

The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Growing Up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of "Whatever"

Introduction

Descartes is history. That's the conclusion of postmodernity. Foundational truth is out, relativity is in. Trace it to Hiroshima, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger explosion. Technology is not the panacea we thought it would be. Trace it to Watergate, liposuction, spin doctors. Truth is not an objective reality anymore. Trace it to institutional differentiation, Baskin Robbins, cable TV. Choice can paralyze as well as liberate.

Nobody knows this better than the young people whose coming of age coincides with the turn of the millennium. They live in a world where microchips are obsolete every eighteen months, information is instantaneous, and parents change on weekends. The one constant in the postmodern adolescent's experience is upheaval. Truth changes daily. The signature quality of adolescence is no longer lawlessness, but awelessness. Go ahead, youth say to the church. Impress me. When everything is true, nothing is true. Whatever.

It's true that we live in a world that considers truth too relative to specify. The comics brought us mutant "X-Men" and now "X-Women"; consumer thinking brought us X-brands and X-spouses; pop culture brought us X-Files and Generation X. The letter "X" is having a banner decade, labeling "whatever" we don't have the time or the inclination to explain.

Maybe the word "whatever" found its way into the contemporary adolescent vocabulary because "X" describes precisely the Truth they seek. In the early church, the Greek letter "X" (chi) referred to Jesus Christ. This generation of young people is neither the first nor the last in search of "X." Paul recognized this quest in the Athenians, who went as far as to erect an altar to "an unknown god":

What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . . The One who is Lord of heaven and earth. . . made all nations. . . so that they would search for God. . . . God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this we are assured because God raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:23-31)

We all seek "X," God's Truth beyond relativity. We are here because we are called to imitate and obey and proclaim this Truth to all who worship unknown gods. The Truth is out there, for young people and for us.

May you find grace to peruse the "X-Files" of your own life in the days ahead, as we grope for "X" together. Though, indeed, he is not far from each of us.

Godspeed,
Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

1998 Lectures

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Faithful Becoming in a Complex World: New Powers, Perils, and Possibilities

Sharon Daloz Parks

As leaders of youth in church and society, we need to become more faithfully aligned to our purpose and vocation. We need to recover the essence of what we already know and to take steps into a deeper recognition of what is at stake and how we might best proceed. We need to reflect on what is timeless and what is dramatically changed in the experience of the generations coming into adulthood after us. This kind of reflection has a particular importance in the time in which we have been asked to live — a time of “growing up post-modern . . . in an age of ‘whatever.’”

William Willimon describes “the postmodern world” as a time of permanent, discontinuous change. We appear to be living in a “cusp time,” one of those turning points in history — a time that generations after us will look back on and probably name in yet some other way, much as we now look back on the Renaissance and the Reformation. We know that the people living through those periods of history did not speak of themselves as living through times of rebirth and reform. It is more likely that they simply felt that familiar patterns of life and belief were shifting. Many people must have longed for things to “get back to normal.”

The evidence that we live in cusp time is multifaceted. The new sciences — the new chemistry, biology, and physics — reveal a far more interrelated and dynamic universe than has heretofore been imagined. At the same time, new weapons of violence alert us to an unprecedented scale of shared vulnerability. These developments, coupled with a new ecological understanding of the integrity of creation, are awakening us to a more interdependent reality. Our cosmology is being recomposed in fundamental ways.

One dimension of this changing consciousness is evidenced in our apprehension of economic reality. Each of us increasingly lives not only within local, regional, and national economies but also in an interdependent global economy. Our hopes

and anxieties are fueled daily by events taking place half a world away. Postmodern reality is shaped by a complex web of economic forces in which we — and often, especially, our young people — are both consumers and consumed. Moreover, this shifting environmental-economic reality is matched by enormous change in our ecumenical reality — our sense of the whole inhabited world. Most of our young people are coming of age within a new meeting, and often a collision, of social-religious cultures.

In this new environmental-economic-ecumenical context, the blurred boundaries and fragmentation that mark the postmodern world abound. Yet, in order to flourish, every adolescent generation must be initiated into a cultural world that provides identity, community, coherence, and meaning. This is the context in which you and I have been called to practice ministry for and with youth.

