



# The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

## Building Bridges

### Introduction

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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

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- 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  
                              and Ministry
- Mark Yaconelli      A Bridge Demands a Life  
                              A Life Creates a Bridge



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## Out of One's Depth: Finding Faith on the Fringe

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In my first lecture I suggested that despite appearances to the contrary, adolescence is a necessarily lonely season of life. It is the vocation of young persons to enter into a kind of intense solitude, to risk wandering in over their heads, out of their depths, to entrust themselves to an object beyond their control if they are to find their own souls, to hear their own unique calling from God, to learn to grow in love, to determine whether the world is persecutory or sustaining.

If I am in some way right about this—that adolescence is of necessity a reclusive time, that God tends to call young people as *individuals*, and that God calls especially those young people willing to risk entering into solitude more so than those who huddle in the safety of groups or communities—then I would now ask a corollary question, namely, “What is the role of the youth minister in the adolescent’s process of self-discovery?” If the call of God, the discovery of self or soul, is indeed a lonely process, is there any role for youth ministers in that call and process? What is our task? What should we say or do, if anything at all, to facilitate the possibility that young people in our care will learn to swim, to risk going out of their depth, to entrust themselves to the deep waters of a life, to a world, to a God beyond their own control? How does one facilitate another’s solitude? How do we increase the likelihood that adolescents will find the courage to wander out into the deep waters on their own? Should we simply get out of the way, hoping and praying that whatever they happen to find there beyond their depths will sustain rather than drown, persecute, or otherwise harm them?

### The Capacity to Be Alone

D. W. Winnicott, the British child psychoanalyst, believed that a young child’s capacity to be alone, that is, the child’s ability to play imaginatively and contentedly by himself or herself, was the surest sign of emotional health in that child. However, the child’s capacity to be alone, which would become for Winnicott the precursor to the adolescent’s capacity for solitude, was not a

rejection of the need for human companionship. Solitude, for Winnicott, was not “a defiant declaration of one’s capacity to go it alone,”<sup>1</sup> not the same thing as telling the rest of the world where it should go. To the contrary, in decades of observing young children with their mothers, Winnicott found that the child’s capacity to be alone was grounded in a deeply relational experience “*of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of [the] mother*. Thus, the basis of the capacity to be alone,” Winnicott writes, “is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you have experienced something of what Winnicott is talking about if you have ever been on a long road trip with your beloved or best friend when you suddenly realize that you have gone for many miles without having exchanged a word, lost in your own thoughts in the presence of the other, the silence completely comfortable. Such an experience might be considered an adult variation on a child’s experience of being imaginatively alone in the benign presence of the mother. We generally experience this comfort with silence in the presence of another as a sign of a healthy relationship. It feels somehow *right* to us.

While initially the mother rightly attends to every cry or expression of need on the part of her young infant, eventually—within a year or so— she begins to allow the child a little more room, gradually increasing the personal space in which the child comes to discover his or her own unique imagination, interests, and desires. The emotionally secure mother becomes capable of overseeing her child’s solitary play without undue interference. She establishes a benign environment where the child can experience a kind of quiet exploration, even a kind of groping or floundering for something new to discover or to do. The mother is present but in the background, making sure that the infant will not hurt himself, will not get herself into irreparable trouble, to be sure, but allowing the child space for his or her own imagination and personal interests to take root and grow.

Being alone in the presence of another permits the discovery of authentic impulses, interests, and desires that belong solely to the infant. An accumulation of such discoveries, Winnicott suggests, leads to a sense in the child that life is vitally *real* rather than hopelessly futile. Being alone in the benign presence of a loving other constitutes the origins of a sense of hope in the child. The child “gets hope” in this relational dance of solitude. “It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life,” Winnicott says. “The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli.”<sup>3</sup>

## A Coach, Not a Player

If, then, any of this translates into what we do in our ministry with youth, it may be that we occasionally need to be aware of the importance of entrusting the young people in our care with enough space to discover just what their own particular deep waters may be, to face their own peculiar demons, to seek to work out what has brought them shame, to read those particular books in the library that could captivate only them, to discern what God may be uniquely calling them to be or do. These are things that we ourselves as youth ministers could never know or discern in any certain terms for them. We need to provide a safe space for them without always having to hint at how they should fill it.

