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ABSTRACTS

Brains on Fire: Neuroscience and the Gift of Youth
Dean G. Blevins

Youth ministers are discovering a startling new era of scientific brain research. The exponential level of research is shaping our basic conceptualizations of people, including young people. Early efforts at explaining the implications of the work often came packaged with "neuro-myths" which may have impeded not only practical application but also any hope of an integrative theology of youth development based on this information. Perhaps the single greatest problem revolves around the controversial views concerning the neuroscience of adolescent "risk-taking," the idea youth are unable to make logical, mature, decisions. This article proposes a theological framework for accepting both the strengths and limits of young people, a view that respects the insights of neuroscience, but also argues for the need for adolescent vision and passion within the life of the church.

Civic Engagement among University Students
Alexandra L. Stroutman and Jessica L. Perry

University students have the greatest opportunity for civic engagement but are not always committed to action. Four variables pertaining to civic engagement were investigated: 1) the amount of university students' civic engagement; 2) students' attitudes toward civic engagement; 3) students' personal values and religious commitment, and 4) why students do or do not spend time involved in civic engagement. This study found a disconnect between students' beliefs and their actions.

New Digital Media: A Contemporary "Eternal Fear"
Matt Elison

In every age people have created and adopted new technologies. As these technologies have become widely accepted in a society, specific values and assumptions inherent in them begin to shape those who integrate them into their lives. This article addresses how the widespread adoption of new digital media by adolescents and emerging adults in the last decade has cultivated a passion for efficiency, immediacy, and constant connectivity. These longings might be making it more difficult for adolescents and emerging adults to practice such traditional spiritual disciplines as solitude, silence, and meditation.
Faith as Language Acquisition: Findings of Faith, Faith Practices, and Orthodox Beliefs in Church of Christ Adolescents
Walter Surdacki and Chris Gonzalez

This paper examines the results from a survey conducted during the summer of 2011 at Lipscomb University’s IMPACT Camp. This paper will analyze results and address questions related to the transmission of faith in adolescents. It will attempt to answer the question “How is the Church of Christ doing in transferring the language of faith?” The results have implications for the practice and philosophy of many traditional youth ministry programs within the Churches of Christ.

Wholly Hip-Hop: Black Youth, Hip-Hop and Youth Ministry
Richelle B. White

Today’s Black youth are challenging the church to “keep it real.” The kind of reality that is being referred to requires an embrace of engaged pedagogy—a form of teaching and learning that connects with the life experiences of those being educated. Wholly Hip-Hop addresses this pedagogical challenge by placing the aesthetics of Hip-Hop at the center to educate for Christian discipleship.

History of Youth Ministry Education
Mark H. Senier III

History of Youth Ministry Education traces the development of non-formal and formal Protestant Youth Ministry education, primarily in the United States. Non-formal agencies of training dominated the nineteenth century and included newspapers, union meetings, and conferences. Formal education of youth workers emerged in the twentieth century and began with the YMCA as their need for professional General Secretaries developed, primarily associated with the facilities necessary to implement the YMCA’s ministry philosophy. Following the secularization of the YMCA, Young Life pioneered formal education, followed by Bible Schools, Christian colleges and seminaries. The article includes brief critiques of the objectives of formal educational programs and a survey of the development of academic doctoral programs.

Brains on Fire: Neuroscience and the Gift of Youth

Dean G. Blevins*

Introduction

Journalist and father, David Dobbs (October 2011), posted a story emblematic of the problem this article attempts to address. Dobbs received a call one May morning when his oldest son, age 17, was arrested for driving 113 miles per hour. The sober exchange between father and son revealed that the speeding represented a deliberate, carefully reasoned attempt to test the limits of the vehicle by what appeared to be a rational young man. The exchange prompted yet one more story of adolescence and the seemingly inability of youth to make reasoned judgments. To some this story might be considered amazing since it appeared in National Geographic, a journal not given to this type of culture story. Yet what differentiates this story from many like it rests with its author, a writer who proved to be neither a dispassionate researcher nor a headline-grabbing journalist. Instead Dobbs appears as a father sympathetic to his son’s apparent decision. Dobbs’ research, alongside his personal account (Dobbs, September 2011), provides a balanced engagement with the issue of youth decision-making and neuroscientific research. The publication also represents a more personal understanding of the issues based on a real world understanding of youth. Yet, this approach rarely surfaces when the discussion of neuroscience and youth decision-making appears within youth ministry.

