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A Rite in the Wilderness

By: Mark Yaconelli

Mark Yaconelli is the director of the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, the founder and director of the Sabbath contemplative retreats, and the author of *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*. He lives in Southern Oregon with his wife and three children.

"Mark, are you awake? It's time."

Unzipping the door to my tent, I looked out across the predawn sky at the dark shoulders of the Mendocino Mountains. I quickly dressed and joined Nancy and Lori by the truck bed where we kept our food. Nancy pulled the coffee kettle off the camp stove and poured me a cup. The three of us looked quietly across the moonless sky. Somewhere out in the early morning darkness, seven high school students were each loading their packs, preparing to begin their trek back to the base camp. Three days earlier they had left as kids, but this morning they would return as men and women.

It started with an injustice.

The Trip

One night at a December youth group gathering, a group of ten seniors from our high school ministry announced they couldn't commit to our summer mission trip. These kids were at the heart of our ministry, so we were crestfallen to hear they were going to miss our annual trip. After a little investigation we discovered the story behind their decision.

At the end of each school year a local travel agency met with the junior class to propose ideas for a celebratory graduation trip the following summer. The agency offered a package deal that included chartered airfare to Mexico and lodging and meals at a Mexican resort. In the agency's presentation, they mentioned there would be no adult

chaperones and emphasized that the alcohol policy in Mexico is very lenient. For the past ten years each junior class had voted to do the package trip. It had become a tradition among the high school students.

The agency collected a non-refundable \$300 deposit from each student a year in advance of graduation, yet the dates for the trip were unknown to the students until 3-8 weeks before the trip. The agency told families that in order to get the best price, they needed to be flexible with dates. Seniors and their families were forced to keep their summer plans in limbo.

When our ministry team learned of this moneymaking scheme (now common among West coast high schools), we became upset and concerned. How could the school and parents condone such a trip? How could the kids in our youth group consider participating in such an outing? (We learned that previous trips were mostly focused on binge drinking, drugs, and sex.)

We prayed and listened, trying to discern how we should respond as a ministry team. After weeks of discernment we met with the students and shared our concerns. The students agreed that the activities of the trip were risky and hedonistic, but they also felt that to miss the trip would be to miss a chance to celebrate with their classmates and miss what had become a tradition in their community that marked the beginning of adulthood. This last response surprised us. Could the trip to Mexico actually represent a rite of passage to our high school students?

Searching for Adulthood

The following week we asked the students to give us their definitions of adulthood. "Adults do what they want." "Adults can drink alcohol." "Adults have freedom." "Adults make money." "No one tells an adult what to do."

Later that evening our ministry team met and discussed what we'd heard. We recognized that for the young people, being an adult meant unrestrained freedom. The more we talked, the more we realized that there was no consensus of what it means to be an adult, and even less understanding of what it means to be an adult Christian.

We recognized that the party trip to Mexico had become a makeshift rite of passage for the community. Kids left home, traveled to another country, abused their bodies, and then came home feeling

like adult members of the culture.

We continued to explore these issues with kids. We asked them to expand their understanding of adulthood based on the adults in their lives. What were their impressions of adulthood gathered from observing their parents, neighbors, and teachers? The results of one evening's conversation were shocking. One student summed it up as follows: "Adults have no friends; adults have no passions; and adults are stressed out."

A number of questions emerged for our ministry team. How can our kids grow toward a mature, adult form of faith if their images of adulthood are so vague and negative? Don't we as a church need to help them develop a faith that can accompany them into adulthood? Is it possible that many young people drop their faith after high school because they don't know how to bring it into adulthood? What does it mean to be an adult? When do you become an adult in a culture where everyone wants to look and act like teenagers?

After a month of intense prayer and contemplation we decided to hold an all-church retreat on the subject of adult faith. In small groups we asked people to tell their faith stories, disclosing the experiences that marked their passages into adulthood. Some people shared that they didn't feel like an adult until they were married, others until they had a good paying job. Some felt they became an adult when their parents died, some as old as 45 reported that they still had never thought of themselves as adults. We asked people to record and share the experiences, songs, sermons, lessons, and mentors that helped them maintain their faiths into adulthood.

Over that weekend an idea emerged. As a church we recognized that we were doing a poor job preparing our youth for adulthood. We needed to give the young people a set of experiences and teachings that would accompany them into a mature faith. Finally, we recognized that we needed a clear rite of passage—a ritual that publicly marked the transition into adulthood with a sense of God's love and calling.

Developing a Ritual

We relied on a number of sources as we created our curriculum, reflecting on Jewish rites of passage, Jesus' baptism and time in the wilderness, and the collection of faith experiences shared from our all-church retreat. In addition, we called upon the wisdom of two people within our church, Nancy Wiens and Michael St. John, who were experienced in wilderness retreats and rites of passage.

