CHAPTER 5

Growing Faithful Children in Media Cultures

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THE DOOR PUSHED OPENED, and all three kids shoved through. Marvin and Jude, at 7 and 10, ran up the stairs and toward their own rooms. Fina, 4 years old and just a little less willing to body block, followed behind. Diane sighed as she set down the two bags of groceries and tried to sort out through the pile of mail that had fallen from the mail slot onto the floor.

Let's see, bill, bill, bill, oh yes, a request to support environmental action, junk mail, junk mail, junk mail, and . . . another bill. Diane sighed again. There was never enough money to feel comfortable and this month was going to be tighter than most, given the run of ear infections they'd had last month. Why couldn't health insurance really insure? There was no real answer to that, and Diane grabbed the groceries and walked into the kitchen. If she got dinner simmering in the next half hour she might be able to grab half an hour's peace before Mark got home.

"Mooommmm!" came a voice screaming down the stairs. "Jude won't give me the Scooby DVD!" "But, Mom," came Jude's equally shrill voice, "Marvin watched it yesterday. It's my turn."

Diane trudged up the stairs in response, wondering why it was that a computer in every room, DVD capable, hadn't erased the fights the boys seemed intent on having every day after school.

As she passed Fina's room she saw her hunkered down in front of her own TV. Why a 4-year-old would find a show about a high school spy enjoyable was beyond her, but at least it had some redeeming qualities.

Ten minutes later the spaghetti was simmering, the kids were entranced in front of various screens, and Diane sipped at her coffee, half an ear to the radio mumbling gently beside her, and her eyes on the paper in front of her. People were being massacred again, and the government couldn't decide whether to do anything about it. Children's test scores were falling, and the city wasn't ready for another tax increase. At least the weather was looking up—rain was finally expected and a soaking rain, at that. Maybe the corn could recover after all.

Diane's heart ached. It seemed like there was no end to the pain in the world. She wondered what she could do about it. Nothing, likely. It was hard enough just keeping her own family fed and clothed, let alone off to school and work in time. Yet there was just a wisp of a song floating through her head . . . what was it? The lyrics said that you've got to get yourself together and can't get out of it. "Don't say that later will be better." U2 had always been one of her favorite bands, and that lilting, haunted phrase from the song "Stuck in a Moment" reminded her that, growing up, her mom had always believed that God was active in the world. Maybe there really were signs of such activity. It was hard to know. She wondered whether going to church could make a difference. The kids hated being dragged out of bed on a Sunday morning, and Mark—with some legitimacy—thought the hypocrisy of the congregation was teaching them something they didn't need to learn. Still, maybe Bono was right, maybe "later WASN'T better" and it was time to be more open to hearing God's voice in the world. It was an open question and she let it sit in her heart as she rose to stir the pasta sauce.

Children's ministries are once again a hot topic in many communities of faith. We are beginning to recognize how important it is to reach out to young families, to draw children into our programs, and to support parents. Far too many of our attempts, however, are based on outdated assumptions about the ways that children's ministry should be structured. Children's ministry is not so much about ministry *to* children as it is about ministry *with* children. The primary religious educators of children are those with whom they spend the bulk of their time, and thus our focus in children's ministry ought to be on these adults. No amount of carefully designed programming will "solve" our problems with supporting children, because the challenges are adaptive, not technical. Finally, for better and worse, media culture is the primary context in which children's ministry takes place, and communities of faith must engage that culture fully, understanding children's ministry as a deliberate cultural intervention.

These are strong statements, and I do not expect you to accept them without sufficient argument. I will, however, focus in this chapter on ways that communities of faith can support learning with children. Others' chapters in this book explore the theology of such learning environments or deal with the specificity of learning directly within a congregational setting. In this chapter, I hope to provide both a theoretical and a pragmatic foundation for supporting such learning in the larger media contexts of which we are all a part. A shorthand way of describing my topic would be to say that I am interested in learning with children in, about, and through media culture.

To help you follow my argument, here it is in outline form. First, we live in challenging times, and focusing on media culture makes those challenges particularly clear. Educational theory can help us to engage these challenges constructively, pointing to our need to radically re-vision what we understand learning with children to be about—that is, that it is both a relational process, and about relationality. Supporting children requires us to attend to the practices we use to share our relationality. Supporting children's ministry requires that we work adaptively, not simply technically, or programmatically. In particular, we need to provide adequate amounts of *confirmation*, *contradiction*, and *continuity* around issues of relationality for children and the adults who nurture them. Finally, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus points to specific, pragmatic interventions we can work with in making such deep relationality vivid and embodied.

The challenges we face in media culture

There has perhaps never been a more vibrant or more challenging time to learn with children. Just three decades ago, when today's parents of children were themselves children, the world looked very different—at least in the United States. The World Wide Web, now fairly ubiquitous, was merely a gleam in a science-fiction author's imagination. Television was the favored mass medium, but generally only three channels held much interest for people. Movies were something you went to the local movie theater to watch together, and telephones came with long, spiral cords attached to them.