The current discussion between neuroscience and youth agency reveals a practical theological issue in how youth ministers interpret and respond to the changing literature. Basically youth pastors, even when they react against the demeaning caricature of adolescence implicit in earlier neuroscience depictions, still struggle to see how youthful “brains of fire” reveal a unique contribution to the life-course in general (the whole span of childhood, youth, and adulthood) and to the church in particular. For youth pastors to navigate the literature of neuroscience they may have to first name whether they embrace youth either as

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a problem to be solved, or wonder to behold, and shape their ministry accordingly. To explicate this issue, the article will first name the issue at hand: the neuroscience of seemingly poor youth judgments, and then detail the controversies both in the interpretation of neuroscience research and how adults use that research to construct views of adolescents. The writing then posits an alternative theological vision based on both the passion and the contingency of youth, revealing their contribution to the life-course through neuroscientific capacities rather than limitations.

**Naming the Issue: Youth, Brains, and Risky Behavior**

Any investigation of youth that involves the brain and risky behaviors provides a forum for a number of competing claims and attendant issues (Moshman May 2011; Oestreich May/June 2011; Oestreicher, 2012). This discussion, traced particularly to the early work of Lawrence Steinberg and Jay Giedd, includes varied discussions around the agency of youth, the social construction of adolescence and the measured use of scientific research (Hutchings & Ojalvo, 2013; American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2013). This article seeks to explore all three issues for the sake of youth ministry. In a nutshell, Giedd (2009) notes

... three themes emerge from neuroimaging research in adolescents:

1. Brain cells, their connections and receptors for chemical messengers called neurotransmitters peak during childhood, then decline in adolescence.
2. Connectivity among brain regions increases.
3. The balance among frontal (executive-control) and limbic (emotional) systems changes.

These themes appear again and again in our studies of the biological underpinnings for cognitive and behavioral changes in teenagers.

Giedd notes that adolescents actually develop emotional systems before executive-control systems so impulsiveness and risk-taking occur as part of the “natural” lack of development of judgment-oriented systems in the executive (frontal) regions of the brain (originally associated with a lack of myelination and synaptic pruning). Early reactions to this material included tendencies to assume youth were incapable of careful judgments, “naturally” disposed to risky behavior, lacking in advance planning, and therefore subject to impulsiveness without thought or ability (Weinberger, Elvovag & Giedd 2005). Neuroscientists involved in this research now find themselves in the unenviable role of resisting popular interpretations that youthful brains might be “defective” in some manner, an unhealthy but understandable conclusion by some reading and reacting to the material while considering future public policies affecting youth (Steinberg, 2011).

To be certain, most neuroscientists still acknowledge adolescent risky behavior, including risky judgments. They continue to report limited activity in decision making regions of the brain like the prefrontal cortex and occipital frontal cortex, while identifying increased activity in emotion center regions of the brain like the amygdala and the anterior cingulate cortex...regions closer to the center of the brain (Spear 2010, pp. 136-154). However, their overall approach appears much more nuanced than earlier work.

