



Engaging the Quest: Encountering Youth and God in Their Longing • *Roland Martinson*

One of the most challenging issues facing the church today is the question that John Westerhoff asked, “Will our children have faith?” Dean Hoage studied young Presbyterians thirty years ago and gave greater traction to Westerhoff’s question. He interviewed these young men and women at age twenty-five—all of them had been confirmed at age fifteen. And he discovered that while most of them remained believers, they had little or nothing to do with a local community of faith. Three-fourths of them were not worshipping, and most of them saw little value in church as a way to express a continuing, but latent and ill-formed, faith.

Drift among the baptized is a conundrum, a mystery. And as a new generation unfolds in front of us, they bring to us both great promise and ever new challenges. What I want to do here is to explore the possibilities of youth ministry at a new level of power, engagement, and traction. I believe we are alive at a time in this movement when we are taking on hard questions—theologically and strategically. And as we take them on I believe we will help ourselves—those of us who believe in this work and the churches with whom we serve God in the world—to be more able at ministry not only with the first third of life but with the next two-thirds of life as well.

In the beginning, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Noah and Moses and Miriam and Esther was lonely. And so you know in Scripture, the narrative, the story of how this God created a universe, a world, and humankind full of God’s Spirit, and God looked at what had been done in overcoming God’s

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loneliness and said, “It’s good. It’s done.” And then like a huge knife drawn across glass, like a huge crack at the heart of that universe, heaven and earth are broken. What God had created, God busted. And so God fussed with it. As the acts and thoughts of alienation unfolded, Adam and Eve were out of the garden. And now life itself became excruciatingly difficult. It got so messed up that God destroyed most of it; God thought to keep some of the best around—Noah and the clan—to start over. But it didn’t work. So then God called Abraham and Sarah and a people who would be a beacon, a light, a means of grace to it all. And God worked with this people. God loved them. God agonized with them; God went with them into exile, slavery, busted them out, freed them through the Exodus, and made them a nation. God sent them prophets and women of wisdom, but this didn’t work. We come upon this poignant moment in the life of God in Jeremiah 31:31–34:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

And then for over four hundred years, not much happened. In the fullness of time, in a baby, God entered deeply into the human pathos. And in all of the vulnerability that comes with childbirth in unsanitary conditions, God takes up life in the heart of a human. We have the story of this God, living at the heart of the human. We see what it’s like to see God thinking, acting, carrying on, as God full of initiative, full of power, with direction and purpose at the very core of life itself. It’s interesting. Jesus starts his ministry out in the wilderness, taking on the powers of evil in power, fame, and money. Then, he goes out of the wilderness into the places where fisher people and tax collectors work. He claims these people, and they take up this mission. Also the

people who are possessed—those taken over by the systems of evil, so that their lives are no longer viable—recognize what God's up to. In Mark's Gospel, one of the first acts of God at the heart of a human is to encounter evil. And evil knows God in Jesus, and they do business, and the one who is possessed gets life back. This is God loose in the heart of the human. Jeremiah 31 comes to pass.

In this lecture I want to wonder about these questions: What does youth and family ministry look like when God and those in the first third of life get joined at the heart? What does it look like when this God—who created the universe, because this God was lonely, and then watched it get busted up because God gave humans incredible freedom, possibilities—partners with humans? I want to wonder about what that mission, that continuing work of God, that God loose in the world, looks like when God continues to take up life at the heart of young women and men. In this lecture, I want to pay particular attention to those between the ages of tweens, middle adolescence, and later adolescence. I believe that when we pay attention to these young people we will discover not only their longings but God as well. This is because God has gone there, and God is already there. How does this happen? How is it that we who have been called into the life and mission of God, can go with God into the hearts of young people?

For forty-one years I've done research, but in all the years that I have been out there doing that research, I have always had an uneasy sense that when I finished the project, interpreted the data—whether quantitative or qualitative—I have not been alongside the pulsating heart of Sarah or Fred or Jose or Carl or Sally.

