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Searching for Joy: A “Tangled Portrait”

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Searching for Joy: A "Tangled Portrait"

On October 17, Marysville-Pilchuck High School in Marysville, WA, held their annual homecoming celebration. Jaylen Ray Fryberg was crowned prince of the freshman class. For the freshman class, it was the highest possible honor bestowed by one's peers on a male student during the homecoming celebrations. Seven days later, on October 24, Jaylen pulled out a handgun in the school cafeteria and, according to witnesses, did not randomly target students nor authority figures but instead, deliberately fired at his closest friends killing two students (one who died at the scene and one who died yesterday while under intensive care) and seriously wounding three others including two cousins before turning the gun on himself and taking his own life. *The New York Times* article about the latest American school shooting featured the headline: Tangled Portrait of a Student Emerges in Washington Shooting (Oct. 25, 2014). The article quoted Rick Iverson, a former teacher and wrestling coach at the high school who said, "This wasn't your typical trench coat, introvert-type person, no. This was an outgoing person that everyone loved."

Jaylen, 14, whose Facebook account has over 2,000 "friends", came from a prominent family on the Tulalip Indian Reservation. Many said he was proud of his heritage and his facebook page features photos of him wearing his tribal dress, dancing and singing in his tribal tongue and relating well to his close-knit family of father, mother, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. He was an athlete

and hunter. One of his close friends described him as "just so full of life and energy. He was happy."

The article, perhaps in an attempt to search out an explanation for this terrible act, described a recent fight at football practice where Jaylen punched a student over a racist joke. He was briefly suspended from the football team but other students discount that as a reason for Jaylen's actions.

Perhaps what is most telling is a series of social media posts written on the Monday and Thursday before the shooting on Friday in the school cafeteria.

"It breaks me. ... It actually does. ... I know it seems like I'm sweating it off. ... But I'm not. ... And I never will be able to. ... I should have listened ... you were right. ...The whole time you were right. It won't last. ... It'll never last."

It is not clear and likely will never be clear what was breaking Jaylen and what will not last. But this much is certainly clear -- that this young man, for all of his popularity and athletic ability, grew so desperate in this past week that the best choice he could make for himself was to bring a gun to school and shoot some of his closest friends and relatives and then himself.

It seems remarkably trenchant to me that a week after this latest school shooting, we who care so much about young people and the church's ministry with them, would gather around this conversation about adolescence and joy.

In the wake of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis and Michael Brown and so many young men and women who daily confront challenges to and a trampling of their God-given identity as the *imago Dei*, it is little wonder, then, that so many, like Jaylen would choose a way to end the pain, the despair, and the sadness. For so

many, the message that they *are* created in God's image and so wonderfully and fearfully made that the very God of the universe would offer God's own self so that they might live, that message at the very least is missing and at worst finds no traction in their lives as they confront daily injustices and threats to their identity. It seems crucial, then, that we would engage in this examination of adolescence and a theology of joy.

Located fully in these times, this reflection brings together

- a brief conversation from my own understanding of adolescence and neuroscience,
- a discussion of a theologian whose work seems particularly related to this conversation, and finally,
- a wonder as we embark together on this discussion.

What is neuroscience teaching us about the teenage brain?

1. The teenage brain is largely under construction.

In adolescence, the teenage brain's gray matter, its outer layer, is thickening and then dramatically thinning down, a level of change that was previously thought to end in young childhood. Brain thickening generally happens when the tiny branches of brain cells bloom madly, a process neuroscientists refer to as over production or *exuberance*. Matthew Kuan Johnson in his fine paper, "Opportunities and Obstacles for Joy during Adolescence: Perspectives from Cognitive Science" uses this same term in the third section of his paper although in a different way naming exuberance as "a special type of physical and intellectual energy." While this is certainly an apt description of most adolescents (and anyone who has tried to get a group of excited teenagers to focus their actions and thoughts in a particular way may not be so

inclined to use such a generous and generative term as "exuberance"), these neuroscientists limit this term to dramatic changes in the adolescent brain. Many believe that in periods of such exuberance, the brain is highly receptive to new information, or primed to acquire new skills. At a certain point beginning with puberty in many adolescents, the brain undergoes a growth spurt, particularly in the area that most makes us human, the frontal lobes.

