REIMAGINING THE TAKEAWAY:

AN INVITATION TO WONDER

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the concept of the “takeaway”: the brief, memorable phrase that summarizes the main point of a lesson in youth ministry curricula. This paper identifies two problems with the takeaway model and proposes reimagining the takeaway as an opportunity to cultivate wonder and theological imagination. It concludes by offering four different models of a “takeaway” that can enhance the critical thinking skills and theological imaginations of young people.

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“If you don’t hear anything else I’ve said today, hear this.” I have heard this phrase more times than I can count at youth conferences and retreats. Assuming that the youth have tuned out by the end, the speaker offers a signpost: “Now is the time to pay attention; here comes the main point.” When one examines the scope and sequence for most youth ministry curricula, one almost invariably finds two pieces of information about each lesson: a key Scripture text, and the lesson’s main point. In the curriculum itself, the same information is featured prominently at the top of each lesson plan, bracketed off so that the facilitator cannot miss it: *This* is what students are supposed to learn from this lesson.

Key texts are brief, usually only a verse or two, and they make sense as a unit, seemingly easily understood without context and applicable to an individual. They are usually either inspirational and encouraging (like Jeremiah 29:11, “I know the plans I have for you”), or they appear to have a straightforward “go and do” application or moral. One typically does not see a key text from Leviticus, or a verse that recounts the generations of a patriarch, because these texts cannot stand alone or convey an applicable message without context or explanation. Relegated to the null curriculum[[1]](#footnote-1) are texts that seem complicated or boring, and, perhaps most importantly, texts that acknowledge pain, doubt, or the absence of God. Students are unlikely to be asked to recite together, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” or write it on an index card to tape to their mirror. An approach that consistently chooses key texts implicitly communicates that the Bible is a repository of helpful one-liners, much like a day-by-day calendar full of motivational sayings.

The second piece of information highlighted by the scope and sequence is what is colloquially referred to as the “takeaway,” typically a clear theological principle or moral imperative derived from the text. Alternately referred to in youth curricula as the Big Idea, the Central Truth, or the Bottom Line,[[2]](#footnote-2) the takeaway is the teacher’s distillation of the lesson into a short, memorable sentence; it tells students how the text is relevant to their lives and how it should inform their faith and practice.

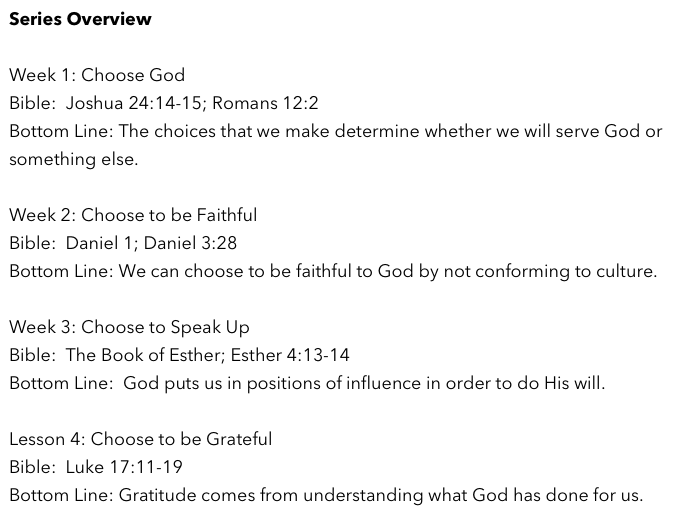


Figure 1, Ministry to Youth, “Choices: New 4-Week Series,” One-Year Youth Curriculum vol. 4, https://ministry-to-youth.com/collections/back-to-school-youth-group-lessons-and-games/products/choices-4-week-series.



Figure 2, Orange, “XP3 2024-2025 Scope and Cycle.” While this particular Scope and Cycle will no longer be accessible at the end of the identified year, the Scope & Cycle for the current year is available to download at https://tinyurl.com/yn4v34y8.

