



## **The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture †**

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### **Sharing Not Only the Gospel, But Also Our Lives**

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published online annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2009 lectures is “Sharing Not Only the Gospel, but Also Our Lives,” from 1 Thessalonians 2:8. Youth leaders in today’s church can easily speak Paul’s words to believers in Thessalonica, written two thousand years ago. “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” The 2009 lectures address this passage through discussion of relational youth ministry, the transcendence of God, and the question of what gospel, “which Jesus” will we share.

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### **2009 Lectures**

Andrew Root

From an Incarnational Model of Ministry to Being Ministers of the Incarnate One OR Justin Versus Jan  
Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry

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Which Jesus Shall We Teach?



## Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry † Andrew Root

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It was about 5:30 a.m. I was sleeping deeply and restfully when I was shaken awake by the piped-in pleadings of my son screaming at me through his monitor, “Daddy, Daddy, come and get me, I’m ready to get up!” The problem was that I wasn’t ready to get up. It was 5:30 in the morning; his (and therefore our) wake-up time is usually not until 6:30. I stumbled out of bed and walked to his room, my stiff body reminding me that another hour of sleep would be very nice. Opening his door the dawn light of an early summer morning hit me as it engulfed him. I should have been moved by the beauty of my then two-year-old sitting in his bed being washed with the early morning sunrise as he awoke to a new day of life. But seeing him sitting in his bed illuminated by a sunbeam, all I could think was, *Great. I guess there’s no way to convince him that it’s still the middle of the night.* Still feeling unable to function, and my body yearning to lie down and rest my eyes, I decided that instead of lying to him (which I wasn’t above, it was just obvious it wouldn’t work), I decided to bargain with him. So I made my pitch: “Hey Owen, it’s still very early in the morning. How about Daddy lies with you in your bed and we listen to a CD, and then get up?” To my surprise, he fell for it. So I walked over to his CD player and put in a nice, quiet children’s CD, figuring the one called *Sleepy Time Tunes* would be perfect, and crawled into his bed. I shut my eyes to doze off as he lay next to me, chatting away to his stuffed animals and then directing questions toward me just as I began to fall deeply into sleep.

About halfway through the CD, a very catchy yet soothing song came on called, “God Is Watching.” It went something like...

Where is God?  
God is watching, God is watching you tonight  
Where is love?  
Love is holding, love is holding you tonight  
And angels hover over you,  
And Jesus loves you as you are...

Being a theologian, my once-sleepy mind—that just minutes earlier sought to lie to or bargain with a two-year-old for an hour more of sleep—snapped awake. Lying on a large teddy bear and surrounded by a stuffed rabbit, three dogs, and a plastic gorilla, my mind started to theologically examine this beautifully soothing song.

I was first struck by the question, *Where is God?* This question really is the heart of the connection between theology and ministry. *Where do we understand God as present? Where is God in the world? How can we help the adolescents we work with encounter this God where this God is? And how can we construct our ministries and times with adolescents to be faithful to where God is?* Once God becomes the God of Israel, once God unveils Godself in Jesus Christ, when revelation is central to our theological conceptions, once we claim that God reveals Godself, then we are confronted with this question, “Where is God?”<sup>1</sup>

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## Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry †

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The singer's question, spilling gently from the rhythm of her acoustic guitar, encompassed a central theological question since the arrival of modernity, *Where is God?* In a world where miracles happen only on TV, death happens in hospitals, and churches sponsor Starbucks kiosks and Pilates classes, where is God concretely? Where can we say we encounter God? The arrival of individualism tends to encourage us to assert that God is where we subjectively feel God. But if we are honest, such assertions can't avoid the white-hot heat of doubt in late modernity. "Can I trust my feelings?" "Is it God or what I had for lunch?"

So, as much as I admired the songwriter's question, I was unconvinced by her answer—that God was watching. I found myself unsatisfied. God is watching doesn't give me any answers to her question, *Where is God?* (I know, I know, I'm a high-strung theologian, and I should cut her some slack. The song, after all, is not her dissertation, though truth be told it may impact the thinking of the church more than 100 dissertations, so I'll continue). The songwriter's direct question about where God is concretely, where we encounter God, was answered with obscurity and abstraction. God is watching somewhere, it seemed; far enough away that God can see us but we cannot be encountered by God. But the question *Where is God?* asks for a direct, concrete answer. The question assumes a desire to be encountered by God, and encounter is the heart of relationship.