My professional life is now located at the Whidbey Institute in Washington State. The Institute creates learning retreats and conferences that bring professionals from many sectors together to address the spiritual challenges that lie at the heart of the critical issues of our time. We also have an important program for teenagers, *The Power of Hope*, led by Charlie Murphy and Peggy Taylor. Offered in several different locations, this program is designed to nourish a viable hope among adolescent youth. In March 1998, one hundred fifty young people from across a broad social spectrum gathered in Portland, Oregon, for a weekend of small workshops and large events that encouraged genuine conversation, nurtured interior reflection, stimulated creative expression, and inspired participation in a wider community of belonging, responsibility, and commitment.

I had the privilege of observing one of the workshops titled “Talk Poetry.” The leader, a gifted African American poet, invited a circle of twenty young people to “just take a few minutes here and begin to write. Just write what you find coming to mind, and try not to censor it. “Poetry,” he said, “is the music that comes through, but first you have to break through the fear.”

After a considerable period of silence and writing, he invited the young people to read to each other what they had written — one by one around the circle. Halfway around, a tall, lanky young woman read her offering with considerable power. Later, I asked if she would send me a copy. It reads:

Stream of Consciousness Talk Poetry
Sagesse Gwinn

BROWN HOPE, COLOR AND SWEETNESS, GREEN PANTS,
UNDERPANTS, TRANSCENDENTAL HOPE AND EXPERIENCE,
WINDOW, LIGHTS REFLECTED THROUGH EYES REALIZE,
SUN RAIN, GOING HOME, HERE STRANGERS, CHANNELING

EMPTY FREE SPACE, SICK SORROW, NOT AND THEN AGAIN
 AT AN ANGLE, A T-SHIRT, A MURAL, A POLITICAL STATEMENT
 A SPIRITUAL STATEMENT 8 8 8 8 8 A STATEMENT OF SELF
 AND WORDS THAT END AND START IN SSSSSSSSSSS THIS
 PULSE, THIS RHYTHM ONE ONCE, NOW IN TIME AND
 MOVEMENT AND GRACE, COLOR AND WOW WIGGIDY
 WOGGIDY, ZIGGIDY ZOOMIDY, WOW TICK TACK A TICK A
 RICK RACK A ROCK, DEATH, STILLNESS, LIVE BIRTH REBIRTH
 NOT BEING AFRAID OF FEAR AND FEARLESS BEHAVIOR
 NOT BEING AFRAID OF DREAMS VISION QUEST VANITY
 WHAT IS IT, VANITY, PULSATING RHYTHMIC REMEDY, PLA-
 GIARIZING VANITY AND EGOTISTICAL EGOS WITHOUT
 ANY SHADOW OR ECHO OR WHAT, WHO, WHY, WHEN
 DID I JUMP AND WHEN WILL I LAND, DID I FALL OR AM I
 FLYING CAN YOU FEEL MY BREATH AS YOU BREATHE AND
 THE AIR BECOMES A PART OF US AND THEN THE PATTERNS
 SHIFT THE MAGIC OF THE CARPET THE CARPET FLIES INTO
 THE EYES OF COLOR IDEAS STREAMING FORTH WITH LIFE,
 FERTILITY, COMMA COMMA COMA COBRA AND
 SSSSSSSSSSSSSSS SNAKE PERIOD TURN EACH SELF INTO A
 STORY LIFE THE PAGES FROM THE HEART AND SOAR AND
 SING AND OHHHHHHHHHHHHH WHAT A FEELING OF
 FREEDOM KINGDOM AND PEACEFULNESS IN FULLNESS OF
 SPIRIT AND BODY AND EVEN MY TOES AND MY FINGERS A
 FAMILY, A COMMUNITY, A TRUST, A REFLECTION, A
 STRENGTH.
 A FAMILY, A COMMUNITY, A TRUST, A REFLECTION, A
 STRENGTH.
 A LETTER A []
 A LETTER A SYMBOL WHAT, BAT MAT CAT INTO REGRES-
 SION, NO SUPPRESSION,
 HELL NO HELL O HELL O

AMERICA

If the postmodern world is marked by the blurring of traditional boundaries and fragmentation, this is a postmodern poem! It is also fragments of life being turned into jazz. Youth ministry in our time requires the capacity to imagine how, within this improvisational world, young people can discover faithful, meaningful, and joy-filled pathways into adulthood as adults and teens together must create new patterns of life.

