



Journeying with Youth toward Living Waters

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Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4:13–15)

How messy were your rooms when you were growing up? Teenagers are often accused of not being the best of housekeepers when it comes to their rooms. Many bedrooms of teenagers are characterized as jungles requiring a map to navigate your way in and out. I think a “messy room” is really an outward expression of a teenager’s inner chaos.

Have we ever stopped to consider all of the developmental changes occurring at the same time in the part of the life span we call “adolescence”? Emerging research suggests there is dramatic neurological development taking place in the teenage brain.¹ Researchers are suggesting that the teenage brain begins a new growth spurt at puberty, and it continues well into their twenties. One of the more fascinating discoveries has to do with the development of the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that controls reason and judgment and the amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for instinctual or gut reactions. It’s the part of the brain that produces emotions. One of the responsibilities of the prefrontal cortex is to help the brain, or more specifically the amygdala, manage emotions. It has the responsibility of helping a person balance instinctual reactions and put emotions in context, with some light of reason. The fascinating thing is that the prefrontal cortex does not reach maturity until a person enters his or her twenties, while the amygdala matures much earlier. Because the prefrontal cortex is still under construction, it is unable to partner with the amygdala to help adolescents engage in critical reasoning and make logical decisions. It

leaves young people susceptible to making bad decisions and taking unhealthy risks. Adolescents are not fully equipped to always stop and think through the outcome of their choices. In the developing teenage years, instinct will rule out in the beginning over reason, thereby having a profound effect on the choices young people will make.

While teens are navigating the changes taking place in their brains, they are also navigating the changes taking place physiologically. Their bodies are changing, their hormones are active, and choices concerning these biological changes are challenging them. And while neurological changes and physiological changes are taking place, psychologists tell us that adolescence is the time of psychosocial changes, where identity formation becomes crucial. Young people are in the process of defining their sense of self, discovering who they are. The sociologists further inform us that socializing agents such as family, school, friends, and popular culture are also beginning to have greater influence in shaping the identity of young people. This is also a time when their spirituality is too being challenged and changed. They are moving from living the faith of their family and faith community to claiming a faith for themselves. As they do so, they struggle with the questions: “Do I really believe?” “Who am I to God?” “Who is God to me?” Given all of these developmental changes to navigate, is it any wonder that young people have “messy rooms”?

In the previous lecture, I shared with you what I believe to be seven spiritual yearnings of young people. Given the many changes taking place in adolescent development, their yearning for mentoring is very important. As they navigate uncharted waters, young people need persons who will not only walk beside them but also lead them. They need persons who will serve as their prefrontal cortex, someone who will aid them in making sound judgments and clearer choices. They need leaders in their lives to help them navigate all the changes taking place within them, particularly as it relates to their spiritual development.

This may come across as a blatant generalization, but my experiences suggest that many youth leaders love their work, love their time with young people, love their conversations with young people, love being a shoulder to cry on, yet are afraid to lead and afraid to guide. I believe that to be a leader, to be a guide, you have to believe there is a destination. You have to believe there is someplace you’re trying to get to, some goal you’re trying to achieve. We must ask ourselves “What is the goal of youth ministry?” “What is the desti-

nation? Where are we leading youth to?” The answers will vary based on culture and context, but if we are to truly be “youth leaders,” we must have a sense of our destination. We must have a goal to strive toward.

I’m afraid some youth leaders are anxious to truly lead because they fear being accused of messing up the heads of young people. We don’t want to be accused of making them believe something. Somehow or another, we’ve convinced ourselves that it is better that the young people discover what they believe on their own. But you see I believe there is a difference between force-feeding and offering someone a gift. The question we must ask is whether or not we believe we have a gift worthy enough of offering to young people. Do we truly have a gift of living water that will satisfy the yearnings of our young people and do we know the way to that living water? We must ask ourselves what the church really has to offer young people. What is our gift of living waters and can we lead them there? If we believe we have a gift of living water, then we must be intentional about leading young people toward it, because there is a difference between wandering and leading: We wander aimlessly; we lead purposefully.

