



In Search of Living Waters: The Seven Spiritual Yearnings of Youth • *Reginald Blount*

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

My work in youth ministry began in 1994 when I was working with a program offering a new approach to youth ministry. The program was called the Youth Theology Institute (now named the Youth Theological Initiative), or YTI. YTI is a four-week, residential, ecumenical summer academy for rising high school seniors from across the country. Emory University has served as the home of this program since 1993, and the program is administered by the Candler School of Theology and funded by the Lilly Endowment. YTI’s primary purpose is to promote Christian theological education for youth who are in transition from mid- to late adolescence. YTI’s goal is for youth to “fall in love with theology” as a lifelong pursuit and for cadres of “public theologians” (young people who are willing to take their faith and apply it to whatever their calling in life may be) to be cultivated for church and society.

My work in youth ministry continues as Director of Faith Passage, a year-long spiritual and leadership development program committed to nurturing and empowering high school youth in making a faith passage from adolescence to adulthood. Faith Passage brings together youth from the United

Reginald Blount is instructor of Christian education and youth ministry at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and director of Faith Passage, a yearlong spiritual and leadership development program for high school youth. Blount also serves as pastor of Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Church in Waukegan, Illinois.

Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Church to explore the theology and tradition of their particular denomination and their common Methodist roots and the role of the Church and their faith in addressing issues concerning youth and racial and social justice.

My experience with YTI and Faith Passage convinces me that at the core of many challenges and struggles confronting youth are really spiritual yearnings that need to be satisfied. I am convinced that youth struggle with a spiritual emptiness they are unable to name, yet seek many ways to fill. I want to name and explore seven spiritual yearnings I believe youth are seeking to fulfill: identity, intimacy, purpose, healing, mentoring, nurture, and courage. I realize that many of these seven are not new concepts. Other disciplines use these terms to address the developmental needs of adolescence. Yet I see these areas as deeper, spiritual concerns needing pastoral attention in the lives of youth. They may be developmental concerns, but I believe they are equally, if not more so, spiritual yearnings seeking fulfillment within the heart and spirits of youth.

Identity

We understand that it is a natural desire for adolescence to long to know who they are. We understand that the question “Who am I?” is one of the most pivotal questions of life. Many young people are struggling to find answers to this question, longing to know who they are and finding themselves hearing a variety of “voices” offering a choice of conflicting answers. Some are hearing “you are what you wear,” “you are what you eat or drink,” “you are what you watch,” or “you are what you do.” Others are hearing “you are who you hang out with,” “you are what grades you get,” or “you are what school you get into.” Some hear that their identity is tied to their family’s societal status and even their denominational affiliation. I believe that many young people lack the understanding that their identity is not tied to what they do or how they do it, or what others choose to label them.

As a matter of fact, I argue that “Who am I?” should not be the question, because it is not helpful, enriching, edifying, or life-giving. The task of discovery ends up resting solely on the one posing the question. When asked the question, “Who Am I?” it leaves the one asking to fill in the blank. I believe that this question needs rephrasing; this question needs recasting. Instead of asking “Who am I?” the question should really be “*Whose am I?*” “Whose am

I?” recasts the question to discover the real longing, the real yearning that young people struggle with, and that is: “to whom do I belong?”

I believe that when young people enter the church, they do not always enter with an assurance that they know to whom they belong. I don’t believe they enter the church with the certainty that it is God to whom they belong; that they are God’s child. I don’t believe young people know without a shadow of a doubt that no matter where they go, no matter what other people say, no matter what identities others want to place upon them, that they are first and foremost children of God.

I believe young people’s true identity is lost when they end up defining themselves by what they are or by what others say they are, rather than by whom they really are: God’s child. I believe young people long to know who they are; they long to know to whom they belong, because every identity they’ve attempted to embrace seems to leave them wanting more.

As youth search for identity, our challenge is to offer them living waters that help these young people claim the identity God has prepared for them before the beginning of time—children of God. Our challenge is to offer youth living waters that help them claim an identity far greater and more satisfying than the various identities the dominant culture desires them to claim and possess. I believe our challenge is to help young people to embrace what it means to truly be made in the image and likeness of God.

Intimacy

I believe the scriptural verse that traditionally serves as the aim of Christian education in many faith communities is Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (KJV). Oftentimes when I overhear or am a part of a discussion concerning the plight of youth today, this proverb is invoked. As I reflect back on my own faith formation in the church, this proverb was more connected to my moral and ethical development, yet had no or very little impact on helping me build a relationship with God. I learned the Ten Commandments and my faith community’s understanding of God’s do’s and don’ts (and it was more don’ts than do’s). I learned the tradition and the rituals. My faith community did a great job of teaching me about God, but I learned little of what it means to have an intimate relationship with God, what it means to truly experience God.

I believe at the heart of any ministry we do, but in particular ministry with youth, one of the goals, if not the ultimate goal, should be a deeper, closer, more intimate relationship with God. We must reimagine Proverbs 22:6 to

consider what it would mean to provide guidance to young people as they journey with and draw closer to God, so that when they are old, they will not depart from the relationship.