For instance, if my son came up to me while I was watching a baseball game on the couch and asked me, *Where is Momma?* and I said, "Momma is watching," he would be very unsatisfied; he'd figure I was either a jerk or deranged. He wants to know concretely where she is, so that he can be with her, so that he can be loved by her and love her. *Where is Momma?*—just like *Where is God?*—is a question that seeks the presence of a person, to be in a relationship with another. To answer "God is watching" is to assume that we cannot share in God's presence, that God is too far away to be with us, too abstract to be a person.

But then what really got me going was the second stanza. "Where is love? Love is holding you tonight." What bothered me wasn't that she equated love with holding and rocking her child (this no doubt is one of the purest acts of love that we know). What was disturbing in light of the first stanza was that there was no connection between where God was and where love was. (Again, I know this is a children's song, and not a theological paper, but this divide between God's presence and our experiences of day-to-day love and care is too common, the two are too often unrelated, or the connection unsophisticatedly thought through). The songwriter had somehow made love concrete: "Love is holding you tonight." She had made it an encounter, a relational reality; but she had made God's presence abstract, God is invisibly watching you from somewhere unknown.

When we focus our ministries on the *who* of Jesus Christ, when we see the incarnation as the encounter with a person as opposed to a theme, we are pointed to either a God who's far away just watching, or a God who can be divided from the love and embrace of a mother to a child. Rather, the incarnate one reveals a God of encounter, a God who desires more than just to watch us, but to share our place in relationship, to love us by being present to us. But if this God is loving us by sharing our place, how should we understand our encounter with God and how should it impact our ministries?

The theological reason for relational youth ministry is not simply the fact that "It's what Jesus *did*." Rather our reasons for relational ministry should have something to do with *where God is*. Or to say it another way, relational youth ministry isn't about getting kids to accept a message from long ago, but is rather about participating in the living presence of God together with them, right now.

A youth ministry of place-sharing argues that our relationships—where we truly see other persons and share their place—are the location of God's presence in the world. So...if asked, "Where is God?" we would answer that God is found in our relationships. Because God has become human, gone to the cross suffering our estrangement, and overcome it with resurrection.

Jesus Christ stands with us and for us, beside us.<sup>2</sup> So when we search for God, we don't look outside our world, for God in Jesus has already entered our world. Rather, we search and find God by turning to our brothers and sisters and confessing that God in Jesus Christ stands with/next to them.<sup>3</sup>

This is why in Mathew 25:31ff Jesus equates his presence (his "where") with feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner. Since Jesus stands with and for them, that means that what we do "unto" them, as Jesus says, we do unto him. When we enter into relationships of place-sharing, God is concretely present, not just as an idea, not just as a nice thing to say or believe, but as an actuality. Since Jesus Christ is really there, then, quite literally, what we do to another we do to Christ. For through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection Jesus stands with and for others.

But what does all this mean? Primarily it means that our relationships with young people are not tools for influence but rather something more beautiful and significant. Our relationships with youth (and our relationships in general) are the location of God's presence in the world. When we open our lives to young people, and they open theirs to us, we're not just doing good ministry. Rather, we are doing good ministry because we're both (kid and adult) communing with God, not in ourselves, but in our communion with each other. As we share each other's place, through the power of God's own action as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected, we're participating in God's own person.

At first glance such a perspective seems to make God into our pet. Asking the question "where is God?" at all seems to run this risk. But this is only so if we fail to explore the profundity of relationship. Relationship (true relationship that is not the road to something else, but the destination of being together, being with and for each other) is the experience of transcendence.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of encounter, in the midst of really seeing and being with others, we discover that they are other than us, that they escape us, they are outside what we can grasp. The more I love my wife and embrace my children and allow them to embrace me, the more I encounter them as a mystery, as others that I cannot possess or totalize but can only encounter in the infinite mystery of their being, of their being with me as other than me. The deeper we encounter others the more they become other than us, the more they transcend us. They become our limit, that which is outside and beyond us, that which transcends us.<sup>5</sup>