Still, we need to linger in their neighborhoods a bit as they begin to venture in out of their depth. We need to remain somewhere benignly nearby, a lifeguard at our stations on the shore (though working primarily on our tans). Our job is to create what Winnicott called a safe “holding environment,” as safe a place as possible for their generous sort of negligence, in order not only to see that they do not drown in the process but to see as well how it will all turn out in the end, to see what new thing God may be up to in these adolescents’ lives. Who knows what we may learn about what God is doing in the world from these very adolescents in our care? Would it not be worth staying around long enough to find out? Eli the priest’s job was not one of telling Samuel what God was trying to say to the boy; Eli had *no idea* what God was trying to say to Samuel. Eli’s task, rather, was *to coach Samuel in how to listen* to what God wanted to say to Samuel alone, to coach him in the art of being alone with God, the art of solitude.

Earl Palmer, pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle and my former supervisor during a brief internship, told me that he thought it would be a good idea for me to find one author with whose work I resonated and then to proceed to read everything that author had written or would ever write. It is important to know the whole of one author’s work and thought, he said, to find one author worthy to serve as one’s guide and companion throughout the whole of one’s ministry. For Palmer himself that author had been C. S. Lewis. What Palmer did not tell me, however, was which author I should choose. He did not recommend, for instance, that I choose C. S. Lewis as he had (though there was a time when I did read a lot of Lewis). He could not presume to know this about me. Indeed, how could one know this on behalf of anyone but oneself? In this rather ordinary example, then, Palmer

served as a competent coach for me. “Find an author,” he said. He was a coach but not a player in my life. He did not go out to the court or field to play the game for me or even with me. I had to do that myself; I had to find my own author (which I eventually did in the person of Frederick Buechner).

Eli did not provide the message from the Lord for Samuel. He did not know what God would say. Instead, he coached Samuel in *how to listen for and respond to what God would say*, and this is a big difference. In fact, the message Samuel finally discerned as a result of Eli’s coaching—a message that Eli and his wretched sons were soon to be history—was not a message that Eli would have wanted him to hear, if Eli had had any say in the matter.

The capacity to be alone is a *deeply relational gift*, the experience of being alone in the presence of another. Like the twelve-year-old Samuel, it is the adolescent’s job to hear God’s call. Like Eli the priest, it is the youth minister’s job to assist the adolescent in acquiring a capacity for hearing. In our case like in Eli’s, this may involve something akin to sending the youth back to his or her own room all alone at night, in the dark, in fear and trembling. It may involve encouraging the young person to enter the terrors of solitude, instructing him or her to say, when that voice comes, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” even at risk of our own demise as ministers, even if that word from on high, like God’s to Samuel, is spoken against *us*, which it almost inevitably will be. *Your benign presence as youth minister actually constitutes the adolescent’s solitude*. You create the holding environment that allows the adolescent freedom to enter his or her own peculiar deep waters.

## A Stressful Safety

In his elegant book *Pastoral Counseling: The Basics*, published just before his recent retirement after nearly 50 years of teaching pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School, James E. Dittes tells of how one counselee described his experience of pastoral counseling, a testimony to the gracious but radically disorienting space we ministers seek to provide for others in quest of themselves and God.<sup>4</sup> Dittes’s counselee told him:

“[My experience of pastoral counseling] is like the time last winter when my car stalled, and I couldn’t get it going again. Everyone behind me started honking, and everyone around me stared, and I found myself trying to deal with them more than with the car, and I wasn’t doing very well with either. Then I saw this big cop ambling

over to me, and I really panicked: Now I'm going to get a ticket for obstructing traffic. I fumbled with the window—one more thing I couldn't manage well. Then he leaned nonchalantly on the car, grinned, and finally said, 'These Corollas just don't like this weather; it happens all the time.' Then he ambled away saying, 'I guess I'll go see what they are making all that noise about.' He meant, 'Don't let them bother you.' And they didn't and I calmed down, remembered to tap the gas pedal, and got the car going. He made a place for me where the pressure and self-consciousness and demands were off."<sup>5</sup>

Dittes contrasts this counselee's experience of grace in pastoral counseling to the usual warnings we are given to "drive defensively." "Driving defensively," he writes, "means to expect the worst at all times from all people. It means to be attentive to the dangers that may loom at any time without warning.... That could be the slogan by which most of us live our lives, whether or not we are in a car: 'Drive defensively.'"

