The 2001 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture
Proclaiming the Gospel in a Wired World

Introduction

Cell phones, e-mail, MTV, the Web, Palm pilots, and pagers fill our lives and the lives of young people. Teens live in a world where "religious chat rooms and web sites act like spiritual supermarkets, offering an assortment of belief systems all within one click" (Newsweek, May 8, 2000). Whether you laud the changes technology has brought or long for yesteryear, there is no denying that today's wired world affects how we share the good news of Jesus Christ. Those who are engaged in ministry with youth are translators—charged with the daunting task of making connections for young people who are more familiar with gigabytes than with grace.

Rather than offering instructions on how to use e-mail, set up chat rooms, and design multimedia presentations, the 2001 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture examine the theological implications of modern technology and globalization. They help us to reflect on our modes of proclamation—not just preaching and worship but also storytelling, relationships, justice-seeking, service, teaching, and the daily practice of Christian life. They provide inspiration that will refuel us for bearing witness to Jesus Christ with youth in the wired world.

Thomas Beaudoin engages us in a provocative discussion of the relationship of the church to consumer media capitalism. He argues that consumer media capitalism functions strategically as an anonymous spiritual discipline, thus creating "theocapitalism." Beaudoin then proposes a tactical plan for Christian theology and pastoral ministry to contest the strategic discipline of theocapitalism. His lectures offer challenging insights on ministry in today's wired world as well as practical directives for discipling young people in this context.

Marva Dawn raises concerns about blind acceptance of contemporary fads and asks how we can teach youth to question their use of technology. The gospel, says Dawn, calls us to be hopeful realists about the wired world and enables us to de-idolize those elements of culture that begin to take primary place in our lives. She gives ten Christian practices that can help us to clear a space for the focal commitments of our faith in today's culture. Dawn then urges readers to take greater care in how they use words, and she provides insights from Luke's account of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24) on how we might proclaim the gospel to young people.

Richard Osmer takes us on a rafting trip through the white water of globalization, exploring this cultural shift's influence on adolescents through the global media, the globalization of risk, and the new pluralism of globalization. Drawing on the research of the Princeton Project on Youth,

Globalization, and the Church, he explains why we experience globalization as catching us up in currents of change that are beyond our control and discusses the practical implications for ministry with young people. Osmer calls the church to provide young people with three indispensable gifts for their white water journey: a creed to believe, a code for the road, and a dream to esteem. These gifts for the journey are developed out of the practices of catechesis, exhortation, and discernment found in Paul's ministry and are illustrated for today through case studies of two very different congregations.

Finally, Katherine Paterson blesses us with the gift of story. We are important, she persuades, not because we can teach our young people about the wired world or because we must warn them away from it, but because we are the church and we have a story to tell. Paterson explores how we might tell our story to the young who think they have nothing to learn from us. She challenges us to see the "invisible youth" by looking at young people as they really are and loving them as such. Perhaps, she notes, youth would welcome from us a vision of who, in God's sight, they really are, in a sharing of stories that illumine and heal.

May these lectures inspire you and equip you to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the young.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Institute for Youth Ministry

2001 Lectures

Thomas M. Beaudoin
Celebrity Deathmatch: The Church Versus Capitalism?
After Purity: Contesting Theocapitalism

Marva J. Dawn
Technological Devices or Engagement in Practices?
The "Humiliation" of the Word or Its Restoration?

Richard R. Osmer
Riding the Raft: Ministry with Youth in an Age of Permanent White Water
A Checklist for the Journey: Biblical Foundations of Ministry with Youth

Katherine Paterson
I Love to Tell the Story
The Invisible Youth

The Invisible Youth

Do you know the story of Treehorn? Treehorn wakes up one morning to discover that he is shrinking. He thinks of course that his parents will notice at once. After all his nose barely scrapes the dining room table, but all they say is: "Sit up, dear." "I am sitting up," says Treehorn. "It's just that I'm shrinking." "What, dear?" his mother asks. "I'm shrinking. Getting smaller," says Treehorn. "If you want to pretend you're shrinking, that's all right," replies his mother, "as long as you don't do it at the table."[1]

It occurred to me as I was preparing this lecture that perhaps I should just quote all of Florence Parry Heide's classic picture book *The Shrinking of Treehorn.* It is a wonderful parable of the invisible child—who is the person I want to focus on in this second lecture. Like Treehorn's parents, his teacher, even the principal of his school, we adults who are so anxious to do something to or for young people often fail to really look at the young themselves.

