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Testimony

The Joy of Adolescent Witness

aManDa hontz Drury

At twelve years old, I was convinced I was in the throes of religious persecution. My adolescent self was shocked to hear my seventh-grade science teacher speak of creation and evolution in the same class lecture as if both were valid ways of understanding the origins of our universe. What troubled me even more, however, was that one of my own friends didn't believe in a literal seven-day creation story. This friend—I'll call him Ryan—made it clear he ascribed to the Big Bang Theory, and I left the class certain this was a personal war on my faith.

My twelve-year-old self knew precisely what to do. I knew what the proper Christian response was. I knew this was a test, and I was being called to challenge my friend to a lunchtime debate where I could publicly testify that I was not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I was going to stand up for my Lord and Savior lest he be crucified all over again. I would share my faith and end the persecution of my fellow creationists.

And so, in front of my small lunchtime table, I extended the debate invitation to Ryan, who promptly told me no. He wasn't interested in a debate; he just wanted to eat lunch and play cards like we normally did. Nevertheless I knew this was my chance to speak truth into Ryan's

life. He might not be up for the debate, but I certainly was. Yes, I was nervous about this debate, especially since my opponent hadn't exactly agreed to participate; but I knew I had to be ready in season and out of season. I knew I needed to be prepared to explain the hope I had in Christ. I knew I would be blessed when I was persecuted and that even if Ryan rejected me, it wasn't really me he was rejecting, but the Lord.

I was eager to tell my youth pastor about my upcoming debate. (I gave myself a week to prepare.) He loaded me up with books on apologetics. My small group prayed for me. And after a week I was ready to jump into that fiery furnace, filled with lions, armed with nothing but five smooth stones and a sling.

The day of the debate arrived. Ryan, myself, and two unsuspecting friends sat at the table together as I mustered up the courage to initiate what I knew was going to be a life-altering conversation. I looked Ryan straight in the eye and asked him if he was ready to engage in a debate concerning the origins of life. "Not really," he said. I was speechless. I was expecting something—anything that would cue my speech. A challenge. A question. Anything. Instead, he said, "I don't really want to talk about it," and then he dealt out the cards for us to start our euchre game.

I had an internal moment of panic. What about my testimony? What would I tell my youth pastor? How would I explain this to my small group? My spirits settled as I came to the conclusion that surely, at the very least, I had "planted a seed."

I didn't have a lot of friends in middle school.

As I reflect on this story, I feel shame, embarrassment, resentment, and a mixture of sadness and anger that perhaps my difficult adolescence didn't need to be quite so difficult. I think the practice of testifying is crucial to faith formation, but it sure made my life difficult. The Word of God was sharper than a double-edged sword, and I was being called to throw myself upon it.

My embarrassment with this story is tempered with compassion. I can appreciate my twelve-year-old self's display of courage as well as my genuine concern for my friends. Mostly, however, I have compassion

for my younger self, who put so much pressure on herself to save the world. Somehow at my young age, I had come to see myself as some kind of defense lawyer for the divine, speaking up for this silent, misunderstood Messiah. God needed me to defend his honor. The Savior needed saving. I was the Obi-Wan Kenobi to God's Princess Leia. I could hear him calling to me: "Help me, Mandy. You are my only hope."

Not all of my conversations, however, were as cringeworthy as the one mentioned above. Many of the God conversations I had growing up were life-giving. Some of the most spiritually formative conversations of my first twenty years of life took place with my mother, my youth pastor, and the young man who would later become my husband. All of that is to say that most of my adolescent experiences of talking about God fall into one of two buckets: conversations about God that enhanced joy and conversations about God that inhibited joy.

Ultimately this topic of conversations about God belongs in the more theologically

Creating opportunities and space for teenagers to testify, offers them a means of joy.

robust category of "testimony," or, if you'd prefer, "witness." Both "testimony" and "witness" come from the same Greek word: "mart," from which we get our term "martyr." Before "martyr" took on the meaning we know today, it was simply a term for one who speaks of God. With this understanding one could argue that the deacon Stephen was a martyr even before he was killed in Acts 7. My operating definition for the word "testimony" is simple: a testimony is a story we tell in which God is one of the characters.

