

Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry

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Part I: Introduction

Chapter 01

New Paradigms in Youth Ministry

Old habits are hard to break, and no one is easily weaned from his own opinions; but if you rely on your own reasoning and ability rather than on the virtue of submission to Jesus Christ, you will but seldom and slowly attain wisdom. For God wills that we become perfectly obedient to himself, and that we transcend mere reason on the wings of burning love for him.

Thomas à Kempis

I wrote a lot of this book in coffee shops. I was working at one in May when one of those Midwestern spring thunderstorms came roiling across the plains of western Minnesota. The table at which I was sitting overlooked a large parking lot for an adjacent mall. As the wind picked up, the trees started to bend, and then the rain came in almost horizontal sheets.

The mall's parking lot was only half full, being a weekday afternoon. Way out on the edge was parked a brand new BMW 525i—it didn't even have license plates yet. Someone had parked it far away from all other cars, hoping to avoid the dings and dents of carelessly opened doors.

As the wind gusted, I saw a shopping cart begin to roll, pushed by the storm. Free from the constraints of the Cart Corral, the unmanned missile gained speed, unhindered by obstacles as it wheeled across the slick asphalt.

I saw it coming—it seemed to be caught in the tractor beam of the new car—250 yards and closing fast! 200 yards! 150! 100 yards! 50...25...10...5...Impact! That cart smashed right into the side of the as-yet unblemished BMW. I kid you not: there was not another car within 100 yards, but that cart was homed right to its target. Mission accomplished.

It seems to me that God is a lot like that shopping cart—not that God has four wheels and a child safety strap, but that God always seeks us out. No matter how far away we park, and no matter how much we try to avoid conflict with him, God finds us and leaves his mark. It's not a search-and-destroy mission; it's a search-and-give-life mission.

That's not to say that we can't avoid God. Of course we can, and a lot of people do. But for those of us who are followers of Christ, and especially for those of us called to lead others into Christ's presence, it's pretty common for God to hunt us down and smack us in the right front quarter panel. Hence the continued popularity of Frances Thompson's poem, "The Hounds of Heaven," in which the protagonist proclaims,

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

And yet Love pursues with an "unhurried pace," and a Voice proclaims, "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me." Love wins; God wins, hounding us toward the gates of heaven,

never giving up on us, in spite of our attempts to outrun him. God has been pursuing each of us, and I believe he has been pursuing the profession of youth ministry.

WHERE WE`VE COME FROM

Youth ministry has undergone a significant amount of change in the last 30 years. The fact that I can refer to what we do as a “profession” is foremost among the changes. We’ve come a long way from the days when Mike Yaconelli and Wayne Rice were selling mimeographed game sheets out of the backs of their cars. The number of “youth ministry packs” of those marketing postcards you get in the mail bespeaks the influence that we have in the Christian marketplace.

Youth ministry has morphed from a fringe occupation to a “must-have” for any church that wants to influence its community. In the heady days of the 1980s and 1990s, the number of job openings in churches suddenly and vastly outnumbered the number of qualified individuals to take those jobs—and that trend continues today.

But somewhere in those years, youth ministry lost its way. It became about personalities rather than about relationships. Churches looking for a new youth pastor were unabashed in their desire to have someone with a “strong personality.” Not unlike the Pony Express, the best candidates for youth ministry jobs were young, single men—men who would literally sacrifice their own social lives to work 70 hours a week for \$18,000

a year. And if you happened to work for a parachurch organization, you had to raise that salary yourself.

This engendered an atmosphere of self-assured entrepreneurs, almost reckless in their desire to grow a big ministry. And the fact is, you often grow a big ministry by having a big personality. Workshops popped up in the 1980s and 1990s teaching youth pastors how to be “dynamic communicators,” and the question you heard around the conventions was, “What are you running?”—meaning, “How big is your youth group?”

Pardon the cliché, but size mattered. Job announcements even publicized the fact that a church was looking for a youth worker who could “manage a large ministry with hundreds of kids and dozens of volunteers.” Youth workers were reading more books on management and leadership than on youth culture. Some youth pastors even became consumed with architecture as they planned how to build the new youth wing on the church.

I am deliberately painting with a broad brush, and you may resent the paint I’ve splattered on you. However, we cannot deny that these trends were common in student ministry at the end of the 20th century. In fact, it’s been these very emphases

that Mike Yaconelli has targeted in his “Dangerous Wonder” column in the back of *Youthworker* for several years.

But the days of big programming, dynamic communicators, and huge sound systems is coming to an end. As youth ministry comes of age, and more youth workers are graying in the job (as opposed to jumping to a “real” ministry), the allure of spotlights and microphones is waning. Many Christian colleges and seminaries are taking youth ministry seriously enough to provide professors who reflect theologically on youth work, so more theologically astute individuals are entering the field. And if one thing has been proven time and time again, it’s that a long-term relationship, not big programming, nurtures a student’s faith in Christ.

WHERE WE ARE

Currently, youth ministry is undergoing a revolution. Or better yet, a renaissance. And it is this new era that God's "hounds of heaven" have been hounding us into. It is a renaissance of creativity and innovation—and like any renaissance, it is drawing on the best of the past.

Youth pastors and the institutions that provide for us are changing. People are harking back to the spiritual disciplines and to the classic, orthodox theology that have defined the church for centuries, and they are applying what they find to the practice of youth ministry.

