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# Agency

## *The Joy of Activism*

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While researching joy in and across African American life, religion, culture, and history, we began to wrestle with the historical dimensions of black joy and how cultural memory helps youth and young adults (and even adults) embrace lives of joy and flourishing, but we also began to think about the components or characteristics of this historical black joy. In that research we summarized that black joy (or joy in African American culture and history) was multidimensional.

Black joy is searched and yearned for. People want to see, envision, experience joy in the midst of and beyond life's trials and tribulations. Black joy is expressed, embodied, and encountered. Joy is not simply expressed orally or verbally. It is expressed, embodied, and encountered in music, dance, smiles, shouts, hugs, food, and laughter shared between loved ones and strangers and as the result of religious, celebratory, and critical life experiences. Black joy is cultivated and chosen. In spite of all that trails against joy, people make a conscious decision to enter into what they envision and expect to be a joy-promising and joy-infusing experience, often with and invited by God. Black joy is resistance and justice. Joy is a way of being and triumphing or having the last word in the face of wounding, life-negating, and life-taking systems, structures,

and societies that say black people are not worthy of living, let alone enjoying life. Black joy is intergenerational, communal, eco-connected, and transcendent. Joy has vertical and horizontal dimensions. Joy does not happen in isolation. It is not a one-directional experience. It happens horizontally in relation to and in mutual exchanges across generations, in communities, and with the natural world. It happens vertically

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**Youth need agency to choose and more fully experience joy.**

in relation to God in response to God's invitation to lean, trust, call on God, and step out on God's word.

Building on this multidimensional nature of black joy, in this chapter we focus more

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carefully on the ways that joy is often chosen and cultivated and how we might invite youth and young adults to experience joy for themselves or to see joy as an option in spite of all that life throws at them. One of the important dimensions of choosing joy is agency. In fact agency is an allied or parallel skill that youth and young adults need in order to choose and more fully experience joy.

## What Is Agency?

Why is agency important to adolescent flourishing and to empowering youth to choose and experience joy? Like joy, agency is another concept that defies easy definition and articulation. Without rehearsing many of the debates regarding agency in the social sciences, we note that most often agency is viewed as simply a belief in one's self-regulative capability to attain goals<sup>1</sup>, or as the "capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices."<sup>2</sup> Agency often is

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1 Barry J. Zimmerman and Timothy Cleary, "Adolescents' Development of Personal Agency: The Role Of Self-Efficacy Beliefs And Self-Regulatory Skill" in *Self Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents*, (Information Age Publishing, 2006), 47.

2 "Agency" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Stanford University, accessed June 18, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/>. See also Nicki Lisa

described in individual and personal terms—deriving from our theorizing about a singular agent or actor. However there is also collective and social agency. In particular many social scientists spend years wrestling with the social dimensions of agency and attempting to determine to what extent social structures, including things such as class, sex/gender, and race, affect one’s agency or ability to act independently. In part this debate can be summarized as a question of agency vs. structure.<sup>3</sup>

Looking specifically at ethnic minority youths and young adults and their communities, it is important to recognize several potential pitfalls in discussions of agency. Often when we discuss structures and systems, we downplay or overlook the agency of black and brown youths and young adults in the face of immense social structures and systems. While it is important to note fully the power of oppressive structures and the impact of years of oppression on individuals and communities, means of cultivating agency must also be discussed in order for minority youths to flourish. Without a genuine belief in their ability to act and make choices even in the face of structures and systems that are rigged against their success, minority youth and young adults cannot even enter discussions of thriving. In other words it is important for us to recognize that all youths and young adults have agency—the ability to make decisions that affect their life outcomes—even in the harshest and most oppressive situations.

We cannot downplay their agency, and we must remember the instructions of earlier liberation educators and organizers such as Septima Clark and Paulo Freire, who emphasized the necessity of believing in and trusting the people to be agents and actors in their own liberation and success.<sup>4</sup> Part of Freire’s discussion of the process of human-

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Cole, “How Sociologists Define Human Agency,” ThoughtCo., accessed June 18, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/agency-definition-3026036>.

3 *Agency*, Stanford.