Dittes then offers an alternative vision of a safer place. Can we imagine, Dittes wonders, a world—a highway, someplace, anyplace—where it would be impossible to crash, where safety would somehow be guaranteed, where there would be "no surprise ice spots, no errant drivers, no tire defects"? This place, Dittes argues, is called pastoral counseling, "a training module in which [the counselee is] guaranteed a safe landing."<sup>6</sup>

What if we were to view our calling as ministers to adolescents as somehow the ministry of providing this kind of radical safety, this kind of safe place, where if for just a few minutes or hours each week it would be impossible for this young person, these young people, to crash? What if we could provide that holding environment where they might be freed to relax, to listen, to allow themselves for once a kind of self-forgetfulness, to risk a generous kind of negligence with themselves in which to venture out into new and untested waters?

Given that defensive driving has become second-nature for most people, Dittes recognizes that the transition to a realm of relative safety carries its own particular threat: "Whatever 'content' or 'problem' the counseling addresses," Dittes says, "the most important benefits—what makes pastoral counseling pastoral—have to do with just the stress of transition, the stress of learning to live in a safe world," a world, in the words of Adam Phillips, not persecutory.<sup>7</sup>

“Imagine how disorienting it would be,” I tell my students in discussing Dittes’ radical vision, “to drive down the twelve-lane New Jersey Turnpike at rush hour knowing that it would be impossible to crash. Imagine how distressing the experience of living for a day, an hour, even a few minutes, as though there were no reason for distress.” This is the stress of transition to a safe world, a stress that, if we do our jobs right as youth ministers, should become a familiar one to the youth in our care.

### **Attending to Differences among Youth**

How do we create this kind of safe place, a benign but gracious and slightly disorienting holding environment for the youth in our care? I have written at some length about what I think goes into creating something of this kind of safety in my book *Counseling Troubled Youth*.<sup>8</sup> If I were to sum up what I said there in a sentence or two, it would be something to the effect, *Keep your promises to young people and never give up on them, no matter what. Keep your promises to them. Never give up hope.*

What I want to say now, though, are things that I might want to add if I were to write that book today, six years later. I would suggest first that creating such a safe space involves *paying attention to youth*, simply and intensely attending to individual young people in your care, observing them, knowing them, loving them. Even more specifically, it means paying attention to the individual differences within and among your youth, not with an invasive, in-your-face presence, not by relentless hovering, but more like Winnicott, like Dittes, like Eli the priest, like your mother (if you were lucky), namely, *benignly*, by sleeping in the next room, so to speak, by allowing for a comfortable silence between you. Against all odds you maintain an attitude in which you come to believe that, no matter what, young people will not crash on your turnpike. Rather, they will be able to experience in your presence, perhaps for the first time ever, the safety to risk going out of their depths, to face their shame, to listen for that still, small voice of God making a claim on their lives. *Pay attention to your young people. Pay attention specifically to the differences within and among the youth in your care.*

W. H. Auden said, “The first criterion of success in any human activity, the necessary preliminary, whether to scientific discovery or to artistic vision, is intensity of attention or, less pompously, love.”<sup>9</sup> We attend to what we love, to James Baldwin or Immanuel Kant or the night-flying Luna moths or the drama of the Scottish preacher. So, too, in youth ministry the first criterion of

success is our intensity of attention, our love toward our subject matter, toward first the God whom we love in Jesus Christ but no less toward the youth entrusted to our witness and care. You have to observe your young people as *individuals*, to notice things about them that others do not notice, to help them learn to listen to their own souls' unique calling, a call that you yourself cannot hear on their behalf, a call that only they, finally, will be able to discern in solitude, in the benign presence of another, in the benign presence of *you*.

### **The Single Aberrant Kernel**

In 1982, Barbara McClintock became the first woman to win an unshared Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. The genetic research, however, for which she received that prize—a discovery called “transposition” in which fragments of genes were found capable of purposeful movement to new positions on chromosomes and thereby of regulating the expression of other genes—had been completed nearly forty years earlier. Beginning in 1951, McClintock had attempted to communicate her findings on transposition to professional colleagues who responded only with uncomprehending silence, baffled by what they considered her mad eccentricity and the unorthodox nature of her claims. Following nearly a decade of unsuccessful additional attempts to communicate her discovery, McClintock simply stopped trying to do so. Instead, she spent her time in almost complete isolation in her laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island doing meticulous research—twelve hours a day, six days a week, for fifty years—almost exclusively with corn.

