

THE NEED TO BELONG

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Introduction

RECENTLY, I HEARD some very articulate youth address a presentation to adults involved in Christian education and pastoral ministry in parishes. The young people asked to be taken seriously when they dialogued and communicated with adults. They expressed a definite need for adults to understand that their culture as youth was an important consideration in any kind of collaborative activity. The profound insight in their reflection was that 'religion needs relationship'. Attendance and participation in any liturgical or social activity meant 'checking out' who was going to be there and whether the event would address their need to be together, to celebrate in a creative activity and to have a choice whether or not to be with their families. The immediate response from some of the adults was in the form of 'Why?' questions. 'Why don't you want to be with your families?' and 'Well, it works both ways, you have to understand why we have certain traditions'.

As I reflected on the dialogue between the youth and the adults that followed the presentations, I realized that I had witnessed a pluralism of spiritualities in the group that most probably focused on a different understanding and need to belong. While it is very difficult to decide on a definition of spirituality, I am going to centre the discussion on spirituality as the need for our spirit to be intimately connected with our bodies, psyches, and relationships with ourselves, others and nature. Our spirituality is our ability to cope¹ and our need to live our relationships with integrity. As adults, we realize that living with integrity can be a lifelong process, but adults can also forget how real and important the tension to create an ideal can be for young people. For many youth, their acute struggle during this time of growth is with their own individual process, and their relationship with themselves. This 'ideal' self can be profoundly affected by family, religion, culture, media, peers and economic stress. As adults we may want to believe that family and religion have a profound effect on young people in our care. However, I am going to ask in this article whether the 'individuation' process for the nineties and the need to belong may be significantly different for youth today. If the individuation process is different, then the youth today may have some important lessons to

teach adults in regard to the nature of our relationships with ourselves, our need to belong and the integrity of our spiritual journeys.

The need to belong

In a general sense, the need to belong is one of our primary needs as human beings. Just as we hunger for food and affection, our need to belong is an integral part of our psychological development. The experience of belonging to a place, a cultural group, a family or a time in history needs to be recognized as a vital and essential part of our relationship with ourselves and others. Think about the places we have called our own, where we have grown up, the neighbourhoods, the physical surroundings, the kinds of food, smells and spatial relationships that formed our sense of belonging and influenced our future choices about what we might call 'home'. Many of us will remember (or maybe we would rather forget) some of the behaviours we chose just to belong or to 'fit in' to our peer group. Most commonly, the behaviour was evident in the way we dressed, in our change of hairstyle, or choice of language, music or leisure activity. Although the memory of trying to belong might seem embarrassing or memorable, it is equally important to realize that the failure to recognize our need to belong can have serious consequences in later adult life.² Ignoring or resisting our need to belong can mean the later recurrence of a deep and insatiable hunger within the psyche of an adult.³ This incessant hunger might affect our later adult life in terms of our relationships with ourselves and others (intimacy) or with our desire to join other groups for some purpose.

Feeling the push to belong

Each generation experiences its own struggles and 'begs for a new dream'.⁴ The point where a person and their friends are involved in a culture's history influences their choices and attitudes.⁵ Studies in Canada, the United States and Great Britain have painted the profile of young people today as belonging to a generation of 'conservative conformists'.⁶ Youth in these studies have been cast as politically quiet, worrying about acid rain but not politically proactive in terms of social change. They do not see the connections between buying designer jeans and Nike™ shoes and talking about Third World poverty and pollution. Yet many young people consider AIDS, the environment, child abuse, and teen suicide as major social concerns, with racial discrimination and violence against women and the economy close second, indicating serious concern.⁷ Schools have taught our children

tolerance towards people who are gay, people of colour, and people who grow up in different kinds of family situations. However, youth are also characterized as having a certain cynicism and resistance against institutional religion and its leaders, and they have still less respect for political parties. This does not mean that youth today are anti-religious: many believe in God, but they prefer not to belong to a conventional religion.⁸ They worry about the problems that have been passed on to them from older generations and they feel stressed about the unprecedented competition for jobs. They also wonder if anyone is really listening to their protests. Their biggest fear is to find out who they are and where they belong in a world that has been packaged through television and the hungry appetites of consumers. The most unsettling question for youth has become: 'What am I meant to do with the rest of my life?' and 'Where do I belong?'

