



Teenage Spirituality: Not an Oxymoron



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"*Spirituality*" may not be the first word that comes to mind in describing the typical teenager. A walking hormone, maybe, but spirituality "hungry" or "deep" or "alive"? On the surface, adolescent spirituality might even appear to be an oxymoron. But, those who have both the privilege and challenge of walking and working with young people would consider that an unfair generalization at best, misguided and superficial at worst.

The search for spirituality is one of the deepest issues in present day United States culture--just visit a bookstore or library's New Age bookshelves if you doubt this. Many people are simply empty at the core of their being, and young people are no exception. Although not always verbalized, basic life questions such as these are percolating within the lives of young people:



Meaning

- Is there a center to life, a coordinate around which I can build my world?
- Who or what puts it all together?



Purpose:

- How and why is my life important?
- What things matter more than others?
- What gets me out of bed in the morning?
- What keeps me going when life feels overwhelming?



Hope:

- Is there a foundation for a hopeful future?
- What can re-energize me when I'm ready to give up?

When we pay attention to the spirituality of young people, we recognize their multi-faceted humanness. They, like adults, have needs that are intellectual, emotional, physical, social and spiritual.

*The word adolescent is from the Latin verb *adolescere*, which consists of *ad*, meaning "toward," and *alescere*, meaning "to grow."*

The word reminds us that adolescents are in process--growing toward adulthood.

Human life in this world, from birth to death, is a process in and through which we grow, learn, and mature. Our lives are like unfolding stories as we journey through stages and develop as persons, all along discovering what Jesus' invitation to "come, follow me" (Mark 10:21) means for us. Adolescence is a chapter of that larger story. It is a stage of the journey, marked by self-discovery, dramatic changes and constant needs as young persons move toward adulthood and maturity.

Consequently, spirituality is one aspect both of the human life-journey, as persons created by God, and that particular stage of the journey that we call adolescence. Like all other facets of our lives, there are spiritual characteristics that are unique and specific to humans during adolescence. Here are some of them:

Jr. High-age Teenagers

- Seek a practical, personal religion;
- Want to make their own decisions;
- Have a vision for service;
- Seek "ideals" in life (i.e., adult, self);
- May have doubts and questions about religion that need to be voiced and heard.

Sr. High-age Teenagers:

- Are concerned about finding friends (a support group, a place to belong);
- Seek guidance in moral decisions;
- Are establishing priorities in life and for future plans;
- Want to make a difference;
- Ask "God" questions and want to understand their faith.

The following questions begin the spiritual search of adolescents. They are not always verbalized because young people often live in a place beyond words.

- First, what makes life work? Is there something big enough for which to live life?
- And if so, who or what can put me in touch with it?

These questions lead us to the foot of the cross and into the eyes of Jesus, through whom God has overcome death and promises new life.

In other words, teenagers need a combination of both the content of the faith (story, doctrine, theology--the living voice of the gospel) and an experience of the faith (worship, ritual, life in community, giving self away to the needs of God's world). Young people begin to mature when they experience the content of their faith; that is, when some of what they have heard, read, and been taught begins, little by little, to take shape and happen in their lives.

Adolescents need "windows" through which they can see faith (spirituality) in action, and people make the best windows. In teenage spirituality, the "rubber hits the road" in and through relationships-- healthy, loving, honest, open and safe relationships.

Young people need more than role models; they need adult mentors who will take them seriously--listening to them, loving them, and showing them what it looks like to live what one believes. Adolescents need to see a "full package"--an adult who is real. That means one who is authentic, one who genuinely cares about young people, and one who has a relationship with God which defines his/her life. Young people need a "window" through whom they can see what it means to be authentically human and faithfully a child of the Triune God.



Teenage Spirituality Resources

Ford, Kevin Graham. Jesus For A New Generation. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1995. 259pp.

This book grew out of a national consultation on Generation Xers. Offers good insight into the thinking and experience of this generation, as well as practical implications for evangelism.

Howe, Neil and Bill Strauss. 13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail? New York: Vintage Books, 1993. 229pp.

An excellent overview of the inner dynamics of America's 13th generation born roughly between 1961-1981. The authors use fresh and honest language, and draw widely from current stories, anecdotes and quotes.

Shelton, Charles M. Adolescent Spirituality: Pastoral Ministry For High School And College Youth. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983. 366pp.

A more scholarly approach to the subject of adolescent spirituality, written by a Roman Catholic priest and campus minister; for adults who minister with and counsel youth--perhaps primarily parents. A classic work and, in some respects, still the definitive work in the area of adolescent spirituality, Shelton provides a practical book that integrates counseling and developmental psychology, pastoral theology and spirituality.



