



Breaking In, Breaking Out: Disruption as a Theological Practice in Youth Ministry

In her introduction to philosophical inquiry methods, educator and philosopher Maxine Greene highlights a passage from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The passage begins with an account of the routines of daily life and describes the lurch into a new mode of awareness, or what Greene terms “awakeness.”¹ Greene uses this passage as evidence of what Camus names as the “mode of awakening.” She argues that this mode of awakening is necessary for growth. It is the moment, Greene writes, that “everything begins.”

I liken this mode of awakening to disruption, and I argue that one of the essential practices of youth ministry is one that of late tends to be ignored, even prevented: the practice of disruption.

Twenty years ago, David Ng, professor of Christian Education at San Francisco Theological Seminary, wrote a book titled *Youth in the Community of Disciples*.² Ng argued for ultimately including young people in the whole life of the church and for a focus on discipleship in youth ministry. He wrote that youth ministry is not four things: it is not fellowship, it is not maintenance, it is not entertainment, and it is not protection.

By saying that youth ministry is not about “fellowship,” he explained that too many youth ministry programs were focusing on relationship building for the sake of relationship building. The church is not simply a social club of attractive, well-adjusted people who enjoy being together, he reminded us. We do not build relationships for the sake of relationships. The goal of the church is not to serve as some lonely hearts club. Youth ministry is not simply about fellowship.

Nor is youth ministry about maintenance. For Ng, maintenance is the mistaken idea that the goal of youth ministry is to just keep young people in a holding pen called “the youth room” until they mature and are less destructive and are able to tithe and contribute to the church’s mission. In my work with various congregations throughout the country, I have seen congregations

that were trying to maintain, and what they did not realize is that while they were trying to just hold on until the new head of staff came or whatever, they were actually losing ground because everyone and everything else was still moving—passing them by.

Ng also wrote that youth ministry is not about entertainment. This kind of youth ministry is expressed by those who are convinced that if you simply purchase a better sound system or wide screen television or call a more attractive youth leader or...you can see where it ends. Actually the point is that it never ends. That is the problem. Viacom or Murdoch or AOL Time Warner or whoever will always be able to do better than the church at delivering entertainment. Youth ministry is to be engaging, but the goal is not entertainment.

Finally, Ng wrote that youth ministry is not to be about protection, which he defined as the mistaken belief that the church's task is to somehow inoculate young people against all the evils and temptations of the world—to keep them safe in an insulated place where they might thrive and prosper. This idea of protection is the main culprit in our neglect of disruption as a theological practice in youth ministry. It seems that we have misappropriated the concept of safe. We know the world is a frightening place, so we have misconstrued our job in youth ministry as one of creating a “safe space” for young people, and sadly we have confused safe with comfortable. Safe cannot be equated with comfort and complacency. It is entirely possible for the church to be a safe space but for there still to be discomfort.

Certainly our search for comfort is understandable and, perhaps, human nature. In fact, among developmental theorists, there is wide agreement that what we desire ultimately is comfort and balance. The cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget in his development of stage theory described this as a desire for equilibration. The natural direction of development, according to Piaget, is toward states of equilibrium—that is, states of balance among different elements of cognition, balance between processes of what he termed “assimilation” and “accommodation,” and balance between the cognitive system and the outer world. A state of equilibration or equilibrium implied a synchronized, smoothly running, comfortable cognitive system, one that yielded ready and consistent answers to the problems one encountered. In contrast, a state of disequilibrium, or cognitive conflict, implied some imbalance or discomfort, some lack of fit, some uncertainty in the solutions that the cognitive structures offered. Interestingly enough, Piaget said that we need disequilibrium because such states were motivating and because in seeking to resolve the

disequilibrium and achieve equilibrium again, the child would move to a whole new understanding or mode of awakening to use Camus's term. Without disequilibrium, there is no growth.³

Some of us think it is our job to make our young people as comfortable as possible, but if we try to we are doing a disservice to them. Youth ministry is not about protection, and it is certainly not about comfort, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is not about protection and it is certainly not about comfort. Earlier this spring, at a lecture at Columbia Theological Seminary's Colloquium, J. Louis Martyn, professor emeritus of biblical theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, called the advent of Jesus Christ, God's great interruption into the history of humankind. Surely our Lord practiced a ministry of disruption. He sought to disrupt the money changers in the temple, the comfortable lives of the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day, the Roman authorities, his parents, even his disciples.

