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## A Life Creates a Bridge

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*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13–16*

Bridges presuppose a distance or separation, as well as a desire to span that separation. In my first lecture, I laid out the various forces that give rise to youth ministry. Many of these forces, if followed blindly, increase the separation, isolation, and alienation between adults and youth, between young people and the Christian faith, between ministers and their own hearts. This separation is the sin that arises from lives grounded in fear, anxiety, and wrongly placed desires—ones that are often more about adults than about youth. I tried to show how we as youth ministers increase the distances in our ministries when our work remains pre-occupied with quelling the fears and satisfying the desires of parents, church members, and ourselves.

What I want to address in this lecture is how we overcome the divisions that emerge in our ministries between youth and adults, youth and God, youth and ourselves. What are we as youth ministers supposed to do to traverse these distances? What is our role? What actions do we take?

### Doing Nothing

My first suggestion for navigating the separations within our ministry is this: do nothing. For seven years, a friend of mine had a job organizing national conferences for pastors. Each year he would bring together teachers and church leaders around a particular issue facing North American pastors. One day I called him and asked how the conferences were developing. He said, “I’m frustrated and thinking of quitting my job.” “Why?” I asked. “Well,” he said, “no matter what the subject of the conference, whether it is

stewardship, evangelism, or sexuality, the conversation among participating pastors always devolves into one topic: ‘Do you do contemporary or traditional worship? Do you have guitars or organ music? Do you read *The Message* or the King James?’”

He went on to say that in seven years of leading conferences, this seems to be the sole topic church leaders want to discuss. I asked him how he was responding to this trend. He said, “The last conference I led was for two hundred pastors. As usual the conversation quickly turned to the subject of contemporary or traditional worship. As people were talking, this image came to me. I suddenly stood up, walked to the microphone at the front of the room, and said, ‘You know friends, at every pastors’ conference I attend, people want to talk only about worship style. After seven years of listening to pastors anxiously talk about this subject, a thought has occurred to me...maybe we’ve lost Christianity and we don’t know it. Maybe this is not Christianity. Maybe Christianity is living among some other group, within some other culture. Maybe what we call Christianity is really something else.’”

What my friend was trying to do was to stop the conference. He was trying to stop all the talking and worry about “relevant worship.” He was inviting people to still the anxious chatter and fearful scheming. He was inviting people to slow down and listen, to stop the frenetic activity and attend to the present moment. In the midst of people feeling anxious and confused he was drawing them to look beneath their words and activities and to ask themselves, “What’s happening here? What is our experience of life and ministry? What Spirit are we attending to? What is it that is truly driving our lives and ministries?”

Our first calling as ministers among youth is to do nothing. It is the call to stop and be still. It is the Holy Spirit’s invitation to live in the present moment, to slow down and discern the heart of our actions.

A friend of mine, Daniel, took his first assignment as the solo pastor of a small Presbyterian church in the Midwest. For the first six months he went to work and tried to fulfill the requisite duties of a solo pastor. He attended committee meetings, visited parishioners, planned and led Sunday morning worship. But after six months, something felt wrong. He noticed a hollow feeling inside himself during worship. One Sunday while leading worship he realized what was bothering him; he noticed that nobody was paying attention. Upon further observations he began to suspect that most of the people in worship

did not know why they were in church. Consequently, no one was really participating in worship and certainly no one was hearing his sermons.

Soon after his realization I called to ask how he was. “I’ve decided to stop preaching,” he told me. I was confused. I said, “Dan, what do you mean? Are you canceling worship?” He said, “Oh, no...we’ll still have worship. I’m just not going to preach anymore. I’m going to lead the service, but during the sermon time, I’m just going to stand up in front of the congregation and invite questions. If there are no questions, we’ll just spend the time in silent prayer.”

