

Resilient Leadership and the Search for Meaning in Youth and Young Adult Ministry

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Let me start with a provocative statement: Our “human resources management” of young people does not work. We have been unsuccessful in securing the social capital of the future because we fail to adequately address its sources – our young people themselves. While our society is being storm-swept, we appear unable to identify, let alone tackle, the real questions. Young people amplify the yearning of our culture. They ask for mature attention and time for what is “valuable”: to live truthfully, to balance work and leisure time in families and relationships, to share our diverse lives with zest, to have compassionate teachers and safe mobility – in sum: to have perspective. Children and adolescents have always asked adults for these values. I have the impression that they often go unheard nowadays, despite all forms of increased participation policies, communication technology, and child-involved education. Although they seem preoccupied with mobile phones, chatboxes, places to hang out, et cetera, they are in fact surrounded by silence. They are even surrounded by dumbness and “systematic inarticulation”, according to the religious educationalist Michael Warren. “There ain’t no point in talking when there’s nobody listening”.¹

The purpose of this contribution is to stimulate adults to listen more carefully to young people. To lead them implies to learn from them. Speaking with authority implies listening carefully to the different voices of fellow human beings. This paradox is an outstanding characteristic of present time. Young people want adults to take notice of them, rather than to be passed by without paying attention. However, this does not mean that adults should try to imitate young people or link up with their environment. In today’s world, education and formation imply that adults take responsibility for their words and actions, that they are approachable. The renewed question of values cannot be solved with educational technology, but it *can* be solved with material involvement, with actual interest (a word which is derived from the Latin verb *inter-esse*, “to be among”). It is in this dialectical field that I want to post myself as a theologian by giving voice to what I see and hear.

First of all I give a brief description of the cynical and hectic atmosphere in which post-modern young people grow up in Western-Europe. Then I introduce the concept of the summer camp as a successful learning environment in which young people experience resilience for their vulnerable quest for meaning. In a third paragraph I present an explicitly religious approach to this quest, by referring to the religious workshop that we organised last summer. And finally I reconfigure youth and young adult ministry as an ‘art of maieutics’.²

1. Surviving in Youth Culture

Most adolescents manage to survive in these hectic times. Because they seem to have an innate talent to be socially flexible, adolescents are called the “flex-generation”.³ They experiment with the dazzling supply of an affluent society and fully enjoy all the good things of these times that are geared exclusively towards children and adolescents. Their identity is a so-called “balancing identity”. They maintain themselves in the complexity and haze of the supply. They are equipped to give meaning to what they encounter and try to stay motivated. This attitude towards life and modern society doesn’t hold for all adolescents and this is exactly where the shoe pinches. There are many who have fallen a victim to the individualisation scenario of today. Flexibility can lead to fragility, a requiring of the self can lead to an over-requiring of the self. In principle nobody is spared from over-requiring because flexibility is such a structural fact. For the trend to *be* somebody, proud and stubbornly post-modern, affects all contemporaries, both young and old.

Without exhausting my analysis, the following trends play an important role. When dealing with individualisation people are marked by a compulsive desire to be visible and accessible. Those who are invisible are out of the picture. Those who do not stand out, are outsiders, they do not count. The frenzy around *Big Brother* programmes on television, the illusion of ultimate accessibility thanks to cell phones, the hidden values that come with the use of new media, creating tension between work and leisure time (“You can’t ignore an e-mail from your boss, not even at night”) – these are examples of the way our culture treats its people. A glow of immortality is created. We speak, network, conduct business and so on as if we were immune to death. Post-modern people know no boundaries, not even the boundary between life and death. In the past people used to dream of heaven, put all their hopes on the afterlife. Today, people hope to encounter this intensity of happiness in this life, by showing themselves to other people in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Master narratives no longer exist, they are no longer lived by. New stories have taken their places, completely absorbing the lives of contemporaries, young and old. Old bonds between the church and the community are being phased out, new commitments are being made. In order to hold their own in the *rat race* of performing, of being somebody, possibly at the expense of others, people need something to hold on to. When trying to find this, they think in terms of economisation: If you pay good money for something, you may expect it to guarantee that you will be *in the picture*. The media colour your day and decide for you what clothes to wear, what food to eat, how to establish happy relationships, et cetera. We are even told to believe that we show authenticity if we buy products bearing ecological and ethical labels. Everything seems to be available, even moral outrage. As long as you pay for it.