Faith Development for the Common Good

For more than twenty years, I have been studying the development of faith. I have particularly studied the third decade of life — the “twenty-something” years.¹ Initially, I felt that it was important to speak about faith in a manner that could embrace the whole human family. Following on the prior work of James Fowler, I described faith as the activity of meaning-making in its most comprehensive dimensions embracing all that is ultimate and most intimate — an activity that all human beings share, whether it is expressed in religious or secular terms.

Later, however, I discovered that I wanted to research a particular kind of faith, the faith that is manifest in practices of love and justice. I wanted to study the formation of people who, even in a postmodern world, are able to live on behalf of the common good rather than just for “me and mine.” With my colleagues, Larry Daloz and Cheryl and James Keen, I began to study more than one hundred people who are able to wade into the growing complexity, diversity, and moral ambiguity of our time and live as the kind of citizen-leaders we need. We interviewed people from many walks of life who as a group roughly represented the demographic make-up of our society. We explored two primary questions: How were their lives formed? How did they sustain a commitment to the common good? These are critical questions for leaders in youth ministry as we must ask, “How do we respond to adolescent youth in a manner that enables them to become adults who are faithful to the common good?”

A New Commons

Of course one might quickly and rightly ask, “Whose common good?” In a pluralistic world, we are immediately suspicious that a narrow notion of the common good may be imposed upon all. Thus it is useful to meditate on the image that informs the concept of the common good: the commons.

The image of the commons has shaped the civic, political, and economic imagination of our society in a primary way. In its most classic form, it was the New England green where everyone could have a cow; it was surrounded by the church, the schoolhouse, the general store, the bank, the town hall, and a flock of households with the farmlands beyond. But the commons also took many other forms: Main Street in middle America, the bodega in the Puerto Rican community, the wharf on the West Coast, the square at the county seat on market day in the South, the ice-skating pond in the winter. The commons was the place where people met, talked, listened, and worked out how they were going to live together over time.

The commons does not function well as merely a nostalgic, romantic image. The commons holds a mix of human sins and graces. Yet the image of the commons

matters because the commons was the center of a shared world. Across the boundaries of race and class, people who reflect on the power of the commons in their own experience often remark, “I think when I was growing up [within a tangible sense of ‘a commons’], there were more people who cared about you.”

Though fragments of an earlier sense of a more cohesive commons remain for some, all of us are now plunged into the life of a new commons — global in scope and personal in influence. The challenge of youth ministry today can be understood, in part, as the task of attending to the formation of human life within the context of the powers, perils, and possibilities of the new global commons. Those of us who stand in the Reformed tradition believe that to be sons and daughters of the Reformation is to know that we are forever called to ongoing reformation at the hand of God. That does not mean we like it. It does not mean that ministry to youth is made easier by this knowledge. But it does provide perspective as we seek to align our lives and commitments with the youth to whom and with whom we minister in the dramatically changing world of the new commons.

New Powers

The powers, perils, and possibilities of the new commons intersect in important ways with the considerable new powers, perils, and possibilities that mark the life of every adolescent who is stepping into adulthood.

Our society is keenly aware that adolescent behavior is fueled, in part, by significant changes in hormonal activity and by the development of the capacity for adult sexuality. But dramatically underrecognized is the potential for a simultaneous development of new powers of mind that can, in turn, foster new powers of heart and soul. As Jean Piaget has taught us, the early teenage years harbor the development of “formal operational thought.” This means that if a young person dwells in a context that encourages it, the adolescent years mark the emergence of reflective thought and the capacity for abstract thought. Objects can become symbols — keys to whole patterns of meaning.

Embedded in this new power is the capacity for “third person perspective-taking.” This is an extraordinary achievement. The grade school child can manage only “second person perspective-taking.” That is, when the grade school child stands where I am now standing and looks at the podium, he or she knows that you see the podium differently from where you are sitting. But to mentally see what you see, the grade school child must abandon his or her own perspective and mentally run around to where you are sitting in order to “see through your eyes.”

The achievement of “third person perspective-taking” is what is practiced in a complicated conversation. You know what you are saying and feeling, and *at the same time* you are listening to the other person, and you are seeing what they are saying.