With leadership from Nancy and Michael, we proposed to the congregation a ritual for high school seniors that would involve two months of formation including Bible study, various prayer disciplines, wilderness safety training, journaling, and discussion—all with the intention of helping them seek their identity and calling as adult followers of Jesus. At the end of the training we would take the students into the Mendocino wilderness where they would each spend three days in solitude, prayer, and fasting—seeking to let go of their adolescent selves and listen for God’s calling into adult faith.

Seven of our 10 senior students signed up to participate in the rite of passage. We began in a Sunday morning worship service. After a reflection on Jesus’ time in the wilderness, the students stood in front of the congregation, one by one sharing their desires in going into the wilderness—what they hoped to leave behind, as well as their hope to hear God’s calling in their lives. After each student spoke, she sat on the floor with her back to the congregation. A member from the congregation had hand-carved seven crosses, one for each pilgrim to wear during the time away. As he placed these over the heads of each student, an elder from the church led each student in the following vows:

Elder: As a young member of this Christian community, are you declaring yourself ready and willing to seek God’s call into adulthood?

Pilgrim: I am ready and willing.

Elder: Are you willing to seek God with all your mind, with all your heart, and with all your strength?

Pilgrim: I am willing.

Elder: Will you trust that God loves you and has a vision for your life and that Jesus is your constant companion?

Pilgrim: With Jesus as my companion, I will trust God.

Elder: What is your intention in this pilgrimage?

Pilgrim: [Each young person stated their reasons for embarking on the journey.]

Elder: On behalf of this faith community let me share this encouragement from Jesus: *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who*

knocks the door will be opened. May the peace of Christ go with you on your journey.

At the end of the service we had all of the children present come forward and encircle the seven students. The pilgrims stood and held hands with the children while the rest of the adults encircled them. We prayed and asked the Holy Spirit to protect, guide, and inspire our young people. After the prayer, the teens let go of the children's hands, broke through the surrounding adults and walked out of the worship service into a waiting van.

Into the Wilderness

It took us most of the night to travel and an additional day to set up camp and orient the teenagers to the mountains. Each student spent an afternoon hiking and praying, until they found a place where they felt drawn to spend the three days of prayer and solitude. We marked these places on a map and went over our safety procedures (students had safety whistles, water, emergency food packs, and a system in which they left symbols out each morning signaling they were safe).

The night before the first day of the fast we sang, prayed, and reflected on Jesus' identity as the beloved of God. Again, students shared the desires they were bringing to God and the younger selves they were letting go.

We woke before sunrise at 4 a.m. We gathered the young people in a circle. Again we prayed, sang, and read Scripture over them. We blessed them saying:

"Be alone so that you may know how to be with others; pray in silence so that you may discover the power of speech; fast so that you might experience gratitude for the gifts of life that God gives us each day. Go and find your identity in God. Go and seek God as the source of your life."

Each student placed a rock in front of him; together they formed a small circle, signaling they were ready to begin their journey. Then as the sun rose, three members of the ministry team sang and watched the seven students leave in silence towards the waiting mountains. For the next three days Nancy, Lori, and I prayed and waited. Back at our home church the parents of the seven students met at the church each night to pray and talk about the new ways in which they would relate to their children after they returned home.

On the fourth morning, as harbingers of sunlight came creeping over the mountains, we stood ready to receive the pilgrims. Nancy, Lori, and I stood with milk and honey—symbols of God’s promise to the people of Israel, symbols that represented God’s faithfulness to the young people who were entering adulthood. We stood around the circle of rocks that represented each student, praying, singing, and welcoming them home.

As each young man came down from the mountains, I waited alone within the circle. When he approached, he lifted his rock and placed it in the center of the circle. I then embraced him and blessed him as a man of God. As each young woman came down from the hills, Lori and Nancy waited, embraced her and blessed her as a woman of God. When all had returned we placed honey on their mouths and talked about the sweetness of God, then milk representing God’s continuing nurturance, and finally bread and grape juice representing the promise and companionship of Jesus.

We spent the rest of the afternoon and the next day helping the young people recover from their fasting and share stories of their experiences. Students read from journals, talked about their struggles in prayer, and shared the insights they felt had come from God. We drove back late the next day and spent Saturday night in the church. On Sunday morning the service was packed with church members and extended family from each of the students. During the opening hymn the students processed into the sanctuary. Then one by one they shared the insights God had given them while they fasted in the wilderness. They shared the inspirations they had received concerning their own lives as well as words they felt they were given to express to the congregation. They spoke like desert Abbas and Ammas.

The words they shared were challenging and prophetic. They told the congregation to spend more time with their families, take time to enjoy God’s creation, worry less about money, take more naps, let go of busyness, and make time to sit in solitude and silent prayer. The congregation of overworked, upwardly mobile adults fell into tears. At the close of the service we again had the children come forward with the adults encircling them. The seven students ritualized their new adult status by joining the surrounding adults. They spoke to the children, telling them that one day, they too would be sent out from childhood into the circle of adults. They too would be invited to pray and listen for the women and men God was calling them to become.