

1 The Postmodern Challenge . . . and Stories

*In those days there was no king [authority] . . . all the people did what was right in their own eyes.
—Judg 21:25 NRSV*

Young people are growing up in a new, shifting, and complicated world. In response to modernism's objective, scientific certainty, postmodernism describes the world in terms of subjectivism, relativism, and uncertainty. Generations since the 1960s no longer find security trusting in science and education. They no longer believe in the essential goodness of humankind and the inevitability of human progress. To many, the world looks more chaotic than orderly, cynicism seems more appropriate than faith or patriotism, and deconstruction of traditional structures brings ironic satisfaction. Faith and truth, however anyone wants to hold them, are not so much argued as tolerated.

Postmodernity has brought serious searching but few moral parameters. People say they are spiritual but are suspicious of religious truth. Some of the appealing features in the movies *Contact* and *The Matrix* and in the television series *The X-Files* are that they point through paradox to meaning, promising postmodern youth a truth that is somewhere out there and can be discovered.

About truth, God once told the people, "Nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us that we may hear it.' . . . No,

the [truth] word is very near to you” (Deut 30:12, 14 NRSV). Some scientists and engineers who believe in the exploration of space, on which billions of dollars are being spent, hope to find intelligent life in the universe. Science fiction is certainly filled with such quests. If such beings are malicious, we hope to defend against them. If they represent a saving reality, we hope to learn from them.

Modernism rejected the first and final causes that the ancient Greeks posited. Scientific positivism was interested in efficient causes empirically observed. But without a source (the first cause) and an end or purpose (final cause), life becomes one-dimensional and meaningless. Postmodernism may seem like a bumpy and circuitous path, often ironically funny, searching out some lost truth.

The anger and despair of some postmodern youth may come from holding a sense of high expectations while being deprived of meaning and stripped of hope. In the midst of social flux and complexity, there is an undefined longing for certainty and moral guidelines. Young people sense that science cannot explain everything, yet they are turned off by religion’s occasional rigidity and condemning stance. Many youth are looking for moral guidelines—and adults who will have the courage to set limits.

In reaction to prevalent worldviews, some young people are dissatisfied with deconstruction, irony, and pastiche.¹ They are looking for some source of beauty, truth, and meaning. There is a quest for justice and peace. That quest may sense that justice without any moral base evaporates and that peace without final hope is a mirage.

The loss of objective certainty often causes post-moderns to seek support in relationships. They have been conditioned from birth to be attracted to images and to learn through stories. Generally they are active learners who want to discover things for themselves. If they are respected and


¹Deconstruction suggests the instability of traditional structures and the need for each individual to determine meaning. Pastiche refers to imitating or copying what others have done in the manner of a collage or striking mix, as in rap and pop music. Irony is often used by cynics who have given up on truth.

taken seriously, they are open to truth. If their stories are heard, they may be able to find God's truth through God's story.

Young people often long for mentors who possess moral assurance, who will accept and respect them, and who can point them toward purpose and significance.

This book respects the many paths young people are traveling. When their choices lead to destructive ends, we seek to understand objectively and theologically. In the midst of complexity and ambiguity, we try to offer grace, truth, and hope.

In dealing with sensitive and controversial issues our challenge is to hear people's stories while standing firm in God's truth. We commit ourselves to walking many ways with them while pointing toward the Way.

 Imagine yourself as a leader of a small group of teenagers. One of the teenagers is very postmodern whether she realizes it or not. She is tolerant of all positions to an extreme and very relativistic in her ideas about truth. Another is very scientifically minded, wants proof for everything and trusts evolution as fact and as an adequate explanation of origins. Another is dabbling in Eastern religions and sees these as a necessary complement for Christian teaching. Another likes and needs the group but is rather uninterested in discussion of issues. Another is seeking spiritual truth, but doubts any one religion has an exclusive hold on truth. You also know that two of these young people are using drugs and another is struggling with depression.

How might you use stories to lead these young minds toward truth? How might you get them to tell stories of highlights in their own lives? What movies interest them and how could stories from these movies be brought into your discussions? Could stories from your own life be appropriately shared? How might these discussions lead

to biblical stories and especially stories of Jesus? The telling of stories can build strong relationships and point to the Way? What resources might help you in this process? (See Resources at end of this chapter.)