Despite my embarrassing adolescent testimonies, I believe a case can be made that the practice of testifying is nevertheless indispensable to the adolescent experience of joy; and when we neglect to create opportunities and space for teenagers to testify, we are robbing them of a means of joy. Of course, not all conversations about God result in joy. There are those conversations about God that seem to suck the life right out of us. So what does it look like to cultivate joy through the

practice of testimony? Three ways in which we cultivate this joy are (1) giving our teenagers eyes to see where and how God may be present in their own lives, (2) providing the space and opportunity for teenagers to testify, and (3) recognizing the testimonies shared in a way that offers honor and respect.¹

The Joy of the Event: Helping Adolescents See God

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Gen. 28:16, NIV)

I was in college when my now husband convinced me to watch the movie *The Sixth Sense*. It was one of those films that has a startling reveal at the end that makes you want to rewatch it as soon as it’s finished. There is a kind of delight that emerges when you realize the story you

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Kierkegaard

were experiencing has another interpretation that sheds a completely different light on the narrative. And so you revisit the story and find new significance to the plot line you had originally followed.

We interpret things differently when we have new information. Consider Mary’s

encounter with the empty tomb early Easter morning. We can speak of an empty tomb with a glint in our eye knowing she is about to see the resurrected Jesus; but to Mary the empty tomb is initially terrifying. According to

1 My past research on the practice of testimony has revolved around a Theory of Articulation whereby we work out and reinforce our faith as we speak it aloud in the presence of others. When we testify to an experience, we are not merely telling a story about the past, we are actually constructing the present as well. Amanda Hontz Drury, *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in*

Adolescent Spiritual Development (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

the Gospel of Mark, even when the angel appears and tells her that Jesus has risen from the dead, she and her companion are still terrified. They flee the tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (NRSV, Mark 16:8).” If we piece together the rest of the story, we are left with a woman whose terror likely turned to joy as the implications of the angel’s words were made clear. With time we might say the tomb transformed from a place of despair to a place of hope and promise.

Perhaps one of the roles of the youth worker is to help a teenager reinterpret their experiences, looking for where God may have been present. We are, perhaps, the Eli to their Samuel, instructing the young that the voices they are hearing just might be the voice of God calling them to something deeper. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we could give our teenagers are lenses in which they might see where God is discernably at work.

Oftentimes if a church does invite their youth to attempt to discern the movements of God, it’s following a mission trip or during a youth camp experience—those highly concentrated times when we might be particularly mindful of the Holy Spirit. If a church does create space for testimony to occur, it’s often after events of this sort: “I went on a retreat and here’s what happened . . .” We have a big experience, and then we come back home and talk about it. While I’m grateful for these kinds of sanctioned spaces to allow for testimony, my fear is that if these are the only times we are giving teenagers space to testify, we are implicitly sending the signal that God only shows up at the big events as opposed to just a normal Tuesday in the middle of February. We should be inviting our teenagers into a kind of “perpetual advent” whereby we live life with the hopeful expectation of God’s presence.²

Seventeen-year-old Madie³ began living in a perpetual advent soon after her youth group began a time of regular testimonies. Every Sunday

2 Drury, *Saying is Believing*, 166.

3 Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

morning seniors in high school would stand in front of their peers and share their spiritual stories. Madie shared with me how surprised she was by the kind of teenagers sharing their stories. She had assumed it would be the outgoing kids—the ones that gravitated toward the spotlight. What she noticed, however, was that the people who were sharing were the kids “that didn’t really stand out in our youth group.”⁴ This was inspiring to Madie, because, as she said, “I’m pretty shy. I’m kind of in the background, too.” Madie reasoned: if they can do it, maybe I can as well. She told me she was planning on sharing part of her story the following spring. When I asked what she was going to talk about, she responded, “I don’t know, but I’ve got my eyes open to see where God shows up.”⁵ Somewhere along the way, someone had given Madie the eyes to see.

