



The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Building Bridges

Introduction

We cross bridges all the time in everyday life. They get us over obstacles, whether river, valley, road, or railroad tracks. Some bridges are as simple as a plank or log laid down over a stream by a child. Others are feats of strength and grace, with high suspension structures bridging the waters of a bay or the steep expanse of a canyon.

All of us in ministry are about the business of constructing bridges. We build bridges between youth and adults, between the youth group and the congregation, between the church and the community. We build bridges across cultural and racial divides, bridges of reconciliation, bridges of healing and hope. Like those we cross by foot or car, some are simple and others seem like impossible feats of engineering and balance. The good news is that the support for all the bridges we build in ministry is the cross of Jesus Christ. We build these bridges not by our own strength and ingenuity, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those of us engaged in youth ministry help young people cross over from childhood faith to adult faith, bridge the generational gap to welcome youth into the church, and walk alongside youth as they build their own bridges across cultural and racial boundaries. The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore the dynamics of building bridges in ministry.

Robert C. Dykstra suggests that adolescence is a necessarily lonely time of life and that those of us in youth ministry should not be too eager to herd the youth of the church into groups. We all know young people who are loners, on the margins of the fun and camaraderie of youth group, and we are often pressured to bridge the gap to these youth by inviting them to join the crowd. Dykstra instead affirms the importance of solitude in adolescence as the point from where a young person can learn to love, to think, to speak, and to listen for God's call. The task of the youth minister, says Dykstra, is to provide a safe space for adolescents to discern God's call and to coach them in how to listen.

Dykstra suggests that one way we create such a place for youth is by paying intense attention to the individual young people in our care.

Rodger Nishioka looks at the theological practices of constancy and disruption in youth ministry. If we are hoping to build bridges with young people and to accompany them through the transitions in their lives, says Nishioka, then we are called to practice constancy. Many of us have appropriated misconceptions that youth ministry is supposed to be about “making a difference” and that our work should always feel fulfilling. Nishioka challenges this assumption with a call to stay involved with youth ministry, and with a particular congregation, not because we see impressive results or because we get something out of it, but because it is what we are called to by God. In his second lecture, Nishioka argues that youth ministry should be more concerned with disruption than with protection, for without disruption there is no growth. Our job is not to keep young people as comfortable as possible, but rather to welcome the disruption of the gospel and to accompany young people as they encounter it.

Vivian Nix-Early suggests that the arts are a natural resource for building bridges with and among young people. She discusses the importance of arts as a redemptive vehicle in reconciliation and demonstrates through case studies how groups and individuals are using the arts in mission and ministry. When used for ministry, the arts, persuades Nix-Early, reach to those youth who might never enter a traditional church on their own. Nix-Early explores the role of the arts in bringing about what she terms the NU JERUZ, the kingdom of God here on earth. Her lectures demonstrate the personal, societal, and community transformation that ministry through the arts can bring and give us a blueprint for building bridges through art.

Mark Yaconelli explores the matrix of fear and desire that lies beneath youth ministries. He calls us to build bridges founded on our desire to love youth rather than on our fears about youth. Yaconelli looks to the gospel story of Jesus blessing the children for insight on how we might approach the task of youth ministry. He challenges us to stop our busy activity, to be amazed by young people and God’s presence in their lives, to let go of our anxieties, and to resist the oppressive forces that seek to destroy life. These movements prepare us to receive and bless the youth among us, just as Jesus blessed the children brought to him.

May these lectures feed your mind and your soul and give you new and useful tools for ministry.

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2003 Lectures

- Robert C. Dykstra Out of One's Depth: Seeking Soul in Solitude
Out of One's Depth: Finding Faith on the Fringe
- Rodger Nishioka Keepin' On, Keepin' On: Constancy as a Theological
Practice in Youth Ministry
Breaking In, Breaking Out: Disruption as a
Theological Practice in Youth Ministry
- Vivian Nix-Early Art: A Naturally Occurring Resource for Building
Bridges to the NU JERUZ
Art and Transformation: Using Art in Mission
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- Mark Yaconelli A Bridge Demands a Life
A Life Creates a Bridge



Out of One's Depth: Seeking Soul in Solitude

I want to suggest in this lecture that adolescence is a necessarily lonely time of life, and that we, as persons interested in serving and guiding young people, should not be too eager to remove their loneliness from them.

