

# Wild Frontier's Faith Shaping

Hello

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I wish I could say I came up with these Faith Shaping Tasks. I didn't. I learned them from a book called *Faith Shaping: Youth and the Experience of Faith* written by Stephen D. Jones published in 1987, originally written in 1978. That is a youth ministry generation ago. Yet these Faith Shaping Tasks have continued to influence how I lead in youth ministry. This has been the one book that has influenced me the most. So I've taken the liberty to re-write these Faith Shaping Tasks mixed with Wild Frontier thinking to provide a faith development resource for practical youth ministry today.

But all credit goes to Stephen D. Jones. His book contains more faith development thoughts than just these tasks so I strongly recommend reading the entire book. The principles are timeless.

The insight compiled here was originally a series for [Pair of Cleats](#) which is a monthly article covering "out there" thoughts on youth ministry. It is one of the free resources available from Wild Frontier.

And who am I? I am the founder of Wild Frontier. Wild Frontier simply is a place for those who want to leave safe which leads to a place where God shows up to do wild things. The ministry of Wild Frontier was birthed first out of God's specific call on my life and second because I knew in my soul that something wasn't right in the practice of youth ministry. This was back in 1990. Since then there has been a lot written about what that "not right" stuff is and a lot written about a better way to do youth ministry. I just know that I've searched this way for a long time and have made these thoughts public. All of the *Pair of Cleats* from these years are archived for anyone to glean from.

What I have centrally found out from all this searching is that the core of our job as youth ministers is to teach the Scriptures in a way that makes faith clear, to paint a vision of

what maturity looks like, to live by example with a mature faith, and to bring along the Church Family (not just the youth group) to partner with teens on this faith journey. To accomplish this rightly, there are a lot of "how" questions left. These Faith Shaping Tasks answer some of those "how" questions. I know you will have a lot of "I get it" moments from reading this. You also will see how your own faith has been shaped. And you will see even more clearly the important role you play in the faith shaping of teens.

I pray that this simple download blesses you nearly as much as reading *Faith Shaping* did for me in my early years of being a youth minister. But this is just a beginning teaser. After this, read the book.

Brenda Seefeldt

## Faith Shaping Task #1

### Experiencing

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The first Faith Shaping task is **Experiencing** which is defined as providing a continual reservoir of spiritual experiences from which a faith can grow on. This is what we love about youth ministry. We have the privilege to help teens whom we love experience faith. So much of what we plan is to provide these experiences of faith.

One of the [Wild Frontier Youth Ministry principles](#) is to spend considerable efforts in making memories with your teens. Think about the role that memories have played in your own life. Go as far as to make a graph of your own spiritual journey. I guarantee it will be marked with times of memories, the good and the bad (more on those bad memories coming up). It is those memories which have formed who you are today. Providing memorable experiences of faith is truly the core work of youth ministry.

"Attention is the currency in pop culture today," as youth expert, Dr. David Elkind says. You have the currency (all your creative ideas and those you "borrow" from printed resources and the internet) to create faith experiences which form faith foundations. (Idea: I encourage you in your planning of these to try to use all five senses as a way to further sear these experiences into their memories.)

This is also youth ministry based from 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 which says "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." Providing experiences is the right kind of planting and watering.

Are you familiar with the eBay atheist and his book, *I Sold My Soul on eBay*? Hemant Mehta, an avowed atheist, visited all types of churches for his part in the eBay auction. One of the

churches he visited, an ELCA Lutheran church, just happened to have the teens give their testimonies and thanks that day to the congregation for their experience at the national denominational youth conference.

From the book: "The students shared that fifteen thousand youth had participated in this event (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Youth Gathering). Fifteen thousand? Wow. I was jealous. Most atheist conventions I had attended attracted several dozen college students—nowhere close to hundreds or thousands. It wasn't that there are so few of us, but it was difficult to get the funding to bring everyone to one centralized location. Even so, those conferences left us students excited and ready to be more active in our local groups. As the Lutheran kids talked about the event they had attended, I was amazed by how life-changing the experience was for so many of them. Many students noted this was the first time they had met such a large gathering of people who shared the same beliefs they did. They came back energized about the church and eager to share their faith with others.

"As I listened, I could imagine certain atheists saying a church conference is a way to brainwash youth into thinking that they just because something is fun, it must be valid. ...The conference presented the kids with a chance to interact with other teenagers and have a good time. Theology may have been taught, but it wasn't the focal point for most of the students who spoke about it."

Interesting insight, which is why I saved it. These youth had an experience. Yes, it may have died out a month later as so-often happens with emotional teenagers but they still had an experience. A big experience associated with faith.

