

The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Life Together: Practicing Faith with Adolescents

Introduction

“And they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

“Get a life!” adolescents are told by their peers, their parents, and the media. But just how does a young person get a life? What kind of life can they get? Left to their own resources, adolescents will look for meaning and purpose in friendships, service, and faith or in cliques, drugs, sex, and violence.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Christ offers not only “a life” but abundant life. And he calls the church to live out together the life he offers. We are called to invite and to guide young people into life with Christ—and to live it together with them. Christian practices—worship, prayer, giving to those in need, Bible study, forgiveness, the sacraments—provide a way to live out the abundant life of faith with young people. These and other Christian practices are acts that identify us as, and form us into, the people of God, the church. Because they shape our identity in Jesus Christ, practices are essential to ministry with adolescents. When “doing” faith through Christian practices, young people discover they don’t need to “get a life” because they already enjoy abundant life in Christ.

The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, with their focus on Christian practices, push us toward seeing the Christian faith as a way of life. Dorothy C. Bass explores “life together” as a worthy pattern of living in which many people can share. She calls young people to identify themselves not primarily as consumers, but as practitioners of a way of life. Highlighting the Christian practice of breaking bread, Bass demonstrates how Christ transforms the practices of our life and faith.

Ellen T. Charry posits that many adults have retreated from the lives of adolescents rather than take up the difficult work of transmitting enduring moral values. Youth do not need “space,” she argues. They need Christian adults in their life as a sign that they have an identity and a destiny in life and belong to something stronger than their peer group. Charry challenges us to offer youth an alternative to the ideology of autonomy by helping them to reclaim their baptismal identity every day in service, in prayer, and especially at the Lord’s Supper.

L. Gregory Jones lifts up the power of caring mentors forming young people in Christian faith and proposes rethinking confirmation as apprenticeship. Jones then argues that grace and obligation belong together, with Christian practices, or obligations, opening up our receptivity to grace. He encourages

us to instill in youth the importance of cultivating habits oriented toward the grace we find in Jesus Christ.

James M. Wall invites us to join a search for grace in the practices of everyday life. He examines the secularity that stands as a barrier to finding God's grace and then considers avenues to finding God's grace within that very secularity. Our society, says Wall, is dominated by people and institutions that want to keep the sacred from being an essential part of our private and public lives. Wall challenges us to lead youth out of the secular mind-set and into a larger space where God will find us with a redemptive word of grace.

May these lectures encourage you and the youth you serve to practice the faith as you live in grateful response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Institute for Youth Ministry

2000 Lectures

Dorothy C. Bass

"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": The Consumer and the Practitioner
"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": Practicing Life Abundant

Ellen T. Charry

Grow Big and Tall and Straight and Strong
Thinking Ourselves Outward from God

L. Gregory Jones

The Apprentice's New Clothes: Shaping Christian Community
The Grace of Daily Obligation: Shaping Christian Life

James M. Wall

Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Searching for Grace in the Stuffness of the Secular
Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Overcoming Secular Barriers to God's Grace



“Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ”: The Consumer and the Practitioner

The title of this conference, *Life Together*, echoes the title of a small but powerful book that is now some sixty years old: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological account of life in Christian community.¹ This is a book that we who live at the beginning of the twenty-first century would do well to read attentively and often. It is informed by Bonhoeffer's rich theological understanding of the social character of the Christian faith and quickened by his own intense experience of community in an underground seminary of the Confessing Church in Hitler's Germany. *Life Together*, which was written shortly after the Nazi raid that shut down the seminary, proclaimed the possibility of Christian community to a world that desperately needed people able to live in hope and to resist injustice: Christian community, though not necessarily permanent and surely never perfect, nonetheless embodies God's just and merciful presence to the faithful and, through them, to the world. By sharing with the world church one small community's experience, Bonhoeffer implicitly invited other Christians elsewhere to develop the richer and worthier forms of life together for which they, and the world itself, so hungered. This hunger persists today.