**Neuroscience: Controversies and Contributions**

The appeal to neuroscience as a basis for explaining, much less predicting, adolescent behavior remains a problematic field. Neuroscience research is a highly specialized, expensive field that blends the use of isolated subjects, often in artificial settings, with highly technical readings based on computational methods, all in dialog with varying educational assumptions (Sousa, 2010). Popular accounts of this research inevitably oversimplify both its methodology and results because the complex mixture of technology, physics, biology and statistics is difficult to master and communicate clearly. Many of the studies involve test subjects residing in large Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) machines as researchers test the human brain’s “functioning” around a task (fMRI). The machines, where subjects lie, often immobile, during the mental exercise, generate magnetic fields (measured in Teslas) that literally change the direction of iron particles in blood so that flow is determined during the time of recovery. Using voxels, three dimensional units that describe a 3-5 cubic millimeter of the brain’s surface, researchers chart changes in blood flow by locating the change of intensity of oxygen in the blood (BOLD: Blood Oxygen Level Dependent), inferring where brain activity occurs. So scientists ascertain neuronal activity (i.e. brain cell activity) based on the amount of energy each neuron depletes by burning oxygen, causing the blood to redirect its flow to replenish the activity.

Normally scientists record and feed this activity into computers as a data stream. Researchers analyze the data to determine general patterns of blood flow as evidence of neuronal activity. Since the data is also subjected to statistical analysis (hence the term computational neuroscience), “outliers,” or data that do not fit the general tendencies, disappear in the analysis. These smaller points of analysis produce a chart superimposed on the brain, one that is then “smoothed over” using computer imaging to create the brightly colored pictures now available in many books and magazines charting brain activity.

Admittedly the use of finely tuned equipment to produce statistically enhanced computer models can either appear as an expression...
of intricate scientific inquiry or so much technical hocus-pocus. Popular news reports concerning the inferences of isolated neuroscientific studies have been challenged by a number of critics, even in youth ministry (Epstein 2010, pp. 197-201). In similar fashion psychologists and scientists are beginning to question the explanatory power of computer imagery to infer more than can actually be determined, leaving the impression that the mind can be reduced to these awkward, and actually imprecise, computer models (Sate! & Lilienfeld 2013, pp. 1-24).

However, such criticisms may be misplaced. In truth, many measured reports on adolescence and neuroscience rely on a number of studies including those that employ other testing methods, from tracing radioactive dyes in the brain to recording electroencephalogram (EEG) brain activity. For instance, a twenty-three page survey chapter by Linda Patia Spear (2007) on “Brain Development and Adolescent Behavior,” drew on over 160 articles, dedicating eleven pages just to references. Similarly neuroscientists have long been aware of the limitations of computer modeling, representing something much more akin to Christopher Columbus’ maps of the New World than a fine cartography of the brain (Blevins 2012). The field retains a number of its own critics and often explores its more controversial aspects through public lectures (Monge, Farah, Aguirre, & Roberts 2012; The Neurocric, 2014).

In truth, the field of neuroscience engages regularly in a robust dialog with theorists in education, resulting in several grounded journals as well as published overviews cautioning against the “neuro-myths” often associated with the early days of the research (Tokuhama-Espinosa 2009). Many of the early neuro-myths documented such ideas as left and right hemispheric thinking, the idea that children’s brains could be stimulated early with classical music, and the idea people only use ten percent of their brains. The work of educators and neuroscientists debunking ideas like those mentioned also paved the way for reducing the simplistic notions of brainless youth, incapable of rational thought (Tokuhama-Espinosa 2010, p. 90-98). Indeed, as early as 1995, risk researchers like Laurence Steinberg (2004) concluded “that the sorts of reasoning abilities activated in most decision-making studies were fully developed, or nearly so, by age 16” (p. 54). Steinberg continues that what distinguishes adolescents from adults is not a lack of knowledge of real risk. Instead adolescents possess a higher need for the stimulation that risk provides (p. 51-56).

Steinberg’s observations spark more recent studies of youth and judgment which tend to focus less on the lack of development of judgment making areas of the prefrontal cortex. Instead, the research shifts to the early activation of reward oriented systems in the brain that result in a specific “judgment” between risk and reward in most activities (Zimmer 2011). In addition, neuroscientists herald what they consider new, yet landmark, research that the social context of peer relationships reinforces risky behavior alongside cognitive judgments (Albert, Chein & Steinberg 2013, p. 114-120). While youth workers might simply acknowledge this “landmark” insight as old news, the fact neuroscientists are branching out to incorporate other sociological factors helps overcome earlier misreadings and myths associated with the literature.

