WISDOM’S PEDAGOGY: ENGAGING WISDOM LITERATURE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

ABSTRACT:

Young people are growing up in a culture that is inundated with information, but sorely lacking in wisdom. This paper argues that one of the goals of religious education in youth ministry is to cultivate wisdom in young people – and that the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible provides us with a pedagogical model and practices for just such a task. Rather than providing answers to life’s questions, the wisdom literature invites us to wrestle with those questions, developing the ability to think critically and practice discernment. However, the wisdom literature is rarely engaged in youth ministry. When it is, the parts that are taught and the way it is taught falls short of, and even negates, its transformative potential. Drawing on scholarship in youth ministry and religious education, as well as the work of Hebrew Bible scholars, this paper will explore the pedagogy of the wisdom literature, and how that pedagogy is intended to cultivate wisdom in the reader. It will conclude by suggesting methods for engaging the wisdom literature with youth that are consonant with its own pedagogy.

We live in a culture that is inundated with information, but gravely lacking in wisdom. In the era of smartphones – theoretically, at least[[1]](#footnote-1) – we have access to any knowledge we desire at our fingertips. And yet we often do not have the skills to discern the true from the false, nor the foresight to consider the ramifications of our own words and actions. We have instant resources at our disposal of which our ancestors could not have dreamed, yet our relationship with knowledge has become warped and distorted. As educator Parker Palmer writes, we objectify and exploit knowledge for our own ends, rather than seeing the goal of knowledge as “the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.”[[2]](#footnote-2) While equal access to information is vital for a healthy democratic society, it has become increasingly clear that information alone is not enough. Our society and our young people are in need of wisdom – knowledge of how to live in the world in a way that leads to wholeness and flourishing.

In this paper, I argue that one of the goals of religious education in youth ministry is to cultivate wisdom in young people – and that the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible provides us with a pedagogical model and practices for just such a task. Rather than providing answers to life’s questions, the wisdom literature invites us and teaches us how to wrestle with those questions, developing the ability to think critically and practice discernment. In the first part of this paper, I will explore the pedagogy of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job from a literary and rhetorical perspective, showing how these books are intended to cultivate wisdom in the reader. Reflecting on and synthesizing insights from these books, I suggest four practices of wisdom for youth ministers to cultivate in themselves and in their students. In the second half of the paper, I will look at the ways in which the wisdom literature is commonly taught in youth ministry and how these approaches fall short of wisdom’s transformative potential. I will conclude by suggesting methods for engaging the wisdom literature with youth that are consonant with its own pedagogy.

**What is Wisdom?**

As stated above, wisdom is the knowledge of how to live a good life that leads to wholeness and flourishing. In the wisdom literature, the word most often used for wisdom is *chokmah* – a word that elsewhere is used in reference to the skill of artisans or crafters. In the wisdom literature, *chokmah* means something like *the skill of living well.*[[3]](#footnote-3)Indeed, wisdom literature seems oriented toward that end; it provides the reader with insight on desiring and living a good life. Wisdom is a different relationship to knowledge than the one we typically have; in Western culture, we tend to have a very compartmentalized and cerebral relationship with knowledge. We downplay the role of the body in our knowing; knowledge is something that lives in textbooks and is processed by our rational mind. Our emphasis on individualism further compounds this – knowledge exists to serve us, and if we can harness and master it, we can achieve success for ourselves.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is a holistic approach to knowledge that values the knowing of body, mind, and spirit. It sees the interconnectedness of all things – humans and the earth, materiality and spirituality – and seeks harmonious relationships among them. In the wisdom literature, wisdom begins with “the fear of YHWH,” which Eunny Lee interprets as humans recognizing their creaturely status and knowing their place before God, accepting both the limitations and the possibilities entailed by our creatureliness.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, wisdom begins from a place of humility, rather than a place of arrogance or entitlement. According to Proverbs, the goal of wisdom is “righteousness, justice, and equity” (Prov. 1:3), a very different educational aim than mastery of the material for our own gain.[[5]](#footnote-5) As the pursuit of knowledge that begins in humility and ends in righteousness, justice, and equity, wisdom is a far more holistic, relational form of knowledge than that to which we are accustomed. Youth formed by a pedagogy of wisdom will know how to be present and attentive to their own lives, be diligent listeners and discerning interpreters of the world, be equipped to use critical thinking skills to make wise decisions, ask difficult questions that get to the heart of how things really are, and innovate faithfully in new situations requiring theological discernment.

The wisdom literature gives us a bit of a mixed report on the accessibility of wisdom to humans. In the introduction to Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as a woman standing in the public square, calling out to any who will listen and inviting them to her banquet. She promises that those who seek her will find her (Prov. 8:17). In Job, however, wisdom is totally inaccessible to humans, hidden more thoroughly than the treasures of mines deep underground (Job 28). In Ecclesiastes, some wisdom is available to humans, but there are limits to how much we can understand in our finitude. To some degree, these differences of opinion reflect Job and Ecclesiastes’ dissatisfaction with the wisdom tradition as they had received it, when their authors saw that it failed to make sense of their life experience. However, it also speaks to a profound and paradoxical truth about wisdom: one is only truly wise when one realizes the impossibility of ever “achieving” wisdom. We can never fully possess wisdom, because a wise orientation toward life recognizes that we can never master all there is to know.

Despite Woman Wisdom’s open invitation and lavish promises, Proverbs, too, recognizes that wisdom is never fully achieved. In the opening verses, the author of the introduction tells us that the proverbs are not only for the young or simple: “Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill” (Prov. 1:5). Several of the sayings also indicate that “the wise” are always in need of wisdom: “The wise, when rebuked, will love you. Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning” (9:8-9). Thus, wisdom is something that is *practiced* more than *possessed,* and a skill in which we grow. The wisdom literature gives the reader advice on how to live, but more than that, its pedagogy cultivates in the reader the habits and practices of wisdom. As we and our students read and engage with the wisdom literature, it trains us in the skill of discernment.

**The Pedagogy of the Wisdom Literature**

Wisdom literature is educational literature. Proverbs is perhaps most clearly so; before it was compiled in its present form, individual proverbs were likely used for instruction in pre-exilic schools in Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6) When the opening lectures (chs. 1-9) were added later, likely in the post-exilic period, they lent a distinctly pedagogical frame to the book, “show[ing] us how one scribe understood the pedagogical purpose of the book.”[[7]](#footnote-7) By couching the collections in the instructions of a father to his son, they frame the whole book in educational language and show its usefulness for the shaping of character. The first chapter opens by identifying learning objectives very similar to what we might find in a syllabus today: “For understanding wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness and justice and equity…” (Prov. 1:2-3). These objectives reveal that the proverbs themselves are not the end of wisdom, but rather exercises that help readers practice the skill of discernment. Thus, Proverbs is more than a collection of wise sayings; it is a pedagogical text intended to help the reader become wise.