I want to share with you my pedagogical model for leading young people purposefully toward living water.

Teaching to Transmit

I believe our Christian identity is directly connected to what we have received, what has been transmitted to us. As we journey with youth toward living water, we must ask ourselves “What Jesus will we teach?” “What Jesus will we offer?” “Is it a Jesus we’re passionate about?”

In Revelation 2:2–4, we find these words: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.” I believe that many of us unknowingly have abandoned our first love! Kenda Creasy Dean, in her work *Practicing Passion*, offers this advice:

The fragmented identity of adolescents echoes our own personal and institutional fragmentation. Young people are dying for something, someone, to live for—but so are we. And the love we seek, the Love

who will not let us go, who will not let us down, and who will not go away, is Jesus. He is “to die for.” And if the church bears witness to anything else, we are not martyrs, but fools.²

Our gift of living water to young people ought to be Jesus and his love. We must transmit our testimony of who Jesus is and how much he loves us to those who are yearning for intimacy and someone to live for.

Teaching to transmit is intentionally telling the Story. The Christian Story may be interpreted in different ways according to the tradition sharing it, but the Story lays the foundation. It’s sharing with young people the history and journey of the Christian church and God’s presence and intersection in that history and journey. It’s telling the Story of the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s telling the Story of Jesus’ continuing living presence and practice in the world. It is telling the story of your denomination, the culture and context of your particular faith community, and the faith and witness of individual persons within the church. Teaching to transmit is about offering young people a firm foundation. Young people may choose to reject the offering, but it’s hard to reject a foundation that was never built. It’s hard to reject a story you’ve never heard. It’s hard to reject a gift that was never offered.

Teaching to Transform

I believe real transformation takes place when young people are able to find their place in the Story, when they can see themselves in God’s greater Story. Young people will not be transformed by a faith they cannot connect with. Transformation will take place when they can find identity and purpose in the Story. Transformation will take place when they believe it is a Story they can become passionate about. Transformation will take place when they feel it is a Story worthy of dying for, worthy of living for.

Teaching to transform is about aiding young people to claim their voice and vocation, identity and purpose within the context of a community of faith. It’s about providing an environment for young people to discover they have a place and a role to play in God’s continuing unfolding drama. It’s leading young people to discover they have a role in God’s story worthy of dying for, worthy of living for.

Teaching to Transgress

As we lead young people toward living water, I believe that we must not only teach to transmit and teach to transform, but also teach to transgress. I'm defining transgression as acting out of one's transformation. It is acting out of one's newfound identity and purpose. It is a willingness to take risks for the faith, for Jesus.

In her book, *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do*, Lynn Ponton points out that "adolescents take risks as a way of developing and defining themselves.... Risk-taking is the tool that adolescents use to shape their identities. Both directly and indirectly, risk-taking affects all aspects of development during this important period of life—physical, social, psychological, sexual and cultural."³ And I include most importantly, spiritual as well.

We must allow our young people to take healthy risks on behalf of their faith commitments. We must allow our young people to be transgressors. Young people are already naturally prone to take risks. Why can't we make room for them to take healthy risks for Christ? Kenda Creasy Dean says, "Immersing adolescents in the practices that participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ does not just turn them into nice people that help others; it shapes them into subversives and prophets, forever marked by their identification with Jesus Christ and set apart by grace for lives of holy service."⁴

Jesus was a transgressor: He healed on the Sabbath; he admonished the Pharisees; he turned over the money table; he intentionally associated with sinners; he intentionally included women in his inner circle; he rebuked his disciples for hindering the children from coming to him to be blessed. In one account after another we see Jesus transgressing, acting out, to fulfill the ministry God had given him to do. If we are to take Christian discipleship seriously, then we must teach our young people to transgress like Jesus did.

Jesus and his love are living water. It is toward Jesus that we must commit ourselves to leading our young people. If the journey we lead is not toward Jesus, rest assured that our young people will continue to visit wells that will never satisfy their spiritual thirst.

Notes

1. See Barbara Strauch's book, *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

2. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 253–54.
3. Lynn E. Ponton, *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 273.
4. Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 254.