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Thrive Squad Chases Down Joy Shoplifter
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Abstract

An analysis of youth and poverty and the factors that are promotive for youth in the midst of these circumstances. Elements for youth ministry are discussed and a theology for joy and thriving is offered.

Introduction

　　Health, joy and flourishing in the lives of youth in poor urban contexts is the theme of this essay. A description of poverty in the urban context will be given along with a discussion about how it serves as an inhibitor of joy and flourishing. Next, the issue of trauma will be presented as it accompanies poverty in the context we are ministering in. As these are described they will be followed by an understanding of the elements of ministry needed to create enhancers in the midst of these problems in order to allow for the emergence of faith, joy and flourishing. An explanation of what shape joy, faith and flourishing may take in an urban poor context will be offered. This will include the biblical/theological dimensions.

Joy Shoplifter: Poverty and its consequences for youth

　　Karina is taking basic math in high school for the second time. She has her head on the desk and is holding her abdomen while long division is being explained. The teacher asks her to sit up and pay attention. Karina continues in her present position. The teacher walks up to her and asks what is the matter. Karina says she has cramps. The teacher sends her to the nurse who at first thinks the cramps are due to her menstrual cycle but upon further inquiry finds out that Karina has not eaten solid food in over seven days. For the past two years her family has been waiting to get into affordable housing but in the meantime, everything they have goes into paying their rent. Income poverty creates conditions where a family does not have enough income to cover the basic needs of living such as food, clothing and shelter.[i] Philadelphia's poverty rate is 25.7 percent with 37 percent of the city's children living below the poverty line. Deep poverty is when one lives 50

percent below the federal poverty line. Almost 50 percent of the poor residents of the city live in deep poverty. Hispanics and African Americans have the highest poverty rates at 37.9 and 30.8 percent respectively.[ii] These levels of poverty limit the tax revenue and therefore the support services that government can provide. The economic status of a city has implications for crime, health and public education.[iii]

Poverty may affect the educational attainment, delinquency or risk behaviors of youth. Poor adolescents will have lower rates of school completion which in turn affect the capacity to earn enough income to sustain their own adult lives in the future. The lack of resources such as recreation, the development of the arts or academic extra-curricular activities in poor neighborhoods create an environment where youth spend more hours without adult supervision or guidance or structured activity. Instead, they spend more time with peers in unstructured environments. Poor neighborhoods also offer less safety due to drug activity, violence due to petty crimes and gang violence. This places the youth at risk of being adversely affected by violence and of becoming exposed and involved in at risk behavior. Other factors also affect the lives of the poor: inadequate nutrition, instability of residence that sometimes turns into homelessness, environmental toxins, fewer learning experiences, less access to services, friends or mentoring adults, lower quality of schools, less opportunities for development of gifts, passions or leadership afforded by jobs or structured service activities and family violence. Due to these factors, youth are also more prone to experience diminished physical health which affects school performance. The lack of adequate health services exacerbates these conditions.

Poverty affects the mental health of persons whether children, youth or adults. There is an increase in stressors and less availability of services. The stress levels affect the parents who suffer irritability or depressive symptoms. These are "associated with more conflictual interactions with adolescents, leading to less satisfactory emotional, social and cognitive development."[iv] This makes for difficult parent/child interaction impairing the pathways of guidance that youth desire from their parents.

Poor urban environments expose youth to community violence.[v] "Community violence has been defined as the exposure to violence and violence-related events occurring in or around the home, school, or neighborhood and may involve physical as well as threatened harm."[vi] Young people in low income urban settings are exposed to violence either by experience or by witnessing it on a daily basis. This exposure makes them at risk for adverse mental health outcomes including

posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTS). This will in turn contribute to maladaptive psychological functioning presenting as depression, anxiety, lowered attention and poor school performance.

Depression in youth due to exposure to community violence takes the form of sadness, withdrawal, loneliness and self-hate. Because community violence takes place not as isolated events but is a part of the environmental conditions of urban poor areas, the pervasiveness of exposure is greater while access to mental health services is less and when available, services are of poorer quality. When treatment does take place, it is the presenting symptoms such as depression that are treated and not the underlying causes- PTS due to community violence.