It is as though you are a third person who can see the whole interaction between you and the other, and how each is affecting the other, and you can hold the whole thing at once. It is a very complicated mental operation. And it is a big deal. It changes the way young people experience themselves in the world.

We do our young people a great disservice when we speak of this new power simply as critical thought. New questions can now be asked, and they can sound critical; however, the essence of this emerging power in adolescent lives is the capacity for reflection and for wondering in new ways about the relationship between self and world.²

This new power is vital in the development of both the moral and the spiritual life. It allows the individual to take into account the perspective of the other — even many others. It enables the individual to come closer to participating in the perspective of God. It represents an enlargement of consciousness and an enhanced capacity for wonder.

One Saturday afternoon, I met a friend who had just come from a bar mitzvah. “Oh, Sharon,” she said, “this was the kind of occasion that is one of the best parts of being Jewish.” Then she described how the young man who was having his bar mitzvah happened to be a particularly small thirteen-year-old. As is the custom, he had prepared a passage to read in Hebrew and a question that arises from the passage that he posed to a selected circle of friends and wise ones who had gathered on his behalf. In the circle that day was one of the most revered philosophy professors at Harvard. After a pause, it was this professor who first responded and said to the young man, “You know, I wonder about that, too.” This was an initiation into an adulthood of wonder and new possibility.

When I first began formal research in faith development, I interviewed a person who is now in a position of significant religious and educational leadership. As he reflected on his formative years, he told me that he had grown up in a Presbyterian church. When he was in the ninth grade, his family had visited New York City at a time when Billy Graham was there on one of his crusades. This man was moved by the powerful music, and what Billy Graham was saying that particular evening made more sense to him at that point than the answers he was receiving elsewhere. He responded to the altar call. But what seemed even more significant to me was a moment three weeks later on a family vacation when he was lying on the beach alone. (Now at these points even articulate people often become quite inarticulate in faith development interviews, and this was the case here.) “That sun was OK,” he said. As I worked to listen into what he meant, it was clear that in that time alone on the beach he had an important experience of communion, an enlarged communion, between himself and the sun, the universe — Life, Spirit, God.

Such listening often triggers one’s own memories. I thought, “Well, when I was

in the ninth grade I don't remember that the sun meant much to me." Then I thought, "But the moon did." (Now, anyone trained in Jungian theory might respond, "Yes, he is a male and was attracted to the sun, and you're a woman. . . ." But let's set that aside for the moment in the service of another insight.)

When I was a teenager, at night before I went to bed I would often stand at my bedroom window and pray. When the moon was full, it served as a focus of soul and spirit. I know that I was not praying to the moon, but it did serve to anchor an enlarged consciousness and a sense of participation in a wider world of being. That experience was qualitatively different than when I had prayed six or seven years earlier.

Once when I spoke of this, someone responded, "What you are suggesting is that the adolescent will have a high." Indeed, in the period we describe as adolescence, the changes going on in body, mind, and spirit will find their expression in some form of "high." Whether the milieu is fast cars, sex, music, sports, religion, drugs, or bungee jumping, the adolescent soul will seek a new home in an expanding world of new wonders and possibilities.

New Perils

Along with this new capacity for an enlarged consciousness, there are also new perils. Enlarged consciousness creates new self-consciousness. This can be both wonderful and terrible. Some of you have known young people who, when they were perhaps nine years old, seemed to be sturdy and resilient, confident, even feisty, and great to be with. Then you do not see them for awhile, and suddenly they are not only fourteen, they are also tongue-tied, self-conscious, and not nearly as comfortable with themselves or anyone else as they previously appeared to be. Or, if they remain outgoing and engaged, there is, nevertheless, a marked difference. Now able "to see the other seeing me," they are vulnerable to the tyranny of the "they." What do "they" think? How am I seen in "their" eyes?

One sixteen-year-old expressed it to me this way: "I wonder what they are thinking about me, because I know what I am thinking about them." In the circle of Talk Poetry that I described earlier, another young woman who spoke appeared capable, articulate, and socially an integral part of the group. Yet she had written: "I am nervous about being accepted. I am OK here at The Power of Hope. But I am still nervous about being accepted."

In this new awareness, this enlarged consciousness, there is not only a new capacity for a "high." There is also a new capacity for angst — for a new recognition of suffering, fear, dread, and a highly charged sense of the threat of meaninglessness.