4 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 2003) and Katherine Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 2009) for a fuller discussion of Freire and Clark’s strategies and emphasis on love and trust of people in education and social change.

ization (or overturning dehumanization) was that people must see themselves and others as capable of creating change in their own lives. Agency resists attempts at both dehumanization and rendering others powerless (or making people feel as if they are powerless). Similarly Clark's success in training an entire generation of disenfranchised black southerners to read and write so that they could register to vote rests in her inherent belief that they were capable not only of basic literacy but also of full participation in their communities and in the government. She trusted them to be full citizens and agents of social transformation.

This belief in people has to be expanded to youths and young adults, so that we never overlook the capacities of youths to fully participate in their lives and contribute to their communities and world right now. Several religious educators and youth workers have noted the ways that in the United States we have (in the words of David White) domesticated adolescents—pushing them to the sidelines of adult life.<sup>5</sup> And while we don't want youths to have to take on undue and unfair adult responsibilities too soon, we need to recognize their capacities. Likewise we must recognize the differences that youths from ethnic minority communities experience in terms of responsibilities and assumption of adult roles.

Poetry by ethnic minority young women writers share the collective experiences of many nondominant youths and young adults. These poems describe the responsibilities that minority youths have had to take on even as middle schoolers and teens. The words of Nova Venerable, a young poet featured in the documentary *Louder than a Bomb*,<sup>6</sup> as she describes her care of her brother, Cody, epitomize the ways many minority adolescents do not have the privilege to simply wait to grow up. Her poem points to the ways that agency and responsibility look differently for many youths.

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5 See David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2005).

6 *Louder than a Bomb*, dir. Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel. Siskel/Jacobs Productions, 2011.

Nova writes:

My youngest brother was born with my grandfather's nose  
round like spools of thread,  
my father's eyes and my mother's genes.

...

But I can't help but wonder  
Can his brain still hold the times I meshed his food up when  
he was 8 or changed his diapers at 7.  
Will he miss me when I am not there to run my fingers  
through his hair like Pink Oil when he wakes up from ear tube  
surgeries or seizures.  
Will he remember how he slept in my bed every night after  
mama left, and  
I held him like an extra pillow.  
Or when my arms were his restraints when daddy said put  
him in middle without seatbelt so he would be the first to die  
in car accident.  
Can he know how he found a mother in big sister?

...

I hope that he won't grow accustomed to not pronouncing  
my name when I go away to college,  
and I pray I pray that his seizures won't kill him before his dia-  
betes does.<sup>7</sup>

Her words force us to wrestle with what agency, joy, and flourishing look like for Nova and many others like her. In many ways she is the epitome of agency. She reminds adults and her peers through her creative art that these are her experiences and that she has been making choices about how to care for her brother for years, in spite of the adults around her. She demonstrates agency in choosing not only to live this but also to share parts of her life in her art—speaking to and with other

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7 Novana Venerable, LTAB 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kpt1rCtPEQ> (accessed April 30, 2018).

youths to offer the larger society reminders of the health disparities in many communities, as well as reminding religious people that often our platitudes about God don't make sense in light of the lived realities of people all around us. Nova reminds us of the role of agency and making choices that might appear resistant to the stereotypes of young adults while describing how she faces head on the reality that she is being expected to be parent to her brother long before her more privileged counterparts might have even a part-time job or a student government position.

As concerned adults we must be aware of these differences and be intentional about cultivating the agency of youth and young adults across the spectrum in the United States. Katherine Turpin and Anne Carter Walker, in their book *Nurturing Different Dreams*,<sup>8</sup> remind us that agency for youths, particularly minority or nondominant youths, looks different and can often take on an oppositional or resistance stance/character. Agency is connected to identity, one's sense of who one is and will become (as well as who people, society, etc., expects one to be). Agency is also intricately connected to resisting attempts to prescribe or limit this sense of who and what a person can do and be. Walker and Turpin give examples of students who already have to contribute to their families economically and through childcare and chores, resisting the middle-class narrative that adolescence is simply a time of preparation for the future, where students pass through classes without fully considering what contributions they could make to their lives now. Instead some students resist and protest these expectations, with positive and negative results—but in any case, they demonstrate their agency in the matter. Turpin and Walker write

Youth agency, whether developed in authorized or unauthorized forms, serves a key function in helping young people grow into their full sense of vocation. Attending to the multiple sites

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8 Katherine Turpin and Anne Carter Walker, *Nurturing Different Dreams: Youth Ministry across Lines of Difference* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014).

of agency development among non-dominant youth requires movement beyond typical understandings of entitlement to consider practices of resistance and collective agency in new ways. Often that agency enlivens to fulfill dreams that may be distinctive from those of their adult mentors.<sup>9</sup>

So, what does this all mean for us? How do we help youth cultivate various forms of agency? And in particular, where should we look to take seriously the variety of agency that youths and young adults have and demonstrate right now?