There are gender differences in how youth react to trauma. Females react with more internalizing behaviors such as poor academic performance, while males develop externalizing problems such as depression and suicidal ideations and attempts.[vii] Development of substance abuse often begins after experiencing traumatic events for both males and females.

Youth workers should be trained to understand trauma so that they know what to look for and can do proactive inquiry. This can lead to referrals when possible. Trauma training is becoming more accessible and common in mayor urban centers. Many times it is free to public employees particularly first responders and educators. Youth workers can create an ecology of support systems that will allow them to develop a network of support services both in and around the city. These support networks can be enhanced when a church works within a larger ecclesial body which spans across a larger geography.

Most important is ensuring that the spaces we create for youth can be determined as safe spaces by them where no form of violence is tolerated and where respect is modelled in all interactions. Youth workers ought always to be screened. Such spaces are environments of reflection on one's behavior and the modelling of care and nurture is consistently and systematically practiced and encouraged. Readapting to a safe environment may take some time especially as youth return to violent environs after being in our safe space. The development of a relationship of trust and not only programs becomes the ground for healing as a part of shalom or a fullness of wellbeing for youth.

In their book, Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much, Shafir and Mullinathan write about the long term effects of poverty on persons.[viii] They show the connection between the stressors of poverty and decision making. Persons may make a short term decision that covers what seems like an urgent matter while not seeing an equally urgent, long term issue.[ix] Stress and negative

emotions may decrease a person's willingness to make long term investments.[x] The inability to see the long term picture could exacerbate poverty.

Other researchers have found that persons are adverse to making what may seem to be decisions that place them at risk such as taking a student loan, although it may open a pathway to a future with less poverty. The delay of gratification is also affected. Persons experiencing sadness and anger are less willing to delay gratification. This may have implications for the moral development of youth.

How can we work to progressively alleviate the negative effects of an urban poor context on youth? What are the promotive factors that can contribute to positive developmental outcomes in this context? The development of positive psychological perspectives lead to higher motivation and self-efficacy the effects of which ae greater achievement and status and better emotional and behavioral health.[xi] These elements are some of the components for building resiliency. For example, having friendships gives a young person a sense of belonging and efficacy which in turn, promotes a positive sense of the future. In the present, it helps academic achievement and psychological adjustment that promotes overall motivation.

Healthy psychosocial adjustment is important for adolescent development. Psychosocial adjustment is determined by the interaction of risk and protective factors. This adjustment or lack thereof, affects educational achievement and overall health. If an adolescent faces more risk than promotive factors, they will find themselves struggling throughout the different stages of their lives. Negative neighborhood contexts with a limited selection of peers brings about a lifetime of struggle. Positive health and educational outcomes generate lifelong success. This comes about when an individual has high levels of self-efficacy and cognitive motivational skills. Increasing the levels of a perception of a better future, a sense of friendship and belonging, also increases levels of psychosocial adjustment and the health and educational outcomes.

Thrive Squad: Promotive factors in ministry

In religious youth work, programming and relationship building will promote belonging and friendship. Activities that promote psychosocial adjustment and motivation will generate success in different dimensions of a youth's life moving them on a continuum towards lifelong success where they perceive their lives as bringing positive outcomes, lives full of meaning and purpose. Interventions should include creating team work among peer youth and providing adult mentoring/coaching. Expanding these interventions to the community by including parents, teachers, and health providers can improve life outcomes of urban youth.

The promotion of social capital on the collective rather than individual scale helps build resilience and the ability for a young person to reframe their surroundings in positive ways. One way to promote coping and resilience is by providing long-term positive adult role models for young persons. The focus of their interaction with youth would be to create opportunities for collective problem solving and life skills. Mentors/coaches serve as guides not as controlling parents or rescuers. The later would be disempowering to youth. The purpose of guidance is to bring forth the inner creativity and control of life in the young person. This counteracts hopelessness and despair while also redirecting energies in positive directions that reframe their own lives, communities and ultimately, their perception of life as hopeful. It is this perception of hope that promotes motivation and psychosocial adjustment.