While this characterization of the newest generation might reflect some of the insecurity of an older generation of adults analysing their interviews and surveys, one fact stands out as defining and shaping many youth today: it is the first generation that has been socialized outside a faith culture.⁹ In earlier generations, religion worked in partnership with families, providing a social structure that nurtured community relationships. The social profile of families today has radically changed. The stress caused by economic disparity and the need for so many families to relocate across neighbourhoods, cities, countries and even continents has meant that families can tend to be small and fragmented. This has greatly affected a sense of belonging to a continuum and being part of a greater story that has beginnings, struggles, redemption and new life.¹⁰

The paradox of the Christian gospel has been that 'anyone who loses their life . . . for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (Mk 8:35). Our willingness to move from place to place and our search for a compassionate God and the way of justice is dependent on a sense of belonging and an experience of rootedness. In the case of a younger generation searching for its 'roots', a critical question remains for these youth who may wonder where they belong: what will fill the spiritual void left by the absence of formalized religion and how can the Christian story challenge young people beyond a journey focused on their individuation process and their struggle to belong to a culture?

I think that our Christian spirituality does offer some insights into this critical point in the journey of our young people and our own journey as mentors, parents and spiritual teachers. First of all, it is important to discern between need and desire. The need to belong is

very different from a desire to belong that has been fabricated through media and consumerism. My own experience of working with urban-challenged youth over a period of twenty years has taught me to recognize the structures that oppress youth such as underemployment and the lack of future opportunities. These injustices need to be addressed before many youth can even feel safe enough to articulate a real desire to belong to anything spiritual or to change an abusive environment. Before young people can discard or recognize false desires, and appropriate real needs, they require adult listeners who will acknowledge some complicity in the need to belong to a consumer culture and to perpetuate an advertising industry that seems driven by the desire to convert dreams into profit.

Coming out

Although the term 'coming out' has more recently been associated with gays and lesbians coming out publicly about their sexual identity, I would like to apply the same term to young people who are also asking a 'coming out' question in terms of their own spiritual growth: 'What would happen if what was inside of me were to enter the world, would it make a difference?' This is a spiritual question because young people need to know if their story will be taken seriously.

There are many stereotypes about youth present in the media which rarely become validated against the real-life experience of young people today. A young person's attempt to 'try on' different personas and their struggle for integration can be misinterpreted by adults who are not present and passionate about the 'inner life' of young people. If adults make quick judgements about youth from the music they listen to, the remarks they make or the make-up and earrings they wear or the 'gangs' they hang around with, they have lost the real story of community and belonging that is simmering beneath the surface of many young people today. Among the hidden discourses of youth, there is a quiet but loyal solidarity among young people who have experienced loss or alienation. Countless acts of kindness are exchanged with little notice or public acknowledgement. I know of innumerable stories of youth who have worked long hours supplementing their parents' wages, volunteering for community service or raising funds for projects or friends in need. Many young people simply want anonymity when it comes to attracting any attention to their acts of genuine love for others. Sometimes I wonder if young people really are 'conservative conformists' as some studies indicate, or whether the media has too much to lose in revealing the solidarity and sense of

relational integrity that exist among youth. Their sense of risk and generosity in relationships is unparalleled at this time in life and perhaps envied by adults who can become consumed in career and financial ambitions.

A young person's criticism about the lack of integrity within organized religion or the need for better relationships among the community of believers may be indicative of a healthy insight into the need for spiritual growth and questioning among young people and adults. A recent documentary from the United States concerning the reasons why young people and adults join cults revealed that ordinarily these people do not have any history of mental illness; generally speaking they are not considered unstable people. Professionals studying the histories and lives of people who have joined cults have speculated that many adults who were members of, for example, 'Heaven's Gate', 'Solar Temple' or 'Jonestown' were well-educated and came from middle-class backgrounds. The defining factor was not some traumatic event or unresolved issue in the life of the person that joined a cult. The difference seems to have been that these people were very idealistic as young people and had led very sheltered lives. Facing reality as adults was a difficult task where ideals were jeopardized by the harsh circumstances of life. Instead, the cult offered an alternative to the reality they encountered in the outside world. If the authority in the group was challenged or threatened by another member, that member was punished and discriminated against by the other members.

These findings shed new light on the way adults may want to interpret the resistance and critical questioning among the younger generation. Young people often spend a considerable amount of time in search of community and a certain transcendence beyond themselves. Their questions, doubts and critical scrutiny of an established group or authority may be a healthy way to 'test' whether they want freely to belong to this group while maintaining their own individuality.