The phrase “life together” might also refer to what we get, like it or not, growing up in families, going to school, hanging out, working jobs, and worshipping God. Indeed, it is what we get taking the subway or an airplane, going to a concert or a movie, and shopping for groceries. In late capitalism, on a crowded planet, life is together. We are literally surrounded by other people, most of them strangers, a few of them friends. Our lives are interwoven in patterns of work and consumption and meaning with the lives of people all over the world. Some of these are near at hand, but most we will never see. In general, though, this surround doesn't always feel

Dorothy C. Bass has worked with an ecumenical and interracial group of authors to develop *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. Bass is director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a Lilly Endowment project based at Valparaiso University. She serves on the board of directors of the Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment program for the study of American religion, based at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. A graduate of Wellesley College, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Brown University, she has taught at several colleges and theological schools. She is a minister in the United Church of Christ.

like *life*—at least not the Christ-centered life, the life spilling over with God's bountiful Life, that Bonhoeffer had in mind. And we don't always feel so *together* either, as individuals or in relation to other people.

One of the most important questions Christian people need to consider at this moment in history is the question of what constitutes a way of life that is good, a way of life that has meaning and coherence because it is grounded in God and oriented toward God. This is not a question that can be answered, or even asked, with a singular focus on the individual; it is impossible even to conceive of a good life for one person who is all alone. It is, rather, a question that requires us to focus on a way of *life together*, a worthy pattern of living in which many people can share. Such a way of life would nurture life rather than succumbing to the powers of death. It would be a way that brings good, not harm, to ourselves, to other people, and to all creation.

A significant portion of the spiritual hunger that is so evident in contemporary society arises from hunger for such a way of life. We who are Christians might call this a way of life abundant—a way shaped by the kind of life Jesus said he came to bring to the world. (John 10:10) It is a very different way than the lifestyles of abundance that so often distract and disorient the desires of the contemporary heart.

Lifestyles of Abundance

People of all ages yearn to spend their lives well. We want to feel useful and appreciated because we have given ourselves to something worthy, something that will make a difference, something that will increase the sum of well-being in the world—our own well-being included, to be sure, but not just our own. However, cultural and economic forces pervading almost every corner of this society press in upon us, cajoling us to try to satisfy this hunger for a life well spent with a material form of spending that finally does not offer the rewards we truly seek. Instead of persevering in our search for ways of life abundant, therefore, we find our desire drawn to lifestyles of abundance. Instead of pursuing a way of life that is abundant in love and mercy and justice, we chase, by spending, what is colloquially known as “the good life.”

Images of this “good life” are everywhere. Celebrities live it; at least, so the huge publicity engines behind them would have us think. Advertising, now nearly ubiquitous, seeks to persuade us that we can live it, too, and that nothing else can be as satisfying. On popular television programs, the accoutrements of this life have become the taken-for-granted furnishings of domesticity. Compare the sets of *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy* to the sets of *Home Improvement* and *Frazier*, for example. The portrayal of normal domestic space has changed a great deal since the 1950s, and with it Americans' sense of their material world. One result, the economist Juliet Schor argues in her book *The Overspent American*, is an “aspirational gap” that catches

many Americans in a cycle of overwork, indebtedness, and dissatisfaction.²

A particularly poignant example of the influence of this set of images appears in Alex Kotlowitz's book about two boys growing up in a public housing complex in Chicago, *There Are No Children Here*. Kotlowitz was amazed at the cultural isolation of the boys' world; although the Henry Horner Homes are less than a mile from the Loop, the boys had never visited any of Chicago's museums. Nor had they ever been to the suburbs or to the countryside. Even so, they did have at least one strong connection to what Kotlowitz calls "the American mainstream." They connected as consumers. Ironically, while suburban white teens were wearing huge jeans in an effort to embrace the on-the-edge style of the ghetto, these young men craved Coach and Tommy Hilfiger and Perry Ellis. "It is as consumers that poor black children claim membership to the larger community," Kotlowitz reports. "It is as purchasers of the talismans of success that they can believe they've transcended their otherwise miserable situation." As he rightly concludes, however, this kind of belonging is tenuous at best, and a lie at worst. "In lieu of building real connections—by providing opportunities or rebuilding communities—we have found some common ground as purchasers of each others' trademarks."³