Another young woman, Erin Lopez, who spoke in the circle of Talk Poetry, read this poem, composed during the second round of writing. It is titled "Snake."

HhhllllllllllllllllllllSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

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Interiority—At Risk

A growing competence in perspective-taking, a new self-consciousness, an enlarged capacity for wonder, and the ability to be in dialogue with one's own pain and the pain of others all reveal the adolescent's readiness for the development of interiority. Depending upon the nature of the surrounding environment, the adolescent soul can grow deeper, wider, higher. If the adolescent is encouraged to listen within, space is opened in which Spirit can more fully become at home. There is more space for inspiration, for creativity, for becoming. There is more space both for wounding and for healing. Whether or not this spaciousness of spirit is enabled to grow is determined in significant measure by how you and I minister, because the culture at large has set this capacity for interiority at risk.

I had the privilege of working with the MBA program at the Harvard Business School as they began to readdress ethics and leadership in the curriculum. During this time, we discovered that the pressures to meet the terms of competition that come from outside the self can thwart the development of reflective interiority. Further, in a society in which all are increasingly, systematically distracted and entertained, inner reflection comes at a premium. Yet the development of interiority remains essential to the formation of a mature conscience — the capacity to reflect on one's behavior and to make ethical choices.

In several sectors of youth ministry we find new attention being paid to the value and importance of young people having time for shared silence. This is one of the signs in our time of the faithfulness of the church. This dimension of ministry was not evident even a few years ago. There is a growing recognition that perhaps we need to change our ways of ministry to be responsive to what is now at stake as a new generation comes to adulthood in a world of multitasking and the pervasive presence of video technologies and other electronic media.³

Accordingly, I am deeply grateful that my stepdaughter, Kate, and my stepson, Todd, have grown up in the faith and company of Quakers — the Society of Friends — and that they have learned the power of shared silence and listening within. This has occurred primarily within the context of a wonderful set of retreats for Quaker youth in New England. Every six weeks or so, Young Friends gather from all over Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. They are led by Chris Jorgenson and a wonderful staff who work with her. The staff has a genius for creating good space with clear boundaries in which the Young Friends can themselves become responsible for the welfare and decision-making of the group, which is often as large as seventy for a single retreat. Part of how the staff creates and maintains safe boundaries is to set three clear rules, which the young people themselves help to maintain: No drugs or alcohol, no sex, and "keep the caps on the magic markers."

With this in mind, I asked Peggy Taylor, who leads The Power of Hope pro-

gram, how they create safe space. They also have three rules: No drugs or alcohol, no sex, and (interestingly) no media — no boom boxes, no magazines, no Walkmans. Much of their program is built around creativity, and the arts and music abound. But it is music and art that the young people create within and among themselves. They are not rendered passive. They are not encouraged to be mere consumers. Space is provided where young people experience community and can gain access to the creative, transforming power within and among them. They are initiated into active participation in the power of new possibilities. With the leadership of committed and creative adults, they discover positive images of their own emerging adulthood and experience what it might mean to work with others to create a viable future for all.

The New Media in the New Commons

In light of the adolescent readiness for imagination of self and world, it is vital to pay close attention to the role of the mass media in the new global commons. If every generation of adults, by intention or default, passes to the next the “best” by which we have come to live, *our* generation is primarily using the technologies of the new media to transmit that imagination into the heart of the commons. It is, therefore, a matter of considerable import to note that approximately \$4.5 billion is spent worldwide on advertising every year, and a growing percentage is targeted at teenagers and children. The bodies and souls of our youth are being transformed into the image and likeness of markets. I believe that generations after us will look back with sadness and dismay to see that we were so seemingly naive about the power of images to shape the souls of our youth.

Those of us who stand in the Protestant tradition are people of the Word. We are not so much people of image and sacrament. Now in this new time of reformation, we are being challenged, I think, to reclaim a rich, religious understanding of the power of images and the way in which they become embedded in us. On behalf of a generation that is steeped in the visual and the tactile as primary ways of learning and communicating, we need to get up to speed.

In *Common Fire*, we describe the kinds of images that are important to the formation of the citizen-leaders that are now needed. Among these are three of particular importance for adolescents. The first is positive images of self. One woman told us, “I was seen as a ‘watercolor’ child all through high school. I’ve worked hard to find more vibrant colors I have oil paints in my soul.”⁴ Young people are seeking positive images of self in the new global commons.