The complex of questions that many young contemporaries are wrestling with, however, is this: “Has anyone ever seen me in all my plainness, vulnerability, mortality?” And most of all: “Is there anyone who will listen to me in all my loneliness, my struggling? With all the possibilities in communication, young people remain asking questions such as: “Where do

I find a *communio*, a community of human concern? Is there anyone who will listen to my yearning, my desire for an authentic life, and who will not immediately stuff my brain with cheap filling?” If we want to explore the contours of this era, we need only to watch the advertising commercials on television, where people’s yearnings (the yearning for wholeness, true community, authentic spirituality, and so on) are intensely represented, where their questions are magnificently evoked. But the answers to these questions belong to the realm of commerce and saleability or non-saleability, and must therefore be critically looked at. The question is, who can – and dares to – represent this concrete situation of young people today and give voice to it?

So in their pursuit of their true selves many young people encounter a deeper yearning. I do not think this yearning is dead, but it does seem to have been hammered shut, hidden behind the wall of post-modern greed. People of today are greedy, not just with regard to food and drink, but also with regard to relaxation and work, relationships and life styles and/or life views. We are confronted with our lack of asceticism through the adolescent who, at first sight, seems uncommitted (refusing to enter into any relationship, old or new). Some young people express their protest by becoming fundamentalists (“at least that gives us something to hold on to in a hazy field of meanings”), others retreat to meaninglessness and indifference (“what difference does it make whether I differentiate myself by giving meaning; it’s all the same anyway”). Fundamentalism and relativism are sources of cynicism. And these sources are utterly unwholesome for the raising, formation and education of youngsters.⁴

2. The Summer Camp as an Event of Resilience

In the first week of July 2002 I attended the summer camp, organised by the Roman Catholic youth service of the Vlaams-Brabant and Mechelen diocese. Every year this youth service organises a weeklong trip for young people aged sixteen to twenty five, to exchange thoughts, play games and work together, all in connection with a theme that concerns them all. Several adults and/or young adults come along as guides, giving impulses within the various subgroups and during moments that are spent with the group as a whole. The atmosphere is pleasant: working sessions alternate with singing, eating and dancing sessions. There is room for quiet as well: Each day contains “oasis moments” of prayer or celebration, there is a silent area, there are creative workshops, et cetera. A central theme is approached from different angles: playful, creative, social, relational, and religiously deepening. The entire experience rests upon three pillars: to be there as you are, dialogue with all participants and responsibility for your own words and actions.

The main theme in 2002 was: “What are we waiting for? Changes in society.” The assignment was to reflect on social processes that hold people in their grasp, preventing them from being or becoming their true selves. The paradox of honesty towards yourself versus respect for the life perspective held by others was expressed aptly in the *Leitbild* (model) of the camp: the surfer. The surfer will wait for the right wave before taking action, but his decision to ride the wave or not also depends on other circumstances, on the swell of the sea. The discussion about individualisation and its risks (see paragraph 1), about freedom and limits, about surfing the waves of social context, went very well,

because the subject matter was recognisable to young people. The Flemish theme song, in a modern musical rendering, sounded something like this in English:

“The Right are coming into power and Palestine is pining, people being exploited.
 The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, injustice must be eliminated.
 I am conservative or frightened like a child, I remain standing on the sidelines.
 What is the meaning of all this, and if I started now, what good would that do?
 Violence is unnecessary, change is necessary, peace is our dream.
 The world is fighting, where is the revolution, we are standing in this stream.
 Things can be different, things can be better. I feel powerless and very small.
 Am I waiting for that one wave? Am I waiting for that perfect wave?
 I will not remain standing on the beach, I want to go into the water now.
 I will not wait for the perfect wave, there is an abundant life (John 10:10)”

