

**Youth, Faith, and the Christian
University After Moralistic
Therapeutic Deism:
A Reassessment of the National
Study of Youth and Religion
Findings in Light of Walter
Brueggemann's *The Creative
Word***

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Dedicated to

Professors Bob Drovdaahl and Ed Smyth

*Who embody the legacy of Educational Ministry at Seattle Pacific University.
Your contribution to the spiritual depth, breadth and height of students over the years is
a testimony to what the teaching ministry of the Church is all about.*

Psalm 73: 25, 26

Youth, Faith, and the Christian University after Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: A Reassessment of the National Study of Youth and Religion Findings in Light of Walter Brueggemann's *The Creative Word*

I would like to begin with a compelling statement by Karl Barth about the person of Jesus Christ from his *Church Dogmatics* that I will return to and weave throughout my comments in this paper. This is one of the essay prompts used in the School of Theology Capstone course in Winter 2013 I taught with Dr. Brian Bantum and offers a context for our discussions tonight:

God who reconciled the world and therefore the Christian to Himself, and who does not cease to reveal Himself as the One who did so, is for him in either case, on this way which is possible, necessary and meaningful in this time. This is what makes him in all circumstances a positive man. His life is positive in the fact that from the very first it is one long calling upon God. He calls upon God representatively for those who do not yet do so, or do not seem to do so. He does not exclude but includes them when he prays to this God: 'Our Father! Hallowed by thy name! Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!' This God will not faint, neither be weary. He hears all those who call on Him in this way.¹

Situated in Barth's volume IV in *Church Dogmatics* on the doctrine of reconciliation, this statement about Jesus as one who fully exhibits "from the very first...one long calling upon God" is what I hope to argue for what it means to be a teenager as well. To be an adolescent is to be aware in some fashion of moving away from the confines and strictures of constant familial and institutional support as an external locus of control of one's life. This movement is continuous and always striving toward the event horizon of taking on the mantle of responsibility for one's life as an internally motivated and externally actualized reality in some fashion. This movement has both Damascus and Emmaus seasons: times of abrupt, sudden seismic conviction as well as slow, plodding journeys bridged by relationships where transformation is not always

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* ed. G. W. Bomiley and T.F. Torrence (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) Vol. IV "The Doctrine of Reconciliation" Part 3.1 p. 367

discernible until the bread is broken and the cup raised in praise at the end of all journeys. The songs that populate our culture underscore this one long calling upon God in both implicit and explicit means that teenagers have been singing for decades. As heard in the medley of songs reaching back to the 1970's, 80's and 90's, this "one long calling upon God" is evident in the popular culture our student's parents came of age in as teenagers and provided a soundtrack² to the world into which they were born whether they were aware of it or not. This hunger is in the heart for escape on the open highway in a Springsteen song and is the perennial search for a heart of pure gold as found in a Neil Young tune. There is that perplexing reality that we are continually seeking yet still haven't found what we are looking for as U2 reminded a generation and which resonates with the apophatic tradition in Theology that acknowledges *Deus Absconditus Praesens* or 'God is hidden yet also present'. And there is that deep fear in many teenagers that when we do find that which gives life meaning – whether in a community of saints in worship or during detention in a John Hughes teen movie of misfits who christen themselves "The Breakfast Club" – that we may be forgotten. This is what makes these songs and many others cyclical in our culture - a song like Simple Minds "(Don't You) Forget About Me" is as current to youth culture in the 2012 film "Pitch Perfect" as it was when teen rebel Judd Hirsh walked across a football field in his trench coat almost 30 years ago and punched the sky in youthful deviance and triumph as the credits rolled. To "come-of-age" has always meant that to grow up into adulthood is to acknowledge that there is a hunger for something more, a longing for purity, the paradox of searching and not always finding, and that life is often about risking heartbreak for the sake of love and that takes courage.

² My sincere thanks to Eric Miller - <http://ericmillersongs.com/> - for arranging the song medley for this lecture. I encourage people to get acquainted with this gifted singer-songwriter and follow his art.

How do we raise a generation into a passionate and thoughtful life that is the embodiment of “one long calling upon God”? How does a culture determine whether or not the young people in our midst are “calling upon God” or not? What measures do we use? What is the job of those who work with youth be it parents, churches, let alone Christian universities in this task? This is what is at stake with the work of the data set collected by the National Study of Youth and Religion.

2012 marked the ten-year anniversary of the first completed wave of data collected by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). As they state on their website “the purpose of the NSYR is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.”³ As many church leaders and youth workers in America can attest, while numerous papers and articles have been drawn out of the work, perhaps the most important is the book published by sociologists Christian Smith and SPU alum Melinda Denton in 2005 as *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (OUP, 2005).⁴

The NSYR began its work in shadow of the shootings at Columbine High School and in the aftermath of 9/11. The cultural landscape of this time in America cannot be understated when one reads *Soul Searching* today. Here was an American population traumatized and

³ The NSYR continues to update its findings online at www.youthandreligion.org/research and has been incredibly generous with sharing their findings.

⁴ Cf. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (OUP, 2005).

deeply uncertain of its future and the future of its young people. When the data collection began at the end of 2001 and then fully engaged in 2002, armed soldiers were still patrolling many airports, processing of passports almost ground to a halt, and the Transport Security Administration (TSA) was becoming the reality it is today. Within this cultural context the NSYR took a representative survey of US households with teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 in forty-five states, and it progressed to include qualitative in-person interviews with 267 representative teens from across the country. The NSYR offered the cumulative view that young people in America were developing not as orthodox to their respective faith traditions *per se*, but into Moralistic Therapeutic Deists – Teens were viewing God as primarily a means for discerning what is right and wrong ethical behavior (Moralistic), that God has a central and primary concern for the individual needs of the self prior to those of a community (Therapeutic), and that God is ultimately distant and often indifferent in regard to the activities of our everyday life and usually only interceding in times of crisis... if at all (Deism). We live in a largely diagnostic time so the potency of seeing teenagers as Moralistic Therapeutic Deists is what I want to address as a case study of sorts. My thesis both as a theologian and professor is to address how easily concerns about the transference of faith from one generation to the next can galvanize the social imaginary of faith communities either out of fear or visionary wonder and hope. What has occurred through this distilled rendering of the NSYR into the catchphrase Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is the coining of a neologism so common place in many faith communities that it is hard to remember a time when teenagers were thought of in any other way and unfortunately has bred more fear than hope and Shalom. My prayer is that SPU can change that.

