

Adolescent Spiritual Development

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I was a teenage hypocrite. Or at least that is what it would seem to most people, although I would not have thought so at the time. I was an adolescent who attended church regularly, prayed at least occasionally, and even worked at a Christian radio station on the weekends. At times I would lead people in the “sinner’s prayer” as they listened on the radio. When people called the radio station, I sometimes provided advice of a spiritual nature. Many people looked up to me as something near ideal as a Christian teenager. I was even featured on the cover of a magazine for Christian teenagers!

But the fact was that when I was with my friends, I was a different person. Most of my friends were anything but Christian. I don’t recall hurting anyone, although we did cause discomfort with some of our pranks—a favorite was ringing the church bell in the middle of the night. We also did a few things that were outside of the bounds of the law, primarily for the excitement of the experience. Often teenagers participate in such risky behavior because they enjoy retelling the experience over and over with friends (Lightfoot, 1997), and I suspect that was a strong incentive for my group as well.

At the time, my experience as simultaneous saint and sinner did not seem as wildly incongruent as it does in retrospect. I have been quite perplexed with those memories. My experience also points to the complexity of the topic before us. Adolescence is such a strange time of life, and to speak of spirituality during this time period only adds more complexity.

What is Adolescence?

Perhaps it may clarify things to define what we are talking about. First, what is adolescence? The simple definition seems clear at first, but quickly becomes murky. Adolescence, of course, is that period of life between childhood and adulthood. But when does childhood end and when does adulthood begin? For most of history, and for many non-Western cultures today, those two events coincide—childhood ends and adulthood begins with biological maturity, often celebrated with a special rite of passage such as the Jewish bar mitzvah. The time “in-between” childhood and adulthood is a few days, a couple of weeks at most, after which the twelve or thirteen-year-old is considered an adult; ready for career, marriage, and starting a family.

It has only been about a hundred years that we have had a several year period termed “adolescence,” where the child is no longer a child yet is not considered an adult (Koteskey, 1991). Like many things—both good and bad—adolescence is the product of the Industrial Revolution, although it did not become firmly rooted in American soil until the Roaring Twenties, and became universally accepted with the Baby Boom generation of the late 1940’s and 1950’s. This social invention was created, in part, so that the prolonged education deemed necessary for a literate society would be readily accessible (it is also possible that high unemployment was a motive for removing teenagers from the labor market). It was a grand social experiment, this invention called “adolescence,” but the results at best can be described as mixed. When the negative consequences of the invention of adolescence are considered, such as increased use of illegal drugs, sexual license, vandalism, and other evils, the results for some teens is closer to catastrophe.

Thus adolescence is an invented period of life when teenagers are provided with an ambiguous role to play—if they are neither children nor adults, what are they? *They* decide who they are, and do so in two ways. First, adolescents individually choose an identity, rather than having an identity provided for them, as it was prior to the Industrial Revolution (a boy usually entered his father’s trade, a girl followed her mother’s role). Adolescents also define themselves collectively in the phenomenon of “youth culture” (Davies, 1991), usually in the form of new music, unusual styles of dress, and creation of innovative words (“argot”), all of which distinguish them from children and adults. As a result, adolescence is in constant flux, as the youth culture of one era is infused into the mainstream culture of the next, and people bring selected parts of their adolescence into adulthood, leaving the next generation of adolescents to reinvent itself with different music, different styles, and different lingo.

What is Spiritual Development?

In his summary of the literature, Kenneth Hyde (1991) describes many religious aspects of adolescence, such as their behavior, attitudes, influences, and understandings of religion. While most Christian schools and churches have emphasized learning about the Bible, God, and beliefs, the last few years have produced a new emphasis upon the experiential aspects of faith, often termed “spirituality.” This is in part because one can know a great deal about God, and even make an initial commitment to the Christian faith, yet not have an active, ongoing relationship with God that includes religious experiences. “Spirituality” emphasizes awe, wonder, and other experiences that are beyond mundane, everyday life, and that connect the individual to something transcendent and/or of ultimate importance. While spirituality includes experiences with God, it can also include awe and wonder from experiences such as viewing a beautiful sunset that overwhelms the person emotionally and even perceptually. Spiritual experience can be either positive and constructive, or negative and counterproductive (Hay & Nye, 1998).