For the many of us who've been to big events like this with our youth groups, we'd love for such a large event with all that the event offers to changes lives forever. We pray that at the event teens hear God's call on their lives and for other teens to miraculously quit their sin habits. But know this, all that money and all that effort provided a powerful Headline memory that is planted and something will grow out of it. Even if it appears to die out a month later. Something will grow out of it.

This type of experience is what Stephen Jones named Headline Memory. Other types of headline memories are mission trips or preaching a sermon on Youth Sunday.

Another type of memory Jones categorized is Personally Touching. These memories are camp and/or retreat experiences or a tough time that was teachable. Deep emotions are directly tied to these memories.

Another type of memory is Repetitive. This is more than an annual youth event. Some of those strong repetitive memory experiences are the traditions from your church. It may be how you celebrate Advent or how you sing the Doxology. This is not the stuff you spend hours planning like Personally Touching or Headline memories. These most likely are church family traditions and yet they are powerfully important (even if they drive you crazy). Even the faux communion "plastic" wafer is important.

The last type of categorized memory is Significant Relationships. Your role is important here and we all desire to be memorable. However, you are in a role at your church where you can help many of the adults in your church family to also be a memorable significant relationship. At my own church we have a 20-year old man who's been through the youth ministry. His family situation is sketchy and honestly is a mystery to those of us in leadership. Yet there are a few men in the church family who continue to connect with Randy in church as well as outside of church. And these men were never volunteer staff with the youth ministry. Help your teens get to know the elders, the intercessors, the ones who decide on the communion wafers and the wealth of other great men and women of God from your church. You just never know if a significant relationship will develop that will impact that teen for the rest of that teen's life. P.S. That adult may be at this church longer than your tenure.

We know that youth ministry is more than just providing experiences. Youth ministry is faith shaping and experiences are just the beginning. But this task is an important one because if teens have no important memories of the faith, of the church, of an experience with God, of worship, or of spiritual feelings, they will find themselves in a faith vacuum as young adults.

## Faith Shaping Task #2

### Categorizing

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The second Faith Shaping Task is **Categorizing** which is consolidating emotions, clarifying values, and shaping attitudes. A lot is being written about this task lately and it is generally coined in today's terms as Starbucks Spirituality. The picking and choosing of what one believes about God has always been a Faith Shaping task. The new part is in this postmodern world teens and young adults are brazenly picking and choosing from other religions and feel okay about their truth being their truth just for them. Or as *USA Today* surmised, "Religion today in the USA is a salad bar where people heap on upbeat beliefs they like and often leave the veggies--like strict doctrines--behind." (*USA Today*, June 23, 2008)

A great example of Categorizing is this class assignment from a professor from Boston University. From the editorial: "For the past two years, I have asked students in my introductory religion courses at Boston University to get together in groups and invent their own religions. They present their religious creations to their classmates, and then everyone votes (with fake money in a makeshift offering plate) for the new religions they like best. This assignment encourages students to reflect on what separates 'winners' and 'losers' in America's freewheeling spiritual marketplace. It also yields intriguing data regarding what sort of religious beliefs and practices young people love and hate.

"The new religious concoctions my students stir up might seem to mirror the diversity of American religion itself. Students tantalize one another with a religion (Dessertism) that preaches the stomach as the way to the soul, another (The Congregation of Wisdom) that honors Jeopardy! phenom Ken Jennings as its patron saint, and yet another (Exetazo) dedicated to sorting out the pluses and minuses of all the other religions so you can find a faith tailored to your own unique personality.

"What strikes me most about my students' religions, however, is how similar they are. Almost invariably, they mix fun with faith. (Facebookismianity anyone?) But they do not mix faith with dogma. My students are careful--exceedingly careful--not to tell one another what to believe, or even what to do. Above all, they want to be tolerant and non-judgmental. Most of the religions my students developed were fully compatible with other religions.

"They made few demands, either intellectually or morally. Repeatedly, their founders stress that you can join their religion without leaving Catholicism or Judaism or Islam behind.

"...But my students' 'dogma aversion' (as one put it) goes liberal Protestantism one further. These young people aren't just allergic to dogma. They are allergic to divinity and even heaven. In the religions of their imagining, God is an afterthought at best. And the afterlife is, as one of my students told me, 'on the back burner.'

"What my students long for is not salvation after they die but happiness (or, in the case of Euphorianity, euphoria) here and now. They want less stress and more sleep. (In fact, two student religions--Sertaism and ZZZ--emphasize the importance of a good night's sleep.) They want to discover themselves and to give voice to their discoveries. They want to experience joy because of their bodies, not despite them. And they don't want to be told what to do with those bodies, or with whom.