At the heart of McClintock's genius, her biographer Evelyn Fox Keller concluded, lay a passion for individual difference. McClintock once told Keller, “The important thing is to develop the capacity to see one kernel [of an ear of Indian corn] that is different, and make that understandable. If [something] doesn't fit, there's a reason, and you find out what it is.” McClintock believed that the prevailing focus on classification and numbers blinded geneticists of her era to individual difference. “‘Right and left,’ she says, they miss ‘what is going on.’”<sup>10</sup> In their enthusiasm for what McClintock called “counting,” her colleagues “too often overlooked the single aberrant kernel.”<sup>11</sup>

How did McClintock come to grasp genetic mysteries that eluded others? She did so, she said, by taking time to look, by waiting to hear what the material itself had to say, striving for what she called a “feeling for the organism”:

One must understand how it grows, understand its parts, understand when something is going wrong with it.... You need to know those plants well enough so that if anything changes, you look at the plant and right away you know what this damage you see is from—something that scraped across it or something that bit it or something that the wind did. You need to have a feeling for every individual plant.

No two plants are exactly alike. They’re all different, and as a consequence, you have to know that difference. I start with the seedling, and I don’t want to leave it. I don’t feel I really know the story if I don’t watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately, and I find it a great pleasure to know them.<sup>12</sup>

McClintock eventually could walk through a cornfield and simply by natural observation of any particular plant, without the use of a microscope, could determine its precise, peculiar chromosomal structure; and she never made a mistake.<sup>13</sup>

If recognizing individual difference proved so fruitful in McClintock’s work with corn—a Nobel Prize—how much more rewarding would it be in our ministry with adolescents. *The important thing is to develop the capacity to see one kernel that is different, and make that understandable.*

### **Every Lion Is Different**

In his book *Paradox and Discovery*, “John Wisdom tells of a keeper at the Dublin zoo who had a record of unusual success at the difficult task of breeding lions. ‘Asked the secret of his success, Mr. Flood replied, *Understanding lions*. Asked in what consists the understanding of lions, he replied, *Every lion is different.*”<sup>14</sup> So, too, this terrible, paradoxical, impossible realization of the youth minister: To succeed with adolescents means *understanding* adolescents, and understanding adolescents consists in the recognition that *every adolescent is different*.

William James, still perhaps the greatest American psychologist even one century removed from his heyday, once said that “one of the most philosophical remarks [he] ever heard was made by an uneducated carpenter who was doing some repairs at [James’s] house.” The carpenter told James, “There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, *is very important*.”<sup>15</sup> “It is not only the size of the difference which concerns the philosopher,” James says, “but also its place and its kind. An inch is a small thing, but we know the proverb about an inch on a man’s nose,” where a very small inch makes for a very big difference.<sup>16</sup>

The first criterion of success in any human endeavor is intensity of attention or, less pompously, love. To understand adolescents is to understand that every adolescent is different. There is very little difference between one adolescent and another, but what little there is, *is very important*. Providing a safe holding environment for our young people, then, may well involve paying a kind of intensive attention, if from a benign distance, if even from a benign indifference of sorts, to those youth entrusted to our care—to attend to them, to observe them, to notice them, to discern what small thing makes this or that one different from the rest.

In the same article in which he speaks of his carpenter’s insight, James goes on to say, “The zone of the individual differences, and of the social ‘twists’ which by common confession they initiate, is the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet. It is the theater of all we do not take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life; and however narrow its scope, it is roomy enough to lodge the whole range of human passions.”<sup>17</sup> The zone of individual differences among our youth is the precise point where the past and future meet, the stage of the living drama of life, the place of lodging of all human passions—all that is different contained in that one tiny kernel.

### **Listening for Three Hours**

Occasionally over the past decade or so, I have taught a seminary course on pastoral care and counseling with adolescents. One assignment for that course has required that each student become a sort of anthropologist of adolescence by conducting three one-hour interviews with any one young person outside the student’s own family. I provide a list of potential interview questions—playful questions but also significant ones concerning sexuality, death, and experiences of God—to which my students add their own creative

possibilities. I instruct the students not to attempt to counsel their adolescent but more simply to learn of his or her history, struggles, views, hopes, and faith. The interviews are tape-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed into a lengthy verbatim manuscript, usually about fifty pages long. In a final semester paper, the student then reflects on and analyzes those conversations using various theoretical materials from the course.

In assigning this exercise, I have found myself struck by two observations. The first occurs on the opening day of the semester, when it becomes quite evident to me that this assignment makes many of my students quite anxious. The threat inherent in the thought of actually talking at length with a young person becomes quite palpable in the classroom. The second observation, which comes only at the end of the semester, has been even more striking to me. As I near the end of reading each interview transcript and reach the point in their conversation where the seminarian would thank the young person for granting the interview, time and again I would find the youth responding by saying something to the effect, “That’s OK. I sort of enjoyed it. No adult has ever just listened to me for three hours before.”