In a recent article⁵ by columnist David Brooks, he cites a Yale University senior by the name of Victoria Buhler who offered an exemplary snapshot of her current peer group of students. In a paper she wrote for a class Brooks was teaching at Yale, Buhler described how children raised in a time after the economic idealism coupled with the Grunge nihilism ('Here we are now, entertain us') of the 90s and then followed by the moral imperatives to rid the world of evil after 9/11 left a generation – who she calls “The Cynic Kids” - both fearful and largely indifferent to institutions offering lofty absolute moral claims. As Buhler states “We are deeply resistant to idealism... Ever the policy buffs, we know we are unable to scientifically appraise different options, and so, given the information constraints, we stick with the evil we know.” Buhler goes on to say that Cynic Kids “don’t like the system — however, they are wary of other alternatives as well as dismissive of their ability to actually achieve the desired modifications. As such, the generation is very conservative in its appetite for change. Broadly speaking, Cynic Kids distrust the link between action and result.” As Brooks assessed Buhler’s observations, he offered this reflection in closing:

The harsh events of the past decade may have produced not a youth revolt but a reversion to an empiricist mind-set, a tendency to think in demoralized economic phrases like “data analysis,” “opportunity costs” and “replicability,” and a tendency to dismiss other more ethical and idealistic vocabularies that seem fuzzy and, therefore, unreliable. After the hippie, the yuppie and the hipster, the cool people are now wonksters.⁶

What Brooks concludes is that the generation of young people who are coming of age in our midst are formed by fears of their parents and church leaders that arose in cultural moments of terror as repeated scenes of teenagers ran out screaming from Columbine High School and the

⁵ David Brooks, “The Empirical Kids” *New York Times* March 28, 2012
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/opinion/brooks-the-empirical-kids.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20130329&r=0

⁶ David Brooks, “The Empirical Kids” *New York Times* March 28, 2012
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/opinion/brooks-the-empirical-kids.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20130329&r=0

clouds of dust of the Twin Towers billowed out into the streets of New York over and over and over again.

As seen in the first decade of the first three waves of its work⁷ as one does a literature review of Christian Smith's trilogy *Soul Searching*, *Souls in Transition*, and the most recent *Lost in Transition*, as well as Lisa Pearce and Melinda Denton's *A Faith of Their Own*⁸, the outcomes at once point to the complexity of teenager's faith journeys yet continually land on a note of alarm that results more in fear and panic for faith communities receiving the data than hope and promise. In large part this is due to a basic reality anyone working directly with young people over the course of time will tell you: the future that teens desire and resources they need to encounter in order to deepen Christian faith is often not in sync with the past of the adults who are their parents and leaders. Sometimes this is cause for concern, but it is also a cause for hopefulness and inspiration.

⁷ The third wave of NSYR surveys was completed in 2008 following up with the initial interview group as they progressed into young adulthood and was published in 2009 by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell as *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (OUP, 2009) and the recent Christian Smith et. al. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (OUP, 2012).

⁸ Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Denton, *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents* (OUP, 2011). In *A Faith of Their Own*, Pearce and Denton develop categories that identify the varying levels of religious belief and involvement, called the "Five As" These five typologies represent the various moods that surfaced in the second and third rounds of data reflection and are seen by Pearce and Denton as the dominant typologies in American teens at present:

Abiders: The most likely to have given the most religious response to each of the conventional measures of religion (belief in God, exclusivism, prayer, attendance, importance of faith, being close to God)

Adapters: Believe in a personal and involved God, high service to others, high personal religious practice

Assenters: Tend to believe in a personal God and feel somewhat close to God, however faith is not likely to be very important in life

Avoiders: Express some belief in God, but often a distant impersonal God, have low levels of religious conduct

Atheists: Do not believe in God

(Drawn from Figure 2.2 Summary of religious characteristics of the five religious profiles, *A Faith Of Our Own*, p. 55)

Critiques of the label “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”:

In his recent article, “Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice,” sociologist Robert Wuthnow challenges those using qualitative methods of research to treat the “talk” happening in interviews as a unique resource for insight and depth of meaning.⁹ Wuthnow traces the historical trajectory of the reputation of interview based research through the 1960’s, 70’s, and 80’s leading to the academic acceptance of interviews as a legitimate vehicle for doing research. Despite the general acceptance, however, Wuthnow points out that interviews are often still used as anecdotes to quantitative research or are analyzed quantitatively despite their qualitative quality.

As an alternative, Wuthnow considers how qualitative researchers might continue the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault who “proposed that culture not be thought of as underlying beliefs and values influencing behavior, but as a toolkit of habits, skills, and styles from which people conduct strategies of action.”¹⁰ In this way Wuthnow proposes that qualitative researchers give greater attention to modes of expression and the assumed forms of knowing imposed by authority figures and institutions upon the narrative context that surround a given issue being researched. Wuthnow puts it this way,

Talk is cultural work that people do to make sense of their lives and to orient their behavior. It is a toolkit – culture in action in Swindler’s terms – with which to do work, but it is more than after the fact justification. It serves rather as the means through which values and beliefs acquire sufficient meaning to guide behavior and to provide a template for self-understanding.¹¹

⁹ Robert J. Wuthnow, “Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* vol. 50, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 1-21.

¹⁰ Wuthnow, “Taking Talk Seriously” p. 4

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

It is with this definition of the function of “talk” as a cultural work and toolkit by which people are not merely offering responses to set questions but are always in the process of building, shaping and critiquing their beliefs that I want to link to the work of Walter Brueggemann in his 1982 volume *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*. This ‘culture in action’ is what is lost in much of the employment of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as I will discuss shortly. With the rabid embrace of this distilment of the NSYR study comes a quick and overly easy mode of assessing who teenagers are and what makes them ‘tick’ that is largely akin to a flat reading of text as opposed to a thick and deep engagement. I have addressed some of these concerns in other work in relation to teen faith development where institutions such as churches and universities flatten a view of faith as something that needs to be fixed and static much too early and forgoes the complexity and mobility of teens as seekers and plodders in what I have termed a ‘sacred mobility’ of meaning making.¹² As will be seen in the second half of the lecture in reflecting on Brueggeman’s conception of faith formation for young people that is largely in keeping with this notion of “talk” that Wuthnow offers us. A moving, changing, deepening, engaging process of intimacy that defies labels and categories in the ways words like “love” and “joy” feel trite in the face of the experience of the real thing these signs seek to signify. What Wuthnow offers as “talk” may be enlarged to include other forms of dialogue that is ‘culture in action’ that serves as ‘the means through which values and beliefs acquire sufficient meaning’. Tonight we will see and hear some of those forms of “talk” about faith through music, dance, poetry and studio art¹³ to offer only a few examples.

¹² Jeffery F. Keuss and Rob Willett, “The Sacredly Mobile Adolescent – A hermeneutic phenomenological study toward revising of the Third Culture Kid typology for effective ministry practice in a multivalent culture” in *Journal of Youth Ministry*, Fall 2009, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 7 -24.