What I want to do here is to wonder about how we tend this great mystery, of who these young women and men are. The person who has helped me the most in this enterprise in the last five years is Patricia Hersch. You know her probably through the book that was six years in the gestation and the birthing, *A Tribe Apart*. She has now conceived of another project and is gestating it. It will probably be delivered in the next year or two. This new one is about the passions of young people. What I have learned from Patricia, in terms of deeply entering the heart of the human in the first third of life, goes something like this: In her three years at Reston, Virginia, and their schools, these five dynamics emerge: participating, listening, writing, interpreting, and

getting the story out. They are easy to say but much more complex and difficult to actually do.

To begin, go and be with young people in their world. This sounds like youth ministry 101. It is vital to take up this complex mystery, going into their cultures, their subcultures, their places, their experience of media, their consciousness, their schedules. I am convinced it is absolutely necessary if we are going to be following God into the heart of the young person—to go on this risky journey. Once there, it is important to value and respect the young people in their journey, rather than to objectify it. It is important to wonder with them about the great and awesome mystery of the journey that is unfolding. Once one enters that world it is important to be there, compassionately and consistently, long enough to be claimed by them, so that their destiny has a stake on your future. It is important to accompany them so much so that you can't walk away from it without grieving the loss of something. As one enters into that world, I have learned from Patricia that very often, even in that trusted, deep hallowed ground, young men and women will have depth and breadth of experience for which they have no language.

A great part of the journey is to find words together. Not to give them words. But to find pictures and to find metaphors. I learned this from Robert Coles—from his work and the research that he and his wife did. He has over 250,000 pictures drawn, colored by two and three-year-olds. His work with these children is amazing. He received a Pulitzer Prize for doing this work with children. From these children there begins to emerge a voice and a language, which now flows not just in little bytes but into story, narrative. And in hearing the story together, it becomes something more than just a piece in their heads. And then as that story takes on its life, the story gets spoken. If Jeremiah 31 is going to occur with young men and women in the twenty-first century, I believe it is going to involve an exceedingly costly, risky journey with God into the heart of the human at the first-third of life.

On this journey, one remains there in their world, valuing and respecting them, picking up on their journey, developing bonds across years, not weeks, sharing in their destiny, hearing them in voice and story, and then together with them interpreting the story. The first thirty years of my research I sat around with women and men with PhDs who were all over forty, and we interpreted the story. We never took this to the young men and women in different regions of the country, to different genders, or to different orientations.

We skipped over the whole process of getting into their world when we interpreted the story. Let's see what some people who are going there are picking out as we work our way into the heart of these young men and women. Here is what we are hearing: They are a unique generation with common traits. They are engaged; they are up to changing the world; they are hopeful. Those are some of their unique characteristics, but there are more: possessing high self-worth and self-confidence; struggling for normalcy against great diverse expectations; facing a lot of competition; having to cope with a stressful multidimensional world very early. They are still looking for acceptance. They live in a world of great diversity. Even some of the most remote places where young men and women live are filled with elements of the different or the other these days. There is still an incredible search for freedom, individuality, and uniqueness. Authenticity is highly valued. There is an incredible interest in and search for their potential. They are entering into their powers.

Entering one's powers. I have watched young people these days do as much talent scouting with one another as cutting each other off at the knees. You know it used to be that what happened in the gauntlet at the lockers is that they relentlessly cut each other down. I watch them now also become each other's talent scouts. Something interesting is going on with this generation of young men and women. Underlying all of this, however, there is anxiety and fear, which takes on many different forms. One of them is this: Will anyone be there for me? Can I trust this relationship? Can I trust you? Will this go on across time?