They soon learn that mere shrinking won't do the trick. A while back I learned that an old friend of mine had moved to northern New England, and I called him up. His teen-aged daughter answered the phone. "Mia," I said, "How do you like New Hampshire?" "It's okay," she said. "I just wish people wouldn't stare so much." There was a pause before she continued. "Of course, I guess I wouldn't dye my hair purple and put a ring through my nose if I wanted to go unnoticed." We both laughed. But we both knew it wasn't really the purple hair and nose ring that she wanted people to notice. It was Mia that she wanted people to recognize; she just hadn't figured out how to help people do that yet.

As we read with anguish the story of the shooting at Columbine high school, we asked ourselves over and over again how it could have happened. Where were those parents, those teachers? Couldn't they see what was happening? How could those two boys, who tried so desperately to be noticed, have remained invisible?

My husband and I were in India two years ago. He hasn't recovered

yet, because he really looked at the misery. I'm not proud of the fact that India did not totally devastate me, because I know quite well that I was more protective of myself. I didn't let myself see everything he saw. And perhaps that is why Columbine could happen. We are protecting ourselves. We are afraid of what we might see if we really look.

In the parable of the last judgment the unjust are appalled that the King should accuse them. "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" I do not need to remind you of the King's answer. We have trouble making ourselves see, we parents, we Christians, we humans.

But the task of the writer for whatever audience is to help readers to see. I am quite conscious that it is for me a situation in which the physician must first heal herself. With that firmly in mind, I want to talk with you about seeing the invisible young in our midst.

Joseph Conrad said in his often quoted statement to potential readers:

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.[2]

I'm aware that when I speak of "the invisible youth" you are probably hearing the echo of Ralph Ellison's masterpiece of this century *The Invisible Man,* the book that made us see what it meant to be invisible as far as the dominant social group was concerned. In a humorous, miniature way, *The Shrinking of Treehorn* is just such an echo. But as I began talking over the topic with my husband, John, the concept of the invisible youth began to take on an additional flavor.

John began to talk about the fact that each character in a novel has a visible self and an invisible self. It is the peculiar nature of novels that they allow that invisible self to be open and available to the reader. Which is one reason why the reading of fiction is so important to our spiritual nourishment.

I've become acutely aware of this unique quality of the novel as my books have been adapted for the stage or screen. Children who have both read *Bridge to Terabithia* and seen the Wonderworks adaptation for the screen can readily understand what a novel can do that a film cannot. "I liked the book better," one boy said to me, "because in the book you knew what Jess was thinking and how he was feeling. In the movie, you just kind of had

to guess. You couldn't know for sure."

Soon after I saw the film, I was asked to adapt the book for the stage. I agreed to do so, not because I knew so much about theater or drama but because I thought I might be able to do a better adaptation than the film-makers had. I did have enough sense to enlist the help of Stephanie Tolan who, before she became a writer for young adults, was a poet and playwright. I figured Stephanie could help me understand what would or wouldn't work on the stage. Then I sat down to read the novel with an eye to adapting it. I nearly threw the book across the room. "You can't put that on the stage!" I yelped. "It all takes place inside a little boy's head." I didn't need Stephanie to tell me that Hamlet-length soliloquies probably wouldn't work in theater for today's children.

When we began to write, neither Stephanie nor I imagined the play as a musical, but the longer we worked, the more we realized that a character could sing thoughts he could not so readily declaim.