## **Black Youth Agency as Activism**

Where are black youths and young adults experiencing or exhibiting agency and joy? One of the most frequent manifestations of agency among youths and young adults is work in their communities. In particular we focus on their collective agency in resisting attempts to domesticate them and to make them spectators in their own lives. Over the past few years, we have observed increasing numbers of students resisting this passive image of adolescence by participating in acts of resistance and civil disobedience. One example took place in a Chicago high school a few years back. The mayor of Chicago visited an esteemed high school, where he usually gets a warm reception and where the students represent success stories of urban youth with a 100 percent graduation rate and college acceptance rate.<sup>10</sup> Instead of standing to recite the school's creed, the students started chanting "Sixteen shots! Sixteen shots! Sixteen shots!" It became a rallying cry and a well-timed exhibition of their collective agency.

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9 Turpin and Walker, *Nurturing Different Dreams*, 54.

10 "Students Chant '16 Shots!' As Emanuel Visits Urban Prep," CBS Chicago, December 16, 2015, accessed June 22, 2016, <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2015/12/16/students-chant-16-shots-as-emanuel-visits-urban-prep/>.

But why? Why would these “good” kids decide to chant against the mayor instead of standing to recite the school’s creed? They were protesting the fatal police shooting of seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald and calling for the mayor’s resignation for his delaying and possible cover-up of the information that led to the indictment of Officer Jason Van Dyke. These well-behaved and respectable students made a conscious choice to participate in a legacy of civil disobedience in order to bring attention to injustices around them. In truth the frustrations and outright rage at systems and structures that continue to oppress minorities and youth in the United States offer many snapshots of the role of agency in adolescence and demonstrate where and how youth participate in their larger communities—making decisions and choices that not only affect their individual lives and future trajectories but also have the potential to impact the larger society for good.

The last seven to ten years have experienced an uptick in youth activism and political engagement—notably the resurgence of a type of activism across socioeconomic classes and an increased interest in community organizing—with an emphasis on the unique role of social media. Protests such as Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, and most recently March for Our Lives are becoming key historical markers and movements for recent generations of young people.

## **Activism and Faith**

However, as a Christian practical theologian, my (Almeda) work also forces me not only to wrestle with what is going in society in general but also to look specifically at how and where we see examples of youth agency in Christian communities and how faith connects or does not connect with questions of agency and adolescent flourishing. Therefore I went looking for examples of youths and young adult exemplifying agency as activism and how this activism and agency was inspired by or inspiring their faith. Part of this research entailed exploring exemplars of black Christian youth activism, even though young people do



not understand their social and political agency primarily as Christian. Inclusion of the narratives of young Christian activists counters some of the dominant narratives about youth agency and spirituality and offers important models to other youths of the interconnection and integration of faith and activism.

As I looked at the array of youth activism, the landscape included individuals and groups who were directly involved in starting movements and others who later took them up and began to protest, write about, and reflect on the current injustices facing people of color locally and around the globe.<sup>11</sup> Within these groups are also strong African American Christians who have vocally participated in and reflected upon the ways that activism is strengthening and often challenging their faith and practices. For example Jonathan Butler, a graduate student, participated in a hunger strike at the University of Missouri in order to demand change on that campus. Jonathan took seriously what he was embarking upon and recounted to me how he had to draw on his faith, pray, and call his mentors and pastors, because he knew that he could die fighting for what he believed in.<sup>12</sup> Another example is Bree Newsome, who is best-known for scaling the flagpole in South Carolina to remove the Confederate flag days after nine people were massacred in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Newsome's work stood out because of the ways that she publicly quoted psalms and prayers as she protested, offering youth and adults another model of black public faith and witness.