A Few Negative Spiritualities

[this designation is similar to what Berryman (1991) terms “pseudo-play”]

1. Violence
2. Suicide
3. Bullying
4. Illegal Drug Use
5. Risk-Taking
6. Controlling with Detachment and Disguise (by “spirituality sponges” who are parasites, says Berryman)
7. Lack of Moral Impulse/Corruption
8. Lack of Concern for Others
9. Meaninglessness
10. Prejudice
11. Materialism
12. Evil Personality (M. Scott Peck)

The new emphasis upon the experiential aspects of faith is reflected in Christian books such as Klaus Issler’s (2001) *Wasting Time with God*, which focuses on the ongoing, dynamic, and transforming aspects of a walk with God. This process is sometimes referred to as “spiritual development,” a progression of growth that can be encouraged by “spiritual formation” activities.

There is some debate as to whether spiritual growth occurs in phases or is more of a gradual incline of becoming more and more what God desires, a debate that in part stems from differing theologies (Ratcliff, 1993). The Bible speaks of stage-like growth, emphasizing the distinction between spiritual childhood and adulthood (Eph. 4:14-15, Heb. 5:12-14), both of which can be distinguished from unbelief prior to salvation. Thus the progression implied is unbelief (or spiritual death), then salvation (spiritual life), initial faith (spiritual infancy and/or childhood) and eventually a degree of maturity (spiritual adulthood). Theorists such as James Fowler (1981) have suggested alternative stages of faith development, and Engel and Norton (1975) have even suggested phases of development prior to salvation, although Engle (1991) admits that measuring spiritual development is problematic.

Harold Darling (1969) has formulated a stage model of spiritual development that reflects theological components of both Reformed and Wesleyan perspectives (Ratcliff, 1993), adding a stage of spiritual adolescence to the biblical progression. Thus if an individual becomes a Christian as a child, it is quite possible that spiritual and physical adolescence could coincide, while those who accept Christ during adulthood are likely to progress through phases of spiritual childhood and adolescence while they are physically adults. Spiritual adolescence, in Darling’s model, involves a degree of turmoil as the individual questions the immaturity and dependence of the preceding spiritual childhood. While a healthy move on to spiritual adulthood is one option, there are other alternatives as well. Drawing from psychodynamic theory, Darling asserts that the individual could choose some dysfunctional form of adulthood, perpetual fixation at spiritual adolescence, or regression to spiritual childhood, instead of healthy spiritual adulthood. Darling adds that there are also small growth loops in healthy spiritual development prior to and subsequent to the adolescence stage. These loops involve four steps: assessing one’s weaknesses, faults, and sins, confessing these problems to God, affirming God’s forgiveness, and appropriating the strength God provides to overcome the problems and live a healthy Christian life.

For some people, the progression is not as uniform as Darling's model may suggest. Some mistakenly confuse moods with spirituality, and thus their perception of their walk of faith may be cyclical—hills and valleys which reflect positive and negative emotions that can change from day to day. These are not to be confused with times of struggle and victory which are normal aspects of the Christian life, sometimes described as “mountain top experiences” and “valleys” or “dry times in the wilderness.” Others live out a crisis-based faith, marked by occasional moments of spiritual experience during revival services or retreats; sudden shifts from a normally mundane spiritual existence. Perhaps a combination of Darling's loops, and occasional valleys and “mountain top experiences” are the most common components of healthy Christian living, loops and cycles that are part of a long-term incline marking spiritual growth and development. Spiritual adolescence may or may not be part of that progression.