A common structure for youth curricula is to introduce the takeaway through an illustrative game or activity, explain the key text, discuss with students how to apply it to their lives, and conclude by repeating and reinforcing the takeaway.[[3]](#footnote-3) Youth ministry scholar Andrew Zirschky identifies this method as the “instructional approach” and defines its goal as helping students “understand a small portion of Scripture and then help them apply it to their lives.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Youth ministers tend to default to this style of teaching for a few reasons. First, the key texts are memorable. If one of the goals of biblical education is for young people to have a repository of familiar Scriptures to which they can turn, the key text approach is a way to build up their repertoire and encourage them to memorize passages. Second, the takeaway makes the text seem relevant. Getting teenagers interested in the Bible is a perennial concern of youth ministers, and students’ buy-in is more likely if they can see how this ancient text applies to their experience and is immediately relevant for their life.[[5]](#footnote-5) Third, as Zirschky points out, this approach may be the only way of engaging Scripture in youth ministry that has been modeled for youth ministers, or to which they have had exposure, either in their own church experience, or because this is the approach taken in the curricula they use.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, the key text and takeaway approach has significant limitations. Not least among them is that the selection of key biblical texts perpetuates misunderstandings of, and inadequate ways of reading, the Bible—a concern that I gesture toward throughout this article and have written on more extensively elsewhere, but a full exploration of which is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, from a pedagogical perspective, I will focus on two main problems with the takeaway model.

**Two Problems with the Takeaway**

The first issue with a takeaway is that it is concerned with giving students *content* to learn, rather than engaging them in *processes* of thinking and learning. It is only by “actively [experiencing] various cognitive and affective processes” that students can grow in their ability to think theologically.[[7]](#footnote-7) The takeaway is a pre-digested nugget of information that absolves students of the responsibility of doing their own interpretive work. It treats young people as passive consumers of the Bible’s content; it does not cultivate their ability to explore the text critically or equip them to think theologically.

In the language of Bloom’s taxonomy, the takeaway model asks students to remember, understand, and apply the key text and takeaway, while the higher levels of learning—analyze, evaluate, and create—are often neglected.[[8]](#footnote-8) Young people are not typically asked to analyze how a text is constructing its theology or how it compares with the perspective presented in other texts. They are certainly not asked to evaluate its theology, as that might undermine the text’s authority. And they are *definitely* not invited to create their own theology in response. Within the top half of Bloom’s taxonomy, there are endless opportunities for exploration of the biblical text that rarely materialize in youth curriculum. It is less theologically risky to interpret the text for young people and end with application—in short, to provide them with a takeaway—than to invite them to interpret the text for themselves, to question core doctrines, to disagree with the biblical text, or to posit their own ideas about God. As Kenda Dean writes, the church prefers to treat young people as consumers of theology, rather than people who help to construct it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At its core, the takeaway represents what Paulo Freire called the “banking model” of education, in which the teacher deposits information into the minds of students, rather than asking students to engage content for themselves.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the banking model, the material is the “private property” of the teacher, rather than a shared “object of reflection” about which teacher and students can dialogue and learn together.[[11]](#footnote-11) As Freire writes, there are two stages in the banking model: first, the teacher “cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons,” (that is, the teacher studies the material for herself), and second, the teacher “expounds to his students about that object.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In this process, “the students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The two stages of the banking model accurately reflect the way many youth ministers have described their lesson-writing process to me in interviews: first, they come to their own conclusions about the meaning of a biblical text and distill it into a catchy takeaway. Then, they provide students with the takeaway to memorize, rather than presenting them with the text itself to explore. As one Miami youth minister described, using a recent lesson on Proverbs as an example, “I’m looking at ‘[go to] the ant,’…and I thought, ‘Well, this sounds like cooperation and communication, let’s just go with that,’ and then I just used allusions to the text to kind of reinforce that principle.”

The second problem with takeaways, stemming from the first, is that they value convergence and uniformity. Rather than students “taking away” different ideas from an encounter with the material, they all learn the same principle. Takeaways are definitive, rather than generative; instead of beginning conversation, they end it, foreclosing the possibility of other readings or perspectives. By telling students what to think and how to understand the material (typically the biblical text), takeaways limit, rather than cultivate, students’ theological imagination.