¹³ My thanks to Sarah Watkins and Abigail Platter for participating in live painting for this lecture. The support of the SPU Department of Art in this event is greatly appreciated.

Let's begin with a reflection on Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 9. In this passage of scripture, Israel has received the divine commands of God as given to Moses and now must put them into action.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as emblems on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

If we take this passage as a flat text, it is evocative enough: a call to listen to God with everything that we are and then to “talk” with young people in all contexts of our lives. Yet what does putting the Scripture in motion look and feel like artistically? For this I have asked movement artist Karin Stevens¹⁴ to give us some help.

As Karin has told me in relation to her work, there is a “truth in the tissues” that movement artists experience as they draw upon a personal history of textures of meaning, experiences and education grounded in scripture, creedal affirmations and deep reflection in community. For artists like those who are painting, moving and singing this evening, the “truth in the tissues” of their work simply does not fit into the confines of textual, linear, doctrinal affirmations. They point towards such affirmations and respond to such traditions. They offer a 'body' history of responses and reflections. Karin offers through modern dance, eastern body practice, and catholic embodied liturgy one way of living into and with the textures and tissues

¹⁴ My thanks to Karin Stevens for creating this movement installation in regard to the Shema of Deuteronomy 6 for this lecture. Karin began her training most notably with Pacific Northwest Ballet and The Seattle Children's Theater. Her artistic lens has been influenced by a diverse movement background and travel, including a theatrical performance experience as a teen in Tashkent, Uzbekistan and a year studying dance in Spain as a young adult. While completing a B.A. in dance from the University of Washington, she was awarded a Mary Gates Endowment for Student Leadership Grant for her work with at-risk youth through dance. In 1999, Stevens began presenting her work and since has completed more than 50 dances. As Director of Dance at Dr Philips H. S., Orlando, FL, 2000 - 2003, she created many notable dances and was awarded multiple invitations to present in various national and local dance festivals, including a request to teach and choreograph for The Orlando Ballet School. In 2003, Stevens was awarded a full scholarship and teaching assistantship for the Mills College MFA Dance program. For more on Karin Stevens and Karin Stevens Dance: http://karinstevensdance.com/Karin_Stevens_Dance/welcome.html

of the text that is the *Shema*. It is a deep listening that moves and experiences without words yet communicates in vital ways.

As we glance at the paintings in progress, hear the songs raised to ceiling, the body moving and turning in sync with the sacred text, we are challenged to remember that there is always a danger in any “one size – fits all” view to what is considered biblical literacy and deep faith that plots toward rationalism over and against embodiment and practice. The diversity of expressions and experiences in Scripture of God through what constitutes conversation, discipleship, mission, and evangelism (just to name a few) only augments the point that faith is a mysterious, multifaceted reality. For example, in order to set a standard of Christian identity based on faith, which of the litany of names lifted up in Hebrews 11 do we turn to primarily? Abel? Enoch? Rahab? David? Sixteen people are mentioned by name and numerous others are noted by inference. As we hear throughout this chapter in Hebrews and leading in Hebrews 12, this ‘cloud of witnesses’ is diverse in gender, race, economic status and degrees of observable piety as well as questionable and at time reprehensible behavior. Yet all are examples of faith to remember despite being diverse and distinct.

Identity formation in the Christian faith is ultimately grounded in what theologian James McClendon stated as ‘biography as theology’¹⁵. Our identity is formed by those we surround ourselves with and subsequently those who surround us and shape us. Rather than depending on merely one star in the solar system of Christian faith formation, teenagers are encouraged by virtue of the canon of Scripture to be informed and transformed by a vast constellation of people who will differ in belief, will approach faith in both stoic and fearful ways, have courage to scale mountains and the timidity to whisper out a prayer in solitude. Faith is not rigidly uniform nor is

¹⁵ James McClendon, *Biography As Theology: How Life Story's Can Remake Today's Theology* (Abingdon Press, 1974).

it to be static in either personal belief statements or the people we allow God to bring into our lives and especially in the lives of teenagers. I believe that both Chris Smith and Melinda Denton would concur with this as well for the most part. Yet in *Soul Searching* they do argue that “all religious groups seem at risk of losing teens to nonreligious identities”¹⁶ which assumes that there is an easily quantifiable religious identity out there that we can appeal to.

One of the tenets I have challenged both undergraduate students as well as seminarians over the years as a theologian who walks them through the complexities of Church history is that there is more to being a Christian than Christianity. As one journeys through the beginnings of the early Church and chronicles the challenges of the season of martyrdom leading to the rise of the Church to prominence after the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the movements of the various ecumenical councils that framed the early Creeds, the years spent canonizing the Scriptures in submission to the movements of the Holy Spirit, the various schisms that split the Church into East and West, Protestant and Catholic, Reformed, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, Quaker, Independent and onwards, you see the ways faith is always moving in and through the media of culture and the identities of people of faith are often influenced by the dynamism of change in relation to tradition.

To this end I have to admit being puzzled by this notion of 'nonreligious' identities that Smith and Denton speak of and deeply suspicious of what the 'religious' persona that is back grounding this assessment would look and feel like. They go on to state that “a number of religious teenager’s propounded theological views that are, according to the standards of their own religious traditions, simply not orthodox”¹⁷. The category of ‘religious’ and ‘nonreligious’

¹⁶ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 88

¹⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 136

is not only difficult to discern for many of the ministries transforming the lives of young people today, the categories as conceived through the study are ultimately at odds with the long witness of faith seen through the canon of Scripture and the tradition of the Church itself. Remember that the Apostle Paul not only cited pagan poets and philosophers as part of his evangelistic apologia to the Athenians in Acts 17, but this ‘nonreligious’ source material has become canonized as Holy Scripture! One of the MTD critics who voices a similar concern to what I am reflecting on is practical theologian Tom Beaudoin at Fordham University. In his book *Witness to Dispossession*, he underscores the fact that faith is complex and not an easily reducible thing:

[T]heology itself is discovering with ever greater complexity, the particular beliefs that are “sanctioned” by religious leadership, at any particular time and place, are deeply implicated in “nontheological” or “nonreligious” political, social, cultural, and economic factors. The very opposition between “picking and choosing” and “accepting the whole” is itself a recent way of imaging, often for the sake of an intended control, what the options for belief are today – much like the opposition between fundamentalism and enlightenment, or relativism and moral fundamentalism.¹⁸

Another challenging aspect of how Smith and Denton respond to the data they collected in the NSYR is that the ability to articulate a rational faith which seems to be the high watermark of what it means to be a Christian yet doesn’t sufficiently allow for the inherently inarticulate nature of real life. Let’s be honest shall we? God is simply confusing and utterly mysterious quite a bit of the time. One of the most important things to instill in young people is this very basic premise: ‘faith’ is not ‘certainty’. Yet the core of Smith and Denton’s work is a concern that youth cannot articulate what they believe with clarity and certainty. As they say: “The bottom line is, when it comes to their religious belief about God, U.S. teens reflect a great deal of variance on the matter, and perhaps in some cases more than a little conceptual confusion”¹⁹. On the one hand, the concern regarding ‘conceptual confusion’ is certainly worth reflecting on when

¹⁸ Tom Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession* (New York: Orbis, 2008), p. 81

¹⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 42

it comes to understanding the value and appropriate weight to be given resources within the Christian tradition. Yet we cannot throw mystery, wonder and periods of deep questioning out the window by making sweeping statements that imply having ‘a little conceptual confusion’ is always problematic.