Note: You may find a poetic, dramatic, or musical way to consider the word “way” or “path” (Hebrew *derek*) in the Psalms and Proverbs. A character study on how biblical persons found wisdom or the way might be especially helpful. The idea of “wisdom” as a means of truth might also come through the biblical teaching on wisdom, e.g., Psalm 51:6, 90:12, 104:24, 111:10 and especially Deuteronomy 29:29. Finally, be aware of the Bible’s emphasis on stories.

Stories for Healing and Growth

We have set for ourselves an ambitious task. To accomplish our goals of analysis and application we will rely on stories—for through stories we come to care, and through analysis we can appropriately respond. Reflective questions at the end of each chapter seek points of contact between the stories of young people and you, their helpers. Finally, we humbly seek convergence between youthful stories and the great story of their Creator, Healer, and Enabler.

I hope you love stories as I do. Stories can be means of healing and growth. An old Jewish tale concludes that God loves stories and that’s why the Creator made us as people who love and crave stories. Stories help us make sense out of life, which suggests that existence seeks union and significance. Even in the saddest dramas redemption usually struggles to overcome tragedy. God’s design is for all people to find ultimate union and significance in the Creator.

Children grow up on stories; in traditional societies they’ve done so throughout history. In urban cultures, stories come to children from their families, communities, schools, and increasingly through the media and their peers.

Fortunate young people are also molded by stories from their faith communities. The stories we hear in childhood—about the world and ourselves—gradually shape our emerging story. Great storytellers influence not only individuals but also cultures.

Every person has a story to tell, and personal stories are parts of a culture's story. We must make sense of our stories—to ourselves, to others, and to our Creator. When we don't, and our lives seem to have no meaning, we stumble in our journey. Our stories tell us who we are, where we are going, and what difference it makes. Each individual digression can bring confusion or may even produce a menace to the human community. The human chronicle needs each individual story. God has made our stories part of the divine story.

Many stories in this book are accounts of being tripped and trapped. Behind each story is a person on life's path, struggling to find a way that leads, whether one realizes it or not, to the way of life. Not only is each path unique; what also varies are our perspectives on the ways other people choose. Respecting all kinds of choices and each person's story, it is easy to give up on truth. There are so many paths and views. We get lost culturally and personally. We need to know that behind life's mysteries and complexities there is a way to truth.

The Way

Is there a way through this life's maze? Young people question deeply and differently. Contemporary life assumes only ways: your way and mine, this way and that; no real answer, no sure way. The Way we speak of is life's moral framework: a way to make sense of it all. Speaking of the Way assumes reasons for such things as gravity, growth, justice, and peace. The Way is the foundation allowing life to make sense, and it involves choices, positive results and negative consequences. A speaker and writer, E. Stanley Jones, wrote a book called *The Way*, in which he says:

In regard to all phases of life in the universe there is “the way” and “not-the-way.” In chemistry H₂O produces water. You may fight the formula and try to twist it into something else, but in the end you will surrender to it, accept it, obey it, or you will not produce water. . . . Aviators tell us that every moment they must obey the laws [of aerodynamics] upon which flying depends—or else! There can be no moral holidays in the air.²

Whether we are hang-gliding or driving a car, we need to respect the laws of nature. Nature is arranged in a special way, according to fundamental principles. Human culture and relationships are also guided by basic principles in moral and spiritual realms. Although there is great variety in cultures and many differences among individuals, there is still need of a consolidating principle summed up in a single word: respect. Respect is the principle behind all human rules. The Ten Commandments are more than Ten Suggestions. And the commandments boil down to respecting God, self, and others.

Babies grow into productive adults with proper nurture from family and society. Obedience to the way things are brings positive results; disregard produces negative consequences. Each person’s way needs guiding principles derived from a higher Way. As human beings we continually choose between the positive and the negative, ways that lead to health and growth or paths that lead to irresponsibility and destruction. This book assumes there are ways life works—and ways it won’t work.

We will be realistic about the ambiguity and mystery, about the gap between principles and any given case. Even after a great deal of listening, we may have only questions. But those questions will be informed by an assurance about the way things are supposed to work and a confidence that those who seek will find. We want, then, to be realistic about right ways and the many shortcuts and detours that take us away from better paths.

