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Introduction

This essay seeks to shed light on the topic of adolescence and joy. It's specific intent is to name Christian worship as a primary zone for youth to receive and share joy and to shape their joy Christianly. Proceeding from this theological opening, I offer several practical theological implications for the church as it seeks to: (1) attend to the varieties of ways youth may awaken to joy; (2) discover how worship is key to the formation of joy; and (3) assist youth in discerning and taking up joyous patterns of living (Christian vocations). In preparation for writing I reflected at some length on my own adolescence then informally queried a few adolescents on their feelings and experiences of joy. Their reflections were often quite moving, so I include some of them below. In addition, (the second half of) my life has been devoted to thinking about and practicing youth ministry in light of the practice of Christian worship and especially the Baptismal Covenant through Duke's Youth Academy for Christian Formation (DYA). That experience inescapably shapes my perspective on any subject. Finally, I am indebted to those "saints who have gone before me" (this fall) and whose wisdom is collected in the form of the summative case statement plus Matthew Kuan Johnson's fantastic essay on all things socio/bio/psycho/neuro/ and even theo-logical in relation to young people and joy.

A Little Theology of Joy

With other participants I am inclined to think about joy *in relation* to some person, object, or encounter. Put differently joy's character, like love, is to be shared. I propose, therefore, that joy originates in and is a dimension of the love shared between the members

of the Triune God. Indeed, that they “dance” together in relations of mutual love evinces a sense of their love as positively joyous.

The church encounters this triune dance of love by way of its worship. Specifically, it receives the Good News that God creates out of a “surplus” of love (Schonborn 2011, 14); that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal definitively the superabundance of divine love, and that the Spirit works within and beyond the church to foster creation’s flourishing toward the fullness of God’s Reign.

Through baptism into Jesus and in the name of the Trinity, the newly (re-) born may not only rejoice in receiving this gift of divine love, they are invited to step lively into the joyous dance of new creation: “I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly,” promises Jesus (John 10:10).

In blessed circularity, therefore, the church’s joyful doxological confession begets further doxology. What more fitting response can we imagine than praise, thanksgiving, and rejoicing in the One who joyfully gives all good gifts? In continuing recognition and remembrance of its joyful creation, redemption, and graced sustenance, the church gathers in worship to offer God gratitude and joyous thanksgiving only to have its offerings multiplied and returned by same God who is its source.

Christian joy is qualified by the cross upon which Jesus is crucified. It is not cancelled, however. Roberta Bondi has helped me to understand this better than anyone. She quotes a sixth century monastic describing Jesus as “crucified in the divine cheerfulness” (1987, 22). Bondi finds this sentiment neither gnostic nor perverse. For her, Christ’s passion is no less an expression of the surplus of divine (joyful) love than his incarnation or resurrection. Just as Mark’s Jesus proclaims the need to take up one’s cross, Bondi recognizes that becoming Christian does not preclude suffering. Nevertheless the redeeming

intent behind the passion of Christ is God's original delight in and love for creation. It is possible to sustain joy in the midst of suffering.

This "realistic" joy requires that it become more than a momentary feeling. Christian joy should be conceived, therefore, as an affection, a perduring disposition of the heart, a bodily hermeneutical stance earnestly "desiring the kingdom" in hope. Christian joy acknowledges the present reality of suffering, but it is not defeated by it.

Adolescence and the First Tastes of Joy

In his description of adolescent "exuberance," Matthew Kuan Johnson implies that the youthful pump is primed for joy. Cognitive and affective developments in the brain enable the feeling of emotions at a depth unavailable to children while, at the same time, emotions are not yet highly regulated by what will become in the adult brain the "executive function." That propensity for passion combined with the broadly human capacities for mimesis and susceptibility to emotional contagion make the teen brain (and teens themselves) a lollapalooza waiting to happen. Consider the relatively recent (but now passé?) phenomenon of the "flash mob" as one concrete social outcome of this synaptic stew.

Adolescent brain development is also associated with the emergent capacity for reflection. Reflection makes possible everything from considering what it's like to walk in another's shoes to munching delightedly on metaphors. Of course, to a certain degree, reflection also presumes a self as the basis from which to reflect. Yet in my conversations with young people and in my own memory not so much "self" as "self-transcendence" seems associated with joy. One conversation partner, a young man, describes an experience of joyful self-transcendence while on a month long trip through the mountain west with his father. They had mostly been car camping but were on this occasion doing a fifty mile backpacking trip from the northern entrance to the southern border of Zion National Park.

For the first two days they had stair-stepped their way ever higher through a succession of long valleys. In the middle of the second day, they'd hiked over a rise opening to a panoramic vista revealing the massive mountains that constitute the walls of Zion Canyon.