God is other and beyond us by entering our history, by revealing Godself. God is transcendent as both hidden and revealed by binding Godself with humanity, first through Israel and then through Jesus. Because Jesus is the incarnate, who is crucified and resurrected, Bonhoeffer contends that God's transcendence is historical; it confronts humanity within humanity's experience of time and space. Following this, the place of God's transcendence within human history is found in the *person* of Jesus Christ. God has chosen to make Godself known as person, for the inner life of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is constituted by persons in relation to one another. Therefore, it is the other person (or human neighbor) who confronts me within my existence, and in so doing demonstrates his or her otherness from me (his or her transcendence). Because Jesus Christ is person (both in the inner life of the Trinity and within human history) we experience the transcendent otherness of God as we encounter the otherness of our human neighbor as person.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is within the relationship that we come up against the living God.<sup>7</sup> In standing with and for the other person whom Jesus Christ stands beside, I encounter Christ as I see the mystery of others' humanity, as I recognize that I cannot possess him or her, but must love him or her as I confess the love of Christ for us both.<sup>8</sup> I encounter the presence of God because in encountering the other I meet the one, Jesus Christ, who is for and with us both. But how do we do this? What might this look like?

## The Shape of Place-Sharing

I was leaning against his kitchen counter, sipping a freshly poured soda still cracking the ice in my cup. I hadn't known him or been in ministry for long when, in the middle of our awkward small talk, the doorbell rang. It was 6:00 p.m., and I was the invited guest for dinner at his home. He went to the door, then left the house and closed the front door behind him while his wife prepared the dinner and hurried the children to the table, rushing from microwave to oven as she readied our

meal and her children's. I just stood there, drink in my hand, waiting for him to return, too young and stupid to ask if she needed me to do anything.

When we sat down for dinner he still hadn't returned. She finally sat, breathed a deep sigh of exhaustion, and began cutting her youngest child's hot dog as I started with the salad. I felt uncomfortable; I was there for dinner because he and I had just started doing ministry together, and he was nice enough to invite me over. But as I spooned the pasta onto my plate, he was gone, and I was sitting with his wife and kids, feeling more than a little self-conscious. He had answered the door and disappeared. I thought this was odd, but she seemed, though annoyed, to see it as regular behavior. Finally, feeling so embarrassed as the silence grew and my mind raced to find something to say but could think of nothing, I inquired about her husband's absence. She responded that it must be the guys. "The guys?" I asked worried that he had somehow gotten entangled with the mob or something. "You know, the guys from his Bible study. They stop by most nights." This didn't seem right, but I was too new in ministry to understand why.

We had finished dinner and the ice cream was being placed on the table when he finally came in. "Everything alright?" I asked, assuming that one of them must have been suicidal for him to be gone for the last forty-five minutes without so much as a word. "Yeah," he responded with a suspicious look. "Yeah," he continued proudly, "they were just coming back from hanging out." After a pause he continued, I can only assume as if to teach me something, "I guess that's ministry for you; it doesn't just happen nine to five." As he said this, I looked at his family—wife clearly worn out, kids messy from dinner. He'd left his wife, children, and invited guest during dinner to be relational, to be in ministry. And this wasn't abnormal; they stopped by most nights around dinnertime. He'd given his life to being relational with young people, but his relational behavior seemed, from my perspective, to be hurting his family. He was saying that he was being relational, but what does relational mean and what does it look like?

Does it mean always dropping everything to be with young people? I can imagine if our nights are only filled with *Family Guy* reruns and snack foods, we might answer "yes." But what about when our nights are filled with needed rest, time with friends, stories read to our children, and long talks with our spouse? Then must we be so-called "relational," responding to every phone call and every doorbell ring?

Now you may be wondering, *Doesn't all this talk about entering into adolescents' suffering and sharing their place affirm us taking such a stance, becoming people who are always on call, always available? Wasn't that coworker being a place-sharer? If not, what then would faithful place-sharing look like?* There are four stances that faithful place-sharing will encompass that connect with the concrete "where" of God in relationship.

## 1. Open and Closed

A relationship can only be a relationship if the people in it are able to be both open and closed with each other. We rightly assume that being in relationship with another person means being open to that person, letting that person in, sharing things with that person as he or she lets us in and shares things with us. We often hear this in the midst of frustration; for instance, when a parent, spouse, or friend says, "I don't know what it is, but he just won't open up to me." Yet we too often make the mistake of assuming that the major component to any relationship is the ability to be open. While this is important, it's just as important (though this seems counterintuitive to us) that we can be closed with another. Bonhoeffer writes, "Be wary of the person who cannot be with others, but be just as wary of the person that cannot be alone."