"One of my students, Carrie-Anne Solana, told me that the religions her colleagues presented in class amounted to nothing more than 'organized atheism.' 'They took normal human impulses,' such as eating, drinking, sleeping, having sex and socializing, she said, 'and justified them under the title of religion while not offering any form of explanation into why we are here, where we came from or where we go when we die.'" (Steven Prothero, chair of Boston University's Department of Religion, *USA Today*, February 4, 2008)

So yes, this is the case of taking experiencing faith a bit too far. They don't have that faith vacuum from not having faith experiences but they also have categorized their faith experiences into something that justifies their lifestyles. This is true for more than these college students. This is true for the youth we know too. The research from the National Study of Youth and Religion confirms this. We all see it too.

What are we to do? How do we help our teens categorize but stay on the path of Truth?

One important thing to remember here is that this is a step that the youth take. They are the ones categorizing their experiences and their growing beliefs. If you categorize for them... I can't even finish that sentence because it is not possible to categorize for someone else.

Your responsibility is to provide a safe place for them to do this and to be accepting and affirming. You can also provide honest feedback. You really can't accept or affirm a sinful lifestyle that may be a part of their beliefs. But there are ways to provide acceptance and affirmation that upholds Biblical truth. This is so tricky to define in words so I trust that you will handle each individual you love with Holy Spirit wisdom.

Another direct area of help that the youth ministry can certainly provide is to teach in a way where the teens learn with you. This generally is called experiential learning. There is the first faith-shaping task again. The importance of experiential learning is that it removes the teens from passive learning which doesn't allow for categorizing their own beliefs—until they leave your building. Putting teens into the learning process helps them categorize based on the Truth.

Mark DeVries offered us this warning in his renowned book *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, "Teenagers' isolation from adults has left many of them unable to think critically. They are easily swayed by what feels right at the moment, whether it is going to church, buying a \$200 pair of shoes or having sex. Without the habit of critical thinking, our teenagers become easy prey to anyone who has something to sell."

Too many teens are categorizing while being isolated from adults. As church youth ministers, we have a ready-made community full of trusted adults at our disposal to help teens categorize all of their many adolescent thoughts. Perhaps even our greatest role in this Faith Shaping task is to help train your church family to be safe, accepting and affirming.

## Faith Shaping Task #3

### Choosing

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The third Faith Shaping task is **Choosing** or valuing, deciding, and shaping a belief. This is the natural progression from Categorizing as the teen chooses to believe what has been categorized as good, true, or what he/she likes. Say a teen girl has joined your youth ministry and has experienced faith through a retreat. She has categorized the experiences and then decided to believe that Jesus does offer a second chance. She has chosen to believe that what Jesus offers is good, true, and what she needs in her life at this time. The big catch here is that she is not invested in this choice yet. This is a legitimate Faith Shaping task. Choosing is different from Categorizing because their categories for their faith experiences do affect their lifestyles.

Truth is the desire to affiliate with the church or youth ministry is more often an emotional response. Teens Experience, Categorize, and Choose beliefs based on what is right for them in whatever current emotional state they are in. If they are in "love" with the boy at the party, they will choose what they believe is right for that situation. If they are in need of purpose, they will choose the belief that God has created them for a higher call. Emotional decisions are a large part of adolescent development. (This is why there are minor laws to protect them.)

We honestly don't like to be a part of emotional decisions knowing there is power in those to manipulate. Yet so often youth ministry is planned to play off of emotions—for the greater good, of course. Much of the style of youth ministry from the 1980s and 1990s was geared around that. This is one reason why so many new studies are showing that teens are

leaving their faith and their churches when they enter young adulthood. They were never invested in their faith choices. Their faith choices didn't go beyond their emotional decisions.

There has been a lot written, said, and marketed about these alarming new research numbers. What the research doesn't show is that this is a Faith Shaping Task. The research doesn't show that teens are emotional and fickle. These are factors that have nothing to do with the state of youth ministry or the mistakes of previous youth ministry.

Part of Choosing is simply what Stephen Jones called "personalizing one's faith." This is a big part of middle adolescence development. It is similar to the adolescent development step of achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults. Personalizing one's faith is creating a faith that is something of their own.

When teens are personalizing their faith, they can come off as being wrapped up in themselves or self-centered. We've all seen the teen who is just flabbergasted that her mother stays over occasionally at her boyfriend's home, and let's her mom know of this sin at every moment she gets, while this teen drives her own car like a speed racer. Teens really are wrapped up in themselves. But it is just for a stage.

