

A Cloud of Unknowing: Articulations of Identity and Faith in Younger Adolescents

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Abstract: Younger adolescents struggle to recruit and retain adult mentoring and engagement across the many institutions in which they participate, creating a potential dearth of support critical to the development of mature identity and faith. Because their bodies and social roles are in flux, as well as their capacity to interpret themselves socially and existentially to those around them, younger adolescent expressions of self are often variable. However, mature conventions of selfhood require the capacity to articulate one's self in a recognizable and consistent fashion, causing many adults to be uncomfortable and impatient in the face of younger adolescents' unpredictability. Persons who hope to provide support to younger adolescents require the capacity and desire to be a consistent relational presence despite the unknowability of the middle school self.

Key Words: Adolescence, Identity Development, Younger Adolescents, Narrative

Younger adolescents (roughly 11-14 years old) have a bad reputation. As a scholar in practical theology and youth ministry who currently works primarily with middle-school aged youth, I notice that much of the theoretical literature in my field focuses on older adolescents. Although most churches have significantly more younger- than older- adolescents in their communities, something important happens between younger and older adolescence that makes the latter group more attractive to mainline religious Protestants writing about how to effectively engage with young people. Namely, older adolescents are better able to articulate and perform their identity

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and faith in a way that is recognizable by adults. This capacity to perform selfhood helps them to recruit adult mentoring and engagement. This same recruitment and engagement appears much more difficult for younger adolescents because of their inability to perform a coherent and stable account of themselves, creating a potential dearth of adult support and mentoring across the many institutions in which they spend their time. Both the lack of adult mentoring and connection and the difficulty younger adolescents have in offering an account of themselves in one-to-one counseling situations raises concern for those who work with early adolescents. By better recognizing the dynamics of change and identity in this phase of life, adults who hope to offer support and guidance to younger adolescents may be able to sustain relationship with them even in the face of their changeability.

When I was sharing the topic of this article with a group of colleagues, the entire room of professors of religion misheard the title of this article as “A Cloud of Annoying.” In a collective Freudian slip of the ears, they replaced “unknowing” with a term they personally associated with their experience of younger adolescents. Like my colleagues, many adults find middle-schoolers difficult to be around, particularly if they happen to be related to them. As someone who has worked with many youth groups and youth ministers over the years, this phenomenon holds true in terms of recruiting volunteer teachers and mentors for younger adolescents as well. While the occasional adult really connects with this group and enjoys working with them, other adults seem put off by them or even scared of them. It becomes difficult to find and sustain long term volunteers to work with younger adolescents, and educational programs that take seriously the gifts and strengths of this age group are hard to come by. What makes this relationship between adults and younger adolescents particularly difficult?

One explanation/justification for this phenomenon is the common-sense wisdom that younger adolescents are “all about peer relationships,” and therefore it does not make much sense to invest adult attention in them. This everyday interpretation skews the insight of older developmental literature that notes the emerging importance of peer interaction for identity development in this period of life. Studies have demonstrated that early adolescents’ long-term developmental values (including their choice of peer groups) are most influenced by significant adult caregivers in their lives during this period, but this research does not impact the average adult’s perception that peer relationships trump all else during this time (Aimin, Peterson & Morphey 2007). This common sense understanding can lead to adults feeling as if their investment of time and energy relating to young persons in this age group is a waste of time.

This phenomenon of adults avoiding younger adolescents extends to the institution where many younger adolescents spend most of their waking hours: schools. In the educational literature about middle school, one persistent theme is the lack of teacher education and research available for persons wanting to work with this age group. Despite large scale efforts within the world of education to attend to this age group during the development of the junior high school at the turn of the 20th century and again with the middle school movement in the 1970’s and 1980’s, significant training programs for teachers and administrators at this level have never materialized. As Mills (1995) notes, “Generally, the literature reports that many teachers see the middle level as a ‘stopping-off point’ on their way to high school teaching, and middle grades teachers not only lack confidence in their ability to teach young adolescents but also feel overwhelmed by the middle school environment” (p.141). Only the rare middle grade teacher lives with a particular calling to work with this age group, and others, as a friend who has taught middle school for more than a decade wryly noted, are simply waiting for a position to open at

the high school. Despite repeated calls in the educational literature for teachers who are committed to learning about and working with persons in this particular age range, a lack of focus on this age group still exists in both teacher training programs and education research.

