lives.



They are no longer lost in the burning forests but are on the path to discovering the deeper skills of discipleship. 

NOTES

1. Seth Mydans, "In Vast Forest Fires of Asia, Scant Mercy for Orangutans," *The New York Times*, 16 December 1997, pp. A1, A4.

2. For more on this point, see my essay "The Imaginations of Youth," in *Youth Ministry and Discipleship*, White, Mahan, and Warren (Nashville: Abingdon Press, forthcoming).

3. Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 132 and 154. His point is that intelligence resides in institutions and in groups, not just in isolated heads. Intelligence, in a word, reflects a microculture of praxis: the reference one uses, the notes one habitually takes, the computer programs and databases one relies upon, and, perhaps most important of all, the network of friends, colleagues, or mentors on whom one leans for feedback, help, advice, even just for company. So it is probably as true of the sciences as of messy daily life that the construal of meaning is not from some Apollonian "view from nowhere," p. 132.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

5. Francine Du Plessix Gray, "Starving Children," *The New Yorker* (16 October 1995): 51.

6. *The New York Times* (5 December 1990), p. C6.

7. Bruner, *Culture of Education*.

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