Second, we found that it is also very important to have images of “the world as it is” — images that are true, including images of things that should not be so.

One person we interviewed, a legislator, often remembers a line from Pericles. “‘We [must] obey those unwritten laws that it is an acknowledged shame to break’ You’ve got to have a consensus that certain things are simply not done.” Young people in the new commons need clearly defined images of truth, beauty, justice — and injustice.⁵

Third, it is critically important that on the threshold of adulthood, young people have planted in their souls images of meaningful transformation. Cynicism thrives wherever life presents itself as static or ruled by lesser powers than the transforming spirit of life itself that Christians profess to see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the church.

Therefore, as we seek to respond faithfully to this generation of youth, one of the central questions before us is, “Who is crafting and mediating the images by which this generation will live and die?” Certainly one answer to that question is the film industry.

***Titanic* — An Attracting Story**

At the present time, James Cameron’s *Titanic* promises to break box office records, and notably large numbers of teenagers are flocking to this film.⁶ Reflection on the story and images mediated by this film and observed through the lens of adolescent powers and vulnerabilities that we have sketched here may be useful in thinking about ministry to and with youth in our time.

In a *New York Times* article harvesting international commentary on why *Titanic* is such an attracting film, Andre Klib in Bonn, Germany, was reported to have said:

The love story of *Titanic* is merely the wrapping on what really drives the movie. It is a picture of a wholeness that we have lost, the picture of a sunken world in which, from the captain to the mechanic, from the immigrant to the millionaire, everyone had a secure place. At this end of our *Titanic* century, after the collapse of Communism as the last integral ideology in anticipation of coming conflicts and crisis, the world can no longer be seen, grasped, in great structures of thought. Only through images [metaphors] can we still understand the world. The cinema delivers the images in which humanity and the cosmos blend again in a feeling of unity.⁷

Young people would probably not describe why they like *Titanic* with anything like the words of Andre Klib. But perhaps we can glimpse how it might be that this film does, in fact, function for teenagers in a manner very much like what Klib describes, as *Titanic* captures important pieces of the adolescent’s reality in a blend of humanity and cosmos.

A Love Story

This rendering of *Titanic* is a love story featuring a handsome young man, Jack, who is booked in steerage/third class, and a beautiful young woman, Rose, who resides with the upper class. Echoing the mythic strains of Romeo and Juliet, the story is of romance writ large and confirms the power of love to transcend social expectations and even death. But we are mistaken, I think, to believe that this alone accounts for the power of this film for this generation.

Unamuno has written that the temple is the place where we go to weep in common. In today's society, movie theaters function as temples for many,⁸ and there is a good deal of evidence that *Titanic* creates a place where people go to weep in common. I understand that it is considered quite legitimate to cry at the end of *Titanic* — every time you see it. What is the crying really for?

Titanic is a film in which Prince Charming and hundreds more die because of a quest for wealth and headlines, combined with hubris on several fronts, including serious miscalculations about the ability of technology to triumph over nature. Many of our young people understand the resonance of these themes with the patterns of our own time.⁹ But note that at another level this film is also about “absent parents.”

The film says nothing about Jack's parents or family; they are never referred to in any way. He is on his own — a young man off on an adventure across the Atlantic. We learn that Rose's father has somewhat recently died, and he apparently squandered or mismanaged a fortune, leaving his wife and daughter with only the appearance of wealth, even less affection for him, and little for each other.¹⁰ Moreover, in a desperate effort to preserve financial and social security, Rose's mother is apparently willing to sacrifice her daughter (in this case to a loveless marriage). The aspiration to financial security at any cost appears to be the only image of adulthood that this mother has to offer her daughter — the image in which she, herself, has lived her life. Images of “absent parents” ring true and serve as images of “the world as it is” for many youth today.

What is most interesting is that the youth, finding no place for themselves in the adult world at the center of things (for example, at the “family” dinner table in the first-class dining room), seem to flee to the margins of the ship, the margins of this floating replica of society. Most of their big scenes happen at the railings. In the first big scene, Rose, driven to despair and falling into deep angst, runs to the stern, crying, and threatens to jump overboard. Jack, hearing her distress, follows her. It is there that they meet for the first time, as he coaxes her back from the railing, prophetically describing how cold the water would be and how quickly one would die.