So Jesse sings a song that foreshadows the tragedy to come. The lines in the book read: "Sometimes it seemed to him that his life was delicate as a dandelion. One little puff from any direction, and it was blown to bits."[3]

Steve Liebman's music echoes the sound of raindrops in a minor key as the invisible children inside Jess and Leslie sit on opposite sides of the stage and sing what they're feeling:

First Jess:
My life's like a dandelion
Perfect today,
But delicate as a dandelion
One puff blows it all away.
I'm king of a secret kingdom
A land built of magic and dreams
I'm king—What on earth could harm me?
Yet, sometimes suddenly it seems,

My life's like a dandelion
Perfect today,
But delicate as a dandelion
One puff blows it all away.
And then, Leslie:
My life's like a dandelion
Wanted or not
All my life long I bloom where I please

Golden and stubborn and strong....
I'm queen [she sings echoing Jess's words]
What on earth could harm me?
Yet sometimes, suddenly it seems,

And from the opposite ends of the stage they both sing once more of the dandelion at the mercy of the breeze.[4] Two children invisible even to each other made visible to the audience through a song.

I am often berated by adults who think that my books are too intense for young readers. Yet when in life are feelings more intense than when we are young? Why else are there so many suicides among teenagers? As we minister to the young we must respect this intensity of feeling, while remembering whether as minister or writer that our task is to heal and illumine, to "repair a spirit in disarray" not to join in their despair.

Recently a writer friend forwarded to me a discussion of *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved,* which appeared on the Internet. More than one of the children's literature experts engaged in the discussion were deeply troubled by both of these books declaring, in essence, that both books were depressing and offered no hope.

Joseph Conrad once said that he never read his reviews, he measured them. So, I suppose by the length of the discussion, I should have been cheered, but of course I'm a reader, not a mathematician, so I was properly downcast. I rather pride myself on being a hopeful writer. Of course, I also think I'm a pretty funny writer, but few are they perceptive enough to pick up on that fact.

In my own defense, it seems to me that what these experts are calling "depressing" are what I would call "seeing the invisible youth." Jess, when he realizes a bit too late that he might have asked Miss Edmunds if Leslie could have joined them on the trip to Washington, can't suppress a "secret pleasure at being alone in this small cozy car with Miss Edmunds."[5] Such a thought is not admirable, and because we know the rest of the story, it proves to be tragically ironic. I maintain, however, that Jess's feelings here are true to childhood, true to human nature. When a death occurs, it is always these secret moments that the griever returns to and wrestles with and feels guilt-ridden over. If we play false in a story about death on such an important detail, then a grieving child will lose an opportunity for comfort that the story might have provided.

I long to ask these critics who find no hope in *Bridge* what would constitute hope for them in this story? Leslie's miraculous resurrection from the dead? Jess waking up *Dallas*-style to find the last twenty pages to have been

simply a bad dream? Or a story in which Leslie never dies—which would be a quite different story from the one that, out of the tangled questions of real life, I was trying to tell.

In my latest book, the personality of the central character is so out front that he barely lets you see his invisible self, this despite the fact that *Preacher's Boy* is written in the first person. I do not like to write in first person. I find it limiting, but more than that I find it deceptive. No one can be trusted to give a true, unbiased account of his own life. And, indeed, neither Louise Bradshaw nor Robbie Hewitt can be regarded as wholly reliable narrators.

I remember an angry conversation I had with a librarian years ago about *Jacob Have I Loved.* "And besides," she said bristling, "I don't even think Caroline is all that bad." "Neither do I," I said. I can't remember where the conversation went from there, but I remember my astonishment at the number of intelligent adults who seemed unable to realize that you can't count on a jealous person to render a fair account of events. I have been astounded at the number of critics who berate the Bradshaws for their favoritism—for loving Caroline more than they love Louise. Pish posh. But Louise is, at least, writing from the viewpoint of an adult, which makes her a more trustworthy witness than the eleven-year-old Robbie who is still ninety percent bluster and brag. So how do I expect the young reader to see through all this into the hidden, the invisible Robbie? I think those who see themselves in Robbie will not be deceived by the personage. I truly believe my readers will see past the posturing into the heart of a little boy who longs for his father's approval—a child who loves his afflicted brother despite all and who is finally able to accept the grace that Elliot brings to the family.

