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Youth Ministry as Conflict Transformation in the War on Kids

Abstract

The war on kids is a conflict between adults and youth, in which adult institutions and their representatives ghettoize, objectify and abuse youth, and to which youth respond with withdrawal, resistance or even violence, visited upon each other, adults or themselves. Such a conflict, once named and understood, can be engaged constructively and transformed through the way we as adults interact with youth. I will trace the historic, economic, political and cultural factors shaping this conflict, examine a specific practice of ministry that contributes to unlearning this violent dynamic of adult-adolescent relationships, and suggest implications for educational ministries with youth.

Introduction: Discovering Storytime

It was only the second night at the Youth Theological Initiative's three-week Summer Academy, and one of the staff members, I'll call her Anne, along with four teenage girls living on her dormitory floor, were still getting to know each other. Anne had wandered into their suite, sat down, and started to engage them in conversation. After chatting for several minutes, engaging in the typical "get-to-know-you" conversations, one of the girls asked Anne to tell them a bedtime story.

Anne accepted their invitation, but decided that she wanted the girls to be part of the process; to be active, not passive. She therefore invited them to think about different ways they could tell stories that would spread out the creativity—and responsibility. After some discussion, the group came up with the storytime format they would follow for the remainder of the program: each night, a different person would be the storyteller, and the storyteller would narrate a tale in the "Mad-Libs" style, asking the person next to her in the circle to come up with a word to fill in the blank, thus sending the tale in a new direction that the storyteller would then need to build on and follow until she asked the next person in the circle to supply a key word for a blank. In this way, each person had a chance to be the storyteller, but the entire group helped to shape the story. Anne continued to join the group for storytime every night, but she was not in charge of this activity. She was an adult participating alongside youth.

Over the course of the three weeks, Anne noticed several dynamics developing. First, in the minutes before storytime commenced, Anne was able to engage in informal conversation that often yielded important insight into how the girls were relating to each other, and how the community as a whole was functioning. By simply sticking around and being a part of the group, she was able to understand on a more complex level the social dynamics taking place throughout the community. But she had to listen; she had to be present without controlling the conversation.

Second, by the final week, the storytime girls no longer needed storytime. After so many nights engaging in silly, informal conversation that served to create the space for building trust, the girls moved into deeper conversations with each other and with Anne, conversations in which

they were able to become vulnerable, engage in self-critical reflection, and ask their most pressing questions about life, love and God. They turned to Anne as wise-person, recognizing the resource she could be as someone with more life experience. By hanging out, being a participant rather than a leader in this space, Anne's role as respected adult grew rather than diminished.

Having sensed early on the value of this time in helping to develop trust with the girls who participated in storytime, Anne had encouraged the other staff members to do something similar, to simply go up on the halls and hang out with the girls as they transitioned to going to bed. The staff in the girls' dorm resisted this idea, however. From their perspective, the girls had spent the entire day in the presence of adults, and they felt strongly that the girls needed space and freedom. Going up and entering their suites to hang out felt intrusive, and seemed like a form of "surveillance." Yet, once a few of the staff members did go up on the floors to hang out, they realized this was not surveillance. The girls *wanted* them there, and welcomed them into their space. It was true that they had had enough of adults standing on the edges of the room, watching and judging without participating, listening, or contributing to their discussions. It was true that they didn't want surveillance. It was *not* true, however, that they didn't want adults. They wanted adults—fully present, caring adults.

Naming the Conflict: The Youth Theological Initiative and the War on Kids

Since 1993, the Youth Theological Initiative has gathered youth from around the world, to its Summer Academy, an ecumenical program in justice-seeking theological education for juniors and seniors in high school. Our summer "scholars" explore theological and social issues, create an intentional community of mutual relationships, and serve others through work at Atlanta-area social agencies. While such language sounds relatively innocuous, the observations and assumptions that inspired this vision comes out of a critical social analysis that seeks to transform a larger dynamic—and I would argue, conflict—taking place in our society.

Based on their observations of the cultural context of youth and the church, the original designers of YTI concluded that North American society marginalizes and oppresses young people *as young people*—regardless of (or in addition to) race, class, gender, sexual orientation or other identities that are marginalized across age ranges. The authors of the first grant proposal described "contours of oppression" that characterize the experience of contemporary youth, including the "domestication of youth" the "lack of meaningful adult sponsorship for youth," and the "absence of voice and vision among youth."[1] I see these claims, made more than 20 years ago, as prophetic and more urgent than ever. What my predecessors described as "contours of oppression" that marginalize youth I now venture to describe as elements of a set of systems that is engaged in nothing short of a "war on kids."[2]

This "war" is a conflict between adults and young people, in which adult institutions and their representatives ghettoize, objectify and abuse young people, and to which young people

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[1] YTI Handbook, 2012 edition, 4.

