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Creativity

The Joy of Imagining the Possible

Stephanie Paulsell and Vanessa Zoltan

It's an interesting time to be talking about adolescents and joy, because adolescents have been leading the way in expressing a deep dissatisfaction with how things are going in the United States. They took their lament to the streets after Trayvon Martin's killer was set free. They lay down on highways and church steps and the sidewalks of their cities wearing masks that said "I can't breathe" after Eric Garner was killed. They marched for weeks in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of Michael Brown and started a movement for black lives that continues to challenge our status quo. Survivors of a high school massacre in Florida and young people who have grown up in neighborhoods plagued by gun violence stand together to say that it is not acceptable that our country cares more about easy access to assault rifles than it does about the slaughter of our children. Anyone who heard Parkland High School senior Emma Gonzalez's powerful speech two days after the shooting knows what it sounds like when someone has had it. All of these kids, from Ferguson to Florida to Chicago, have had it with the violence directed at them and with adult complacency in the face of it.

Powerful forces have a vested interest in silencing these young, deeply dissatisfied voices. And one of the ways they do so is to encourage

the shaming of these young people if they show any capacity for joy. “Why all the laughter?” some ask, when they see the Parkland kids cracking jokes on social media. “I thought you were mourning your friends.” “How offensive,” some said when Beyoncé released her video “Formation,” in which a young boy dances joyfully between a line of police officers in riot gear and a wall that has been painted with the words “Stop shooting us.” Our culture often seems comfortable with young people’s expressions of dissatisfaction with the way things are only if they are performed off camera, in silence and in tears. When they post smiling photos of themselves with their arms wrapped around each other or videos of themselves singing along to the *Hamilton* soundtrack as they travel to Tallahassee to lobby their legislators—well, that’s different. Why all the joy if they’re supposed to be so sad?

It’s worth asking if our institutions, including our churches, really do want adolescents to experience joy. Because joy will not create compliant young people. Joy is excessive; it spills over from one part of life to another. It makes us feel that we can do more—and be more—than we once thought we could do and be. Joy opens us up. Joy reaches us in the deepest parts of ourselves. Joy is a potentially transformative force. It has the power to change us.

Joy is linked to dissatisfaction with the way things are, because it results from imagining the way things can be.

Joy, however, is not synonymous with happiness. And certainly it is not the same thing as satisfaction. In the Bible joy seems often to be connected with dissatisfaction; the word “joy” often follows the words “and yet” or “but.” In the Psalms true joy emerges from experiences of dissatisfaction. Psalm 13 opens with “How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” It ends with “But . . . my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” In Psalm 30 we hear that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” My enemies are plotting against me, Psalm 71 says, “but I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more.” That kind of radical hope in the face of

pain and injustice seems to be a crucial part of joy for the psalmist. It makes of joy, as Willie Jennings has said, an “act of resistance against the forces of despair.”¹ It is an act of resistance and an act of resilience. The psalmist whose pain and sorrow did not keep him from making a joyful noise and the teenagers who hid in a closet while a shooter rampaged outside the door but who are still capable of laughing with their friends until it hurts are all saying: I have not been destroyed. I am still capable of joy.

Joy is often closely associated with dissatisfaction with the way things are, because it is born from the creative work of imagining the way things might be. “People feel joy, as opposed to mere pleasure,” the social critic Ivan Illich has written, “to the extent that their activities are creative.”² Creativity and imagination are capacities that have the potential to generate a deep and sustaining joy—for adolescents and for us all.

God’s Creativity and Ours

The novelist Virginia Woolf once described the world as a work of art³ of which we ourselves are a part. The author of the opening of the book of Genesis seems to have believed that, too. God is the artist in this gorgeous hymn to creation, speaking the world into being, defining the edges of earth and sky, creating a home for life in all its forms.

Because the first chapter of Genesis has been so thoroughly co-opted in cultural debates about science and religion, it’s easy to forget that it was not written as an argument against Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. This account of creation was written during a

1 Jennings, Willie. “Joy That Gathers.” *Yale Center for Faith and Culture*, Yale Divinity School, Aug. 2014, faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/jennings_-_joy_that_gathers.pdf.

2 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1975), 34.

3 Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 72.

particular historical moment, composed by an artist during a time of hopelessness and despair for a people who had been conquered and exiled.

What might the exiled people of Israel have heard in the verses of Genesis 1? Perhaps they would have heard that things could be otherwise. Perhaps they would have heard that change is possible, that something wholly new can happen. Chaos can be transformed into a habitable work of art, beloved by God and proclaimed to be good. As the scholar Walter Brueggemann has noted, the God of the first chapter of Genesis does not say “There must be light” but rather “Let there be light.”⁴ God does not decree creation like an authoritarian ruler signing executive orders. God sets unpredictable, creative possibility loose in the world: let there be light, let there be fish in the sea, let us make human beings in our own image.