Takeaways thus do a disservice to the material itself, as they reduce multivalent texts to a single interpretation. A *Ministry to Youth* lesson on Proverbs typifies this tendency when, after reading the proverb “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17), the teacher script continues, “Can anyone tell me what it means? [Take responses.] Right, this means, make sure your close friendships are with people who will help you walk with Jesus.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Although Prov. 27:17 has a long history of interpretation in which it is understood to refer to positive influence, it mentions neither close friendships nor Jesus, and it is framed as an observation rather than an imperative; it does not tell the reader to “make sure” to do anything.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, the meaning is not unambiguous enough to warrant the educator’s assumption that it should be obvious. However, the metaphor is not offered up for the group’s reflection; it is succinctly explained to them as a single “right” interpretation.

The uniformity of thought engendered by the takeaway is made even more problematic by the fact that it prioritizes one person’s perspective—the educator—and makes that one person’s reading normative for the whole community. The takeaway is not only one interpretive possibility among many, but it is also shaped by the educator’s own concerns, biases, and limitations, without acknowledgment or awareness of their positionality. Instead, as in the *Ministry to Youth* example, it is often presented as the obvious reading. Rather than students exploring the material for themselves, discerning the meaning of the text in community, or playing with other possible readings, they are expected to internalize uncritically the educator’s interpretation.

**Takeaways and Learning Goals**

When discussing the limitations of takeaways, however, it is important to distinguish between *takeaways* and *learning goals.* I do not mean that educators should not have learning goals for their students. It is important for educators to approach curriculum design with goals for what they want students to know or do as a result of their teaching; otherwise, teaching becomes unfocused and directionless. Unlike a takeaway, which distills the content students are expected to learn, a learning goal describes the skills students will acquire and the thought processes in which they will engage as they learn. Learning goals guide the teacher’s preparation; they are not presented to students as a principle for memorization.

For example, in a lesson on the Passion narrative(s) in the Gospels, one might approach a lesson with the learning goal that students will be able to “identify several factors contributing to Jesus’s death,” or in simpler terms, to “explain why Jesus died.” To that end, the educator might provide students with copies of the text, asking them to highlight people who were involved in Jesus’s death, or other phrases that indicate a reason or cause for his crucifixion.[[16]](#footnote-16) On the other hand, a typical *takeaway* from a lesson on the Passion might be, “Because Jesus died for us, we should live for him.”

In this example, the learning goal is generative; it invites student engagement with the material, rather than distilling the teacher’s own engagement with it, and in so doing, it makes space for divergent interpretations. Although a teacher might also help students identify some of the contributing causes, the goal is to help students read and interpret the text for themselves. The takeaway, on the other hand, is definitive; it tells students how they should understand and apply the text, rather than inviting them to engage with the text for themselves. By presupposing one certain reading and interpretation of the Passion (namely, that Jesus died “for us”), it excludes other interpretations. However, if another reason Jesus died is “because leaders wanted to hold onto their power,” as an astute eighth grader in my youth group once pointed out, this provides a whole new lens on the text and potentially suggests some very different life applications than “living for Jesus.” In this instance, supplying the students with a takeaway would have foreclosed other fruitful readings of the text.

Thus, a well-written learning goal avoids the two issues with the takeaway. First, it avoids the two-step process of the banking model Freire describes; a learning goal, rather than engaging the material on behalf ofstudents and explaining it to them, identifies how educators want students to engage the content and practice their own “acts of cognition.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Second, although the learning goal provides a *direction* for the lesson, it does not assume the *conclusion;* it is open to divergent interpretations and opinions.