The expectations with regard to change tend to be quite modest nowadays, so it seems in the theme song. It is not the system itself that can be changed (you cannot adapt the sea to your own needs) but we *can* expect changes *within* the system (you can decide which waves to ride).⁵ What is surprising, is that occasionally, while camping together, the light of a completely new insight broke through even with the initial assumption that the system was unruly and unchangeable. Now and then a clearing, a *Lichtung*, appeared in the dark forest of feasibility and obviousness (Martin Heidegger), when the very rules of the game were repositioned and re-imagined while playing. This open-minded attitude seems to be characteristic of working with young people: Let’s experiment and see where we will end up if we adopt an alternative attitude towards the facts. Nowadays such audacity is a sign of vulnerability rather than a sign of obviousness.

For my generation (the so-called *Generation X*, whose members were born in the 1960s and grew up in the 1970s and 1980s) it was easier to stimulate our peers to a radical change of perspectives. The desire to change the world was deeply ingrained in our activities and discussions. Today I find more diffidence among young people: Rather than wanting to change the world, they are doing all they can just to keep their footing. It is quite something if they manage to do so. Moreover, many young people bear the additional weight of the frustrations of their parents who feel they have failed the emancipation project of the 1960s. I have found three basic shifts with respect to the “generational” appreciation of change:

- The basic-democratic movement of the 1970s and 1980s has changed; today, young people ask for clarity: “Tell us what needs to be done”.
- The relational-sexual experience has changed profoundly; nowadays, young people call for a feasible perspective of love and friendship instead of lifelong fidelity; mostly, they want to enjoy themselves without having to worry about break-ups, they want honesty in their dealings with each other.
- Finally, the experience of faith has changed radically; young people do not want to hear an adjusted, unemotional message of faith in their own language; what they do want is to be taken seriously in their own search for meaning, which is often a far cry from what religious leaders preach.

Most of the young people who went camping had no connection with the church. They had been asked to come by their local youth pastor – to think and play along, or simply to be there. It is good that the church offers young people such space for a confrontation with the questions and desires of a particular era.⁶ There is no hidden agenda whatsoever, to make converts, to bring them to a profession of faith, or whatever. The basic inspiration however does ring through at all times: the biblical notion of an abundant life (John 10:10), which can be found in the camp song and which is the *leitmotiv* of the pastoral plan of the diocese involved, is the ultimate perspective at which the camp aims.

3. Religious Re-Imagination of the Quest for Meaning

In the summer of 2003 we prepared an explicitly religious workshop for the participants with the theme “Home on the road: coming home in your own life story”. Fourteen young adults between nineteen and twenty five years old attended the workshop; we had to refuse five candidates. We were not the only ones who were successful with this approach. Two other groups gathered large numbers of interested youngsters with their meditation and spirituality materials. Almost one third of the older group of summer camp participants joined in a spirituality related workshop.

Again, most of these people are not regular churchgoers. Most of them will not even consider themselves believers, let alone Christian believers. They experience a deep longing in their lives, when they are confronted with issues such as future, despair, loneliness, vocation, life style, relationships, etc. The real astonishing thing is that they are accessible for images and stories of the good life – even for biblical language games – if they are related to these ‘movements of the soul’ – to their marginal experiences of hunger for orientation and meaning. We invited this years’ participants directly to jump into the water and to swim without reserve. As leaders of the group we brought in our own narrative struggles with the ultimate ground of our lives. We gave them permanently the chance to interfere with our words and gestures, prayers and rituals, by using challenging discourse and play techniques. And we give them ample opportunity to discuss their thoughts with their fellows ‘home on the road’.