> I grabbed Elliot's hand. "Can you believe it, Elliot?
> You and me? We're riding in a genuine motorcar!
> "Is dat good?"
> "It's a miracle!" I yelled over the racket of the motor.
> "A genuine miracle!"
>
> "Wheeee!" cried Elliot. Then he leaned over and kissed my hand.
> And do you know? From that very moment I stopped all pretense of being an apeist and signed on as a true believer for all eternity. How could I not? God had worked a personal miracle especially for me.[6]

I almost missed the miracle myself. It's not, as Robbie thinks and then relates and as even I first thought, the fact that God has sent him a motorcar. No, the real miracle is in that sentence that slips past the bravado into the narrative:

"Then he leaned over and kissed my hand." It is here in Elliot's gentle act of affection that the healing begins to take place in the invisible Robbie whether he himself knows it or not.

I'm not sure how often I've been told that my characters are "not wholly loveable" or just plain "not likeable." It always hurts me to hear it, as it does any mother who is told that her children are obnoxious. Because, you see, I peer deeper into their hearts than a mother ever could. I see the whole invisible child. In a real way, I am that invisible child, and although I must be truthful in my portrayal of these children, it only makes me love them more, not less, to know them as they are.

It is my hope, of course, that young readers will find these characters to be real persons like themselves—that they will be able to see themselves in them and then as they come to love and forgive these people on the page to be able to forgive and love their own deepest selves.

My preacher husband used to have a motto hanging in his study that read: "Love is a hell of a lot of work." Well, it is. There is nothing easy or sentimental about it. We do well to be suspicious of love that comes too easily. I think of the children, handsome, bright, winsome, so doted on by their parents. But we must be wary—we who are blessed with such children. We must be careful to look at these children, not past them to some goal of our own, to some ego-satisfaction we count on them to provide us with.

In the wonderful movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), the young chess genius senses that his teacher and even his father have become obsessed with his skills. The father whom we have known as exceptionally loving and thoughtful suddenly has become very much like his chess teacher—two adults who don't seem to care what is happening inside of Josh just so long as he keeps winning chess matches.

> "So what if I lose?" Josh asks his father the night before a big match.
> "You won't lose," his father says.
> "I'm scared I might," the boy replies.
> "You're the best," his father says. "All those other kids are scared of you."

The father has turned off the light and is about to leave Josh's bedroom when the boy says in the dark: "Maybe it's better not to be the best. Then you can lose and it's okay."

The next day Josh stops the madness the only way he knows how. He loses in the first round.

In the scene following this humiliation father and son are in the pouring rain outside the hall. Josh is sitting huddled against the building while his furious father paces up and down.

> "Seven moves. Seven! How is it possible to lose in seven moves?"
> "Maybe I don't really have it," Josh says plaintively.
> "That's not true. That's not why this happened. Think!" he demands of the unhappy boy. Did he disobey his teacher's instructions? Did he bring out his queen too soon?
> "Maybe he's just better than me," Josh says.
> "No, don't tell me that potzer is better than you!"
> The camera closes in once more on the child's wet, pain-filled face.
> "Why are you standing so far away from me?" he asks his father.
> His father stops in his tracks and takes a long look at his miserable son. "C'mere," he says. Josh runs to him and throws his arms around his father, burying his face against his clothes. His father strokes his hair. "It's okay," he says to the sobbing child. "It's okay."

And that is what our children want us to do— to look—to look at them as they really are and assure them that it's okay for them to be who they are.