As someone who is concerned about the wellbeing of younger adolescents, the idea that they spend much of their day in contact with adults who do not necessarily enjoy their company is concerning. Coupled with my own experience of the difficulty in finding volunteers who enjoy engaging in mentoring relationships with younger adolescents and parents who struggle with their children at this age, I wonder about the impact of this aversion to younger adolescents on their development and transition between childhood and adolescence. What is necessary for adults to engage persons in this period of life, and why are many of them averse to doing so?

Given this reluctance to engage with younger adolescents in teaching and research, I have become curious about what makes the relationship between middle-schoolers and the adults who surround them particularly difficult. Why do so many people think of middle school as a time to be endured rather than a place of discovery and openness? Why do parents, pastoral caregivers, and adult volunteers struggle to connect with persons in this age group? One interpretation holds that this time period was, for many adults, a time of peer interaction so painful in their own experiences that they do not have the desire or strength to re-experience the trauma as an adult working with persons in this age group. While I certainly have read enough adolescent autobiographies from students in youth ministry classes to believe this statement, I still wonder. Can younger adolescence really be such a bad a period of life that adults nearly universally avoid regular contact with it?

Adult discomfort with this age group may arise from experiences of younger adolescents turning their nascent critical thinking skills on their parents and other people close to them. As

young adolescents develop the cognitive capacity to reflect critically on ideas and concepts they begin to use this logical capacity to evaluate the ideas and beliefs of parents and friends as part of their search to place themselves in the social matrix of their life (Nydham, 2004). The shift adults undergo, from relating to a child who has regularly trusted and depended upon that adult's wisdom for the past eleven years, to now relating to one who practices emergent critical thinking skills by assessing the adult's intellectual capacity and life commitments in a negative fashion, can be rather disconcerting. But again, is it simply fear of the judgment of the young that keeps adults from connecting with this age group?

In addition to the reminder of a traumatic past in witnessing social interactions among middle-schoolers and finding oneself the target of their critical thinking, I believe something else fosters trouble in our relationships to younger adolescents: the way we adults encounter them is highly variable. One time we find a mostly unselfconscious, childlike person who is confident in their body and in their capacity to recruit adult support. In the next minute, a surprising display of intellectual capacity shines through, and adult-like descriptions of life experience and wisdom emerge from their mouths. The next minute, a wrestling match may break out between friends, or young people slide into name-calling and put-down swapping that seem callous to the real emotions of their peers. This changeability from minute to minute is unusual in adults, and a possible indicator of mental health issues. However, for middle-schoolers, the variability is an honest expression of their bodily and intellectual realities, which are very much in flux.

While it may be developmentally appropriate and in line with physiological and other tracks of growth in early adolescence, this changeability is something that we do not often value in adult expressions of self. In an adult, encountering essentially a different kind of person in multiple conversations is a sign of being deceived, or an indication of a serious deficiency in the

integrity of the person. Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan (1982) tells the story of a young woman he calls Terry, an inpatient in a medical facility having difficulty in evoking sympathy and response from the various personnel in the hospital. Kegan describes her situation:

Terry's parents love her, and the hospital was ready to care for her, but she was unhelped because no one could feel moved by or attracted to her. On the contrary, people found her revolting. People are moved by heroic and vulnerable expressions of dignity and integrity, and no one could see these qualities in the way Terry lived her life (p.177).

Kegan goes on to describe how her behavior seemed more appropriate for a younger teenager, but seemed appallingly immature for a person at 16. He describes how the research team "...could see her in group meetings struggling unsuccessfully to talk about herself in a way the staff would approve" (p.176). Terry was unable to narrate her experiences and personal integrity in a way that evoked a caring response from the adults around her.