In a sense most people working within the intersection of neuroscience and education, often known either as “neuroeducation” or the “mind, brain, education movement,” really seek to find the “neuro-logical base of education... the neural correlates of sound educational practice” (Willis 2010). Neuroscientists and educators alike recognize that the field of neuroscience has a long way to go, even with new projects that focus on “connectomes,” actually following the synaptic connections between neurons rather than using larger indicators of blood flow in specific regions of the brain (Markoff 2013; Seung 2012). Work remains to be done, but this long-term goal does not necessarily invalidate the contributions within the field to date.

Youthful Judgment and Defining Youth

A contentious debate involving the social construction of adolescence, both in society and youth ministry, provides a backdrop for this recent controversy. Since the popularization of the term “adolescence” through the work of C. Stanley Hall, social theorists and theologians have questioned the efficacy of the idea. Critical educators such as Henry Giroux question whether the term has been used primarily as a framework for social exploitation, class warfare, and control (Giroux 1996, 2012, 2013; Gills 1974; Mintz 2006). In the case of Côté and Allahar (1994, 2005), adolescent culture marks a range of economic limitation. Others theorists, like Patricia Hirsch (2004), see adolescence as primarily a social stratification where young people are segregated from adults, left to exist as a “tribe apart.” Christian theorists like Chap Clark (2004, 2011) often draw similar conclusions based on parallel approaches (Clark, 2004, p.10). Even neuroscientists acknowledge the high cultural variability that shapes adolescence (Spear, 2010, pp. 11-12).

Within the field of youth ministry, contemporary theological educators, David White (2005, 2008), Brian Mahan (2008) and Michael Warren (1987, 1994, 1998, 2008), appear to provide the strongest social and historical critiques of earlier attempts to define adolescence. Other youth ministers seem to embrace the terminology. For instance, Chap Clark (2011) adopts the term “midadolescence” from the American Counseling Association, an approach which seems to embrace and extend the idea into later ages, through college (pp. 17-18). This elongation of the social category mirrors the current acceptance of the term emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004; Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith, Christoffersen, & Herzog, 2009). With emerging adulthood serving as the final, liminal, stage into adult behavior and responsibility, adolescence now seems to
define young people that prove to be neither children (to be protected) nor adults (to be productive). As far as neuroscientific research validates this social theory of youth, concerns will continue.

To be certain, challenging the social construction of adolescence does not preclude the life course category for youth, a category that seems to be resident in a number of animal species. If youth cannot be reduced to a social category, the presence of young people needs to be taken seriously in their own right. Traditionally theorists have resorted to evolutionary theory as an explanatory framework for youth. For instance, highly regarded adolescent neuroscientist Patricia Spear believes that impulsive behavior on the part of youth fulfills a particular evolutionary role. Spear believes that youth take risks in part to preserve the gene pool of a given species. While youth might possess rational faculties, not all youth prove equally intelligent or creative. Under this explanatory framework, youth in other species who take risks, but fail due to lack of intelligence, often lose their lives (Spear, 2010, pp. 13-18). So, using this evolutionary model, a young, adventurous, but cognitively deficient or physically limited animal might provide dinner for a predator. The “weeding out” of the weaker of the species merely preserves the gene pool for the next generation.

While not a theological rationale, this view might on the surface appear to make sense to some youth ministers. Youth pastors privileged to see home grown expressions of the media sensations Jackass, Ridiculousness, or America’s Funniest Videos, probably wonder if they could actually identify youth at the lower end of the gene pool. As humorous as this notion might be, experience may bear out that age and bizarre behavior really do not appear as positively correlated as one suspects. To counter this prejudice that sees youth as more likely than adults to engage in risky or foolish behavior, youth ministers might consider the phenomenon of Harley Davidson’s appeal with older baby-boomers, aging males who attempt to relive the “Easy Rider” vision of their youth (Libaw, 2013).

