



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

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 Out of One's Depth: Finding Faith on the Fringe
- Rodger Nishioka Keepin' On, Keepin' On: Constancy as a Theological
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 A Life Creates a Bridge



Keepin' On, Keepin' On: Constancy as a Theological Practice in Youth Ministry

At Columbia Theological Seminary, where I am privileged to serve on the faculty, I have a friend named Alexander Oliver. Mr. Oliver is part of our maintenance crew and has been around for some time. Once when I asked how long he had been at Columbia, he replied looking down as he often does when he is talking to you, “long time.” When I asked how long, he sighed and said, “Professor, I’m old.” When I asked how old, he said, “older than dirt.” That’s pretty old. A highlight of the year is when Mr. Oliver is coaxed to sing in a chapel service. Word spreads quickly that Mr. Oliver is going to sing. He helps to get the word out by telling everyone he sees. The chapel gets full. He comes in wearing his uniform, and in our chapel, so quiet it seems as if we are holding our collective breaths, he begins to belt out a spiritual that is no doubt lodged deep in his bones. For instance, I thought I knew the song “Wade in the Water,” but quite honestly when I first heard Mr. Oliver sing it, I realized then and there that I had never heard the song before. He is a handsome, if ancient, African American man who for some reason has taken a liking to me, his first “oriental” friend as he reminds me. Whenever I see Mr. Oliver, I ask how he is doing, and more often than not, he says, in his mumbling, “Oh, you know, keepin’ on, keepin’ on.”

It is one of the great Southern phrases to which I am becoming accustomed in my orientation to Southern English. To parse that phrase, I would say it means something like persevering much like the idea in Hebrews 12:1 about “[running] with perseverance the race that is set before us.” I believe Mr. Oliver has it right. Much of what we are called to in youth ministry is just that: keepin’ on, keepin’ on.

Rodger Nishioka serves as associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Prior to joining the faculty at Columbia, Nishioka served for twelve years as denominational staff in youth and young adult ministry for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

It is running the race with perseverance. It is the long stretch after the excitement at the start of the race and well before the relief at the end of it. It is the idea of constancy and consistency. It is the idea of abiding when in John 15:4 Jesus calls upon us to “abide in me as I abide in you.” It is remaining. It is staying. It is hanging in there and doing the routine and going through the motions not because it is deeply rewarding but because we are called to it. This is a contrary idea today in this age of instant gratification and extreme sports and do the dew and thrill-a-minute and a war that lasts three weeks; however, the truth is that any bridge worth building is going to take time.

What we are struggling with here is the dominant narrative of the romanticist hermeneutic that tells us that every single moment of ministry with young people, every single conversation, every interaction is to be productive, fulfilling, and even transformative and, friends, that narrative is lying to us. It simply is not nor can it be true. I confess that I love the oft-quoted definition of vocation from that wonderful Christian wordsmith Frederick Buechner. Buechner tells us that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”¹ But that does not mean that in every moment of our acting out our call, we are going to experience that Disney-esque magic of having made a profound difference in each young person’s life. The dominant narrative I am challenging is one of selfishness, solipsism, and egocentrism that says in order to experience God’s call, I have to find fulfillment in every moment of my work.

The challenge is to keep on keepin’ on bridge building and not to subscribe to the romantic notions of ministry that surround us and ultimately disable us. Romanticist notions can get in the way. In the movie *Shrek* these romanticist notions almost prevented Princess Fiona from being rescued. You see, she had it all worked out. When she is rescued, there are certain things that are supposed to happen. When they did not happen as she had planned, she almost calls off the rescue. Just like Princess Fiona, we must come to grips with the positivist tapes playing in our heads and reinforced in our culture that everything we do has to be a high and must translate in some way to a result that is tangible and immediate or our work is for not. This tainted worldview is communicated to us with phrases like “go for the gusto,” “grab what you can,” “life is too short.” The irony here, of course, is that life is actually longer for North Americans than it has ever been, and now we are being told to prepare for work well into our 70s.