Ecclesiastes is also intended for the education of the young. Although it is in many ways a direct rebuttal to the retributive theology of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes too is framed in pedagogical language as a sage helping youth find the way to a good life. It opens by identifying its content as the words of “Qohelet,” Hebrew for “the Teacher.” In chapter 11, Qohelet moves to address youth specifically, which he does six times in the span of three verses (11:9-12:1). What began as musings has culminated in explicit advice-giving. The concluding reflections in chapter 12, likely added by a student of Qohelet, indicate Qohelet’s role as a careful pedagogue who “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs” (12:9). Qohelet’s words are more than the random cynical musings of a bitter sage; rather, they are crafted intentionally to lead the reader on a journey toward wisdom.

Job is the outlier of the three in that its entirety is set in the story-world; there is no meta-reflection on the purpose of the book nor explicit advice to the reader. ANE wisdom scholar Kenneth Kitchens differentiates “reflective wisdom” from practical advice or ethical instruction,[[8]](#footnote-8) and Job seems a likely candidate for this category. Thus, although its learning goals are left implicit, scholars who work with literary, rhetorical, and reader-response criticism have shown the ways that the book of Job is crafted to lead the reader toward wisdom.

So how do these books cultivate wisdom in the reader? William Brown sees that the primary way the wisdom literature cultivates wisdom and shapes character is by evoking a sense of *wonder* in the student. Scholars have long acknowledged creation theology and character formation to be significant themes in the wisdom literature. Brown explores wonder as the link between the two; wonder arises from the experience of creation and leads to the formation of character. Wonder can arise from two different experiences, Brown suggests: first, from experiences in which we marvel at the perfection of order in creation (as in Proverbs), and second, experiences of disorientation in which that order seems to be turned upside down (as in Job). Either way, the mark of wonder is that a desire for knowledge overcomes fear and leads one to an encounter with the object of wonder. Rather than shrinking back in fear, we long to engage more deeply with the curiosity that has captivated us. Thus, there are two sides to wonder: the initial experience of *awe* and the resulting move toward *inquiry*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Wonder serves as the pedagogical tool of the wisdom literature that leads the student, through awe and desire, toward the object of wonder to engage it, and in so doing, to become wise. The sense of awe that accompanies wonder, however, does not permit us to harness knowledge, to capture it and study it under a microscope, but rather invites us to revere it as a sacred Other. Wonder cannot be objective but is a relational knowing: “to know something in wonder is not to control or use but to know passionately, ever provisionally, and always reverently.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In some sense, wisdom is always just beyond our grasp; it is only in constant pursuit of wisdom that we become wise.

Of those disorienting experiences of wonder, paradox is a hallmark of the wisdom tradition. A common trick in wisdom’s playbook is to introduce contradictory ideas as a way to press the reader into critical thought. When we bump up against conflicting truths or contradictory versions of reality, it can feel confusing and destabilizing. But true to the sense of wonder it creates, the wisdom literature does not shy away from paradox. Instead, it embraces ambiguity and paradox, dwells within it, valuing it as a fruitful opportunity for reflection. The discomfort of paradox is the grain of sand in the oyster that produces the pearl of wisdom. Kathleen O’Connor writes that, in the wisdom literature, ambiguity is revelatory:

According to wisdom, life is not a simple set of truths to be followed scrupulously, but a continual encounter with conflicting truths, each making competing claims upon the seeker….Opposing truths are set side by side, and in some instances not resolved at all. This requires that readers enter into the ambiguity themselves and discover their own resolutions to the conflict of truths….The point of highlighting ambiguity or paradox is not to bring the individual to an intellectual impasse but to lead her beyond the obvious into deeper, transcendent truth.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The ambiguity present in the wisdom literature is an indication that its wisdom does not lie in neatly parceled morsels of truth that can be dispensed like medicine for fools. Instead, the text is pedagogically crafted in such a way that it invites students to think for themselves, to wonder over the puzzles and mysteries it presents – and, in the course of wondering, to develop the skills and habits of wisdom. With these general observations in mind, we will look briefly at some of the specific pedagogical techniques of each book.

Anne Stewart writes that Proverbs does not simply tell the reader *what* to think, but rather, the form of the poetry teaches them *how* to think – “its function is not only to convey wisdom but to ensconce the skill of discernment and understanding within the student.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The main unit of poetry in Proverbs is the *mashal*, or aphorism: a short, pithy saying that can also be a kind of riddle or puzzle. It is through these puzzles and metaphors, Brown argues, that Proverbs evokes a sense of wonder in the reader.[[13]](#footnote-13) The genre of the *mashal* allows for a significant amount of play in its meaning; readers must work to understand it, and it is this process of thinking that begins to develop wisdom. The individual saying lends itself to the practice of discernment in several ways.

First, the proverbs are often open to multiple interpretations. Hebrew is notoriously terse, which enhances the ambiguity and thus the discernment quality of a proverb as one puzzles over what is meant. An example that Stewart gives is the famous proverb “Train up a child in his way, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).[[14]](#footnote-14) It is ambiguous, however, what “his way” refers to. Does “his way” refer to the preference of the child, meaning that if he is spoiled, he will never amount to anything? Or does it mean “the discipline appropriate to him,” so that he flourishes under individualized instruction? Or does “his way” mean, as it is often interpreted, “the way he should go,” or correct path in life? The proverb could mean any or all of these, and the truth in all of these interpretations is worth pondering.

Second, the proverbs (and Hebrew verse writ large) use parallelism, a poetic feature in which the first line introduces a thought, and the second line compares to the first, expands the thought, or qualifies it in some way. Most of the proverbs follow this form. Occasionally, however, there is disjointed parallelism, which occurs when the lines do not match up precisely, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps in their mind.[[15]](#footnote-15) Fox offers Proverbs 10:5 as an example: “He who builds his stores in the summer is an astute son; he who drowses off at harvest is a disgraceful son.”*Disgraceful* is not a clear antonym for *astute*, which makes the reader consider the relation between the two: “The couplet reminds the reader that a lazy son shames his parents, while a diligent one makes them proud.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Fox reflects on the pedagogical value of disjointed proverbs:

By actively supplying the missing assumptions and conclusions, the reader participates in the reasoning process…teach[ing] himself….The gapped proverbs not only transmit packets of truths, they *train* the reader in a mode of thinking: identifying behaviors and associating them with their consequences. In other words, they train the reader to think like a sage.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Another way that parallelism lends itself to the imagination is through what Fox calls “proverb permutations,” which are sprinkled throughout the book – proverbs that have the same or similar first line, but a diverging second line.[[18]](#footnote-18) One example is the template “The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold,” which is finished in 17:3 as “but the Lord tests the heart,” and in 27:21 as “so a person is tested by being praised.” Proverb permutations like this may represent someone who was inspired to reflect further on a proverb, recognizing that it could lead to another conclusion – and they invite the reader to ponder other possible endings.

Finally, proverbs are full of figurative language, with rich and creative images and metaphor to spark the imagination – thornbushes in the hand of drunkards, dogs returning to their vomit, a bear robbed of her cubs. In addition to being memorable, metaphors function to invite the reader’s imagination to supply the rest. How exactly is a proverb in the mouth of a fool like a thornbush in the hand of a drunkard (Prov. 26:9)? Because it will hurt him, or because it will hurt others? How did the drunkard end up with a thornbush, and how do fools end up quoting proverbs?