**The Role of Wonder in Learning**

In surveys I conducted for my doctoral research, youth ministers identified the top challenges of biblical education as getting/keeping youth interested or engaged, and helping youth see the relevance of the text. To this end, takeaways are designed to make learning easy for students. If the message of the text is accessible, they should be engaged—right? If their youth pastor tells them how to apply the text, they should be able to see its relevance—right? But in fact, nothing anesthetizes the imagination like over-explanation. Youth ministers tend to smooth out the rough edges and fill in the blanks for students, so that their theology is coherent, and all their questions are answered. But educators do not need to do all the interpretive work for students. In fact, easy answers can cause students to disengage, whereas a difficult question can draw them in for a lifetime of pondering and the insights that arise in the process. Young people do not need to be told what to think; they need to be invited to wonder.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of wonder and its role in learning and education. Wonder is the experience of fascination and amazement with something awe-inspiring, mysterious, or surprising. It involves a desire to engage more deeply with the object of wonder, as well as an awareness of one’s limited understanding.[[18]](#footnote-18) Wonder is a complex and diffuse concept; as Anders Schinkel summarizes it, “Wonder can take various forms—it can be more or less ‘inquisitive’ (involving a drive to solve one’s puzzlement through understanding and explanation), more or less aesthetic, more or less joyful, more or less unsettling.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Here I will explore two aspects of wonder that attempt to encapsulate its diversity: wonder is both orientation and disorientation, and it is both cognitive and affective.

First, wonder is connected both to pleasant experiences in which one marvels at beauty, order, and perfection—in which one feels a sense of connection with the world or an at-home-ness in it—and to experiences of disorientation or bewilderment, in which those feelings of at-home-ness are turned upside-down.[[20]](#footnote-20) Wonder is not always pleasant; it can include a sense of fear and dread.[[21]](#footnote-21) Similarly, Yannis Hadzigeorgiou sees the two faces of wonder as *thaumazein* (admiration) and *aporia* (“that is, puzzlement over contradictions, discrepancies, paradoxes”).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Hadzigeorgiou’s conception of wonder as *thaumazein* and *aporia* reflects wonder’s first aspect, orientation and disorientation, and it connects easily to the second: wonder has both cognitive and affective dimensions. One *feels* a sense of wonder, and one *wonders about* the precipitating experience.[[23]](#footnote-23) Under this umbrella of wonder’s dual nature as cognition and affect can be included Hebrew Bible scholar William Brown’s understanding of wisdom as *awe* and *inquiry,*[[24]](#footnote-24)as well as Marina Bazhydai and Gert Westermann’s description of *passive wonder* (“wondering *at*,” more akin to awe) and *active wonder* (“wondering *about*,” more akin to curiosity).[[25]](#footnote-25)

What unifies these diverse aspects of wonder is that, whether one is experiencing joy or fear, marvel or perplexity, wonder evokes a desire for understanding that draws one closer to the object of wonder to engage with it more deeply.[[26]](#footnote-26) If educators want students to be engaged with the material, the takeaway model is actually counterproductive to that goal; instead, they need to cultivate in students a sense of wonder and a desire to know more.

**Reimagining the Takeaway**

How, then, can educators conclude a lesson so that young people are drawn more deeply into it and continue to remember and engage with it in the days, weeks, and even years to come? I suggest reimagining the takeaway as something open, rather than closed, and generative, rather than definitive; as a conclusion that invites wonder and imagination. A traditional takeaway wraps up the lesson neatly with a bow on top; a takeaway reimagined through the lens of wonder leaves some loose ends so that students can, and must, do their own synthesizing work. I suggest four categories of “takeaways” that provoke wonder and invite students to continue to engage the subject after the lesson ends.

*A Sensory Experience*

As an experience that often takes one by surprise, a sense of wonder—particularly passive wonder—can be difficult to create. However, educators can create conditions that make it possible by facilitating encounters in which students might experience wonder. Engaging in a sensory experience—seeing an image, hearing music, feeling textures—and practicing attentiveness to that experience helps make space for wonder. Hadzigeorgiou suggests that one educational implication of wonder is “starting with the ‘richness’ of an object or phenomenon (e.g. a tree leaf, a waterfall, a flash of lightning) through attentive observation…and ‘letting them speak to us’ (i.e. moving away from cognitivism).”[[27]](#footnote-27) Laura D’Olimpio suggests that the arts can provide an opportunity for students to slow down and see things differently, helping to cultivate deep contemplative wonder.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Concluding a lesson with a sensory experience is helpful for two reasons. First, it allows students to “take away” their own experiential encounter with the material, rather than the educator’s. Students will remember what they *did,* not what the educator *said.* Second, it moves the locus of learning from the brain to the body. Even if the mind is tuning out the educator’s words at the end of the lesson, a sensory experience reaches beyond conscious cognition.[[29]](#footnote-29) Jerome Berryman, creator of *Godly Play,* reflects on children’s experience of play with the objects in his parable boxes. “I wonder what they are thinking,” Berryman muses. “Perhaps they are not thinking anything with their conscious minds. Perhaps they are thinking with their hands.”[[30]](#footnote-30) What if educators left a takeaway, not for students’ minds, but for their hands, eyes, or ears?