Notably, neuroscientists, including Spear, do offer other theories for youth impulsiveness. One of the more popular visions might be that youthful behavior encourages youth to “leave home” and take risks to embrace people (and mates) from other places beyond the “tribe.” Spear and Dodd both ascribe to this possible theory. Spear also allows for other reasons for risk taking, including exploring adult behaviors, conquering challenges, mastering developmental difficulties, or gaining peer status and affiliation (Spear, 2010, p. 135). In each of these cases the actions of youth actually serve both youth and their social community, providing a potentially productive view of youthful behavior, if only to leave home, explore the world, and return a richer person, a theme often associated with pilgrimage in both American and Christian culture (Neville, 1967, 2005).

Brains on Fire: the Gift of Youth

The idea of pilgrimage brings this review to its theological task. How might youth ministers understand the seeming impulsiveness of youth in a way that draws on both the strength and limitations of their behavior as revealed by neuroscience? To begin, one must first jettison the idea that youth somehow seem deficient in judgment, and embrace youth making judgments based on differing criteria. The shift in neuroscience research from a deficit model of youth impairment to a differential model indicates a metaphor where youth possess “brains on fire,” weighing risk versus reward. Youth balance the “vision” of risk with the “passion” of reward by exercising both while seeking the maximum return in both.

Still, neuroscience research seems to be clear that some of the impulsive behavior can bring about consequences based on the sensitivity of youth and their actions. For instance, while risky behavior may present a “reasonable risk,” in light of the rewards, it is clear that youth remain particularly susceptible to certain consequences of those behaviors. Spear and other neuroscientists appear clear that chemical addiction to alcohol and other narcotics remain primarily a youth phenomenon. Youth seem highly susceptible to these addictions. As noted, the reward systems in youth appear to be operating at extremely high levels during this time (Zimmer, 2011; Geidd 2009). Spear (2010) elaborates

Alcohol, nicotine, and illicit drugs of abuse interact with the same reward circuitry that evolved for responding to natural rewards. Hence, developmental changes during adolescence in these brain reward systems and related systems that support learning about, and directing motivation toward, rewards may increase the propensity to experiment with drugs and alcohol and sometimes use them extensively (p. 193).

Undoubtedly, the neuroscientific research that reveals the power of the rewards system at play in youth also identifies an arena of deep caution for the sake of youth development. If there is a social mandate for guarding youth health, removing the presence of addictive drugs seems to be one of the key concerns of adolescence.

Yet, even with this major concern, do the “brains on fire” of risks and rewards signal a need to “protect” youth from themselves in all circumstances? Theologically would such an approach indicate a responsibility for the church to step in and insure youth be shepherded and protected from all risky behavior? At one level this seems to be the standard mandate for youth ministry. If youth are seen as hurt, estranged, or alienated, it may be that many youth ministers would advocate for a kind of “care-filled,” ministry. No doubt many books and articles seem
to advocate this particular role of youth pastor as protector and care giver.

However, such an approach might reveal as much about the contemporary social context as it does about a practical theological response. While social theorists primarily worry over the marginalization and exploitation of youth, youth ministers seem to worry over the “problem of youth” within the life of the church. To follow the work of Martin Marty (2007), youth, much like children, often appear as a “problem to be solved” by parents and primary caregivers, including youth ministers (p. 1-51).

In short, the neuroscientific view of youth, especially when it overemphasizes their delayed decision-making abilities, often feeds into a mindset where the church feels it must “care for” or “solve” the problems of youth. This view often permeates ministry strategies seeking to help youth by providing resources, recreation, and interventions in segregated cohorts. Youth ministry often appears as a “tribe apart,” even though no one intends to socially segregate youth from the rest of the church. Whatever the intentions, youth are segregated, and cared for, to help solve the problems associated with youth, to protect youth, contain youth, and otherwise keep them safe for parents and adults. Such an approach, while laudable compared to commodifying and exploiting youth (a global phenomenon), may not always serve the best interests of youth development.