The book of Proverbs is unique in that it has neither narrative structure nor a building argument, but is a seemingly haphazard collection of old proverbs. These proverbs, which each originally had a context into which they were spoken, have been frozen in their current literary form as a collection. This means that situational proverbs are now juxtaposed with others that are often unrelated or even completely contradictory. In addition to the ambiguity of the proverbs themselves, their juxtaposition creates another layer of puzzle for the reader. Peter Hattonargues that Proverbs is deliberately arranged in such a way that contradictory truths are set side by side as “goads for the wise,” to prod and provoke the reader into critical thought.[[19]](#footnote-19) The most famous contradiction in Proverbs is 26:4-5, which deliberately sets completely opposite instructions next to each other: “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will become like them. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.”

This juxtaposition shows us that proverbs are not one-size-fits-all advice, and to obey them blindly or apply them indiscriminately would in fact be very unwise. Discernment is required to know which proverb to apply at which time. To see such a glaring contradiction immediately provokes the reader to wonder which situation might call for which proverb, and whether or how both can be true. When I have pointed out these verses to high school students and merely asked, “Which one is right?”, it has sparked remarkably lengthy and passionate discussions – discussions in which the very practice of wondering, thinking, and arguing makes them just a little wiser than they were before. Although this is the most obvious contradiction, Proverbs is full of others: different attitudes toward retribution theology, poverty, and other topics.[[20]](#footnote-20)

By engaging the natural human desire to seek meaning and patterns, the juxtaposition of proverbs in a collection – although they have been removed from their performative context and are ossified in that sense – demands the reader’s cognitive engagement to connect the dots. In that sense, the form of the text is indeed pedagogical – it trains the reader in the habits of thinking. And, as we saw above in Proverbs’ “course objectives,” interacting with proverbs and riddles cultivates the habits of reflection and critical thought. The objectives, Brown writes, assure the reader that “perplexity leads to discernment”;[[21]](#footnote-21) the act of puzzling over one proverb leads to the ability to understand others.

With the book of Job, we enter a realm where the order of Proverbs gives way to chaos. After the prologue’s initial set-up of the story, Job and his friends try to find their way through the chaos, arguing back and forth about why suffering happens and who is responsible. Their arguments end with a reflection on the elusiveness of wisdom, Job’s soliloquy, and an interruption by a previously unnamed character, Elihu. When God finally responds towards the very end of the book, scholars have long noted that the divine speeches do not answer or even address the issues that have been raised throughout the book. They make no reference to the divine council at the beginning, nor do they address the issue of retribution theology at all; instead, God takes Job on a grand tour of the cosmos, showing him the intertwined beauty and wildness of creation. The book concludes by returning to the prose tale, in which God restores what Job had lost – a rather disquieting “happy ending”[[22]](#footnote-22) for those who have waded through the previous 39 chapters only to find all their questions left hanging. At the end of the book, have we learned or accomplished anything at all by reading it? Is the lack of conclusive answers a failure of the book – or part of its pedagogy?

Carol Newsom argues that the rhetorical goal of Job is to juxtapose different genres that have their own rhetorical framework and goals, and force a conversation among them, to reveal the possibilities and limitations of the genres and their assumptions about the world. Thus, it provides an exploration of many themes in a way that no one genre could possibly do. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary theory of a dialogic or polyphonic text, she argues that Job is just such a text – one which has found a way to incorporate different “moral imaginations” through the cut-and-paste of genre, in which true dialogue can take place. It is open, unfinalized, and unfinalizable, with no authoritative narrator to guide the reader to the truth. Truth is found not in a single perspective, but at the intersection of multiple perspectives; there is more to truth than any one account can reveal. The resumption of the prose tale is the only way the book could have accomplished this; had it ended with the divine speeches, one would assume that God has the final say. But instead, by returning to the simple world of the prose tale, it refuses to let any voice be the “right” one. Thus, she writes, “there can be no end to the book, no end to its dialogue, and no end to the dialogue it provokes.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Part of the pedagogy of Job, according to Charles Melchert, is to draw the reader into the debates and invite them to participate.[[24]](#footnote-24) And in fact, Job’s redaction history provides yet another reason this is so. The character of Elihu – the only character with an Israelite name, and thus assumed to be a later scribal addition – gives an example of a reader of the story who, dissatisfied with the dialogue thus far, inserted himself into the conversation with his own theology and his own genre: the sapiential hymn, a later Hellenistic genre.[[25]](#footnote-25) Like the proverb permutations which “allow for a creative dialectic between the old and new,”[[26]](#footnote-26) Job legitimates theological innovation and dialogue with the tradition. Newsom has used Elihu as an invitation for students to insert themselves similarly, assigning students to write their own response to the dialogues.[[27]](#footnote-27)

If dialogue is prized over answers in the book of Job, this gives us an important clue about the practices and pedagogies that are valuable for cultivating wisdom. Wisdom is gained not when answers are found, but is rather gained along the way in the process of seeking them – even if we never find them. Often in our religious education with youth, we prefer to box things up with a neat little bow, having a systematic explanation and coherent apology for our beliefs. If we start introducing conflicting ideas, we worry that it will confuse them or cause them to doubt their faith. But there is wisdom to be gained in the tension of unanswerable questions, opposing viewpoints, and unresolvable dilemmas. An easy answer can cause students to disengage, whereas a difficult and probing question can draw them in for a lifetime of pondering and the insights that can arise in the process.

Ecclesiastes has several rhetorical features that contribute to its pedagogical effectiveness. All of them come together to form Qohelet’s pedagogical strategy: he teaches the reader how to think in the way of wisdom by taking them along on his own journey, making them experience his thought process. First, Ecclesiastes – along with Job and Proverbs – is full of strange paradoxes and juxtapositions that “goad the wise” to critical thought. Ecclesiastes has an argument that builds, unlike Proverbs, but the progression of thought is not exactly linear. Michael Fox describes Qohelet’s thought as having an “episodic, discontinuous, staccato character.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The words on the page reflect Qohelet’s inner state, making visible his scattered observations and musings. W. Sibley Towner writes that Ecclesiastes is best understood as a “notebook of ideas by a philosopher/theologian…In this notebook he reports much of his own inner life and then turns to his students or his public with instructions that flow from that inner life.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Although he does give explicit advice to his readers, eventually moving from observation of “what is good” to exhorting his readers in the imperative voice, the reader is not given his wisdom freely but must follow along on the tortuous path to finding it. Along the way, they may develop some of the habits and practices of wisdom.

Second, Ecclesiastes has an emphasis on observation of life. Chapter one opens with a poem about the cycles of nature, chapter three with the poem on the “times” of human life. Naoto Kamano argues that these two texts, these observations on the world’s “eternal sameness” and “constant fluxation,”[[30]](#footnote-30) set the foundation for Qohelet’s argument that humans are not in control of the vagaries of human life.[[31]](#footnote-31) With the recurrent refrain “Again I saw,” Qohelet tells the reader all the things that he has “observed under the sun” and his subsequent reflections on these observations. He observes oddities in the order of the world, situations that do not seem right or fair: that entire fortunes are worked for and lost in the blink of an eye (5:13-16), that the righteous perish while the wicked enjoy long life (7:15), that no one remembers the wise (9:13-15). This is how Qohelet thinks: he pays attention to the world, observing and taking in what he sees, puzzling over it and reflecting on its meaning, and letting those observations trouble the cracks and crevices of retribution theology.