I was shocked. I tried to tell him that this was a career-ending move for a Presbyterian pastor. I said, “Daniel, we’re Presbyterian. The Episcopalians have liturgy, the Lutherans have music, the Catholics have the sacraments, the Baptists have alter calls; all we’ve got, Daniel, is the sermon—no incense, no ritual, no aesthetics, no fancy liturgy, just the sermon.” I said, “Daniel, how can you stop preaching?”

Daniel didn’t listen to me. Instead, the very next Sunday he canceled Sunday school classes. All the kids were invited to attend worship. When it came time for the sermon he stood up in front of the congregation and told them he was not going to preach. He told them he had a sense that everyone has forgotten why they are attending church. Instead of preaching he invited people to stand and ask a question that they carried with them as they came to church.

Soon there was an awkward silence. Children fidgeted. Teenagers began to crane their necks looking around the room, soaking in the awkwardness of the moment. People got uncomfortable—for most people, the one thing worse than sitting through a sermon is sitting in silence. Daniel continued to do nothing. He just stood waiting. Finally, people got agitated and someone raised his hand, “Well, is it true that you have to be born again? I mean I was always raised in the church. I never had this experience.”

Daniel said, “That’s a great question.”

More silence. Then after a few moments a woman stood and said, “Well, I want to know why the God in the Old Testament seems so different from the God of Jesus.”

“Yes,” Daniel replied, “that’s a great question.”

And that went on for twenty minutes. Afterward, people felt relieved. There was lots of excited conversation after the service. People found the questions interesting. It was actually refreshing to experience something new and different in worship.

The next Sunday Daniel got up during worship and said, “What questions do you bring with you this morning?” People became visibly upset. There was a look on most everyone’s face that said, “Come on pastor, we’re not doing this again are we?” People began to fold their arms. No one stood up. No one said anything. Daniel stood in front of the room in silence. Then he said, “It looks like no one has brought any questions this morning...my sermons are usually twenty minutes. We’ll have twenty minutes of silent prayer. During this prayer ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of your longings, the questions that brought you here this morning.” Daniel pulled out a chair and led the congregation in silent prayer for twenty minutes.

After two months I called and asked him how it was going. “Well, it’s very interesting,” he told me. “People are getting agitated. They’re asking questions about the purpose of worship; they’re calling me and asking what my job is at the church. People are stopping me to ask about the purpose of the church itself. Everyone is stirred up. But here’s the most interesting thing. The other night at youth group we had planned to just eat pizza, visit with the kids, and skip the lesson time. Well as soon as we sit down with the kids this one young guy says, ‘Pastor, I have a question. If we think God is so good, why are all these bad things going on in the world?’”

“So we talk for a while. Then this other sophomore girl says, ‘Daniel, do you really believe Jesus is the only way? Because I have a friend who’s Jewish and she goes to synagogue. Does that mean she won’t get to go to heaven?’”

“We went an hour past our normal youth group time as these kids kept asking questions. And this didn’t just happen in youth group. My wife and the other Sunday school teachers started experiencing the same questioning from children in Sunday school classes.”

After two months without sermons, people were becoming in touch with their desires, with their questions about faith and life. Youth and children, after watching their parents and other adults ask the hard questions of faith, began to explore their own experience of life, their own musings about God.

Instead of producing more dramatic sermons, more exciting hymns, more mystical rituals, Daniel had the courage to invite the congregation to stop, to be still, and to listen. He invited the congregation to slow down and pay attention to their hearts, their experience of life, and their relationship with God.

This is a very scary thing to do in a church—to stop and attend to your experience. Since 1996, I have co-led a four-day retreat entitled Sabbath: A Spiritual Retreat for Youth Workers.<sup>1</sup> Many people who come to Sabbath call

it a retreat “about nothing,” like the sitcom *Seinfeld*. On the first day people arrive very excited. They say, “This is going to be so great to get some rest and spend some time with God.” Then they see the schedule. There is silence all morning until noon. We give them a couple of prayer exercises. Then we gather them at the end of the day and ask them how they’re doing.