The recent film *American Beauty*, set at the opposite end of the economic spectrum, grotesquely displays a different facet of "the good life." In one scene we see a self-centered mother yelling at her teenaged daughter. "Just look at how much I have done for you," she cries, citing house and room and possessions while ignoring multiple signs of emotional distress. Though posing as a critique of consumer culture, however, the film actually lets the audience off the hook of our own materialism; we are safe in our smug agreement that material goods are no good at all if you don't have someone to share them with. Possessions alone are never sufficient for the good life; we know that. However, it is all too easy to form the conviction that having many possessions of certain kinds—and the "freedom" to choose and acquire more—is necessary to the good life, even if not sufficient to it.

Seeking a Worthy Way of Life

The *New York Times Magazine* of February 27, 2000, featured a story about a fundamentalist family that is trying to fortify itself against this notion of the good life by crafting an alternative. Within their domestic fortress, resistance to many of the taken-for-granted of the mass media and the consumer marketplace is nurtured, detail by detail. Home schooling and the collaboration of a conservative Christian subculture are key structures in this self-conscious effort to sustain a patriarchal, family-centered way of life whose members can resist the material and moral offerings of what is perceived as the dominant culture. Miroslav Volf—born and raised in Croatia, now an American citizen and theology professor at Yale—found the example of this

family stirring, even though defective in many ways. "I have been troubled by the seeming disappearance of any robust alternative to the pervasive culture of late capitalism, whether in the church or in the society at large," he wrote in *The Christian Century*.

We are drowning in floods of consumer goods and are drenched in showers of media images. We live in a smorgasbord culture in which everything is interesting and nothing really matters. We have lost a vision of the good life, and our hopes for the future are emptied of moral content. Instead of purposefully walking to determinate places, we are aimlessly floating with random currents. Of course, we do get exercised by issues and engage in bitter feuds over them. But that makes us even less capable of resisting the pull of the larger culture, a resistance that would take shape in formulating and embodying a coherent alternative way of life.⁴

The forces and desires I am describing affect people of all ages, but they bear in with special force on those who are young. The yearning of the young for a way of life abundant is palpable. They are encouraged to plan for the future, and they want their lives to matter. At the same time, however, the marketing forces of consumerism focus their strongest efforts to seduce and persuade on young people. After all, teens are the spenders of today (140 billion dollars in 1998 alone), the householders of tomorrow (brand loyalties established early in life are likely to endure), and the cultural icons of the good life.⁵ Ironically, even the consumable markers of rebellion by which some teens assert their independence from the world of adults—hair dyes, boots, drugs—are produced for profit by adults.

Though marketed in up-to-date forms, images of plenty are deeply rooted in the American myth; indeed, they often end up driving American politics and policy-making. Even deeper patterns of meaning than this are interwoven with these images, however. When the iconography of consumerism wins our allegiance, so do certain convictions about who we are as human beings, about the nature of the world in which we find ourselves, and about the ultimate origin, purpose, and destiny of all that is. A guiding sense of human beings as those-who-consume degrades our identity as those who make and play, think and worship. The created world, the source of consumables, is left open to use and abuse, without an intrinsic prejudice in favor of ecological care and sustainability. Freedom and belonging are conceived in relation to brand preference, as people voluntarily join "the community of Saturn owners" or fiercely insist on having Coke rather than Pepsi. Almost anything can be reckoned as a commodity: the care of the elderly, the bodies of the young, leisure time, academic accomplishment, and more.