In sum, healthy Christian living is marked by growth in understanding and a deepening relationship with God. Spiritual development involves confessing and turning from sin, experiencing difficult times when God seems remote, contrasted with moments of spiritual vitality—times of worship and felt love—when God is experienced as being “closer than a brother.” Spiritual formation activities can assist this process, including prayer, retreats, meditation, fasting, and the like.

Adolescent Spirituality

How can spiritual development become part of the adolescent experience? Must adolescents be either spiritually childish or in turmoil spiritually? The mix of adolescence and spirituality is difficult at best. Peers define what is “cool” (1990's) or “awesome” (1980's) or “hot” (1970's) or “hip” and “groovy” (1960's) or “cool” (1950's) or “neat” (1940's), and rarely is God even a minor component of youth culture. Churches may have youth programs, but often the programs seek to entertain and too often capitulate to the values of youth culture. Teenagers see through that façade and thus the churches that are most likely to keep their teens into adulthood are those that stand against the general culture in some respects (research cited in Meier, Ratcliff, & Rowe, 1995).

What can churches and schools do to promote spiritual development in teenagers? Erik Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of identity development as a central task of adolescence, and religious identity is one aspect of identity development that schools and churches can address. Not only can we teach faith and doctrine as a source of identity, but we can also call teenagers to commitment; identity achievement requires commitment (Marcia, 1980). The commitment needed is not just agreement with propositional statements, but a level of commitment thought to be beyond the capability of children. Teenagers are mentally able to affirm the complete “Lordship” of Christ in every area of life, and are ready to learn how to radically influence the world in very practical ways (Campolo & Ratcliff, 1991). This level of commitment involves self-sacrifice as well as a desire for spiritual growth and more of God. The result is a change in one's perspective of the world, such as viewing the world as fundamentally abnormal due to the curse of sin, and that there is a spiritual world of angels and demons that coexists with the temporal world. Full commitment involves a daily walk with God by reading the Bible and praying, and at least occasional experiences of a spiritual nature, such as intense worship. In the process the teenager increasingly turns *from* personal sin and self-centeredness, and turns *toward* greater communion with God.

Where does this leave the Christian teenager in relation to youth culture? When not inherently sinful, aspects of youth culture can be adopted as long as they do not become a high priority in life. Too often, however, acceptable or neutral aspects of youth culture become idols that need to be dethroned. Musicians can be idols that are adored. Peers may be the ultimate authority. Money, possessions, and the latest fashions may preoccupy one's thoughts throughout the day. Keeping things in their rightful place is no easier to accomplish for teenagers than it is for adults. In fact, because our culture tends to value the “freedom” of adolescence—which too often translates to laziness and irresponsibility—dethroning idolatry may be particularly difficult for teenagers. Paul's insistence that we live our lives as slaves to God may be virtually incomprehensible to teens who have been convinced by society that they should be self-absorbed and follow the latest fashions and fads.

For teenagers to seriously consider a life of radical faith, they need good examples and a social context that supports such anti-cultural sentiment. Christian schools can foster this by selective admissions and alternative social perspectives and activities. But merely having strict rules is not sufficient; it is all too easy to conform to rules but inwardly live a very different life. Spirituality is a matter of the inner person, not just the outward activity. I have seen homeschoolers who have affirmed constructive alternatives to adolescence, such as an “all-but-adult” view of teens that encourages the taking of responsibility and other adult behavior that fall within the bounds of the law. These homeschooling parents usually maintain a close

circle of friendships with other homeschoolers who are like-minded. If the parents live consistently with those values, as well as socialize their children with peers from families that share the same values, teen years without a typical adolescence *is* possible, and perhaps can even seem natural. I know of a family in rural Georgia who did this, and their children are quite mature and well-adjusted.