Concluding a lesson with a sensory experience might look like practicing *visio divina—*a prayerful and meditative encounter with an image that represents the focus text or concept—or listening to a piece of music. Or perhaps, in the last few minutes of the lesson, students could be given a lesson-related textured object to hold and feel: water, dirt, a rock, a coin. If there are physical motions described in the text, students could replicate those motions with their own bodies, inscribing the experience in their muscle memory. In short, any sensory experience suggested by, or representing, the text could become a meaningful takeaway: “As you leave today, the one thing I want you to remember is how the water felt on your hand.”

*A Question*

A second possibility for a reimagined takeaway is to conclude by posing a question that can keep students pondering as they leave the classroom. Not all questions need to be answered by the teacher or discussed in small groups; ending a lesson with an imaginative, rhetorical, or otherwise unanswered question is a powerful way to engage the more cognitive side of wonder. If taking this approach, educators may be tempted to conclude with an application question: “How can you offer grace to someone this week?” However, as the steady diet of youth curricula, students’ familiarity with application questions does not spark wonder. For a question to have the most impact, I suggest imaginative or tangential questions. I will look at the story of Jesus saving a woman from a mob in John 8 to illustrate these different types of questions.

An imaginative question might ask about something that is not in the text: an omission in the text (“What was Jesus writing in the sand?”), a contrary-to-fact scenario (“How would this story be different if the Pharisees had brought the man instead?”) or what might have happened afterward (“Where did the woman go after she left?”). At first blush, imaginative questions may seem like a fruitless exercise; what do students gain from pondering unanswerable questions and hypothetical scenarios? First, such questions can lead to important personal reflection and application in a more indirect way than typical application questions. Considering a question like “Where did the woman go after she left?” may help students reflect on their own encounters with Jesus and the transformation that resulted, or to consider the next steps they need to take in their spiritual life. Second, even if a given question does not lead to an immediately applicable insight, it is still cultivating the capacity for wonder and theological imagination. It is training students in certain habits and ways of thinking, even if each individual thought does not yield a quantifiable product.

Tangential questions, which may also be imaginative, introduce an element of surprise by asking about an aspect of the text or theme that was *not* the focus of the lesson and may, at first glance, seem unrelated. Thus, instead of hammering a point home the way a takeaway does, a tangential question allows students to take a mental break from the primary material and approach it from a different angle. For example, if the lesson centers around the concept of grace, the educator might end by saying something like, “As the only one without sin, Jesus was the only one who could condemn the woman. But he didn’t. He offered grace instead. So, as you leave today, I want you to ask yourself: What circumstances in this woman’s life led her to end up with this guy?” The question is unexpected, because it is not immediately apparent that it relates to the lesson’s theme of grace. However, in the process of pondering this question, students are practicing empathy, a skill which makes it more likely that they will offer grace to others.

In addition to posing a question to the students, the educator can conclude a lesson by asking students to pose their own questions about the lesson as their takeaway. Asking good questions is a skill in which students need to be nurtured. Youth ministry scholar David White writes that young people are intrinsically curious and love to learn. Rather than being stimulated, however, their curiosity is often tamped down and suppressed by educational approaches that tell them what to think, “draining them of their intrinsic intellectual interest.”[[31]](#footnote-31) White goes on to say that churches have followed schools in “fail[ing] to spark intellectual curiosity and capacity.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In the past, I have led youth group Bible studies around the practice of reading the biblical text and asking youth to write down questions about it to discuss together. In the beginning, I found that students were unable to formulate their own questions, first telling me that they had none, then attempting overly-broad questions like “What does this passage mean?” With practice, however, I saw their capacity for wonder blossom as they began to ask imaginative questions (“What do you think this person did after meeting Jesus?”) and wonder about the mysteries of their faith (“When Jesus died, was there no God for three days?”).[[33]](#footnote-33) Either of those questions would make an excellent takeaway.