My marriage is not *only* dependent on being open with my wife. It surely is; but just as important is my ability to be closed, my ability to be myself, to have a self. It is just as important not to allow her or myself to be sucked into enmeshment where we can no longer determine where she begins and I end, no longer be two people. The most tragic of marriages are those in which each person seems almost flat, as if neither has had an original thought, dream, or simply a laugh in years. Rather, the

health of our marriage is dependent on my wife being herself and me being myself. It's dependent on us not only being connected but being connected as the two distinct people we are. If we cannot be closed, having our own opinions, thoughts, and needs—if we are not free to say, “I need to be alone”—then we cannot be open with each other. If she cannot be closed with me, I'll never be able to share in her distinct life, for it won't be distinct enough from my own life for me to see it as “other” than me, as an experience of transcendence, and something that must be cherished and loved.

Now, what does this have to do with youth ministry? To enter into another's suffering and share another's place demands that I open myself to this other; but just as importantly, it demands that I be closed. If I cannot be closed enough to know myself, and young people as different than me, than I cannot truly see them.

My ministry partner in the previous story believed being relational in ministry was about being radically open, willing to let kids in at any time and moment. But in so doing he was open without being closed. He became not a human being with needs, dreams, and other people (such as his wife and children) who made him who he was, but a dispenser who existed only to meet adolescents' needs. His ministry was no longer broken person to broken person, but a ministry to consuming kids with a commodity-giving youth worker. To be a place-sharer we have to be able to say “no” or “I'm finished” or “Don't stop by at dinnertime” or “I'm on vacation” or “Call me when the sun is up.”

If our ministries are only about influence, then we have every reason to fear ever saying any of these things, for any good sales rep is “always open for business.” But if we truly believe that God is present (i.e., that the “where” of Jesus Christ is located) in relationships, then it's vital that these relationships be human person to human person, that they be open and closed, where each person sees the distinct and beautiful humanity of the other, and therefore confesses God in the relationship.

Too often we've told volunteers and youth workers that their relational success is judged on how open they are with kids, but it's just as important they be able to be closed. It's important that they be able to identify with adolescents; but just as important is their ability to be different, to differentiate, to be an adult, to be a person.

Jesus encounters humanity in the identification and differentiation of his own humanity. He is the very *Logos* of God, he is different and distinct from all others. If you have seen him you have seen the Father. But Jesus, at the same time, is open to us; he is fully human, he is bearing death and despair. God has fully allowed Godself to be known and encountered as person in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Where once one could not survive a face-to-face encounter with God, in the humanity of Jesus God is encountered (fully) as person. But this doesn't eliminate God's transcendence, it fortifies it. That which is the most mysterious and other is that which is nearest to hand, that which is other but so near. Like the sad story of your grieving friend, or the warm embrace of your mother's hands, or the deep sleeping breaths of your child. They are near, but in the nearness of their person they transcend us in the love of relationship person to person. The fullness of God's otherness is experienced in open- and closedness. It is experienced as that which is close at hand, it is experienced in our humanity, for God has become human.<sup>9</sup> But in experiencing it here, it escapes us, its nearness reveals its otherness. God has taken on flesh and in so doing shows God's love for us; by being near to us, God shows God's otherness from us. Relationships of open- and closedness, of identification and differentiation, hold within them the possibility of being places to encounter God, because they are places of transcendence, places where persons meet persons, places where the person of God encounters our own persons. But *without* the open- and closedness of person-to-person structure, transcendence is lost, for there is no otherness without closedness.

The place-sharer seeks to always remind adolescents that there is a boundary that separates them. If my ministry partner had gone to the door that night and said, “Hey guys! Great to see you. But I'm having dinner with my family right now. Can I catch up with you tomorrow?” He not only would have communicated love and fidelity to his family, but also would

have communicated to the adolescents at the door that he's a distinct human being with others he loves and who love him, with particular thoughts and dreams, with depth in his person that calls those young people into their own depth. *He would have become a person to be in relationship with* as opposed to the "super-relational pastor." When he spent dinner after dinner outside, away from his family, the teenagers who monopolized his time witnessed not a unique person who calls out for relationship with his own distinct, unique person, but simply a guy who met their needs. They saw someone who could be summarized, not as a multidimensional, mysterious person, but as a youth worker whose job it is to be relational.