Third, Qohelet uses rhetorical questions. In light of the observations he has made, he routinely asks, “What profit is there…?” or “What is good for humanity?” While many scholars read these questions as having presumed negative answers, Kamano shows how Qohelet answers them through the course of his own autobiographical reflections. Kamano sees this question-and-answer formula as key to Qohelet’s pedagogy: he asks the question to pique the reader’s interest, then proceeds to answer by setting up his own persona as the wisest, wealthiest king, then deconstructing it by his own failure to find lasting enjoyment. The question-and-answer form allows the reader to participate in the search for wisdom, rather than having life’s answers handed to them. The questions are important because they invite the reader to wonder about them; the autobiographical reflections are important because they invite the reader to experience Qohelet’s search for the answer. Refusing to smooth over difficult questions about the meaning of life with religious platitudes, Qohelet shows us what it looks like to pursue wisdom by painstakingly working through those questions, reflecting on whether and how God is involved in human life.

Finally, there is a circularity to Qohelet’s thought process. He begins with the assertion that all is futile. He makes observations about the nature of the world, concludes again that all is futile, then tells the reader what he has seen to be good: to eat, drink, and enjoy one’s life. Then he returns to another round of observations, names it as futile, then reiterates the goodness of eating and drinking. Each time, his advice becomes more certain, moving from observation (“this is what I have seen to be good”) to commendation (“So I commend enjoyment”) to imperative (“Go, enjoy”).[[32]](#footnote-32) And yet his reflections end the way they began – with the assertion that all is futile. This is the process of his wisdom thinking and his rhetorical strategy to get the reader to think along with him. He becomes surer of his conclusions as he goes, but it does not keep him from returning again to observe and reflect. The search for wisdom is ongoing, and even the conclusions that we reach do not absolve us from continuing to learn.

**The Practices of Wisdom**

As we explore the wisdom literature and its shared characteristics, we begin to see practices that characterize a disposition toward wisdom and that can cultivate wisdom in those who practice them.

The first practice of wisdom is *playfulness*.This might seem surprising, given that Proverbs contains seemingly straightforward principles for living and Ecclesiastes and Job are so serious – even cynical. However, religious educator Courtney Goto critiques understandings of play that too easily equate it with joy and contrast it with suffering. For Goto, to play is to imagine and live into a counter-reality that can open us up to “revelatory experiencing,” a different kind of knowing than we often get from schooling models that emphasize facts and objectivity. This can include experiences that are frightening or even painful. She writes about monastic “holy fools” in the Middle Ages, who often feigned madness to awaken those around them to their own worldly values.[[33]](#footnote-33) She writes, “Their playing with people was…sometimes threatening and subversive. Confronting people with what might be painful and difficult suggests a higher order of experiencing” than other, more lighthearted forms of play.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In the sense that Goto understands playing, the wisdom literature certainly takes a playful approach to education. Their mode of engaging theology is imaginative and full of wonder; rather than asserting theological certainties, the wisdom of these books plays in and around difficult questions and stimulating ideas, refusing any easy answers or simplistic reassurances. It sees puzzles and contradictions, even serious ones, as playgrounds for the cultivation of discernment. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “There is a playfulness and delight that goes with it [wisdom teaching]. The play involves not only good humor, but the ‘play’ about which we speak in a steering wheel. There is slippage that cannot be overcome or explained. To want more certainty is to crush the wonder that belongs to knowing.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

With Proverbs’ breadth of imaginative metaphors (dogs returning to their vomit, words that pierce like a sword), its snippets of clever, memorable sayings, and its “[delight] in paradox and incongruity,”[[36]](#footnote-36) Proverbs invites the reader into its colorful world of playful wisdom. In Job and Ecclesiastes, play takes on a more serious quality, as they interrogate proverbial wisdom based on its failure to account for their lived experience. Yet it is still playful in the sense of exploring, wondering, probing, and expanding the boundaries of wisdom to account for new insights. Qohelet plays through his happiness experiment in ch. 2, seeking to learn through experience what is good for humans to do. The author of Job plays by creating a disturbing thought experiment that causes us to confront difficult questions. And, even in the face of suffering and death, Job and Ecclesiastes recognize a kind of playfulness to life in spite of – or because of – its futility and randomness. For Qohelet, the enjoyment of life is found in the playfulness of feasting, lovemaking, and dressing in luxurious garments (Ecc. 9:7-9). In Job, scholars agree that a kind of “playfulness”[[37]](#footnote-37) characterizes the divine speeches which, bursting with life and color, constitute God’s “effusive celebration of creation.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The speeches reflect the patterns of the world itself, which is characterized by “a certain randomness, ambiguity, unpredictability, and play.”[[39]](#footnote-39) There is an unpredictability to life which requires us to engage it with a sense of wonder and play, rather than seeking to master or control it.

Because youth ministry has a reputation for creative object lessons and over-the-top games, it might seem at first blush that youth ministry has already cornered the market on playing in religious education. After all, a summer Wednesday night playing kiddie-pool slip-and-slide kickball with the teens is certainly more “fun” than many adult religious education classes. And yet, often the crazy Pinterest youth ministry games are a symptom not of playful learning, but rather of the deep divide between play and learning. They often function as a bait-and-switch technique to bribe young people for attention, drawing them in with play so that they can settle in and sit through the lesson – a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down! It is not often that learning *itself* is playful – but it can be. When we draw a contrast between games and learning, we implicitly reinforce the idea that deep, challenging learning is not fun, stimulating, or enjoyable. However, this is a mistaken assumption; educational theorist Paulo Freire writes that we must learn to see learning as both serious and satisfying, demanding and pleasurable.[[40]](#footnote-40) Although play often leads to deeper and more transformative learning, it is often taken less seriously than a lecture. As educator bell hooks points out, teachers who promote active learning and joyful engagement in the classroom often gain a reputation as “not as rigorous or without standards.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Paradoxically, if educators take teaching so seriously as to refuse the risk of cultivating students’ imaginations, they have not taken it seriously enough. If we consider the material so important that it must be carefully controlled, we strip it of its transformative potential and keep it from doing its deepest work in students. Wisdom literature models for us an approach to learning that is wondering, wandering, and free-spirited, less concerned with getting things “right” than with exploring.

The practice of playfulness connects easily to the second practice, which is *deep and unhurried attentiveness.* Creation theology is a major shared characteristic of the wisdom literature; in each of the wisdom books, wisdom arises from paying close attention to creation, what it has to teach us, and the wonder it sparks in us. Proverbs urges us to learn from the order in creation, even from the industriousness of the ant. Ecclesiastes notes the cyclical nature of the sunrise, of the water cycle, of the generations, probing it for the wisdom it contains. In Job, the divine speeches urge attentiveness to the large and small of creation, describing in rapt detail the characteristics and behaviors of the natural world. Wisdom literature also pays close attention to human behavior and social mores. Whatever the sages find that is of interest, they study it, taking their time observing it, appreciating it, and being attentive to it.