This, of course, is one of the most arresting sentences in the Genesis litany of creation for anyone who hears it—for the people of Israel in exile, for us in twenty-first-century America. God made human beings in God’s own image. Even in exile, even in sorrow, there is something about us that mirrors God back to God.

What is that something that marks our creation in God’s image? It is more than we can know or explain, for sure. But if we are made in the image of the God who made the world, perhaps one answer can be found in the creative impulse that is so much a part of our humanity. To be made in God’s image is to have within us the capacity for creativity. And so when we are making something—whether it’s a poem, a service of worship, a meal, or a movement for justice—we participate in God’s own creativity.

If human creativity is a sign of our creation in God’s image, then it is surely found at the heart of the life of faith. So often, when religion is discussed in our culture, it’s portrayed solely as a set of beliefs to be accepted or rejected rather than imaginative, creative work. But what is any faith if not something assembled from disparate elements—from

4 Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

scriptures, images, relationships, experiences—into something that is saturated with meaning?

In the Gospels Jesus shows us how this works by inviting us to exercise our religious imagination. He does this, as he does so much of his teaching, by telling stories and painting pictures with words:

- The kingdom of Heaven, he says, is like a mustard seed that starts out small and grows into a tree so large that birds build their nests in its branches;
- The kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman stirs into flour so that she can make bread;
- The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field or like a single, perfect pearl hidden in plain sight among other pearls;
- The kingdom of Heaven is like a net that brings up from the sea every kind of fish.

There's a lot to learn from these parables. We learn that the kingdom of Heaven does its secret work in hidden places. That it can be found in the ordinary stuff of life. That once it is added, it cannot be subtracted. That it begins as something so small we can barely see it but grows large enough to be lived in or transforms into something nourishing enough to sustain our lives.

But perhaps the most important thing we learn from the stories Jesus tells is that there is no one correct answer to the question of what the kingdom of Heaven is like. That question has multiple answers, maybe even infinite ones.

By offering us a few of his, Jesus opens a space within which we might create our own stories, our own parables. He invites us to look around, to see where the seeds of the kingdom of Heaven might be waiting:

- Maybe the kingdom of Heaven is like a book that a young person comes across by accident in the library and whose life changed by what she reads in it;

- Maybe the kingdom of Heaven is like a film whose vision of what the world might be is so powerful that it inspires the kids who see it to start working on their own world;
- Maybe the kingdom of Heaven is like a shared meal that dissolves, for a moment, the distances between us;
- Maybe the kingdom of Heaven is like a single act of resistance to cruelty that grows into a movement for change;
- Maybe the kingdom of Heaven is like a hymn sung by a conquered people far from home about a God who delights in creating something new, a hymn about the creativity of God from which they draw hope.

Believing is often lifted up as the main way we express our faith. But imagining is just as important as believing. Indeed believing depends on our ability to imagine—to imagine a God we cannot see or to feel the claim on us, in this time and place, of ancient words whose meanings are not always clear.

With his parables Jesus reminds us that imagination is an irreplaceable dimension of the life of faith, a practice of the freedom of the glory of the children of God. His parables don't offer a definition of God's kingdom. They don't answer the question of what the kingdom of God is. They answer the question of what the kingdom of God is like: a seed, a pearl, a net; yeast, a hidden treasure. In his cascade of images, Jesus teaches us to cultivate what the theologian David Tracy once called an analogical imagination.⁵ He invites us to think with things we can see and touch about things we can only imagine.

If imagination is at the heart of the theological work of faith, it is also at the heart of the ethical choices to which Jesus calls us. During the last brutal months of the First World War, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that the willingness to kill must be a failure of the imagination—an

5 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Chicago: Herder & Herder, 1998).

inability to imagine another person's life and what it might become.⁶ The imaginative work at the heart of the life of faith challenges us to cultivate our capacity to imagine lives other than our own—and to care about them enough to take them into account as we make choices about how we will live. If we can't imagine what the lives of others are like, if we can't feel reverence for the worlds they contain within them, if all we can do is project our own fears and desires onto them, then we become dangerous to them. To lack imagination is to lack mercy. The young survivors of gun violence we've been hearing from know this.

In the Gospel of Matthew, after Jesus has told his parables about what the kingdom of Heaven is like, he offers his followers a last teaching for the day. "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of Heaven," he says, "is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (ESV, Mt. 13:52)." This is how Jesus himself created. He took what was new (the ordinary experiences of the people around him) and what was old (the ancient wisdom that he inherited and reinterpreted), and he made something out of that combination that awakened the creativity and imagination of his hearers and continues to awaken ours.

This is the practice we want to commend: to focus on sources of joy in young people's lives and use the wisdom of ancient practices to help them go deeper, together, in community.