I believe one of the great challenges we have in youth and family ministry is the rapidity with which we leave ministries. This summer I am working with a group. We are going to write a book on youth ministries that have lasted fifteen years or longer. I have had a chance to study a half a dozen of these. There is something very different taking place in those ministries. These ministries are addressing the question "Will you be there for me?" As a preacher, when I have these young people in the congregation, I know I can't put one over on them. They want to know, Is this lively? Is it about that which matters? When I was a pastor in Fargo, North Dakota, I had a young person meet me at the door and say, "Today you handed out all these empty pop cans." I responded, "What do you mean?" She said, "You talked about that which didn't matter in a language no one could understand from a point of view that didn't make a difference." She was fourteen. She became one of my preaching partners. I invited her and her friends to sit in the fourth row, in front of the

pulpit. On Sunday morning, there they were, and I was scared to death. I'd meet with them for breakfast on Monday mornings. After several Monday mornings, she said to me, "Since when is G-o-d a three-syllable word?" After a few more Mondays she said, "I don't do Mondays, so, well, let's do Saturday at noon. We'll help you with your sermon before you mess it up." About three months into this, a woman who could have been her grandmother, but wasn't, looked at me at the door and said, "Reverend Martinson, your preaching is different." I thought, *now the elders are coming after me*. She said, "It is so much better. What's been going on with you?" I said, "Your grandchildren have been after me." And so I introduced these two women to each other. It was the beginning of an incredible team that helped renew our parish. I suspect there is more power in this than we know.

I am sixty-one years-old. I should have been out of this work a long time ago. I discover, though, that they love me. I was at a New Year's Eve party a few days ago. Emily and Rebecca—one of them is a ninth grader, the other is a senior in high school—came over and found me because I preached in their church not long ago. I said to them after the service, "I want to know what your crap detectors are telling you about my preaching." I took them out to lunch after the service to hear what they had to say. Then they came and found me on New Year's Eve at this party. For forty-five minutes, we surfed the spirit of God. These young women are incredible. They wanted to talk to an elder about what really matters. And so we took it on. We wondered about how Rebecca, who has been suffering from depression for a year and a half, survived a traumatic experience two years ago. She told me a story of an exodus. This woman is ready to lead. She is seventeen. It's incredible. And I fussed in on her. This old man was helping her get a language to it, delighting in it, wondering who else needed to know. She looked at me afterward and said, "So, when can we talk next?" Inside of me, I thought, "I can't die yet!"

I want you to think a little. Think about an experience you have had where you have gotten to the heart, to that place where a young woman, a young man is living her or his life. Go to work, pick up your own stories. Here's my thesis: Young men and women will encounter that passionate church when we engage their quest. If the church's passion is at least in a large part, if not first of all, about them, they'll get it. And that passion is to be unrelentingly in the presence of the mystery of God in their life, as they make this journey. If we engage that quest, if we encounter young people, we will get to know their

longings and we will get to know God in their longings. God is there. And so my thesis is that they will know the passion of the church as the church passionately and respectfully pursues them. And I believe that is what God was up to in the decision God made in Jeremiah's announcement. I will write my law in their hearts. You cannot do any writing about it until you go there, until you touch the paper. And so much of our writing, speaking, and acting is miles away from that core, that center where they live and move, and have their being. I believe we can go back to and participate in our ministries, and we can put wheels onto this.

And as we go there, we can do these things: go there; be there; dwell there; listen to voice, language, and story; work life and faith together around shared challenges and gifts. The stuff of the ministry will come from the stuff of their hearts. Bring an honest but a positive interpretive lens. I would invite you to set aside most of the spin of about seventy years of developmental study, which tends to look at young men and women in a negative, half-full, what's the problem attitude, rather than discovering the genius, the unique, the "what's now." We don't need to set it all aside; it is important work. But our interpretive lens needs to be positive. Young people are entering into their powers. And as we go there, I believe it's absolutely critical that they, together with us, do the interpreting of what we are giving language to. What is it that we see here? As we engage in this journey with youth, listening to them and being in awe of the presence of God in their lives, we will together satisfy our quest for a passionate church.