Interestingly enough, the more we see, the more we see. Four years ago my institution began a summer Ignatian Examen program with a group of thirty high schoolers. Every night for two weeks we used the Examen to process our days, attempting to identify those places where it seemed as if God’s presence was keenly felt as well as those places where it was difficult to sense the presence of the Lord. Drawing from Mark Thibodeaux’s book *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen*,⁶ we spent every evening asking questions like “Who wore God’s face today?” and “When were we clinging? When were we avoiding? When were things just right?”

By the time we get halfway through the program, teenagers begin making comments like “I don’t know why, but it just seems like I’m noticing God more in my day.” It wasn’t that God seemed to be intervening in any new kind of way; rather their perspectives were shifting. When teenagers were able to identify where God may have been present in

4 Madie, interview by Amanda Drury, digital recording. Holland, Michigan, November 19, 2011.

5 Madie interview, Drury.

6 Mark Thibodeaux, *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from your Day* (Chicago: Loyola, 2015).

the past, they became more aware of where God seemed to be moving in the present. Along with this shift in perspective came a kind of joy that they were not alone. This was not just the case when things were going well; that same presence was often testified to during painful moments of the day as well. For many of these teenagers, the main thing they needed in order to be mindful of the presence of God was an explicit invitation to do so within life-giving communities.

Warning

Of course, any time we move into the territory of pointing out where we think God may be present, we find ourselves on tricky theological ground. How can we claim something is of God? Not long ago my three-year-old woke me up in the middle of the night because he couldn't find his beloved monkey. I groggily shuffled to his room and began rummaging around for the small stuffed animal. As the time ticked on, I found myself getting a bit desperate. Finding this monkey seemed to be the only path back to my warm bed. Paul was becoming agitated as well. I said one of those desperate prayers that seem silly in the daylight but profoundly necessary where toddlers and sleep are concerned: "God, help us to find this monkey," I said out loud. "No!" came Paul's startling response. "I don't want God to find my monkey I want YOU to find my monkey." He was clearly bothered that I would outsource such an important job. When Paul finally reached under a blanket and triumphantly pulled out the monkey, we were relieved. "Thank you, God, for finding the monkey," I murmured without much thought. "No!" yelled Paul again. "God didn't find my monkey! I found my monkey!"

The toddler has a point.

When we start talking about testifying to the divine, we've entered dangerous territory. In the case of the missing monkey, some might question bringing God into the conversation. Is this how God works—finding monkeys and car keys like our personal valet? Those of us hoping to cultivate joy through the practice of testimony would be wise to temper our language with words like "I wonder," "maybe," or "perhaps."

Such circumspect language contains within it an implicit humility that offers up a story to the church for validation or challenge.

This kind of language of humility might also temper the fear of speaking of something that is unspeakable. Public speaking is daunting enough, and the thought of speaking about the divine is perhaps even more intimidating. It is impossible to testify truthfully of the divine. Even the testimony that God is good is untrue in that the goodness I speak of pales in comparison to the true goodness of God. Our words are inadequate, and so we are failing before we've even begun to speak. "He is at one and the same time knowable and unknowable to us," writes Swiss theologian Karl Barth. "At every point, therefore, we have to be silent, but we have also to speak."⁷ Our words may be inadequate, but our words are blessed.

The Joy of Articulation: Finding the Space to Speak

I have seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one. (John 1:34, NIV)

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8, NIV)

Testifying requires humility. Testifying also requires words. It's not enough to simply notice where the Holy Spirit may be moving. The act of testifying to these stories is also a necessary component of the adolescent experience of joy. In fact we are inhibiting joy when we do not allow space for adolescents to speak their experiences and beliefs aloud. There's an old Franciscan saying: "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."⁸ We Christians tend to like this saying because

7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1.322, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 341–50.

8 Commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. While this seems to be a loose translation, the substance can be found in his Rule of 1221, chapter XII, on how

it keeps us actively engaged in the world. We get to physically, tangibly show people our love of God. We are not those hypocrites who simply talk the faith without living out the faith. We also like this saying because it lets us off the hook. It leaves us with the impression that if we just act like a people of faith, then we don't have to actually talk about our faith.