However, in most cases adolescence cannot be avoided entirely, but teachers and other adults can be important assets at this time of life. Don Joy (2000) underscores the importance of spiritual mentors during the teen years. Strong youth leaders can call for full and costly commitment, and mentor their protégés so that they reject sinful aspects of youth culture. Unfortunately, in childhood, as well as adolescence, spiritual experience is often suppressed by critical peers, the negative views of mainstream secular culture (Hay & Nye, 1998), and even by some churches. As a result, a “loss of faith” in high school or college in actuality may be a burial of what died years before. Thus it is imperative to begin prior to the teen years to encourage and give serious attention to children’s spiritual experiences, encourage and nurture spirituality in preadolescence, and perhaps the result will be that in the teen years youth culture will be marginal and living for Christ will be primary.

Conclusion

As I reflect upon my experience as a teenage “hypocrite,” I now believe I understand what happened. My “two lives” did not seem totally incongruent because I grew up in a good Christian home, had many Christian teachers in school, and attended church from infancy. The intellectual aspects of my faith were played out on the weekends as I worked at the Christian radio station, yet I longed for spiritual experience and commitment that my church—and most other churches—did not encourage. In place of that experience and commitment, my friends became the other half of spiritual existence that was missing in my church and school. My friends were my companions, providing fellowship and acceptance that I longed for. They also provided an earthly excitement of marginal and sometimes illegal behavior, an experience of the moment that temporarily seemed to fill the longing deep within that was in fact a longing for experience with God. I regret the “double life” I led, but I realize now that it was perhaps a grasping on my part for the other aspect of spirituality that eluded me at the time—the personal walk with God. How much better it would have been if I had attended a school and church where spirituality in its fullest sense—mental, relational, and experiential—was encouraged; not just learning *about* God, but also *experiencing* God and *growing* through a walk of faith.

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Recommendations for Encouraging Adolescent Spiritual Development

1. Encourage wholehearted commitment to Christ. Recommitment, or surrendering to the Lordship of Christ in all of life can be understood and affirmed by adolescents, although the scope of surrender should increase with time.
2. Read, encourage students to read, or even assign good books on spiritual formation. One of the best, for teens and adults, is Klaus Issler's (2001) *Wasting Time with God*. Small group study of such books may be particularly helpful.
3. Using biblical principles, help students critique the current youth culture. It may help to bring in—or have students bring in—lyrics of popular songs and teen magazines. Discuss the reality of idolatry in modern life, both for teens and adults.
4. Affirm student spiritual experiences—both religious and non-religious—that do not contradict scripture. Also discuss why some students turn to negative forms of spiritual experience to fill the vacuum that only God can adequately fill.
5. Study with your students the lives of Christian leaders and martyrs of the past and present, including accounts of their spiritual experiences. Emphasize how they resisted some of the cultural pressures of their day.
6. Encourage an activist approach to Christian living (Campolo & Ratcliff, 1991). This might involve community outreach, overseas missions experiences, letter writing and other political action, and systematic prayer for problems in the world.
7. Live a life consistent with biblical principles, including an active rejection of anti-Christian values in the mainstream culture. Share some of your own spiritual experiences and things God has taught you. Your example may help your students reject aspects of youth culture, as well as reflect upon and describe their own spiritual experiences.
8. Consider spiritual mentoring (Joy, 2000). Encourage mature adults—even senior citizens—to volunteer as mentors. Mentors may need training. Encourage students to meet regularly with their mentors. However, do not automatically assume a youth leader is mature; adolescents can be manipulated and emotionally abused yet not say anything. Allowing teens to attend another church is better than losing them altogether.
9. Be open in dialogue; do not overreact when students are merely experimenting with ideas. Tentative ideas offered by teenagers can sound very much like firm conclusions. Harsh rebuke may end the discussion on everything—permanently.
10. Encourage parents and teachers of school-aged children, and younger, to affirm and encourage spiritual experiences (Ratcliff, 2001). If these are suppressed in children, it may be very difficult to reverse that pattern and encourage spirituality in adolescence.