As noted by sociologist Nancy Ammerman in her wonderful edited book *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, faith is often known through “fragments”, “side plots” and “tangents”²⁰ in holistic narrative more than systematically theorized and rendered in well formed doctrines. In her concluding chapter summarizing sociological research on the lived experiences of people of faith both young and old, Ammerman raises this important point: “A person may recognize moral imperatives that have a transcendent grounding without ever having a ‘religious experience’ or being able to articulate a set of doctrines about God.”²¹ For Ammerman, we need to be cautious in too readily dismissing the journey people are on. They may have yet to fully ‘connect the dots’ as it were leading to a robust understanding of faith in God, but the arc of history may certainly be trending that way. Our job as a faith community is not to push for resolution too soon nor overly qualify what is deemed useful for faith formation without investing time in the relationship for the long haul. Think for example about the man born blind in the 9th chapter of John’s Gospel. In this narrative, the man is questioned by many religious leaders about what ‘happened’ to him. Over and over again he cannot articulate a response that is robust enough to satisfy the religious professionals and thereby validate according to their metrics his claims in relation to the baseline they have established for deep and abiding faith. He ultimately states that in reference to who Jesus is that “‘whether or not he is a

²⁰ Nancy Ammerman (ed.) *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007) p. 226.

²¹ Ibid. p. 226.

sinner, I do not know,’ the man replied. ‘All I know is this: I was blind and now I see’” (9:25).

When at the end of the chapter he meets up with Jesus once again, he does perhaps the most embodied act of justification we have in the fourth Gospel: he falls bodily at the feet of Jesus.

And here is a man who Jesus celebrates and embraces for a faith that while it can't be articulated in reasoned discourse is still a faith worthy of emulating as testified to its inclusion in our canon of Scripture. Ammerman makes the following point:

Like all stories, religious and spiritual stories are richly complex. They are not didactic lessons or moral recipes but are contingent accounts of how life proceeds from one point to another. They encompass experiences of body and spirit, as well as mind. Religious narratives may presume beliefs about how the world works that vary from the mundane and scientific to the wishful and fantastical. Some stories may mark the chapters of a life with ritual interruptions; others may be more or less explicit about how everyday dilemmas are to be resolved.²²

Theologian Richard Niebuhr illustrates this function of narrative in life stories by describing two potential histories of a healed blind man:

A scientific case history will describe what happened to his optic nerve or to the crystalline lens, what technique the surgeon used or by what medicines a physician wrought the cure, through what stages of recovery the patient passed. An autobiography, on the other hand, may barely mention these things but it will tell what happened to a self that had lived in darkness and now saw again trees and the sunrise, children's faces and the eyes of a friend. Which of these histories can be a parable of revelation, the outer history or the story of what happened to a self?²³

As a university community we offer multiple accounts of what it means to be a person – through the manifold disciplines of a liberal arts education students encounter the language of authentic humanity in both major and minor chords. This rich and thick accounting of humanity seen and experienced through 62 undergraduate majors, 57 minors, 39 concentrations, 17 Master's degrees, and 5 Doctoral programs spanning a rich diversity of academic and vocational

²² Ibid. p. 226.

²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Story of Our Life,” in *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 29.

disciplines is more than an exercise in academic guild building or merely on-the-job training. Grounded in the calling of living into one Faith, for one Lord, and always remembering the vows of baptism that claims us, shapes us, and sends us not for ourselves but the world Christ died for, our strength will be found in diversity of opinions that bridge challenging disciplinary questions as form and content of faith formation. To put it bluntly and perhaps to lift up something that is widely acknowledged but not often underscored, the job of faith formation does not reside merely within the walls of the church nor does it reside solely in the School of Theology and University Foundations courses. This is the role of a Christian University working together in an interdisciplinary repose that intentionally seeks collaboration to better articulate the vast complexities of faith that is abundant and generative for this age and the age to come. For our students to grow in faith they must not be restricted to merely a waltz with one or two academic dance partners, but to a vibrant flash mob where the public faith of Christ is writ large for all to see and experience.²⁴

Another challenge brought forth by *Soul Searching* and other responses to the NSYR data has been to ground the framing and sustaining of religious faith almost exclusively upon the shoulders of churches and other religious institutions. According to Smith and Denton, institutional representatives are the “agents of religious socialization”²⁵ and as such should bear the burden of righting the wrongs of MTD to a large degree. That is fine on one level – churches, Christian schools, parachurch organizations and other institutional locations should continue to seek new ways of spurring on conversations for and about faith. Yet what Smith and Denton don’t take into account is the role that other networks play in framing faith and that, in many

²⁴ And yes, I would pay good money as part of the Inaugural Year celebrations for our new President and Provost to lead us in a rowdy flash mob for the sake of the Gospel. I hereby commission students to begin submitting electronica remixes of Wesleyan hymns for consideration to ASSP President Nate Strong.

²⁵Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 27

ways, serve to remind us that God does indeed move in mysterious ways. Tom Beaudoin makes the following comment in regard to this aspect of *Soul Searching*: “The authors imagine religious beliefs as starting from pure official teaching, stewarded by contemporary religious leaders, well or poorly, through official channels, such as programs of religious education.”²⁶ To this end one of the biggest oversights in this body of work is the profound influence that social networking has had on teenagers often for the better.

Piggybacking on the last concern, there is the assertion that eclectic approaches to faith development is something of an aberration and that authentic faith is to be found in a categorical and resolute allegiance to a particular faith tradition without considering how God might be in conversation through other means. When Smith makes the statement that “U.S. teens as a whole are thus not religiously promiscuous faith mixers,”²⁷ he is seeing this as a good thing.

Is this a good thing?