Is the story alive?

My experience of 'freeing up' young people to tell their story and discover their need to belong does not come from asking direct questions about where they come from or what they want from life. However, I have seen young people transfixed by the integrity and authenticity of a real-life story. The age of the storyteller is irrelevant. They want to know the details and difficulties of life. How did the storyteller find hope and humour amidst adversity and hardship? Whether the storyteller was a survivor of the Holocaust or an abusive

family, an elderly man fighting for justice, or a single mother seeking refugee status, they listened intently to the story. For a short, but intensive time, the storyteller invited them to 'belong', to become 'rooted' in their own story of struggle, doubt and joy. The effect of listening to the personal risks taken by the storyteller can often dispel the idea that making a commitment to spiritual growth can restrict one's freedom of choice. Freedom is one of the most important goals for youth.¹¹ The need for relationship and being loved only comes a close second.¹² Youth need the chance to share their stories of risk and their stories of failure and fear. A group is often the forum to sort out what they have been told from what they want to appropriate as their own spiritual story.

The liturgy of the group

Listening to the stories of youth can mean a tremendous amount of risk on the part of adults. When I first started working with the stories of youth through role-play, music and drama, I wanted to edit the language and the violence that I initially experienced through their work of storytelling. I had to shift my understanding of what it meant to experience life as a young person in today's culture. After we experienced the initial impact of violence through the carefully chosen piece of music or drama, we reached a moment of quiet and emptiness. A question would hang in the air, 'Where do we belong now?' 'What are the voices we hear?' 'Who are the prophets that we want to listen to?' 'What are the choices we make?' As with an over-anxious parent, the temptation is to short-circuit the process and guide the story to a quick conclusion. The faith response is to let the deeply personal and dynamic reality of grace come to birth within these young people.

The dynamic of the group can also work against a sense of new birth and the breaking of barriers and stereotypes. If the group of young people belong to a particular cultural group, the pressure to remain within this group can be greater than the desire to seek another kind of relationship outside the community. If the group experiences a lot of oppression or marginalization as a community, then the pressure to stay within the group can come from other peers who may need a sense of solidarity and security. In my experience, many youth from cultural groups, striving to maintain their identity within a larger community, have reported that dating or socializing outside their community meant a choice between being with their friends or disobeying their parents' rules and values. Caught between being loyal to their families and being accepted by their circle of friends, some youth choose to stay

within their own familial and cultural group, others decide to leave home. Some youth have little choice in regard to the group they belong to owing to the economic and political lines drawn by the history of adult prejudice. For other young people, who have identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, the sense of friendship they experience in a group is worth transgressing the conventional social, religious and familial taboos. In some of these situations, 'belonging' is imposed from without but not freely chosen from within the group or by the individual.

The desire to belong can also be manipulated by the group. Concerns are often voiced by adults in regards to youth who form very strong bonds within local gangs. The relationship between youth within gangs can be stronger than familial bonds. The safety, protection and respect that youth experience within gangs is socially constructed to guarantee a member's loyalty. Even when the agenda is contrary to the ethical values of an individual, membership in the group can override the individual's personal goals. The will and courage to leave a gang requires an inner strength that has been nurtured through healthy relationships with a family, or an extended family member, or a loyal mentor or friend. Sometimes it takes a severe crisis or a brush with death before some young people decide to leave a neighbourhood or school gang.

Some youth have to make the painful choice between the needs of the group and the needs of their family. The family itself may also be the source of conflict when its members impose a sense of belonging that contradicts norms or places a young person's needs as subordinate to the needs of the family.

Youth learn the spiritual freedom they need to make choices within their first experiences of belonging – the family. A teen's second 'family' is the group, their intimate circle of friends, that acts as a transitional experience of belonging during the journey through the liminal zone between dependence and independence.