What is interesting to me about this story is Kegan's belief that such behavior seemed normal for a younger adolescent, but became problematic because it was still present in a 16 year-old. What does it mean to find this behavior generally revolting and off-putting in older adolescents, but somehow tolerable in younger adolescents? This account leads me to wonder if one of the reasons that younger adolescents have a difficult time recruiting the support of sympathetic adults is this incapacity to narrate a consistent and integrative self, even when it may be nascently present.

In my own work teaching youth ministry, I often have students in my youth ministry classes interview an actual adolescent as a way of interrogating and being in dialogue with the theories about adolescents that we read. Over the years, I have discovered that students who work with younger adolescents often have a harder time striking up useful conversations with

them and end up at a disadvantage in completing the assignment. I now encourage students to work with someone 15-18 years old whenever possible on the assignment, simply because older adolescents are better able to narrate their own experience in a way that my adult students can understand and engage. My own assignment provides a clue that I will explore further in this article. Namely, I believe that adults find it difficult to relate to younger adolescents because they are not reliable narrators of themselves in ways that adults can easily comprehend. This situation has obvious implications for those who might be called upon to work with younger adolescents in care and counseling situations. How is a pastoral counselor to establish a contract of care and some sense of progress in a therapeutic setting within a context of variable selfhood?

The problem is not that younger adolescents do not yet have a sense of self, significant values and commitments, meaningful life experiences of joy and suffering, or existential questions and concerns. Rather, these deep currents of being have not yet made a reliable transition into language and bodily expressions that adults can readily access. I find it useful to think of the narration of self in the experience of younger adolescents as similar to spoken language in young toddlers. Young toddlers develop receptive language far before they develop the capacity to speak. In other words, they understand what other people are saying well before they can form language themselves in ways that others can understand. In a similar manner, young adolescents develop, recognize and respond to integrity of selfhood and faith well before they are able to communicate to other persons their own internal experiences of identity and faith. In other words, they lack the skill to perform a self that communicates internal integrity and elicits sympathy from the adults around them.

Selfhood in transition

Between the ages of 11 and 14, humans go through a remarkable amount of physical and cognitive change. Physically, the movement into puberty causes growth spurts that can lead to literal awkwardness as well as an emotional awkwardness about one's presence in space. Nydam (2004) describes these physical and emotional changes as a kind of adventure that combines excitement and fear:

It is a time of both unavoidable awkwardness and possible delight. These spurts of early adolescent growth are unpredictable, uneven, and out of personal control as the body 'takes over' in its press toward physical maturity. One of the major developmental goals of early adolescence is managing and accepting these bodily transformations. (pp.214-215)

As humans live and experience reality out of embodied experience, major changes in physicality not surprisingly impact how young people understand and narrate themselves. The rapid bodily changes of early adolescence can be intrusive during early adolescence, causing the physical self to become "an 'insistent presence' for the child." (Brinkhaupt & Linka, 2002, p.6)

Cultural discourse about the significance of bodies also impacts young adolescents' experiences of themselves at this time, because along with bodily changes come changes in the way that people perceive and relate to them. This relationship between others' evaluations of their body and a young adolescent's sense of self-worth is particularly salient for young women, but affects young adolescents of both genders (Davidson & McCabe, 2006). For example, developing a mature female body can lead to sexual harassment, or even just sexual noticing, by adults, phenomena that may well be difficult for young females to handle. Either embracing this attention or being embarrassed by it can cause discomfort and unusual reactions in relationships with parents and other adults. Reflecting on these kinds of embodied experiences and

expressions, Nydam (2004) notes the multi-layered meanings that can be attached to such a behavior by describing a young girl wearing a bikini at age 13. While an adult might read such behavior as sexually provocative, in reality the young woman may not be thinking in these same categories. She may simply be trying to be noticed by manipulating her appearance. Cultural practices that normalize scantily clad female bodies used in advertising and mass-produced media impact an emerging adolescent's read on her own body. Yet, she is just beginning to read herself into that broader cultural narrative, without a great deal of experience of what it means to have this body in this space. The lag time in gaining awareness and experience may mean there is a certain level of naiveté about what her bodily performance means to those who read it, or simply a lack of practice in performing it within the categories recognized by adults in her culture.