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11 The list of people who are now part of the Black Lives Matter movement and the many organizations that have been created as a direct spin off (and at times in opposition to the ways that the original creators wanted their worked used) are innumerable. Part of the generativity of the hashtag has a great deal to do with the ways that social media is changing how they protest and share information. It also allows for a different type of activism and movement, one which does not depend on a singular charismatic (and often male) leader.

12 See Dana Ford, "Jonathan Butler: Man behind the Missouri Hunger Strike," CNN, November 10, 2015, accessed June 23, 2016.

This landscape of black Christian activism also includes young seminarians and students on campuses across the country who sponsored marches, “die-ins,” and protests against national injustices and campus racism (such as the names of buildings that reflect parts of their schools’ offensive and unacknowledged history). These groups also coalesced around issues such as racial profiling and harassment by campus police and sexual abuse on campus. In other words there are a wealth of exemplars of black youth activism and protest just from the past few years.

One example stands out in particular for his integration of faith and activism. Nyle Fort serves as an exemplar of young adult agency and Christian activism. His narrative helps us to better theorize about joy, agency, faith, and resistance in the United States.

## **Nyle’s Story**

Two months after I graduated from seminary, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. It was 2014. The country was about to be rocked by arguably the most dramatic people’s movement since the 1960s. I had planned on spending the following year applying to PhD programs. I’m the first in my family to go to college, so the opportunity to get a doctoral degree is a big deal for my family and me. But I had to ask myself: what would it mean for me to get a PhD while people who look like me are being gunned down in the streets by those sworn to protect and serve? And what does it mean for me, a person of faith, to study religion in an ivory tower while black people are being sacrificed on the altar of white supremacy every day? I wasn’t okay with pursuing an American dream while so many live an American nightmare. So I got on a bus and went to Ferguson not only to protest police brutality but to do what I believe is God’s will: to speak truth to power and fight for freedom and justice.

Michael Brown was no anomaly. It’s important to understand that Mike Brown’s murder was not a case of bad apples but the strange fruit

of a tree rooted in white supremacy. Just weeks before Brown's murder, Eric Garner was choked to death by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo for allegedly selling "loosies." Garner spoke for so many black Americans when he gasped, eleven times, "I can't breathe." This epidemic of racialized state violence has a long history in this country, from slavery and lynching to Jim Crow and mass incarceration. James Cone wrote in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, "Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus."<sup>13</sup> The state-sponsored execution of Jesus can be directly linked, both theologically and politically, to the execution of black people in America. The question, for me, was simple: What is the church's response to the deaths of Amadou Diallo, Shantel Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Sean Bell, just to name a few? For many churches the responses were, at best, prayer and, at worst, silence.

On the bus ride back from Ferguson, that silence haunted me. I needed to do something. More than prayer. More than a moment of silence. But I struggled to name a church where I could articulate my rage, my righteous indignation in the face of racial injustice. I began to think of Cone, of that rich tradition of black liberation theology, and of growing up in the church. I remembered the many Seven Last Words services I'd been to and how, in my eyes, Good Friday—not Easter Sunday—always felt like the highlight of the black church calendar. (For those who may not know: Seven Last Words services are services organized on Good Friday where preachers exegete and preach the last words of Jesus according to scripture.) As I sat on the bus an idea came to me to remix the traditional Seven Last Words service and, instead of preaching the last words of Jesus, preach the last words of black people killed by police. We called the service "Strange Fruit Speaks."

"I want to go home." These were the last words of Renisha McBride. She was nineteen years old and looking for help after a car accident when she knocked on Theodore Wafer's door. She never got help. She got a bullet to the head. "Mom, I want to go to college." These were the

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13 James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 158.

last words of Amadou Diallo. He was twenty-three years old, shot forty-one times because he fit the “general” description. “I love you.” These were the last words of Sean Bell. Shot fifty times by the NYPD after leaving his bachelor party. He wore the same suit to his funeral that he was going to wear to his wedding.

