Don Richter
on the
Spiritual Formation
of Young People

Interviewer: Tracy Schier

Since 1993 the Youth Theology Institute (YTI) at Emory University has been assembling some 60 rising high school seniors from across the country for a one-of-a-kind experience. In the four-week residential summer academy the youth read and dissect theology texts, discuss theology as it relates to public policy, question professionals from all walks of life about their faith, and engage in community service activities. From its inception through 1998, Dr. Don C. Richter served as director of that program, imparting his own knowledge of theology as well as utilizing his administrative skills while simultaneously learning a great deal about the multiple dynamics taking place in the education and formation of young people in faith.

Richter received his Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary and is currently an associate with the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, an initiative, like YTI, that is funded by the Lilly Endowment’s Religion Division. He is responsible for managing the Project website (www.practicingourfaith.org), administering the Project’s grants program, and coordinating the Youth and Practices Seminar which is developing a book on Christian practices addressed primarily to teens entering high school. In addition to his work with YTI, Richter also taught
Christian education at Emory’s Candler School of Theology and at Bethany Theological Seminary. He and his wife Kim Richter are ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

This conversation is edited.

Q. We all know there are many challenges in educating and forming people of all ages in faith. There are special challenges when it comes to young people. What have you discovered to be the biggest challenges?

A. One of the biggest issues has to do with the formation part of the equation. We have to ask, where are the adults who have formed themselves and who have developed a way of life that is an example for young people. There is a perennial quest here – wanting for our own kids what we ourselves don’t have. In this attempt to help young people to form their own lives of faith we are pulling strands of life together that adults often don’t model.

Here’s an example that will literally hit home with many people. We all seem to know that household rituals, such as eating meals together, are essential to how we connect with young people. Yet how many of us who are parents often are guilty of neglecting this important family ritual, engaging all too often in what Dorothy Bass calls “random acts of nutrition.” Instead of sitting down to break bread with our teenagers and using that time for conversation, for a time of mutual understanding and sharing of values, ideas, concerns, joys, and all of those things that can bring families together and help in the formation of a faith life, we grab a sandwich here, a bowl of cereal there, and worse, sometimes this takes place in front of a television instead of around the family table.

Q. We all blame our culture for this. What is the remedy?

A. Formation in faith happens by the grace of God and through the development of practices over time. There has to be intentionality here – significant adults have to model the practices. So while sharing family meals together is a good start, there are other Christian practices that take us out into the world with others, practices such as hospitality, forgiving, honoring our bodies, and more. Engaging in these practices with young people involves the cultivation of skills that can be as demanding as playing a musical
instrument or engaging in a sport. And to learn these skills young people need significant adults beyond their parents – I am talking about teachers, coaches, counselors, pastors and religious educators – all those adults who interact with young people regularly.

Q. The parents and teachers of today’s teen-agers are the baby-boomers. The attitudes and practices of that generation have been highly dissected and documented. The baby-boomers are known for their anti-institutionalism and their stance of being “spiritual but not religious.” How does this come into play regarding educating and forming their children in faith?

A. First of all, we must acknowledge that there were healthy aspects of that anti-institutional stance arising out of the Vietnam and Watergate experiences. Having said that, we can now see how “market logic” over the last several decades has shrewdly played into institutional suspicion. Advertisements proclaim that you can’t rely on any institution – the family, the government, the church. Marketeers tell us that individuals can only rely on themselves – and of course they have products that help individuals become self-reliant! This market logic does more than sell products, however. It promotes the disconnect and isolation that turns people into atomized consumers.

It is interesting to see how those ideas are being challenged today on both ends of the life spectrum. At the one end, we can see people with Alzheimer’s who can no longer “make meaning” as individuals, yet who can still say their prayers and sing hymns with the gathered faith community? At the other end we have young people who don’t buy into the “spiritual but not religious” attitude because it is not grounded in anything in particular that provides meaning for them.