At the same time that so many physical changes are in play, the brain is also transforming itself in powerful ways, with new brain cells and neural connections proliferating that allow for better processing of sensory input. The capacity to learn new languages diminishes, even as more complicated capacities for self-control, assessing risky behavior, and emotional regulation begin their long process of emergence, a process that takes up to a decade to complete (Brinthaupt & Linka, 2002). In other words, even as younger adolescents' bodies are changing, their capacity to process and understand information is shifting with hormonal and physical changes. Younger adolescents likely experience themselves as highly changeable in their perception and understanding of the world as well as in their bodily experience, which contributes to their variable performance of selfhood during this time.

Middle schoolers are thus a bit raw around the edges, changeable from day to day in their self-presentation. They are beginning to borrow the language and categories of the culture

around them to try to fit it into their experience. That language is newly accessible to them as their thinking is becoming more abstract and attuned to social discourse and tropes. But they have not quite had the experience to really place themselves within those spectrums of conflicting discourse with reliability and certainty, which means that they will often deploy multiple ways of narrating their experience given multiple contexts and categories offered. While this, of course, also is true for older adolescents and adults, persons with more practice in narrating their experience recognize that the conventions of communication require articulation of some level of stable “self” over time. Often younger adolescents do not yet have this convention as part of their capacity. In other words, the capacity to read and deploy cultural narratives comes before the capacity to construct a self-narrative that integrates both of these narratives in a way that communicates stability to others.

The narrative self and the life story

The relationship between having a self and being able to tell one’s own life story has been explored by philosophers and psychologists such as Paul Ricoeur (1991), Charles Taylor (1989), and more recently Dan McAdams (1996):

The challenge of identity demands that the modern adult construct a ‘telling’ of the self that synthesizes synchronic and diachronic elements in such a way as to suggest that (a) despite its many facets, the Me is coherent and unified and (b) despite the many changes that attend the passage of time, the Me of the past led up to or set the stage for the Me of the present, which in turn will lead up to or set the stage for the Me of the future (p.306).

McAdams holds that the form of this construction is a life story, a “more or less coherent, followable, and vivifying story” that provides “unity, purpose, and meaning in life” (p.306). It is

the “followable” part of this convention that younger adolescents often fail. When McAdams articulates standards for a healthy life story that can effect positive life change, “coherence” is the first quality of a good narrative (p.315). Younger adolescents, with their embodied variability, do not often meet this criterion.

Given the multiple contexts and narratives within which persons compose their own life story and account of identity, the project in a contemporary context of narrating the self becomes quite complicated. Adolescents, as well as adults, struggle with the multiple discourses, images, and meaning systems in which they are called upon to give an account of themselves:

The self-narrations that purportedly provide a temporal coherence for lives are not really ‘inside’ the person, subject to the person’s revision, waiting to be told, continuing to be enacted. Instead, the postmodern person seems to reside amid the stories that surround and define him or her on a moment by moment basis. The self is as much ‘out there,’ in the swirl and confusion of the postmodern world, as it is ‘in the mind’ of ‘the person.’ (McAdams, p.298).

McAdams is seeking to define more clearly the experience of adaptivity that allows persons to experience themselves as “embodied actors with internalized intentions and plans” in the midst of changing stories and experiences over time (p.299). Telling a coherent life story, argues McAdams, best corresponds to “that quality of selfhood that goes by the name of *identity*” (p. 299).

McAdams describes seven narrative features of recognizable structure and content that are common to adult life stories: narrative tone, imagery, theme, ideological setting, nuclear episodes, imagoes, and endings (pp.308-309). Skillfully deploying these features takes time to learn the conventions of storytelling in one’s cultural context, including the common themes and

structures available in the culture through which one articulates the particular collections of experiences and reactions that have occurred. Given the plural nature of most contemporary Western cultural contexts, adolescents have the added burden of gaining exposure to multiple stories and ideologies by which to define themselves, and the need to navigate and weigh the consequences of taking on particular story forms by which to tell themselves. In early adolescence, this construction point is primarily a matter of gathering raw materials and trying to connect these materials to the nuclear episodes of experience, often without the integrating function of a narrative arc. McAdams locates younger adolescents in the “prenarrative era” of the self, when the task is simply to “gather material for the self-stories they will someday construct. Identity is not yet a part of their telling of the Me, but they are nonetheless immersed in experiences that may have a significant effect in the long run on the stories they someday will tell to provide their lives with unity and purpose” (p.310).