We held the first service at Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey. I preached the last words of Jordan Davis.<sup>14</sup> Jordan was seventeen years old. He and his friends drove to a local gas station to buy gum and cigarettes. As they sat in the car listening to music, forty-seven-year-old Michael Dunn became irritated after they refused to turn their music down. He then reached inside his glove compartment for a handgun and shot Jordan to death. Jordan’s last words were “F\*\*\* that, n\*\*\*, turn that s\*\*\* up!”

If we were to take a poll asking the American church as a whole, “Whose side are you on, my friend?” the answer would not be Jordan Davis. It would be, at best, silence and, at worst, Michael Dunn. What do I mean? I mean that the church, more often than not, has a Michael Dunn ministry rather than a Jordan Davis message. How often does the church, like Michael Dunn, silence the voices and stereotype the culture of black youth because our music is too loud, our pants too low, and our language too real? How often does the church, like Michael Dunn, murder the futures of black girls and boys who do not fit into the definitions of what white dominant society deems as holy, acceptable, and good? The hard truth today is that every time a black youth is not welcomed by the church—because of the way we look, because of the way we talk, because of the way we dress—we are perpetuating the same pattern that took Jordan Davis’s life. We are murdering our babies and doing so in the name of Jesus.

What does this have to do with joy? In black life joy and suffering are inseparable. That means we cannot talk about joy seriously without

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14 See Leigh Owens, “Michael Dunn Claims Shotgun Was Wielded Prompting His Shooting of Jordan Davis,” *Huffington Post*, November 28, 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michael-dunn-claims-shotgun-wielded-\\_n\\_2207287](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michael-dunn-claims-shotgun-wielded-_n_2207287).

talking about the death-dealing conditions that impede on the possibility of black joy and black life. Otherwise we miss the miracle of Jordan Davis's last words. That staring in the face of death, he insisted on turning that shit up. How we remember those crucified in our midst, how we mourn and memorialize them through song and dance and storytelling, is a kind of celebration. It is a refusal to let death have the last word.

## **What Can We Learn from Nyle and Many Others Like Him?**

After encountering youth and young adults who are integrating strong passions for justice, taking action in the world around them, and looking for ways to integrate this with their faith life, myriad probing questions emerge. How did Nyle (or Jordan) get here? What shaped them? Who are they reading, watching, listening to? Where did they go to school? What injustices shaped their experience? Who taught them that they could or should act and have agency? Nyle shares answers to many of these questions, and he goes further in his self-reflection to help youth workers create strategies for nurturing this type of faith and agency in youth and young adults. Therefore, in the final section of this chapter, we attempt to wrestle with the question of how youth workers can cultivate agency in youths and young adults. While this research has not illuminated all of the things that we might do, it helps unearth several crucial points to get us started.

### *Learn from History.*

Black youth activism, and activism in general, did not emerge in the past ten years. Young people of African descent have been protesting injustice, participating in civil disobedience, and working to enhance their quality of life in every moment in American history. Black youth activism has many historical antecedents. In other research I discuss the trends towards cultural amnesia (or an ahistorical nature) in which

young people, in particular, do not fully connect with or claim the precursors of particular traditions and events.<sup>15</sup> However, it is our work as youth leaders and concerned adults, in addition to exploring and offering models of contemporary black youth and Christian activism, to place this contemporary activism into conversation with the larger history of movements for change and the tradition of Christian social witness.

Part of the narrative that often goes overlooked in the discussions of activism in general is the consistent presence of radical young leaders, activists, and organizers. Children, teens, and college students were on the front lines of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights work. Yet before the civil rights movement, children and youth participated in and led the first mass African American march in 1917.<sup>16</sup> The march through the streets of New York City was organized to protest the mistreatment of blacks during a race riot in East St. Louis, Illinois, and to protest lynching and “lawless treatment of Blacks nationwide.”<sup>17</sup> According to newspaper reports, there were eight hundred children, some as young as six years old, participating in this silent protest.<sup>18</sup> This event speaks greatly

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15 John Fea, *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 173.

16 James Barron, “A History of Making Protest Messages Heard, Silently,” *City Room* (blog), June 15, 2012, accessed June 23, 2016. [http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/a-history-of-making-messages-heard-silently/?\\_r=1](http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/a-history-of-making-messages-heard-silently/?_r=1); “The First Massive African American Protest in U.S. History Was Led by Children Marching Against Lynching In The Silent Protest Parade,” *Black Then* (blog), May 12, 2015, accessed June 23, 2016. <https://blackthen.com/first-massive-african-american-protest-in-u-s-history-was-led-by-children-marching-against-lynching-in-the-silent-protest-parade/>.