Honestly, the best way for me to validate the reality and essence of this change is to provide a bunch of examples, first on the institutional level:

→ The Lilly Endowment, a private, family foundation in Indianapolis, has given millions of dollars to seminaries, colleges, and other organizations for the development of programs that introduce students to classic theology and to classic spiritual disciplines.

→ The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at San Francisco Theological Seminary is in the midst of a multiyear program to

teach classic disciplines to youth pastors, volunteer leaders, and students. Currently, they are working with 13 churches and 10 denominational leaders, and they periodically report what they have learned at consultations and in print.

→ Upper Room Books has published *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, a book detailing 18 practices such as what to do with your stuff, telling the truth, being welcoming, and grieving. Eighteen students and 18 adults collaborated on this project over two years. Due in 2003 is *Sharing a Way to Live with Teens*, a sequel for youth workers detailing the undergirding theology of the practices and giving ideas for their application.

→ Youth Specialties offers a Labyrinth experience at each of their National Youth Workers Conventions. They have also hired a full-time spiritual director, and they offer free spiritual direction at the conventions. They offer numerous Sabbath retreats every year for youth workers to take some time for silence and learn some spiritual disciplines. And this book is part of their SoulShaper line, of which YS President Mark Oestreicher writes, "By using historic contemplative practices and fleshing them out in the context of modern youth ministry, we're not just connecting kids to God in real and tangible ways—we're also con-

necting kids to God's unfolding story."

→ The Anglican Church in England has hired Jonny Baker, inventor of the Labyrinth Experience detailed in Chapter 12, to find new ways to engage British students in Christian spirituality.

And much is happening as well at the local church and para-church level. My thanks to the many youth workers who sent me their ideas and innovations for inclusion. Here are some that were e-mailed to me and some that I visited:

→ The Boiler Room in Reading, England is housed in a former pub on the spot of a medieval monastery—in fact, they call themselves a "Millennium Three Monastery." Not your average drop-in center for teens, the Boiler Room has people committed to pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week (part of a larger 24-7 prayer movement in the UK). They have a pilgrimage flat (in which I stayed on my visit), rooms for local youth groups to meet, and multiple prayer chapels. Their online "wailing wall" is a place where students from all over the world can post prayer requests, and the pray-ers at the Boiler Room bring those requests before God.

→ Chad Farrand is a youth pastor in Michigan. His senior high

students learned the *lectio divina* method of praying with Scripture in seventh grade, and in a recent congregational poll, these students had the highest rate of daily devotions in the church—higher even than the church elders. Chad e-mailed me this: "Just last week, we were going out to bowl, and one of my freshmen asked, 'Now, we are going to be doing *lectio divina* and some solitude next week, right?' Man, that means so much! These kids crave closeness with God!"

→ Lilly Lewin in Ohio produced a Prayer Room SOS for a week-end retreat. Over the course of 12 stations, students were guided through prayer for themselves, others, and the world, all centered around Isaiah 61. Sweet and sour candies reminded students of the good and bad in life as they prayed for their hometown of Cincinnati; neon-colored sticky notes on windows made a type of stained glass of prayer requests; pieces of broken dishes stuccoed mosaic-style on a wall reminded students of their brokenness. Lilly's goal: "To create an experiential prayer and worship center for use by the students and staff of SOS utilizing tangible mediums to engage all five senses in prayer and worship;" and her purpose: "To encourage prayer in new and exciting ways and to teach us to engage in prayer for personal, local, and global needs."

→ Jeremy Vickers in Pennsylvania wrote, “I ask my youth to fast or give something up/take something on during Lent, and I was shocked to hear that some other youth ministers and churches don’t even talk about Lent. I know many Christians now do not like to follow the Christian year, but I believe that it is vital to the life of our youth. Ancient practices in the church seem to be gaining in popularity, especially in the last five years. I know this is not innovative, but it works. Our youth come out of Lent with a greater appreciation of what they have and who they are. This also helps on mission trips when their intake of food changes for a week or so. Along the same lines, our Survivor trip last year had a similar goal. We left for three days, camped out, no batteries, no watches, nothing technological, and they had challenges, cooked for themselves, read their Bibles and learned what it means to live in a world of beauty and nature. Quite an interesting trip. Kind of an extreme camp out. It changed a few lives.”

→ Brad Miller works in California: “One of the most incredible things we have done in our Sunday evening services is to try to create an environment conducive to experiencing God. After studying God’s Word, we turn down the lights and leave the candles on the tables as the only lights in the room. We begin

to worship. We have 2 separate areas in the back of the church that are sort of ‘God-business stations.’ At each station there is a 6-foot tall cross, communion elements, a tray of tea lights (that can be symbolically lit when lifting up our prayers to God), and a few large candles that provide just enough light. We are very deliberate about inviting everyone to worship God in their own way. We let them know that at any time during worship they can go back to the cross and do their business with God. What is amazing is to see how passionately and sincerely people are connecting with God at those stations. When we give them the freedom to just ‘be,’ they do. It is a beautiful sight to behold.”

→ Jonathan Gonyou assigns his senior highers a chapter a week from Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. He finds the students almost always rise to the challenge of practicing each particular discipline.

→ Richard Logan in Texas brings his students on a weekend SOLO retreat, during which they observe lengthy periods of silence, solitude, and fasting.

→ Eric Haskins in Illinois has three levels at the annual “Weekend of the Disciplines.” Students experience silence and