

**Going There:
Teens, After School Programs, and Spiritual Development**

Josh Borkin

You are the bows from which the children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you
with His might that His arrow may go swift and far. (Gibran, 1923, p. 18)

This quotation from Gibran’s classic *The Prophet* punctuates an engaging and lively conversation at the Youth Empowerment Leadership Community (YELC). The YELC is an after school program designed for young men to think about their purpose in the world and make “good choices” in order to live out that purpose. Quickly, one participant responds to the passage by saying, “Yo, so what if instead God is the archer, my parents are the bow, and I am the arrow?” Another participant chimes in, “But wait, I don’t believe in God. Maybe it (the archer) is my Song (a term the group uses to describe one’s purpose in life)?” Yet another says, “Yeah, but what if you have a kid with a disability; which way does the arrow go then?”

On the surface, YELC seems like an unlikely place for sophisticated discussions about parents and children, the infinite, and one’s purpose in life. Located in a school computer lab, the majority of the young Dominican and Puerto Rican men in the program are considered below average or poor students. Yet, over three years these teens have spent countless hours (formally and informally) finding their Song and then developing the “instruments” needed to play that Song. This guiding metaphor of song focuses the group’s community building efforts to create a space where “real honesty” and “real respect” are valued. It also consistently challenges the participants to think about the role that values such as integrity, caring, and humor play in helping them find meaning and purpose in their own lives. To reinforce the importance of this metaphor the group

recites a mantra about their Song to launch each meeting.¹

On this day one participant is fast asleep, among others the discussion routinely meanders into gossip and potty humor, and facial expressions and comments make clear that many of the participants are turned off by The Prophet's archaic language. But the group leader helps participants expand upon their reactions and challenges them to apply the passage to their own lives. For example, one participant shares that he was recently told his parents are divorcing. In response to this situation the conversation shifts back and forth, from academic analysis of The Prophet, to a personal conversation with a group of friends, to a theological conversation about the nature of God, to an informal group therapy session where participants offered specific advice and concrete support.

I became drawn to the YELC because I witnessed participants use language, explore subjects, and grow in ways I did not typically associate with urban male teens. Developmental psychologists have conceptualized the overall phenomenon of spiritual development in adolescents as "self-transcendence, where the self is embedded in something larger than itself" (Benson, 2006). Participants say they "invested" in YELC because they "got" something out of the program. For many participants "investing" means sharing of themselves, trusting the other members, and taking the program seriously. Participants use the YELC as a place to reflect on their own sense of self, discuss their relationships with friends and family, and explore their personal philosophies about politics, faith, and the larger world. Given the space and security to see oneself in these different contexts, teens used the YELC as a site for spiritual development.

In many respects participants' experiences of learning the Song concept and of building relationships in the YELC, challenge assumptions about what spiritual development is and how it occurs in the lives of teens. Here participants' three-year journey disputes the idea that spiritual development is something that happens naturally over time. Instead, these time-limited journeys suggest that spiritual development can be explicitly taught and learned. Buber (2000), for example, argued that spiritual learning in education meant transforming *Leerstoff*, the learning of a subject matter, into *Lehre*, learning that alters life. In the YELC, teaching for *Lehre* means undergoing a process in which participants articulate who they want to be in the world and the leader relentlessly connects and reconnects participants' immediate choices and experiences to the ideals they articulate. The emphasis does not necessarily have to focus on the outcome of changed lives; what is important for the teens to realize is how one's choices are connected to one's identity goals.

Implications for Religious Educators

As a participant observer, I found that fostering teens' spirituality is intrinsically connected to an essential concept at the heart of education—the value and magnitude of relationships. My own experience in the YELC speaks to both the power and importance of these relationships. I found it

impossible not to care deeply about the leader and the participants in the YELC. This meant more than simply recording their stories. I empathized with their challenges, praised their accomplishments, and, when asked, tried to be as source of friendship, support, and guidance. In doing so, I experienced the primary goal of the YELC--of finding the humanness in oneself, by engaging in the immediate world, and the metaphysical world.