Immediately people get nervous. They get frustrated. They say, “Hey, wait a minute! I just paid money to be by myself all day? After traveling all the way out to San Francisco all you offer me is silence, a couple of prayer exercises, and a spiritual director who asks me how I’m doing? I could have done this on my own!” We remind them that they would never do this on their own. We ask them, “Would you really choose to spend four days in silence and prayer on your own?”

For the first five years that we led this retreat, people would quietly disappear from the event. On the second or third day we would notice someone missing. A participant would come up to us and say, “My roommate is gone. Her luggage and everything has disappeared. She left no note. She didn’t say goodbye. She just disappeared.”

I would then reply, “Don’t you see? You were left behind. The rapture has come, and you weren’t taken. I’m only here to give you your last warning. You have one week to repent.” Although this is how I wanted to reply, in reality the first few times this happened I became very concerned. I’d track down their home phone number and call them. Their stories were often similar. In the silence and solitude they had become frightened. As they sat still all of the anger, resentment, sadness, or desire that they had been ignoring in their life began to emerge.

When we stop and do nothing, we begin to traverse the long distance between the head and the heart. We begin to notice our experience of life—the motivations and forces that drive our activities. It is difficult to stop and sit still before God. Often we need a friend. We need a spiritual director.<sup>2</sup> We need a small group or covenant community. It is a difficult journey to the heart.

Why do we need to take this journey? We need to attend to our heart because our theology, worship, teaching, and ministry are grounded in our experience of life. Once our theology is no longer rooted in experience, once our teaching begins to be abstract and distant from the longings of our hearts, once our ministry ignores the desires of young people, we are in danger of living life alienated from ourselves, from others, and from the God we profess.

For the past twenty years Christian congregations have expressed a greater and greater desire to explore “spirituality.” Spirituality is simply paying attention to our experience. Christian spirituality means paying attention to our experience of Christ—Christ’s presence within our individual and collective lives.

One of the reasons young people stir up so much anxiety among adults is that they are always stopping us. They continually ask us to pay attention to our experience. In the middle of worship a young person will whisper in our ears, “This is boring.” Immediately we become anxious or irritated. We ignore their comment. We don’t want to stop and respond. Yet, what would it mean for us to stop and respond? Can we receive their comments, attend to our own experience, and say, “I hear you. I understand that you feel unengaged by this service. But, let me tell you what I love about worship. You see, when I was singing our first hymn this morning, I felt like my heart was opening and I was singing straight to God. I suddenly felt all my fears and stress dissipate. I just felt more connected to others and less alone in the world.”

What would it mean to stop and pay attention to our experience so that our conversations with young people are alive? What would it mean to talk with young people without pre-programmed answers, without being reactive to our own fears and insecurities? What would it mean to address a young person as if they were just like us? As if they were one person having an experience of God and life, talking with another person who is having his own experience? What would ministry be like if we met on that common ground?

The first thing Jesus calls us to do is stop. He calls us to sit still. He calls us to do nothing. He calls us to turn our attention away from our anxiety and busyness and notice the work that God is already doing. When my wife was pregnant with our first child she noticed that when she was actively running errands and doing chores around the house the baby rarely moved. It was only when she stopped, sat still, or lied down that the baby would become active within her. Sometimes at night I would have these private moments with my unborn child. I would wait until Jill fell asleep, then I would reach over and place my hand on her stomach. I would lie there feeling the baby stirring and moving. It’s the same with us. Until we stop the activity and sit still we often miss making contact with life. We miss God’s Spirit present and moving within us and around us.

## **Being Amazed, Letting Go, and Resisting**

What takes place after we stop? German Theologian Dorothee Soelle, in a book titled *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, identifies three movements within the spiritual journey that are helpful for our exploration of youth ministry.<sup>3</sup> Remember that in the Western tradition the classical stations of the spiritual life are purgation, illumination, and union. Purgation is emptying. It is shedding the distractions, the pre-occupations, the ego that clouds the soul. This movement through purgation opens one up to be filled with Christ; it makes space to receive God.