As noted earlier, neuroscience research in risky behavior now incorporates the power of social stimuli, including peer influences (Albert, Chein & Steinberg, 2013, pp. 115). To the extent that peer relationships influence risky decision making as much or more than supposed cognitive deficits, segregation of youth into peer related “tribes” may actually encourage risky behavior. At one level this segregation may well remove other motivations for youthful behavior such as mirroring adult behavior, leaving youth only to see the respect and guidance of their peers. However, the underlying issue may not be the fact that our “solution” of protecting youth by isolating them actually puts them at risk. Instead the root issue might be the adult perception of youth as problems to be solved.

Brains on Fire: The Gift of Emotion and Vision in Youth

If, as it appears, youth do have “brains on fire,” then this cognitive reality might be of service to both young people and the rest of creation. As noted, even neuroscience researchers believe that youth risk taking might be of some value. Without adopting a necessarily evolutionary perspective, one might still ask how youthful desire for novelty, boundary testing, and risk taking serves the larger life course. At one level this type of behavior helps youth to test the limits of social convention, often exploring new ideas and horizons that can benefit not only youth themselves but also other people within the social context. Youth creativity and impulsiveness lends to the richness of the life course, often reminding adults of the power of rewards and cautioning children of the danger of risks.

Such an approach might also be important for the church. Too often congregational leaders gloss over the gift and promise of Acts 2: 17-18:

17 “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy;
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
18 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.”

This proverbial, eschatological promise reflects the movement of the Holy Spirit throughout the book of Acts, and the passage may well include a life course reality. In one sense the prophetic promise serves as a proverb that serves Peter, and Luke, as a reflective statement of God’s Holy Spirit throughout the book of Acts where young and old receive and manifest this prophetic description (Blevins & Maddix 2010, pp. 30-36). In this sense, the activity of the Holy Spirit narrates the fullness of the activity of all people, including youth, through all aspects of their contributions to the church and world. The passage invokes the whole book of Acts and serves as the way of “witness,” drawing participant and observer into a theologically rich environment, as the activity of the Holy Spirit invokes both the narration of scripture and our participation through hearing and discerning the message of the text (Hur 2001/2004, pp. 28-36, 185).

Yet, as a proverbial statement, the passage might also reflect the experience of all young people as the Holy Spirit interacts with naturally active limbic centers of emotion to “fire” their desires for the Kingdom of God. In short, God’s grace shapes humanity in our createdness as well as in igniting our redemptive visions of God’s action in the world. The presence of the Holy Spirit includes the activity of young and old, or for the emphasis of this writing, old... but also young! Rather than seeing this announcement as strictly a spiritual reality disengaged from common humanity, one might ask if the visionary power of youth appears both as a gift from God’s creation, woven into one’s humanity, as well as a spiritually empowered gift within the life of the church.

Neuroscience and theology alike acknowledge the need for both desire and vision, as mutually related abilities. Since the research of Antonio Damasio (1994; 2000; 2005), neuroscientists have long advocated
the needed interplay of emotion and cognition, even below the seat of consciousness (Damasio 2000, p. 35-81). Emotions represent a complex array both of basic and of subsidiary feelings, dispositions, even character complexes. Collectively these emotive states provide motivation toward action and joy in learning (Zull, 2011, p. 53-80). Unfortunately, the emphasis on “cognitive” neuroscience often leaves lay readers with the unrealistic thinking that cognition trumps emotion (Pfaff, 2006). Yet distinguishing between traditional reward and mood altering substances mentioned above may entail the development of two differing regions of the brain that overlap but attend to differing emotional tasks (Burgdorf \\& Panksepp, 2006). Youth may well be focused on core neurological tasks even as they learn to distinguish the different reward systems at play. In addition, traditional research around the impact of mirror neurons and reciprocal emotions reveal the necessity of emotional development for key tasks such as empathy and care (Adolphs, 2009; Frederique de Vignemont \\& Singer, 2006). Rather than thinking that youth postpone cognitive development, youth ministers might choose to appreciate the range of emotional development at work during this time, emotions that fuel visions.