*A Puzzle*

A third kind of takeaway, and perhaps the broadest category, is to leave students with a kind of puzzle or riddle. Most takeaways are expected and do not require students to think, to make connections, or to fill in the blanks. Wonder, however, is piqued by mystery, ambiguity, and cognitive dissonance. Consider the example given above of the *Ministry to Youth* lesson that explains the “iron sharpens iron” proverb. The proverbs themselves are intended to be puzzles that engage the imagination, yet youth ministers often feel the need to explain them to students rather than allowing the proverbs to do their work. Valentine Banfegha Ngalim and Fomutar Stanislaus, reflecting on the value of traditional African pedagogy for cultivating wonder, write that African proverbs and riddles spark wonder through their “oblique and veiled” nature, in much the way that the biblical proverbs do.[[34]](#footnote-34) Christian educators assume that an obvious, uncomplicated takeaway will promote better learning outcomes, but the opposite is often true; students are more drawn in by mystery or by a puzzle that presents an intellectual challenge.

*A single word or phrase.* Educators can offer a takeaway of a single word or short phrase, which leaves more to the imagination than a full sentence. The word could be the main topic of the lesson (“grace,” “healing,” etc.), a word from the text that is tangentially connected to the lesson (in the example of John 8 above, the takeaway might be “stone” or “the older ones first”), or the introduction of a new word (“humility”) that would require students to ponder how it might relate to the lesson. There is more that students’ brains can do with a single word than with a full takeaway. It provides an orienting framework in which students can assimilate concepts they learned in the lesson, but they may also have other associations with the word that might deepen or nuance the educator’s presentation of it. A single word or phrase is also more likely to be repeated in their head over and over, and to become a breath prayer.

*A puzzling statement.* Key biblical texts in youth curriculum are chosen in part because they seem easy to understand and apply. But why not provide students with an unexpected or puzzling text as their takeaway? I noted above in a tongue-in-cheek way that no one decorates their room with “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But offering it as a takeaway is a surprising choice that is likely to get students thinking: Why is *this* what my youth pastor wants me to remember? What does it mean for my faith?

*A tangentially-related Scripture.* Ending with a tangentially-related Scripture takeaway works by juxtaposing two things whose connection is not immediately obvious. When a student is forced to consider whether, and how, two things are related, it pushes them into the realm of analytical thinking, which requires more of them cognitively than the typical application model does. It is common in youth curricula for a lesson to include more than one biblical text on a given topic; however, the connection is usually explained or seems obvious. Instead, an educator should consider concluding a lesson without explaining the connection. In the case of John 8, the lesson could end by reading the Mosaic law about stoning; one of Jesus’ rebukes to the Pharisees; another story of Jesus interacting with a woman; or any other text that might have a tangential connection to the main story.

*A contradictory perspective.* A way to pique students’ curiosity through cognitive dissonance is to conclude by introducing an alternative or contradictory perspective, either within the Bible itself or as a theological rebuttal, which might be framed with “Although, on the other hand…” or “But then again, some people think…” For example, a lesson on the importance of honesty could be concluded by reading the story of God blessing the Hebrew midwives for lying (Ex. 1:15-21).

*A story or parable.* An illustrative story or parable—again, one that is somewhat enigmatic and not fully explained—can also be an effective way to end a lesson with a puzzle that keeps students thinking. Preacher Fred Craddock was a masterful storyteller who did not spell out the implications of his stories but rather left his listeners to make the connection for themselves.[[35]](#footnote-35) An educator who can conclude with stories like Craddock’s will have students mulling over the lesson—and coming back for more.