While unhurriedness and attentiveness go hand in hand, they each require something of us. Unhurriedness requires that we slow down, that we focus on quality of knowledge over quantity. Rather than rushing to cover material, the practice of wisdom dwells with the object of inquiry. It sees the time spent in contemplation as valuable in and of itself, even if it does not immediately yield a marketable insight. In his book *The Nature of Design,* David Orr contrasts Western culture’s obsession with “fast knowledge” with the more wisdom-like orientation of “slow knowledge.” The culture of fast knowledge, Orr writes, believes that knowledge and information are interchangeable. Profit, not wisdom, is valued as the goal of knowledge: “Knowledge that lends itself to use is superior to that which is merely contemplative.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Slow knowledge, on the other hand, is the collective wisdom of a culture acquired over time with “thoroughness and patience,”[[43]](#footnote-43) based on the steady rhythms of nature. It is not as flashy as fast knowledge, but its roots in us are deep, forming us over the course of our lifetimes as we wonder, contemplate, and linger over the questions and ideas that call to us. In youth ministry, we are often more concerned with the efficacy of our scope and sequence than we are with unhurried “slow knowledge” that takes the time to ponder what seems most fruitful or generative. But it is in those unhurried moments of exploring an important idea together that wisdom can grow and flourish.

Attentiveness requires us to be fully present, undivided and undistracted. If we are taking a walk, for instance, we tend to focus on where we are going, or how many more steps we need to meet our Fitbit goal, or we look down at our phones. We are often not present enough to the world around us to notice all the things waiting for our attention. Unhurriedness does not guarantee attentiveness, but it does provide an opportunity for us to notice and contemplate. In his book *Contemplative Youth Ministry,* Mark Yaconelli writes about the time when his four-year-old son, tired of being hurried by his parents and preschool teachers, announced that he was starting a “Slow Club.” Yaconelli recalls, “At night over dinner, Joseph would talk about his club. He told us about the things he noticed during the day and shook his head at the other children who always seemed too busy to see the marvels and treasures so clearly visible to the patient eye: a piece of wire, a bottle cap, an especially smooth rock, a line of ants.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Inspired by his son’s contemplative orientation toward life, Yaconelli reflects on the need for youth pastors to cultivate this skill in themselves and in their students:

Like Joseph, those of us who minister among young people seek to be members of Slow Club. We invite youth to attend to their lives; we encourage them not to overlook the signs of God’s presence. Every time we’re among youth, we look and listen with slow eyes and ears. We listen for the deep sounds of God. We look patiently for the little signs of grace. We cultivate wonder. Like Joseph, we walk beside them saying ‘What do you notice? What do you see? How is God present in this moment?’[[45]](#footnote-45)

If we model unhurried attentiveness in our pedagogy, we create a learning environment where young people have the time and space to notice, wonder, reflect, and discuss things that are meaningful to them.

I once took a group of young people on a field trip to the Martin Luther King, Jr., memorial. When we went in the museum, I quickly realized that they were breezing through, looking at their phones, talking to their friends, and that they were on track to walk through all the exhibits within five minutes. I gathered them together and challenged them each to choose one item that drew their attention, and study it closely for sixty seconds. On the drive home, I asked them each to share which item they had chosen, and what they noticed about it that they might not have otherwise. Their attentiveness led to a robust conversation: about the eternal flame and what it represents, about the tearstains on the veil Coretta Scott King wore to the funeral, about the work of other civil rights activists, and more. The simple practice of encouraging young people to slow down and pay attention – in museums, on hikes, during service projects, through practices like *lectio divina* – pays rich dividends in the practice of wisdom.

Unhurried attentiveness naturally leads to the third practice of wisdom: *wonder and curiosity.* As discussed above, William Brown writes that the experience of wonder is the link between creation and wisdom. Wonder and curiosity are what draw us in to explore enticing, sometimes difficult, and even frightening experiences and questions, and we gain wisdom through that exploration. The one who seeks wisdom does not see puzzles or paradox as something to avoid, but rather dwells within them as a generative space for reflection and the cultivation of wisdom.

Youth ministry scholar David White writes that young people are naturally curious and love to learn. Rather than being stimulated and nurtured, however, their curiosity is often tamped down and suppressed; White writes that “youth’s alienation from their intellect…is not natural or normal,” but results from an educational system whose focus on teaching facts rather than awakening wonder “drain[s] them of their intrinsic intellectual interest.”[[46]](#footnote-46) He goes on to say that churches have followed schools in “fail[ing] to spark intellectual curiosity and capacity.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Religious education in youth ministry can either participate in draining our young people of wonder and curiosity, or it can play a role in awakening and enlivening it. As youth ministers, how do we educate our students toward wonder? Is curiosity something that can be cultivated through the way we teach?

One of the most successful youth Bible studies I have ever led began rather poorly. I was leading a small group of middle school girls through the gospel of John, and felt frustrated at the density of the material and the difficulty of getting them to discuss the text. My commentary and discussion questions were not landing well, and they were clearly not invested in the material. By chapter 3, I decided to try a different approach. On a whim, I gave them each an index card and asked them to write down a question that they had about the text. They just looked at me, somewhat perplexed, and said that they had no questions. I asked if they understood the passage. At first, they said yes, but when I told them I did not fully understand it, they began to waver: “Welllll, there were maybe a few things I didn’t understand.” I urged them again to ask a question to understand it. They found it difficult to know how to begin, presumably as a result of the curiosity suppression White describes, both at school and in church. It took several minutes of prodding that first night, but then the discussion got going: What is a Pharisee? Why did Nicodemus come at night? What *did* Jesus mean by being born again? Does Nicodemus ever come up in the Bible again? Is Jesus God? If so, when Jesus died, was there no God? From that night on, our little ritual was set: sitting in a circle with Starbucks drinks, reading a chapter of Scripture together, writing questions about the text on index cards. Once they got the hang of asking questions, it was like the floodgates were opened to a whole world of curiosity that had never been allowed to break free. Questions began to pour forth about the doctrine of the Trinity, eschatology, the beliefs of other Christian denominations and other religions, the problem of evil, and how to navigate conflicting ethical imperatives.

Their questions were often prefaced by “This might be wrong to ask,” or “I don’t know if I’m allowed to ask this,” which indicated to me that somehow – whether implicitly or explicitly – the church had given them the message that difficult questions were not allowed, and in the process, had shut down their capacity to be curious about their faith or even what they were reading in the Bible. But over the course of six months, not only did their questions and conversations became more confident and risky; I also saw a marked difference in the group’s critical thinking skills. The practice of wonder and curiosity gave them valuable skills for cultivating wisdom.

There is a risk, however, in letting the curiosity of young people run unchecked – which is why churches tend to suppress it. It can lead us deep into the discomfort of contradiction, or it can cause us to question the tradition that has been handed down to us, as Job and Ecclesiastes do. But the moment we shut down any question – even implicitly, through closed-off body language or a quick change in subject – curiosity becomes something associated with fear rather than delight. To practice wonder and curiosity with young people, three things are required: first, we must model curiosity ourselves. Second, we need to find ways to invite questions, and help our youth reclaim their natural inclination toward wonder. Third, and most importantly, we need to affirm the wonder of young people, even if it makes us uncomfortable or takes us off topic, because that very wonder will lead them toward wisdom. If we want to cultivate wisdom in young people, we have to create space for the practice of curiosity.