I share Miroslav Volf's urgent concern: nonfundamentalist Christians need to be thinking about how to formulate and embody a coherent alternative way of life, for the sake of people of all ages and all economic classes. This is what my colleagues and I were attempting to do in the book *Practicing Our Faith*.⁶ At the present juncture in history, we noted, even the most basic patterns of life together are shifting. Consider, for example, recent changes in the value and shape of time, in the organization of the household, and in the help offered to those who are ill. In such a context, we argued, the experience of Christian people over the ages provides constructive resources for strengthening forms of life together that are good because they are attuned to the goodness of God. We especially commended the things Christian people have done together over time to address fundamental human needs—needs as basic as the needs for welcome when lost, care when ill, and clarity when confused. Over the centuries and still today, Christian people have sought to address these needs and others in ways that are illumined by and responsive to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ. Together, they have engaged in hospitality to strangers, healing, discernment, and many other activities that pursue the well-being of humankind. A full set of such shared activities constitutes a way of life abundant, a way of life most likely not abundant in things but overflowing with love, mercy, and justice. We call such shared activities *Christian practices*.

Christian practices address fundamental human needs in down-to-earth ways: in a given situation, a wise practitioner knows how to offer a bowl of soup, a bandage, a conversation, a prayer, a touch, a word. But practices are not just acts; they also embody beliefs. Entangled in the everyday activities of the Christian life are deep convictions about who we are as human beings, about the nature of the world in which we find ourselves, and about the ultimate origin, purpose, and destiny of all that is. Such beliefs—convictions about how things really are in spite of what the consumer culture or other voices may say—are an intrinsic part of this way of life abundant. Conversely, indeed, such beliefs necessarily go hand in hand with certain activities and forms of communal life. Here, a way of life becomes a Way of Life.

One of the most important goals of ministry is to render a Way of Life—to make it imaginable, to show how others have lived it in the past and live it today, to assess the obstacles in its way, and to urge people to try it where they live. And we need to do this not only for adults, but also, and perhaps especially, for those who live on the verge of adulthood. If the pressures they face are most keen, so the yearning they bring is most urgent, and the future they approach most open.⁷

Young Practitioners

I'd like to experiment in thinking about youth and practices by drawing first on some examples of practices that are not necessarily Christian. We'll see young peo-

ple engaging in these and then work through an argument that will lead us, I hope, to an understanding of *Christian* practices. I ask you to think first, therefore, about the way many of us probably used the word “practice” when we were young. “When are you going to practice the piano?” “Mom, can you drive me to practice?” “I can’t do it very well yet—my pots always lean to one side—but I’ll get better after I have more practice.”

Many young people are, observably and in their own estimation, practitioners more than they are consumers. To use Volf’s terms, they are not “aimlessly floating with the random currents” of late capitalism but “purposefully walking to determinate places.” They have interests and are developing skills and desires that keep them from being too deeply attracted to the gaudy promises of malls, situation comedies, or worse. The practices in which they engage are challenging; they are practices that invite these young people to flex their muscles, their brains, and their moral sense. They require competence; it takes lots of practice to get involved. The young practitioners I have in mind are not necessarily Christians; I am referring at this point to “practice” in a more general sense and purposefully giving a nontheological account.⁸

Who are these young practitioners?

Some are musicians. They have received an array of gifts: talent, good teaching, adequate instruments, and the opportunity to take part in enjoyable ensembles. They might be in a choir or a rock band, a jazz trio or a woodwind quintet. They practice making music.

Some are involved in crafts or mechanical arts. A generation ago, boys worked on cars; now they work on computers. Some educational programs use practices of this sort to teach discipline and cooperation. For example, Robert Kegan describes a job-training program that taught cooperation, responsibility, and skill by sending young people as apprentices into a situation furnished with “a half-finished boat in a boatworks; a letter from a buyer offering several thousand dollars for the boat when it was done; [and] a competent adult who knew how to finish the boat and who was willing to teach people like himself how to build them.”⁹

Some are campers, testing their mettle against the resistant and disclosive reality of the natural world on strenuous journeys by foot, mountain bike, kayak, or canoe. I know a fine young man of sixteen who was an overweight and unhappy boy until a wonderful teacher guided him into the wilderness on a series of two-week-long treks. The wilderness has turned out to be a garden for this young man.