The frontal lobes are that part of the cerebral cortex where the so-called executive functions happen. These functions help adolescents plan ahead, resist impulses, and hypothesize possibilities based on their behavior. Because of this delay and because the hormones of the teenage brain are raging and the amygdala, one of the earliest parts of the brain that develops fully and contains the fundamental core of our emotions and emotional responses (fear, anger, pleasure, etc.), some neuroscientists posit that adolescents are uniquely situated to seek out and relate to emotions and the emotional. It is as if their brains are hard wired for emotion in ways that adults are not.

Schleiermacher and faith as "feeling of unconditional dependence"

I see in Schleiermacher a combination of piety and philosophy. Schleiermacher's major focus was on Christian identity. Here, he relates well to the primary task of adolescence which is, in essence, to form a durable and consistent identity and for the adolescent theologian, to do so in relationship to God and God's activity in the world. In his famous work, *On Religion, Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher creates an apologetic based upon *gefühl* or feeling. For him, religion is not theoretical knowledge; it is not moral action; religion is feeling,

feeling of absolute dependence. When Schleiermacher used this term, however, he was not doing so in the usual use of the word as “subjective emotion.” Rather, he used the term to describe the impact of the universe upon us in the depths of our being which transcends subject and object. This feeling, then, or impact indicated the human’s awareness of that which is beyond subject and object, of the ground of everything within and beyond us. The best evidence that when Schleiermacher spoke of feeling he did not mean subjective emotion is the fact that in his systematic theology, in *The Christian Faith*, he uses the expression of “feeling of unconditional dependence.” This is very different from subjective emotion because everything in our subjective emotion is conditioned. It is conditioned on a stream of emotions or thoughts or wills or experiences. On other hand, the element of the unconditional, wherever it appears, is precisely not predicated on conditions. So when Schleiermacher argued that religion is not a matter of clear knowledge and moral action but of feeling, he is arguing much more than subjective emotion.

I engage Schleiermacher in this reflection on adolescence and joy because his focus on religion (or belief in God or faith in God) is not based on theoretical constructs or moral action but rather on this "feeling of unconditional dependence." As we understand more about adolescence and their search for identity and this sense of joy, I find Schleiermacher to be instructive. How is it that adolescents come to know and claim their identity? In this American culture of radical individualism, many young people have been misled to believe that they form their identity on their own. And sadly, many of our congregations and parishes have reinforced this notion. In a recent conversation I had with a high school student who is a proud

Episcopalian, I asked her why she was so proud of being Episcopalian and she quickly and passionately responded, "Because I can believe whatever I want and that's okay with my church." I could not resist and probed further to see if that was really true asking, for instance, if she could believe that she was God and would that be okay with her church, and she wrinkled her brow and responded that she had never thought about it that way. Trying to channel Schleiermacher in responding to this young woman, I would raise this question of this "feeling of unconditional dependence" which ultimately challenges the notion that any of us alone are the first and last arbiter of truth, identity, and even joy.

Wondering...Are our questions big enough?

Finally, as I ponder this conversation about adolescence and joy as part of what God intends for us all -- that we humans flourish in relation to God, one another, and indeed, to the whole of creation, I am drawn to the writing of Sharon Daloz Parks in her important work, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams, Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. In her discussion of mentoring communities towards the end of her book, Parks directs a question specifically to the academy. Parks asks if the questions we are asking lend themselves to the full engagement of the intellect and the whole self of the learner? She further asks if the academy, as a mentoring body, truly serves the formation and practice of seeking and finding and living a real and vibrant truth? In asking these questions, she is quick not to suggest that the academy's only purpose is to deliver in trade school fashion, a specific set of skills or practices. But she is seeking to frame the larger questions of meaning and truth in real and tangible ways. She is asking if we who teach and lead

in this particular mentoring body, actually see ourselves as truly mentors meaning that not only do we teach concepts and ideas (which I would argue is a way of mentoring) but also that we teach a way of living and being that engages the mind and awakens the imagination and calls for moral leadership in the public arena.

This past year, our school completed and has now begun to implement a curriculum review that has made the most significant curriculum changes in over three decades. And during this four year journey as the chair of the faculty's curriculum review committee, I have continually asked myself and my colleagues, thanks to Parks', if the questions that are driving our curricular changes are big enough.

I am pondering the same question as we gather to engage one another in this conversation about adolescence and a theology of joy not simply for our sake as theologians and those who care so deeply about young people and their families and their places in the world, but even more so for the very lives whom God has entrusted to our care -- the lives of Jaylen and Trayvon and Jordan and Michael and so many others who have gone before us and who are yet to come. I look forward to our time together.

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