The last practice of wisdom we will discuss here is *dialogue.* Dialogue is important for shaping, nuancing, and challenging our own thinking, and the wisdom literature shows us that it is a valuable practice for gaining wisdom. Job is the most explicitly dialogic of the three wisdom books, as it consists of the actual debate between Job, his friends, and God. But even in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, there is a sense of dialogue through the juxtaposition of various perspectives and traditions. The wisdom literature shows us that wisdom is found in the intersection, mutual exchange, and even tension between different life experiences and viewpoints. No one perspective contains all the wisdom there is to be had, and the wisdom that exists at the intersection of multiple perspectives is more than the sum of its parts. There is wisdom to be gained through quiet contemplation on our own, but ultimately, we become wiser through dialogue with others refining and enlarging our own perspective.

Educational theorist Paulo Freire, whom we will revisit below, argues that “only dialogue…is capable of generating critical thinking.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Freire used a pedagogy he called “problem-posing education,” which presents a “generative theme” to the learners to be unpacked together. Rather than the teacher transmitting information to the students, Freire believed that the content or object of study should be placed in the center of the learning circle to be equally engaged by all. Unless teachers and students are mutually engaged in the process of discovery, students may be learning facts but are not growing in their ability to think, to learn, to probe assumptions or puzzle over a stimulating idea.

The dialogue that Freire proposes, however, is different than the discussion we often see in youth groups. Youth group discussions are often dominated by the agenda of the leader, who comes with a set list of discussion questions. Those discussion questions are often not open-ended; they have a predetermined answer, or at least a range of acceptable answers. They often stay at the surface level with questions of comprehension (“What did Jesus mean by this?”) or application (“How can you love your enemies at school?”) rather than presenting a challenge to the students’ intellect and inviting true dialogue, even debate. What differentiates Freirean dialogue from discussions like these is the teacher’s goal for the dialogue. Freire was a radical liberative educator, and for him, the goal of teaching was to free students to think for themselves. He was frustrated later in life that some had wrongly understood the dialogical method as the takeaway of his work. Dialogue as a pedagogical tool, if it is divorced from a foundational commitment to respect and trust the learners’ agency, leads nowhere at best and reinforces domination at worst. Without a commitment to liberation, and without a central topic about which to dialogue, it devolves into pseudo-dialogue which is often just used to lead to, and reinforce, the teacher’s point.

Instead, true dialogue in youth ministry – dialogue as a practice of wisdom – should be an open-ended opportunity to explore, rather than a roundabout means of lecturing. We can practice this in youth ministry by re-framing the way we approach discussion. First, we make sure that we have a central topic or idea that we can all discuss together, and we make an effort to see that idea as the shared property of the group; everyone gets to engage with the idea.

Second, we ask questions that do not assume a “right” answer, but rather that can take us deep into the idea together. On the topic of loving our enemies, for example, an interesting conundrum to explore might be, “Is it possible to love someone and not like them? Or to love them without ever interacting with them? What would that look like practically?” This question does not assume one “right” understanding of love, it allows for students to share different opinions, and it helps the whole group to engage Jesus’ teaching on a more complex level.

Third, we share our own opinion as a helpful contribution, not the definitive answer. By virtue of our position as the teacher, students are socialized to take our word for it, so it is helpful to begin by saying, “Different people think different things about this, but I think…” or, “This is my experience, but I’m curious if others have a different experience.”

Fourth, we engage in mutual conversation with our students, neither shutting down a comment nor affirming all comments regardless of quality. Instead, we use them as an opportunity to encourage critical thinking. “I wonder if that’s true in all circumstances, though? Can you think of a situation where that might not be true?” “You’re right, some people do think that. Other people have a different take on it, though.”

Finally, instead of being satisfied with one response and moving on, or with answering a student’s question, we involve the whole group in dialogue. “Has anyone else had an experience like Marie just shared? How was it the same or different?” “Malachi just asked about whether God makes everything happen, or just knows everything in advance. What do you all think? Are there other options?” When we engage in dialogue in this way, we create a learning community where old ideas can be challenged, new ideas can sprout, and difficult puzzles can “goad the wise” to deeper learning and wisdom.

**Why We Can’t Download Wisdom**

The concept of wisdom as something that must be *cultivated* in young people runs counter to the way we often think of wisdom: as something that can be imparted or passed down from the older generation to the younger. While the wisdom of the elders – and their sharing of their history and life experience – can plant a seed by giving youth something to ponder over, it cannot in itself make them wise. As Freire writes, no content is “magical.”[[49]](#footnote-49) It always requires the critical engagement of the learner to become meaningful. They must do the work of digesting what is given to them, wondering about it, wrestling with it, discerning what it means for them and their own experience. If we as youth pastors want our young people to become wise, it seems natural to want to give them whatever wisdom we have acquired, whatever wisdom can be strip-mined from the pages of Scripture. However, we cannot simply impart wisdom to young people, no matter how hard we try. Wisdom is more about asking questions than having answers, so giving students the answers – especially ones they haven’t asked for – shortcuts and ultimately negates the process. They may learn what the teacher has taught them, but they will not have the skills necessary to think for themselves, to ask their own questions or find their own answers.

Paulo Freire’s problem-posing education was his response to what he saw as the dominant model of education, which he termed the “banking model.”[[50]](#footnote-50) This approach to teaching sees knowledge as a commodity, to be “deposited” into the minds of students for safe-keeping until it needs to be recalled. The teacher is the one with the knowledge, the one who has power over the material and how it is distributed. The students are largely passive in this model. They do not choose what they learn nor do they participate in their own learning; instead, their task is merely to receive the information given to them. This model troubled Freire because of the power dynamics hidden within it. Students are socialized to swallow information uncritically, rather than being invited to create their own knowledge. As discussed above, this kind of education suppresses curiosity and imagination in favor of standardization. Too many free thinkers in our midst might disrupt the status quo, question authority, or challenge our time-honored traditions.

Unfortunately, much of our teaching in youth ministry tends to fall into the banking model – often because it is the only kind of teaching we have experienced ourselves. We are often concerned with teaching young people the moral of a story or the point of a lesson (how many of us have ever said, “If you don’t hear anything else I say today, hear this…”?). Religious education for adults may be more participatory or exploratory, but religious education for youth is often driven by a catechetical model that emphasizes learning the content of Scripture and applying it to their lives. As teachers tasked with making disciples and forming young people in the Christian tradition, we feel responsible to teach our students the information we think they need to know. But when we try to transfer content into students’ knowledge banks, we miss the crucial step of young people’s critical engagement with the material. Despite the wisdom literature modeling pedagogies and practices of playfulness, unhurried attentiveness, wonder, curiosity, and dialogue, when we teach the wisdom literature to youth, we tend to bypass these practices. But when we do, the way we teach the wisdom literature often falls short of – even negates – its transformative potential. There are two main problems with the way that youth ministry education approaches the wisdom literature: the selection of content, and the pedagogical process.