My ministry partner that night was right: Relational ministry is not done from nine to five. Sharing another person's place happens at times and places rarely anticipated, and often it is in the middle of crises that we are called to enter others' lives. But the fact that it's not a nine-to-five job doesn't mean that it's not humanizing, that relational ministry isn't practiced from the core of our beings, which calls us to be with everyone (adolescent or not) as open and closed.

The real art of practicing relational youth ministry, then, is not about dropping everything to be with kids; more profoundly, it's about being open and closed alongside them. It is not your job to be radically open with young people; it's your job to be a healthy and whole person who's able to both identify with them and be different from them.

## 2. Barrier

In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, Will is a delinquent young adult from South Boston. After getting in a fight with someone in the neighborhood and hitting a cop who was breaking up the fight, Will's sentenced to see a psychiatrist or go to prison. Chasing away his first two psychiatrists—by questioning one's sexuality and the other's vocational methods—Will is close to accomplishing his strategy of avoiding this court-appointed hurdle by scaring off all willing counselors. That is, until he meets his last option, Sean. Sean is dealing with issues of his own. Once a promising MIT grad, he's found himself working in a community college teaching uninterested students. Yet, his issues are not really career related; he's still dealing with the death of his wife who lost a long, painful battle with cancer.

Will enters Sean's office for their first meeting and puts his strategy into action, looking for a way to push Sean to quit before ever starting with Will. Will begins by insulting the books on Sean's shelf; Sean is not bothered. Trying a new tactic, Will asks Sean how much he can bench. When Sean responds with a weight much higher than Will's max, he looks for another angle. Seeing a painting leaning against Sean's window depicting a man in a boat, Will inquires, "Did you paint this?" "Yeah," Sean responds. Taking a few shots at its quality, Will then tries to interpret it. "You ever hear the saying, 'any port in a storm?'"—Well, maybe that means you. Maybe you were in the middle of a storm, a big...storm—the waves were crashing over the bow, the...mast was about to snap, and you were crying for the harbor. So you did what you had to do to get out. Maybe you became a psychologist." Sean's not bothered. "Bingo," Sean says. "Now let me do my job." But Will takes one more jab at finding Sean's weak spot through the painting, "Maybe you married the wrong woman." Sean turns quickly and shoots back, "Watch your mouth." Will smiles; he's found Sean's vulnerability, so he goes for the kill, "That's it, isn't it? You married the wrong woman. She leave you? Was she [seeing] someone else?"

Like he's fired out of a cannon Sean crosses the room, grabs Will's neck, and pushes him up forcefully against the wall. Sean says through the intensity of clenched teeth, "If you ever disrespect my wife again I will end you." And the scene is over.

This scene reveals a deeply theologically significant moment—a moment that we can build our ministries around. Of course, I'm not advocating that you strangle kids (though you may know a few that make you wish that was exactly what I was saying). Rather, what this scene shows is the power of another person becoming our barrier or limit.

Sean's act communicates closedness to Will; it communicates boldly that Sean is a human being who knows suffering and pain—and this suffering and pain will have to be respected. It is closed to Will; he has no right to use it for his own purposes. In the forceful act Sean asserts, "No further! This is me, a human being. You will respect my broken humanity, or there

can be no relationship.” In shooting across the room and asserting his closedness, something beautiful happens, as you’ll remember if you’ve seen the movie. Through this act of closedness, in which Sean becomes Will’s barrier, a relationship is formed—and such a rich relationship that Will (and Sean for that matter) discovers who he is and what he offers the world. The power of faithful place-sharing that’s both open and closed is that the other person becomes our barrier or our limit. When we come up against their person, we discover who we are. Whenever we’re forced to see the other person (and are not allowed to use them, but to really see them), we discover ourselves. It’s in interaction with others that we discover our gifts, abilities, and overall uniqueness. We form our very identities as we come up against the barrier of other people. It’s only after witnessing Sean’s closed-ness and seeing Sean as his barrier and limit that Will begins, through their relationship, to discover his own person.