In some ways it might be reasonable to expect that our increased access to such technologies would create more leisure time and increased affluence, but the opposite is actually the case. Statisticians point out that those Americans who are employed (and our rates of unemployment have been rising rapidly since the year 2000) spent "142 hours more per year on the job in 1994 than they did in 1973."[1] Additionally, "While there has been a per capita rise in income in the U.S. since 1970 of 62%, there has also been a decrease in the quality of life as measured by the Index of Social Health—to the tune of 51%."[2] These are statistics that get at the material circumstances, but what is also true about this period of time is that there have been significant shifts demographically, with immigrants arriving from all corners of the globe, practicing many different faiths. These statistics only begin to hint at the enormous changes now taking place in the United States, changes that reach from the most intimate to the most far ranging.

At the same time as families living amidst this change struggle to cope, they are also being bombarded more than ever by advice on "proper" parenting. Where once they might have relied on neighborhood institutions such as church or local school, on the extended family networks that lived around them, if not in the same house, they now often find themselves struggling to hold together multiple spheres of activity without such supports. Families that exist on the margins economically often must accommodate the schedules of others—social workers, aid agencies—along with their advice. Families that live comfortably often shuttle their children between play groups, after-school programs, and other activities. Parents rush home from work or other commitments to cram food down their kids' throats before taking off for the next round of activities (whether additional jobs, or structured recreation). Each of these environments may offer its own range

of advice, and have its own rules for how to participate and how to "play," and parents and children must negotiate among them all at once, finding their own compromises and making their own choices.

Woven into all of this blur are the daily practices of media—so commonplace that we often take them for granted. TV programs on during breakfast, the car radio on while commuting, after-school "screen time"—all of these are part of our shared environment. It is into this context that religious educators must enter, and it is in this context that we will be supportive and engaged with learning with children, or not.

I want to suggest some very pragmatic and constructive ways to enter into this context, but before getting to those suggestions I think it will help to review some basic educational theory. Many people speak of the challenges we face, but how we describe them will inevitably affect how we choose to address them.

Educational theory that guides our interventions

There are two basic frames for thinking about learning that I find useful no matter the context I'm working in. The first is oriented more toward internal learning processes, that is, processes at work within a learner, and the second toward more external elements, that is, teaching processes that contribute to shaping the learning that is taking place within any person.

First, researchers tell us that learning takes place on three levels within each person—the *cognitive*, the *affective*, and the *psychomotor*. You may perhaps be more familiar with the language of ideas, feelings, and actions.[3] Why is this important? An easy answer would be that understanding the multiple levels at which learning is taking place allows teachers to attend more carefully to structuring learning effectively. A deeper answer would encourage religious educators to recognize that far too often our learning environments attend to *cognitive* issues—specific creedal formulations, details of biblical stories, and so on—all the while ignoring *affective* and *psychomotor* elements of the learning taking place. If learning is always taking place in all three areas, then ignoring particular areas means that we are either assuming that someone or something else will attend to those areas, or we are deciding that they are not important.

If the only time children engage a biblical story is in worship, and that experience requires them to sit still and listen to someone far in front whom

they may not even be able to see, it is possible that the children's experience of isolation and boredom will attach to the Bible story regardless of its actual content. Imagine, on the other hand, a Bible story that a child engages through song, dance, and an illustrated picture book, perhaps while sitting on the lap of a loved one. The feelings surrounding the experience of that story mean that its content is much more likely to sink in. To use educational terms, such learning can be integrated into and held by multiple brain pathways.

Pause for a moment and think about some of your most vivid learning experiences: What were the ideas? What were the feelings? What were you doing physically in that situation?

It is perhaps obvious, but nonetheless worth pointing out, that certain kinds of media hold children's attention better than others. It is not coincidence that some of the most successful children's videos tell a story, sing a song, invite identification with several characters, prompt dancing, and so on. What may not be so obvious is that the most successful of such media are also those with stories compelling enough, characters interesting enough, to spark children's improvisation with them. McDonald's might include a movie tie-in toy with its children's meals, but the only toys that really get used are those that children find amenable to including in their own storymaking.

This example already spills over into the external environment where the story is encountered. If *cognitive*, *affective*, and *psychomotor* issues are internal, then it is the second set of frames—that of *explicit*, *implicit,* and *null* curricula—that help us to attend to how we shape these processes. A *curriculum*, by definition, is a structured approach to learning. Elliott Eisner identified these three curricula as operative in any environment, and invites us to recognize, again, the multiple ways that people learn.[4] Another way to speak of these three is of the intentional, incidental, and unacknowledged forms of our learning. Teachers set out intentionally to convey certain kinds of information, to support certain kinds of learning. Anyone who has ever been a learner, however, knows that while a teacher may have an explicit intention of teaching something, many other things get taught along the way

incidentally. Then there are the things that get taught by not being taught, by being ignored or being taboo, those things that we learn are not to be spoken of, although no one explicitly tells us these rules. Again, pause for a moment and try to remember some times in your own religious educational history when teachers were explicitly teaching one thing, and you found yourself learning something else.

In many cases, religious educators are very clear about our explicit curriculum—we may speak in terms of "deepening discipleship," "sharing Christ," "giving people access to a tradition," or "attending to God's action in our midst," but we are often less aware of the incidental learning that is taking place within our learning contexts. All of the goals I've just noted, for instance, clearly include *cognitive*, *affective*, and *psychomotor* elements. It is clear that you cannot deepen discipleship if you ignore people's feelings and actions alongside of their beliefs. But how often do we pause and deliberately ponder how to engage people's feelings and actions in their beliefs? How often do we ask whether the materials we're working with in one setting support or contest our community's voiced mission in another?