Some are scientists. The film *October Sky* portrays a group of these: small-town teens who through research, ingenuity, and persistence honed the knowledge that allowed them to launch a rocket. Many teens today are deeply involved in similar projects.

Others are actors, soccer players, dancers, poets, bakers, journalists, gymnasts,

artists, or animal handlers. For youth who have found a practice that deeply engages them, the good life is not associated with what one possesses (though having an instrument or a pottery wheel certainly helps). Nor is youthful goodness itself determined on the basis of what one does not do (sex, drugs, and violence), as high school counselors seem to imply. Instead, the good life is associated with a realm of practice that involves certain embodied, communal forms of knowledge and skill. The characteristics of youth's engagement in these apply to a wide range of practices.

First, practices such as these occur in relationship to a coach or mentor of greater accomplishment and experience and to a team, ensemble, or crew of peers.

Second, these practices require careful, even loving, attention to reality. Practitioners must recognize the best place to pitch a tent, know the weight of a tool and the density of a medium, or distinguish the particular sound that confirms that a string is properly tuned. They become better practitioners as they become more deeply attentive to the complicated, often concrete, sometimes impervious, realities with which practices engage.¹⁰

Third, such practices invite youth into activities that possess intrinsic beauty and worth. Although practices might lead to status and wealth, these are not what captivate true practitioners.¹¹

Fourth, engagement in a practice of this sort involves adoption into a tradition. This is not always named, but glimpsing the lineage within which they stand and which they now represent can be an empowering experience. My daughter's oboe teacher deliberately offers her this gift at almost every weekly lesson. For example, as my daughter once fussed over an imperfect reed (a constant problem for oboists), he told her of a conversation with a famous oboist many years before. "He said that only once, during the summer of 1967, did he have a perfect reed," the teacher said, granting my daughter's chagrin a certain esteem by association. Locally, he has introduced her to one of his former students, now a college oboe major. In addition, he delivers with each new piece the story of its composition or an account of a performance he has heard. Even through hours of solitary practice, my daughter never plays the oboe completely alone.

Fifth, young people experience within such practices identification with a pursuit, not first of all with an age cohort. They are not "teenagers," they are "poets" or "hikers" or "gymnasts." I recently heard a university dean tell hundreds of students at a state science competition that they were not future scientists, as a previous speaker had claimed, but scientists already. Striving to increase one's knowledge is intrinsic to being a scientist, he said, whether one is in middle school or in the top ranks of a university. His statement resonated with the deep desire of youth to be known by and in relationship to adults not on the basis of age but on the basis of shared interests or vocations.¹²

Sixth, practitioners acknowledge and internalize standards of excellence appropriate to each practice. A young person who practices soccer knows a great soccer player when he sees one. Wonderfully, however, he can engage fully in playing soccer even when he knows that he is not yet great, and indeed may never be. These standards stimulate rather than stifle.

It is a joy to be present when young people are engaged in these ways. It is never long, however, before ambiguities, or worse, intrude. At the state science contest, the speaker after the university dean was an officer in the national guard whose task was to award prizes to those who had most successfully built and launched rockets. Suddenly what had been a delightful intellectual challenge leading to an awesome display for assembled parents and friends had a use that might lead to harm. A dubious utility had trumped the joy of watching one's rocket soar above the trees.