I think of a boy twelve years old, sensitive, spiritually inclined, drawn somehow mysteriously to the things of God. His name is Sam, and he lived at a time when “the word of the Lord was rare,” when “visions were not widespread.” He is not in a youth group, not sitting around a campfire, not on a ski trip. No, he is all alone, sleeping in the church—not at a lock-in with his friends but as a strange kid singled out from day one to sleep in the church—when he hears a voice calling him by name, “Samuel! Samuel!” He runs to ancient Eli, the priest sleeping in another room, and says, “Here I am, for you called me.” Eli had not called, of course, and the scene must be repeated three times before Eli gets wind of a Wind calling the boy from afar. He instructs Samuel to go listen again but the next time to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

It is so quiet, so lonely, so private, so isolated, so individualistic, so direct, so personal, so creepy, Samuel's call. The message he finally receives from the Lord when he responds as Eli had instructed him is a terrible one, a word that plunges Samuel into deep waters, far out of a twelve-year-old's depth, and keeps him awake for the rest of the night. God was about to make all things new, and that meant that all things old—like Eli the priest, Samuel's youth minister—were about to experience God's variation of a little “shock and awe” campaign. God came to young Samuel, all alone, asking him to bear this terrible burden. The boy was to displace the man, to venture in out of his depth (1 Samuel 3:1–18).

Robert C. Dykstra is associate professor of pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. A minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), he has worked with youth in parish and clinical settings around the nation. He is author of *Counseling Troubled Youth* and *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching*.

God usually works this way, you know. God calls individuals, and often enough, perhaps even normatively, God calls individuals who happen to be adolescents. God does not usually call entire youth groups in one fell swoop, at least not youth groups I have known, but rather individuals—strange kids on their own, all alone, by themselves in a night of solitude—to a life of service, to a particular mission for God.

A Generous Kind of Negligence

The British child psychoanalyst Adam Phillips tells of a sixteen-year-old patient, a self-described “loner,” who in a therapy session told Phillips “about the moment, at age ten, when he eventually learned to swim after having been terrified of water: ‘I knew I was safer out of my depth,’” the boy told Phillips, “‘because even though I couldn’t stand, there was more water to hold me up.’” Phillips continues:

One of the central paradoxes for the adolescent is his discovery that only the object beyond his control can be found to be reliable. For the boy the risk of learning to swim was the risk of discovering that he, or rather his body, would float. The heart of swimming is that you can float. Standing within his depth, apparently in control, was the omnipotence born of anxiety; the opposite of omnipotence here was not impotence, as he had feared, but his being able to entrust himself to the water. The defense of vigilant self-holding precluded his being able to swim. He needed a “generous kind of negligence” with himself.¹

You can’t learn to swim, as this boy so remarkably determined, by standing up to your knees or even to your neck in water, by remaining safely within your depth omnipotently in control. You must instead risk giving yourself over to your terrors, risk surrendering yourself to the water, to find out whether it is reliable, trustworthy, something worth counting on. “I knew I was safer out of my depth because even though I couldn’t stand, there was more water to hold me up.” Only the object beyond our control can be found to be reliable. Only the object beyond our control is an object worthy of our desire, love, and trust, if we are ever to swim, ever to get beyond mere safety on shore, beyond our depth, beyond anxious omnipotence. This is a painful paradox of life and love, a terrifying reality of coming of age.