But words matter. One of the major findings of Christian Smith and Melinda Denton's seminal work *Soul Searching* is that teenagers are largely inarticulate when it comes to faith and their beliefs.⁹ They are active participants at their local churches, but when they are asked to speak of their faith, they are speechless. Various sociological studies suggest that when someone has a hard time talking about something, that person often has a hard time believing that thing is true. If we can't talk about our faith, we will have a hard time taking our faith seriously. When we talk about our faith, we become more faithful people. Joy flourishes not only when teenagers see the presence of God, but also when they speak to what they see.

When *Soul Searching* was published, youth workers scrambled to revamp basic doctrine curriculum, the logic being that if teenagers don't know what they believe, we should tell them. This well-intended response, however, may not have been that effective. Consider the average seventh grader. Every day this teenager picks up between ten and fifteen new words. Few of these words, however, are picked up through formal instruction; most are acquired through more organic methods. New words are learned in conversation, and unfamiliar words can be teased out in context. This understanding is broadly known as latent

the Franciscans should practice their preaching: "No brother should preach contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church nor unless he has been permitted by his minister . . . All the Friars . . . should preach by their deeds."

- 9 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131.

semantic analysis (LSA).¹⁰ The abridged thesis of LSA is that the majority of language that we acquire doesn't come through formal, intentional instruction but is picked up through everyday life experiences. The core principle of LSA is that individuals are capable of figuring out words and their concepts in the context of more informal settings.

Psychologist Jerome Bruner laid the groundwork for LSA with his work on how infants acquire language. Bruner observed numerous mothers reading stories to their toddlers. He found that the toddlers who had mothers who paused for them to participate in the story tended to learn words faster than those who were simply passive recipients of the story. A simple cue like "The cow says—" followed by a pause seemed instrumental in the acquisition of language.¹¹ Where do we pause in the church? Where are we creating space for teenagers to reflect on where they might be seeing the Holy Spirit? Perhaps the greatest sermon we will ever give is a well-crafted, thoughtful, engaging question that elicits testimony.

Too often we are asking teenagers to simply be passive recipients of our words, and so rather than creating space for teenagers to speak about God, we fill that space ourselves. This makes sense. Anyone who has spent time teaching has probably had the experience of asking a question and being met with deafening silence. And in a room full of teenagers, the sound of those crickets seems to be amplified. But if teenagers are not invited to talk about God at church, if they are not given space to try out their language on religious matters, then where will conversations like this take place? You expect the topic of health to come up when you're in a doctor's office. When you walk into a restaurant, it's expected you will order food. And if you show up at a book

10 Thomas K Landauer and Susan T. Dumais, "A Solution to Plato's Problem: The Latent Semantic Analysis Theory of Acquisition, Induction, and Representation of Knowledge," *Psychological Review* 104:2 (1997): 211–40. For further reading see Thomas K Landauer, *Handbook of Latent Semantic Analysis* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

11 Anat Ninio and Jerome Bruner, "The Achievement and Antecedents of Labelling," *Journal of Child Language* 5, no. 1 (1978).

club, there's a good chance that at some point the conversation will get around to the actual book. You don't walk into a shoe store with the intention of talking about the stock market. And yet testifying or even articulating one's faith in general seems to be something that's done apologetically if at all. Perhaps we give space to talk, but the conversations are on everything but faith.

I often hear the sentiment, "Even if my teenagers were aware of the presence of God, they are not the kinds of kids who could actually talk about it." In their extensive interviews, Smith and Denton surmised that their direct questions about faith seemed to be the first time teenagers were even asked to articulate their beliefs: "Our impression as interviewers," they wrote,

was that many teenagers could not articulate matters of faith because they have not been effectively educated in and provided opportunities to practice talking about their faith. Indeed, it was our distinct sense that for many of the teens we interviewed, our interview was the first time that any adult had ever asked them what they believed and how it mattered in their lives.¹²

When I travelled the country researching youth groups that incorporated testimony into their ministries, I was struck by a similarity: with rare exception none of the teenagers were volunteering to speak. Instead their stories were often invited by leaders in the church. The stories were drawn out from the teens, oftentimes with an adult talking them through it in advance to alleviate fears. And it can be frightening—those some testifying teenagers would tell you that's the point.