Physicists have been surprised to see a randomness and unpredictability in the subatomic world. Their observations

²E. Stanley Jones, *The Way* (New York: Abingdon, 1946), 2.

have led to chaos theories. Bright young people have picked up on this and said, “Yeah, that’s what life really is—just chaos.” But as these scientists step back and look at the atomic and molecular worlds, the working of organs, people, and the universe, they find a basic order—albeit with unexplained twists and turns.

Christians believe Order lies in and beyond this universe. Step back from the transience of life to the transcendent realm of the divine, and you will find the Logos—the ultimate principle creating and making sense of it all. Christians are under a mandate to share this key to reality, the meaning of life, with all those who seek. It does not mean that we have an adequate explanation about children who kill, why someone commits suicide, or that we know what to say to a dead child’s parents. It does mean that we can turn hurting people toward effective and ultimate healing.

How great the responsibility for those who enter youth cultures to share keys of understanding with those who experience life as chaos. Among the ways leading to death, there is a way to life and hope. When young people cry out in pain, we cannot respond with a shaking of our heads, detachment, and silence.

The physical, biological and social sciences all have words for order and disorder. So does theology. We will attempt to bring together insights from the behavioral sciences and theology. Proper order and balance lead to *shalom*, or holistic well-being. This book gives particular attention to disorder, to extremes, violence, and despair. Specific stories behind all of these will occupy our minds. If we are to hear and respond to the stories of hurting young people, we need a holistic understanding of human pain and violence, a holistic approach to forgiveness and healing. We must believe it can all make sense.

To many young people the world is ugly and unfair (they have starker language for this). Someone must tell them how beautiful the world is, how beauty, truth, and goodness (morality) go together. As for the pain and viciousness, it doesn’t have to be like this.

Paths and Choices

Many stories are about losing and finding the way. Reflection on the Way, and our many ways, gives stories significance and excitement.

Along life's path we've all taken big trips and side trips. Trips involve choices that turn out for good or bad, and these choices have special importance in adolescence.

As a high school teacher years ago, I was intrigued by the fascination students found in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." The poem, you remember, is a short story of the poet's experience as a hiker choosing between two paths, equally attractive. He finally takes the "one less traveled." Our reading in class often led to discussions about freedom and fate, the mystery of the future, the power of choice—decisions that make "all the difference."³ They were, of course, probing the possibilities and parameters of their own lives.

Young people are in the process of acquiring a new sense of identity and self-consciousness. They discover their newly acquired strength for the journey and its dangers—often with feelings of invincibility. Without experience, they often make impulsive decisions. The challenge and excitement of choices and exploration, of risks and accomplishments, make their lives exhilarating. Along with those of us who are older, they often sadly discover the truth of the biblical proverb: "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way of death" (Prov 14:12 NRSV). Still, there is the hope voiced in another proverb: "A person's heart must plan his way, and the Lord direct his steps" (Prov 16:9 author's paraphrase).

Though they may not always acknowledge it, young people need love and support if they are to succeed. Whether they understand it or not, their lives are stories demanding significance.

³Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 556–57.

Stories in Youth Work

Every person is a story in progress—but to be a story without significance is unbearable. Ultimately all our stories are begun and are completed in God. We reflect the Creator's spirit, intelligence, and passion. This Creator has communicated to us in the form of person and story. We are creatures of the great storyteller; deep within us is a sense that our stories strive toward love and significance.

Human stories are so poignant and powerful, it is easy to forget the main story. That's how we fall into despair, cynicism, or apathy. In all the stories related in this book we will try to remember the overarching theme of transcendent importance. The great story is a narrative of relational love, grace, and hope. Everyone approaches the great story from his or her personal story; it can be no other way. And if one can, through the hurt and fear or pride and doubts, hear the story, one can find affirmation of one's story no matter how plain or tortuous it may be.

The great story is a narrative of divine initiative, creation, and redemption. Relationship, ultimate love and rejection, painful consequences, forgiveness, and final reconciliation are themes of this story. Think of almost any story and it probably draws on these themes. This great story describes ultimate reality to those who hear: why we were made and for what. Without the great story's sense of design and destiny, people perish. The great story is a vision of the Way.