In order to grow and mature, to live and to love, the adolescent is called to discover, Phillips says, that which is “beyond [one’s own] omnipotent control but not...persecutory.”² The water that was once frightening must somehow become in adolescence a new, taken-for-granted environment in which to live and move. “Can I trust myself to deep waters as others seem to?” the adolescent must ask. “Can I entrust myself to my new body, to feeling at home in my new skin as others seem to do?” The adolescent’s awkward, suddenly sexually mature body must somehow come to be a comfortable body in which to “swim,” and this inherently involves taking risks with that body, surrendering the need for omnipotent control over one’s body, determining whether one can become at home in this new body that suddenly now can menstruate or ejaculate, this body possessed of confounding new mysteries and desires no longer in one’s own complete control. The adolescent needs to learn to risk entrusting herself to the new environment of her own body in order to determine whether that body is a safe, if not entirely predictable, haven.

In Over Their Heads

There are some terrors we cannot live without, that we must endure if we are ever to learn to swim, to desire, to love, to think, to speak. Indeed, the dawning realization that we can no longer avoid these inevitable terrors is itself one of those very terrors of adolescence.

William

Twenty-two-year-old William, a gay African American youth, captures something of his own version of learning to swim, of going out of his depth, of surrendering himself to a larger if in his case an especially frightening, yet ultimately glorious, truth in adolescence, in telling about his coming out of the closet at age eighteen. He writes:

I think I came out at first because I was horny. Yes, I was depressed, lonely, isolated, and scared, too. But at eighteen years old I think the feelings that were at the forefront were about sex. I was a boy brimming with desire with no proper way or skills to express it, name it, or even really understand it. Where was a boy to go when he had so many questions in need of being researched? The library.

So I went to the library and read.

I read Edmund White, Bret Easton Ellis, George Whitmore, James Baldwin. I read them all for the sex. Skipping through the books for the scandalous parts. Scenes of men touching, kissing, making love. I was in heaven.

But while I was looking for one thing, I found another: a series of experiences, a set of emotions that echoed my own, beyond sexual desire. I found characters who were lonely like I was, sad like I was, and some characters who were happy living lives I was not even sure were possible. They were all gay, all fabulous. I hit pay dirt. I got hope (and some saucy tales to boot)....

Those written words showed me a community. And in the end that community helped me take my first step in coming out....

The spark had been lit, and next came the fire. I could hardly wait.³

What begins for William as one thing—a search for sex, an expression of desire—begins in solitude, alone with books in the library. It doesn't end, though, in solitude. It ends in a calling, a sense of solidarity, in community and communion, in a newfound faith of sorts. "I got hope," he says, no small thing for an adolescent to get. William searches for sex and finds love; he searches for desire and finds passion. "The spark had been lit, and next came the fire." "I don't know how to swim," William had been saying to himself. "What shall I do with these desires that don't fit the mold? Will I sink? Will I overcome my anxiety, my shame?"

This kind of feeling, the feeling that one can no longer avoid entering into some terror or another if one is to continue to live and grow, is inevitably exaggerated in gay and minority youth and in every girl in a patriarchal culture. It is nevertheless true, however, of young people across the board: In adolescence, we are necessarily called to go out of our depth to that which is beyond our control, to confront our shame, our demons, our fears, our confusion. We are called to a generous kind of negligence if we are finally ever to know whether the world is bent on destroying us or whether that world will hold us up and sustain us instead.

Ernie

Bill O'Hanlon, another psychotherapist, tells the story of his colleague, Ernest Rossi, who as a boy had a learning disability that made it hard for him to learn to read. O'Hanlon writes:

Because learning disabilities were unheard of during his boyhood, when [Ernie] fell seriously behind the other children, he was taken out of his classes and put with the kids who were called "retarded." On the playground, his former classmates teased him mercilessly, chanting, "Ernie's a retard, Ernie's a retard." He was terribly ashamed.