The further irony is that it is part of the rhythm of life that not all of our Sundays are high holy days like Easter and Christmas and Pentecost, and that is why the ecclesial calendar is filled with thirty-three Sundays in “Ordinary Time.” Virtually eight months of the year are designated Sundays in Ordinary Time. To be sure, Ordinary Time does not mean stagnant time. In fact, the days of Ordinary Time are to be marked by continuing growth, but these days are separate from the high holy days, and they are in the vast majority by a ratio of 2:1. These are the days of constancy and consistency—the days of keepin’ on, keepin’ on.

Keepin’ on, keepin’ on challenges the dominant narrative that ministry is always fulfilling or it is not ministry at all. Too often, when I hear that dire statistic that the average stay for a youth worker in a congregation is (fill in the blank—two years, sixteen months, twelve months, whatever), the implied indictment here is singularly on the congregation, and to be sure, the congregation must own some complicity in that statistic. But as with all statistics, the full story is not shared. One of the key reasons youth workers do not stay in positions for very long is that they have appropriated the misconception that being a youth director is about “fun” and “making a difference” and the moment things become “boring” or “mundane” it is time to leave. In this way, youth ministry has become a haven for the church worker with attention deficit disorder, and unfortunately there are enough jobs available and enough congregations that are desperate that there always seems to be somewhere else to go.

If we are hoping to build bridges, to work with young people in the midst of the transitions and changes of their lives, then we are called to constancy as a theological practice. To discuss more about this term “practice,” I turn to Kenda Dean and Ron Foster’s excellent book *The Godbearing Life*. When discussing practices, they write:

We use the term practice in the way scholars use it rather than soccer coaches’ definition, although similarities exist. Practices are the constitutive acts of a community that both identify us as, and form us into, people who belong to that community. Christian practices mark us as and make us into Jesus’ followers. Our salvation comes by grace through faith, not through practice—but Christian practices are means of grace by which God strengthens individuals and the church to live faithfully.

The ordinariness of Christian practices makes them easy to overlook. Practices are much like the back and forth, give and take rituals that happen around the family dinner table, ongoing activities that subtly shape us into people who bear a family resemblance beyond the nose on our faces. Practices constitute the daily rhythm of our life together. Through them God shapes us and uses us as a point of entry into the world. They align our steps with God's and, in so doing, create holy vibrations that radiate far beyond the church.²

We are called to the practice, then, of constancy, as a means of grace in our own lives and in the lives of others, as a point of entry into the world, especially into the world of young people and their families, so that holy vibrations are created that radiate far beyond the church.

In his book *Faithshaping* to which I turn year after year, Stephen D. Jones writes about two practices among adults that help nurture faith in young people. Jones writes about nearness and directness. It seems to me that nearness can be likened to the practice of constancy. Jones says that growth in faith requires that there be nearness to the faithful—that young people experience adults in their lives who live out their faith in natural, consistent, expressive ways. This happens in the family when parents and stepparents and other caregivers express and verbalize their commitments as disciples of Jesus Christ. Too often, says Jones, adult leaders are too casual in their commitments, or the ministry with youth is tangentially related to the whole church's ministry, what Dean and Foster trenchantly indict as the “one-eared Mickey Mouse model of youth ministry.” Nearness happens, says Jones, when young people feel they are integrally related to the church in an important way and when they develop deep and meaningful relationships with adult Christian models as mentors.³

An illustration of this concept of nearness occurred about ten years ago when a group of twelve young people were brought together on Princeton Theological Seminary's campus for a weekend retreat. As a supplemental resource to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s church school curriculum for young people, the designers and editors decided to film a group of young people over the course of a weekend and create an MTV “Real World” type video. The theme for the weekend was exploring the life of Jesus Christ. These were bright, hand-picked, high school students from the northeast, and their task was to focus on Christology. By the end of the weekend, not only were they

not able to come up with a statement about Jesus Christ that could be used in the video but out of the twelve young people who came together, the four who actually possessed a strong Christology were now thoroughly confused and questioning everything about the church and its confessional stands, and for \$17,000 and miles of footage, there was very little that could actually be used. It was a terrible weekend. In an attempt at redemption, the editors and designers invited each of the twelve young people to look at the camera and just “say something about Jesus.”