Further, how often do we consider that the ways in which we are teaching, the kind of understanding we're striving toward, may in effect be counter to many of the prevailing practices around us? Here I'm not thinking only of the larger cultural spaces we inhabit, but even those most close to us within the walls of our community of faith.

How do we teach and learn while remaining aware of the multiple levels on which learning occurs? What does it mean to invite people into a space where they will be challenged to overturn their whole way of understanding themselves? What does it mean to do that with children, let alone their parents, in media culture?

Part of what we can learn from the scholarship on learning, from the frames I've just noted—the *cognitive*, *affective*, and *psychomotor* piece, as well as the *explicit*, *implicit*, and *null* curricula piece—is that the vast majority of learning takes place relationally. This is not a difficult claim to substantiate from people's experiences. Consider your own response to my earlier question about a vivid religious education memory. Your memory probably

included a person who shared an important relationship with you (parent, teacher, neighbor), whose judgment of you, you both desired and respected.

This relational component to learning it is even more true when understood from a Christian perspective. As Parker Palmer so pointedly notes that "we know as we are known," and we are known most intimately by God.[5] Yet it is one thing to affirm that our learning is relational, and quite another to name that belief theologically, particularly given the ways that traditional theological categories are less well known in popular mediated contexts. We may affirm as Christians that we are known most intimately by God—but we rarely believe it, or at least, we rarely act as if we have this experience at the heart of our knowing.

This lack of experienced knowing shines through in the ways that our children learn from us, it is the *implicit* and *null* curriculum of much that we teach in our current cultural contexts. This challenge—that gap between what we affirm theologically and what we embody in our daily experiences—is the key challenge children's ministries must face directly. We affirm relationality as at the heart of Christian being and knowing—we are a trinitarian people [6]—but we rarely act upon that knowing, we rarely trust it. One of the big opportunities here, however, is to recognize that we have at least as much to learn from our children as they do from us.

One of the most visceral and intimate ways that we understand knowing and being known by God is through the way we know ourselves with our children, and the way that we know our children through our love for and with them.[7] It is not a coincidence that referring to God as "Father" has had such a long and sustained history. We ought also to affirm that relationship by referring to God as "Mother." But even apart from the theological implications of this shift, consider the underlying issue—that we learn so much about love in the relationships we have with children. Some of that knowing comes about in our recognition of the extent to which we will go to protect children, but if we are honest, it also comes from our recognition of the elemental nature of their love for us and for others. This is relational knowing at its most pure and its most intense.

There is an opportunity here, to learn from our children and with our children in deep relationality. Yet this opportunity also poses difficult challenges in media culture, for representations of relationality pervade our media, but they are, by and large, fairly narrow and limited representations. You cannot engage mass media without encountering depictions of relation-

ship, yet you can engage the media and still end up with only a very narrow and limited range of such depictions.

Turning to media culture

Media culture really is a *medium* in which meaning is made. Think of the definition of *medium* you learned in science classes: a substance in which something can be cultured or grown. Contrary to popular conception—a conception shared by many communities of faith—mass mediated popular culture is not simply a set of content that is enforced by sheer market presence on passive recipients. Rather, it is a meaning-making space where enormous amounts of material are provided for people to draw on. As noted earlier, effective learning engages *cognitive*, *affective*, and *psychomotor* elements. Mass mediated popular culture does this in a variety of ways, not the least of which is by fusing sound and image to representations of being.

Indeed, *media culture* is best understood as a dynamic medium in which meaning is produced, circulated, contested, and improvised with.[8] That means that learning is taking place all of the time, all around us. That means that our relationships are often our most potent teachers. That means that when media culture encourages us to "reason by means of sympathetic identification" we are engaging one of its most powerful tools. If we truly do "know as we are known," what does it mean "to know" as media culture represents ourselves to ourselves and to each other?

First, and foremost, it means to know affectively, experientially. Media representations can be enormously powerful, pulling us into their worlds and helping us to suspend our disbelief. Unfortunately it is also often the case that the sheer ubiquity of a particular representation captures our attention, limiting the database of possibilities we perceive as we engage in meaning-making, and focusing our attention on the "content" of that representation, rather than on its construction.

In addition, most media engagement in the United States in mainstream, middle-class families is increasingly happening in isolation. Whereas three decades ago each family might have one television set (with a handful of channels), many families have more than one set—perhaps even more sets than they have actual family members. Increasingly families are even buying more than one computer. So viewing screens (television or computer) is more often done in isolation. Movie theaters have evolved from showing one or

perhaps two movies at a time, to big cineplexes where more than a dozen movies may be showing. Even families that go to the movie theater together may not see the same film. This reality cuts down on two important elements of media engagement—being in the same place at the same time when viewing media—so that people laugh together, cry together, yell at the absurdities, and so on—and being able to have shared conversations about media elements, being able to draw on the same database of meaning-making raw materials.

In this case a very tangible *psychomotor* element of the learning—that is, viewing done in relatively passive physical positions, and in relative isolation—contributes to some of the more challenging aspects of media practice. Mass mediated popular culture thrives on stories of relationality. Indeed, in some way, every genre of mass mediated pop culture, indeed almost every single piece of pop culture you can point to is at heart a reflection of relationality, whether *right* relationality, *broken* relationality, or at least *strained* relationality. Sitcoms tell stories about families and workplaces. News programs reflect our understanding of reality and its connection to our own experiences. Reality shows purport to represent how *real* people in *real* situations are responding to their relationships, or the lack thereof. Children's cartoons model relationships—some imaginary and some realistic. Indeed, communities of faith have always recognized how powerful a story teller pop culture is, how much this story teller reflects us to ourselves, and that is part of the reason we have been so reluctant for it to take center stage in our sharing of stories.