O'Hanlon continues:

When Ernie entered high school, his family had moved, and he had a chance to escape his old shame. Though he could now read, on that first day of high school, he began to doubt himself. *Maybe I'm not smart enough to hack it in high school*, he thought. After classes were over, he wandered around the big school library, feeling overwhelmed by all the knowledge contained in those books. His attention was caught by one particular thick tome. *If I could ever read a book like that and understand it*, he told himself, *it would prove I wasn't stupid*. He plucked it out of the stacks and read the title: *Critique of Pure Reason*, by Immanuel Kant. He sat down to read it. He stared at the first paragraph and could not make heads nor tails of it. He read it again. And again. And again, until he finally understood what the author was saying. He did the same with the rest of the first page and finally, after understanding it, walked home with a deep feeling of satisfaction. Ernie visited the library every day after school and read that book until he had understood the whole thing. By the time he had graduated from high school, he had read the book three times.⁴

Ernie went on to pursue a Ph.D. in pharmacognosy (a field that has to do with deriving medicines from plants) until, while in graduate school, a friend handed him a copy of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which so captivated Ernie that he decided to get a Ph.D. in psychology instead. He became a

successful analyst and has since written more than a dozen books on mind-body healing, hypnosis, and a recent one on the psychobiology of gene expression. O'Hanlon says that Rossi, now in his sixties, has finally settled the issue within himself that he is not stupid.

There he is, the ridiculed sixteen-year-old Ernie Rossi, like the eighteen-year-old William, all alone in the high school library plunging into the deep waters of Kant every day after school, paragraph by painful paragraph, confronting his terrors, his shame, his fear of being stupid. He surrenders his anxious omnipotence, entrusting himself to a world beyond his control but a world, he comes to learn, that is not persecutory. Ernie is in that library over his head, out of his depth, but he discovers there that he can float, that the water will hold him up.

Carl

Another story is that of another adolescent, this one Carl Rogers, who would grow to become perhaps the most influential psychotherapist of the twentieth century. Rogers grew up in what he called "a very strict and uncompromising religious" home where alcohol, dancing, card-playing, movies, even drinking sodas, were not permitted. When Carl was twelve, his parents bought a farm, not so much, he suspected, because his already prosperous businessman father in any way needed to farm but because the father thought that his adolescent children should be spared the "temptations" of suburban life.

As a solitary adolescent on the farm, Rogers developed two interests—those of observing beautiful moths and of immersing himself in the scientific method—that he later came to believe had bearing on his profound innovations in psychotherapy. He writes:

I became fascinated by the great night-flying moths.... I became an authority on the gorgeous Luna, Polyphemus, Cecropia, and other moths which inhabited our woods. I laboriously bred the moths in captivity, reared the caterpillars, kept the cocoons over the long winter months, and in general realized some of the joys and frustrations of the scientist as he tries to observe nature.

My father was determined to operate his new farm on a scientific basis, so he bought many books on scientific agriculture.... [M]y

brothers and I had a flock of chickens, and at one time or other reared from infancy lambs, pigs, and calves. In doing this I became a student of scientific agriculture, and have only realized in recent years what a fundamental feeling for science I gained in that way. There was no one to tell me that Morison's *Feeds and Feeding* was not a book for a fourteen-year-old, so I ploughed through its hundreds of pages, learning how experiments were conducted—how control groups were matched with experimental groups, how conditions were held constant by randomizing procedures, so that the influence of a given food on meat production or milk production could be established. I learned how difficult it is to test a hypothesis. I acquired a knowledge of and a respect for the methods of science in a field of practical endeavor.⁵

The adolescent Carl Rogers, introverted and alone, religious and solitary, was in over his head: “There was no one to tell me that Morison's *Feeds and Feeding* was not a book for a fourteen-year-old, so I ploughed through its hundreds of pages....” He is searching for one thing, but he finds another—a larger world, a depth, a water that could sustain him, giving him far more than knowledge of moths or of scientific agriculture but giving him also *hope*, the hope that he was not alone in the world there on his lonely farm. He finds passion, community, purpose. The spark had been lit, and next came the fire.