When they next meet they appear again at the railing, this time amidsthips. In

a delightful bit of play, he teaches her how to spit off the side of the ship. It is a positive step in her attempt to break out of the conventional constraints for a woman of her time. Rose provides an image of a new woman, breaking out of the inappropriate strictures of her society, claiming life as best she knows how — certainly a resonant image in today's society where, for example, an inordinate number of young women are in treatment for eating disorders that arise from a toxic mix of both an effort to resist inappropriate expectations and an aspiration to fit the body images purveyed by an advertising-saturated culture.¹¹

In perhaps *Titanic's* most widely advertised scene, Jack and Rose are again at the railing — this time perched on the tip of the bow. The sunset is resplendent, the music soars, and as the ship dangerously picks up speed, they are “flying.” In this dramatic moment, the energies of the young couple combine with the tremendous power of the ship, the beauty of the sea, and the cosmos itself. It is a “high” — an absolute, glorious “high”! This is followed by a descent into the bowels of the ship (again at the margins rather than at the center) for spirited dancing with the others in steerage and for lovemaking in the baggage hold — all an extension of the kind of “high” so resonant with the adolescent soul.

After the ship has struck the iceberg and is going down, we see Jack and Rose, now having come full circle, again at the railing where at the opening of the film she was courting death. A transformation has occurred. Though she has refused a secure seat in a lifeboat with her mother in order to remain with Jack, Rose no longer wants to die. Together they make every possible reach for life. She wants to live if she can also love. Through the power of relationship, despair has been transformed into hope. As the ship is heading down and the stern rises up out of the water, they climb up on top and cling to the railing in a valiant, tenacious bid for life against the odds.

After the ship goes down, a piano top becomes a raft that can only hold one of them. Jack urges Rose to claim life, even as the icy grip of the sea carries him away.

Rose chooses to live, and we are led to believe that she later marries, has children, and lives a very adventurous life. Through her, *Titanic* becomes a story of love and transformation — and also a story of a kind of faithfulness.

At the end of the film, Rose is an old, wise crone who has been brought by the treasure seekers onto a ship above the place where the *Titanic* went down. A part of the drama has been built around the huge blue jewel that the false fiancé gave her, the *coeur de la mer* — the heart of the sea. The search for the *Titanic* has been, in part, a search for this jewel that insurance records claim went down with the ship. Not so. Rose has kept it across all the years, telling no one. In the night, when there is no one about, still in her long nightgown she slips out of her state-

room. Then, in the last great scene at a railing, she takes this extraordinary jewel hanging from a diamond necklace and drops the whole thing into the sea, as it were, giving what she can to the one who gave her life. This gesture transcends any quest for wealth and fame. It is a gesture of fidelity to a more meaningful story than would be told by the headlines that would flow if she revealed her treasure. In an age of divorce, cheap profits, and celebrity politics, the adolescent soul hungers for gestures of fidelity.

Likewise, the adolescent soul hungers for truth-telling and for images of things as they are. In America it is difficult for us to acknowledge the racial tensions that still plague us and the growing class divide. *Titanic* is a vivid portrayal of both. Recently I was in conversation with a mother whose young teenage daughter had gone with her to see *Titanic*. Afterward when they were talking about it, the daughter, in her own way raising the issues of economic class, said, "If we had been on the *Titanic*, which deck would we have been on?" And her mother (who knows that they would have been on the upper decks) responded, "What deck would you want to be on?" Her daughter said, "I think I'd want to be on the lower decks."

This film dispenses positive images of self. Jack is not only good looking, he is a new kind of man. He does not wield a gun. He is not only courageous, he is a very connected guy. When Rose is debating the merits of suicide, though they have barely met, he says, "Well, if you jump, I'll have to jump, too; I'm involved now."

Finally, there is one more image that may be particularly important for us who seek to minister to and with young people. Rose's survival was dependent not only on the courage, good humor, and fidelity of the young man she learned to love. Her survival was dependent also on the good adult who figured out how to get the people out of his not-full lifeboat into another not-full lifeboat so that he could return to seek out anyone still alive in the freezing water. In this current rendering of the *Titanic* myth, he is the only one in the many only partially filled lifeboats who is able to act in a manner that transcends merely his own salvation.