The second step is illumination. This is often called “transformation.” It is the process of being “formed” by Christ after stripping away the ego, or what Thomas Merton calls “the false self.”<sup>4</sup> The third step is union. This is also sometimes referred to as deification or perfection. This is a rare and overwhelming experience of complete freedom from the old self. It is an experience and reality of being completely free in God. All of these movements in the spiritual or mystical life are given by grace; they are not earned by our own efforts or ascetic living.

In her writing, Soelle, however, discerns a similar but different set of movements for the spiritual life today. In the post-modern world, Soelle argues that the stations of the spiritual life are being amazed, letting go, and resisting.<sup>5</sup> I want to use Soelle’s progression to help us understand how we bridge the distances that arise in youth ministry.

### **Being Amazed**

The first step is being amazed. When was the last time you were amazed by the presence of young people? It may be that our best qualification as youth ministers is that we are easily amazed by the presence of young people. As ministers we are capable of seeing their beauty, their gifts, and their belovedness in God. We are people who live in wonder at young people, at their beauty as well as their suffering. We are people who have the time and inclination to savor the energy, questions, struggles, and sufferings of young people.

In our culture today, young people are treated as projects. Youth are an untapped market group that needs to be assessed and managed. As ministers (“professional Christians”), we often can’t help but immediately begin to assess and manage a young person as soon as we meet her. We encounter a group of youth and immediately begin to manage them: “That freshman boy needs counseling, that one over there is ready for Bible study group, this one needs

camp....” In youth ministry we set up programs to help control, manipulate, and manage young people. We buy into the conventional wisdom within the Church that young people are problems that must be solved. They need converting. They need to be in worship. They need confirmation. They need better moral training. They need Bible study. We don’t have time to be “amazed” by young people. We have no space in our lives to stop and notice how God is alive in youth. We have work to do. We have a ministry to run.

Isn’t it a relief that Jesus didn’t start “Jesus Christ’s World-Wide Ministries”? Isn’t it a relief that Jesus didn’t write a book series or curriculum called “Here’s the Way!” It turns out, contrary to what we see in most of our churches, Jesus wasn’t running a ministry program. Instead of directing ministry Jesus spent most of his life in wonder. He stood in wonder at the beauty of the natural world, the suffering of people, the questions of strangers, and the presence of the poor. He stood in wonder at the presence of the little ones, the marginalized and discarded children.

Stopping and doing nothing is what prepares us for wonder and amazement. When we stop and slow down we are open and available to see the miracle of living and the power of God’s presence in the world. When we allow ourselves to be open to the sacredness of living, we suddenly realize that there is no need for bridges. We become aware that there is no distance, and therefore no need to build bridges. The Christian experience is the realization that there is no separation between God and us. Paul writes in Romans 8 that nothing separates us from the love of God. In Psalm 139:7 we read, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”

When we allow ourselves to be amazed, we begin to notice that God has always been present in our youth rooms and Sunday school classes. We begin to understand that God was present to our young people long before we entered the ministry. We begin to understand that God began ministering to our young people while they were still being created in their mother’s womb, long before they met us. When we stop to see what God is doing, we begin to understand that God has been seeking our young people with greater passion and desire than we could ever possess. In our amazement at the ministry God is doing, it becomes clear to us that our ministry is not about us. We realize that we are not the center of the ministry. We become aware that our role in the ministry is simply to be in wonder at what God is doing, and then to lend a hand when we’re needed.

What would our ministries be like if we trusted that God is already doing the ministry? What would we be like if we understood that Jesus has already bridged the distance between youth and God? The truth is that *we* don't need to build bridges.