We not only love stories; we are stories. We are all stories shaped by significant social systems: family, community, schools, media, peers, and perhaps church. Human beings are born wonderfully unique, with a DNA and gene system distinct to each person. But we are amazingly malleable at birth and throughout childhood we are shaped by family and society in unique ways. The story of our shaping includes joys and sorrows, benefits and hurts.

The development and playing out of life stories calls for coaches, acting directors, or mentors. The nurturing of children and mentoring of youth might be diagrammed across a

great spectrum from good to bad. For those who have known only bad directors, the story is almost bound to go off track at some point. Stories often get back on track when good directors will allow the story to unravel until it reaches a safe setting, a stable plot, and a supportive cast of characters.

For these reasons I like to describe youth ministry as including the following steps:

- attracting young people to a safe place
- providing young people with caring mentors
- enabling young people to hear someone else's story
- empowering young people to tell their own stories and be affirmed
- sharing the story of God's love

We might conclude a definition of youth ministry in terms of empowering young people to become storytellers able to help others and serve the human community.

Not only have contemporary societies made adolescents “a tribe apart” (a term coined by author Patricia Hersch),⁴ but also our cultures don't seem sincerely interested in the stories of hurt and resiliency that come from young people who are marginalized and vulnerable.

For too long the adult world has ignored the voices of the young. Robert Coles and Jonathan Kozol are among the exceptions who have carefully listened to and told stories of youth.⁵ The human family, as dysfunctional as it can be, cannot ignore stories that demand telling . . . stories of oppressed minorities or ethnic groups, of persecuted faiths, of battered women, abused children, and enraged young people.

⁴Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

⁵Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis* (series; Boston: Houghton Mifflin), *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), *The Political Life of Children* (1986), *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990); Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1996), and *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope* (New York: Crown, 2000).

Understanding the Stories

All of us need attention. Our efforts seek affirmation, our needs crave attention, our hurts seek healing, and our hopes prosper with encouragement. Jesus was a master in the way he attended to individuals. He noticed, he asked questions and listened, and he often touched as if to affirm his listening care. The ministry of Jesus was need-based, and by example and instruction he taught his followers to be compassionate shepherds.

Teenagers especially need attention. If they are not offered good attention from friends and adults, they will take bad attention from anyone; bad attention seems much better than no attention. Hearing the stories of young people involves caring, taking time, waiting for them to feel confident and for teachable moments, encouraging them to share and to develop their stories.

In one dramatic way after another, adult society has shoved young people into silent margins; there they must tell their stories—if not in words, in silent, self-destructive acts or bold outbursts of violence. This is the simplest explanation of self-injury or self-immolation, of gangsta rap, school shootings, and perhaps bullying and rape.

The complexity and horror of bizarre, violent outbursts can lead to oversimplification of causes or blaming the victim. Social science begs careful analysis of complicated and interrelated factors. The absence of moral order and theological principles, however, can lead to excusing the perpetrator. Neither extreme is productive. When human groups or individuals participate in vicious ethnic cleansing, wanton terrorism, or random, deadly shootings, stories cry to be heard. Social and historical perspectives need attention at individual and communal levels.

Whether a killing is accidental, impulsive, or planned, it is proof that something went terribly wrong, and thus, systemic factors must be investigated. As human beings, we can leap into murder or war, but we can only crawl toward reconciliation and peace. This book will attempt to point out how

immediate and forceful vengeance, though easier, is usually less productive in the long run than careful and patient prevention and treatment of social ills.

Hearing stories is a necessary prerequisite to prevention and reconciliation. Unless we hear the stories of those whose struggle for significance has taken destructive shortcuts, adult strategies are bound to fail. Too often adults seek an easy solution; one that misses the unmet needs of youth.

The principles we seek here must work in the secular as well as Christian or religious worlds. Christians, Jews, Muslims, followers of other faiths, and agnostics can live together in pluralistic societies. If justice and peace are to be achieved in mixed societies, there must be respect for the common moral base in various scriptures and traditions. The Golden Rule is still a basis for crucial consensus in today's world.