Smith and Denton go on to state in *Soul Searching* that “based on our experience talking through these issues face-to-face with teens around the country, we estimate that no more than 2 to 3 percent of American teens are serious spiritual seekers of the kind described above: self-directing and self-authenticating people pursuing an experimental and eclectic quest for personal spiritual meaning outside of historical religious traditions.”²⁸

In many ways I don't find comfort in this at all. Students I know find ‘common grace’ flooding through the music they listen to, the books they read in comparative lit courses, in the art they study from the 16th century, in the organic chemistry labs as they isolate unknowns and even in the characters they follow on TV shows late into the night. This is in keeping with St.

²⁶ Tom Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession* (New York: Orbis, 2008), p. 81

²⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 32.

²⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, p. 78.

Paul's repose to the world as he spoke to the Athenians in Acts 17 - seeking not merely the so-called orthodox rendering of what constitutes the faith tradition, but beginning with a tour of their museums and finding whatever cultural artifact seemed to shimmer and resonate with that which connected with their searching for meaning.

As I mentioned in the beginning, the primary academic texts that have followed *Soul Searching* in distilling the NSYR data set – namely Lisa Pearce and Melinda Denton's *A Faith of Their Own* and Kenda Creasy Dean's *Almost Christian* - have offered a more nuanced pronouncement on the state of teenagers. While *Soul Searching* struck fear and dread into the hearts of parents and youth workers alike, both *A Faith of Their Own* and *Almost Christian* offer some 'repose of hope'. Here I am reminded of Jürgen Moltmann in his seminal work *Theology of Hope*. In this vital work Moltmann has challenged us to remember that eschatology – the doctrine of final things - is not a statement of possibility alone but an affirmation of promise in the reality of hope as it takes up residence in the Here and Now as the foundation of what we mean by faith. As he states, "faith takes its stand on hope and 'hastens beyond this world' [as noted by John Calvin]. [Calvin] did not mean by this that Christian faith flees the world, but he did mean that it strains after the future. To believe does in fact mean to cross and transcend bounds, to be engaged in an exodus. Yet this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities."²⁹

As one of the researchers for the NSYR study as well as a thoughtful theologian and ordained minister of the Word and sacrament, Dean effectively moves the discussion of the NSYR findings from "this is this" to "how then shall we live?" that does not skip unpleasant

²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993) p. 19. My thanks to Jürgen Moltmann for giving John Calvin a wonderful shout out about 'straining for the future.'

realities on the way to hope. Rather than leaving the raw data lying before us without a hermeneutic of hope, *Almost Christian* is a deeply theological treatise that calls forth the clear mandate for the Church to respond to the NYSR outcomes as one would respond to their baptismal vows – what are we to renounce as sin and what will it take to serve Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - rather than as a pure Cartesian theorem that can seemingly be removed from subjective messiness for the sake of supposed academic clarity. In this *Almost Christian* succeeds in not only stewarding this important study for the sake of effective ministry and theological correction in both academy and parish, but offers an example of how critical scholarship can and should be done by those who live amidst the hybridity and competing voices of academy, abbey and apostolate. Furthermore, what is to be commended is the way Dean is not afraid to think theologically about the task of youth ministry and provide a template for scholars interested in doing critical scholarship for the sake of the church. Dean’s ability to distill the complexity of the data collection rendered from the NSYR, the more esoteric aspects of theological discourse, yet without sacrificing depth and still allowing for nods to cultural landmarks of identity formation in the American experience germane to teenage meaning-making makes *Almost Christian* a model text.

In a similar vein, Pearce and Denton’s *A Faith of Their Own* revisits the NSYR data set in a way that seems almost apologetic for the storm of worry and dread spawned by the initial reaction to the first wave of the study in 2005. As they state in the concluding chapter of *A Faith of Their Own*,

Youth are not all hellions, and they do not all walk away from religious beliefs and practices in adolescences. Neither are the majority of youth extremely religiously or spiritually engaged. Adolescences exhibit an interesting variety of religious mosaics, and many struggle to sort through how beliefs and practices form and are formed by their lives and understanding of the world. For scholars, parents, practitioners, or religious

institutions to assume any less, or to oversimplify their approach to reaching the variety of youth refining their ideas about religion, is to shortchange themselves and the youth they care about.³⁰

Bonhoeffer and *Cantus Firmus* – faith as music that blurs into dissonant and harmonious unity

One way to frame this dynamic approach to faith formation in the midst of the blur of youth culture is through resources such as art, music, literature and poetry that are often used to exemplify theological and doctrinal core beliefs. Youth are formed by the culture in which they exist as a fish breathes through the medium of water in which it swims. Some youth workers become concerned with young people breathing through the culture that swirls around them and will often seek to separate young people into aquariums of Christian subculture – Christian books, Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), T-Shirts, stickers, themed Bibles, etc. The ways in which churches and youth workers have distilled and brokered the results of the NSYR data has only heightened the call for expressly Christian culture in many sectors and caused something of a publishing gold rush to produce materials to alleviate the fears of church leaders that teens will be drawing too readily upon cultural resources not found in and created by what some may deem as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church but is often only a website or target marketed curriculum. Yet seeking to grow faith in teens through these false isolated aquariums of Christian subculture results in stunted, small, often nervous and anxious teenagers who become petrified of the open ocean of the world that we are told in John 3:16 that Christ died and rose for.

³⁰ Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith Of Their Own* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 183

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* written at the end of his life and ministry we hear an appeal for a model of faith formation that is dynamic and readily drawn from his engagement with music. In a letter written on May 20, 1944³¹ Bonhoeffer develops a fascinating aesthetic theology of personhood around an ancient musical principle of the *cantus firmus*. A *cantus firmus* is a melody to which one or more contrapuntal parts can be added – parts that are truly distinct, novel and even seemingly at odds with other parts until they are bound to this consistent yet fluid melody that is the *cantus firmus*. Bonhoeffer extends the musical analogy to the Christian life by stating that the arc of the *cantus firmus* is similar to our relationality to the Triune God who is the core melody of our lives that carries and propels the contrapuntal parts towards a penultimate note that is a step above the final. This push and drive toward a final point is a point of no return (think Galatians 2:20 “It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me”) that catalyzes into a freefall into a climax on a high note, which is melodically consonant – in

³¹ “There’s always the danger in all strong, erotic love that one may love what I might call the polyphony of life. What I mean is that God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts – not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes (which have their own complete independence but yet related to the *cantus firmus*) is earthly affection. Even in the Bible we have the Song of Songs; and really one can imagine no more ardent, passionate, sensual love than is portrayed there... It’s a good thing that that book is in the Bible, in face of all those who believe that the restraint of passion is Christian (where is there such restraint in the Old Testament?). Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are ‘undivided and yet distinct’, in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of polyphony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*? This thought didn’t occur to me till after your visit yesterday. Do you see what I am driving at? I wanted to tell you to have a good, clear *cantus firmus*; that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can’t come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going. Perhaps a good deal will be easier to bear in these days together, and possibly also in the days ahead when you are separated. Please, Eberhard, do not fear and hate the separation, if it should come again with all its dangers, but rely on the *cantus firmus*. – I don’t know whether I have made myself clear now, but one so seldom speaks of such things.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison. Updated Version* - 20 May 1944 (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997) 162 – 3

harmony - with the first and final notes³² thereby creating unity from the first note to the last. Throughout the movement there is always modulation and balance between ascending and descending motion that allows space for variation, change, innovation and even dissonance. If the *cantus firmus* is heard, then diversity is not only tolerable but it is celebratory given its allegiance to the core musical theme. If the *cantus firmus* is dampened – think of white noise generators in Bose headphones that don't remove the surrounding din and clang, but merely provide an alternative frequency that merely turns the auditory nerve toward it as a sonic distraction into nothingness – then order is sought for through external locus of control for fear of chaos and anarchy.