The essential component for this to take place is the committed and caring adult who can buffer the young person growing up in a violent environment from its negative consequences.[xii] This then leaves psychological space for self-definition which in turn fuels resiliency. The ability to see one's life as unfixed or free from being determined by outside forces allows the person to exercise agency. Agency is the capacity to exert power, to operate in the world with command, to achieve an end. It comes about when we believe in ourselves and continues to generate self-confidence. Agency helps construct beliefs and attitudes about life that are not victimizing. It allows teens to rehearse and negotiate with adults forms of being that develop the capacity to overcome the challenging adversities of their lives. This is a power that moves one away from accepting the circumstances of one's life as a fixed reality and allows the person or community to insert power and efforts to change that reality. For example, playing on a sports team allows youth to be guided by coaches to think about and play out attitudes, behaviors and strategies for believing in themselves and each other. Youth can learn to deal with conflict and can test expressions of anger that create team efforts towards a common course. This team building will use or channel the very anger that could be construed as a negative emotion towards persevering or determination in ways that bring the team to a win. The youth learn to use their anger as a force that finds a strategy for overcoming. In similar fashion, abilities not recognized in a school system that is focused on literacy and numeracy can be invited, affirmed and developed. Some of these are the innate wisdom about how to work creatively with people or business and social entrepreneurship. These constructive forces can come together in a group of youth to help build wellbeing as a collective.

Wellbeing as mental health is defined as "intellectual competence self-efficacy, secure attachments with others, meaningful involvement in one's community, expressions of social justice

and access to recreation, education and vocational opportunities."[xiii] When these are not sufficiently present teens resort to problem behaviors as a way of sustaining wellbeing. This may take the form of participation in gangs or illegal activities as forms of business entrepreneurship to secure other needed resources. Attachment to capable and caregiving adults is important. Teens seek out the interaction with their caregivers as a way of creating their identity as adults. They rehearse these identities in that interaction and while they may challenge or push back on their limits and responsibilities, they still yearn for the guidance and protection that the same limits and responsibilities provide as long as they are balanced with the room to exercise control over their own identities. This balance gives the teen the room and the support to grow as well as the agency and acceptance necessary for a healthy sense of wellbeing. Ungar posits that "teens experience themselves as powerful depending on how they participate in the social discourses that define them."[xiv] This discourse provides a language for self-description as well as a sense of value that results in feeling "confident, powerful and mentally healthy."[xv]

To see an example of this, let us look at Angel, a teen whose parents spoke about him every evening as someone who would never amount to anything. He listened to this discourse through the vent in his room. The negative narrative pounded him every evening and overpowered him rendering him incapable of developing. It made hopelessness set in making him feel he had no control over his own narrative, it threatened his mental health because it denied him power over his own becoming. He suffered a break down and left his home. He was fortunate enough to find strong male mentors who served as role models while bolstering his self-confidence so that with the resources they made available to him, he was able to reconstruct and work towards the reality he wished for himself. While he lost the economic support of his home and had to fend for himself, he gained self-confidence and became resilient enough to sustain his goals and regain his mental health.

A different example is Maria who was told that she could be and do anything. When she confronted the reality of her limitations, without the guidance that would lead her to the discovery of her true gifts or the resources to develop these, she became depressed and anxious. She was unable to define herself and pursued no aspiration. When she attended a youth retreat with a friend where she was coached into discovering understanding and developing her sense of calling on a personal level in connection to the body of Christ, she regained a realistic and realizable vision of herself. The church leaders helped her to gain access to the resources for going to college and her perception of a positive future became joy and flourishing for her.

These two scenarios demonstrate the need that youth have for caregivers and the power they have in guiding a young person to constructing a strong self-defining narrative and a healthy sense of wellbeing. The second example also shows how a false reality of self can bring about depression.

<u>Thrive Squad: The gospel as narrative of hope</u>

The ability to cope in the midst of difficult circumstances is essential to resilience. Coping is not only about problem solving or strategic thinking but it "includes thought and behaviors that are put in place when one is faced with a stressful event" or ongoing life events.[xvi] For these to emerge and become embedded in the ongoing ways of thinking and narrative of one's life, reflection is necessary. Reflection involves talking about the events, venting, exploring options with others who are also going through the same or similar experiences. The opportunity to hear others who have coped with their circumstances helps validate one's experiences or to correct cognitive distortions.[xvii] Reflecting this way with peers can become a powerful way to deal with the tendency towards isolating behaviors.