Adults who have children of their own often feel a sense of loss when their teenager leaves the confines of family sharing and enters a new sphere of friends and confidants. Nevertheless, in terms of spiritual growth, it is important to continue listening to the responses and expectations of youth as they struggle with religious and spiritual issues. Youth can become very restless if the expectations and judgments of adults become too removed from their own life experience.¹³ Teenagers may then become more rigid in their faith orientation (fundamentalism) or develop a tendency to become relativistic in their ethical choices.¹⁴

Belonging to the earth

Besides the story of real people who have journeyed through life's expectations, and the story of Scripture, young people also need to hear the mythic story of the universe from earlier times and the more recent account of the unfolding of the universe.¹⁵ Young people belong to an evolving cosmos and to an ecological heritage. Part of their individuation process has been radically changed by their exposure to the story of the universe, and their own exodus from innocence to a realization of the planet's peril. As one young teen so eloquently expressed to me, 'My parents taught me that the earth belongs to us, but now I realize that we belong to the earth'. This fresh realization of global and planetary connectedness invites a new risk and a new spirituality of belonging. The choice must come from within to empower others for the healing of the Earth community.¹⁶

Towards a new way of belonging

Young people today face many new challenges in the guise of ethnic and cultural pluralism, radical changes in the meaning of family and sexuality and a digital world connected to disembodied voices and stories from around the planet. While adults today may share in the memories of 'trying to fit in' and form new friendships, young people today belong to a different moment in history. Adults who care about youth need to act as midwives in the birthing of a new dream in young people to heal old wounds. As chaotic as the teen years may seem at times, it can be a meaningful chaos if it is chosen as a critical time to examine carefully the need to belong and the desires that may re-energize the community to grow together.

The Africans have a wonderful word, *Muntu*, which means that we are not simply 'person': the person in community includes the physical and the spiritual. We cannot be *Muntu* (person) without *Bantu* (the community).¹⁷ As adults, our spiritual growth and education needs the community of young people in our midst. We belong to them, their questions are our next spiritual challenge.

In many ways, our young people are like the morning dawn, and their experiences and struggles to belong are like the cold and darkness just before the break of day.

The poet Maya Angelou expresses the yearning of youth so well:

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
 For this bright morning dawning for you.
 History despite its wrenching pain,
 Cannot be unlived, but if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.
 Lift up your eyes
 Upon this day breaking for you.
 Give birth again
 To the dream.¹⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Gerard Broccolo and Susan Thompson, *Naming the holy in your life: vital spiritualities* (Naugatuck CT: Center for Ministry Development, 1990), p 23.
- ² Kathleen Kelly, 'Where do I belong?' in E. J. Franasiak (ed), *Belonging: issues of emotional living in an age of stress for clergy and religious* (Whitinsville MA: Affirmation Books, 1979), p 37.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Gail Sheehy, *New passages: mapping your life across time* (Toronto: Random House, 1995), p 9.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p 23.
- ⁶ K. Zarzour, 'Living in a material world' in *Toronto Star* (25 February 1995).
- ⁷ Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski, *Teen trends: a nation in motion* (Toronto: Stoddart Publications, 1992), p 52.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p 261.
- ⁹ Andrew Cash, 'Youth and faith series', *Catholic New Times* volume 1, number 15 (29 May 1994), p 9.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 9-10.
- ¹¹ Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski, *op. cit.*, p 15.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p 260.
- ¹³ David G. Creamer, *Guides for the journey: John Macmurray, Bernard Lonergan, James Fowler* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1996), p 146.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 146.
- ¹⁵ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The universe story: from the primordial flaring forth to the ecozoic era - a celebration of the unfolding of the universe* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 59.
- ¹⁷ Pobe and Von Varterberg-Potter, *New eyes for seeing* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), p 104.
- ¹⁸ Maya Angelou, 'On the pulse of morning' in *The complete collected poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994), p 272.

I know my God will be with me . . .

MY GRANDPARENTS WERE HINDUS who were converted but even after conversion they believed in Hinduism and in *pujas* and went to temples. From childhood I was with my grandparents as my parents were away. Then my father died when I was 11 years old. So I lived in Hindu-Catholic surroundings.

When I was a child I went more often to temples than to churches. In the catechism I came to know about Jesus but I never used to give him importance. I always pray to God who is a friend and father who provides for me. The only image of God I have is his cross. I once attended a retreat camp and there I heard many people speak about the importance of relationships. Some of my hurts were healed. Now I relate to God through every person I meet and the books I read and the experiences God throws into my way of life.

My friends are not selected on the basis of their religion. Therefore I respect them for who they are. I believe that all religions have a certain goodness in them and above all I prefer those who value humanity above religion. I find they have a high regard for Christianity. They love to listen to me when I share my experiences, even if they are just small incidents. They are good people who accept me and my religion, even though they practise some things which are wrong, but their main philosophy is to love others as they love themselves.

I have never experienced any religious fanaticism. I don't know how I would cope with it. I have my own faith and I know my God will be with me and with faith I will leave it to him.

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