*A Souvenir*

The fourth type of takeaway is what religious education scholar Peter Cariaga refers to as a “souvenir”[[36]](#footnote-36): students identify or develop their own takeaways from the lesson and discussion. To help students identify their souvenir, educators might ask students, “What is something someone said that you want to remember?”, or “What do you think God might be saying to you today?” As with the other types of reimagined takeaways, the souvenir has endless possibilities for variation. Students could be asked to draw a pictorial representation of their takeaway. They could write their takeaway in the style of a proverb. They could rewrite a key text in their own words. They could choose a single word or phrase, perhaps from practicing *lectio divina* with the text. To take the souvenir a step further into empathy and critical thought, students could be asked to write down and turn in their takeaway, and then draw someone else’s at random. In addition to having identified their own takeaway, students will see that others experienced the text or the lesson differently. The educator might ask students to think about why someone else might have chosen that takeaway, to reflect on how God might be working in that person’s life, and to pray for them throughout the week.

**A Word on Theological Education**

In my dissertation defense, my Hebrew Bible mentor asked me about the implications of my educational theory, not only for youth ministry, but also for theological education. Facing a curricular change that would reduce Introduction to the Old Testament from two semesters down to one, he found himself wondering how he could possibly tell students everything they needed to know about the Old Testament with less than fifty minutes per book. As the hours of an M.Div. degree decrease, electives give way to survey courses. The importance of the material and the scarcity of time combine to make educators feel that it is more important than ever to distill the material to a few key takeaways. My answer was that, because it is simply not possible to cover an entire book of the Old Testament in a single class period, the goal of the class should not be to tell students everything they need to know—an approach that exempts them from further study—but rather to whet their appetite by showing them how much they *do not* know. It becomes less important to tell students *what* to think, and more important to teach them *how* to think.

Sometime after that, I was invited to give a guest lecture to seminary students on how to teach the wisdom literature. Because my presentation was focused on the puzzle-like quality of the wisdom literature, I found myself struggling with putting my own ideas into practice. I knew that, to be pedagogically consistent, I could not merely reiterate my main points. I needed to conclude with some kind of question or puzzle that would keep students coming back to the wisdom literature. As I pondered my conclusion, I began to realize that reimagined takeaways require far more work than traditional ones. It is easier to tell students what to think than to develop pedagogies that make them think. I puzzled over it for hours on my commute and while lying in bed. I finally landed on this “takeaway”: “What kind of theology, and what kind of faith, leads someone who has lost ten children to dare to procreate again? Because if you want to understand the book of Job, or if you want to have a sustained career in ministry, I think the answer will be important to you.” The change in energy was palpable. Students looked up, leaned in, picked up their pencils, and nearly all of them began to write. One of them asked, “Can you please say that again?” I repeated the question more slowly. Another student asked, “I’m sorry, just one more time? I want to make sure I remember it.”

**Conclusion**

The key text and takeaway approach is the default method of many youth ministers and curriculum writers who want to make lessons accessible to students and easy to understand. However, because a takeaway rarely introduces a new idea, and because it requires very little cognitive effort from students, it often has the unintended effect of dulling student engagement. I suggest reimagining the takeaway as something that can provoke wonder and invite theological imagination; rather than wrapping up loose ends for students, a reimagined takeaway intentionally leaves loose ends for students to wrestle with and tie up themselves. In doing so, the religious educator makes space for young people to continue engaging the deep waters of Scripture, theology, and faith long after the “amen” is said.

And so, if you don’t hear anything else I’ve said in this article, hear this: Wonder dispels our delusions of control.