Going Deeper in Community

Our young people are already engaged in spiritual practices of imagination and creativity. But it's rare that our culture tells them that. What our culture tells them is not that they are creators but that they are consumers. But young people who are seeing the film *Black Panther* multiple times or watching Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and listening to the album over

6 Ann Oliver Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 1: 1915–1919* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1979), 186.

and over, or who are on their fourth or fifth reading of the Harry Potter books or *A Wrinkle in Time*, are not just consuming. They are thinking. They are wondering. And through their love of and devotion to these films, songs, books and videos, they are engaged in a spiritual practice. As Casper ter Kuile of the How We Gather project⁷ has taught, one of the things we can do as teachers, youth leaders, and mentors is to help our young people recognize and have confidence in the spiritual practices they are already doing.

Take, for example, the popular podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.⁸ The hosts, Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, are working their way through all seven books in the Harry Potter series, one chapter at a time, discussing each chapter in the light of themes such as friendship, betrayal, privilege, and faith. Then they choose a portion of the text to read closely using an ancient spiritual reading practice such as *lectio divina* or *Pardes*. Lastly they each offer a blessing for one of the characters. This podcast has a faithful, enthusiastic audience, most of whom grew up with the Harry Potter books. They are mostly millennials, but there are also many younger listeners in middle school and high school. Sometimes the kids are introduced to the podcast through their English teachers, who want them to hear what it sounds like when two thoughtful people bring real questions to a book and talk about them together. But most of the time, young people find the podcast on iTunes as they look for podcasts related to their great love, the Harry Potter novels. *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* has been downloaded, as of this writing, 12.5 million times.

One of the things that I think has surprised those who work on the podcast is how active and engaged their listeners are. They are constantly receiving email and voice mails from listeners who sometimes write to thank them, sometimes to disagree with something Zoltan or terKuile has said about the chapter under discussion, and sometimes to

7 Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather*, www.howwegather.org.

8 Casper ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, www.harrypottersacredtext.com.

offer their own ideas about the text. Sometimes they tell the hosts difficult truths about their lives: they were abused as children, some write, and reading about Harry Potter navigating his own childhood abuse helped them survive. Some write that because of their experience of abuse, it hurts when the hosts talk about forgiveness. Because of their own experiences, the Harry Potter books were sacred to them long before they found the podcast. Responding pastorally to this far-flung community has been one of the unexpected challenges of this work.

Recently the podcast received an email from a teenager in tenth grade. The subject line read: “From a high schooler: Dear Casper, Vanessa, Ariana, and everyone who contributes to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. My name is Sophie and I LOVE your podcast!”⁹ This youth wrote about stumbling onto the podcast on the internet, listening to the first episode, and getting hooked. She went on to say that she had recently read all the Harry Potter books and had fallen in love with them. “I would read [the books] whenever I could,” she wrote, “and on weekends, I barely did anything else. By the end of December, I finished the series and I was so in love with the story and the whole wizarding world. I cried a few times after I finished. I was so desperate for something to keep the momentum going because the feeling of having nothing else was so overwhelming.”

Youth ministers, parents, and teachers are familiar with this kind of overwhelming devotion. It might not be Harry Potter that gets their kids excited, but there’s something they love and cannot get enough of.

In her email Sophie wrote that she was so glad to find the podcast because it’s making her “see things differently” from when she read the books through the first time. She listens to one episode a night trying to catch up, reading the chapter and taking notes on the theme Zoltan and ter Kuile have chosen. At the end of the letter, she wrote: “What I hate more than anything is waking up in the morning, but now I’m

9 Actual names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

happy to wake up because I know that it means I get to listen to an episode on the bus and take notes about what you both have to say!”

This is the kind of joy that we hope our young people will experience. We want them to have something that makes them excited to get up in the morning or that keeps them up late at night. To love something so much that it calls to them while they’re still in their beds, hating to get up because they’re tired, depressed, or overwhelmed by the demands of their lives. “I slept, but my heart was awake (NIV, Song of Solomon 5:2,” one of the lovers in the Song of Songs says about the way her love for her beloved keeps her always listening for his voice. Joy keeps our hearts awake, even when we’re sleeping. That is the kind of joy that gives meaning to our days and has the power to shape our lives.