I rode my first roller coaster at an amusement park with my youth group. I was terrified. There was a long wait for the ride, and every minute increased my terror. The designers of the ride staged a dreary car-accident scene complete with a spraying fire hydrant to keep us occupied as we walked slowly through the line. I remember telling God

¹² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 133.

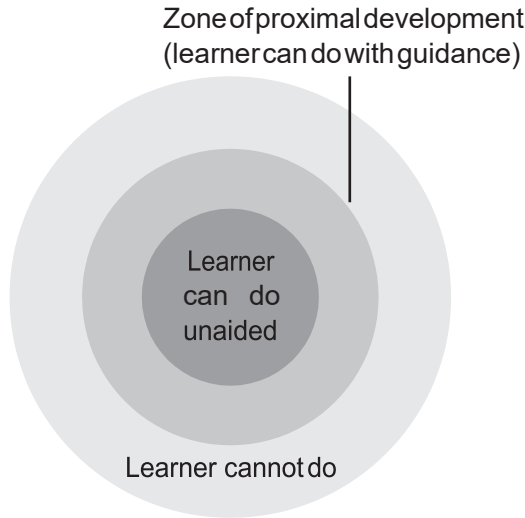
that if he just allowed me to make it through unscathed, I would promise to never ride another roller coaster again. I knew I could step out of the line at any time, but I didn't want to be the only one to bow out. By the time I reached the front of the line, I was in tears. Nevertheless I climbed aboard, triple-checked my harness, and shot through the sky, suspended from above, looping and twisting with excessive speed.

I loved it. Afterward I immediately got back in line to repeat the experience, forgetting all about my vow to the Lord. The rest of the day was spent looking upward and walking toward the tallest structures I could see. I didn't use my map; I simply followed the tall towers of twisting metal and the sounds of terror.

Public speaking is terrifying. Public speaking about God, perhaps even more so. Interestingly enough it was the image of a roller coaster that one teenager gave when asked about her experience with testimony. It was terrifying, Meredith said, yet there was also something exhilarating about it. According to Meredith, part of the exhilaration was largely due to the corresponding fear:

I think that you experience joy most when you're pushed just barely outside of your comfort zone, because you want to be comfortable but sometimes when you are comfortable you don't get to experience it fully. Like when you're on a roller coaster you're not comfortable but you're just outside of it and you know you won't be hurt but it's just enough of not comfortable that it makes you be joyful.

Meredith essentially described Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD consists of three concentric circles. The smallest circle represents those things one can do by themselves. The outside ring represents those things that the individual cannot do. The middle ring represents what the individual can do when guided by another. Teenagers might think they are incapable of speaking about God, but with the guidance of a thoughtful youth worker, they may be surprised by what they are capable of. We might not have teenagers



who can easily testify by themselves, but perhaps they can with supportive coaches along the way.¹³

Of course, some testimonies are easier to give than others. If we look for those places where teenagers are already talking, we might see ways in which we might help our teenagers lean in to testimony. If a youth group regularly participates in a weekly update of “highs and lows,” what would it look like to tweak that practice slightly to incorporate testimony? Perhaps instead of asking “What was the best part of your week?” we ask, “Where did it seem like God might have shown up this week?” or “Where did it seem like God was absent this week?” Those places where teenagers are already talking could in fact be a kind of ZPD that Vygotsky wrote about.

Jerome Bruner built upon Vygotsky’s theory to introduce the concept of instructional scaffolding within educational theory. Just as raising a scaffold can aid in the construction of a building, so too, Bruner

13 “Understanding Language and Learning: The Zone of Proximal Development” Open University, accessed May 20, 2018, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/understanding-language-and-learning/content-section-6>.

says, we create scaffolds for others who are in the process of building their identities in relationship to the world they inhabit. “As a teacher, you do not wait for readiness to happen,” Bruner writes. “You foster or ‘scaffold’ it by deepening the child’s powers at the stage where you find him or her now.”¹⁴ What would it look like for us to provide scaffolding in order to push our teenagers just beyond their comfort level? What if we could help them access these joy-filled, intimacy-creating conversations?