Robert

The stories of William, Ernie Rossi, and Carl Rogers remind me of a time when my own pastor first asked me as a boy of sixteen whether I had ever considered becoming a minister. I remember my first reaction to his words: “Why,” I thought to myself, “would I ever want to bore people for a living?” It was not just that I thought that ministers were boring (which I did), but also that I feared that I myself was boring (which I probably was). I knew at sixteen that I could never become a minister because I was terrified of public speaking. I would never have enough courage to stand in a church and speak to a large congregation. (I know I am not alone in this, since in survey after survey public speaking always ranks at the very top of the list of people's phobias, even ahead of their fear of death, which once prompted Jerry Seinfeld to quip that at a funeral, people would rather be the corpse than the eulogist. I

was one of those people at sixteen and beyond, but the minister's question nevertheless stayed with me.) "Had I ever considered becoming a minister?"

As I gradually came to think that I might actually be interested in such a vocation, I knew I needed to do something about my fears of public speaking. I started enrolling in speech courses and joined the debate team in high school and college. In each instance, however, my anxiety got the better of me, and I managed to drop the course or quit the team before ever having uttered a single public word. I always managed to stay safely on shore, standing within my depth. "How," I wondered, "would I ever be able to preach?"

I am convinced, as it turned out, that I learned to preach as an adolescent not unlike the way that Phillips's young patient learned to swim, not unlike the way that William hit pay dirt concerning gay sex, not unlike the way that the young Ernie Rossi learned how not to feel stupid or that the young Carl Rogers learned about night-flying moths and the scientific method—namely, *by myself*, through an intense kind of solitude, alone in my case not in the library or with books like the other boys but in my car, in a silent kind of listening out of my depth.

It happened that I attended a college halfway across the country from my Midwestern home and that despite the thousand-plus miles between them, my hometown and college city were connected by a single interstate freeway. I noticed in making that long and monotonous drive by myself many times throughout my college years that I would sometimes remain silent for the entire trip. I could drive for days without ever turning on the radio, but I would sometimes listen to tapes of six sermons of a dynamic Scottish minister whose preaching I had once heard and admired. Over the course of a few years of driving back and forth across the country, I heard those same six sermons so often that I eventually could preach each of them right along with the tape, word for impassioned word and complete with a Scottish accent, alone in my car. I am convinced today that in hearing and memorizing a mere six sermons of a master preacher in extended periods of utter solitude, my fears of public speaking were calmed. I learned to speak in public by keeping silent in private. I found in that solitude, however, something more than just my voice, than an ability to speak. I found a vocation, a future, a passion, a community, even a God who would hold me up. I learned there out of my depth that I too could float, that something or Someone would sustain me. There was a world beyond my omnipotent control, a world that if I wanted to continue to grow I had little choice but to enter, but a world, I found, not

persecutory, a world that would allow even me a voice, a self, *my* voice, *my* self.⁶ I hit pay dirt. I got *hope*.

The Adolescent as Isolate

Adolescents who are going to be able to live and grow into their own skin, their own sexuality, their own unique calling from God and to make their contribution as no one else could, must somehow come to learn that sometimes it is safer out of their depth, because even though they cannot stand, there is more water there to hold them up. In the lives of these various adolescent boys—young Samuel in the temple learning to listen, Adam Phillips’s young patient learning to swim, young William learning to desire, Ernest Rossi and Carl Rogers learning to think, Robert Dykstra learning to speak—each had to surrender omnipotent control, to get beyond his zone of comfort, his realm of safety. Each had to cease standing so near the shore and, in a generous kind of negligence, risk entering the deep waters of solitude where he knew not what might happen. It is the adolescent’s vocation to experience a kind of isolation in order to figure out who he is, who she is, to find out of what one’s body and soul are capable, but to find much more than this as well: to find hope, fire, passion, love, community, and maybe, if one is lucky, the very Self of God.

One accomplishes this all alone, always only on one’s own. No one else can say for sure what your soul is telling you to be or do. No one else knows this for certain, though plenty of people in your life and mine have had their opinions. One’s soul, one’s calling, one’s self, is discovered in isolation, in the wilderness, in adolescence, through the terrible risks of solitude.

What I want to suggest here may run contrary to the way we adults usually think of this season of life known as adolescence. Normally when we think of young people, we think of them as needing to be in groups, in organizations, in clubs, on teams. We think of adolescents in terms of wolves or of bison, as necessarily traveling in packs or herds.