Redeeming the Negative, Seeking the Positive

This book is a painful look at all kinds of troubled and suffering youth's experience. It does not, however, intend its readers to become paralyzed by negativity. We can learn important lessons from pain and failure. Even childhood abuse can be turned, after years of healing, to profit. Listen to the way Wayne Muller begins his book on childhood suffering:

When we are hurt as children, we can quickly learn to see ourselves as broken, handicapped, or defective in some essential way. . . . At times the enormity of our childhood sorrow can fill us with a sense of hopelessness, disappointment, and despair. . . .

Yet, at the same time I have also noted that adults who were hurt as children inevitably exhibit a peculiar strength, a profound inner wisdom, and a remarkable creativity and insight.⁶

⁶Wayne Muller, *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood* (New York: Fireside Books, Simon & Schuster, 1992), xiii.

According to J. Curtis McMillen, “The social work profession has long been concerned with how people’s lives are altered by adverse experiences. . . . During the past twenty years, many social workers have preferred models that emphasize human potential in the face of adversity.”⁷ Our study will move toward positive conclusions, but it must first hear the pain of real stories.

Along with hearing painful stories, we will hear stories about children whose actions changed their lives or other people’s. Among them are children in Columbia who used the country’s new constitution to bring political change, and the North American youth, inspired by the courageous example of a Pakistani boy, who publicized the issue of abusive child labor. American readers need a broader, global perspective. Solutions to our problems will not come from America, or the Western world, alone.

This book does not offer quick and easy answers or simple solutions to the complex issues surrounding troubled youth. This book seeks to consider global crises among youth with attention to social science and biblical principles in the tradition of historic Christianity. It proposes that science and faith speak to the need and hopes of individuals and human groups.

There are important issues, however, where faith and science seem to fail us and call for an additional guide. Where science has not yet arrived at empirically proven explanations and where Scripture does not provide clear answers, we must still decide and act. In many such cases prayer and common sense must be used. We must neither force weak arguments and opinions nor become paralyzed waiting further clarification. Not enough has been written or said about the need to go beyond science and Scripture in the shaping of public policy and group behavior, although we should never disregard true science and should not wander from sound biblical teaching. Common sense draws on social science, faith, and experience

⁷J. Curtis McMillen, “Better for It: How People Benefit from Adversity,” *Social Work* 44, no. 5 (September 1999): 455–67.

when it suggests limiting gun excess or reducing media's sensationalism.

In the midst of controversial issues, we must serve our children and youth. Our basic assumption is that young people and human groups search for a significant place in the scheme of things. That quest is expressed in the story every person and each society has to tell. Behind terrible news is a common tragedy: that no one was there to listen and make sense of a story while it was going wrong. This book asks for caring hearts to hear the cries of young people, patient ears in hearing their stories, and an open mind to consider issues and responses.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you want to get from this book?
2. What will the study of painful stories cost you?
3. How do you understand and react to postmodern trends—seeing truth as relative, deconstructing traditional patterns, and the abundant use of irony?
4. Do you think people are more attracted to stories than plain logic? Why or why not?
5. Do you see a special need for stories these days? Explain.
6. Can you accept the paradox and mystery in both many ways and one Way? Explain.
7. You are not called to fully understand a person's problems, nor will you fully understand God's solution. Can you find confidence even so?
8. Are you ready to integrate social science and biblical principles? Do you see how you will bring your experience to both?
9. Do you respect troubled young people? Explain.

Questions, cont'd.

10. Do you believe you have a lot to learn from troubled young people? Explain.
11. What will be most difficult for you about this book?
12. What will you do with questions or problems you find?

Internet Resources

www.centerforyouth.org 📖 This is the website for the Center for Youth, and it contains the *Encyclopedia of Youth Studies*. In it you will find information and provocative discussions on a broad range of issues.

www.cpyu.org 📖 Walt Mueller's Center for Parent and Youth Understanding will give you good movies reviews and information on pop music, etc.

www.hci-online.com 📖 Here you will find a large collection of excerpts from Health Communications' books, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*.

www.ileadyouth.com 📖 This site will provide you with stories and many more resources including ways to use movies in youth discussions.

www.youth.co.za/theedge/movies 📖 This South African site offers further movie reviews.

www.youthministrytools.com 📖 You will have to decide whether the approaches of these resources are your style. This is a general resource providing stories and other helps in youth work.