We have spent a large amount of time engaging the *cognitive* and *affective elements* of meaning-making in mass mediated spheres—seeking to tell our own stories in these media (think about the vast Christian broadcasting empire) or to deconstruct the stories already there. In that very way, we missed a far more powerful element of the meaning-making taking place there that has to do with this element of the *psychomotor:* the physical ways that we learn with these media. Consider the ways that mass-mediated stories used to be engaged amidst relational patterns that augmented them, that provided an *implicit* and *null* curricula in support of relationality. Families watched their one television set together. In the decades before television—and still in many parts of the world—families gather together around radio.

In our current contexts, we increasingly engage media in isolation, or at least in segmented groups—teens with teens, young children watching chil-

dren's television, adults watching adult programming, and so on. The intergenerational, deeply relational patterns of practice with which we began engaging these media have broken down, and we find ourselves increasingly in a position in which the databases we draw on to make sense of our stories, literally to write our stories, are also segmented—intended for specific audiences. One painful consequence of this "target audience segmentation" is that we no longer have shared databases to draw on as we make sense of the world around us, as we struggle to make sense of ourselves, let alone share our sense of our deep relationality.

This is true of age-related programming. Think about the ways that various generations are identified, and all of the targeted marketing thrown at them. It is also true in terms of ideological and religious divides. People who share a particular view of the world can listen to particular radio shows and not encounter other views. People from a particular religious perspective—no matter how narrowly understood—can stay within a database of meanings that supports their background.

Indeed, many people engage mass media solely as a "window on the world"—without recognizing the shape of that window. That "frame," that specific construction of meaning may well be a good, solid, appropriate one, but it is nevertheless a construction of meaning. All of us need to be aware of the limited and narrow nature of any such construction.

One way to think about this is to suggest that the *explicit* curriculum of TV news teaches that what you see on the news is reality. Similarly, that "all the news that's fit to print" can be found in a specific newspaper—or perhaps linked through a specific news Web site. Yet there is an *implicit* curriculum found in news reporting, and it can be interpreted in multiple ways. One could learn, for example, that the world is primarily a dangerous and violent place. Some media literacy educators argue that the central problem with the portrayal of violence on television is not that it causes violence, but rather that people come to believe that the world is primarily violent, and that nonviolent solutions to conflict are not ever feasible. Another conclusion people might come to is that people whose stories do not end up reported in the news are not sufficiently important to warrant understanding. Of course, these are only some of the possibilities because *incidental* learning is neither linear, easily controlled, or even predictable.

Children, to get to the point of this chapter, are rarely present in the news, and almost never produce it. (See the chapter "Who Is the Child?

Whose Is the Child? A Theology of Children.") Indeed, the few attempts to provide opportunities for children to produce and report news have always been relegated to tiny local cable or public stations, or to very rare exceptions on national broadcasts (such as Peter Jennings's town meetings with kids following September 11, 2001). Indeed, children's active presence in news construction is so rare that perhaps instead of noting these as examples of an *implicit* curriculum, it would be more appropriate to note that children's role in news is instead part of the *null* curriculum of our current cultural contexts.

On the other hand, children are frequently at least present in entertainment genres, if not at the heart of the drama. Indeed, some of the most immediately resonant story lines on any number of prime time dramas are so moving precisely because children's lives are endangered (think about the children being hauled into the emergency room on a hospital drama, or the child dying on a mini-series). Children frequently stand as symbols of the most vulnerable of human beings, and of those most deserving of protection and support.[9]

Yet in cold, crass terms, the sheer statistics on children in the United States are stunning. More and more children are sliding further into poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Our schools are increasingly stressed and unable to provide adequate instruction. Unemployment among teenagers is often higher than among any other group, and the few jobs that are available can feel demeaning. Why this enormous paradox? Why can we find so many examples in popular culture that proclaim our desire to help and protect children, yet at the same time find so few examples of ways to provide real, material aid to improve the circumstances in their lives?

I imagine there are numbers of possible answers to this question. I will not attempt to offer any here, although I think communities of faith ought to take the question very seriously. I suspect that our frameworks of understanding—particularly in terms of sinfulness and reconciliation—might have a lot to offer in response. Instead, I simply raise the question to point out that we are learning, in the midst of mass mediated popular culture, how to identify sympathetically with people experiencing any number of compelling problems, but rarely are we given any models to follow for responding in any way other than through vicarious emotional identification.

We are drawn to these media because we can play with our sympathetic identification, we can think through our affectivity with them. It is often truly enjoyable to do so. Yet it is also the case that because the range of images and

activities embedded in these media is so narrow, we end up acting in ways that narrow our relationality, that misconstrue it in fundamental ways.

Let me make this theory more concrete with an example: television commercials for personal care products. Most of us at one time or another have worried about how we appear to other people. Such worries are a basic part of being human. We draw conclusions about people based on our visual associations with them. The problem with personal care product commercials is that they tend to provide a database to draw on that emphasizes the concern, worry, and competitive comparison of such judgments, and then hooks those feelings to a limited range of responses that encourage the purchase of specific products. Simply representing something like this visually would probably not, by itself, cause people to believe that purchasing a product could remedy such an anxiety. But when more and more public spaces consist of shopping malls and other locations, and when increasingly more of what we identify as *fun* is shopping, then the physical activity of purchasing products is tied to the process of being with one's friends, and thus the link is inscribed in multiple learning pathways.