The key word was journey. The four days were build around four basic elements in the life of the pilgrim: stone, robe, angel and walking-stick. The first day was organised as a long journey through the woods and the fields in the South of Leuven. The participants went two by two and were asked to reflect upon key stones of change and continuity in their lives. After lunch we stopped talking and every participant was invited to write down some ideas on these milestones in a sort of spiritual diary. We continued and arrived in one of these small Roman churches (namely Tourinnes-la-Grosse), where we invited the participants to search for shelter and fresh air, and to flee for a moment from the heat outside. In the tower there was an inscription, almost saying this: ‘Let your life speak’⁷, take your time to reflect and to reshape your journey, and be confident that this is a valuable way of doing. We continued our trip and arrived finally in the middle of the fields, in a small chapel. On that spot every one was asked to write a letter to oneself, on possible inspirational key stones or embarrassing stones in the own journey. These letters

were posted and arrived a couple of days later at the summer camp. At the end of the first day a spontaneous conversation about God started in the group. Most of the members said they felt connected in friendship with each other and in this coherence there was a deep spiritual embeddedness. But most of them refused to name this experience 'God' because this concept referred too much to an objective otherness, outside the real experience of human interconnectedness and solidarity.

The second day we organised a sort of labyrinth walk through the cellars of the old school building in which we were housed. After an introduction with a text of Ruusbroec on 'emptying oneself to encounter the other as a new self' the participants went two by two in the dark, using the robe of Antigone, in order to unveil their past experiences of despair and fear – and to connect to new ways of coping with them. This was a remarkable experience for most of the participants: for moments of self-awareness of one's own shadows in life can be very confronting and discomfoting – and therefore the reliance on the walking partner is a thoughtful and overwhelming experience. Afterwards we were discussing the journey through the 'cellars of life' also from another, surprising angle. We collected our thoughts on blindness and discussed them with one of the participants who actually is a blind person. The key word appeared to be 'trust': how much trust or faith do you have in others and in yourself, when you loose the thread of your life or when you are looking for support and clarity to take up the thread again?

The next step in the spiritual journey of the summer camp was to explore the world of angels in our lives. We read the text of the encounter and the struggle of Jacob with the angel at the Jabbok river (Genesis 32, 23-33) and we were defining all sort of situations in which we felt both challengend and sheltered by a guardian angel. The ideas of the German Benedictin monk Anselm Grün were very inspiring for this *exercitio*⁸. Participants were invited to design and to fabrique their own coat of shelter.

The final day was explicitly oriented towards a religious re-imagination of the journey. There was plenty of meditation time – and time for writing and talking one's path through questions such as: "What gives you the ultimate ground under your feet? Where do you trust in ultimately? Where does your walking-stick comes from? Where can you find solidity and resilience? When do you experience yourself most deeply loved?" We read Psalm 23, we contextualised its words in the exil of the Jewish people, and we referred to other key words in religious traditions to explicate this experience of ultimate trust and love. Finally we provided them with a mission (Matthew 10 – "Feel home on the road") and with a blessing.

Many of these young adults are carrying heavy burdens. They are often confronted with the failures of their parents and with the pain of loosing faith in their lives. But they do continue to revitalise small experiences of hope, in community, discourse and action. And they don't stop thinking about what keeps them running. The only thing they don't like is to identify their struggle for the good life with an ultimate transcendent being. For them the source of life is immanent, it is rooted in their daily lives and narratives of friendship and commitment. Do these young people need religion, they have all they 'need'? Or does their longing for true humanity reshape religion radically? Could it be this way: that their search

for interpersonal security and their openness for the permanent surprising movements of the human spirit-in-action, changes our God-images fundamentally? Is God delivering herself radically in the hands of human beings? Has she lost every pre-modern power or every modern rational grip on humanity? Is this the real outcome of the incarnation of the Word? In the New Testament there is no objective absolute 'Word of God out there'. There is only a particular human person, Jesus of Nazareth, who is a merciful friend, a fellow traveller or a guest at the dining table. He is talking, but most of the time he is listening. In this listening he becomes an authority again. What I have learned from these young people is that Christianity should perhaps be re-designed out of this experience of vulnerable commitment, not in order to bring the message of the gospel in an adapted way closer to today's culture, but in order to bring the gospel closer to itself: as a space of friendship in which God happens...

4. Youth and Young Adult Ministry as the 'Art of Maieutics'

What is the key to success? It can be found on two different levels: on a community level and on a story level. This is no new notion. We all know what is important in youth work, nowadays as much as at any time. What is regrettable is that this inspiration tends to get pushed into the background in favour of "youth work technology" and a guidance model that is as functional and anaemic as the social technology of the adult world. Young people want involvement, they want to be "fascinated" – which is not the same as being subject to great old stories that are not their own, or as being absorbed by great new stories that steamroller their own small stories of hope.