Very few younger adolescents are able to construct a “followable” account of themselves that gives them what most adults recognize as identity. However, this doesn’t mean that adults should abandon young people in the messiness of that initial construction zone of the self. The ideologies and experiences to which younger adolescents are exposed have a profound effect on the selves they construct later, and they already possess the capacity to understand those narratives in the adults around them. In fact, they are particularly attuned to assessing them. Anyone who works with young adolescents knows that their antennae for potential hypocrisy and lack of integrity in life story are particularly sensitive. This sensitivity to a lack of integrity between the stories that adults tell about themselves and their actual behavior points to a significant nascent project in self-building that deserves adult companionship and support.

However, many adults seem to want to abandon that role and instead blame young people for being difficult and squirrely.

Soul searching and the demand for “articulation” of faith

The lag in development in younger adolescents between having a maturing self and being able to reliably narrate that self to adults around them would not be a problem, except that it can be hard to recruit adult support and mentoring without this capacity to articulate themselves. The companionship of significant adults is essential to their continued growth into maturity. Another way of talking about this articulation would be to use the performance language that has emerged in social psychology and political theories of identity. Younger adolescents do not typically perform a self that is easily recognized by one of their primary audiences, the adults around them. Adults often misread younger adolescent performances of self as highly distractable, not-caring, disrespectful, or random. When this misreading leads to a lack of adult relationships and investment in the lives of middle-schoolers, the results can be tragic. It can lead to adolescents living in what journalist Patricia Hersch (1998) documented as “A Tribe Apart,” a subset separated from the wisdom and resources of other generations, as adolescents are left to their peer relationships as their main source of social interaction, support, and self-referencing.

A deeper problem emerges when the lack of articulation is interpreted as an actual lack of self, or when the capacity to perform selfhood recognizably is equated with actually having a self. A recent major sociological study of the religious lives of adolescents (in this case older adolescents, because the research team decided that younger adolescents could not articulate their experience), makes this problematic confusion between the capacity to perform or articulate a self and the thing itself. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton’s (2005) book *Soul Searching*

strongly argues that articulation is a critical element in the development of faith in adolescents: “Philosophers like Charles Taylor argue that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality. So, for instance, religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p.268). Smith and Denton argue that one of the failings of religious education of youth in contemporary culture has been its inability to nurture articulateness among young people with regards to vocabulary, stories, and key messages of faith. This lack of the capacity to verbally describe their faith gives the researchers the “distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth” (p.262). In other words, because even the older adolescents that Denton and Smith studied could not verbally describe their beliefs, they believed that such beliefs did not exist.

As I was reading this report of their research, I became suspicious of their claim that articulation was a key developmental goal for adolescents. My first cynical response was that by “articulation” Smith and Denton (2005) really meant parroting doctrinal formulations offered by their religious tradition, the kind of certainty commonly demanded in performance of faith from particular evangelical Christian communities. Some quotes from the report support this suspicion, such as the following: “Viewed in terms of the absolute historical centrality of the Protestant conviction about salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone and not by any human good works, many belief professions by Protestant teens, including numerous conservative Protestant teens, in effect discard that essential Protestant gospel” (p.136). The research team was looking for a small and narrow gate of acceptable articulations of “key messages” essential to Protestant identity that they did not find shared by the religiously diverse

adolescents they interviewed. The lack of these specific formulations led to the charge of inarticulacy about faith more broadly.

However, as I thought further about this assessment of adolescent religiosity, I began to become more uncomfortable with the assessment that articulation of belief was an important goal for even the older adolescents that the study worked with (15-18 years), and especially for the younger adolescents they excluded from their study on the grounds of their inability to narrate themselves to a researcher. Here, another quote from their text indicates the extent to which the researchers equated the capacity to articulate themselves in the realm of religion with actually being socialized into a religious identity:

But Joy was hardly the only teen we interviewed who struggled with inarticulacy and confusion when it came to religion. If there is indeed a significant number of American teens who are serious and lucid about their religious faith, there is also a much larger number who are remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion. Interviewing teens, one finds little evidence that the agents of religious socialization in this country are being highly effective and successful with the majority of their young people. (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 27)

I believe the researchers are collapsing two different measures here...being socialized into a religious identity and being able to articulate those commitments by an accepted form of narration of the self.