He reports:

I stopped worrying about how many miles we'd gone and how many were left to go, where we'd camp, what we'd eat, whether the cliff bar would make me feel uneasy. It was so quiet along that stretch; the sagebrush muffled the wind....I couldn't feel my feet hit the ground,...It's a good feeling, where I know I'm moving but don't really know how. The sudden wash of color just stopped my internal dialogue and I could only think about the color contrast: the pale green sage against the beige-red-purple-white rock and the deep blue sky.

To be sure, this is not the first person to experience a Zion? Mountain High. Nor does it necessarily add up to an encounter with the triune God. It does, however, reveal the power of self-transcendence to evoke joy in young people. Though he doesn't say so explicitly, he had literally stumbled into communion with something way bigger than himself. The encounter evoked joy resonant Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's "flow experience.. The aesthetic nature of his experience is also an oft-repeated theme in young people's stories of joy. I will return to it below.

Other youth speak of what I am calling the joy of self-transcendence through their participation in sports teams, musical groups, and similar cooperative ventures. They name a "more than the sum of its parts" quality to their participation capable of creating a power and feeling of living beyond themselves. As a young person my thing was music. I played percussion in diverse groups from marching band to jazz ensemble to my city's symphony orchestra. Occasionally in practice or performance we would find ourselves caught up in the transcendent power, the glory even, of the music. We could see it on the face of the conductor and feel the electricity between us. On those occasions our ensemble became a

unified body. One of my own joyful adolescent memories is of a performance of “The Pines of Rome” with the local symphony. Respighi is not subtle, the piece calls for a massively bulked up orchestra (two harps!), noisy percussion (a gong and a ratchet even!) plus an extra brass section playing from the balcony. The need for more brass meant that a number of my high school buds were called in as players. At practice we made faces at each other between stage and balcony. During the actual performance and as the final movement slowly marched toward its triple fortissimo climax the house lights were brought up to illuminate the balcony brass. I could also see faces of audience members; some euphoric, some awed; it wasn’t just musicians who were caught up this time. We were all in this joyful zone together.

I am not suggesting that either of these cases automatically qualifies as Christian joy. Prevenient grace maybe, mature joy, probably not. Instead I am simply pointing to representative experiences of young people’s first tastes of joy. As noted, Christian joy is an affection, a habitual “posture” of being, a virtue of character formed over a lifetime. Even if more subtle and mature than the singular emotional experiences described above, however, the human expression of Christian joy springs from and even in maturity retains some of the affective flavor of this original joy. The same bodily machinery at work in these awakenings to joy is ingredient to joyful Christian affections. Adolescents who can name experiences of transcendent joy are already “primed” for receiving and sharing Christian joy.

Forming Joy: Youthful Communities of Worship and Other Practices of Hope

Worship as a Primary Practice for Forming Joy

Since I have claimed that youth are something like a neurological party waiting to happen, we ought not be surprised at their passion for worship. Augustine, just before evoking the now famous restless hearts trope, says “you stimulate us to take pleasure in praising you” (Baker, Nyberg, & Tufano, 1993, 8). Nor should we be surprised when

adolescent worship is sometimes likened to a joyous concert that conveys them to the summit of ecstasy. Those same synapses and neural networks are involved in these varieties of experiences. We ought to be invested in the object of their worship, however. Christians affirm, for example, that God created both the mountains *and* Respighi. In other words, Christian worship makes normative claims about the source and content of Christian joy. In some ways it taps beautifully into youth's predisposition to praise and delight in what they love. The Eucharistic imperative to "Lift up Your Hearts!" flows completely with the youthful grain, for example. (I've never heard "*We lift them up to the Lord!*" declared with more vigor than by youthful assemblies!) In their inclination to joyful praise adolescents are a gift to the church. Yet sometimes we adults, perhaps fearful of harshing the kids' mellow, shy away from disclosing the cruciform shape of Christian joy. We get around this by excising rites of lament, confession, reconciliation, healing, and intercessory prayer from youth worship. My sense, however, is that not only do adolescents need the gift of cruciform joy to properly form their expressions of joy, developmentally speaking, *they can take it*. Sociology and cultural studies tell us that young people become acquainted with suffering early in life while their demographic isolation avails them fewer and fewer resources for responding constructively to it. Worship that invites youths' pathos as well as their praise becomes a rarified zone of truth. (This is only true, however, to the extent that worship interprets Jesus' passion as kenotic solidarity with humanity rather than as appeasement of an indignant daddy.) That the liturgy invites youth to confess their suffering while it juxtaposes that suffering to God's joyous self-giving even from the cross contributes to the authentic formation of the Christian affection of joy.