Many times at youth ministry conferences we become overburdened with guilt. We get confused at all the different ministry models and techniques. We spend sleepless evenings wondering, "Should I adopt an art ministry program, or use a family-based model?" We ask ourselves, "What kind of ministry model do I build?" It's so hard for us to trust the ambiguity. It's hard for us to trust God. We find it difficult to go into a youth room and simply spend time with kids. We worry that we're not being efficient with our time. We worry that the kids won't want to talk about anything spiritual.

We forget that conversion, spiritual formation, is a grace that can't be managed. When you develop a relationship with young people, often times you are beginning a four-year conversation. It may be that for the whole first year of your relationship with a young person all you're going to talk about is basketball. That's it. Every time you try to change the subject the young person will tolerate it, but as soon as they get the chance they're going to bring the subject back to basketball. Then the second year of the relationship all you're going to talk about is their girlfriend. The third year you're going to talk about their parents' divorce. That's it. The fourth year you're going to talk about colleges. Then out of the blue, at the end of that fourth year, you're standing with this young person in line at a fast food restaurant and he turns to you and says, "Do you ever wonder what life's about?"

For four years you've been talking about basketball, friendships, divorce, parents, and college. You've been waiting four years to talk about the meaning of life. Now, because you were patient, because you were present, simply savoring the life of this young person, they are ready to talk to you about matters of the heart. Now they are ready to listen to you when you talk about your life with God. They trust you because they have received your amazement, your love, and your patience. After four years they trust you enough to ask, "What's all this Christianity stuff about anyway...and why do you go to this church?" Then is the time that you talk.

Do we trust that our presence is enough? Can we trust the hidden work of God? Can we trust that God is holding this young person, our ministry, and us? Can we trust God with the lives of our young people?

Jesus has removed the separation between ourselves and God, ourselves and one another. The bridges are already built. They are like the natural bridges—the rock formations, fallen trees, and geological outcroppings that span over rivers and canyons. These natural bridges exist without human construction, allowing people to cross precipitous chasms with little effort.

When I allow myself to be in wonder, I find that I am no longer the center of the ministry. The ministry is no longer on my shoulders. In wonder, I become a participant in life, rather than an expert or an observer. I am able to sit beside young people and be amazed by the incredible mystery of life that God has created—this life that is happening in and around us.

### **Letting Go**

As amazement takes hold of us, we are drawn into the second movement of Soelle's progression. We are invited to let go. When people brought their children to Jesus, the disciples tried to control the crowd. They tried to respond to the longings of the crowd. Jesus, noticing that the disciples had placed themselves at the center of the ministry, became indignant. He called the disciples to stop. He called the disciples to listen. He called them to notice what they were doing. He called them to turn or repent. He was calling the disciples to let go.

When Jesus called the disciples to turn their attention to him, he was calling them to let go of their activity, their concerns, and their ministry. We understand how difficult this must have been for the disciples. We can understand why they didn't want to turn and face Jesus. First of all, who could trust Jesus with the ministry? Jesus had no order, no system for effective ministry. "Let the children come!" he exclaimed. No straight lines, no organization—just kids climbing everywhere. When we turn to Jesus, chaos seems to break loose. We lose "control." People get upset and confused. There's too much ambiguity. Why should we let go of our ministry and trust Jesus when he's so unpredictable?

It is the amazement and wonder that first begins to draw us toward letting go. Our wonder at God begins to draw us toward a different life. It's like a little thread of life that you slowly begin to notice and follow. Wonder and amazement illumines our life, it brings us back to our senses and allows trust to arise. In wonder and amazement we begin to sense a call to live as our true selves, to release our anxiety, our control, and even our ministry. Soon we find we are being invited to let go of our faith, a faith that we created out of our

own needs and insecurities. We begin to let go of our images of God, our images of our self, and our image of others. We begin to feel drawn to surrender, to turn toward Jesus, and to let all other concerns fall away. We begin to yearn to stop talking and instead listen and trust the One who is present, that sweet mystery of Christ among us that is far more than our words can express.