Before I set Smith and Denton up as straw persons, I should note that they also recognized that an activated faith expressed through involvement in religious communities and practices was central to the adolescents they studied:

For such teens, faith involves their intentionally engaging in regularly enacted religious habits and works that have theological, spiritual, or moral meanings that form their lives, such as habitually worshipping with other believers, reading scriptures, praying regularly, practicing confession and forgiveness and reconciliation, engaging in service to others, using and not using one's body in particular ways, tuning into religious music and other religious art forms, and engaging in regular faith education and formation. Religious practices, in short, seem crucial to vibrant religious faith among American teens" (p.27).

In addition to this description of the ways in which the adolescents they interviewed participated in religious communities and enacted lives of faith, the sociologists found a positive correlation between "greater teen religious involvement and more positive outcomes in life" (p.28). While many of their indicators of positive outcomes can be legitimately challenged (for instance adolescent sexual activity is seen as a negative life outcome incompatible with religiosity; p.278), these findings undercut the importance they place on articulation of belief as a key indicator of adolescent religiosity. Even when they could not articulate their experiences of faith, religious involvement by adolescents resulted in positive outcomes as measured by factors such as success in school and psychological wellbeing. Given this reality, why, then, the focus on the ability to articulate oneself as the key intervention necessary?

Smith and Denton seem suspicious that such an embodied faith can be "real" without young people having the words to describe it. Yet, religious experience often falls into the realm of the ineffable; the significance of religious practices and symbols often moves beyond the capacity of articulation and description even for adults. In a zone of proximal development similar to those described by educator Lev Vygotsky (1978), more religious understanding and commitment may be present than youth are able to articulate on their own in an interview. Is the

capacity to critically articulate one's faith truly a good measure of religiosity for adolescents? Or would such an articulation merely be the uncritical adoption of the beliefs of adults around them, given that such a developed performance of self-narration is highly unlikely among adolescents, particularly younger adolescents? While Smith and Denton are working primarily on articulations of the religious beliefs of young persons, I think their mistake of connecting a lack of articulation of what is going on internally in adolescents with an actual deficiency in their development holds true in areas beyond religious formation. In the remainder of this article, I want to pursue the younger adolescent self and why articulation may not be the best value to hold in this stage of development.

Articulation of self and faith

Is the kind of articulation of personal faith Denton and Smith were expecting, with integrity about who one is and how one lives into religious belief, at all possible in adolescence, particularly younger adolescence? Certainly describing what the people around them believe, sometimes even assuming that it is what everyone believes, can be possible in early adolescence. But the capacity to articulate a belief as one's own and central to one's identity seems premature at this point in life. Such an articulation would require embodied and experiential knowing of those beliefs, an opportunity to question and think critically about them by experience in diverse religious settings, and finally the capacity to articulate them consistently as part of a life story in ways that are readable by adults. This seems like a high standard for adults, much less persons who have generally not yet "left home" economically and physically. While their research is particularly focused on the religious identity and development of teenagers, Smith and Denton

pointed me to consider that expectations of performing a recognizable self consistently seems out of place in adolescence.

The capacity to articulate one's identity and commitments may develop well after they are formed. When Erik Erikson (1959) described the formation of identity, he noted that identity developed prior to being able to think consciously about that identity:

An increasing sense of identity, on the other hand, is experienced preconsciously as a sense of psychosocial well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going,' and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count. (p.128)

For Erikson, identity first comes as a non-verbalized, even a preconscious sense of what is colloquially identified as "being comfortable in one's skin." He pairs this sense of being at home in one's body and having a sense of direction with "an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count." For Erikson, the process of gaining identity includes the sense of being recognizable to others, particularly those others one deems very important. This description of preconscious identity development sounds very much like what Smith and Denton (2005) described in their acknowledgement of the "embodied faith" in the adolescents they interviewed: "[R]eligious identities, organizations, and practices are significantly shaping people's lives, despite the fact that at the level of subjective consciousness most of them are only dimly aware of how or why that is happening" (p.263). They knew how to be Christian with their bodies, and that this performance would be recognized by their community of faith, even as they were not yet able to articulate this identity.