Once at DYA a guest priest invited students to receive an anointing and laying of hands for healing after receiving the Eucharist. I knew they were already freaking about

drinking real wine, so I figured a public healing rite would be the bridge too far. Of course nearly every student partook of the healing rite. They were desperate for someone (maybe even God) to touch their suffering. Catharsis was in the air; students wept openly. Suffering and joy comingled. The truth was enacted.

Worship Shapes Communities of Hope

Not only does the liturgical *ordo* prescribe joy, it holds the potential to order communal life toward joy. This was the genius of monastic rules of life, a genius that is being re-appropriated in varieties of settings today. Eucharist, for example, sends its recipients into the world to practice hospitality, to seek to fill the world's hungers, and to live sustainably on the planet. Baptism enjoins the washing of wounds, the satiation of thirsts for justice, righteousness, and liberation, and the reconfiguring of social orders befitting God's Reign. (It washes persons equally from pretense or self-loathing envisioning a new politics in the process.) In sum, liturgical practices prompt Christian practices beyond the worshipping assembly.

Once a group of students and mentors from DYA shared a hamburger cookout with a community of HIV positive persons who'd been ostracized by their families. After dinner they returned to campus for worship. In their small group meeting that evening, one young man remarked, "we had communion twice today." He had at least intuited the connection between liturgy and living and had expressed his sense of the intersection of suffering and hope.

With Kenda Dean, therefore, I am a proponent of the church's sponsorship of retreats and camps for young people where liturgical and extra-liturgical social practices may be linked into mutually supportive and interpretive communal ecologies. These settings become outposts of hope where adolescents, by participating in Christian life in all its

abundance, may powerfully sense the redemptive activity of God in their lives and in the world. By living simply in community, offering and receiving hospitality, tending the earthly garden (many Christian camps are adapting an agrarian ethos), sharing honest conversation, coming to know adult exemplars, and worshipping daily, adolescents “dance” toward God’s Reign. As Dean says, these are “eschatological” events (Dean and Root: 2011, 169-173) revealing and inviting participants’ reveling in the in-breaking of God’s Reign.

Even as adolescents “go home” again, events like these may, to paraphrase William James, become benchmarks by which the rest of one’s life is measured and interpreted. At the first reunion of DYA alums, a college freshman testified: “DYA screwed up my life, forever, ...in a good way.”

Living Joyfully

In recognition that adolescents tend to be forward looking and they come to adulthood in a work-obsessed culture, DYA seeks to help them imagine baptismal vocations. I have written elsewhere on vocational discernment with the young, so I will limit my comments here to just a few. Baptismal vocation is as much about identity as it is a life’s practice. It is keyed to incorporation into Christ. Christian vocation therefore partly solves the paradox of choice. If my identity and call are linked to Christ’s identity and call then the future is not wide open and I am not responsible for constructing myself. Who I become is a gift to be received joyfully from the three in one.

Students often express joy as their vocational imaginations awaken. A young woman, now studying to be a dancer reported:

When I was in high school, I think I experienced joy right after seeing a concert at [the American Dance Festival]. Dance had always been an after school activity. It was never something I thought was [life]. Anyways, the exact ADF piece I remember seeing that night consisted of two men in their underwear shimmying around in a kiddie swimming pool. I think I was joyful afterwards because I had finally discovered weirdos that also viewed the world

in a (semi-) distorted way. I felt excited by the idea of continuing the weirdness, that it was something that I, too [could] study and be a part of. I felt a shift in my attitude towards dance that night. Instead of being something I happened to be good at, it became a thing I wanted more of.

Another young woman, a DYA student, enacted a similar story. One day a faculty member helped students to interpret dense incarnational imagery in a Denise Levertov poem. In this process, the young woman simply soared with interpretive insight; we were stunned by her vision and passion as she described the risks Levertov (and God) took in offering infant Jesus to the world as a “dumb lamb.” Moved by her contributions I asked her about them later. She shed tears of joy as she reported her lifelong love for reading and writing poetry coupled with the realization, for the first time, that her love for this art could become a life of faith as it was for Levertov.*

Conclusion

I have attempted to frame joy as a gift of God’s overflowing superabundant love. I have also suggested three possible contexts in the lives of adolescents where joy may be received, deepened toward an affection of character, and, ultimately, incorporated into a way of life. Though I’ve claimed realism for Christian joy in light of the cross, I have not addressed even a little bit sin as an agent seeking to defeat joy. I’ve not mentioned, for example, that our culture cares not a whit for helping poets and dancers to earn their daily bread. I fully expect those issues will be addressed by my colleagues and come up in shared conversation.

* Though these stories not representative of all adolescents everywhere, I am interested in how often beauty in some form factors into vocational imagination. What is it about aesthetics that summons joy?

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