The gospel can become a narrative of hope. In ways similar to the Latin American base communities, youth can be led to reflect on their lives alongside the stories in the Bible. For example, Elis who said she was dead inside identified with the story of the raising of Lazarus. Sonia a teen mom of 16 years old, reflected on how the word (logos) brought all things into being and she decided that she would use her words to bring about positive things in her life and the life of her child. The understanding of the chemistry of positive and negative thoughts in the body made a group of young men commit to exchanging positive words with each other by way of texts and cards which they called life chips. Each chip had Philippians 4:6-8 written on the back. Jamir held onto Ephesians 6:11-16, the passage about the armor of God. He was visited every evening by a demon who wanted to take control of him. The passage gave him protection and authority to fight until the demon no longer came to him. Dramatizing the stories in their own interpretations has at times even led to rituals of healing, exorcisms of the negative effects of fears and traumas, and forgiveness for their own violent behaviors. When internalized, the biblical narratives give them confidence and hope. The stories create pathways to encounters with God- faith moments. When the connection with God is made the youth tap into a source of inner authority. In these moments of encounter youth have repeatedly said "I feel this weight come off of me, this peace." Herein begins joy and thriving.

Allen et.al. explain, that while adversity in their daily lives can affect emotions, behaviors and a sense of a hopeful future, active coping is connected to a positive perspective of life, the future

and hope which helps adolescents to adapt attitudes and behaviors that stem from a problem-solving mindset.[xviii] The work of youth ministers in creating positive correlations through this reflection process with coping strategies, attitudes and the biblical narrative translates into an increase of resilience and hope.

An example of this is the Timoteo football league that spans a variety of neighborhoods in Philadelphia. About six years ago, three churches and a handful of young men set up a flag football league. The league was going to be an outlet for youth to interact with adults, develop faith and grow as individuals. As a way of developing faith the coaches have the youth engage the Bible stories in tandem with the personal development needed to become a strong team member. Transformation takes place when resilience and hope take root. Such an example is Bryant Keal. After joining the league, Keal was quick to throw blame on teammates and had trouble controlling his temper. With the help of his coach Ness, regular worship and team-oriented practice, Bryant learned to be humble to other players. Eventually he became a team captain. He is currently in his second year at Kutztown University and returns to the Timoteo League to coach. This type of transformation takes a while. Coach Ness Espinoza reflects, "During the first few seasons, coaches played with the teens—getting the youth to step up was difficult. We couldn't throw them into leadership positions. It was very hard. But as some kids gained confidence, others followed; there's a ripple effect."[xix]

Thrive Squad: Flourishing as future aspirations

Future aspirations are affected by factors that can be found at the individual, familial and community levels. At the community level neighborhood and school elements are included. Self identifications of race and gender and the perceptions of how these affect what can and can't be done, language proficiency and citizenship status affect aspirations. At the family level the expectations of parents and the parent child relationship are critical to influencing future aspirations.[xx] When youth do not grow up in the family but in juvenile facilities or foster homes, then the affirmations of staff or foster parents play an equally important role.[xxi] Socio-economic indicators and role models influence how adolescents form their expectations for their future. Finding a sense of belonging in their community can influence formation of aspirations for youth who want to remain in the community where they have a strong sense of belonging thus keeping their definition of aspirations within what they see even when this is limiting.[xxii] Henrika McCoy and Elizabeth A. Bowen identified family strengths particularly parent-adolescent relationships and the improvement of neighborhood safety as critical for raising adolescent future aspirations.