Jip in *Jip, His Story* is different from any of my other characters. In the beginning, he is like any poor farm resident, largely invisible to the rest of the community. On the farm itself, the only time he is visible to the manager and his wife is when he isn't working, which is not very often. Then Put comes into his life and sees him. A little later Teacher, too, sees Jip, and what they see is that rare person whose insides match his outsides—whose visible and invisible selves are all of a piece. When, in the beatitudes, Jesus says "Blessed are the pure in heart…" he is talking about people like Jip. Unlike most characters in novels, it is not so much a change in the invisible child that shapes the story but the change in the visible child. Jip finds out that his mother was a slave and that he is therefore considered black though he has actually more white ancestors than black. He tries to figure out why, even though he looks the same and feels the same, he is not seen the same by those he has known.

> How was he different from the boy Mrs. Wilkens had trusted her Lucy to all last winter? She hadn't despised him when he was a waif fallen off a wagon. Now she's set to betray me—like I done her or her children bodily harm, he thought. He wished he could think that Lucy was lying—rather than believe her ma had said such awful things. But he knew the truth of it. In Mrs. Wilken's sight, he was no

longer just Jip but a thing to be despised. His heart was no different, his mind no better or worse. Nothing about who he was or how he looked had altered in the least, but, suddenly in other people's heads he was a whole different creature.[7]

One thing books can do is help us to see past labels to the person. One reason Hitler demanded that the Jews wear a yellow star was the fear that their Jewishness might not be readily visible. Someone might treat them as human beings if they were not properly labeled. Skin color is so helpful to the bigot who lives in us all. You're not so likely to make a mistake as to how you ought to regard someone if her color makes it obvious how she is to be seen.

I was aware of this when our children were small. We had two homemade, obviously Caucasian sons, and then these two girls who were, well, hard to figure out. I cannot count the number of times perfect strangers would approach us and ask us to solve the racial puzzle that our family posed. How could they think about us properly if they didn't know what they were looking at? Lin and I were remembering just recently an incident that occurred when she was about eight. I had all four children with me at a Presbyterian Home benefit bazaar. Since the two oldest were small for their age and the youngest large, I was shepherding four children of approximately the same size but of different varieties. Despite the fact that at that moment all four were behaving themselves quite nicely, a strange woman approached me bristling belligerence: "Are all of these yours?" she demanded. "Yes," I said. Whereupon she grabbed Lin, our Chinese daughter, by the chin and tipped her head up. "Oh, yes, I can see. She's got your eyes." The five of us could hardly wait to get around a corner to explode into giggles.

This demand, *Tell me what I'm seeing,* is one quite familiar to the writer of books for the young. It is not enough, for many adults, to have the writer show the characters—even the invisible soul of the character to the reader. According to some critics, the writer has failed to help the young reader if she does not spell out what the reader is supposed to see. But what the reader, even the young reader, will see is, I maintain, the reader's task and the reader's choice. To paraphrase the Good Book, "He that has eyes to see let him see." If the book is good enough, the reader will see more on every reading, more even than the writer knows is there.

We have to respect the invisible souls of those we work with, whether we are writers, teachers, parents, or ministers. We have to, as Eugene Peterson so eloquently reminds us, see them as "redolent with spirituality. There are no ordinary people," as he said.

We all know that there is a difference between the skull of early humanoids and our own skulls. Our egg shaped foreheads have replaced their sloping ones. And in that enlarged space, are the frontal lobes that allow us to do something else animals cannot do. They enable us to plan actions and wait for rewards that are not immediately evident. We out of all creation can plan for the future. This unique human development, Bronowski says, "means that we are concerned in our early education with the postponement of decisions." Therefore, before the human brain is an instrument of decision, he says, it is an instrument of preparation. We need, as human beings, a long childhood and adolescence. We have to delay decision making, because we need first to acquire the knowledge our future decisions will demand.

What happens during this period is crucial to what the person will become. We know now that our children are born with their brains wired for acquiring language, but science has also taught us that to actually acquire language, any language, a child has to learn some language quite early on. A baby is born with a brain receptive to language, but if she or he is not spoken to, played with, read to, or, in short, not truly seen, those areas of the brain simply do not develop as they are meant to.