Our trying to protect our young people is ultimately insulting to them and reductive of them. Our young people know disruption. They know sadness and pain and suffering already.

Educator Kevin Kumashiro in his book *Troubling Education* writes that to challenge oppressive structures, one needs disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge but disruptive knowledge. This disruptive knowledge, like Piaget's disequilibrium, is what leads us to change and grow.⁴

I confess that I too often have fallen into the protection trap. Years ago when I was working in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.'s youth ministry office, I was serving as one of several denominational staff members for the design team, a group of young people and adults whose task was to plan and implement the Presbyterian Youth Triennium, a triennial gathering of more than seven thousand youth and adults from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America. One of my colleagues, another staff member from the PC(USA), was new to the process. She was staffing the global partners work group. I had heard rumors that things were not going well, that she was being autocratic with and dismissive of the young people in her work group. During our third and final design team meeting before the event, at about 2:00 a.m., I was awakened by someone knocking on my door. I opened it and found two of the young people from that work group in tears. They had been talking with each other and were obviously distressed. These were two incredible young women—one of them was from the

Presbyterian Church in Canada and the other was from the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. I invited them in, called the staff person from the Cumberland Church, and asked him to come over. We sat together for an hour while they relayed to both of us their experiences in between sobs. They talked at length about how they did not think they were being respected by my staff colleague. They said they knew that other young people on other work teams were getting real assignments and were listened to and taken seriously, and they wanted to transfer to other teams. I went into rescue mode. I began to tell them that I was sorry and that I would take care of it, but before I could finish, the other staff person, Frank Ward, who was older and certainly wiser than me, invited us to take some time and pray. He said we were all tired, and it was very late—by then early morning. And then Frank said something I will never forget. He said, “I am not so sure that what you both are experiencing is such a bad thing. I am glad you came to talk to Rodger and glad he called me. I am glad you have each other. Let’s sleep on this and see if we can work this out. Let’s talk in the morning.” We prayed together, and they left. I told Frank that I was sure it was a bad thing and that I was embarrassed and I was going to fix it. Frank smiled and told me that it was probably best for all of us to get what little sleep we could. We talked over breakfast, and the two young women agreed to try it for the last day of the meeting. At the end of the day they assured us that it was not a whole lot better, but they had decided they were going to stay with it, to persevere. They did. And they grew and spoke up and took charge of the international program and worked with the international delegates. And they learned. And so did my colleague. And so did I.

A significant part of bridge building is disruption. We are called to allow it. I even believe we are called to enable it to happen.

Rick Osmer, who now teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote the following in an article for the journal of Union Theological Seminary when he was still teaching in Richmond, Virginia:

An important part of the dissatisfaction of today’s young people with the mainline churches stems from the absence of a spiritually challenging and world-shaping vision that meets their hunger for the chance to participate in what Stanley Hauerwas has termed “a worthy adventure.” Instead, our efforts have focused on devising strategies for keeping young people in the church because it is a place

where they will be safe from the terrors of the streets or the seductions of the shopping mall. Our hopes for them are modest and reasonable. For the most part, they mirror the expectations we have for ourselves. We ask no more than that they grow up to be “good” people—decent, law abiding, successful in their jobs and happy in their marriages. To this end, we program activities which are certainly wholesome, sometimes edifying, and almost always fun. Conscientious youth ministers work hard to find ways to involve youth in worthwhile service projects, and often such projects—which yield concrete results to which we can point with pride—are very successful. Of course, some youth do remain in the church, and most of these do turn out to be “good” people. But many more do not. They leave the church because it asks nothing significant of them. They leave the church because it is spiritually innocuous.⁵

Tony Campolo’s perspective on the biblical concept of the kingdom of God is that people committed to Christ are called to do more than be “good” persons. Rather, God is calling them to transform the current social order. Campolo believes that a critical mass of committed Christians is needed to call for the end of the consumption of unrenewable resources, the pollution of the environment, runaway military spending, and the support of oppression upon which the United States’ economy thrives. In his book *Growing Up in America*, Campolo concludes that if the current generation of teenagers is not present in the church and is swallowed up by the culture, it is not because leaders in the church demand too much from them, it is because we demand too little.⁶