Warning

Constructing scaffolding to assist teenagers in testifying doesn’t automatically lead to joy. Testimony can lead to joy, but, as discussed earlier, it can also inhibit joy. Some of my interviews on testimony took place at a large evangelical church in the Midwest. A number of the teenagers interviewed reported how much they enjoyed their weekly discipleship groups where they talked about God. Hannah explained: “It’s my favorite time of the week, to have that time not even necessarily where we spend a lot of time talking/reflecting about God but just talking about life in general and just seeing God play out through that.”¹⁵ Hannah can clearly articulate the joy she finds in her weekly small group. Unfortunately for Hannah, this doesn’t count as testimony.

Regardless of the language we use (testimony, God-talk, a story about God, etc.), these teenagers hear one thing: convert non-Christians. From the start it quickly became clear that when we said “God-talk,” the teenagers were hearing “evangelical sales pitch.” When we said “conversation,” they were thinking “conversion.” In fact what we might consider the more natural and organic God conversations that emerged within small groups often seemed to be dismissed. Talking about God in small groups is fine, but the gold standard is converting

14 Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 120.

15 Hannah, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, Marion, Indiana, November 2015.

the stranger or the atheist at school. Those are the conversations that really count. The primary hindrance to joy was not what they were saying about God; the hindrance was what they thought they should be saying about God.

By far the biggest hindrance to joy in terms of testimony came in the form of guilt teens felt that they were withholding the ultimate antidote for the world. Jesus is their Savior and healer, and they have a responsibility to administer the drug before the world succumbs to the disease. It seemed as if God was a giant EpiPen, and our responsibility was to inject the dying around us. And not just the dying, but to approach person after person, asking, “Are you allergic to peanuts? Do you have an EpiPen?” After all, what kind of monster keeps an EpiPen hidden in their pocket when the world is dying of a peanut allergy?

Even when they think the conversation goes well, the joy these teenagers described was somewhat distorted. James describes the joy he feels after talking about God: “I can look back at the scenario and think, okay, I got through that hard instance and I was able to share my faith with someone even though it was hard. So, I am overjoyed because I can do what God asked me—asks us to do as Christians.”¹⁶ In other words he didn’t feel joy until the conversation was over and he realized he had done it. This kind of extrinsic joy is not sustainable. The teenager who plays soccer and hates every minute of it but finds joy only after the game (“Phew, glad that’s over”) will probably not be playing soccer for long.

For many of the articulate teenagers interviewed, there was a scaffold in place giving them the guidance and confidence to testify, but at the top of that scaffold was a shiny gold star, and if their words weren’t quite good enough, they failed. Where adolescents seemed to encounter their greatest hindrance of joy was when they testified in order to reach a particular end. Perhaps Bruner’s image of the scaffold is problematic in this setting. Perhaps rather than a vertical ladder to traverse,

16 James, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, Marion, Indiana, November 2015.

we are better off seeing testimony as a kind of Möbius strip that we climb on and through and around. There is no goal in climbing—just the joy of play and sharing space.

The Joy of Recognition: Receiving and Honoring Testimony

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” Eli said, “What is it that he told you? Do not hide it from me.” (1 Sam. 3:15–17, ESV)

Sixteen-year-old Justin’s camp experience didn’t end when he stepped off of the youth group bus. One of the best parts about youth camp was not camp itself. While he reported a fun and meaningful week with his youth group, what really caught his attention was the experience of talking about camp soon after with a friend. Within a few weeks of returning home, Justin ran into a friend who had recently come back from another church camp. The friends got to talking and shared their experiences with one another. Justin explained why this conversation was so meaningful to him:

It was just the feeling that I’m not alone and that somebody else felt the same way that I did. Me and this person are a lot alike and they went to a different camp, but when we came back and talked about it we were like, “We had similar experiences!” And it was really neat to hear that we were feeling the same feelings about things. I felt like it was God pointing out to me that I’m not the only one out there that feels certain ways.¹⁷