Young people are yearning, longing for intimacy, longing for relationship, longing to love, and longing to be loved. I believe their longing for identity and their longing for intimacy are fundamentally connected, for the answer young people are truly searching for when they ask “Who am I?” or “Whose am I?” is “I am somebody who is loved.” It is a natural, spiritual desire to long to belong to someone who loves us. When we know we belong to someone who loves us, we have no problem embracing and possessing that relationship as our own.

Our challenge, as young people search for intimacy, is to listen to the questions young people are asking and guide them toward answers that deepen their intimacy with God. I am concerned that many of our young people are yearning for intimacy, longing for an intimate relationship with God and God’s people, and the church is doing very little to foster the relationships. We spend a lot of time concerned about the sexual activity of our youth while missing or overlooking their deepest longing. Yes, their bodies are changing, and yes, they are trying to figure out how to navigate these waves of hormones flowing through them, yet their deepest yearning is not a physical one, but a spiritual one. I believe young people don’t long for sex, but they long for intimacy; they long to be loved; they long to be part of an intimate meaningful relationship. What they experience, however, is a bombardment from popular culture that tells them that the best way to satisfy their longing is through physical fulfillment. Many discover that physical fulfillment alone is not a substitute for intimacy and thus is not satisfying at all. Our challenge is to offer young people living waters that guide them toward answers that deepen their intimacy with God and with God’s people.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that many of our young people look for love in all the wrong places, but what is astonishing is that when they come to the house of God, when they come to the church, many of them realize they can’t find love there either. There was a time when people would look at Christians and say, “look at them; see how they love one another.” Now many look at us the church and say, “look at those Christians; see how they fight, see how they slander, see how they envy, see how they boast, look at their arrogance, witness their rudeness, take a look at their resentfulness, watch how they rejoice in other folks’ as well as their own wrongdoing.” And

our young people look at us and cry out, “where is the love?” Our challenge is to offer young people living waters that help them embrace the unconditional love of God and assist them in building healthy, loving relationships with others.

Purpose

Just as young people are longing for identity (longing to discover to whom they belong) and just as they are longing for intimacy (longing to be in a relationship, to love, and to be loved), I further believe young people are also longing to discover the answer to the question: “Why am I here?” It seems that immediately after one asks the question “Who am I?” the next question that follows is “Why am I here?” What is my reason for being? What is my purpose in life? Does my life really have any meaning?

Just as I believe “Who am I?” is not the right question, “Why am I here?” is not the right one either. Instead of asking “Why am I here?” the question really ought to be “Why does the One to whom I belong have me here?” or “Why does God have me here?” When young people come to us longing to discover their reason for being and longing to know what the purpose of their lives is, we need to tell them not to look to themselves, but to look to God. I believe our challenge is to offer youth living waters that foster a faith in a God who loves them unconditionally and who has already fashioned a purpose for their lives and is waiting for them to embrace it.

I believe our challenge is fashioning a ministry with youth that takes seriously the task of helping young people discover God’s purpose for their lives. I’ve grown a little weary of youth ministry programs with no purpose. I’ve grown a little weary of youth ministry programs that do little in helping young people discover answers to their deepest longings. I’ve grown a little weary of youth ministry programs that do much in fostering enthusiasm but very little in nurturing passion. Our challenge is to offer youth living waters that foster a belief that spiritual passion is directly tied to divine purpose. The calling that God places on our lives is the passion that burns deep inside. Frederick Buechner says it best:

There are different kinds of voices calling us to different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest...

By and large a good rule for finding out is this:

The kind of work God usually calls us to do is work (a) that we need most to do and (b) that the world needs most to have done. The place God calls us is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.¹

I believe our calling is at the intersection of our passion and our heart's burden, at the intersection of our greatest joy and our heart's deepest concern. Our young people have things they are passionate about and concerns they want to see something done about. As young people search for purpose, our challenge is providing an opportunity for young people to discover their purpose, discover their calling, and then make room for them to live out their God-given destiny.

It is never too early to talk with youth about their divine purpose, their divine calling. It is never too early to guide young people in discovering the intersection of their passion and their heart's deepest burden for the world. I believe God has already placed a calling within them. Ephesians 2:10 states: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (NIV). They don't have to search, they don't have to figure it out; our challenge is helping them discover how to receive the gift God has already prepared and provide them a context and the support and guidance necessary to cultivate the calling God has provided.

Healing

I believe all young people have experienced some level of brokenness. By the time young people reach puberty, they've experienced some degree of rejection, ridicule, emotional or physical pain, shame, guilt, oppression, or demonization. One of the major challenges facing adults is acknowledging that youth experience some level of pain and oppression. We must acknowledge that youth deal with some level of brokenness on a daily basis. Teen depression is on the rise. Teen's abuse of drugs, sex, and alcohol is primary related to their desire to medicate the pain they're experiencing. The increase in teenage suicide is greatly due to many young people believing they are out of options for overcoming or getting through the emotional rollercoaster they find themselves on or the excruciating internal turmoil they consistently battle. The church will be unable to effectively address their search identity,

intimacy, and purpose if it does not take seriously young people's spiritual yearning for healing and wholeness. I believe our challenge is for faith communities to acknowledge young people's brokenness and offer pathways of healing through faith, hope, and love. Our challenge is to create an atmosphere where young people can experience the presence of God and bring their whole selves to God, brokenness included. It's a context where young people can share both joys and pains; where young people can engage in both prayers of thanksgiving as well as prayers of laments. The challenge is offering young people living waters that enable them to hear and embrace the healing power of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness as well as that provide a context for young people's voices to be heard and validated.