Among the components that are important for gaining healthy perceptions of future success is educational efficacy. Youth who are resilient and socially well-adjusted have higher educational success. In a study named Religion Matters: Predicting Schooling Success Among Latino Youth authors David Sikkink and Edwin Hernandez found that Latin@ congregations have an educational impact by providing educational opportunities for parents and youth.[xxiii] A congregation's direct and indirect provision of educational experiences, such as tutoring for children, organized outings or Bible studies, reinforce the value of learning. Churches provide opportunities for enhancing informational networks about the process of schooling for parents. Knowledge of such resources can dispel fears or barriers for aspiring for more. Time spent in church together increases time that parents and youth spend together.[xxiv] This is a positive factor for influencing educational efficacy which in turn affects aspirations in positive ways. The study also found that Latin@ youth who actively attend church or see their religious faith as important achieve scholastic efficacy.[xxv] Also, because of the enhanced networks of the church, religious involvements enhance the "opportunities for Latin@ youth to reach their academic potential."[xxvi] As mentioned earlier, educational efficacy becomes a doorway to perceiving the future as positive and giving an overall sense of wellbeing and joy for thriving in the midst of difficult environments.

Thrive Squad Theology

Salvation means health, shalom, wellbeing. Resiliency is more than surviving. It comes about through the hard work of creating safe spaces for reflection and encounter with self, God and each other and together perceiving and finding ways that promote positive perceptions of the future, aspirations that are hope giving. Resiliency is a type of salvation in poor urban neighborhoods. It encompasses the power to *luchar* that comes from the Jesus who came to give life more abundantly. Some of the youth came from places where their wish was for death but the strength of the God of life gave them the power to face another day- resiliency. Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara speaks about this power in the following way: "I have observed an experience of a power that is totally different. This power seems over and above known powers; it is simply the power to live! In spite of all contradictions involving this inconceivable power, it possesses in popular culture some element of a real savior."[xxvii] The coping strategies of resiliency become more than a mental exercise. It is psychosocial adjustment, academic efficacy, a positive perspective of the future as the infrastructure that holds one's aspirations and dreams, it's the daily ways of finding alternatives and problem solving.

Resiliency as thriving is safe space-sanctuary where there is protection from violence and a space of sabbath from stress that allows healing. Sanctuary is where friendship and belonging can be cultivated along with the disciplines necessary to sustain the strategic steps towards becoming and growing, which make possible the accomplishments aspired to. They are a wisdom, an expression of prophetic imagination, spiritual disposition that generates hope.

Hope is when we contemplate the trouble and our "imagination is aroused to picture every issue, to try every door and to enter again into the trouble with many possibilities."[xxviii] This hope is a powerful force that withstands despair. It is a saving power for those who despairing, give up the hope to live. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life (Provs. 13:12 NRSV). Youth ministers working together with adolescents, parents and other nurturing forces in solidarity, enter into the agony of hopelessness and powerlessness pushing the imagination to find possibilities beyond despair.

It takes a while to build up hope and while it is being framed, while we find ourselves waiting, we have relationships. These are the foundations of resilience, joy and thriving. Relationships with youth help hold them together. Perichoresis is the theological term used to speak of the relationship of the three persons of the trinity with one another. The three interpenetrate each other in such intimacy that they are in a dance and we are invited to join the dance. In this dance we are attuned to the holiness and therefore the value of one another. This dance is the spirituality of our relationships which invites us to incarnate the love of Christ by modelling unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness, and accountability. In that sanctuary we work on relationships that will serve as the foundation for the patterns of exchange and mutual support that will become the basis for resilience. Valuing teens, earning trust that will allow us to hold each other accountable, transparency on the part of both that shines into our wounds are some of the things to cultivate in this space. Our wounds are spaces from which once healed, a balsam may flow for the healing of others.

It is a grace space for cultivating the inner voice of teens by asking questions that examine the reasons and directions of their conduct and actions. We talk about the underlying differences of opinions and articulate ideals together and share stories of faith. We help shape the attitudes so that adolescents can cultivate their "*I amness*" by communicating to them honor and respect without judgment. Disciplines are constructed together for it is these that make up the infrastructure for holding together the fullness of our personhood and dreams for attaining the future hoped for. Without goals, strategies and the disciplines that hold these, dreams become delusions for they have

not the means of coming to fruition. It is the relational that facilitates the transformations that prepare us for thriving.

   Lastly, wellbeing for youth it is about positive outlooks in the present that lead to a good future, relationships that support and guide, spaces for defining identity, self confidence that brings about academic efficacy, resilience. It is shalom, a concept that includes the dimensions of love, loyally, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessing and righteousness. It is a vison of connectedness. [xxix]

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