It is when Sean *acts* upon him as a barrier and limit that Will is actually invited into a relationship. The other therapists were willing to see Will as a patient, someone that needed knowledge to avoid his dysfunction. But Will’s own (inappropriate) actions forced the therapists to quit, for his actions subverted their role and they wished to only deal with Will outside of action and in the realm of technical knowledge. When Sean “chokes” Will he is acting, he is revealing his very self through his action. His action is not avoidance but becomes a direct barrier to Will’s own action, reflecting back on him not only who Sean is (a hurting widower) but who Will is as well (a self-protective and hurting kid).

It is through action one to another that we discover our very selves, but also discover that our selves are bound in relationship to others. We need others to be our limit.

A theology of God’s otherness encountered in revelation is the assertion that we know God through God’s own action. There is no knowledge of God outside of God’s own action, outside of encounter. And now that God has made Godself known through the action of taking on humanity, it is in encountering humanity, it is in acting with and for our fellow human being, in coming up against our limit, that we encounter God. But only if we see that God has encountered the world, that God has acted in revealing Godself by being found on the cross, by being found in suffering and brokenness, acting for the world by suffering the world, restoring relationship by suffering broken relationship. Sean acts from the core of his brokenness, inviting Will to share in it, calling Will to open his own broken suffering to Sean. In the mutual action of shared suffering we witness the other person as a barrier, as that which cannot be crossed, and in encountering that barrier we find ourselves with our neighbor in the presence of God.

The power of relationships in ministry is *not* that they’re ideal tools to get kids to do things or intimacy zones that makes kids feel things. Their power is that they offer young people barriers; they offer our humanity as the adolescents’ limit, as the adolescent’s becomes ours. And as such, the relationship becomes the place where adolescents discover their own person, as they encounter the otherness of God in the nearness but strangeness of our humanity.

But in order to be barriers we need to be ourselves. We need to be open and closed with adolescents; we need to be able to say, “No further; this is me and that is you,” just as Sean did with Will (minus the strangling part!). This is the ultimate danger with my ministry partner’s actions. When he became so open to young people that he would skip out of his parenting responsibilities (not to mention his relationship to his wife or obligation to his dinner guest) to be with adolescents, he was forgetting his ability to be a barrier to kids. Instead he became a jungle gym; his relationship with them gave them something to do, but he couldn’t claim his otherness enough to become their barrier, to communicate to them who he witnessed them to be.

### 3. Corresponding to Reality

This third disposition is corresponding to reality, it is seeking to *see the world from the young person’s locations*. We can’t be in relationship with young people if we refuse to allow young people to inform us, whether through conversation or observation, about their world.

## Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry †

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In the British movie *About a Boy*, Marcus is an eccentric kid who lives with a hippie-ish, depressed single mother. Soon Marcus meets Will, a bachelor who thinks only of himself, on a picnic with Marcus's mother's friend, Susie. Marcus was along on Will and Susie's date because his mother was feeling "blue." Upon dropping Marcus off at home, they stumble across his mother passed out on the floor, having attempted suicide.

For the next several weeks Marcus shows up at Will's flat after school. At first Will is reluctant to allow Marcus in; after all, Will is self-centered, and Marcus is a weird kid. But it soon becomes something Will expects: Marcus arrives, they watch *Count Down*, and Marcus leaves. There's no agenda. Marcus likes being with Will, and after a while Will looks forward to being with Marcus. After several weeks together, Will uncharacteristically breaks the normal rhythm of their time by asking Marcus, "So how is it going at home, then?"

"You mean with my mom?" returns Marcus, trying hard to show that it is not obvious what Will is referring to. "She's alright, thanks." Marcus continues, looking away quickly.

"I mean she's..." Will adds tentatively, unwilling to finish his thought. But Marcus knows exactly what he is referring to, finishing Will's sentence, "I know, no, nothing like that."

Sensing Marcus' anxiety about his mother Will responds, "So, that still bothering you then?"

"Does it bother me?" Marcus adds, trying to appear stoic.

We are then taken into Marcus' thoughts: Every single day, that's why I come here instead of *going home*. Looking away he answers Will's question, "A bit, when I think about it."

Will can only respond by looking away, shaking his head. Then in deep compassion and understanding he says, "F-king hell." Marcus and Will share a meaningful look and the scene ends.

