NAVIGATING TOWARD ADULTHOOD

A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents

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Mumbai, India, may not be recognized as such in Minneapolis; but, at the same time, the cultural practices in Minneapolis are shaped by those brought from Mumbai. For many young people, they encounter this diversity in school, from elementary to postsecondary. But they also encounter it in their neighborhoods and even families. Each of the people they encounter has hopes and expectations, which may be similar in their grand scheme, but differ sufficiently in their particulars to be confusing. The diversity itself is not necessarily problematic. However, making sense amid diversity is more challenging than learning the expectations of a homogenous world. There is so much more to learn in the face of such diversity and a greater need to develop capacities for interpretation and discernment.

Adolescence Experienced Differently

These larger cultural realities frame the experience of adolescents and families and contribute to the structures of isolation that are now prevalent. Structural isolation refers to those habits and patterns of daily life that make it difficult to establish and foster relationships with select important people, both inside and outside of immediate families, while simultaneously managing hundreds or thousands of contacts and connections. Current social structures have served to isolate adolescents into age peer groupings and away from adults. And they have also served to isolate immediate households from one another, thus burdening the parent with the role of sole adult model and support for their adolescent children. The separation of adolescents from adults (and families from one another) makes it difficult for the development of enduring and robust relationships between adolescents and adults who are not their parents. Beyond the population changes noted earlier, there are several interrelated factors that contribute to structural isolation of adolescents, some of which have been developing over centuries so that their impact has gone largely unnoticed.

Structural isolation of adolescents has not always been the case, and perhaps need not be in the future. In a previous article, I argued that "for most of human history young people have grown to adulthood within small, intergenerational, and relatively stable communities of people, all of which would have contributed to the opportunity

to make meaningful relationships with adults in their midst."[24] If we look to premodern Europe, the historically dominant cultural influence of the United States, we can appreciate how the changes over the past several centuries have shaped where we are today. Prior to the technological explosion of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, most people were born, came to maturity, and died within geographically and socially stable communities, wherein populations were small and travel was limited. Enduring relationships among children, adolescents, and adults of all ages would have been relatively easy, simply because there were fewer people to know and few opportunities to meet new people. I am not suggesting that the relationships themselves were easy, nor am I romanticizing premodern people or periods. It is important to note the difference in social worlds, in terms of small numbers and stability in populations within a given locale. Such stable and small communities of people would have been the experience of most humans prior to the modern age, and thus the relational setting in which adolescents came to maturity. Adolescents would have spent their days and years surrounded by people of all ages whom they knew well and who knew them. This would have provided the opportunity to have significant relationships with multiple adults beyond their parents, simply by the fact of opportunity.[25] Among those adults who knew them, some would have invested in them and challenged the youth to invest in the community. However, changes in labor and transportation over the past few centuries have dramatically impacted how children, adolescents, and adults spend their days, such that these groups have become largely segregated from one another. Unlike centuries ago, today, there is not the same deep familiarity among adolescents and adults who are not their parents.

For much of human history, adults worked near to where they lived, very often in the same building. If they were agricultural laborers, which most were, they lived close to the land they cultivated. As early as children were able, they took on tasks relative to home and labor, growing in skill and responsibility over time. If adolescent or older children went into service or apprenticeships, they lived in the homes of those to whom they were contracted, usually for years at a time. Thus, over time, they came to maturity within the ongoing presence of multiple adults and learned vocational skills in their company. It would have been rare for them to spend time with large numbers of their age peers.[26] The removal of adult work from the home progressed

adult lives and who offer adolescents some transparency in what that demands, the benefit of time over months and years, and the opportunity for care and respect to grow and be communicated in the relationship.

The Transforming Spirit

Beyond the neurobiological and cognitive developmental framework, theological claims are also appropriate for this discussion. The first claim, which was initially proposed in chapter 3, is that we are always in relationship with God simply because God has created us in and for relationships. Therefore, the relational transformation is not *bringing* the adolescent into relationship with God, for that relationship, as *uncreated grace*, precedes everything.[16] Through the gift of *created grace*, the adolescent can be transformed; he can become aware of the relationship, and so by being aware, participate in it more fully, more consciously and constructively. Thus, from a ministerial perspective, there is value in assisting the adolescent to gain this relational capacity so that he may be more able to live into the call of Christian discipleship. The second claim is that transformative grace is the gift of the Holy Spirit, from whom all life and all holiness come. I close this chapter by naming how the Holy Spirit is present and active within the adolescent and his robust relationships to help him see himself in relationship with God and with the world. To repeat, it is essential for an adolescent to know himself to be valued for himself. As he experiences himself as loved, he very naturally turns in generosity to love others. Love, both received and expressed, is the medium in which his relational capacity grows. It creates the opportunity to discover his unique personhood and acknowledge the personhood of another.