Growth in ministry means following the call to let go. Letting go is hard. I once heard Eugene Peterson talking about how we create these busy, activity-filled ministries that are really about our own insecurities and ego. He said in ministry, “Busyness is laziness.”<sup>6</sup> I got angry when he said this. I wanted to call him and say, “Hey, Eugene, try coming to my church on a Sunday morning when I’ve just returned from a senior high retreat and the junior high Sunday School teacher didn’t show up and I have to unpack the van, drive kids home, teach Sunday school class, shepherd kids into worship, and then lead a Christian education committee meeting. You call this laziness? This is the hard work of ministry!”

But the more I live a life of ministry the more I understand that Eugene Peterson is right. Peterson is calling us to let go of our sense of relevance, our sense of self-importance, the myriad activities that make us feel like we’re accomplishing something. He is asking us to let go of our sense that we are the most significant, critical, valuable, linchpin of the whole ministry.

When I let go of my agenda, I become available to what God is doing. When I let go of my own course of ministry, I can then respond to what God is doing in me, through me, and with me. That’s letting go.

## **Resisting**

The third movement for Soelle is resisting. We go from being amazed, to letting go, to resisting. This is the point where compassion and justice begin to take root. As we let go of ministries that depend upon us, as we claim the real life that Jesus offers us, we begin to discern the oppressive forces that seek to distort and destroy life. As we tend life within and around us there begins to arise a greater need and desire to resist the powers and principalities that seek death.

There is a Chinese American youth pastor at a second-generation Chinese American Church in San Francisco who came to see me the other day. His name is Jason, and although he’s only twenty-eight, he’s already been in the ministry for ten years. Two years ago Jason realized that his ministry was

really about his own need to be accepted and praised by youth, his parents, and the authority figures in his church. He realized that for him the ministry was really not about the Gospel, nor was it allowing him to be his true self. With this realization came a radical honesty. He decided to be absolutely frank about what parts of his ministry were life-giving and what parts of his ministry were just about producing activities to please others. He entered a period of letting go. The first thing he had to admit was that the Sunday school program he had developed was detrimental to the spiritual life of his kids and himself. He didn't know why. He didn't try to understand why. He just knew that for some reason when he and the kids met for Sunday school class the kids became anemic, passive, and resentful while he himself became reactive, pompous, and critical.

He said, "I felt like a substitute teacher in an after-school detention center. There was no sense of the 'Good News' within a hundred miles of that classroom." Despite the opposition of parents and church leaders, he decided to cancel Sunday school for both senior high and middle school students. He resisted the pressure of parents and church leaders. Instead he started a program called "Hang with Jason."

"Hang with Jason" was about being radically available to young people. Jason is employed only as a part-time minister. He spends most of his time as a producer at a public radio and television station, yet he decided to invite kids to spend time with him in his home, at his job, during meal times, and at family events. He decided to trust that his life would be the best teacher. He stopped preaching to the kids and instead hoped that the Good News would shine through the alternative way in which he lived—the way he treated strangers, the way he ate, the way he spent money, the way he made decisions. He decided that if the kids didn't see Jesus in his living, then he had nothing to teach them. As I listened to him I was reminded of St. Francis who admonished, "Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words."

One of the problems in the Church today is that young people don't see the Christian faith as an alternative way of living. Christianity just seems to be a more beige, milk-toast form of consumer living. We preach that Jesus calls us to new life, but young people quickly perceive that the Christianity that's being preached is a kind of "Capitalism-lite." We tell kids, "Go ahead and live the life of the culture but try to be a little nicer, buy Christian products, recycle, help someone if you get the chance." When young people enter a Christian community it should feel like a different culture. It should be like

entering “Chinatown” or “Little Italy” within a city. It should be very plain to young people that Christians don’t live like the rest of the culture. It should be clear that Christians are people who struggle to resist the seductions and consumptive practices of North American life.