Numerous authors and producers have called attention to the destructive elements of this process, particularly for the self-perception of children. Girls and boys who only see girls and boys represented within a narrow range of physical type tend to begin to assume that that type is somehow normative, and that if they do not conform to it they are lacking in some essential way. When they further see this representation continually linked to the purchase of specific products, they become caught up in a pattern of practice that is difficult to escape from. Anyone who has ever tried to change a habit will recognize how difficult it can be to step outside of familiar patterns of practice, particularly if some element of them is enjoyable.

Adaptive versus technical challenges

This is why the challenge that communities of faith face in mediated cultural contexts is so difficult, and why it is what Ronald Heifetz has termed an adaptive challenge, rather than simply a technical one. The distinction Heifetz is drawing gets at the center of the problems we face in this analysis. His classic example of the *adaptive versus technical* challenge comes from thinking about medical challenges. What a doctor needs to know to treat a broken bone, for instance, is quite different from what is involved in treating

heart disease. Treating a broken bone is essentially a technical challenge, involving issues like realigning the broken bone in the proper position, applying the cast adequately, and so on. Whereas treating heart disease inevitably involves helping people to change elements of their lifestyles—to shift eating and exercise patterns, to handle stress differently, and so on.

If the challenge of supporting children in a mediated cultural context was simply a technical one, then communities of faith could choose the most effective media literacy curriculum to apply. We could try to provide the best vacation Bible school program, the best Bible translation, and so on. But it is not a technical challenge we're dealing with, but rather an adaptive one. We need to find ways to intervene in daily family practices that interrupt the narrowness and limited meaning-construction of relationality that is embedded in popular media, while at the same time affirming, expanding, and supporting those practices that encourage a deep relationality, that encourage and nurture rich religious life. While turning off the TV might be helpful once in a while, we can not hope to encourage the kind of adaptive practice necessary by ignoring mass mediated popular culture. We have to engage media, contest the elements that are narrow and limiting, and encourage those that help us to stretch our imagination and to feel deeply our global relationality. We need, in short, to envision children's ministry in this cultural context as a deliberate cultural intervention.

For years now it has been a truism that people "return" to church when their children are born. The argument given for this observation is that people want their children to have "good values," and that church is the place they turn to accomplish this goal. Religious educators have become, de facto, the professionals who are then expected to instill these good values. There are numerous problems with such a prescription, but what if the diagnosis itself is wrong? What if one of the main reasons people return to church is not simply to support good values—although that could be a good and sufficient reason—but because parenting young children raises very difficult existential questions for which other parts of our culture simply don't provide adequate answers?

Human beings are remarkably resilient and resourceful creatures, and we are created for and in relationality. When the standard, default practices of a culture on the one hand evoke that relationality in a dozen different explicit ways in various media—particularly affectively—but then subtly, in both *implicit* and *null* ways, seek to break that relationality, or at least to severely

strain it, then deep questions and hungers arise. Communities of faith need to take these hungers very seriously, and recognize that our traditions hold resources with which to address and nourish them. We also need to acknowledge that children are those most vulnerable to broken relationship, and also most able to model uncomplicated love. Indeed, children have a gift for identifying new metaphors for relationality—particularly with God—and for asking questions that can open adult eyes to relationship. Ministry with and for children is thus at the heart of faith formation in our contemporary context.

Robert Kegan points out that transformative education, education that takes seriously the challenges to our frames of mind presented in this culture, has a three-fold dynamic to it that is always spiraling onward—c*onfirmation*, *contradiction*, and *continuity.*[10] This dynamic requires that teachers begin the process of transformative learning by entering into the realities of the learners with whom they are journeying. This kind of *confirmation* can be as simple as listening carefully and fully to the stories of the learners they are engaging, and as complicated as finding ways to walk in daily practice with them. What it must entail, though, no matter the context, is a deep appreciation of and respect for, the meaning-making in which they are embedded. Such respect does not assume that there will be no contestation of such meaning-making—that teachers will not disagree or confront problematic beliefs—but it does assume that there is real meaning being made, and that that meaning has deep connections to the narratives of the people involved. Jesus, for instance, did not engage his disciples by speaking in language with unfamiliar metaphors, or about issues that they did not care about. At the same time, however, he did confront their beliefs—often acting in ways that they could not understand, and telling them stories with endings they could not predict.

When an adult and a child arrive in your learning context, you can not assume much about them, other than that they are in some kind of relationship and that something about your learning context appealed to them. You will learn over time what kind of relationship they share: Are they parent and child? Grandparent and child? Foster parent and child? Caretaker and child (in the case of a child with severe disabilities)? Neighbor and friend? From there, in what other relationships are they a part? Perhaps there are two parents: those parents might be married to each other, or perhaps you have a parent and a stepparent. Perhaps the parents are "effectively" married but both of the same gender and living as committed life partners. Perhaps the

grandparent brings the child because the child lives with her or him, but perhaps the grandparent brings the child because the child's parents don't much care about religious education, let alone children's ministry more broadly construed. The key here, is that until and unless you spend time getting to know the adult and the child, you can not hope to provide a learning environment that is both sufficiently *confirming* and also challenging, to support learning.