Other ambiguities arise from the location of practices within an ambiguous social, cultural, and economic realm. The boys in *October Sky* succeeded because of their excellent engagement in the practice of engineering—but their chief motive was to win scholarships and thus escape becoming coal miners like their fathers. Happily, the economic benefit that arose from their excellent rocketry seems to have granted these particular young men a certain freedom. Some other practitioners, however, have lost the joy and beauty of their practice when driven to pursue a distant payoff by greed or need—their parents', their coaches', or their own. A few gifted practitioners become, in effect, commodities, consumed by college athletics programs, recording companies, or movie studios. For others, obsessive engagement in a practice sometimes consumes the practitioners themselves; think of anorectic ballerinas and gymnasts, or of male athletes who damage their strong young bodies by using steroids. Commodification also intrudes in ways that are probably less harmful, though not necessarily less expensive, as equipment, clothing, and memorabilia associated with each practice finds its way to market. You would be astonished at how much you can spend on oboe knickknacks if you so desire.

Religion Consumed, Religion Practiced

As wonderful as young people's engagement in practices can be, it is never pure in this life, much less in this culture. Even so, I hope that the distinction I have been making is clear, and that you are willing to join me in identifying two ideal types: the consumer and the practitioner. If you are, we are ready to consider a second claim: a parallel distinction between the consumer and the practitioner appears in the different ways in which people in this country, adults and youth alike, think about and engage in religion.

Many recent commentators detect the habits of consumerism in the way many Americans approach religion.¹³ Offered a vast array of religious perspectives and

experiences, they choose those that seem to suit them for the time being, as if they were guests at a “smorgasbord,” as Miroslav Volf put it. In this context, many religious institutions “market” their wares, sometimes aiming to attract specific constituencies within specific age, class, or racial cohorts. Christian congregations “market” themselves as they seek to grow; religious publishers, whether New Age or fundamentalist, “market” books and recordings; and within congregations, program leaders “market” specific events for youth, seniors, or singles. In the meantime, prospective members “shop around” for a new church. The language is disclosive and erosive. When the quantitative ethos of the marketplace overtakes qualitative concerns in congregational thinking about programs and members, the ethos of consumerism cannot be far away.

Practitioners, on the other hand, approach the steam table of American religions more cautiously. They are less interested in balancing an array of tidbits on a plate than in delving deeply into the more substantive fare available when mentors draw newcomers into excellent engagement in a rich tradition. For example, I once knew a small group of lovely teenage girls who served as the altar guild in a large church. Working under the guidance of a very capable woman priest, they became liturgical enthusiasts who took great joy and pride in setting the table correctly. Other aspects of church life are also accessible to this approach: you can do church business or building care or youth group programming as a practitioner.

The second ideal type sounds better than the first, at least to me, but it is still missing something. We have not yet spoken of God. Now, therefore, we move to my third claim. It is time to get more explicitly theological.

Practices Transformed in and by Christ

The way of life abundant is not simply the practice of the Christian religion. It is the transformation of all of our activities—what we do when gathered as church and what we do when dispersed into homes and workplaces and schools and music classes and soccer fields and wilderness campgrounds and science contests—into practices that address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to the active presence of God in Jesus Christ.

This kind of transformation is consistent with a view of the world as created and sustained by God. It relies on an understanding of human persons as created in God’s image, called by Christ into reconciliation with God and others, and continually made new by the working of the Holy Spirit. This view of what matters most impels us to worship this God. “Praise to you,” we say, and “thank you,” and “please forgive me.” Conversely, sound worship fosters in us such a view of the world, ourselves, and others. This was one of the main insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he lived with and taught a small band of theological students in the very belly of the beast. About half

of the book *Life Together* is about the rhythms of worship Bonhoeffer thought were essential if a community's capacity to resist evil was to be maintained.

The transformation of the activities of life into Christian practices also means developing a sense of how activities done beyond the gathered community are framed by God's active presence. Most of our day, as Bonhoeffer noted, belongs to work. It is there that we know the fruits of prayer, or not; there that we must ask, with Bonhoeffer, "Has [prayer] transported her for a few short moments into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it lodged the Word of God so soberly and so deeply in her heart that it holds and strengthens her all day, impelling her to active love, to obedience, to good works?"¹⁴ Young people can tell the difference between prayer as spiritual ecstasy and prayer that has lodged the Word of God in the heart, and so can we adults if we pause to be reflective about the shape of our days and our deeds.