Nobody can live without a narrative. People tell themselves and each other stories, they reconstruct their existence while telling. They link up the major events of their lives in the telling, portraying these events as if they constituted a perpetual umbilical cord that keeps them connected with the life dynamism of humanity. This is a communal custom: Nobody has to start at the very beginning when telling his story. People grow up in philosophical traditions, circles of explicitly meaningful life, with a characteristic vision of the good life, of friendship, desire, love and death. Such traditions offer insight into the individual's story, helping him to gain clarity as to who he is and who he wants to be. In such traditions values and meaning are personified, represented by concrete people of flesh and blood, who pass the narratives on while blending in their personal experiences of love and death. Such people are not sacrosanct, they too have their struggles and their doubts. But they *are* explicit: They can be called to account for their convictions, they make themselves accessible.

The young people who attend the summer camp are no snobs. They rather represent and amplify what remains easily unsaid among their peers. I want to present the following thoughts for consideration that I have distilled from their stories. Young people are in search of warm involvement in the adult world. They proceed, so to speak, to the place from where (they think that) adults should lead. They "pro-voce" (from the Latin verb 'pro-vocare', to call forward) adults to show their true colours, to move away from indifference and to make a real difference. Again, in the present boom of values education it is not the authoritarian enforcement of common decency and socially well-adjusted

behaviour of young people – whether or not cleverly presented in attractive methodologies – that is important. Rather it is this question that is at the heart of it: Do adults still have faith in their children?⁹ Do they have the courage to exert leadership in vulnerability and modesty while showing persuasiveness and insight? Do they show themselves in their greatness *and* in their plainness, in sum in their mature coping with the complexity of life?

In my opinion, young people are twice as vulnerable nowadays. All through their personal growth struggle runs today's social lack of clarity as to what is really worth living for. They lack biographical advice. In the 1970s the famous moral psychologists Kohlberg and Gilligan described this phenomenon as follows: "The adolescent is a philosopher by nature, and if not by nature, by counter-cultural pressure".¹⁰ But how much rudderlessness can the young philosopher handle? Where are the bounds of his flexibility? How much irretrievability can one take before becoming irretrievably lost? Judging by our culture's perspective we should embrace change, according to the Dutch pastoral theologian Tjeu van Knippenberg.¹¹ After all, this era likes to flirt with anything new and original. The first thing we look for when surfing the Internet, is the "What's new?" column. But many contemporaries are in fact scared of losing themselves and becoming completely meaningless and thus valueless. This is why Van Knippenberg recommends spiritual leaders to continually assess the foundation of stability on which people stand in their dealings with plurality in a pluralistic culture.¹²

This insight to be of great pedagogical value: To lead young people in a culture like ours implies leading them in meaningful orientations of life, showing them the beacons that they can hold on to amidst the multitude of (often contradictory) meanings. It implies learning to live with/in difference. Young people have to familiarise themselves with these beacons; they cannot be passed on from one person to the next, nor can they be forced upon others. There is an abundance of educational action that fails to offer an orientation of life, that does not yield beacons, and that does not render account wisely. Several educational efforts do not show the way, they rather point 'away' from what really matters. They point to a future time that is beyond reach ("Just wait until it's your turn"), to material indulgence or, even worse, back to the young people (by retro-socialisation: "As adults, we follow the example of the carefreeness and flexibility of the youth; we no longer lead, we prefer to follow"). These are unproductive educational paths.

The resilience of young people to remain true to themselves in a confusing multitude of meanings (remember the surfer-metaphor used in the 2002 summer camp) can be strengthened by the exemplary conduct of resilient educators. They do not use words redundantly nor do they have programme explanations ready. Instead they show the courage to express their convictions, fresh and original, animated and deliberate. Their walk is an indication of their talk. Franz Rosenzweig once said: "Truth is not *proven* in the reality of the existence, it is *tested*; true is what can be tested. To believe a truth implies to bear witness to it".¹³ In a nutshell, this is the essence of my plea.