Our responsibilities to help these developing teens choose rightly with the Wild Frontier mindset are to once again create opportunities for youth to think through experiential teaching. Even *Time* magazine figured this out. "Youth ministers have been on a long and frustrating quest of their own over the past two decades or so. Believing that a message wrapped in pop-culture packaging was the way to attract teens to their flocks, pastors watered down the religious content and boosted the entertainment. But in recent years churches have begun to offer their young people a style of religious instruction grounded in Bible study and teachings about the doctrines of their denomination. Their conversion has been sparked by the recognition that sugarcoated Christianity, popular in the 1980s and early 90s, has caused growing numbers of kids to turn away not just from attending youth-fellowship activities but also from practicing their faith at all." (Sonja Steptoe Bellflower, *Time*, October 31, 2006)

While teaching our youth to think we must also teach them to doubt rightly. I clipped this quote from Rick Lawrence a long time ago. "Doubt is a developmental necessity for an owned

faith." (Group, January/February 2005) I used to dread doubt in my teens. My thinking was "Why go through the pain and struggle of doubt. Just trust me through it." I now embrace doubt, challenge doubt, walk with them through doubt because I know they are Categorizing and Choosing and are along the way to Claiming.

As you know, doubt is always a part of the Christian life. It is not unique to adolescence. What is unique to adolescence is abstract thinking. Once Santa Claus brought toys on Christmas Eve and Jesus fixed everything. Abstract thinking means teens have figured out that Santa is Mom and/or Dad and Jesus has some gray areas which are hard to understand. This is on top of their very own bodies changing so much that they feel their own bodies are also failing them.

It is important that you teach that doubt is a part of a growing faith. And that doubt is not an excuse for immoral behavior. Immoral behavior is detrimental to a growing faith. A good doubter will question everything around that doubt and learn through the process while not moving into a negative direction. As you know in your own growing faith, wrestling through doubts are some of the most memorable times in your faith story. Share your story of those times as you teach and counsel.

Like Categorizing, this is another step that the youth have to take on their own. However, you are that positive influencer to introduce them, or re-introduce them, to choosing the way of faith.

## Faith Shaping Task #4

### Claiming

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The fourth Faith Shaping task is **Claiming**. This is dedicating oneself to follow through on one's choices or as this is more commonly called, conversion. It is also the privilege we get to be a part of in youth ministry.

Claiming is often the progression of Experiencing, Categorizing, and Choosing. The teen has progressed to a commitment being made. Yeah! Finally! The salvation experience!

It is these moments of youth ministry that makes everything all worth it, right?

This is why we don't work at a Boys & Girls Club or another community youth organization. We believe in the salvation experience and its power to transform lives. However, youth ministry is more than just the salvation experience. Youth ministry is needed for Faith Shaping Tasks #1, #2, and #3 and as well as for #5, #6, #7, and #8. We desire to grow whole disciples.

A good picture description of all of the Faith Shaping tasks is an hourglass. The hourglass is wide at the top but everything is funneling downward to the neck of the hourglass. Faith Shaping starts wide with Experiencing then everything else funnels down toward this one small neck or point of decision of Claiming. This is how God has worked to lead all of us to make the decision of Claiming. Everything from relationships to nature to circumstances (all of those memories or experiences) is used to lead us to that point of decision. That is a picture of how God has worked in each of us.

Tension is a big part of Choosing. Like the sands piled up waiting to get through the neck of the hourglass, tension is what the Holy Spirit uses to move someone to a decision. It is often memorable tension. It is the tension that stories/testimonies are made of.

You can't be the Holy Spirit but if you are providing experiences, helping for Truth to be categorized, providing for opportunities for faith to be chosen, the Holy Spirit will provide the tension to move to Claiming.

There was a time when I'd be frustrated at seeing the same youth commit his life to Jesus at every retreat. My thinking was "What went wrong in his life to lead to this commitment again." "What did I miss?" "Why can't he just grow in his faith?" Etc. I know you know these thoughts too. I was truly set free from this frustration (which I often took as failure) when I first read this book 20+ years ago. Somewhere along the way I was taught that there was a one-time decision to live for Jesus. It was that way for me personally. Those who had to re-commit again then must not have really committed the first time. Hence the next decision. And the next decision. Now I know that this thinking is wrong. Yes, the Holy Spirit is active enough to convict everyone to make a one-time decision. However after that one-time decision we don't stop growing. We continue to Experience, Categorize, Choose and Claim.

The "money" quote for me from Stephen D. Jones is, "Becoming a Christian is not a slow, unintentional process of evolution in which a young person eventually 'ends up as a Christian.' The Christian call is for 'metanoia,' a Greek New Testament word which means to change one's way of being. It calls for revolutionary not evolutionary change. Jesus came to His ministry calling for radical repentance (Mark 1:15). We 'become' Christians by radical transformation of our lives, turnaround experiences, that must not happen just once but many times."

I am now grateful to give teens the freedom to claim and have powerful, tension-filled memories again and again. These memories provide stepping stones for their faith to grow on. Even if they Claim at every summer camp or every snow camp. In fact, you should plan many invitations to commitment in a variety of settings.