But there is a dark side to this long period of preparation and that is the sense of powerlessness it engenders in children and, especially, in adolescents. How can we both respect this powerlessness and minister to those who feel overwhelmed by it? How can we as the church assure them that they are truly seen? Well, I have this book I'd like to recommend. In my first lecture I spoke of the stories of the Bible. Children do respond to the stories of the Bible, but they also respond to the language, the poetry of the Bible. I can remember as a child listening to the eighth Psalm with chills running up and down my spine:

> Oh, Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

I didn't quite get the verse about the babes and sucklings but I sensed it meant that the Psalmist was saying something about us children—how our praise was powerful before God.

> When I consider thy heavens [and that meant me, Katherine]
> When I consider thy heavens and the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has ordained: What is man [and that man included me, too] that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man that thou art mindful of him?

We know ourselves to be invisible children in this immense and awesome

universe—and yet, miraculously, we are not invisible to the Creator of all things.

> For thou hast made [us] a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned [us] with glory and honour. Thou madest [us] to have dominion over the works of thy hands ....

No, the Psalmist declares, we are not invisible children to the Creator—we stand before God crowned with glory and invested with responsibility. Isn't this a staggering truth we must share with our children? Doesn't the Psalm fill you with wonder?

There are two impulses in the education of children that concern me today. One is the back-to-basics slogan that sounds almost like the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of power: If our children don't master the basics, or math, or computers, or whatever, how will we be able to maintain our position as number one in the world? But we already know what happens when our goal is knowledge for the sake of power. The eugenics and efficient annihilations of an Auschwitz; the fire bombing of a Dresden; the instantaneous vaporization of a Hiroshima. Knowledge has not made our world a safer place, much less a better place or a more beautiful place.

We must, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, "go out to meet the world not only by way of expediency but also by the way of wonder. In the first we accumulate information in order to dominate; in the second we deepen our appreciation in order to respond." He reminds us, "Power is the language of expedience; poetry is the language of wonder.... The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living."[8]

Then, as though it were the antidote for knowledge run to conscienceless power, there is a movement to teach our children moral values. Now, I am not opposed to moral values, I just don't think we're going about it the right way. If you've seen the movie *Shine* you've seen what happens to a man who worships family values. He nearly destroys his children. But even those who are not emotionally ill, as David Helfgott's father (as portrayed in the film) surely was, often seem to think morality can be taught in sterile tales and doggerel.

If knowledge without a sense of reverence is dangerous, morality divorced from wonder leads either to chilling legalism or priggish sentimentality. I am always nervous when some well-meaning critic applauds my work for the values and lessons it teaches children, and I'm almost rude when someone asks me what moral I am trying to teach in a given book.

When I write a book I am not setting out to teach virtue; I am trying to tell a story, I am trying to draw my reader into the mystery of human life in this world. I am trying to share my own sense of wonder that although I have not always been in this world and will not continue in it for too many more years, I am here now, sharing in the mystery of the universe, thinking, feeling, tasting, smelling, seeing, hearing, shouting, singing, speaking, laughing, crying, living, and dying—hope beyond the pain, meaningful life despite the alienation.

Wonder has its grounding in profound mystery. It is the mystery of meaning beyond the universe, but also the mystery that has formed the universe. When we ask: what does this all mean? We are asking a theological question. When we seek to compose a coherent plot—a story that has meaning—we are acknowledging, whether we admit it or not, that there is such a thing as meaning. We are saying that the universe is not the realm of blind chance and chaos—that, however turbulent our individual lives may be, they are not adventures down the rabbit hole, but life in a universe the ordinary workings of which are so dependable that we mistakenly call them "laws."

And it is our faith that no matter how immense or ancient the universe, the One that has made it sees each one of us. I was always deeply comforted as a child when I heard Jesus say to me: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered." And just in case I still didn't get it, he adds, "Fear not . . .you are of more value than many sparrows."[9]

How did Jesus know how it felt to be invisible?