To be sure, I am aware of peer pressure. I know of cliques and of gangs and of the desire to belong. I know of what Laurie Halse Anderson speaks in her novel titled *Speak* when she describes the protagonist Melinda Sordino’s first day of high school: “We fall into clans,” Melinda says. “Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas [as in Martha Stewarts], Suffering Artists, Thespians, Goths, Shredders.”

Concerning herself, however, Mel, who has been ostracized because she called the police to an end-of-the-summer party after something terrible happened to her there, laments,

I am clanless. I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with. I am Outcast.⁷

We know, of course, that like Melinda Sordino, adolescents want to be, even need to be, a part of the gang or group. In her freshman year of forced exile, however, Melinda finds something even more valuable than clans. In her isolation she eventually finds strength, passion, and, most important, her own *voice*. She learns for the first time (and unlike her peers who have stuck with their clans) to *speak*.

Does not all this youthful pressure to run with the wolves—with the Jocks or the Idiot Savants or the Marthas—protest too much, pointing beyond itself by its sheer desperation to an even deeper and more frightening awareness perhaps tucked just beneath every young person's consciousness, namely, an awareness that adolescents are profoundly alone, that adolescence as a time of life is profoundly lonely, and perhaps even that it *needs* to be a very lonely time, that there is no other way than through these deep waters of solitude, that adolescents *should* be, *must* be, finally, terribly alone if they are ever to hit pay dirt, to become a self before God?

Several decades ago, the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott wrote: "The adolescent is essentially an isolate. It is from a position of isolation that he or she launches out into what may result in relationships."⁸ Winnicott was saying that without a period of isolation—without a time apart specifically in this season of adolescence for wrestling with one's demons, for facing one's terrors of swimming or fantasizing or thinking or speaking or hearing God's call—how would a young person, how would we, ever discover whether the world is, finally, persecutory or whether it is sustaining? Without solitude, how will our young people ever come to know what they love, what they desire, what they believe or feel or think or are? How will they come to discern their personal callings or capabilities, or be able eventually to give themselves over to others in intimate relationships? Indeed, how did you, how did I?

Intimacy always works better between persons who are selves than between those who have no self, such that giving oneself over to another in sexual, spiritual, or emotional intimacy means having to have a genuine self to give. It is this self that is the adolescent's lonely, terrifying, and, God help her, sometimes exhilarating burden to seek and find, and the finding can be accomplished only, finally, on her own. If not in adolescence, then when *will* such a self be found, such a soul be emboldened?

James O. Freedman, the shy and esteemed president-emeritus of Dartmouth, raised eyebrows in his audience but also eventually raised the intellectual ethos of the college by suggesting in his 1987 inaugural address, "We must strengthen our attraction for those singular students whose greatest pleasures may come not from the camaraderie of classmates, but from the lonely acts of writing poetry or mastering the cello or solving mathematical riddles or translating Catullus."⁹ Freedman sought to transform Dartmouth by seeking not convivial joiners but reclusive loners, young people who knew their own passions and could ply their crafts in solitude.

It is this capacity for solitude—what Winnicott once called the capacity to be alone—that is the risk, task, and burden of any adolescent who is ever to learn to swim, to love, to think, to speak, to listen for God's call. The young William caught up in the scandalous heaven of James Baldwin; the young Ernie Rossi lost in the befuddling hell of Immanuel Kant; the young Carl Rogers absorbed in the mysteries of the gorgeous Cecrophia moth; I myself transported by the melody of the Scottish preacher; the young Samuel hearing his name in the temple: alone, interested, stepping out in a generous kind of negligence beyond the borders of the safe and familiar, beyond omnipotent control, launching into deeper water where it is either sink or swim. Only the object beyond our control can be found to be reliable. Only the object beyond our control is one worthy of our desire, of our trust, of our love—this exhilarating paradox of adolescence, this lonely terror of coming of age.