Kids sometimes get criticized for this kind of joy. They’re told that they love what they love a little too much, and could they please stop talking constantly about Harry Potter or the Black Panther or Beyoncé. Sometimes kids are criticized for their reading or viewing or listening because the adults around them consider their books, movies, and music escapist and would rather they focus on something more serious. But as the great science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin once wondered, why do we criticize people for wanting to escape? For “nobody . . . escapes to jail,” she wrote. “The direction of escape is toward freedom.”¹⁰

The writer Annie Dillard describes in her autobiography the way she followed books toward freedom and depth as a child. What she was looking for in books, she wrote, “was imagination. It was depth, depth of thought and feeling; some sort of extreme of subject matter; some nearness to death; some call to courage. I myself was getting wild; I wanted wildness, originality, genius, rapture, hope Those of us who read carried around with us like martyrs a secret knowledge, a secret joy, and a secret hope . . . that there is a life worth living [which] could

10 Ursula K. Le Guin, *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 83.

be found and joined, like the Resistance. I kept this exhilarating faith alive in myself.”¹¹

Our kids are often carrying around that kind of exhilarating faith in the possibilities of their lives that is awakened in them by what they read, watch, and listen to. What if their church said to them: you know that feeling you have when you are watching Wakanda unfurl on the screen, or when you’re reading about Harry Potter finding out that he is not a forgotten orphan but a longed-for wizard, or when you’re watching Beyoncé knit together poetry and music and dance into a wholly new work of art? What if we said to them that feeling is a reflection of your creation in the image of God? And church is a place to explore, in community, the things that you love and that make you feel creative and alive. It’s a place to find ways of responding with your own stories, your own poetry, your own music and images, your own lives. What if we said that the books, films, and music that are lighting up your imagination are sacred because they connect you to the most sacred part of yourself—your creativity, your imagination, your reflection of God’s image.

Sacred texts are so full of meaning that they spill over and invite us to exercise our own creativity, the way Jesus invited those around him, and still invites us, to hear his parables and to compose our own out of the stuff of our lives. Sacred texts are worthy of being read closely, prayerfully, contemplatively, in community. They stand up well to careful scrutiny. They are rich in meaning that keeps unfolding and unfolding. Sacred texts are generative—they create more texts, more commentary, more hymns and prayers, more music, more books and films, more and more ideas about how to live. And sacred texts are made sacred by a community that thinks with them, prays with them, hopes with them, finds joy in them.

How can we help our kids engage the sacred texts they are already reading, watching, and listening to? How can we help them recognize what they are doing as a spiritual practice?

11 Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1987), 183.

First we'll need to recognize that ourselves. Whatever is inspiring creativity in our young people, whatever is giving them joy, is worth the attention of their community of faith. We will need our young people to guide us—to show us the books, films, and music that are full of meaning for them, the ones that are leading them deeper and deeper into their most urgent questions and their fiercest hopes.

Second, we'll need to assure our kids that all of who they are—including what they love and are inspired by—is welcome in church. Every community will have its own unique ways of supporting its young people's engagement with the sacred and learning from them in the process. A church that is good at Bible study can bring its ways of reading to the texts in which young people find joy. A church that cares about social justice can join its young people in their demonstrations of resistance. A church that cultivates spiritual practices can think with its young people about the spiritually formative power of stories and images and actions and make space for them to respond to that power in community—through discussion, through artmaking, through organizing. Bible study, social justice, spirituality—faith communities have a lot of shareable wisdom about these practices. By offering them at the threshold of where our young people's lives meet the life of our churches, we will not only offer them a fresh welcome but we will also learn from our young people more about our own sacred texts and our sacred responsibilities.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text offers an example of what can be done by experimenting with bringing ancient religious reading practices to bear on the Harry Potter books. Approaching those books through Jewish and Christian reading practices—*lectio divina*, *Pardes*, *havruta*, the creation of florilegia, and sacred imagination—Vanessa Zoltan and her colleagues have invited young people who already love the Harry Potter books to go deeper, to use those books to think about their lives and the life of the world. Using the practice of sacred imagination, they try to place themselves inside a scene from the story, smell its smells and take in its sights, and, most important, to empathize with one of the characters, to try to see the world through their eyes,

to practice walking in their shoes, and to think ethically and spiritually about the choices that character makes. They have encouraged their listeners to create florilegia—collections of their favorite sentences from the text. This medieval practice of writing down fragments of one’s reading in a collection creates a new text in which seemingly unrelated fragments begin to speak to each other and new meanings begin to emerge. With *havruta*, they encourage their listeners to find a partner with whom to question the text. Through *lectio divina* and *Pardes*, they invite their listeners to consider the multiple layers of meaning that can be excavated even from a single sentence and to learn from that close reading something meaningful about how to live.

We all need opportunities to experience the joy of seeking meaning together in community, young people and older people alike. And we need opportunities to respond to the meaning we find, opportunities that are experimental and generative, that open us to the joy of creative engagement with the world. Creativity and imagination are our inheritance as children of a God who is always creating and forever inviting us—as Jesus does in the parables—to join in. With their passionate devotion to the things they

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love, our young people remind us that exercising the creativity that is at the heart of the life of faith generates the kind of joy that wakes us up in the morning, gives us the strength to resist what must be resisted, and inspires new visions of what the world might become.