Claiming is also the one task that gets the most attention from church leadership. Too many ministries, in an honest effort to try to evaluate the effectiveness of these ministries, mark their success by the numbers of decisions for Christ. What is not mentioned in those numbers, but what we know from our experiences, is how many of those are true first-time decisions for Christ or are those decisions from people who commit and re-

commit their lives to Christ whenever convicted or even whenever the "altar" is open. Ministry evaluators aside, every time a teen makes a decision for Christ it is a good thing.

Our blessing is, "Now let us celebrate as we bring in the crops. We cried on the way to plant our seeds, but we will celebrate and shout as we bring in the crops." Psalm 126:6

## Faith Shaping Task #5

### Deepening

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The fifth Faith Shaping task is **Deepening**. Remember that symbol of the hourglass described in Claiming? Deepening is the bottom part of that hourglass. Experiences, Categorizing and Choosing have happened to get the teen to that point of decision or Claiming or the neck of the hourglass. After that, everything widens out again as we live our lives from that point of decision. Some would call this stage maturing in the faith. Some would call this stage working out your salvation. We would call this stage growing into that Wild Frontier faith.

After the tension and the memory-filled moments of Claiming, reality sets in. New questions arise causing a deepening in the faith. No longer is this decision just "come to Jesus and He'll make everything better." Yes, life is better but there are also even more questions. Through even more Experiencing, Choosing and Categorizing, naïve thinking is replaced and updates are made to the commitment. Also childhood faith, or the faith inherited from one's parents, is deepened to become a personal faith.

I had this e-mail conversation with one of my current teens, age 16. I was on an 8-week medical leave of absence. To help my recovery and to bridge this leave of absence for the teens, I asked them all to submit to me their favorite movie on DVD and a one-page description on why this movie is their favorite. I promised to watch the movie while convalescing and write a response back about what I got from the movie. While collecting the movies from all the teens, I received a lot of responses that they didn't give me their favorite movie because those contained cussing or violence or something negative and they didn't want me to watch that. This was decided not out of shame but out of love for me. But yet those scenes were okay for them?! So I challenged the parents and teens on this and received this one response:

"The reason I feel you would interpret them (movies with cussing) differently is many reasons. Yes, we are both Christians but we are not on the same level. As Mr. Ponikvar (one of our pastors) explained in his teachings, there are 3 different types. I'm on about a Stage 2 while you are and have been on for many years a Stage 3. So naturally we will feel differently about a number of things. Like I may have an extreme dislike of the words but you may have a hatred of the words to the point where you would let one word ruin the whole movie. Now I'm not saying you are like that. I'm just saying you could be which is why I come to church every Sunday and apply those things to my everyday life. I strive to become a Stage 3 as you and everything has to start somewhere, doesn't it?"

This is a deepening faith striving to become a personal faith (as well as a memorable blessing for me).

One common programming question many youth workers have had over the past 30 or so years is how do you run a youth ministry for the teens who want deeper stuff and keep the teens who want the fluff? The suggested practice has been to implement programming for each such as a youth meeting for all entry level teens (the fluff) but also do small groups or Sunday school classes for those who want deeper stuff.

This theory seems more plausible for those youth ministries who have great staffing, whether paid or volunteer. As for the rest of us who don't, we are left out as "have nots" once again. But as Willow Creek found out in their own 3-year qualitative study of their church, *Reveal*, this same plan of programming for different levels of faith did not truly grow disciples. If it didn't work for a church with all the resources in the world, why would this be suggested for youth ministry? We can do better.

Another option has been something akin to joking with the youth that if they'll sit through Bible study this week, we promise to do something "fun" next week (I've heard this too many times). You can read what that message sends, right?

From personal experience, mostly without great staffing, I believe that our role in youth ministry is to plan in the Faith Shaping Tasks of Experiencing and Deepening while providing opportunities for Claiming. Every teen needs Experiencing and Deepening which requires further Experiencing. Categorizing and Choosing are tasks that teens do. We can't help them.

Center for Youth and Parent Understanding ([www.CPYU.org](http://www.CPYU.org)) as a part of their College Transition Initiative (recommended reading) has interviews of actual youth group teens in their first years of college away from the youth group. One question asked was what they wished they'd learned in youth group. Look what they had to say:

- "I wish my youth group had done more to prepare me for the academic challenges to Christianity instead of focusing on high school drama. I was fortunate to make great and knowledgeable friends, but I have known others who have turned away because of professors and students raising tough objections. I wish my youth group had taken things more seriously and done more apologetics and less of worrying about the drama of high school."
- "I wish they had not catered to the idea of us being "teenagers". Some of us claimed responsibility for our own growth but that was because of the teaching and nurturing we had elsewhere not in youth group. We simply were fed the light and fluffy week after week, month after month, and the majority of the students simply didn't realize or didn't care. If we sought out adults who would mentor us and guide us, and if we pursued God on our own initiative, then this mindset ('teenager') had less of an impact. You can't wait for a student to get to college and then wait for them to step out on their own two feet when you've been catering to their childishness for the past ten years of their teenaged lives. Treat us like adults. Make us grow up and do hard things even if we kick and scream while you do it. Teach us hard things that we can't understand. Frustrate us and demand behavior that befits someone older than our years. When we step away from you holding our hands, we're going to fall if we hadn't been practicing walking on our own the whole time."
- "I was in several youth groups in high school and unfortunately found that youth group was too 'soft'—we played a lot of games and had a lot of fun retreats, but rarely learned about the fundamentals of faith, why we believe what we believe, and what it is that we do believe. Now that I am in college, my faith is under constant scrutiny and always being tested by scientific concepts and the secular slant of most universities. I wish I had been equipped with a more solid justification for my faith: knowing how to answer the tough questions, how to respond to arguments, and how to stand firm in what feels like a

storm against my spirituality. While I loved the friendships I made in youth group, there were far too many social events and not enough deep studying of God's word. I felt this left me ill-prepared for the questions I would be faced with in college."

I read these college interviews and have become even more convinced that our best role in youth ministry is to plan Experiencing and Deepening faith tasks. This is our role in a teen's faith shaping.

The late Mike Yaconelli shared the testimony of his life faith experiences in his book, *Messy Spirituality*: "Hundreds—maybe even thousands—of decisions make up genuine growth, some moving us closer to God, some moving us farther away, but all contributing to a deeper, richer, and more textured relationship with God.

"During my adolescence, I made hundreds of decisions to become a Christian, to re-become a Christian, to rededicate my life to God, to rededicate my rededication, to go into full-time Christian service, to treat my parents better, to give God my hormones. I meant every one of those decisions, yet I successfully acted on most of them for only about two or three days. Still, those two or three days laid the groundwork for the next decision. I couldn't have made the next decision if I had not made the previous one. I was growing one decision at a time. No question about it, my growing looked inconsistent: two steps backward, one step forward, up and down, in an out, over and under. But I was growing all the same."

In his story, which is similar to so many stories, do you see the role that youth ministry has in Experiencing and Deepening while providing opportunities for Claiming? This is our best way to do our role in youth ministry.

## Faith Shaping Task #6

### Separating

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The sixth Faith Shaping task is **separating**. This is a very real Faith Shaping task, but it is the one that most hurts youth workers. A simple definition of Separating is faith is set aside for a time.

Tim Clydesdale, associate professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey, through his research has termed Separating as the Lockbox Theory. [Fuller Youth Institute](#) has some great articles further explaining this. While Separating is a legitimate Faith Shaping task, this task does not necessarily involve sin. I know of many teens who have passed through this task with deep searching questions but they didn't sin. They were also quite frustrated when the responses they received from adults when they asked these questions were that they were sinning in asking. Ugh. I used this quote from Rick Lawrence for Choosing, "Doubt is a developmental necessity for an owned faith." (*Group*, January/February 2005) This is also true in Separating. Doubt is a developmental necessity.

Yet, like the Lockbox Theory explains, Separating too often involves sin. Heartbreaking sin. Damaging sin. This is so sad for us. And too often we beat ourselves up with such thoughts as I should have prayed more or I should have mentored better. Like every loved teen's salvation was centered on us.

Please stop your self-persecution. For some peace of mind, let me quote Derek Melleby, who is one of the leading voices in helping youth ministry re-learn how to help teens make the college transition: "College transition is a hot topic in youth ministry circles. More and more parents and churches are recognizing that students are not prepared for the challenges that college brings. Anecdotal evidence is easy to find. We all know students who have grown up in the church and have made commitments to follow Christ, but have walked away from the faith during college. Some students, of course, return to faith

and church later in life, often after marriage or having children, but it's seldom with the same vibrancy exhibited during their teen years. Clearly, college has been a difficult place for Christian students. Many students come out the other side no longer identifying themselves as Christian.

"...I am convinced that a new approach is needed when confronting the issue of college transition. Rather than questioning the statistics, or giving too much weight to individual stories and experiences, we need to be reminded of this remark from the writer of Ecclesiastes: 'What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun' (1:9). This verse helps us keep things in perspective. In all times and in all places, at some point young people have to take ownership of their faith. This is not new. We can debate the statistics, trying to convince ourselves that it is not as bad as some say it is; or tell personal stories to make it seem even worse; or we can recognize that the challenge for students to make the faith their own is a perennial one. The challenge will always be with us." ("Why Students Abandon Their Faith: Lessons from William Wilberforce," [www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org))

Once again Separating is a legitimate Faith Shaping task. Furthermore if you've studied adolescent development, you are then somewhat familiar with Erik Erikson's developmental stages, Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development, and Jean Piaget's cognitive development. With a review of those you will see how Separating fits into the development of a teen's faith.