As we ponder what these transformations might look like, let us take one of our young practitioners—a young oboist, say—and consider what might happen to her as she comes to understand herself as belonging not only to the practice of oboe playing but also to the Christian practice that church musician Don Saliers calls "singing our lives to God."¹⁵ The transformation will affect her making of music both when she is gathered with her church community to worship God and when she moves beyond this community, learning and playing music in the world.

First, she would discover that music addresses a fundamental human need. Music matters profoundly. Making music involves giving the breath of her body to praise, lament, and more; it draws her with others into rhythms she did not create during a span of time that will never be repeated. Her music is not trivial or merely ornamental; it addresses her sisters and brothers in the depth of their humanity. Knowing this, she would seek ways to offer her gift to others, especially to those in need.

Second, she would learn to situate her playing within the long history of creation, redemption, and sanctification. The stories of faith are full of music, and the church's music is full of stories, as Fred Pratt Green's hymn reminds those who sing it. "When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cried Alleluia!" Music moves us to "a more profound Alleluia," writes Green; the church has sung "through centuries of wrong," bearing truth in every tongue. "And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night when utmost evil strove against the light? Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight: Alleluia!"¹⁶ One of the traditions to which she now belongs, this young musician would see, is the tradition of those who have made music to the glory of God. In a time when many young people are rich in experience but poor in language, she would be equipped with stories and images that allow her to situate her life and efforts in a meaningful story.

Third, she would become ever more fully conscious of the dynamics of gifted-

ness. Perhaps she would even utter the oboist's equivalent of the phrase in which Eric Liddell, the runner in the film *Chariots of Fire*, expressed his own deepest delight: "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." In its origin and in its end, music, like running, is not an endeavor or a commodity but a gift. Knowing this, the young oboist would experience the humility and joy of gratitude.

Fourth, she would find in music a wonderful metaphor and experience of the relationship between the integrity of the self and wider forms of belonging. "Sounds do not have exclusive boundaries—they can blend, harmonise, resonate with each other in endless ways," writes the theologian David F. Ford. "In singing there can be a filling of space with sound in ways that draw more and more voices to take part, yet with no sense of crowding. It is a performance of abundance, as new voices join in with their own distinctive tones." In music, the boundaries among practitioners are transformed, as the music outside and within each musician creates "a new vocal, social space of community in song." More and more players can join, and still we can "imagine how each singer can be valued and have something distinctive to offer while yet being given to the complex unity of the singing." For Ford, it is as "singing selves" that we most readily perceive "the abundance of God."¹⁷ This young oboist would experience this abundance in musical communities both within the church and beyond it.

Fifth, she would see that Christ, crucified and risen, is present as she practices and plays. She would allow her breath, her fingers, her ears, and her oboe to be clothed in Christ. In other words, she would come to see that her playing, like everything else, is caught up in the paschal mystery, the dynamic interplay of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and renewal that most deeply shapes the Christian life. Wrapped in Christ, she would remember that her worth does not reside in her ability to play the oboe but rather in her identity as a child of God, created in God's image and made new in Christ in baptism. Knowing this, she would see how the very making of music returns her to the paschal mystery again and again. Sometimes the results of her own sins of sloth or pride would impel her to turn to Christ for mercy. At other times, she would be caught up in the mystery as she suffered the effects of the sins of others, whether a neighbor who sat on her instrument just before a recital, or the voters who refused to fund school arts programs, or as she came up against her own finitude, running into the limits of her ability. Although she would never be part of an ensemble that played something perfectly, she would nonetheless give herself utterly to each ensemble at the level she is able. She would endure pain as she struggled for mastery, but finally, if she is blessed, the music would master her, giving rise to a performance in which she and the music are one. Through her own dying and rising with Christ in all these ways, she would become a partner with God in gifting a range of human communities with song.