[2] I derive this phrase from the recent documentary, *The War on Kids* (2009), which does an excellent job of pulling together in a provocative way many of the points I suggest in the discussion that follows. The film focuses on the U.S. context, including federal and state education policies, current trends in adolescent mental healthcare, and the juvenile justice system. I highly recommend this film for those in the US context who work with youth, and for youth themselves, as a starter for discussion.

respond with withdrawal, resistance or even violence, visited upon each other, adults or themselves. Such a conflict, once named and understood, can be engaged constructively and transformed through the way we as adults interact with youth. As suggested in Anne's story, a specific moment in the context of youth ministry became an opportunity for a creative reorienting of adult-youth interaction, one that suggests possibilities for peacebuilding in the midst of this larger "war."[3]

YTI identifies one contour of oppression as the "domestication of youth." In his essay, "The Social Construction of Adolescence," David White argues that our society has developed the category of "adolescence" and "teenager" only within the last 100 years, and that this social construction has now resulted in the creation of an ever-extending liminal space in which young people—neither children nor adults—have significantly fewer meaningful roles to play in society, compared to their predecessors. Because "adolescence begins with an earlier puberty and extends longer than ever before…this prolongation leaves youth in situations in which they have less than full power for longer than any other age cohort in history." White continues, "Whereas historically youth were at the forefront of those who took responsibility for creating a just social environment in which human life can flourish, today many young people are relegated to marginal social roles that discourage or inhibit such engagement."[4] This dramatic change in the role of young people in society is presented as a necessary process for them to reach the deferred reward of attaining a good job that will enable them to start a family and become a "real adult." White calls this the "bargain of adolescence—dependence and education now, responsibility and independence later."[5] Neither holding jobs, nor starting families, nor engaging in social movements or civic life, but rather biding time under adult supervision, young people have been excluded from participation in meaningful social action.[6] In exchange, they have been given

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[3] I therefore agree with John Paul Lederach that Conflict Transformation "is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creative constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships." See Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 14.

[4] David F. White, "The Social Construction of Adolescence," in Brian J. Mahan, Michael Warren, and David F. White, *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture*, (Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2008), 14.

[5] White, 4.

[6] White points to G. Stanley Hall's seminal 1904 work *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* as the beginning of the invention of adolescence as a distinct phase of psychological development marked by "storm and stress" that must be contained and redirected for the good of youth and society. According to Thomas Hine, this theory became a useful tool in winning the case for compulsory attendance in high school. The high school was thus conceived as a "holding tank" for youth, and as such has developed into a highly regimented, adult controlled space that often abstracts youth from meaningful work and moral agency. See Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York: Perennial, 1999), 162. Others recently have extended this argument to highlight the breadth and depth of youth domestication to take note of the role of student loan debt, zero tolerance school policies and other school reforms, the overuse of ADHD medications and the pacifying effect of media and advertising. See Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New*

movies, clothing, video games, fashion magazines and music to occupy the few remaining waking hours left to them after hours of homework, sports practice, and other adult-directed "enrichment" activities.[7] This is what we mean at YTI when we talk about the "domestication of youth."

Another contour of oppression affecting young people is "the lack of meaningful adult sponsorship for youth." This problem arises out of an increasing gulf between adults and youth-- attributable to several economic, social and cultural forces--that is extending and deepening in every sector of young peoples' lives. As high schools became overwhelmed with the numbers of students entering their buildings, the system became increasingly bureaucratized and impersonal,[8] limiting students' access to teachers and the kind of mentoring relationships possible with smaller numbers and flexible schedules.[9] The evolution of our economic system has transformed family structures, with adults working longer and longer hours, all adults in most households working, and extended families living further and further apart.[10] This separation manifests itself not just in a *lack* of adult involvement in the lives of youth, but also in a *misplaced* involvement that objectifies and alienates them, as our focus on activities and achievement primarily serve the agendas of adults rather than the needs of youth. Whether in school, on the field, on the stage, or at home, young people are experiencing adults as present only in the most shallow of forms. In response, young people have created a subterranean space, what Chap Clark calls "the world beneath," safe from the agendas and betrayals of adults.[13]

In the wake of this increasing chasm between adults and youth, we have developed "ephibephobia"—extreme fear of youth[14] that "exudes both a deep-rooted hostility and chilling