Yet, at the same time as you are listening and hearing deeply, you are also already teaching. You are teaching—via the *implicit* and *null* curricula, via *affective* and *psychomotor* modes—that the community of faith is one of deep hospitality. One of the earliest and most important lessons that a community of faith offers God's people is that God loves. We teach that lesson in many ways, but far too often we teach the opposite lesson by refusing hospitality, by making assumptions about people that are inaccurate, by refusing to meet and accompany people in the places where they are.

A major part of the challenge we face with media culture is the narrowness of the range of representations of relationality available, and the limited nature of the actions in support of such relationality that are modeled. Churches need to become communities where a wide range of representations is shared, and where deeply relational patterns of practice are supported. We can only do that, however, if we know where our people are, if we have entered deeply into the meaning-making they are engaged in, if we have c*onfirmed* the reality where they are embedded.

The second element that Kegan speaks of is *contradiction*. This is an element in the learning process that arises in many ways. Teachers can introduce contradictions, but life also poses them unasked. I have already noted a number of ways that mass mediated popular culture on the one hand evokes our sympathetic identification with children, but then systematically excludes and impoverishes many of them, let alone encourages them in leadership. This is a major contradiction in our meaning frame.

People interested in supporting growing in faith in a mediated culture must help each other to sense and engage such contradictions. How to do so? The process of *confirmation* just noted, with its deep attention to listening, is a first step. What are the primary images and metaphors, for instance, that a family is using to describe their experiences? When children talk with excitement about something in their life, what is it they are talking about? When they make analogies, to what are they referring? This is part of

the process of uncovering and *confirming* the reality that they are embedded in, but it is also part of discovering in what ways religious education might pose difficult contradictions to our meaning frames. If the images and stories children are using draw on biblical characters and biblical phrases, it may well be that engaging popular culture will seem a contradiction and thus be challenging. If the images and examples stem from popular Saturday morning cartoons or Disney movies, then a biblical imagination might at first seem strange or disorienting. To return to an earlier example, if the range of representation of relationship is primarily a mass mediated one, then the kind of "love of enemy" embodied in Christian gospel will not only seem far fetched, but deeply wrong. Living into an understanding of daily life that requires hospitality, that seeks to engage the stranger, that pours out love and power, rather than hoarding them—these are notions that deeply contradict the common representations of popular culture.[11]

There are many ways to engage contradictions, some of which I will detail later in this chapter, but there is one more element to discuss in Kegan's framework first, and that is *continuity*. Kegan refers to *continuity* as the many ways that it is possible to "tell the same story" yet from multiple perspectives. I may experience a particular event when I am 13, and tell a story about that event in one way. When I am 23, I may describe the same event, but tell a very different story. This is also true at 33, 43, 53, and so on. In each case the same event is being described, and I am the same person describing it, but my understanding and thus description of the event shifts as my meaning-making shifts over time, as the experience base I draw upon shifts, and so on. These are time-based shifts, but there are many other experiences that can reshape such stories—changing context is often the most obvious, whether that shift in context comes from geographic move, financial move, life phase change, and so on. The key issue that Kegan raises about *continuity*, however, is that without it, people living with profound contradictions in their meaning frame will often retreat to either deep relativism, or rigid boundaries. To use John Hull's terms, they respond with "ideological enclosures" or "premature ultimates." [12]

Heifetz has written about this issue in relation to adaptive challenges, arguing that we must keep such challenges on a "low simmer" that permits them to be faced and engaged, but that does not send people either into denial or fleeing into avoidance.[13] Here again it is *continuity* that provides the support to enable the challenge to be met.

Whatever the language you use to engage this challenge, the reality remains that *confirmation*, *contradiction*, and *continuity* requires that communities of faith take seriously the fundamental ways that people are already making sense of their lives in mass mediated contexts. Children in particular live more immersed in these environments than perhaps at any other time in our history.

When communities of faith choose to respond to this challenge by refusing to acknowledge either the ways that meaning-making is embedded in these contexts, or by rejecting such meaning-making as trivial or not religious, we can force people into ideological enclosure, into adopting a "premature ultimate." That may be a retreat into closed religious community (and we have more than enough fundamentalists among Christian community to recognize this risk), or that may, in contrast, be a flight to relativism and "secular" community, or religious meaning-making deliberately isolated from religious institutions.

To the extent that a community of faith seriously and respectfully engages these challenges, they teach important lessons about the vitality and essential relationality of church. To the extent that they do not, they teach far more destructive lessons about a lack of values and respect. It is, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, a question of how we intentionally engage the *implicit* and *null* curricula, not simply the *explicit* one.

What are we to do?

What does this mean pragmatically? We have to consciously and intentionally provide adequate support for families (however defined) in the religious development of their children. Children's ministry has to be about creating a learning environment with adequate and appropriate support for learning with children, indeed for learning from them, not simply for believing they have something to learn from us.

At a bedrock level, this learning is and has to be supported as relational. In addition, because learning is always happening on multiple levels, we have to be at once both more ambitious and more humble about what is possible. Learning happens all of the time, and so communities of faith need to imaginatively find ways to enter into daily life. This used to happen automatically—daily devotions, simple table prayers, songs to greet the day and to end it, all of these were family rituals that intimately bound religious

meaning up with daily life. Now many of these cherished rituals no longer hold much meaning for people, and have fallen out of daily practice. This is the ambitious challenge.