What would it mean for work with young people to be considered in regard to a mode and method in harmony with Bonhoeffer's understanding of the *cantus firmus*? Should we perhaps consider how artists could interpret youth in this way?

WB Yeats' *Among School Children*: 'When does the dancer become the dance?' – faith as blurring into sacred mobility

So much of what constitutes Christian formation in young people can degenerate into managing chaos through control in the guise of a search for certainty in an uncertain world. Henri Nouwen in his book *Creative Ministry* wrote that more often than not, ministry can become a “violent process” rather than a redemptive one. He states it in the following way:

“Getting things under control” is what keeps most teachers and students busy, and a successful teacher is often the individual who creates the conviction that man has the necessary tools to tame the dangerous lion he is going to face as soon as he leaves the training field... *As long as teaching takes place in this context it is doomed to be a violent*

³² i.e. such as the distance of a major or minor 3rd, perfect 4th or 5th, major or minor 6th, perfect 8th, or major or minor 10th. My thanks to my wife Diana and my daughters whose musical abilities remind me of the power of music in so many ways and the power of the *cantus firmus*.

*process and evoke a vicious cycle of action and reaction in which man faces his world as new territory that has to be conquered but filled with enemies unwilling to be overruled by a stranger. The teacher who enters this arena is forced to enter into a process which by its nature is competitive, unilateral, and alienating. In short: violent.*³³

How often does work with young people become a competitive, unilateral and alienating experience especially if our posture is one of fear of the world and culture in which they live and breathe coupled with a lack of faith in who they already are in the Image of God? In William Butler Yeats' poem *Among School Children*,³⁴ the sixty year old schoolteacher who is voicing the poem muses about the development of youth as he "walks through the schoolroom questioning" while the children "learn to cipher and to sing,/To study reading-books and histories,/To cut and sew, be neat in everything/In the best modern way." The aging protagonist laments what he sees as the youth sit fixed on their studies and wonders if these youth are being taught what it means to be alive in the world. As he reflects on his own life, this aged teacher remembers that there came a day when it seemed that "our two natures blent/Into a sphere from youthful sympathy/Or else, to alter Plato's parable/Into the yolk and white of the one shell." The irony that he points to is that the great people that the young people are studying in a context of control and stillness were once young people themselves, full of imagination, fire in their belly for change and captivated by both the mystery in life and a willingness to explore ever deeper for meaning even while being uncertain as to what or who they are searching for. As the protagonist leaves the children in the schoolroom he wonders aloud "[a]re you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?/O body swayed to music, O brightening glance/How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

³³ Henri Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1978) p. 6.

³⁴ W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children" in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* ed. Richard J. Finneran rev. 2nd edition (New York: Schribner, 1996), p. 215.

Yeats' summative question – how can we know the dancer from the dance? – is a reminder that for those of us working alongside youth as they grow into adulthood, our concern is ultimately to acknowledge that deep and abiding human development is a moving, generative and often times blur of fully living out our identity with other disciples of faith in the world that is far from static and that deep and abiding Christian formation of young people requires a renewed emphasis upon the *form* and ground of being³⁵ in relation to the *content* of being – that is to say, a return to discipleship as transforming and not merely informing youth. Here I think of the theological anthropology found in St. Augustine of Hippo and in particular his work *Confessions* which provides a call to recognize the fluidity of youth formation found in the inner movement of deep identity and memory grounded in the saving power of Jesus Christ. To this end, Augustine provides a compelling response to Yeat's quandary by taking 'Confessions to the dance floor'³⁶ as it were in relation to what Karin offered us in relation to Deuteronomy 6 – our inner and outer lives as theological dance partners that when in synchronic movement in and with the social Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit provide youth as sacredly mobile adolescents a rhythm and trajectory in the task of becoming deep and abiding disciples in the culture in which they 'live and move and have their being.'

³⁵ Here I am seeking to deepen the doctrine of theological anthropology to see what it means to be a human being as truly bound to a study of 'who is God?' (Theology) and 'what are human beings that God would be mindful of them?' (Psalm 8:4 as "Anthropology" -- the study of human beings) In this way the study of human beings as creatures made "in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 2 made for communion with God and each other living under the judgment because of our sin living under the mercy of God because of Jesus Christ.

³⁶ To the pop culturally astute, this is an echo to another important cultural release the same time as *Soul Searching* in 2005, that being Madonna's CD *Confessions on a dance floor*. Where Madonna is careful to acknowledge through the employment of the indefinite article (*Confessions on a dance floor*) referencing her dance floor is merely one of many dance floors in our pluralistic world, she is in keeping with the multivalent way that St. Augustine holds that identity is distinct yet always in flux across a lifetime – there is but one ground for authentic being – **the** dance floor – where we all join the dance whether the pulsing mosh pit or as passive wallflowers on the fringe – and that dance floor is the one true God.

This is similar to when David Foster Wallace, one of the most transformative young writers in contemporary literature and author of *Infinite Jest*, attempted to describe the experience of watching Roger Federer play tennis for an article in the *New York Times*. Here was one of the most imaginative writers in America struck nearly speechless watching a young tennis player simply serving a ball and then running after the return. As Foster recounts,

The human beauty we're talking about here is beauty of a particular type; it might be called kinetic beauty. Its power and appeal are universal. It has nothing to do with sex or cultural norms. What it seems to have to do with, really, is human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body... and yet none of it really explains anything or evokes the experience of watching this man play. Of witnessing, firsthand, the beauty and genius of his game. You more have to come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, to talk around it, or — as Aquinas did with his own ineffable subject — to try to define it in terms of what it is not.³⁷