Though before God, the author of the eternal story, all creation is fully visible and fully loved, we here on earth still see through a glass darkly. And even when we seek to look with care and love at one another, there is still much in each of us that remains hidden. Part of the marvel of being a writer are those moments when you realize that what is deep within yourself has spoken to the hidden recesses in a reader.

We can never know what will matter to that other hidden person. After a talk several years ago, a young woman came up to speak to me. She waited until the auditorium emptied, and then she said, "I wanted to tell you that *Bridge to Terabithia* saved my life."

It seems she was a victim of incest from the time she was very young and had kept the uneasy secret of her family locked inside herself. Then one day, inexplicably, someone had scrawled her name and the four-letter-word message of her hidden family shame on the sidewalk outside the school for all the world to read.

"I didn't know what to do when I saw it," she said. "Then people came

up and began asking me what it meant. But I had just finished reading *Bridge to Terabithia,* and I remembered what Leslie said to Janice Avery—if she just pretended she didn't know what they were talking about, everyone would forget all about it in a week. It got me through that terrible time," she said. "I wanted to thank you for that."

Of course, other wiser persons were needed for her eventual healing. But I can't help but be grateful that words of mine helped get her through a few weeks of her childhood hell.

In the aftermath of Columbine, I spent an afternoon talking with a group of persons who work with children at risk. The question I had asked them to help me answer was this: Why do our children turn to violence? It was a question many of us have struggled with in these past couple of years.

These professionals were very concerned about the Internet. Today, they said, when a child behaves aggressively at school, the routine solution is expulsion. At the very time when a child is the most vulnerable, most reachable, he is further isolated. Often he goes home to an empty house and spends time with violent video games or on the Internet desperately seeking out connections, and whom does he make connections with? All too often with other desperate, isolated, self-hating individuals who confirm the lonely young person's belief that all his hatreds are justified and that violence is the only way to relieve his mortal pain.

Access to the Internet is not the answer for these young people. They need much more than that. They need much more even than access to good books. Fortunately what they need is precisely what you can give them—and that is yourself. "Every child," said the director of the program, "every child needs a connection with a caring adult."

I was asked to speak to a group of public school teachers who would be taking their classes to see a production of the play *Bridge to Terabithia.* I spent more than an hour telling about how the book came to be written and rewritten and then how Stephanie Tolan and I adapted it into the play their classes would see. There was the usual time of questions, at the end of which a young male teacher thanked me for my time and what I had told them that morning. "But I want to take something special back to my class. Can you give me some word to take back to them?"

I was momentarily silenced. After all I had been talking continuously for over an hour, surely he could pick out from that outpouring a word or two to take home to his students. Fortunately, I kept my mouth shut long enough to realize what I ought to say—it is what I want to say to all of you who minister to the young.

"I'm very Biblically oriented," I said, "and so for me the most important thing is for the Word to become flesh. I can write stories for children and young people, and in that sense I can offer them words, but you are the Word become flesh in your classroom. Society has taught our children that they are nobodies unless their faces appear on television. But by your caring, by your showing them how important each one of them is, you become the Word that I would like to share with each of them. You are that word become flesh."

What I want to say to isolated, angry, fearful invisible youth is this: you are seen, you are not alone, you are not despised, you are unique and of infinite value in the human family. I can try to say this through the words of a story, but it is up to each of you who minister to youth to embody that hope—you are those words become flesh.

NOTES

1. Florence Parry Heide, *The Shrinking of Treehorn* (New York: Holiday House, 1971).

2. Joseph Conrad, preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus,* in *A Conrad Argosy* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., Inc., 1942), p. 82.

3. Katherine Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1977), p. 77.

4. Katherine Paterson and Stephanie Tolan, *Bridge to Terabithia: A Play with Music* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1992), pp. 71-72.

5. Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia,* p. 98.

6. Katherine Paterson, *Preacher's Boy* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999), p. 156.

7. Katherine Paterson, *Jip, His Story* (New York: Lodestar Books, 1996), p. 162.

8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951), pp. 36-37.

9. Matthew 10:29-31.