Resisting the Conspiracy of Christian Community

Correct me if things have changed, but when I was a full-time youth worker many years ago, I found myself under enormous pressure to bring the youth of the church into community, into groups, and specifically into the youth groups of the church. Numbers tended to matter a great deal to those who paid my salary, and bigger youth programs were invariably considered better. I tried as best I could to resist this pressure from within and without, for

I myself, like the fictional protagonist Melinda Sordino, had once been an introspective outcast of an adolescent who at sixteen had been singled out and affirmed by my minister. He and his wife had allowed me generous room to be who I was and to love what I loved. There was a youth group in my adolescence, to be sure, but most of what I came to learn about Jesus was not going to come from it.

So when later as a youth minister myself I began to become aware of pressures to herd young people into groups, into what is not infrequently the conspiracy of Christian community, I experienced turmoil within and without. While I did my best, despite my personal handicaps, to court the princes of Jockdom in hopes of drawing their cheerleader princesses to Christ along with them—if you win the heart of Constantine, you win the whole Roman empire—I personally found myself drawn instead to those youth on the margins, including some who would dare never to set foot in the youth groups of my church, among them some adolescents locked inside the juvenile jail a few blocks away. I was once fired from a youth ministry that was attracting a hundred-plus kids because according to the personnel committee (which actually put this in writing), I was “spending too much time with unpopular youth.”

But what if the church could strengthen its attraction for those singular young people “whose greatest pleasures may come not from the camaraderie of classmates, but from the lonely acts of writing poetry or mastering the cello or solving mathematical riddles,” those with the capacity to be alone, those who can sustain solitude, those who have learned to lose themselves in a generous kind of negligence, those who actually seem to have a shot at becoming a self before God? What if we were to concentrate our efforts as youth ministers on them?

I think of another boy, this one also twelve, this one also drawn from somewhere deep inside to the temple of the Lord. His community, his parents, his youth group have long since left Jerusalem for the return trip to Nazareth, but Jesus, unbeknownst to them, remains behind, alone in the temple with the ministers there. A strange kid who actually *wants* to be in church, Jesus is out of his depth, soaking up what he can, hearing things he had never heard back home with his middle school gang, seeing things with new eyes (Luke 2:41–51).

You get the sense that these youth—Samuel, Jesus, the others, twelve years old, fourteen years old, sixteen years old, eighteen years old—are not going to become wise or faithful prophets, pioneers, or guides as a result of some neat

times in a youth group or by partying with their peers on Friday nights, not in those lock-ins, on that ski trip, at that kegger. Rather, they will come into their own because they somehow have developed the capacity to be alone in church, in the temple, in the library, on the farm, in a car, or in their beds, and that through their solitude have come to hear a voice, a faint echo of a call. They have come to feel their horniness, their passion, their love, their fire, there in the dark, in stillness, in shame, all alone. They perceive somehow that they have been singled out, drawn in, conscripted by an Object beyond their control but one they cannot help but desire.

There are some terrors one cannot live without, and these young people are desperate, lucky, or astute enough to find their way to a minister, a priest, a library, a book, an author who can recognize their gift, honor their calling, and guide them to a generous kind of negligence in responding to a whole new world, a whole new faith, a whole new love, a whole new God beyond that young person's own omnipotent control but a world, a faith, a God not persecutory. *I knew I was safer out of my depth, because even though I couldn't stand, there was more water to hold me up.*

Notes

1. Adam Phillips, "On Risk and Solitude," in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 30. Phillips refers here to a letter to Charles Cotton from his patron, Lord Halifax, in *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton (London: Ward Lock, 1700), p. 5. See also John McDargh, "Emerson and the Life of the Self: A Psychoanalytic Conversation," in *The Endangered Self*, ed. Richard K. Fenn and Donald Capps, Monograph 2 (Princeton: Center for Religion, Self, and Society, 1992), pp. 7–20, especially p. 19.
2. Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, p. 29.
3. "William," in Adam Mastoon, ed., *The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Celebrating Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 141–142.
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