Humility is important as well when we ponder the realities of busy families, stressed communities, and so on. An effective children's ministry in a particular community of faith may not have the obvious markers of religious education programming from the past. While vacation Bible school still provides important services for some families—cheap summer childcare springs to mind—it may not be the best or most clear evidence of effective children's ministry; similarly with Sunday school. Instead we need to ask ourselves questions like, What do the families among us need? and In what ways can we support parents, helping them to see themselves as the first and primary religious educator in their child's life?

If one of the most stable markers of family life for many families is the bedtime story (since even shared dinners are less and less common), then how can we, as a community of faith, enter into that practice? How can we provide, for instance, books with a strong biblical imagination? How can we enter that space with deep confirmation of the importance of that practice, and then with some resources that challenge the imagination by bringing religious themes to bear?

Many programs are emerging that begin to recognize and meet this challenge. Sunday school is being revisioned as churches turn to stepping stones ministries, for instance, or to intergenerational workshop rotation programs. Curriculum such as Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play* actively provides a way to construct an environment that relationally uses stories and rituals to engage children and families in religious meaning-making. Yet all of these are primarily church-based, internal ministry programs.

We have to understand that learning is a daily process, that it always has multiple levels of which we can most likely only attend to a few at any given time. That recognition can be daunting, but it can also be an opportunity to revision and reshape our ministries. In the process, we might well discover that children themselves are in fact ministering to us. A more general summary of these pragmatic considerations would go as follows:

- Supporting children by supporting families means supporting adult learning that prepares primary caregivers to become the first and most important religious educators of children.

- Such education must draw upon the best principles of learning, requiring adults to learn how to listen deeply as an essential element of any teaching they aspire to do.
- All learning has to be understood as experiential and relational.
- All intentional learning attends to the ideas, feelings, and actions of the people engaged with it.
- Communities of faith must ask families, particularly children themselves, to tell us what they need from us—and then we must act respectfully on that knowledge.
- Learning with children should include creative opportunities to focus on creating and constructing their stories in multiple and various media.
- Learning with children should recognize the crucial role that rich ritual plays in the development of religious identity.

Essentially, what we are working toward supporting can be summed up in what Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Park call *responsible imagination*. This team of scholars has identified several factors that people who have lived long lives of commitment to the public good have in common. Among these is one they have identified as a "responsible imagination." Because their study is so important, and their eloquence so rare in academic analysis, I will quote them at length:

> The people we studied appear to compose reality in a manner that can take into account calls to help, catalyze, dream, work hard, think hard, and love well. They practice an imagination that resists prejudice and its distancing tendencies on the one hand, and avoids messianic aspirations and their engulfing tendencies on the other. Their imaginations are active and open, continually seeking more adequate understandings of the whole self and the whole commons and the language with which to express them.
>
> Their practice of imagination is responsible in two particular ways. First, they try to respect the process of imagination in themselves and others. They pay attention to dissonance and contradiction, particularly those that reveal injustice and unrealized potential. They learn to pause, reflect, wonder, ask why, consider, wait. . . . They also learn to work over their insights and those of others so that they "connect up" in truthful and useful ways. They seek out trustworthy communities of confirmation and contradiction.

> Second, they seek out sources of worthy images. Most have discovered that finding and being found by fitting images is not only a matter of having access to them but requires discretion and responsible hospitality—not only to what is attractive but also to what may be unfamiliar and initially unsettling . . . these people live in a manner that conveys . . . the power of a responsible imagination.[14]

This is the kind of response to challenge—an adaptive response—that needs to be at the heart of our children's ministries.

Emmaus journey

The best way I know of to conclude this discussion of the active engagement of our shared narratives in media culture, this kind of responsible imagination in the context of children's ministry, is to share a biblical story as a mnemonic for the pieces of the process.

Consider the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Two of the disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus, shortly after Jesus' resurrection, but before they, themselves, have encountered him. They are down at heart, discouraged, and deeply confused about where their paths might lead. Nothing in their world makes much sense, and it has all been turned upside down by Jesus' crucifixion. In this moment they walk along the road, a daily kind of walk that is emphasized for its banality in the gospel passage. During this walk they encounter a stranger who seems all the more strange because he does not seem to share their disillusionment or despair at the events of the past days. Further, he engages them in a deep conversation that lasts the rest of their walk that day, and that radically reinterprets their known grasp of their core sacred texts. Finally, bowing to the dictates of hospitality and probably their interest as well, they invite this stranger to join them for a meal at the end of the day. In the process of that meal the stranger "breaks bread" in a manner that sharply resonates with the ritual practice they had shared with Jesus. The Gospel of Luke states that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:31). They remark to each other that they should have realized it was Jesus: "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32).

There are numerous ways to interpret this passage, and entire liturgical theologies build from it, but the far simpler point I'd like to suggest here is that this passage marks three crucial elements we need to remember in

supporting children in mass mediated culture. First, we need to remember that it is a daily engagement. Second, we need to remember to encounter strangers, to have the kind of responsible imagination that sees "from whom" we are estranged. Third, we need to embed this knowing in rituals that help us to learn, to rehearse and thus to reinscribe, the meanings we hold dear.