Unlike Smith and Denton, who are worried about the lack of articulation of self and religious commitments, Erikson worried about premature foreclosure of identity. Erikson

believed that adolescents who arrived early to a sense of identity may be expressing “a state of minimal actual choice and commitment with a maximum inner conviction of still being the chooser” (Erikson, 1959, p.134). The kind of articulation of faith that Smith and Denton looked for would be something much more similar to a premature foreclosure than a true expression of mature identity and faith. While both younger and older adolescents have the capacity to learn and recite the doctrinal commitments of their elders and their communities, an assumption that such a capacity would be the same thing as articulating their personal belief system seems to miss a vibrant process of the formation of self and identity that involves searching, assessment, and living into the beliefs that one claims. In adolescents, and particularly in younger adolescents, this process is in its beginning stages, radically open and permeable.

While I do not intend to relegate early adolescents to a permanent state of non-articulation about their beliefs and identity, I think unmet expectations of a coherent performance of self may prevent adults from enjoying working with them. If we expect a consistently performed self, with the capacity to not only articulate commitments consistently but also to live into them with integrity, we are likely to be disappointed. Movement towards articulation and awareness of one’s commitments and life experiences, even critical thinking about them, is a valuable goal of pastoral counseling, religious education, and other encounters between younger adolescents and their mentors. However, its absence doesn’t necessarily denote a failure as Smith and Denton charge. It may in fact indicate a fullness of searching and openness to learning about the world beyond the confines of one’s immediate experience, both valuable characteristics in young religious persons. Any religious identity worth its salt will take a lifetime to fully explore, articulate, and live into. Young adolescents can experience the gift of faith; performing a

consistent religious identity that is recognizable by adults is a different task on a slower developmental timeline.

While younger adolescents may not be in the position to confidently articulate themselves and their faith in spoken language in a way that adults consistently recognize and understand, they may indeed be articulating their nascent selfhood and faith commitments in different ways. One of the gifts of adults who enjoy working with younger adolescents is their capacity to read and affirm these alternate performances of self. Rather than being able to articulate consistently their beliefs and commitments in a life story, early adolescents often point to them in more indirect fashion, through their choices of peers and heroes, through the music and images that they find beautiful and compelling, through the books and movies whose narratives engage them, through the hobbies and interests they obsessively pursue, and even through the situations they find worthy of critique and disdain (Egan, 2005, 1998; Kegan, 1982; Nydam, 2004; White, 2005). These embodied and often rather unarticulated understandings of what they find true and beautiful are indicators of the emerging sense of identity and faith. Rather than being discouraged by the lack of consistency and the changeability of younger adolescents, sharing interest and conversation about these signposts of selfhood can be a way of connecting with the deeper currents of being that do not yet rise to the surface performance of self on a consistent basis.

In search of unknowing mentors and companions

Although younger adolescents are not generally articulating or performing an integrated self easily recognized by adults, they still need adults who recognize their value and are willing to serve as counselors, teachers, mentors, and parents to them. Just because we may not be able to

read early adolescent performances of self does not mean that we stop being in relationship with middle schoolers. As Nydam (2004,) notes, “Getting a useful grip on reality, especially emotional reality both in self and in others, does not come automatically. It is the result of a process of thousands of ongoing internalizations of the truth about self and others that happens within the context of intimate human interactions” (p.214). Without adults willing to engage in those thousands of ongoing interactions, young adolescents are less likely to be able to forge narratives about themselves and their faith that will eventually elicit support and affirmation from their communities. Yet remaining in relationship with changeable persons poses a challenge that many adults seem uneager to engage.