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Consumer Culture (New York: Scribner, 2005); Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); and Bruce E. Levine, "8 Reasons Young Americans Don't Fight Back: How the US Crushed Youth Resistance," *AlterNet*, July 31, 2011, accessed August 20, 2014: http://www.alternet.org/story/151850/8_reasons_young_americans_don%27t_fight_back%3A_how_the_us_crushed_youth_resistance

[7] The film *Race to Nowhere* (2010) documents the increasing stress young people face trying to stay competitive for college admissions and meeting the myriad and sometimes conflicting expectations adults have for them. For a critical assessment of the value of homework, and whether we may now be assigning too much homework, see Alfie Kohn, *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (Philadelphia, PA: DaCapo Press, 2007).

[8] Hine, 254; 269.

[9] John Taylor Gatto's provocative work focuses our attention on the implicit messages that the regimented school day in mass education sends to young people about learning. See, "The Seven Lesson Schoolteacher," in *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabiola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005), 1-19, particularly 5-6.

[10] For an extended discussion on the simultaneous lengthening of workdays and falling wages, see Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) and *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).

[13] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

[14] Clark, 25.

indifference toward youth," and often depicts youth as "criminal, sexually decadent, drug-crazed, and illiterate."[15] At the same time, advertisers play on stereotypes of parents as out-of-touch, easily manipulated, and valuable primarily as purse-holders in their drive to encourage youth and children to use their influence to convince parents to buy them their products. This "pedagogy of commodification" drives a further wedge between youth and adults, because "within this pedagogical template, parents are useful only as a potential source of good for kids and profits for corporations…In fact, 'adults are never cool—they are boring, often absurd, sometimes stupid—and when they try to be cool they are pathetic.'"[16] As adults learn to fear youth and keep their distance, young people learn to mistrust or even disdain adults and insist they want this distance, creating a feedback loop that both fulfills and deepens our stereotypes of each other—driving adults and youth further apart.

Yet another contour of oppression named at YTI is the "absence of voice and vision among youth," and this follows from the others. The absence of voice and vision among youth can be attributed to both sides—adults who actively silence or passively ignore young people's voices, and youth who have internalized the belief that their position as full contributing members of society is on hold until they pass through the danger zone. How much have we lost—fresh ideas, innovative projects, bold actions, imaginative visions of new futures—as a consequence of buying into the stereotypes?

What the YTI "contours of oppression" point out, and what several cultural critics, economists, sociologists and educational theorists echo, is that we have ghettoized and silenced young people, separating ourselves (or allowing ourselves to be separated) from them to such a degree that we simply do not know them. Lacking true connection, we project onto them all of our fears, and we seek to quell those fears by containing and controlling "youth," rather than taking the time to get to know and appreciate young people on their own terms. This is the conflict—the war on kids—that requires transformation. It is within this larger context of conflict that Anne's small gestures of crossing over the gulf between youth and adults becomes a significant moment in conflict transformation.

Storytime as One Practice of Conflict Transformation

What can we learn, then, from Anne and the storytime girls? As the adult in the situation, Anne crossed over the gulf between adults and youth, and did so with no other agenda than to get to know the youth on their terms. Patricia Hersh calls on adults "to reconnect the adolescent community to ours." But, it is sometimes harder than we think. The long years of systemic abandonment has left young people mistrustful of adults who reach out to them. Citing a youth worker that exclaimed exhaustedly her frustration that when she reaches out to youth, they don't meet her halfway, Chap Clark explains that, "whether they experience it from a coach, a schoolteacher, a parent, a music teacher, or a Sunday school counselor, adolescents intuitively

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[15] Giroux, "The Demonization of Youth," in *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 37, 40. See also Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society,* 91. Thomas Hine traces this back to the early 1970s, when films like "Rosemary's Baby," "The Exorcist" and "The Omen" cast children "as the carriers of evil." See Hine, 272.

[16] Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society*, 51. He quotes Madeline Bunting, "In Our Angst over Children We're Ignoring the Perils of Adulthood," *The Guardian/UK* (November 13, 2006).

believe that nearly every adult they have encountered has been subtly out to get something from them." Thus, adults need not only to reach out to young people, they have to make themselves vulnerable and cross over fully into the space of young people, risking rejection, with an attitude of peacebuilding appropriate to representatives of a party to a conflict that knows it has disproportional power and has abused it.