Youth workers can make an error in seeing today's youth culture as a search for fixity and stasis over and against mobility. I challenge us, therefore, to let go of our need to know for certain what a young person believes and concentrate on who she is, where she is in her culture, and the way she is engaging the deep questions of life and God. Vincent Donovan, a Catholic missionary who began to work with the Masai and soon discovered that the methods of evangelism he had been working with did not connect with the people God was calling him to serve, wrote the following in his wonderful book *Christianity Rediscovered*: "In working with young people...do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place where neither you nor they have been before."³⁸

By seeing and listening more deeply to the person and location in culture of young people perhaps we won't be so fearful of the world nor be so quick to pull them away from the context

³⁷ David Foster Wallace, "Roger Federer as Religious Experience" *New York Times*, August 20, 2006 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html?pagewanted=all>

³⁸ Vincent J Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (London: SCM, 1982), p vii

where God may very well be growing and developing them into the disciples of Christ the world needs after all. The task before us in working with young people is to encourage experiences that seek depth of being where mobility and change is a gift rather than a developmental deficit to be overcome in being moved by the initiative of God's calling regardless of cultural location. Whether God is growing and shaping a young person in a youth group ministry or in the midst of indie rock concert isn't a concern of ours if God is there and we are willing to go wherever God bids us to go and support the journey of those God seeks to love.

Certitude – Disruption – Mystery: Walter Brueggeman and how Israel encountered God

Much of what frames the teaching and discipleship formation of Jesus is the deposit of sacred tradition and texts upon which he draws from and fulfills in the midst of people both young and old. As noted by Walter Brueggemann throughout his *oeuvre* but particularly in his educational mandates for the Church found in *The Creative Word: Canon As A Model for Biblical Education*³⁹, we hear that the formation of faithful followers of God is framed by the sacred canon through a holy people sharing and engaging a Holy God. As Brueggemann outlines in *The Creative Word*, the tripartite division of the Old Testament of Torah, Prophets, and Writings was a framework⁴⁰ by which the people of faith were to be framed and centered in their self and collective understanding of their journey with their God. As we hear in Jeremiah 18:18a: "...for instruction (Torah) shall not perish from the priest, nor shall counsel from the

³⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Brueggemann is William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is arguably one of the world's leading interpreters of the Old Testament and is the author of numerous books, including important commentaries on Genesis and First and Second Samuel, as well as introductory texts that have been formative for seminarians and undergraduates such as *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, and *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*.

⁴⁰ Jeremiah 18: 18a NRSV

wise (Wisdom), nor the word from the prophet (Prophets)". This three part call of the Hebrew scriptures is bound together as a single yet at times dissonant voice to remind Israel that the God they follow and are to be transformed into a holy nation by is always on the move as if in a Divine blur of love. Brueggemann underscores as well that the canonical process by which we have received the Scriptures is also instructive and sheds light on the educational journey of Israel as she moves from a period of certitude (Torah) to a time of disruption by 'new truths' (Prophets) to a time of settling down with the mundane and the mystery (Writings). This threefold movement of Certitude – Disruption – Mystery⁴¹ provides a foundation for how Jesus engages the sacred texts for the sake of deepening discipleship and gives a context for how we see Jesus engage young people in the Gospel accounts.⁴²

⁴¹ My colleague Dr. Sara Koenig underscored the fact for me that the Writings are both Mundane and mystery as Brueggemann notes quite resolutely so that we do not lose the fact that there is a positivistic knowledge found there as well as a disruption. Cf. Paul Ricoeur's work as seeing reappropriation of understanding after the appropriation and distantiating. We are brought back to a second naïveté that is constructive and not merely disruptive.

⁴² Jerome Berryman's ground breaking work in *Godly Play* is deeply engagement with the call to 'wonder' and opening young people up to opportunities for engaging God in the fluidity of expressions and mystery. Berryman outlines the following eight concepts as eight instances of stories and sayings concerning Jesus and youth in the Gospels that provide evidence that the model of faith formation that Jesus uses is more about deep encounter in the midst of mystery and wonder rather than certitudes:

1. In our desire to inform young people as to the essentials of a life of faith, as seen in the reflections of not hearing the flute played in the marketplace and not joining the dance, Jesus underscores the fact that youth are often being invited to play the wrong game and that is why they are not connecting with what is being offered them. (Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7: 31-35).
2. Jesus places a silent young person among the talking disciples to be before them without having to perform or recite anything.. In this teaching Jesus shows us that silent young person just by being present can teach the faithful about faith. (Matthew 18: 1-5; Mark 9: 33-37; Luke 9: 46-48).
3. Jesus reprimands the disciples for hindering young people from coming 'as they are' to him for Jesus wants to bestow blessing. Young people know what they need and they non-verbally realize they need and know where this deep need can and will be satisfied. (Matthew 19: 13-15; Mark 10: 13-16; Luke 18: 15-17).
4. Counter to allowing young people to come to Jesus 'as they are' is the reminder that to prevent youth from coming to Jesus - causing youth to stumble (not be blessed?) is a matter of life and death (Matthew 18: 6; Mark 9: 42; Luke 17: 2).
5. To enter the Kingdom of God one needs to become like a young person (Matthew 18:3; Mark 10: 15; Luke 18: 17).
6. The call to a transformed and reconciled life is not only for young people, but as seen in Nicodemus, adults need to consider what complete transformation in the form of a justified and sanctified rebirth and a second *naïveté*, in order to embrace the totality of the Kingdom of (John 3: 3-8).
7. Youth are teachers of the Kingdom in that they can intuit Jesus' presence and announce the location of Jesus in the world, as seen in the exclamations of the young people in the temple (Matthew 21: 15-16).

In reflecting on the nature of the Biblical canon, Brueggemann alerts us to the fact that “the process of canon is a main clue to education, a process which partakes of stability and flexibility, continuity and discontinuity. By attending to this confessional act, we may avoid the hazards of rigid *fossilization* which hold to a frozen, unresponsive canon, and to a deep *relativizing* which gives up everything for a moment of relevance... Canon has to do with life. And in the end there can be no noncanonical life or ministry which can have any sense, meaning, joy or certainly, staying power (emphasis Brueggemann)⁴³. This ‘life as canon’ is grounded in the fully embodied movement of the *Shema* (Deut. 6: 4-9) which is an intergenerational journey of faith that has people sitting down, standing up, walking and abiding in the fullness of life in the midst of and for the sake of God. To begin, Brueggeman locates the responsibility of learning and formation squarely on the shoulders of young people and the larger community of faith alike to not only receive but to critique and reimagine the tradition of faith in our midst. Yet the journey begins by allowing young people to ask the questions that need to be asked and the community of faith must be open in mind, body and soul to hear and respond. “Contrary to our humanistic education and to our catechetical tradition” Brueggeman states, “in the Torah of Israel it is a child who asks and a teacher (priest, parent) who answers. In contrast to humanistic education, this mode of education does not assume that the child must locate a normative answer in his or her own experience, as though immediate experience yielded credo insights on the spot.