The old Socratic image of the educator as a *maieuticus*, as a midwife, still appeals to one's imagination. She helps in the birth of new life. She reveals a new meaning to that specific person.¹⁴ This form of leadership is a source of profound joy for those who stand amazed

at what is happening. Because it might as well have been different. To lead young people in the pursuit of meaning, all of a sudden realising that things go exactly in line with *or* exactly opposite to what had been pedagogically anticipated is one of the most powerful experiences of professional satisfaction of an educator, according to the philosopher of education Hanan Alexander.¹⁵

Perhaps, then, it *can* actually happen: that a new insight suddenly breaks through within the given frameworks – an insight that makes the existing system burst open, creating room for what was completely unanticipated. Should this no longer be possible, which is what some culture pessimists claim, then future generations would be in for a rough time. If that were the case, then perhaps it would be impossible to educate at all.¹⁶

¹ Michael Warren, *Youth, Gospel, Liberation*, Dublin, Veritas, 1998³, 25-42.

² I have been publishing on this issue also in *Religious Communication in Modern Culture. The Case of Young Adults*, in Bert Roebben & Leo van der Tuin (eds.), *Practical Theology and the Interpretation of Crossing Boundaries. Essays in Honour of Professor M.P.J. van Knippenberg*, Münster/Hamburg/London, Lit-Verlag, 2003, 165-186.

³ Hans Alma & Jacques Janssen, *Jeugd en zingeving: een open vraag*, in Hans Alma a.o., *Zin op school. Zingeving in het voortgezet onderwijs*, Nijmegen, 2000, 9-25.

⁴ Bert Roebben, *Shaping a Playground for Transcendence. Postmodern Youth Ministry as a Radical Challenge*, in *Religious Education* 92 (1997) 332-347, here 337-340.

⁵ Tjeu van Knippenberg, *Tussen naam en identiteit. Ontwerp van een model voor geestelijke begeleiding*, Kampen, Kok, 1998, 120-124, discusses two modes of change: change within the system and change by breaking open the system itself. The second mode is not evident in a modern, high-tech culture that forces people permanently into system-immanency.

⁶ Bert Roebben, *Succesvol door bescheidenheid. Praktisch-theologische overwegingen over kerkelijk jongerenwerk*, in *Praktische Theologie* 30 (2003) 74-86.

⁷ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak. Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

⁸ Anselm Grün, *Vijftig engelen voor je ziel*, Tiel/Baarn, Lannoo/Ambo, 2002.

⁹ Bert Roebben, *Do We Still Have Faith in Young People? A West-European Answer to the Evangelization of Young People in a Postmodern World*, in *Religious Education* 90 (1995) 327-345.

¹⁰ Lawrence Kohlberg & Carol Gilligan, *The Adolescent as a Philosopher: The Discovery of the Self in a Postconventional World*, in *Daedalus* 100 (1971) 4, 1051-1086.

¹¹ Tjeu van Knippenberg, *Tussen naam en identiteit* (note 4), 112-118.

¹² *Ibid.*, 154-156.

¹³ 'In der Wirklichkeit der Existenz wird die Wahrheit nicht bewiesen, sondern erprobt; wahr ist was auf die Probe gestellt werden kann. Eine Wahrheit glauben, heisst für sie zeugen' [quoted in Hans-Christian Kirsch, *Martin Buber. Biografie eines deutschen Juden*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien, Herder, 2001, 92].

¹⁴ In Dutch the word for 'to reveal' is 'open-baren'. This compound word can literally be translated as: 'to open for giving birth'.

¹⁵ Hanan A. Alexander, *Reclaiming Goodness. Education and the Spiritual Quest*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 193-198.

¹⁶ I would like to thank the West-European province of the Marist Brothers for their help in translating the text and their thoughtful ideas. I also thank Ms. Caroline Jacobs, Ms. Andrea van Dijk and my colleagues of the practical theology department of the Tilburg Faculty of Theology for their remarks on a previous draft of the text. Special thanks to Ms. Annemie Tuts, co-leader during the 2003 summer camp session.