In the film *The Truman Show*, Jim Carey plays the role of Truman, who unbeknownst to him is actually the focus of a television show. His whole world has been constructed, and all of the people around him are actors. Truman goes about his day with every moment scripted, and he is oblivious and content, certainly comfortable in his world. Some of the viewers and the cast members believe it is unfair to Truman that he does not know that everything in his world is a façade, and they conspire to somehow tell him. In a scene illustrating Truman’s mode of awakening, his easy life is disrupted by a cast member who tries to communicate to him that he is actually part of a television show. Truman then begins to understand that what he knows to be true is actually not true. Before this disruption, Truman is content to go on

about his comfortable, safe life. Once he is disrupted, everything changes for him, and the movie really begins to get interesting. Disruption does the same for our young people and does the same for us.

In this way, I also believe that part of our task is to enable our young people to disrupt us. It was the spring of 1991, Iraq had invaded Kuwait, and we were on the verge of what is now known as the first Persian Gulf War. I was staying in a hotel in Albuquerque preaching and speaking there for the presbytery of Santa Fe, and I remember having the television tuned to CNN and, the next moment, hearing the voice of one of my young people from the Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville. Perhaps you remember this, too. I remember coming out of the bathroom and looking at the television, and there was Corey. At the time, she was an eighth grader at Noe Middle School in Louisville, and she had made the news because she was the organizer of a walkout at her school protesting the impending war. When I got back to town, I talked to her and told her about my seeing her on television. I asked her about why she did it, and Corey told me that she had been reading her Bible, a dangerous proposition to be sure, and, over and over, it seemed to her that to be a Christian meant that we had to seek peace. While she was not sure about this just war stuff, as she called it, she was sure that the United States was not seeking peace enough. She organized a protest, and in the middle of third period, respectfully, she led much of Noe Middle School's student body out of the building and walking for peace, interrupting traffic. Corey was not stupid. She had also sent faxes to the Louisville *Courier Journal* and to the three network affiliates, who all sent reporters and photographers and camera crews. When I asked how she was doing, she said she was O.K. She was a little frustrated though because she had been surprised by some of the name calling and some of the telephone calls her parents had received. Someone had written "fag" and "commie" on her locker, and she didn't understand what that had to do with wanting peace. I told her that her witness was powerful and that when you read the Bible, it changes you. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "Yeah, I guess so."

That young people, out of their faithfulness in studying Scripture and discerning the Holy Spirit's call, might disrupt us surely is one of their most generous gifts to the church. That we would squelch that in any way is one of our most egregious sins.

My colleague Walter Brueggemann, in his book *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, building on the work of Paul Ricoeur, proposes the sequence of orien-

tation then disorientation then reorientation as a helpful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms, and he organizes his theological commentary, *The Message of the Psalms*, around these themes.⁷ Brueggemann likens disorientation to displacement. He writes that “a person in disorientation is one who has lost one’s old equilibrium and is precisely the one who has the freedom and vitality to face the openness of lament language. Those who are safe and settled in an old equilibrium are the ones who want to identify the enemy and all the other figures in this poetry. Interpreters must be freed of our closely oriented habits of exegesis if the psalm is to have the freedom to fully articulate the experience of disorientation.”⁸

Without disruption, there is no growth. As a practice in youth ministry, we allow it, we welcome it, and we are called to do it. Not in a cavalier way and not with the intention of being hurtful and abandoning these young people to their own survival, but as a means of discipleship—as a means of taking up the cross and following Jesus Christ. I believe we are called to it, together, in this worthy adventure of ministry with young people.

Notes

1. Maxine Greene, “Philosophic Inquiry Methods,” *Complementary Methods for Research in Education*, ed. Richard M. Jaeger, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 1988), p. 199.
2. David Ng, *Youth in the Community of Disciples* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984), p. 15.
3. John H. Flavell, *Cognitive Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 350. Flavell et. al. provides an excellent summary of Piaget’s theory of equilibration in this text.
4. Kevin Kumashiro, *Troubling Education* (New York: Routledge Farmer, 2002), p. 43.
5. Richard Osmer, “Challenges to Youth Ministry in Mainline Churches: Thought Provokers,” *Affirmation 2* (Spring 1989), p. 6.
6. Tony Campolo, *Growing Up in America: A Sociology of Youth Ministry* (Minneapolis: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 201–210.
7. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984).
8. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 13.