Mentoring

Young people deeply desire persons in their lives who are willing to help them navigate the seas from adolescence to adulthood. Young people desire persons in their lives willing to guide them on and through their journey toward adulthood. Youth desire caring adults in their lives who are willing to listen and provide them wise counsel as they struggle with issues and decisions they've never faced before or handled badly in the past. Young people desire caring adults who do not respond to them as children but as emerging adults.

Young people need mentors or role models who are willing to share their spiritual journey and offer hope to youth who are struggling with faith and their relationship with God. They need mentors who are open enough to testify concerning their struggles and offer the path that helped them grow in their own faith and relationship with God. Young people need committed adults willing to be spiritually generative with them, persons who are called and committed to spiritually guide the next generation.² The challenge is in equipping the faith community to become a spiritually generative community, open to being the context for adolescent faith passage. Our challenge is providing the context for persons to discover their calling as spiritual mentors to young people and equipping them to be faithful and committed guides for youth. As young people search for caring mentors, our challenge is also offering young people living waters that enable them to hear and embrace the importance of the Holy Spirit to be their chief Spiritual Mentor.

Nurture

Joy Dryfoos, in her book *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society*,³ shares that when the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research for Educational Development explored what they thought was necessary for adolescence to make “safe passage” from adolescence to adulthood, they came up with, what was for them, a surprisingly simple answer: What young people really need on a daily basis is safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people. To be more specific they outlined that:

- Every child must be connected to a responsible adult—if not a parent then someone else.
- To be equipped for adult roles, young people must have access to cognitive learning, including the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills.
- Academic achievement alone is not sufficient. Social skills are necessary for relating to peers and the adult world. Young people have to develop social competence, including the ability to deal with pervasive peer and media influences.
- Young people need room to experiment. They have to be allowed to experience decision making about their own behaviors and values.
- Instilling high expectations and offering real and visible opportunities for success are crucial in motivating youth.
- To enter the labor force, young people have to be exposed to the world of work through career training, voluntary community service, and jobs.
- The welfare of young people can be assured only by safe streets, safe schools, and safe communities.

This study illumines the need and yearning young people have to be nurtured. These insights are appropriate to draw from in articulating the challenges the church has in satisfying the longing young people have to be nurtured:

- The challenge is for the church to provide and equip committed and caring adults to nurture young people.
- The challenge is for the faith community to shape an environment intentional about the faith formation of youth and see them as capable theologians seeking growth and maturity in their relationship with God and with God’s people.

- The challenge is for the church to nurture young people in such a way that they see themselves as a vital part of the faith community and a responsible contributor to the growth and development of that faith community.
- The challenge is for the church to recognize the natural developmental tendency of youth to be risk-takers.⁴ Given their propensity to experiment or take risks, the church must provide opportunities for youth to take healthy risks as well as offer a nurturing context that balances accountability with grace as youth make mistakes along the way.
- The challenge is for the church to provide an environment that supports and encourages the uniqueness and giftedness of all youth and a context that fosters high expectations.
- The challenge is for the church to nurture “public theologians,” young people committed to living out their faith in both church and society.
- The pastoral challenge of the church is to provide young people “sanctuary” as they embark on their faith passage journey.

It is important that the church ultimately sees itself as a nurturing community, committed to the care and development of its young people.

Courage

I believe one of the more overlooked yearnings of young people is to live a courageous life. When we ask youth to go against the crowd, to stand out and be different from everyone else, we many times fail to realize the great amount of courage it requires of them to do so. It is not a natural tendency of adolescence to be different. Many desire to be associated with the crowd. It’s important to be accepted and welcomed into a particular group. When we ask young people to live the Christian life, we often miss the fact that we are asking them to live counter-cultural. The ethics of Christianity are often in opposition to the ethics prescribed by the popular culture. Our challenge is to offer young people living waters that give them the courage to live the Christian life in the midst of a popular culture that oftentimes is in opposition. Our challenge is to provide youth living waters that enable them to be in the world, but not of the world.

I believe these seven spiritual yearnings are intertwined, and the common thread running through all is the longing for God. The Psalmist writes: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Psalm 42:1–2, NRSV). I believe this is the longing, the yearning of all, and its genesis begins in adolescence. Young people long, thirst for the living God. They may not articulate their longing as a yearning for God. They may drink from other wells attempting to satisfy their spiritual longings. I believe our challenge is to offer young people living waters that enable them to truly hear the voice of God, the voice that can lead them to “living water” where they will never hunger or thirst again.

Notes

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.
2. Erick H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994), 138.
3. Joy G. Dryfoos, *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.
4. Cf. Lynn E. Ponton, *The Romance of Risk: Why Teenagers Do the Things They Do* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).