The development of emotion and vision also proves to be of theological importance. Beginning as early as the work of Augustine, the power of emotion, of love and desire, resounds across Christian theology. Augustine’s move from neo-platonic contemplation to the acceptance of human desire and emotion marked a significant turning point in the “young” priest and emerging bishop of Hippo (Brown, 1997, pp. 154-157). Regularly Augustine stressed the importance of love toward God in the Confessions, and he also stressed that God alone was to be enjoyed in Book One of his treatise De Doctrina Christiana, or Teaching Christianity (1996, pp. 114-126). Similar emphasis on “religious affections” by later theologians like John Wesley place a stress on “right affections” that result in love of God and neighbor (Clapper, 1989). To argue that cognition “trumps” emotion in the development of human beings may open youth ministers to a thorny theological problem in light of many discourses around the love of God.

Could young people possess the ability, the brains on fire, to provide a particular passion to the life of the congregation? Kenda Creasy Dean (2004) posited this view in her first major work, Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church (p. 54-69). Dean’s approach may well correspond to the new work of David White (2013), where youth craft a sense of vocation as a “dream.” This approach includes youth’s participation in a world large enough to invoke youthful vision and agency, particularly as “epiphanies of recruitment” by the Holy Spirit (White, 2013, p. 120-125). These approaches see youth less as problems and more as agents who are willing to take risks and seek rewards beyond the respectability and social norms around them. Views like those of Dean and White embrace risk taking as emblematic of youth’s ability to add to the life of community and congregation by modeling a desire to seek rewards in the face of risk. Rather than seeing this neuroscientific phenomenon as a deficit, the willingness to seek rewards even with a somewhat rational consideration of the risks involved may well serve to remind adults of the need to dream beyond one’s capacity, to live passionately beyond one’s perceived limitations. Youth may be “wired” to remind people in the rest of the life course of this occasional need.

Brains on Fire: the Gift of Wonder through Contingency and Grace

As noted, Martin Marty (2007) insists that parents often fail to admit that children live contingent lives. Children and youth live lives that cannot be fully controlled by parents (p. 51-69). Actually all people live contingent lives, lives that daily “risk” calamity, loss, reversals, and tragedy. Marty actually invites adults to view the gift of children, and perhaps youth, with a sense of wonder and amazement (p. 101-134). Rather than focusing on the problems that must be solved, youth ministers might do much better to remain amazed at the “mystery” of youth as their lives unfold in the middle of risks and rewards... like a gift for our viewing. Following Marty, this view of youth allows for both the necessity and surprise of grace at work within the lives of youth.

Reading Dobbs’ account of his son’s actions (as well as listening to interviews with the father) gives one insight into the power of “wonder.” Dobbs’ account includes both mystification and love as he observes his son. Often people appear to lose this ability to marvel and wonder in a culture of control, problem solving, or even caring intervention in the lives of youth. Perhaps the remarkable actions of youth might drive children to amazement and wonder over the antics of these young people. Similarly the same actions often mystify and amaze adults, if only to name the grace at work in the world they live in.

More might be said of youth than amazement, though it is a beginning. Too often research literature treats youth primarily in a vacuum of individual actions or peer settings. Yet youth live in a world of children and adults, both in the general rhythms of social life and within the life of a congregation. In those settings youth need to reside within an ecology of varying companions that provide the social context for appropriate risk taking, often determined interpersonally between youth and adults. In the past many youth theorists and ministers actually invoked neuroscience research to place the emphasis on adult leadership, calling for authoritative communities that provide the right social relations for youth (Institute of American Values, 2007). Such an approach may be laudable in providing a healthier context for youth risk taking, but does it explain why it might important for youth to take risks?