Though I have read a response similar to this in many such interviews, I continue to find it moving. While I am grateful that my student and I have been allowed to plumb the depths of this youthful life, I am also saddened to learn that no other adult, at least outside and quite probably inside the young person’s family, has ever done so. This has been a common conclusion to these interviews with youth across a diverse spectrum of gender, race, class, faith, and family backgrounds. No adult previously had listened to them for three hours.<sup>18</sup>

*Attend to your youth; attend especially to the differences within them, among them.* “The first criterion of success in any human activity, the necessary preliminary, whether to scientific discovery or to artistic vision, is intensity of attention or, less pompously, love.” This attention, this love, particularly from a benign distance—in which you are a coach, not a player, in their lives—contributes to a sense of hope in adolescents that no matter what deep water they may be called to enter, no matter what the terrors they can no longer live without, no matter what the traffic on the turnpike they must drive, no matter what the form of their generous kind of negligence, it will be impossible, here, now, in this particular place and time, with me, with you, to drown, to crash.

### **Attending to Youth Considered “Different”**

The second thing I would like to suggest is that in addition to paying attention to the differences, however small, within and among the youth in your care, it may prove useful in your ministry, useful even in terms of enriching your own personal faith in Jesus Christ, for you to pay particular attention to youth who are “different.” Pay attention not only to their differences but to the different.

I come from Minnesota, where perhaps the greatest affront to one’s character is to be labeled, in the vernacular, “different,” as in “He’s really different,” or “All I can say is that she’s different.” If you do not like something in Minnesota, you say that it is *different*. Difference there is a very bad, possibly the worst, thing.

I have since moved to New Jersey, however, a land where emotion is worn on one’s sleeve, and I now believe that it is most likely in the ways we are each different—in our own individual shame, in the ways each of us to one degree or another is marginalized—that we encounter the God who has become known in Jesus Christ. Whatever else he may be, to a Minnesotan, Jesus would be considered *different*.

In one sense, to be an adolescent at all is invariably to be different, to be by nature marginalized. Thus one of the benefits of being a youth minister is that you yourself are frequently slated to encounter the marginalized, thereby to encounter Christ more regularly than ministers who work more exclusively with adults and others less different.

In another sense, though, some youth are more marginalized than others, and it is these youth, in particular, to whom I would invite you especially to attend. Youth who are particularly marginalized, like many of the adolescents I mentioned in my last lecture, are more likely than others to have developed out of necessity the capacity for solitude. The most different are likely those youth who hold the richest promise for attending to the things of God.

### **Where the Edges Meet**

In her book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a devastating account of the collision of cultures between Laotian Hmong immigrants in Merced, California, and the American medical community there, journalist Anne Fadiman captures something of the drama and tension of life at the boundaries. She writes, “I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where the edges meet. I like shorelines,

weather fronts, international borders. There are interesting frictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one.”<sup>19</sup>

I, too, with Fadiman, find myself drawn to where the edges meet; I, too, like shorelines, weather fronts, international borders, mountain peaks. I wonder now if one reason I prefer life not at the center of things but where the edges meet is because it is there at the margins—where the sea becomes the shore, where the calm becomes the storm, where past and future meet at that “dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty” in which is lodged “the whole range of human passions”—that I personally have most often encountered Jesus as Lord. On the margins. Where the edges meet.

So I wonder whether as youth ministers, you may be more likely to discover and learn more about Jesus yourselves by attending to the most marginal of your young people, that is, to the most marginalized among already marginal adolescents. These may be the youth who, if you are not careful, will bear Christ to you, their ministers.

### **A Scar as Lens to the World**

Alice Walker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, tells of a time as a bright and vivacious eight-year-old tomboy when she was hit in the eye by a pellet from her brother’s BB gun. Her parents did not find out the truth about what happened for a full week, at which time they took her to a doctor who chastised them for waiting so long. He shook his head and said, “Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too.”