By the way, I think everyone is spiritual in the same way everyone is endowed with linguistic capacity. To say, “I’m spiritual but not religious” is analogous to saying “I’m linguistic, but I don’t speak any particular language.” A human being needs to be grounded in at least one language before he or she can branch out and learn other languages. So it is too with our spiritual lives. Our spirits need to be anchored in particular faith traditions so they don’t lose their moorings and drift around aimlessly. A lot of youth today are understanding this and some are literally shocking their parents by becoming religious
adherents – Christian, Jew, Muslim, Zen Buddhist. We even see young converts influencing their parents who have had no previous church involvement, kids who have the passion to ask important questions leading their parents into the worship life of the community.

Q. You and the others who planned the Youth Theology Institute had certain goals in mind that were based on your understandings of the challenges of educating and forming young people in faith. Can you talk about some of these goals?

A. I think our first goal has to do with what we have been talking about. We wanted YTI scholars – the teens who attended our summer academy – to come to a place where they were not isolated, atomized individuals but instead, accountable members of a covenant learning community. We felt that the community itself could become the curriculum – all courses and activities focused back on how we were sharing life together and practicing what we preached. All members of this covenant community, scholars and staff alike, had to commit themselves to honoring guidelines and boundaries. Those who could not respect our covenant were told they could no longer be part of the community. This was, of course, very difficult when a couple of the members ultimately did have to leave. But these incidents were also powerfully instructive for all of us. Parker Palmer’s book, The Company of Strangers, was a core text in helping us wrestle with the paradox of being a group of strangers who had also been called to be companions to one another on the journey. We had young people from a wide denominational and cultural spectrum, so that added to the challenge.

Q. Just the name alone – Youth Theology Institute – suggests the importance of theology in the education and formation of young people. Can you talk about how you use theology with young people and how they become engaged with it.

A. Well, there are several things here. Right off it leads to a second goal that we had for the YTI summer academy. The intent, by engaging students in theological reflection on public issues, is to create a cadre of public theologians. The purpose of the program was not necessarily to steer young people into the pipeline for ordained ministry, although we hoped that some might head that way. Rather we wanted to introduce these talented teenagers to thoughtful people from all walks of life who practice their faith seriously (and
playfully!) and who know how to think theologically about the common good. We wanted young people to be inspired by the many persons in the Atlanta community who have moved their religious convictions into the public realm.

**Q. Did you have the young people read and study theology as background for this engagement with people in the community?**

**A.** It is critical that teenagers have access to theological literature, ancient and modern. A paradox of our information age is that some of the most important theological thinking is not being made available to young people, even to those youth who are highly involved in churches. We had a hunch that if young people knew what was out there waiting to be explored, many of them would “fall in love with theology” as a lifetime companion. We called teens “scholars” because we expected them to read and study books as a central part of our daily life together. We found that many teens came to our academy experience-rich but reflection-poor. That’s because in much youth work around the country today there is an emphasis on chalking up experiences without reflecting on them theologically. At YTI, we emphasized that it’s important to hold head and heart together. We’d say to scholars, “we want you to think with your hearts and feel with your minds.”

For Christians, theological reflection is a communal enterprise. So we’re not simply reading a series of texts by ourselves. We’re reading and discussing them *together* – not just with like-minded folks but also with those who read and understand these texts differently. We do this all the time in seminaries, but it’s fascinating to see how this happens with 17-year-olds. Jim and Cheryl Keen helped me see this in relation to their study of people who have a long-term commitment to the common good (the Keens co-authored the book *Common Fire* with Laurent Parks Daloz and Sharon Daloz Parks). The single most important pattern they found is what they call “a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other.” Jim also describes this as the construction of the “contrapuntal self,” the self-in-counterpoint, the self that frames moral deliberation in counterpoint with other selves. The late teen years provide a great window of opportunity for someone to develop a deep, empathic connection to persons who are radically different. Let me give an example of how this happened during a summer academy.