Given the amorphous and changing nature of younger adolescents, adults who work with them require a certain combination of rootedness and flexibility. Like the tree that bends with the wind but does not break, they can serve as a point of reference even as they are able to meet younger adolescents in the many forms in which they self-present. In her study of what makes an “ideal” teacher for this level, Davies (1995) puts it this way: “Likewise, a teacher’s ‘self-rootedness’ and positive esteem support professional growth, enabling one to stand tall and firmly for young adolescents, to take risks in the classroom, and to model personal growth for students” (p.150). Davies notes that younger adolescents are particularly concerned about the personal qualities of their teachers, and points to the capacity to demonstrate caring in both relational and symbolic ways as central to the work of adults involved with middle-schoolers. Being able to thrive on the energy and openness of younger adolescents does not hurt either. Davies calls for a sort of match of dispositions in the capacity to meet changeable energy with steadiness and the capacity to model channeling that energy into worthy pursuits.

Adults serving in this mentoring and counseling capacity often do so without reliable reports that their efforts are making an impact. The changeability of early adolescents and their lack of reliable narration about what is happening within often means that the adults working with them do not know what kind of influence they are wielding and its impact until much later. Even then, their work may not make it into the finished narrative of an adult's life, because solidifying that narrative (or performance) of self is not the task of early adolescence. By the time a person gets their narrative of self more consistently performed, they may have moved beyond the middle school adult mentors, incorporating instead the efforts of adults they met at an older age. However, the beginnings of these capacities for integrity of self and faith only happen in ongoing relationships with adults who recognize and evoke them. What is an adult to do, who is called to serve as mentor, counselor, teacher, or parent to younger adolescents?

Pastoral counseling, teaching, and other forms of ministry with younger adolescents require a spiritual practice not unlike that of the great contemplative mystics. The metaphor of the cloud of unknowing that I evoke in the title of this paper communicates two things when thinking about younger adolescents. On the one hand, the cloud of unknowing evokes the idea that early adolescents do not yet fully know themselves, having not developed the capacity to leverage broader cultural discourses and describe themselves in such a way as to elicit adult understanding and support. In that younger adolescents do not yet know themselves consistently in a language that can be socially interpreted and understood, they live in a sort of cloud of unknowing about themselves. On the other hand, the cloud of unknowing evokes a fourteenth century handbook for establishing connection with God even in the face of the reality that we can never fully know God. The anonymous work *The Cloud of Unknowing* (1980) describes a way of loving God even without fully knowing God. This foundational work in the *apophatic* mystical

tradition, a piece that has influenced contemporary contemplatives, describes the early experience of contemplative prayer as follows:

For when you first begin to undertake it, all that you find is a darkness, a sort of cloud of unknowing; you cannot tell what it is, except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out to God. This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in our affection. (*Cloud*, 1980, pp.120-121)

While I do not intend to equate God with early adolescents, they do share the quality of being profoundly inscrutable, albeit in distinct ways. The prayer manual teaches would-be contemplatives that there are two distinctive working powers in all rational creatures: a knowing power and a loving power. God is incomprehensible to the knowing power, but is entirely comprehensible to the loving power. The worthy act of contemplative prayer is “this secret love beating on this cloud of unknowing” (p.139). The ongoing act of contemplation allows for occasional rays of light piercing through the cloud of unknowing and generating glimpses of God that evoke affection in the prayer.

Although not a perfect analogy, I believe that part of the charism of working with younger adolescents is developing a spiritual practice of loving what you cannot yet know or understand fully. Working with younger adolescents requires letting go of the demand that they articulate themselves reliably in order that we might meet them where they are. Rather, we approach our work with them knowing that we can never know them fully, that the self they are performing is as yet highly changeable and ineffable. Despite their lack of reliable narration and performance of self, we can love them and accompany them, and in that commitment provide the relational

matrix needed for them to grow strong in faith and in integrity of selfhood. Helping the parents, teachers, pastors, counselors, and other adult mentors of younger adolescents to normalize this unknowing openness and encounter it with the energy and adventuring spirit it calls for rather than to condemn it as immature and distasteful is worthy work to engage. Working with younger adolescents may be something of an unremembered task, yet a critical one performed in the transitional waters of body and mind that occur in middle school.

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