The one young person who I remember the most was Heather, who had been quiet much of the weekend. The child of not one but two pastors, she ended up looking at the camera and saying something like this, “You know, this Jesus stuff, I’m just not sure about any of it, and I’m not sure it really matters. But I do know this. I know that Jesus matters to my parents, and even though I think they’re pretty lame sometimes, I know that I matter to them and they matter to me. So, I guess, Jesus matters to me, too.” It is the essence of nearness, this epistemological claim of Heather’s. That is how the syllogism works.

Anne Lamott also illustrates beautifully this practice of nearness. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Lamott talks about her son, Sam, and his compulsory attendance at church. She writes:

Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church—who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to go. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend? It does not help him to be reminded that once he’s there he enjoys himself, that he gets to spend the time drawing in the little room outside the sanctuary, that he only actually has to sit still and listen during the short children’s sermon. It does not help that I always pack some snacks, some Legos, his art supplies, and bring along any friend of his whom he can lure into our churchy web. It does not help that he genuinely cares for the people there. All that matters to him is that he alone among his colleagues is forced to spend Sunday morning in church.

You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might won-

der why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of the spirit. They are people who pray, and practice their faith—banding together to work on themselves and for others. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.⁴

Lamott testifies to the power of the practice of constancy.

Surely an essential part of being involved in youth ministry is not because we feel like it or because we get something out of it but because it is what we do—it is what we are called to by God. That is the practice of keepin' on, keepin' on; the practice of constancy, staying with it, bridge-building.

To be sure, constancy does not mean staying in a place of abuse. Constancy is not staying simply for the sake of staying. Constancy is not stagnation. But constancy is about a commitment to a group of young people and to a congregation so that we might experience what it means to be with someone for several years. The transience of our society has led us to believe that we ought to be moving. In doing so, we miss the benefits of longevity and staying power.

Constancy is not always easy. Perseverance is not necessarily fun, but something happens when one stays. Persons who have been in positions of ministry for more than eight years will testify to this. I served for nine years as General Assembly staff in youth ministry and then for almost four more years as the coordinator for youth and young adult ministry. In my sixth year, I noted a phenomenon that surprised me. I was in my office, and I distinctly remember receiving a phone call from a pastor who was struggling. He introduced himself, and I remember him saying that we had never met but a friend of his had met me. When he shared his struggle with his friend, this friend encouraged him to call me, and lo and behold, the pastor did just that, sight unseen. What

struck me was the level of trust and grace I was being assigned by this pastor. I did not have to work to earn credibility. It was given freely. That is something that comes as a response to constancy demonstrated in ministry. After a while, one finds oneself having to expend less energy on gaining credibility and then, one is able to shift some of that energy to creativity. Again, it is not easy to choose to be present. It takes hard work. It means choosing to remain, to abide.

In the movie *Dangerous Minds*, Michelle Pfeiffer plays the part of a first-year teacher named Luann Johnson. Miss Johnson is assigned to an “academy” class, a euphemism for mostly “low-achieving” students of minority race who are being bussed to this high school. The class is a difficult one and has already run through one teacher and three substitutes. In an admittedly romanticized plot, Johnson begins to fall in love with these students and they with her, but what I appreciate about this film is that there are rough days as well. In the turning point of the film, she articulates for the first time to them her choice to stay, and it makes a difference. Two of her students, Raul and Guzman, have just been suspended for fighting with Emilio, and she realizes her complicity in creating that problem through her well-meaning naiveté. She decides to visit their homes to talk with their families, and the rest of the class hears about it. She gains a new credibility.

Constancy is not easy. Perseverance is not always fun. But it is the journey to which we have been called. Toward the end of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Two Towers*, he writes of a conversation between the two hobbits, Samwise and Frodo.

“I don’t like anything here at all,” said Frodo, “step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.”

“Yes, that’s so,” said Samwise. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We only hear about those who just kept on.”⁵

It is what we are called to—this practice of keepin’ on, keepin’ on. And certainly there are multiple opportunities to turn back or to change paths, but that is not the way of it with the tales that really matter or the stories that stay with us, as Tolkien reminds us. Instead, staying, remaining, abiding, that is what makes for the way to which we have been called by the God who sustains us. Thanks be to God.

Notes

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.
2. Kenda Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), pp. 107–108.
3. Stephen D. Jones, *Faithshaping: Youth and the Experience of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1987), p. 36.
4. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), p. 102.
5. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine, 1965), p. 362.