First, when the wisdom literature is taught at all, it is often taught rather selectively – particularly Job and Ecclesiastes, which have more troubling content. It is easier to stick to the more orthodox-sounding parts, sanding away the splinters and contradictions that get under our skin. But by removing the difficult parts that challenge our thinking, we remove the potential of those “goads” for cultivating wisdom. The selection is fairly predictable: the introductions and conclusions of all three books, Job’s “I know that my redeemer lives” speech, Ecclesiastes’ poem on time and the verse about a cord of three strands, and a few select verses from Proverbs. If we look at the scope and sequence of popular youth ministry curricula, we see how limited young people’s exposure to this literature is.

In Group’s LIVE curriculum on Books of the Bible, a tour of the canon in “73 lessons that give teenagers a strong biblical foundation,” the wisdom literature (along with the Psalms and Song of Songs) is treated in a module entitled “We’re Not Alone in the Journey.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The lesson on Job, entitled “When Life Hurts,” focuses on Job 42:2-6. Rather than treating any of the chapters in which Job rages at God, this lesson takes the four verses at the very end in which Job repents. What does this selection say – and *not* say – about what constitutes an appropriate attitude toward suffering? The lesson on Proverbs teaches us that “God is Trustworthy” by looking at Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” While certainly an important aspect of wisdom as well as the Christian life in general, these short verses shortchange what Proverbs has to offer. Finally, the lesson on Ecclesiastes is about “Finding Purpose and Meaning” through the first eleven verses of the book and the conclusion, in which the reader is urged to “fear God and keep God’s commandments, for this is the whole duty of everyone” (Ecc. 12:13). If the lesson talked instead about finding purpose and meaning through enjoyment – one of the dominant themes of Ecclesiastes – there is space for discussion and debate (“Does this really solve the problem of meaninglessness?” “What about people who don’t have bread and wine?”). But by going straight to “duty” as the meaning of life, this lesson reinforces the common theme of unquestioning submission to authority. Another popular youth curriculum, Orange, focuses mostly on the New Testament in their 2020-21 school year for junior high and high school. Ecclesiastes shows up twice: once in a module on family, in which the “times” passage in chapter 3 is applied to families changing, and once in a lesson on envy, which uses Ecc. 4:4-6 – a brief reflection on how contentment is better than the toil that comes from envy.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Second, these orthodox pieces and many of the proverbs are taught as settled truths, presented as answers to life’s problems and the conclusion of the conversation, rather than ideas to *begin* a conversation, to ponder and question and discuss. It is in that process of pondering and questioning and discussion that wisdom begins to take shape. Thus, if we teach the wisdom literature selectively as settled truths, we keep it from doing what it is intended to do: to “goad the wise,” to stir up wonder, to poke and prod at mystery and contradiction, to provoke the reader to critical engagement. And if we keep it from doing those things, we neutralize its wisdom-cultivating potential.

A Youth Specialties curriculum on the book of Job – although it has helpful insights and goes deeper into the book than one might expect – demonstrates the tendency of youth curriculum to fall into the banking model, guiding students to a pre-determined conclusion. It encourages letting students ask “hard questions”[[53]](#footnote-53) and “keeping the discussion going,”[[54]](#footnote-54) but its pedagogy does not bear out that ideal. In one of the early lessons in the series, the curriculum asks students to reflect and journal on a tragedy that has happened to them (or the worst thing that they could imagine happening).[[55]](#footnote-55) This activity has the potential to dredge up tremendous emotional baggage, if not serious trauma (and should be done in a counselor’s office rather than in the youth room of an untrained leader). Yet the lesson then concludes by talking about Job’s iconic words of faith: “The Lord gives and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21). In the space of an hour, the lesson moves from asking students to relive their worst nightmare, to reminding them that they need to praise God, who has done this to them, with the piety of Prologue-Job – a move similar to the one Job’s friends want him to make.

Although there is a chapter on “Talking Tough with God,” which is a great start, it deals with chapter 13 – arguably some of Job’s mildest “tough talk.” It comes close to engaging Job’s question of whether God is just by asking students as a “jury” to evaluate the validity of Job’s court case – an activity which could lead to some excellent conversations. However, the lesson ultimately teaches the importance of communicating honestly with God to stay in close relationship – while Job is asking God to stay away!

Finally, the 12-week series concludes in a remarkably unsatisfying way: “As a fitting end to this entire study, ask students to stand. Post the words to Job 19:23-27 [the famous ‘I know that my redeemer lives’ passage] on a whiteboard and ask them to read these key verses in unison.”[[56]](#footnote-56) This text fails to adequately address the pain which the curriculum has asked the students to face. To conclude the study by forcing uniformity is the epitome of the banking model: it tells students what to think, draws the conclusion for them, and asks them to repeat it back. Any pretense of discussion that may have happened along the way was used to lead to a foregone conclusion: No matter what God does to you, you must continue to trust God and praise God. The wisdom that exists in the brilliant argumentation of Job has been flattened into a monotone recitation that asks students to stop thinking and conform to the “right answer.” If we take seriously the potential of Job’s dialogue to cultivate wisdom, a much more “fitting end” to the study would be irresolution, an ending without answers, wrapping up the conversation in a way that leaves students wondering.

In the end, we cannot merely *give* young people the wisdom of these books. Wisdom is found only in the process of observing, wondering, and reflecting – work that young people must do for themselves. The best that we can do as religious educators is to create a learning environment that gives our young people opportunities to practice, pursue, and grow in wisdom.

**Reading Wisdom Literature with Youth**

So how can we teach the wisdom literature to young people in a manner consonant with its own pedagogy, in a way that cultivates wisdom rather than telling them what to think? Below I will identify a few best practices for reading wisdom literature with youth, giving examples of pedagogical strategies. Keep in mind, however, that these curricular suggestions only work if we approach them with an attitude of humility and flexibility, and if we ourselves can be playful and wondering and dialogic. The goal, again, is to open conversations that may lead somewhere we do not expect.

First, *focus on questions more than answers* – both asking our own open-ended questions, and encouraging the questions of students. Many questions have no easy answers, and we often oversimplify difficult issues by trying to come up with one. Leaving students with an unanswered question that interests them also whets their appetite for learning, making it more likely that they will continue to puzzle over it as they pursue their own answers. In a memorable conversation on a youth retreat, I just sat and smiled silently while students went off on a wild tangent, asking questions like, “Are demons real?” “Can they hurt us if we have the Holy Spirit?” “If we’re supposed to love everybody, shouldn’t we love Satan?” “Can Satan be saved in the end?” At least four hands were raised at any given time, and some talked over each other as the questions tumbled out; I could hardly have gotten a word in had I tried. No one ever pressed me for answers, and months later, one of the girls referred to that conversation as her favorite “youth group event” that year. Their excitement over their own curiosity showed me that getting to ask their questions and hear the questions of others was clearly more important to them than hearing my opinion. When reading the wisdom literature with youth, ask open-ended questions for discussion: “If Qohelet is right and everything really is meaningless, what *is* the best way to live?” “Do you think that God answers Job’s complaint in the end? Why or why not?” “Is this proverb true all the time? What is a situation where it might not be true?” Encourage students to ask their own questions: “What is a question you’re left with at the end of Job?” “After all of Qohelet’s experiments, what is one question you would want to ask him?” “These two proverbs seem to say different things. What questions does that raise for you?”