In addition, such risks do not always result in reward. How
might the failure of youth serve others? To be sure youth ministers have often engaged the failure of youth as part of the flow of youth ministry. At times youth failure and estrangement serves as the very hallowed ground of divine encounter and holy relationship. Yet there are times when even mundane failure may serve a larger role in community and congregation. Returning to Marty, adolescent failure reminds each person of the contingency of our lives. In a culture that often worships individual initiative and demonizes individual failure, recognizing the reality of contingency and the necessity of grace proves difficult. Yet the daily struggles of adolescence may provide a gracious, “wonder-filled,” view of this everyday reality for everyone on the life course. Young people’s ability to dream large, risk all, and fail may well mirror to every person, regardless of their place on the life course, that we live amidst not only the possibilities but also the limits of congregations.

Undoubtedly youth engage in a number of activities that possess both a “downside” as well as an “upside” in their contribution to adult life. Neuroscientist Dan Siegel (2014) includes not only novelty seeking, but also social engagement, emotional intensity, and creative exploration as markers of adolescence with potential negative as well as positive outcomes (p. 4-6). Undoubtedly certain decisions during risk-taking times might include elements of sinfulness, often in offense to God but also in the demeaning or destruction of persons. Within certain theological paradigms, the entire venture of risk-taking might be seen as a manifestation of the sinfulness of youth, and those taking such a position surmise that risky behavior reflects the depravity and disobedience of children and youth alike (Simesore 2004; 2008, p. 97). However, it seems more likely that the desire to take risks for the sake of a greater reward might also describe the nature of discipleship, with a willingness to sacrifice the conventions of this world, to “risk” personal and social well being, for the reward of the gospel. To suggest that risk remains part of creation merely acknowledges a sense of agency, without ascribing moral failure to all such actions. This approach is much like Augustine’s notion of desire, which becomes sinful only as desires are focused away from love of God and godly love to embrace a desire that resembles “lust,” or desire that risks idolatry and injustice (Jenson, 1999, pp. 132-152). As noted, certain chemical dependencies such as alcohol and drug addiction may reflect a misaligned desire for feeling reward without natural risk, a tendency that might affect adults as well as youth. Other theological trajectories might acknowledge the potential of harm through risk, but validate the potential of good as well, if only through the ongoing, prominent grace of God (Blevins, 2012).

Frankly parents and youth ministers might do well to look at the lives of youth through the lens of mystery. Such a view helps adults wonder when youth succeed in unexpected ways, marvel at youthful resiliency, and mourn graciously the fragile nature of life when youth fail not only adolescent dreams but also adult expectations. Ministry might be best conceived through approaches like service learning, or compassionate engagement within the community surrounding the congregation. In addition, youth might be willing to risk engaging in leadership not only within the youth group, but within the whole life of the church. As youth share in leading congregational practices like worship, teaching, administration or special projects they risk real losses that might well affect the whole community. As youth take leadership, adults may mentor but need to make sure the efforts include real consequences, real outcomes for the sake of youth and those that participate in their efforts. Often adults accept such risk and place such trust in other adults, although at times with misgivings, but they much less often place their community’s success in the hands of young people. Youth must be given opportunity to perform and participate in public settings where the results are also public and the consequences meaningful. These public displays of ministry provide opportunity to bear witness to both risk and reward for the sake of the entire congregation. In a sense, a neuroscientific view of youthful risk-taking may invoke within each person the reality of life lived... and lost... in its fullest.

Conclusion

Perhaps the metaphor of “brains on fire” proves extreme. Nevertheless, neuroscience research continues to mature in defining the developmental influence of the brain upon the lives of youth. Rather than understanding youth through the language of deficit or problems, adults might embrace the imbalance of risk and reward as a developmental “gift” of passion and grace. This approach encourages adults to build true relationships with youth as mirrors to their lives and souls. Adults no longer meet with youth to solve the problems of risky adolescence. Instead, adults meet with youth to participate fully in their mutual desires and failures, learning and growing together in the promise of new visions and the grace of daily losses. To appreciate the science requires a careful understanding of the changes within the literature. Even when carefully and cautiously interpreted, neuroscience may challenge adults to revise their theological paradigm. Leaders may need to change their understandings of their roles in the lives of youth and the roles of youth in the life of the church. Hopefully such positive perspectives regarding the possibilities and gifts of youth to the churches will grow in the future.

References


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