Anne's *way* of reaching out is thus important. When Anne walked into that dorm room, she didn't stand in the doorway, one foot in, one foot out, standing over the lounging girls as an adult coming to do a shallow "check in"—which, within the context of the war on kids is more likely to be interpreted as suspicious surveillance rather then caring concern. Instead, Anne went fully into the room, plopped down on the floor, introduced herself, and then waited for the girls to invite her into the conversation they were already having. She didn't come in with a set of instructions to give, with pre-planned lessons to teach, or a structured "ice-breaker." She didn't come in to get the girls "pumped up" about the great experience they were about to consume. She ensured the conversation did not become one in which she became the star, the authority, or the impersonal representative of the institution. She signaled that she did not intend to be one more adult abusing her power.

Not only was Anne's act of crossing over significant, but the actual development and structure of storytime itself becomes significant as a peacebuilding practice. Together, the girls and Anne came up with the "Mad-Libs" format that featured rotating leadership and frequent contributions from everyone in the room—not only more creative, but much more inclusive. And more democratic—both in the way they came up with the idea and in the way they executed it—thereby sending a signal that the contribution of each person in the room was equally valuable. But once this was established, Anne no longer could control the choice of topics or the dynamics of the conversation. She had to trust that as a group, the girls would develop a set of guidelines that would keep the game fun and inclusive. She offered to the girls a way of having fun and getting to know each other that was not carefully planned, not closely controlled, and not dependent on her. She showed them respect and trust, and the result was the discovery of a simple yet extraordinary practice of building community.

Moreover, she did this night after night, despite exhaustion, and despite her other commitments. She could not have done this in one storytime meeting, nor even in a week of them. In fact, it was not until the third and final week that the girls began turning to Anne for her advice. She brokered a peace by proving that she was not one more adult using them for her own agenda, ready to abandon them if they did not meet it.

Conclusion: Youth Ministry as a Site for Transforming the War on Kids

In this discussion, I have focused on storytime as an example of a peacebuilding practice that, in its own way, contributes towards the transformation of a larger societal conflict, the war on kids. For Christians, transformation of our relationships with young people is inspired and informed by our understanding of ourselves as already in a transformed and transforming relationship with a loving God that continually seeks us out, broken and lost though we may be, to bring us into healing and wholeness. It is out of this theological orientation that youth ministry serves as a site for conflict transformation on the war on kids.

Christian language and imagery stands in powerful counter-distinction to the language and imagery of consumerism and violence that dominates our culture and institutions, and shapes the way youth and adults interact. In the face of images of youth as violent, sex-crazed or

valuable only as tools for adult agendas, and of images of adults as stupid, self-serving or valuable only as purse-holders, Christian imagery offers the *imago Dei*, humans "fearfully and wonderfully made" in the image of God, and adopted as beloved children of God through Jesus Christ.[18] In the face of images of a "tribe apart" in which youth form a separate community from the adult world in response to systemic abandonment, Christian imagery offers the Church as the Body of Christ—diverse and pluralistic, yet interdependent and united in love—and the Lord's Supper, in which we become one Body through sharing of bread and wine.[19] In the face of images of punishment in zero tolerance school policies, armed guards and surveillance cameras in schools, and adult prison sentences for minors, Christian imagery offers grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, from biblical images like the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to the cleansing waters of Baptism.[20] In the face of images that dismiss the pursuit of social justice as "youthful rebellion," Christian imagery has a bountiful list of courageous prophets, including Amos, Jeremiah, Jarena Lee, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Shane Claiborne, and Oscar Romero, to name only a few. In short, in the face of pervasive and growing "ephebiphobia," Christians can stand with youth as Paul did with Timothy and proclaim: "don't let anyone look down on you because you are young."[21]

For adult Christians to be able to make this proclamation, however, we have to show—not simply say—that we really believe it. If we really believe that youth are intrinsically valuable as children of God, not as projections of our cultural hopes and fears, we have to prove it, by listening to youth, getting to know youth on their terms, taking their concerns and their dreams seriously, and affirming that they are beloved just as they are. If we really believe in grace, forgiveness, love of neighbor, and love of enemy, then we have to stop treating youth as criminals and seek restorative forms of discipline rather than punitive forms of punishment. If we really believe that the "greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves,"[22] then we have to stop standing over young people, lecturing and monitoring them, but instead step—humbly and respectfully—into their space, sit down with them, and show them another way of being leaders.

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[18] Gen 1:27; Ps 139:14; Rom 8:14-17.
[19] I Cor 12; Eph 2:20-22; 4:1-16
[20] Mt 5:38-48;18:15-20; 21-35; Luke 15
[21] I Tim 4:12
[22] Luke 22:26

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