Programs like the YELC expose the challenges religious educators face in fostering spiritual development among teens. For instance, Jean Carlos, a particularly reflective participant, explained to me his relationship with God by saying, "I believe my spirituality is stronger than what people say about a book or rules or something you have to follow. I do believe in God, but I don't believe in rules that you have to follow in order for Him to believe in you." At first, I found this statement somewhat troubling. The religionist in me was wary that participants like Jean Carlos who are marginally tethered to their religious identity (in this case Catholicism) may see the YELC and Song as exciting and able to make their lives better while finding religion antiquated, rigid, and out of touch. Jean Carlos values being "spiritual" over understanding his religious experience. Disregarded are Christianity's own communal and spiritual resources embedded within thousands of years of history and wisdom.

As I developed a relationship with Jean Carlos, however, I gained a deeper understanding of what it meant for "God to believe in him." For students in a school and economic system that tacitly says they are not going to amount to much, having a group leader and nine other companions relentlessly reminding you that there is something valuable inside you, a unique Song, is empowering. Jean Carlos also articulated his sense that God has looked beyond superficial markers like grades and statistics about young Dominican men in general to "believe in him" Individually. While Jean Carlos connects Catholicism to an array of institutional forces that have also left him underserved, he connects God to the awe of seeing a rainbow and the joy he has playing baseball. These experiences have given him an inner confidence and have helped shape him into the "proud" or confident person he is today. At weekly YELC meetings, Jean Carlos is given an environment in which to connect his everyday feelings with his own ideas about faith and God. That is, coming to the conclusion that "God believed in him" was not a notion he had always held but a concept he developed over time.

Creating and sustaining the relationships needed to facilitate spiritual development is not an easy process. It takes gifted mentors and courageous participants willing to build trust and, as they say in the YELC, to "go there." Honoring and nurturing the love and humanness in individuals, or "going there," is a central ambition and core expectation of both religious communities and schools. In secular schools, teachers and administrators are under pressure to raise test scores and improve student achievement. Yet, there is a tacit expectation that schools also provide students with moral and character development as well as social and emotional development.

Many religious educators deal with a similar dynamic. Within religious communities and denominations there is a universal expectation that religious educators are responsible for passing on

the faith to the next generation. Bound up within this expectation is the idea that educators are in charge not only of teaching the substantive content of a tradition but also of exposing teens to the “spiritual goodness” that lies at the heart of religious traditions. This second expectation is the more vague understanding that teens find some sort of personalized spiritual nourishment that cause them to be in relationships with that tradition for the rest of their lives.

The YELC came into being because a particular school wanted to address in an intensive and long-term manner the needs of students who were identified as “falling through the cracks”. Over three years ten young men faithfully attended meetings at lunch and after school to talk about their Song. In a school that averages a 70% daily attendance rate, engaging the same ten participants for three years was unprecedented. Likewise, my experience organizing interreligious dialogues for teenagers has led me to believe that participants not connected to a particular tradition can become particularly engaged in interreligious work. That is, attending a camp, a conference, or a comparative religion class allows such participants to articulate deeply held and well thought out beliefs about faith and how it operates in their lives. It also humanizes people of faith and helps them discover that having a relationship with a tradition is more complicated than an either/or proposition. Like the YELC, conferences, camps, and world religion classes are also places that foster spiritual development for teens who are “falling through the cracks” of a particular tradition.

Though separated and largely foreign to each other as institutions, after school programs may be a potential avenue for religious communities and public educators to mutually invest in the spiritual development of all youth. Like being hospitable to whoever arrives at the door, religious communities should invest in all youth, not just those who were raised in the tradition or those who are likely to become future community members. If religious communities work across faith and institutional lines to ensure the spiritual development of all adolescents, there would in time be more authentic, committed, and passionate adult members of various faith communities. In turn, teens would be more attuned to experience the “spiritual goodness” at the heart of our various religious traditions because capable and caring mentors helped them reach a place where they could find it.

Notes

1 The YELC Mantra: I have a unique mission to fulfill in this life for I am capable of doing things that can be accomplished by no one else. When I honor my inner Song then my purpose will reveal itself. Though shadows of darkness and doubt may sometimes befall me, I keep going and I always return to a place of shimmering light and warmth. Then I will know with certainty that I am traveling in the right direction, and will surely reach my destination in good time.