17 Justin, in person interview by Matthew Beck, Travis Bannon, and Anderson Kursonis, Marion, Indiana, November 2015.

When we receive the testimony of teenagers, we are taking seriously a priesthood of believers that does not discriminate by age. For some there is a temptation to meet a teenager's testimony with condescension. Sometimes we patronize what God intends to be prophetic. If there is one thing we learn from Samuel and Mary in Scripture, it's that teenagers can be trustworthy narrators of their own experiences, and we're all better off when we pay careful attention to what they say.

But what if the teenager says something absolutely crazy? What if the words don't make sense, or are somehow dangerous or misleading? How do we recognize words we are not quite sure we accept? On more than one occasion, I've been in a small group of middle-school girls who, when asked where it seemed like God had shown up that week, make comments like, "I saw God this week when we won the volleyball game." Was this God's doing? Was this win a God-ordained moment? Is this an image of God we want to lift up—one where God lets you win games? The task then becomes to respond to this teenager in a way that recognizes her words while encouraging her into something deeper. And so in this particular case, I might congratulate the teenager on the win and then pose the question "I wonder how God may have been present for the team who lost?"

Recognition does not require agreement. We can hear and receive words we question. A testimony is given, and it now hovers before the small group, waiting for us to engage. We've all had that experience of things we say going unrecognized. Dr. Gregory Ellison describes words that "plop."¹⁸ These are the words that we say that spew from our mouths and hover briefly before falling to the ground, unrecognized. Receiving testimony is the opposite. Receiving testimony means instead of allowing words to plop to the ground, we receive them and allow them to confirm, challenge, or transform our understandings of God's being and action.

18 Gregory Ellison, *Fearless Dialogues* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) 67–68. Ellison draws on the works of Jane Vella for this concept.

Warning

Sometimes recognizing a testimony has unintended consequences. Some of the teenagers interviewed admitted they felt jealous when a friend shared about a place in their life where it seemed like God showed up. The word most used to describe God by these teenagers was “friend.” While the concept of friendship is generally thought to be a positive one, we would be remiss to not consider the role and function of teenage friendships. The recently coined word “frenemy” describes the adolescent friendship culture well. Within these friendships is also the propensity toward jealousy should their friend Jesus spend more time with another person.

One high school student described it this way: “I have a problem with listening to God. I don’t do a very good job of it. I kind of wish I could hear from Him. So when somebody else says that they heard from God, I feel kinda like, ah man, why didn’t I hear from God too? Why wouldn’t God speak to me?” This same teenager admitted this kind of jealousy was not something she was necessarily proud of: “I know that it’s not really a good way to think about it, but when you’re comparing your spiritual lives, I’m like, I go to church more than them, or I’m in the word more than they are, or I try so much harder than they do, and I still haven’t heard from God. So why have they been called by God or spoken to by Him and I haven’t?”

For those of us who often use familial terms to describe God, we would be wise to include those descriptors that transcend human relationships. Yes, God might be described as a friend, but God is also light, and we cannot hurt a light’s feelings. By drawing on images of this sort, we are able to model for our teenagers a God who transcends the human relationships we experience with one another.

Conclusion

Youth workers are invited to play a role in a teenager's unfolding story, helping them see the presence of God, inviting them to speak to that experience, and acknowledging and honoring the words they say. This practice of testimony is indispensable to the adolescent experience of joy within the church, and when we neglect to create the space and encourage the practice, we are robbing these teenagers of a means of joy. While there are certainly warning signs along the way, ultimately we worship a God who not only is actively moving within the world, but who also allows us to testify to this work. The joy that comes with testimony is not limited to adolescents alone. When we are able to shepherd teenagers into joy through the practice of testimony, we experience joy ourselves in witnessing this practice emerge within a young person. We are invited into the joy of seeing a young person grow in fluency in a language they perhaps knew long ago but have since forgotten. And it is here where we can stand alongside the Apostle John and testify ourselves: "I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth (3 John 1:4 NR