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1. The “null curriculum,” the content that is *not* taught, is one of the “three curricula” – explicit, implicit, and null – identified by Elliott Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The “Big Idea” language comes from *Grow* youth curriculum; the “Central Truth” comes from Lifeway’s *Explore the Bible* curriculum; and the “Bottom Line” comes from Ministry to Youth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Illustrative games and activities often tell youth precisely what the “point” of the game is – typically the lesson’s takeaway, either verbatim or a lead-in to it. For example, for an opening activity in a Lifeway lesson on Ecclesiastes, students are shown several caution signs and asked to guess their meaning. The facilitator is then told to “point out that the purpose of each of these signs is to keep us safe from potential danger. Today we are going to see that God has placed two important tools in our lives to keep us safe…His Word and other believers.” Drew Dixon, ed., *Job and Ecclesiastes Leader Guide, Explore the Bible for Students* vol. 7, no. 4 (Nashville: Lifeway, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Zirschky, *Teaching Outside the Box: Five Approaches to Opening the Bible with Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017)*,* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry,* A Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)*,* 24. In surveys I conducted for my doctoral research, youth ministers identified getting/keeping youth interested or engaged, and helping youth see the relevance of the text, as the top challenges of biblical education. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Zirschky writes, “Almost all of them [youth ministry curricula] approach teaching from what can be called the instructional approach….The goal of this approach, as it is often described by curriculum writers, is to help students understand a small portion of Scripture and then help them apply it to their lives. This approach is used over and over and over again in most churches because it is replicated over and over and over again in most published curriculum and teaching resources. Even those youth workers who write their own curriculum tend to fall into the instructional approach because it’s all they’ve ever experienced.” Zirschky, *Teaching Outside the Box,* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Sternberg, Alina Reznitskaya, and Linda Jarvin, “Teaching for Wisdom: What Matters Is Not Just What Students Know, But How They Use It,” *LRE* 5, no. 2 (2007), https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460701440830, 151. Sternberg, Reznitskaya, and Jarvin are writing specifically about educating for wisdom, but the observation holds true when thinking about educating for theological imagination, as I would argue that there is quite a bit of overlap between the two. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, ed., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kenda Creasy Dean, “Fessing Up: Owning Our Theological Commitments,” *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry,* ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 30th anniversary ed.,trans. Myra Bergman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017)72. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rob Quinn, “Week 4: Relationships,” *Proverbs: How to Be Wise,* ed. Sue Verner, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In fact, Ronald L. Giese, Jr., has argued that this proverb does not have a positive meaning at all but rather refers to people stirring up and escalating violence against one another. For Giese’s argument, as well as a helpful summary of the interpretive tradition of this proverb, see Ronald L. Giese, Jr., “‘Iron Sharpens Iron’ as a Negative Image: Challenging the Common Interpretation of Proverbs 27:17,” *JBL* 135, no. 1 (2016): 61-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For example, in John’s Gospel alone, potential causes include Judas’ betrayal (John 18:2), Caiaphas’ recommendation to the Jewish leaders (John 18:14), because Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:7), because Pilate was afraid (John 19:8), because Pilate had been given power “from above” (John 19:11), and because of Pilate’s loyalty to Caesar (John 19:12). While the learning goals identified here are cognitive, describing what learners should be able to understand, other learning goals might be more affective, describing a desired outcome of learners’ emotional engagement with the narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Anders Schinkel, “Introduction,” *Wonder, Education, and Human Flourishing: Theoretical, Empirical, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Anders Schinkel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2020), 11; William Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 20-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Schinkel, “Introduction,” 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder,* 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder,* 20-21; Schinkel, “Introduction,” 11; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Yannis Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder: Its Nature and Its Role in the Learning Process,” in Schinkel, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder,” 189; Marina Bazhydai and Gert Westermann, “From Curiosity, to Wonder, to Creativity: A Cognitive Developmental Psychological Perspective,” in Schinkel, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder,* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bazhydai and Westermann, “From Curiosity, to Wonder, to Creativity,” 151, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder,* 20-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hadzigeorgiou, “Wonder,” 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Laura D’Olimpio, “Education and the Arts: Inspiring Wonder,” in Schinkel, 259, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For a deeper theoretical exploration of embodied knowledge, as well as other practical applications in the religious education classroom, see Lauren Calvin Cooke, “Deep in the Body: Neurodiversity and Embodied Knowledge in Youth Ministry,” *JYM* 19 no. 1 (2021): 68-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Ministry Approach,* Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005),115. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Brian J. Mahan, Michael Warren, and David F. White, *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Elizabeth W. Corrie, *Youth Ministry as Peace Education: Overcoming Silence, Transforming Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021)*,* 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Valentine Banfegha Ngalim and Fomutar Stanislaus, “Using Oral Traditions in Provoking Pupils to Wonder and Grow in Moral and Intellectual Virtues,” in Schinkel, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories,* ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Peter H. Cariaga, personal conversation with the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)