17 Barron; “The First Massive African American.”

18 The National Humanities Center has published primary source materials online which show a memorandum with several banners and slogans to be carried during the silent march. They include the ones listed above and many others with religious connotations and direct biblical quotes. *NAACP Silent Protest Parade, Flyer & Memo, July 1917*, PDF, Research Triangle Park, NC: National Humanities Center, 2014; See also Barron, “A History of Making Protest.”

to the significant and long history of youth activism in African American struggles for freedom and just treatment.

The significance of telling the longer history of activism among young African Americans lies in part in the need speak to the broader society of the ongoing import and value of the critical reflection and practices of young people. However it also reminds young African Americans of what others like them have accomplished and how they can expand upon the foundations and actions created by others. The stories of contemporary activists and combined with this larger history are invitations to explore how youth will contribute to creating change in their historical moment.

*Learn from and with Youth and Young Adult Agents of Change.*

One of the joys of my job is that I get to hang out with young people. Researching and writing about youth activism and spirituality requires that I get into the fray of their action and activity, that I learn where youths are and go there. Part of our work as youth workers and leaders is to also go where youth are. Far too often we ask or demand that youth come to us—for an hour on Sunday, for class, and so forth—and we fail to see them in the places and realities where they are. We have also failed to ask them where they would like to be, where they are going, or what is most pressing in their needs that they are attending to now.

Our work is to learn from and with youth and young adults agents of change such that we are no longer surprised when teens at Parkland are articulate and have clear visions for the future, but expect that to be the case because we have already seen them in action and know that they have opinions about what is going on in the world around them before, in, and after a crisis. Closely related to our need to learn with and from youth is the recognition that we must constantly remind ourselves that youths have so much to teach us and that they are already capable of contributing to their families, schools, and communities.

*Learn to Listen.*

One of the major pedagogical and research tools that emerged in my many years of researching youths and young adults is the power of listening. It sounds obvious, but one of the gifts that adults must give to youth and young adults is the power of a listening ear—one that does not come with a preestablished agenda or set of expectations for how a youth or young adult will respond but with a genuine sense that what they have to say and whatever they share is important.

Part of our calling as youth workers is to mirror back to youth the choices and capacities that they have, while pushing them to participate fully in their lives and communities. Essential to this work is developing the discernment to know when to speak and when to listen. Adolescents, particularly minority youth, spend too much time struggling with voice and voicelessness. This is not to say that adolescents are not speaking, but too often when they speak what they say is dismissed or considered invalid.<sup>19</sup> It is our job to listen even when others do not and even when youth feel that what they have to say is not important. I am constantly reminded of Nell Morton's powerful concept of "hearing people into speech,"<sup>20</sup> and that is part of the work we have to do—to help youth see and remember their own agency.

*Learn to Embrace Joy.*

Finally our discussions of agency and joy have pointed to the many ways that youths and adults need to learn to embrace joy. In particular it is important to help youth embrace joy as an essential part of who they are and not simply a sidebar to their identity and agency. Nyle reminds us that joy and agency are often found in places we do not

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19 See Almeda M. Wright "The Power of Testimony: Spiritual Formation and Ministry with Youth" in *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright, (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2008), 182-195.

20 Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 54.



expect to see them, such as in the face of death and in a desire to choose joy and freedom even in a world that polices the joy and joyfulness of young black people. Experiences such as these remind us of the importance of helping youth, particularly minority youth, to embrace joy and not to be afraid of it or think that it is something that is beyond their grasp.

Within Christian communities we often fail to help youth understand what it means

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**Joy cannot be  
taken away no  
matter what.**

for them to affirm the joy that is placed inside \_\_\_\_\_  
of them by God. This is a joy that cannot be  
taken away even by the most insidious of life circumstances, but that does not mean that youths do not  
need help and reminders to embrace this part of their life and spirituality. They need constant reminders  
that they were created for joy, for flourishing, and for love, to be strong, cre- ative, and so much more.