Second, *give students puzzles to ponder* rather than an overload of information. Like Freire did with his problem-posing pedagogy, choose an image, idea, or paradox that the group can unpack together, in place of multi-part powerpoint slides. Let that initial brain-teaser and the resulting dialogue be the focal point of the lesson. One example that I mentioned above is to pose two contradictory proverbs and ask students which one is correct. They could be divided into teams to debate the case for their proverb. A powerful way to teach Job would be to write a shortened script that includes brief summaries of all the elements (the prologue, Job’s perspective, each of the friends, the wisdom poem, Job’s soliloquy, the divine speech, and the epilogue), having students act it out. Because of the length of Job, a shortened form like this would highlight the strange juxtaposition of genres. Then discuss it together as a group – what parts felt strange? Was there a part that seemed out of place? If so, why? Why do you think the author put it in there – what does it add? For any of the books, presenting an example of its reception in art, music, or popular culture provides an interesting starting point for a discussion. What did this artist think was the main point of this text? How are they using it? What might you change?

Third, *invite young people to join in the discussions of the wisdom literature by writing themselves in.* In doing so, they carry on the wisdom tradition by listening to it, learning from it, and positing their own creative ideas based on their own life experience. I have already noted above the idea of having students write themselves into the book of Job as Elihu. If they were listening in on the conversation between Job and his friends up to that point and feeling dissatisfied, what would they have to add? This exercise helps them wrestle with the material, as well as identify and fill gaps in the arguments. Proverb permutations are another excellent opportunity for young people to exercise their own wisdom and creativity: choose the first half of a proverb, and have students complete the proverb independently. They can then share their work and discuss similarities and differences in the ways they chose to end their proverbs, as well as comparing it to the original ending(s). Both the exercise and the resulting discussion are a great way to practice the thinking skills the proverbs invite. For Ecclesiastes, a way that I have invited students to “write themselves in” has been in the place of Qohelet’s royal autobiography in chapter 2, in which he recounts all of his accomplishments and achievements. I have asked them what they consider to be the markers of success for a high school student, read the passage back to them, and asked whether Qohelet’s conclusion rings true. Another place for students to write themselves in is in the epilogue of Ecclesiastes, when a student of Qohelet is summarizing his work. How might they summarize the book differently if they were asked to write the epilogue?

Finally, *employ playful pedagogies that spark the imagination.* As Courtney Goto argues, play is often more deeply revelatory than the information we can impart through the schooling model.[[57]](#footnote-57) Bibliodrama, a midrashic method developed by Peter and Susan Pitzele, is an excellent way to cultivate wisdom in young people through playing.[[58]](#footnote-58) Bibliodrama aims to bring the text – and what lies between the lines – to life through imaginative roleplay. Participants can embody characters mentioned in the text, implied by the text, or even inanimate objects. Through interviews and conversations, that character can reflect on what they experienced or how they felt. Qohelet would be a great person to roleplay, or perhaps his gardeners or entertainers who participated in his search for meaning. Job’s wife would likely spark some fascinating conversations, or his messengers. Or perhaps the fool in Proverbs could tell us why he rejected wisdom and how he ended up where he did. Wisdom could share how she feels in response. Theatre of the Oppressed, a pedagogical method inspired by Freire’s work and developed by Augusto Boal, is another way to play.[[59]](#footnote-59) One of Boal’s common games, Image Theater, asks a willing participant (the Joker) to represent a concept by posing others in the room to create a human sculpture. Once the sculpture is complete, participants can observe it and discuss what it reveals about the concept. *Wisdom* is a natural choice for Image Theater. A promising prompt for Ecclesiastes is *hevel,* or meaninglessness. For Job, one might suggest the divine speeches. How might participants silently represent these concepts with their bodies? Creative options abound, but whatever the sculpture looks like, it is sure to prompt deepened reflection – which is the goal of wisdom’s pedagogy.

**Conclusion**

“As an uncapped marker runs out of ink, so a teenager without sleep runs out of energy.” The whole room laughed and offered their amens. It was 9 AM, and the quip came from a group of teenagers who did indeed look very sleepy. They were entering their second week of Emory’s Youth Theological Initiative – a summer program for high school students focused on public theology – and trying to stay awake through the morning workshop. I was teaching on Proverbs, and had decided to experiment with having students write proverbs of their own. We started by making observations about the world together and writing them on the dry erase board. “The sun rises in the morning.” “Leaves fall in autumn.” “You can’t go back in time.” “Everyone gets afraid sometimes.” Once the board was full of observations, I gave them their assignment: to get into groups of four or five and choose one of these observations to reflect on. How does this observation connect with your experience? What does it make you wonder about? Is it always true, or is there a “but”? Can you compare it to other things you’ve observed?

After fifteen minutes of discussion, I told them their task was to write a proverb, based on what they had learned about different types of proverbs. We began with the levity of the uncapped marker proverb, but it quickly became more serious when the boys in the back of the room offered theirs: “Leaves fall in autumn, and all people fall into their graves.” (It was a perfect segue to my next workshop on Ecclesiastes.) As the larger group reflected together on their proverb, someone suggested another observation – that leaves grow again in spring – and how that might give us hope in light of death’s inevitability. Another group had run out of time, but had been working with the observation “people smile.” Their conversation had centered around how smiles can mean different things, and what we can learn about human behavior by observing different kinds of smiles. Other groups offered potential proverbs based on their discussion: “Smiles can express joy, or they can mask sadness.” “Sometimes people smile just to show their teeth.”

This anecdote illustrates the type of conversations and insights that can arise when we engage the wisdom literature – or Scripture more generally – with a playful openness to the imagination of youth. The fruit of their own intellectual work will stick with them far longer than any fact I can teach them, and it is by practicing this kind of discussion and reflection – not by passively receiving what I teach – that they gain valuable skills of critical thought and dialogue. Often, when I share stories like this, people express surprise at the thoughtfulness of the young people with whom I work, sometimes even assuming that I must have smarter youth than they do. The truth is that most young people are remarkably creative and insightful when given the opportunity to explore, ask questions, and exercise their intellectual ability – and the more we allow them to practice, the more they will grow in wisdom. Wisdom is not something that we can give to them, but as youth pastors and religious educators, we can help to cultivate it by creating a learning environment where it can thrive and grow.

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1. I do not wish to minimize the relationship between privilege and access to information, and I recognize that lack of school funding in many districts is a significant obstacle to education. Here I am painting in broad strokes about the changes that technology has brought in the past few decades. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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8. For a summary of how Kenneth Kitchens’ work fits into the larger conversation on categorizing wisdom literature, see Mark R. Sneed, “Grasping After the Wind: The Elusive Attempt to Define and Delimit Wisdom,” *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, ed. Mark R. Sneed *(*Atlanta: SBL, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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16. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31,* 495. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31,* 498. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31,* 487-492. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Peter Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a more thorough treatment of contradictory proverbs on various topics, see Hatton, *Contradictions.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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32. For more on the progression of the enjoyment passages, see R.N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 7 (1982): 87-98, and Lee, *Vitality of* *Enjoyment*. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
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56. Ranck, *Creative Bible Lessons*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
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