8. Youth can also be in wonder at the mystery and depth of Jesus’ power to heal and transform in a way many overconfident adults cannot (Matthew 11: 25-26; Luke 10: 21). – See Berryman in “Toward a Theology of Childhood” in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play* Vol. 1 (Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 2002) pp. 108-142. Cf. Hans Reudi Weber, *Jesus and the Children*. (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, 1994) and Judith Gundry-Volf’s “To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God: Jesus and Children,” in Marcia Bundge (ed.) *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001).

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) p. 7

Children are not expected to do this in Israel because normative articulations of faith are not individual, private conjuring.”⁴⁴ Contra to a set of questions given to youth that they are to respond to as seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion, the youth themselves drive the conversation to which those mature in faith enter into a dialogue and journey of discovery.

Brueggemann outlines “the question asked of the parent by the child, or of the priest/teacher by the learner” within “six variant forms” as seen in the canon:

“And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall answer...”(Ex. 12:26)

“And you shall tell your son on that day...” (Ex. 13:8)

“And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him...” (Ex. 13:14)

“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son...”

“... that this may be a sign among you, when your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ Then you shall tell them...” (Josh. 4:6)

“When your children ask their fathers in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know...” (Josh. 4:21)⁴⁵

As Brueggemann summarizes:

The six questions and answers clearly are not objective historical reporting. Nor are they a dogmatic conclusion that is being insisted upon. They are not an exercise in literature to satisfy an aesthetic function. In part, they are aimed at worship, but clearly worship as pedagogy, the engagement of the young in the normative claims of the community. These six exchanges show the binding of the generations, the urging toward a view of reality held by the older generation as definitional for the new generation.⁴⁶

In a similar vein Murray Milner in *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids* has talked about the distinction between instrumental and expressive relationships when working with teenagers. For Milner, “instrumental relationships are formed for some specific purpose or goal; expressive relations

⁴⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) p. 17

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 14 – 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 15.

have no specific purpose but focus on companionship.”⁴⁷ We need to consider how the relationships we forge with our students build toward companionship and not mere instrumentalization.

Brueggemann goes on to argue that “good education, like Israel’s faith, must be a tense holding together of ethos, pathos, and logos.”⁴⁸ Brought together in the Torah (*ethos*), Prophets (*pathos*) and the Writings (*logos*) the canon embodies this tri-fold context by which the community of faith is to know itself and walk with the world in the embrace of God.

1. The *ethos* of our community knows that the memory of the stones is given, settled, and can be trusted. We embrace the consensus of the Torah. We have a disclosure of God’s purpose for and way with his people. That disclosure is sure and undoubted among us. For a place like SPU, we have a historic location in the Holiness tradition of the Christian faith that provides a rule of faith to not only draw upon, but continually build upon for new generations.
2. The *pathos* of God leads to a giving of new truth in uncredentialed channels. The consensus is shattered by the disruptive word of the prophet. In this poetry of pathos, the royal definitions of reality are overcome, to end what cannot be ended, to begin what cannot be begun. In this regard we need to continually asking for new voices to not only come into this community, but we need to open areas of leadership so that prophetic voices are not merely heard, but allowed to transform us.
3. The *logos* of God is the sure ordering of created reality. It is an ordering which requires wisdom to discern – an ordering which leads to responsibility and freedom, but also to mystery and awe. The order of life is at times available to us and at times hidden from us. Wisdom is the readiness both to penetrate the mystery and to live obediently with its inscrutability.⁴⁹

In relation to the prophetic canon, Brueggemann reminds us that education is always in danger of having “poetic oracles from the prophets reduced to prose. It is like having great art diminished to technique or great music “explained.” Prose is always the language of the king, of the

⁴⁷ Murray Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) p. 13.

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) p. 91

“managerial mentality”. If the prophet can be reduced to prose, then the *message* can be translated into a *program*. And the program, predictably, will be administered by the same people who administer everything else” (emphasis Brueggemann)⁵⁰. He goes on to note that “prophetic poetry is a protest against every reduction of life from its rawness, from life being lived rather than merely passed through”⁵¹. Brueggemann exemplifies this in Jeremiah 1: 10 which he says serves as “an epitome for the “new truth” of these poets:

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”⁵²

What the prophets challenge us to remember as educators for the sake of the Church is that if we are to take seriously the canon of Scripture as not merely a roadmap but truly a way of life that, as Brueggemann evocatively underscores for us is “not only that God terminates and evokes, but that the capacity and authority to do this has now been entrusted to the poet... the new truth violates the old truth to which we are committed. For the old truth assumed and affirmed that the world was sure.” Relating this to educators of youth, Brueggemann puts it pointedly: “the adults knew the answers in that old world. “Old truth” upholds “old world.” New truth threatens that old world”⁵³.

If we are to live out the faith for the next generation to take hold of then we will have to have the courage to relinquish control of the future. We will have to allow the questions of the young to drive the responses of the old. We will have to become ever more mindful of the complexities of faith by living out the faith with more intention. Our curriculum is going to be

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 52

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 53

⁵² Ibid. p. 56

⁵³ Ibid. p. 56

part of the equation, but not all of it. Teaching as Christian faculty and staff means living as such. We need to find places to worship together with more space for God and less space given to special events and marquee speakers. We need our leaders to lead in this – to change the priorities of the weekly calendar to mandate places where spiritual disciplines are part of how we see and live together. Faith was never meant to be a private thing. This will also mean drawing students close enough to tell them the honest truth: that living as Christians will require more than mere creedal affirmation in word. The social gospel of John Wesley was not merely a deep and abiding concern for social reform as a sign of the coming Kingdom – the social gospel meant that we as a community did the work of Jesus together, as a collective of hearts, minds and souls bound to the perfecting love of our Savior. We need to eat together more. We need to sing together more. We need each more than perhaps we realize. We all have hungry hearts, we are all seeking hearts of gold, we still haven't found what we are looking for, but we shall in the Lord's time. As Brueggemann wrote in relation to the strangest aspects of Scripture, it is God's persistent love that is foremost in this regard:

The God of the Bible is the strangest thing about the whole Bible. In all the history of religion, there is no other like the God of the Bible... So the people who dwelt with God in the Bible always want to relate to (God) like they relate to all other notions of God. And in every time, even ours today, we are tempted to force God into other categories as though God belongs to a species of similar agents. But God is not like any other. And God's strangeness is in this: God is with His people. God is for His people. God's goodness is not in the great transcendental power nor in the majestic remoteness nor in the demanding toughness but in the readiness to be with and for people. And being with and for is not a matter of bribery or deception or intimidation. God simply wills it so.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggeman, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1977) p. 53



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