To return to the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, Diane and her children are deeply enmeshed in daily engagement with media. Diane is beginning to sense that this engagement might estrange her children from each other, and at the same time has the potential to help her feel connected to hurting people around the world. How can we support her in confronting those aspects of her family's media practices that favor estrangement while at the same time maintaining those practices that have the possibility of bearing empathy? One key will be finding ways to do so that are fully consonant with her daily practices that become habits, rituals even, interwoven with her family's daily life.

These elements will allow us to respond in truly adaptive ways to the challenges we face, and promise to allow us to learn from our children, even as they learn from and with us. How could this work? Here are just a few suggestions to spark your own ideas.

Daily life

- Ensure that media engagement is never done in isolation—watch television together, ask religious questions of the characters you're watching (even if they aren't asked explicitly on the show).
- Share the task of choosing programs to watch with children, respect and engage their choices and expect them to do the same with yours (which might require some encouragement).
- Ensure that media engagement is never simply mass media—search out and enjoy alternative media, too. The rise of independent and foreign film-making has provided an especially broad mix of additional media in this category.[15]
- Provide opportunities for kids to raise questions and to initiate conversations—just giving them the room to do so will raise religious issues.
- Consider listening to recorded music during daily commutes and meal preparation, instead of live radio.

- Have children tell you stories that build on the stories they've seen in media. For example, if they love Scooby Doo, have them tell a new story starring Scooby Doo.
- Tell stories that put characters children love in religious situations. For example, young children might pretend that some of their toys ar meeting Jesus.

Engaging the stranger and that from which we are estranged

- Respectfully listen to and engage your children's media (even if they're teenagers and you feel revulsion at first).
- Let your own religious questions be audible.
- Search out stories of those who are marginalized in popular mass mediated culture.
- Deconstruct the news—and then reconstruct it, especially locally!
- Risk your own stories by listening to others (that is, embrace conversation rather than fear contact with other religious perspectives).
- Provide multiple opportunities for children to take the lead in serving others.

Incorporate media into your rituals, and create new rituals with your media

- Do a television fast for Lent (that is, put away the TV for the 40 days).
- Create original videos for worship contexts that challenge the community to engage the "stranger."
- Add music to a dinner prayer. This should include adding so-called "secular" recorded music that resonates with your prayer concerns.
- Make a point of muting TV commercials and use the time as an opportunity to ask questions about the shows you're watching.
- Learn how to make video recordings and have your kids interview each other and friends/neighbors about religious questions.
- Add videos with explicit religious themes to your typical video watching practices.

- Incorporate blessings into daily practices—bless a child as she or he is getting dressed.

These are moments on the journey to Emmaus. They are elements of a shared process of retrieval and revisioning. Such a process invites us to recognize the "burning within us" in ways that share our deep relationality, and that allow us to draw ever closer to the God who created us, redeems us, and continues to draw us near. Children are a precious element of this process, and we must walk with them on this road.

There is an opportunity for a vibrant community of faith to reach out to people like Diane and her family. Diane and Mark could be supported—*confirmed*—in the difficulty of their lives together, but also have their meaning-making *contradicted* or contested by a religious community. They could be invited to simplify their lives together with their children: reducing "screen time," for instance, or moving screens into one room to reduce their ubiquity so that children (who will find ways to fight with each other regardless of context) might learn to argue effectively—with adult coaching—over the choice of program to watch or game to play. At the same time, though, the family's intuitions of the way God is present can be strengthened and supported. (Think of the song that helps Diane bring to mind this presence.) In short, a community of faith could provide *continuity* with that presence. Family is all about relationality, it is the heart metaphor of our faith as well. In working with children, we need to keep that metaphor—in all of its depth and complexity—at the heart of our ministries. We need to truly walk to road to Emmaus and honor our hearts burning within us.

Notes

1. *All Consuming Passion: Waking Up from the American Dream*, 3rd. ed., pamphlet (Seattle: New Road Map Foundation and Northwest Environment Watch, 1998).

2. Ibid.

3. This theory is described well by Jane Vella in *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). Maria Harris explores its implications in the context of religious education in *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

4. For a more complete development of this idea, see Elliott Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002).

5. See, in particular, Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known, and The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

6. Powerful articulations of the way in which a trinitarian theology imagines our relationality appears in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992); and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

7. By *our* children, I am not referring solely to biological children but rather to all those with whom we are in relationship—potentially all the children of the world!

8. For a more full exploration of this idea, see Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997); Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in an Age of Media* (New York: Columbia University, 2002); and Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2003). See also Delwin Brown et al, *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University, 2001) for its theological implications; and Mary Hess, "From trucks carrying messages to ritualized identities: Implications of the postmodern paradigm shift in media studies for religious educators," *Religious Education*, vol. 94, no. 3 (Summer 1999), for its religious education implications.

9. For the most up-to-date statistics on children and adolescents in the United States, visit the Children's Defense Fund's Web site at www.childrensdefense.org.

10. See, in particular, Robert Kegan *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982); and Kegan, *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1995).

11. For a deeper exploration of the role of "practices" in Christian life, see "Project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith" at Valparaiso University (www.practicingourfaith.com/whoweare.html).

12. See John Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity International Press, 1991).

13. See Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994); and Heifetz, Ronald, and Marty Linsky. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

14. Laurent Daloz et al, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), pp. 151-152.

15. Indeed, three recent films, *Bend It Like Beckham, Rabbit-Proof Fence*, and *Whale Rider*, are some of the most profound representations of relationality produced in the last decade.