We next see Marcus walking home saying again to himself, "I don't know why Will swore like that but it made me feel better; it made me feel like I wasn't being so pathetic for getting so scared."

In this scene Will's "f-king hell" is corresponding to reality; he has taken the time to see Marcus' suffering and can only respond from the core of his own being. He has seen the world from Marcus' place. As the scene ends, Marcus responds that he feels understood, and that Will has entered into this difficult situation with him. Marcus's place of Godforsaken loneliness has become the location of new community, new possibility; it has become the place where God is present. With Will's "f-king hell" he has spoken what is, he has called a thing what it is. He has placed his person in Marcus's hell. He has seen his reality and by seeing and acting to call it what it is, he has joined Marcus in his hell. But Will has joined him as himself, he has really experienced Marcus's pain, but he has not confused whose pain it is. He is able to really join Marcus in suffering because Will is closed enough to distinguish Marcus's issue from his own. If somehow he imagined that Marcus's suffering was his own he could not say "f-king hell" but would instead seek to solve the problem.

Marcus is still in his hell, but no longer alone; he has been joined, his suffering has been shared. And as shared suffering, it witnesses beyond itself to the God who joins God's very being with the suffering of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Will's "calling a thing what it is" is the call to join God where God can be found in hell, bringing life from death. Will's "f-king hell" becomes the joining of his person with Marcus as Jesus joins his with ours by suffering the fullness of our reality. Will's "f-king hell" is at the same time both the assertion of "reality" (it's hell to worry about your mama's depression), and hope. Will's "f-king hell" reveals that Marcus is no longer alone, that his frail, worried humanity is bound

to another, to Will. And if it can be bound to Will it just as well can be bound to the one that promises to bring life from death, to bring hallelujah from f—king hell. But there can be no hallelujah without f—king hell, just as there can be no resurrection without the cross, no ultimate through the avoidance of the penultimate.

Much like Will in *About a Boy*, corresponding to reality with young people often happens as we simply spend time with them. Will didn't do anything magical or professional; he simply weekly (or daily) watched the game show *Count Down* with Marcus, and as he did, Marcus revealed windows into his reality. If we can simply spend time with adolescents with the simple but profound desire to be with them in their realities, we have become their place-sharers.

#### **4. Freedom in Mutuality**

There is no “ought” in place-sharing; there is no need to feel guilty that you should be doing this or that with adolescents. There's only the invitation to be human alongside them, to be yourself as you act with and for them, to experience their lives as they experience yours. In your relationship with young people, you are free—free to share adolescents' place as it works for you and for them. As long as it's mutually humanizing, it need not conform to some master plan (theme). Helping a kid change his oil, making French flash cards, decorating your daughter's birthday cake, or simply sitting together in silence can all be the needed free space for place-sharing to occur. You're free—free to be yourself with and alongside them.

However, the real power of place-sharing is not in filling these free spaces with tactics to get kids to talk to us, sharing their deepest and darkest fears and worries. Too often we imagine that a good youth worker is able to get adolescents to open up and talk, so we carpet-bomb them with questions: “How is school? Who are you dating? How is volleyball? How is your prayer life? How are things at home?” and on and on. As any parent or youth worker knows, getting a fifteen-year-old guy to answer any of these questions with more than two words is a miracle. Rather, in the freedom of this free space, the goal isn't to get them to talk as much as it is to allow them to join in our lives, to come close to us and watch as we seek to live faithfully as authentic human beings. The goal isn't to get them to open up to us as much as it is, in silent assertion through our relationships with them, to invite them to come close to us, to see us, to be with us, and to watch as we seek to live out this thing called discipleship in fear, hope, doubt, and joy.

This is what Ray Anderson calls “closing the circle of transcendence.” If God is found next to our humanity through the humanity of Godself, then we are calling young people not away from their own and our humanity, but toward it, to encounter it as we together seek God. As open/closed, a barrier, and corresponding with reality, we call young people to come and live near us, to watch and participate in our lives. Not because we are perfect, not because we possess something, not because it is about us, but because we believe that God is a God who encounters us not outside but within relationships of broken people, bringing new life out of our broken places. Therefore we call young people to come near to us, not to share in our perfection but in our brokenness, not in our completion, but in our emptiness, not in our fulfillment, but in our yearning. To be with us in these places is to witness the beautiful fragility of our humanity that seeks a God found in just such places. It is the invitation to young people to themselves seek God together with us in the fragility of their own humanity, in relationships where we share each others' places as the proclamation and experience of God sharing ours.

## Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry †

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1. Eberhard Jungel says it this way, “Whether there is a God at all and what a God is, are decided for contemporary man [sic] by answering this question: Where can God be encountered and where can he [sic] be addressed as God?” *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1983) p. 49.
2. “The disciples view other people only as those to whom Jesus comes. They encounter other people only because they approach them together with Jesus. Jesus goes ahead of them to other people, and the disciples follow him. Thus an encounter between a disciple and another person is never just a freely chosen encounter between two people... Disciples can encounter other people only as those to whom Jesus himself comes. Jesus’ struggle for the other person, his call, his love, his grace, his judgment are all that matters.” Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 170.
3. Bonhoeffer explains, “I hear another man really proclaim the gospel to me. He extends to me the sacrament: you are forgiven. He and the community pray for me, and I hear the gospel, join the prayer, and know myself in the word, sacrament, and prayer of the community of Christ to be bound with the new humanity, be it now here or elsewhere, borne by it, bearing it. Here I, the historically whole man, individual and humanity, am touched.” Ibid.
4. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas believes something similar to Bonhoeffer. The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. “A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation. It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan. The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God. God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. The direct comprehension of God is impossible for a look directed upon him, not because our intelligence is limited, but because the relation with infinity respects the total Transcendence of the other without being bewitched by it, and because our possibility of welcoming him in man goes further than the comprehension that thematizes and encompasses its object.” Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1961), p. 78.
5. “It surely must be that the ‘terrifying’ possibility of an encounter with a friend—certainly a strange idea at first thought—is not in the possibility of betrayal, but in revelation. We touch the highest mystery when we come up against the known, or the knowable, not the unknown or the unknowable. For this is the mystery of ‘coming up against,’ it is the ‘uncanny’ moment when we know something or someone. When it dawns upon us that we are loved freely and intelligently by another; where the inner logic of that love is undeniably present, not in our own needs, but in the other’s actions, not even in our own spirit, but in the other’s body. And thus it is here that we come up against the transcendence, not the beyond, the infinite, which extends out from us, but the ‘nearest to hand’, the flesh which carries in it the logic of spirit.” Anderson, Ray S. *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 104.
6. Bonhoeffer states, “There is no relation to men without a relation to God, and no relation to God without a relation to men, and it is only our relation to Jesus Christ which provides the basis for our relation to men and to God. Jesus Christ is our life, and so now, from the standpoint of Jesus Christ, we may say that our fellow-man is our life and that God is our life.” Quoted in Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 67.
7. Bonhoeffer explains this further, “The social basic category is the I-You relation. The You of the other person is the divine You. Thus the way to the other person’s You is the same as the way to the divine You, either through acknowledgment or rejection. The individual becomes a person ever and again through the other; in the ‘moment’. The other person presents us with the same challenge to our knowing as does God. My real relationship to another person is oriented to my relationship with God. But since I know God’s ‘I’ only in the revelation of God’s love, so too with the other person...” *Sanctorum Communio*, 55–56.
8. Green states, “The socio-ethical relation to the human ‘other’ is precisely the form in which people encounter the divine ‘Other’... God is not immanent in us, but is present to us in the social relationship. The transcendence of God means God’s presence as ‘Other.’ *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 35, 36. Green continues, “We do not deal with an invisible God in an invisible world of our wishful fantasies; God is met and heard only in the real world where human, personal wills encounter one another; God is to be sought in the real experience of historical, social, ethical existence. Furthermore... the purpose of the divine presence is precisely to renew the personal and corporate life of human sociality. Human personal being, then, derives ultimately from the personal being of God. If God has been philosophically described as absolute Geist, Bonhoeffer insists that God, as well as human beings, must be fundamental as Person.” Ibid., 36.
9. See Barth’s *Humanity of God*.
10. “The resistance of the Other is not merely a negation of the act of the Self, it is necessary to the possibility of the act, and so constitutive of it. For without a resistance no action is possible. To act at all is to act upon something. Consequently, the Other is discovered in tactual perception both as the resistance to, and the support of action.” MacMurray, John *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1953), p. 110.