A "Good Enough" Story?


For all of these and undoubtedly other reasons, *Titanic* is a powerful story for many young people today. In some ways, it is a good and important story. But is it good enough? Is it sufficient? I don't think so. Therefore, I pose the question: Why isn't *Titanic* a "good enough" story for the personal, social, and spiritual formation of the next generation?

As I ponder this question, there is another scene that is at work in my soul. Several years ago, I lived in an apartment in an old Victorian home originally built by Mr. Mahan for his family in New England. He later died on the *Titanic* before his family was fully grown. Several weeks after the tragedy, a man who had survived came

to visit the family. He told them Mr. Mahan had been in one of the lifeboats, but when he had realized that there would not be room for all, he had left the lifeboat. He was last seen standing at the railing of the ship, saying his rosary. This piece of the *Titanic* story was told to me by his granddaughter, who devotes her considerable energies to working on behalf of encouraging economic support for the people and institutions of Haiti. She is a devout Roman Catholic Christian, and she believes she has a legacy to live up to. It seems to me that her grandfather had been given stories and symbols by which he could live — and die.

What stories, symbols, songs, and practices of life do we have and want to offer as gifts to the formation of a new generation living on a new commons? What are the primary images of self and world that are being offered to them as they are ready to enter into the perspectives of others and to enlarge the space within their own souls? For large numbers of youth, the mall and MTV as well as school, soccer team, and perhaps church constitute “the commons.” What legacy will assist them in becoming creative citizens in a world that none of us can quite yet imagine? Do we have true stories to tell about the transformation of despair into love and hope? Do we live and give an honorable account of the sacred integrity of creation and our embeddedness in it? Do we orient our youth to technology in ways that are free of hubris? Do we model a gracious anticipation of who our youth are becoming and provide real space for them at the center of our common life? Do we embody an excellence of adulthood to which they may aspire?

In Pennsylvania, not very far from here, is the Radnor Meeting House, the home of the Radnor Society of Friends. Dorothy Steere, a woman now in her nineties who raised her two daughters in that meeting, recently asked one of them, “What was it like for you to grow up in Radnor Meeting?” Her daughter responded, “When we were young people in this meeting, we didn’t really understand what you adults got from sitting in silence. But we knew that ‘whatever’ it was, we wanted it.”

In an age of “whatever” that is full of promise, peril, and new possibilities, we seek, sift, and sort images for ourselves and for the generations after us to live by. We find ourselves asking haunting questions like: When are we being faithful in a changing world, and when are we merely compromising? In such moments, you and I demand guidance and insight from an ancient memory. We may find ourselves drawn to the letter written to the church at Philippi where we read again the timeless text: “Finally, my friends, *whatever* is true, *whatever* is honorable, *whatever* is just, *whatever* is pure, *whatever* is lovely, *whatever* is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. And what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.”¹² 

NOTES

1. See Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).
2. "Critical thought" in its most developed form is the capacity to examine the motivations, context, and limitations of thought itself.
3. In another example, the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, codirected by Andrew Dreitzer and Mark Yaconelli and based at San Francisco Theological Seminary, is an initiative designed to work with fifteen congregations to assist youth and their leaders in cultivating spiritual practices that foster the development of interiority.
4. Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 146.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
6. Note that these are primarily middle- and upper-class youth. This film that dramatizes class divisions is typically not even being shown in lower-class neighborhoods, which are, significantly, seeing *Amistad*.
7. *The New York Times*, April 26, 1998, the Arts Section, p. 29.
8. See Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
9. It is reasonable to speculate that a part of the power of *Titanic* for young people today is how it serves to portray our relationship with nature. When many of our practices as a society presuppose ignorance of what is required for a sustainable relationship with the natural world, *Titanic* is a story in which nature has the last word. When the ship hits the iceberg and a shudder goes through it, a long time passes before there is any realization of what is actually happening. Some of our young people feel that this is a metaphor for what is happening to our planet. The shudder has gone through the planet, and we do not yet recognize the import of what is happening to us.
10. Note that there are other conventional myths about women — e.g. Cinderella, Snow White — in which there is an invisible, failed husband, father, or both, and only the women remain visible in a tangle of unhappy relationships.
11. See Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) pp. 134-138.
12. Philippians 4:8-9 (Revised Standard Version, *italics added*).