We had a white female scholar – “Rhonda” – nicknamed “Southern Belle” because of her privileged upbringing in Mobile, Alabama. In the same group
of scholars was “Mike” – a young black man from the south side of Chicago. One evening, after the group took an “urban plunge” in Atlanta, our whole community had a gut-wrenching session sharing experiences of racism as America’s “original sin.” Rhonda, sensing Mike’s pain, came up to him to say that she had written a paper about Martin Luther King, Jr. for her history class. Mike just stared at her and said, “Rhonda, that’s the past. What you and I have to decide is how we’re going to relate to each other here and now.” On the final evening of the summer academy, Mike said that when he hugged Rhonda he cried harder than with anyone else, because he knew how far – geographically and spiritually – the two of them had traveled to become friends. For their entire lives, whether or not they actually see each again, Mike and Rhonda will have each other as internal dialog partners in the way that Jim Keen describes.

During each YTI summer academy we could chart real progress as scholars read theology texts together and engaged in deep conversations. It has been wonderful to see that they continue these conversations among themselves as they go on to college and graduate school. The first alumni group entered college just as e-mail was becoming widely available. They organized their own listserv and still keep in touch with one another today. E-mail is a great way for YTI alumni to stay connected as a community when the academy is over, and they return to their home towns.

Q. Biblical knowledge was, I think, an aim of YTI. And I know that you see understanding the scriptures as an essential part of the whole attempt to educate and form in faith. Please talk about this.

A. Teens need to learn how to read the Bible as Scripture. That was a curricular aim, and that should be the aim of anyone who is helping young people grow in faith. One of our YTI faculty members put it succinctly: “The Bible is a name; Scripture is a claim.”

A big challenge, of course, is that young people come to YTI with a wide variety of biblical understanding, all the way from knowing little to knowing a lot. Our aim is to get these students to see what is at stake when they read the Bible. We have to help them to get beyond reading the Bible as literature – important as that is – and invite them to see how the stories and images make an authority claim on their lives. We ourselves, as teachers and
mentors, need to trust that the Bible has life-changing stories that we can come back to again and again throughout our lives.

There is an encouraging Sunday School model taking hold around the country. It is called the “workshop rotation model,” designed primarily for children in grades K-5 but adaptable for youth as well. In a nutshell, a single Bible story becomes the focus of five workshops. In five weeks that story is approached from a variety of angles through music, puppetry, painting, drama, and other creative ways. In other words, it is an approach that engages the multiple intelligences that have been described by Howard Gardner in his book *Frames of Mind*. This approach encourages congregations to organize their own curricular approach to the Bible, it honors the multivalence of scripture, and is an exciting example of how we can constantly experience new life through engaging the Bible as scripture. (see related website: http://www.rotation.org/outlook.htm)

**Q.** Can you talk a bit about the worship experience, both at YTI and what you have learned from it, that can apply to youth and worship in general?

**A.** Worship, of course, is the focal practice of life together in a covenant community. We wanted the YTI scholars to experience life-giving worship and we wanted them to know that they could have a part in shaping it. Youth today are trained to listen, to watch, and to consume. Through the worship experience we wanted to find ways that they could speak, envision, and create culture, not just consume the culture we had created for them. I see worship as a vital place for that to happen.

A paradox of Christianity is that it has to be embodied and mediated through a particular culture. But the genius of Christianity is that this embodiment does not mean confinement. After all, Jesus as the Christ is not confined to any one place or time – Christ is free to become incarnate again and again all over the globe. Christian youth need to appreciate this mystery of “re-incarnation” as they experience how non-Christians worship. YTI scholars made pilgrimages to encounter worship in a Hindu temple and a Sikh study circle, among others. They were overwhelmed by the hospitality and by the eye-opening realization that God was present in the midst of these people, too.
As I have mentioned, the participants in YTI are a diverse group – ethnically, religiously and geographically. They are a real tapestry. For most of these young people, our own worship services presented a bigger challenge than the pilgrimages to outside faith communities. This was especially the case when liberal Protestant and Roman Catholic teens found themselves worshiping together with Orthodox and Pentecostal youth. These groups don’t ordinarily worship together. So they could see the eschatological dimension at work here. They could sense being part of what we confess as “the communion of saints,” and they could enjoy a foretaste of what all Christians hope for ultimately.