RECEIVING MYSELF AS GIFT

In a renewed theology of vocation, Edward Hahnenberg turns to Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner to describe how God's call is personal to the individual. "Sharing the confidence of Ignatius of Loyola, Rahner believed that it is natural for God to reveal God's will to individuals." Hahnenberg continues that this revelation is not "spelled out in the clouds…[but] is more like a 'sense' or an 'awareness' of something that is both within and beyond us. Rahner called this 'sense' of ourselves

and of God 'transcendental experience.'"[17] The awareness Rahner describes requires a capacity for self-consciousness; not only the ability for the individual to have an inner life, but to see himself seeing it. Self-consciousness enables him to see himself located within a horizon—amid a reality bigger than and beyond him. It creates the opportunity for the adolescent to recognize that there is more to life and more to him than meets the eye. Somehow he is "on stage," seen by others, and that stage and their seeing means something, even as he is unsure what.[18] It is because of this capacity that questions of identity arise: who am I and where do I fit in? While such questions may seem simply social, they are deeply existential; for the new awareness of the greater horizon introduces the possibility of being lost or insignificant. In fact, through the growth in self-consciousness, God awakens in the adolescent the potential for a new awareness of himself as human but also a new awareness of God as the horizon on which he sees himself. This awareness is beyond and different from an instrumental understanding of God, who takes care of what is needed, but otherwise is not demanding or involved with life—what Christian Smith names as *moralistic therapeutic deism*.[19] Through the adolescent's growth, God creates the possibility for upsetting the adolescent's prior conceptions of God and creating a new relational dynamic between himself and God.

Hahnenberg explains that "for Rahner, that infinite horizon of the human person is nothing less than the mystery of God....God is the horizon that opens up the landscape and encircles our lives, calling us forward even as it continually recedes before us."[20] Hahnenberg goes on to write,

> We cannot "know" the mystery of God in the same way we know ordinary objects. And yet—in a move central to his theological project—Rahner argued that this horizon can be "known" in another way: not through an explicit, categorical delineation but through an implicit, preconceptual awareness. We have a "sense," a "consciousness," of our infinite openness to God and of God's gracious presence to us.[21]

Hahnenberg writes, "The experience of God is something we all share—a sense of silent mystery swirling within and around us."[22] Therefore, the growth of self-consciousness provides the opportunity to "grow more conscious of this transcendent presence within ourselves, to

the religious narratives. Adolescents would be better served by adults admitting that they too find many religious stories—whether biblical or hagiographic—inadequate as historic or scientific fact.[11] Without these conversations, the "eleven-year-old atheist" ages into the twentysomething atheist, or at the very least, someone inarticulately holding a deeply inadequate conception of God.[12]

The Retrieval of Stories

This loss of stories calls for a novel approach. When we stop fighting for their factual believability, we open the opportunity to investigate their theological value. For example, when we stop arguing that the Creation accounts found in the bible are valuable as historic or scientific explanations of the beginning of the world, we can begin to explore them for their *theological value*. We can explore them for what they claim about God, about the relationship of God to all creation, and about our relationship to God and to the rest of creation. We can move away from debating *how* the world came to be, and we can move toward proclaiming as Christians that we believe *that* the world came to be because God called/calls it into existence. Our claim is that life is; we believe that its ultimate source is God, and that God claims creation is good and very good (Gen 1).[13] To articulate it in such terms is to simultaneously recognize alternative possibilities (e.g., that there could be nothing) and interpretations (e.g., that creation is not in competition with itself as it comes from a sole source). By unpacking the theological sense of our stories, we open a world of possibility and enter more directly into a discussion on life's meaning, value, and direction. We invite the adolescent into an interpretive tradition that takes the biblical text seriously, to be surprised by the truth encountered therein. By shifting to a discussion on meaning, we move the religious discourse to an arena more appropriate and needed for a modern and postmodern world, and one needed by the adolescent growing toward adulthood.[14]

Fowler names this stage of faith as *synthetic-conventional*, whereby the adolescent becomes able to synthesize "stories, values, and beliefs into a supportive and orienting unity."[15] It is conventional in that the synthesis is drawn from what is "derived from one's significant others…

[even as it is]...formed into a novel, individual configuration."[16] While a young person may outgrow the stories and images of God that were previously satisfying, it is not automatic that she will take on the perspective of synthetic-conventional. Fowler's research indicates that "this involves a process of drawing together into an original unity a selection of the values, beliefs, and orienting convictions that are made available to the adolescent through her or his significant relationships and face-to-face interactions with others."[17] In other words, the adolescent needs the people around her to articulate these values and beliefs in a credible and compelling manner for her to assimilate them. The stories are then no longer fanciful and unbelievable stories that crumble in the face of real life. Instead, they become stories of meaning and value, unpacked for what they say about life, God, and who we are in the world. These become stories that ground the adolescent in the community of believers. This community invites the adolescent to interpret the world from the perspective of God's abiding presence and infinite love. The adolescent needs to hear these stories of God's action connected with the real lives of credible witnesses so that she might learn to make similar connections in her own life. Hahnenberg writes, "To be drawn into the narrative of Christ is what marks the first step on the path of discipleship. It is the necessary prerequisite to vocational discernment."[18] The deeper stories of the tradition, embodied and told in the lives of real people with whom she is in relationship, all help the adolescent train her imagination so that she might interpret her life along the horizon of God's infinite love.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre claims that the human is "essentially a story-telling animal," by which he means that the human needs to make sense of her life and her actions, and does so through stories.[19] As the adolescent leaves behind childhood and moves toward adulthood, stories take on new value. They help her interpret the world in all the complexity she is newly recognizing, they shape her self-understanding, and they offer direction and purpose to her actions. However, as discussed in chapter 5, she does not compose her story out of thin air, but from the surrounding cultural narratives. The dominant cultural narratives tend to focus on individual rights and freedoms, privileging consumption and marketability. Within such narratives, her value is provisional, and her actions are determined by what is immediately expedient. For her to compose a meaningful story for her own life—grounded in the Christian narrative—she must know