This doesn't take away the sadness for us though. We are still sad as we see the destruction of sin take over the lives of these teens we love. This is a part of loving ever-growing and ever-changing teens.

The irony of this all is that this task of Separating is often the most recognized point of spiritual awareness for those whose faith is being shaped. It is through these doubting times and sinful times, when those away from God have never been more aware of God. This would be the "Hound of Heaven" so eloquently described in the poem by English poet Francis Thompson. Or the more modern version of it by Daniel Amos. God is always pursuing us, even when we are trying to Separate. His voice is never silenced. How many testimonies have you heard of those times when someone was aware of God's presence deep in the midst of their destruction? These memories, while sad with regret, are strong faith shaping memories.

You are a part of the Hound of Heaven during this Faith Shaping task. By planning in the Faith Shaping Tasks of Experiencing and Deepening while providing opportunities for Claiming, you are giving your teens permission of sorts to put away childish thinking and to grow into a personal faith. Your permission gives them a safe feeling that it is okay to doubt what they learned in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade and to search for their own personal "adult" faith.

For the kids my husband and I raised ([God's Family](#)) I purposely gave them this permission on their rite of passage trip when they graduated from high school. (Or for some of them when they finished classes in high school. Graduation came after the June ceremony.) I've done this also with our church's rite of passage ceremony for the graduating seniors. Through your creative ways, you can also give your graduating teens a memorable rite of passage that pre-advises them to embrace their coming doubts. And hopefully through the many memories of Experiencing and Deepening faith in your youth ministry, they will continue to Experience, Categorize and Choose on their own. You will have trained them well.

Following your college students and non-college students as long as you can is also quite important to help with this Faith Shaping task. Having longevity at your church will certainly help you with this. Facebook will help you with this. Again using your creativity will help you. One creative thing I've done for my church's college students is I have one person in charge of gathering quarterly college care packages from the church family. These are not just from me. I am doing what I can to encourage their relationships with everyone at church while they are physically away from us. And my volunteer is someone whose own children are grown and would not normally volunteer to work with the youth. But she's creative and putting together packages is in her wheelhouse. Yet another member of the church family is directly involved with the teens and it's off my to-do list.

When David Kinnamen of The Barna Group was interviewed about young adults in this stage, he said, "God did not intend for us to walk alone. The Church seems like it is going in this crazy direction of huge multimedia presentations and all this stuff, but I really think that people want other real people. Every single relationship you have should emulate your relationship with Christ in some way, so if you are missing that in your life, you're not going to be connected. The Church has done such a terrible job of making sure that Christians stay connected."

("Faith No More," [RelevantMagazine.com](http://RelevantMagazine.com)) You serve in a role that can help keep the church family connected to these teens. (For further reading on this Separation Faith Shaping Task, I recommend you read this article.)

Steven D. Jones does mention that there are "late bloomers" who will skip this stage of Faith Shaping. Late bloomers are teens who wait until late adolescence to work through the Faith Shaping Tasks. This could be due to a slowness in responsibility for his/her faith or coming to grasp faith at a later age without the privilege of growing up in the faith. Due to the maturity of development in other areas in this person's life, late bloomers may not have to work through the task of Separating. I am one of those late bloomers who did not have to work through this task.

The important thing for us as youth workers is to grasp that Separating is a legitimate Faith Shaping task. Yes, it hurts us. But with a good foundation of Experiencing, Categorizing, Choosing, Claiming and Deepening, this task may be short. Whatever length it is, that child of God you love is still in the hands of the Hound of Heaven.

## Faith Shaping Task #7

### Responding

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The seventh and last Faith Shaping task is **Responding**. After all of the progressive work of Faith Shaping, one is ready to commit to a life calling of serving Jesus in every area of life that is laid out for him/her. Faith has finally totally become his/her own and he/she feels a need to respond with his/her life.

Finally! The bold and solid Christian we've always believed the teen could be. However, at what age does this typically develop? Typically it is young adulthood or even now into their late 20s as today's culture is helping young adults postpone adulthood. This is a source of frustration for youth workers who rarely get to see this stage firsthand. This is also why those rare communications with grown youth who thank us can motivate us for months on end.

At this point, I want to tie in another great work in the faith development field. That is of James Fowler and his faith development stages. Of his six stages, Stage 3 is labeled Synthetic-Conventional. A limited definition is faith is conventional as it is mirrored from people around you. Faith is also not their own thus it is synthetic. The age span Fowler has for Synthetic-Conventional is 12 to adult meaning that some adults never grow into their own faith. Their faith is always being modeled after someone else's. Their faith always stays synthetic and conventional. You know those kind of adult Christians, don't you?!