Q. In the YTI experience, and in what seems to be your own philosophy of education and formation, it appears that allowing young people to question and seek is of paramount importance. Can you comment on this?

A. We know that as young people are formed and educated in faith it is important that they are encouraged to question and seek without our coming up with pat answers and slogans. I worry about an approach to education that relies primarily upon sound bites. Such an approach might satisfy temporarily but it does not nourish over the long haul.

At YTI, we maintained that questioning is good and that one good question leads to another. In fact, a factor in the admissions process is the quality of the questions that applicants pose. Adults need to honor young people’s deeper and better questions and help them to see their questions for what they literally are – “little quests” or adventures that lead them to a more profound understanding of their faith.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with a number of scholars during YTI, and we asked open-ended questions that invited them to think with us about their life and their faith. I came to see such engagement as a contemporary form of “catechism” without the scripted questions and answers. So often these young people find themselves saying out loud much more than they realize they even know. As trust develops they begin to learn out loud, and the interviewers would learn with them. Most scholars considered these interviews a real gift, saying things like “Nobody in my life has ever listened to me that attentively before.” Teenagers appreciate being taken seriously, and the questions that they ask are deserving of such attentiveness.
Q. Our culture compartmentalizes religion so it seems natural that young people should do the same. How do you deal with this?

A. It is interesting. We find that many young people are looking for guidance in how not to compartmentalize. One of the most refreshing things for me in working with youth is seeing how they resist segregating religion from the rest of their lives, how they want to find ways to integrate religion into their whole life.

Q. I think it is pretty widely known that youth ministry education has been kind of a step child in seminary education. Can you talk about that issue a bit.

A. I think the Lilly programs that are reawakening interest in how we minister to children and youth came at a critical time. The seminaries had just about hit the nadir in lack of training in this area before the Endowment’s initiatives kicked in. And ironically, this country is on the verge of having a generational cohort of young people that will be even larger than the baby boomers – demographers are calling this the “baby boom echo.” So the need for competent ministry with youth will be greater than ever.

In my seminary experience, the old guard are often the folks who “get it” as far as the importance of educating for youth ministry is concerned. That happens because they themselves were taken seriously and had powerful leadership opportunities when they were young and were considering ministry for their life’s work. Across the board, denominations dismantled training networks for youth and youth leaders during the 1960s and 70s. Consequently, we now have boomer-aged seminary teachers who felt abandoned by the church during their youth. For them, the idea of teaching teens theology may seem odd, since these teachers view theology as an adult occupation. But if they can suspend their doubts and give it a try, they’ll see how democratizing theology by including teens can revolutionize their own teaching with all ages.

Q. A final question has to do with your work with the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. Can you talk a bit about the book that the project is producing for teenagers – what do you hope to achieve with the book and how will it be used?
A. During the past year I've had the privilege of collaborating with 17 adults and 18 youth from across the country in writing a book on Christian practices addressed primarily to teens entering high school. We envision this book as an invitation to the abundant way of life that Jesus promises to young people here and now – not just in some distant future. Since describing an entire way of life can be overwhelming, we’ve identified a set of everyday activities that teens can engage in faith as Christians. A chapter summary and a list of authors is available on the “Youth Connections” page of our Project website at www.practicingourfaith.org/youth_connections/book.php. We have a contract with Upper Room Books to publish this book in August 2002, and we’re already planning a leader’s guide and a youth-friendly, interactive website to accompany the book. As co-editors, Dorothy Bass and I have high hopes that this book and its companion resources will encourage teens and adults alike to move out into the world and practice our faith with renewed confidence and conviction.