Most Christian communities rely on the stories of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt to understand our relationship to the culture. Soelle says that in this day it is the stories of the Babylonian exile that will prove more applicable to our present experience.<sup>7</sup> Youth today are growing up in Babylon, they are growing up in ancient Rome, they are growing up in a culture that is saturated in a materialistic understanding of life. To counter an understanding of life reduced to buying and selling we need to embody a spirituality of resistance.

When young people enter a Christian community they should experience a way of life that is deeply resistant to the values and mores of North American market culture. To be Christian necessarily means to relate to material goods differently and to understand and value families differently. It means we experience time, neighbors, strangers, and the earth in very different ways than those presented by the media culture that surrounds us.

Unfortunately, most churches have been co-opted by the culture of hype—the culture of buying and selling. Most ministries mimic the surrounding cultural practices in order to make the faith more palatable. As a youth minister I regularly receive charts and grids from Christian music companies to help sell Christian CDs to the youth I know. These charts list secular bands and then match them with comparable Christian artists. Why do we need the comparison? Why can’t Christians produce music without seeking to appeal to the mass market? Worship services are becoming more like television. Participants can sit back passively and watch beautiful images roll across video screens while a Paul Schaefer-like band performs inspiring Christian rock ballads.

Resistance means that we refuse to participate in the culture’s addiction to greed. Resistance means we refuse to become bored and dulled by the experience of life. To resist means to receive Christ and his mission of reconciliation in the world. It is refusing to stay on the safe side of the bridge. It is being willing to cross-over to the land of the young person, the stranger, and the enemy. It means we have the courage to live as Jesus did, refusing to participate in the illusion that life is about security and self-protection.

When we look to Jesus we are looking at someone who does not experience distance between himself and others. When others see a vast canyon between

themselves and the lepers, poor and wounded, Jesus sees no separation. Jesus continually crosses barriers. He engages, touches, and befriends those who seem distant and removed. Jesus embodies a vision of wholeness, of community, of relationship in God that refuses to permit divisions.

Jesus is in wonder at the suffering of people, and through this capacity for wonder he is able to let go of the fear, the expectations, the rules, and the customs that seek to bind him. He resists bowing to the pressure of the authorities. He spans the chasms of fear and hatred. He heals his religion of separation, hierarchies, and divisions. He becomes the ultimate bridge that transcends all sin, all shame, all fear, and all loneliness.

If we don't live lives that resist the culture's fascination with death, if we don't have lives that make space for life, then we have very little to offer young people. We need to stop and be amazed at the presence of God in the world: the way Julian of Norwich was amazed by a chestnut; the way Teresa of Avila was amazed by the rain, silkworms and honeybees; the way John of the Cross was amazed by the dark of the night. If we can attend to the ordinary miracles of living and let go of our own agendas long enough to follow the simple thread of our lives, if we can just allow ourselves to follow our hearts and resist the ways in which life becomes reduced to productivity, efficiency, and consumerism, then we will find that ministry is natural—that ministry is not about being a role model. It's about being ourselves. It's about being alive.

### **Receiving and Blessing**

As we enter into these three movements of the spiritual journey, we find that our ministry with youth is really about only two things: receiving and blessing. Stopping, being amazed, letting go, and resisting enlarge our capacity to relate to young people like Jesus did. We soon discover that we too can open our arms. We too have the space and compassion within us to receive young people with all of their confusion, all of their pain, and all of their passion.

A mentor of mine, Morton Kelsey, once told me that the hardest thing for a human being to do is to accept another person just as they are. And yet, this is what young people long for (this is what we all long for). They long to be received. They long to be accepted. This longing is what Jesus is able to meet. After stopping the busyness of the disciples, Jesus opens his arms and receives the children. He doesn't ask them to get in line, to pull up their saggy pants, to tie their shoe, or to fix their hair. He just receives and accepts them into his presence, into his arms.