Many are the practices that Christ can transform, as he makes young people his own and invites them into a way of life abundant. I chose the hymn “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ”¹⁸ as the title of these lectures because it sings this invitation so well, addressing both the yearning of youth for lives well spent and the fundamental needs of humankind. It depicts a feast at which each one offers her own talents and each one sings in his own tongue and with his own tongue, studded or not. Moreover, the refrain articulates some definitive features of a way of life that can receive youth and their yearnings. In this way of life, human talents and tongues are caught up in forms of life together that are illumined by and responsive to the active presence of God in Jesus Christ. In this way of life, everyone’s talents and all the world’s tongues become instruments of praise for God and service to one another.

“Jesus lives again!” This is a way of life in which death in all its forms has lost its sting.

“Earth can breathe again!” This is a way of life that is good not just for people but for all creation.

“Pass the Word around!” This is a way of life that is not isolated but shared, and not inarticulate but named.

“Loaves abound!” It is a way of life abundant.

The food at this feast is so simple that it might be scorned by some potential “consumers.” But the people at the feast know that it is nourishing and sweet, because we share it with one another, young and old, and with Christ. ▼▲

NOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, V, edited by Gerhard Ludwig Mueller, Albrecht Schoenherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

2. Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

3. Alex Kotlowitz, “False Connections,” in Roger Rosenblatt, ed., *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999), pp. 67-72.

4. Miroslav Volf, “Floating Along?” *The Christian Century* CXVII: 11 (April 5, 2000), p. 398.

5. Peter Zollo, *Wise Up to Teens: Insights into Marketing and Advertising to Teenagers*, second edition (Ithaca, NY: New Strategist Publications, 1999), pp. 6-21.

6. Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

7. *Practicing Our Faith* is an effort to render a way of life in this sense. Now, a few of that book’s authors and some new colleagues are preparing a book addressed to fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds that will seek to do something similar for youth. Don Richter, my associate in the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, is leading the efforts of these authors. Learn more about this effort and watch for news of its publication at www.practicingourfaith.org.

8. The term “practices” is widely and variously used in contemporary humanities and social science discourse. I am using it here in a way that draws loosely on Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, second ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 187-188.
9. Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 46.
10. The philosopher Albert Borgmann emphasizes the way in which “reality” resists, shapes, and rewards practitioners, calling forth knowledge and skill, in his account of practices. See his *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
11. This appreciation of the “internal goods” of practices as opposed to the “external” rewards they can generate resonates with the findings of the Project on Vocation, Work, and Youth Development, led by Douglas Magnuson, Michael Baizerman, and Kristin Lundgren. Drawing on interviews with 150 teens around the country, Magnuson et al. claim that young people are savvy to the instrumental, *quid pro quo* orientation of our society and expect that adults will “use them” to get access to things. Youth are aware of being manipulated, and so often maintain an ironic distance in relation to commitments and activities. Young people do appreciate the internal goods of an activity, however; and most teens interviewed expressed delight in activities such as music, poetry-writing, drama, working on cars, and hanging out with friends—activities in which they sense a deep intrinsic good that is not merely utilitarian.
12. This was another finding of the Project on Vocation, Work, and Youth Development. See Don C. Richter, Douglas Magnuson, and Michael Baizerman, “Reconceiving Youth Ministry” (*Religious Education*, XCIII: 3, summer 1998): pp. 340-357.
13. See, for example, Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
14. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 92.
15. Saliers’s “Singing Our Lives” is chapter thirteen in *Practicing Our Faith*.
16. Fred Pratt Green, “When in Our Music God Is Glorified,” set to a tune by Charles V. Stanford, Hymn 802 in *With One Voice* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).
17. David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 121.
18. This 1975 text by Fred Kaan, set to a Jamaican folk tune adapted by Doreen Potter, appears in several recent denominational hymnals. It is Hymn 754 in *With One Voice*.