Running Deep: An Experience Named Spirit

A four-part exercise designed to:

- To spark the imagination of young people in exploring their own spirituality;
- To hear a word from a God whose love runs deep, comes close, and stays..in and through the cross and resurrection of Jesus;
- To experience prayer as one way that people of faith and the Spirit of God can tend to those things that live deep within the human heart.

Although the components of this exercise may be used separately, they are designed to be used together to create an integrated experience. "Running Deep: An Experience Named Spirit" will work best with Sr. High youth or post high school young adults in a focused environment. Use it within a space that feels comfortable, open, and safe. This resource can be folded into a pre-existing program or group meeting, but also stands alone as a one-time activity.

I. Modern-Day Psalms

As young people gather and you greet them and offer hospitality, play background music just loud enough to be noticed. Choose music that expresses the spiritual hunger so pervasive within our contemporary context. One suggestion is U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" ("The Joshua Tree," 1987), or something newer such as Joan Osborne's "One of Us" ("Relish", 1995), Dishwalla's "Counting Blue Cars" ("Pet Your Friends," 1995), or "Salvation" by the Cranberries ("To The Faithful Departed," 1996). Ask those in your youth community for other songs that might reflect their music interests, such as country or rap.

After all have gathered and settled, play the song again and ask all to listen carefully to what is being expressed in the song. Ask: "What do you hear being expressed in this song?" Write some of the responses on newsprint or a marker board. Suggest the deep longings and hungers of people are often expressed through popular music. Do the participants agree or disagree with your

suggestion? Why or why not? Say: "We're going to spend some time discussing spirituality, and exploring our own deep longings and hungers."

II. Journaling: Reading the "Scriptures" of Your Life

Distribute large index cards, paper, and pens/markers. Invite the participants to work alone and complete some or all of the following sentences as you write them on newsprint or a marker board (feel free to add some of your own). When everyone has finished, ask each person to find a partner and share their responses. Invite them to pay attention to similarities in what they have written, and to ask each other questions if clarification is needed.

- (God) I love God because...
- (Faith) The most important thing about my faith is...
- (Jesus) Walking the way of the cross and journeying with Jesus means...
- (Community) One important relationship in my life is with _____ because...
- (Service) One way that I live what I believe is...
- (Future) I believe God is leading me...
- (Spirituality) To me, spirituality means...

III. Encountering God's Story

Have each pair from the previous journaling exercise get together with another pair for Bible study. The text is Romans 8:26-27(NRSV). Distribute copies of the Romans passage or make sure each person has a Bible.

26. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

In advance, write on butcher paper or marker board these questions:

- What is the message of these verses?
- What do these verses say to me/us?
- What are these verses suggesting about who I am and what I do, or who we are and what we do?
- To what specific action(s) does the text call us?

Encourage groups to elect their own leader. Make sure you're available as a guide to answer questions the group might have. Either open with prayer, or ask groups to do so, asking God's spirit to lead, guide, inspire, and empower their encounter with scripture.

Tell leaders to have group members read the text to themselves, and then for someone to read it aloud. Allow 15 minutes for discussion of the questions you've posted, and encourage groups to close with prayer, thanking God for the opportunity to be in God's presence through the Word, and for the guidance and strength to live what has been learned.

IV. A Meditative Prayer Journey

Gather the whole group back together. Dim the lights in the room, if possible. Play some quiet, meditative music to help create a space conducive to meditation and reflection. Invite participants to find a comfortable position, close their eyes and relax. Tell them to focus on their breathing. Read the Romans text again. Guide the group through the following prayer journey, leaving time and space in between each statement for silent reflection.

- "How does it feel to sigh?" (pause)
- "What makes you sigh?" (pause)
- "What kinds of things are too deep for words?" (pause)
- "God knows these things...(pause)...God will work with them as you think and feel and live them."(pause)
- "Spend a few moments speaking silently with God...about these things of yours...(pause)...about other people you know and care about who have special prayer needs...(pause)...about the needs and issues in God's world."(pause)

After a few moments of quiet time, say: "Because the things that have come to mind during this prayer journey are yours, because they are deep, because God knows you and these deep things and promises the Spirit to help you tend to them, let's honor this

time, the power of the silence, these matters for prayer that live deep within you."

Invite them to offer their prayers to the one who has known them forever, while singing a prayerful response such as "The Spirit Intercedes" by Dakota Road*. Have someone sing through the song once so the young people get a feel for it. Let the song conclude the prayer journey, and end the session in a way appropriate to the needs of your group (e.g., sharing of the peace).

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