The first thing that young people are looking for in a Christian community is to be received. Can we trust that our love and receptivity will do far more to shake loose the binding sins of young people than any condemnation could ever do?

The second act of ministry that Jesus does with the children is this: he blesses them. The passage says that Jesus “took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” In the past fifteen years that I’ve been involved in youth ministry, there have been these guidelines regularly sent out from our denominational offices advising youth workers not to hug or touch young people. This is tragedy. I realize there is physical and sexual abuse present in our churches. I realize that children and young people are vulnerable to this kind of abuse from teachers and adults. I believe it is necessary to do stringent background checks on people who work with youth and children in our churches, yet at the same time I do believe that, when appropriate, youth and children need touch.

I was working as a volunteer youth minister at a small Presbyterian church in the San Francisco area. The youth ministry began to attract more and more kids from foster homes, government housing projects, and homeless shelters. We did the background checks of the ministry volunteers and then after months of prayer and discernment we decided that every kid in the youth group would get hugged by every one of the volunteer ministers every time they came to youth group.

We decided that the greeting time was the most important part of our ministry. Kids would show up for youth group, and they would hear their name called out by eight different volunteers. Every kid would get hugged eight times when they first entered the church. This would often take twenty to thirty minutes. We had decided that our ministry was going to be marked by the spirit of hospitality. We decided that welcoming would be the fragrance of the ministry.

When was the last time you were touched? When was the last time you were embraced within a church in a way that made you feel received and blessed?

Jesus touches the children and then he blesses them. Jean Vanier says that to love a person is to reveal a person’s beauty to themselves.<sup>8</sup> To bless a young person is to be so present to them that you reveal their beauty to themselves. That’s the blessing we offer. That’s the reason most of us are in the ministry. Sometime in our life we had someone who was so present to us, someone who delighted in us, someone who helped us experience our own giftedness and

belovedness that we couldn't leave. We just wanted to stay within the church, to stay on the path of Jesus, to serve the Good News, and to use our gifts and energy to spread the power of this love to others.

To bless youth is to hold their beauty before them. It is to hold up an image of a young person that she may yet not see. As a minister I'm called to bless that young person. I'm called to tend and hold this image of this young person as beloved, as capable, as beautiful, as uniquely gifted to carry light into this world. I bless them with this truth about themselves, I bless them until they can hear this good news that they are "fearfully and wonderfully made," until they can hear their blessing within every daybreak, within every struggle for life, within every suffering stranger, within bread and wine, within their very hearts.

Every time I am among young people I listen for this blessing. I listen for how God has blessed them. As I teach middle school Sunday school class I listen to the young people—I listen past their words and posturing. I listen past my own anxiety and frustration. I listen, wondering where's this young man's beauty? What are this young woman's gifts? When does this young person come alive? How has God created this young man to carry life? As best as I can, I let go of all of my judgments, agendas, and projections. I resist the temptation to address the young people as religious consumers. I seek to accept them as they are and simply behold God's presence among them, behold the Christ that lives within them. When I'm able to do that, life flows naturally. Ministry becomes simply sharing life with young people, being alive with young people. That's what it means to bless. That's what it means to minister. That's when you realize that life itself creates the bridge.

## Notes

1. Sabbath: A Spiritual Retreat for Youth Workers is sponsored by San Francisco Theological Seminary and Youth Specialties Inc. The retreat is held in various locations across North America and is directed by the staff of the Youth Ministry & Spirituality Project. For information go to [www.youthspecialties.com](http://www.youthspecialties.com).
2. Contact Spiritual Directors International at [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org) for a listing of spiritual directors in your area.
3. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).
4. See Thomas Merton, "Things in Their Identity," *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 29–36.
5. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, pp. 88–93.

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6. Interview with Eugene Peterson, *Cloud of Witnesses* 1 (January 2001).
7. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p. 204.
8. Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 97.