Too many adults just never grow up in their faith. However I do believe that with our active involvement in the faith shaping of teens, teens will move on to the Responding task and have a faith that is Individuative-Reflective, Conjunctive and maybe even Universal, the remaining stages of the Fowler faith development stages.

As a blessing and closing to this updated look at Faith Shaping, I'll quote rapper Ice Cube, "Life ain't a track meet, it's a marathon." I agree strongly with the truth but I'd rather also quote Duffy Robbins, "All of the metaphors that Paul uses—all of them—are metaphors of length; for example, 'built up.' In our culture we understand that if something's built fast, it's probably not built well. Then he talks about being 'rooted.' You can't grow a root fast. It takes time." (*Group*, January/February 2008).

The work of faith in a teen's life is one that takes time. It is also something that we play a large role in. Parents have a large role in this too but you are in a unique and wonderful position to encourage parents in their role and provide all those opportunities of Experiencing and Deepening while providing opportunities for Claiming. Hopefully you have learned from all of the Faith Shaping tasks how your role and your calling will shape the faith of many ever-growing and ever-changing teens.

## 3 Faith Shaping Ideas from Wild Frontier

### **Prayer as Incense**

#### **Faith Shaping Task of Experiencing**

Supplies: Bibles, camp stove/hotpot, saucepan, water, pancake syrup, salt, cinnamon, clove, basil, and other assorted fragrant spices.

Before the activity combine 1 cup water and ½ cup of syrup into the saucepan. Set up the camping stove or hotpot to be in the front of the room and approachable for the youth to get to. On that heat unit, have the water/syrup mixture hot and the fragrant spices scattered around the heat unit. Keep the flame low so it simmers, not boiling.

When the group has gathered, read aloud Revelation 5:8 and Revelation 8:3-5. Explain how incense is a symbol that represents our prayers to God. Heaven is filled with our prayers. They rise to God like a pleasant aroma.

Asking everyone to keep the silence, invite all to take a turn (randomly) by coming forward to the set-up altar and take a moment to pray. But before they pray, invite them to pick one of the spices and add a shake or two to the hot water. When done right everyone in the room will be experiencing the sweet aroma of prayer.

Close the prayer time.

After this prayer time, ask the group:

- Now that we've prayed, what do you think is happening in heaven?
- Why does praying for others please God?
- How does God want our hearts to be when we are praying?
- How is praying for others a way to worship God?
- What will you take away from this experience?

## 5,475 sins

### Faith Shaping Task of Claiming

Open up your teaching time with the question, "Does being good get you into heaven?" Allow for conversation to develop amongst your group. If a debate starts, allow it. But don't allow it to get ugly. Let this be a time for youth to fully flesh out this subtle lie. Input any personal insight of yours and this one important nugget--according to real life and surveys, most youth do believe this.

At the appropriate time, interrupt the conversation with this scenario:

Say you were a good person. Say you were such a good person that you only sinned once a day--only one, probably some small "slip up" every day. Sound reasonable?

If that is so, then you will commit 365 sins a year. If you live to be 21, that is 7,665 sins.

Say you really didn't start sinning until you were 6 years old, then that is still 5,475 sins to carry. And this is only up to the age of 21.

This total is if you just sin once during a day. This doesn't count for those bad days you have.

Ask everyone: Can a good person with the minimum of 5,475 make it into heaven with those sins unforgiven? Let the tension build.

Define grace. Describe grace. Ask: How do you receive grace? What do you need to do to get into heaven? Why is this hard? Why is it easier to think you just have to do good things?

In the way of your church tradition, have a call for commitment.

## **Four Church Tour**

### **Faith Shaping Task of Deepening or Experiencing**

Plan a day event to tour four different worship centers in your community. The four could be a Catholic church, a Jewish synagogue, an Islamic mosque and a very different type of Protestant church. For example, if you are Assembly of God, choose an Episcopal church. If you are Lutheran, choose a church which meets in a storefront. If you are Catholic, choose each type.

Beforehand arrange the tour at each location. Arrange to have someone with knowledge explain the different parts of the worship center and why they are important. Also warn that tourguide that he/she may be asked a variety of questions from your group.

Also beforehand write up direct questions which will be discussed in the vehicles between locations. Some example questions are:

- What differences are there in the Catholic faith and our faith?
- What do you know about Islam?
- What do we incorporate from a Jewish synagogue into our church?
- Why do we have an altar rail (or not have an altar rail)?

You will need to have plenty of drivers for this event so this would be a good event to also include parents. Strategically group up by car, give everyone directions to and in the order of the worship centers you are visiting. Give an adult in each car the list of questions which need to be answered before starting the tour. Then tour. Let the questions fly and the learning happen throughout the daylong tour.