The doctor’s comment terrified Alice, but what bothered her even more was how she looked. The BB left an ugly “glob of whitish scar tissue” on her eye. She writes of herself as that eight-year-old: “Now when I stare at people—a favorite pastime, up to now—they will stare back. Not at the ‘cute’ little girl, but at her scar. For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head.”<sup>20</sup>

Alice suddenly starts doing poorly in school for the first time, has nightmares of suicide, becomes afraid of school, where classmates now insist on fighting with her. At age twelve she recalls burying her face in books as one way to keep others from seeing her eye, the white cataract still clearly visible. She rages against her eye before the mirror, hating it, despising it: “I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty.”<sup>21</sup>

At fourteen, Alice visits her favorite brother, Bill, and his wife in Boston, adults who finally understand her shame to the point of taking her to a doctor who removes the scar tissue, though a “small bluish crater” remains in her eye. With the white glob at last gone, she experiences a newfound lease on life.<sup>22</sup>

Reflecting on her childhood trauma and shame, Walker says:

I have always been a solitary person, and since I was eight years old (and...blinded and scarred [in that] eye), I have daydreamed—not of fairy tales—but of falling on swords, of putting guns to my heart or head, and of slashing my wrists with a razor....

I believe, though, that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems.<sup>23</sup>

Then, years later, this revelation:

I am twenty-seven, and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother’s eyes are different from other people’s. Will she be embarrassed? I think. What will she say? Every day she watches a television program called “Big Blue Marble.” It begins with a picture of earth as it appears from the moon. It is bluish, a little battered-looking, but full of light, with whitish clouds swirling around it. Every time I see it I weep with love, as if it is a picture of Grandma’s house. One day when I am putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focuses on my eye. Something inside me cringes, gets ready to try to protect myself. All children are cruel about physical differences, I know from experience, and that they don’t always mean to be is another matter. I assume Rebecca will be the same.

...She studies my face intently as we stand, her inside and me outside her crib. She even holds my face maternally between her dim-

pled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyerlike as her father, she says, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: “Mommy, there’s a *world* in your eye.” (As in, “Don’t be alarmed, or do anything crazy.”) And then, gently, but with great interest, “Mommy, where did you *get* that world in your eye?”

...Crying and laughing I ran to the bathroom, while Rebecca mumbled and sang herself off to sleep. Yes indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror. There *was* a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I *did* love it.<sup>24</sup>

The most marginalized of youth—outcast, ashamed, unable to look you in the eye—may be those very youth who discover a *world* in their shame, a *world* in their scars, their peculiar shame precisely the lens that enables them, enables you and me, to see the world, to see even God, with a clarity of vision that others, for all their power and competence, do not possess.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps we Christians should not be surprised to learn that there was a world in Alice Walker’s eye, a world in her shame. Perhaps we should not be surprised to learn that in the solitude to which her shame had sentenced her, she began to venture far out of her adolescent depth, began really to see people and things, began to read stories and to write poems, and learn there in the depths that the water would hold her up. We Christians should not be surprised at this, for we serve a Lord who has scars of his own, has a world in his scars, in his hands, in his side. *He’s got the whole world in his hands*, in his scarred hands, in his shame, in his dejection, there at the edge of the city, there on the margins, there on the cross. There is a world in your scars and mine, in your adolescents’ scars, too, as in Jesus’ own, but a world not persecutory, a world where you are safe, where you are welcome, where you cannot crash, where there is enough water to hold you up.

## Notes

1. Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 51.
2. D. W. Winnicott, “The Capacity to Be Alone,” in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, CN: International Universities Press, 1965), p. 30, emphasis in original.
3. Winnicott, p. 34. See also Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 23–26.

4. This material includes excerpts from Robert C. Dykstra, "Maturing into Boyhood: James E. Dittes on Men and Meaning," *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 52, no. 2 (November 2003).
5. James E. Dittes, *Pastoral Counseling: The Basics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pp. 42–43.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.
7. Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 29.
8. Robert C. Dykstra, *Counseling Troubled Youth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).
9. W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 319.
10. Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1983), p. xxi. This material includes excerpts from Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon*, pp. 80–82.
11. Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism*, p. 97.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 198.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
14. John Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p. 138, quoted in Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 77.
15. William James, "The Gospel of Relaxation," in *William James: Writings 1878–1899* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1992), p. 831; and William James, "The Importance of Individuals," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), pp. 256–257.
16. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 257.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
18. This material includes excerpts from Robert C. Dykstra, *Counseling Troubled Youth*, pp. 5–6.
19. Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. x.
20. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1983), p. 364.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 366–367.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 369–370.
25. I am grateful to Sang Uk Lee, a graduate student in pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, for clarifying this metaphor of scar as lens.