

Transformational Relationships as Framework for a Spirituality of Joy  
Erik C. Leafblad with Andrew Root  
Presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Youth Ministry Educators  
St. Louis, October 27-29, 2018

Abstract:

*Transformation is an upending that brings new insight, direction, and sense of being. Social scientific studies have found that a relationship with a coach, teacher, neighbor, or youth worker is positively correlated with both social capital and church retention, but without looking at transformation. This paper will explore whether relationships that are reported as impactful to forming one's faith have a uniquely transformative shape (which we will describe as hypostasis, kenosis, and theosis).*

Responses in the past three years to the initial data regarding religious disaffiliation coming out of the Pew Research Center's report on the Religious Landscape of North America have proliferated,<sup>1</sup> though the significance of "faith-drifting" has been felt for some decades in youth ministry. Myriad research has been done often with the well-intentioned goal of kindling religious commitment measured by greater institutional participation.<sup>2</sup> This research and programmatic thrust seems validated by almost daily reporting in the North American context on the rise of these so-called "nones." It is in the air.

Time and again relationships are held up as the core of youth ministry. When young people speak of the meaningfulness of youth group or their local church they often point to a mentor or youth pastor as a primary reason for their faith. This had led much of the research and suggested practices regarding "faith-drifting" to stress relationships. By way of illustration,

---

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, *Religious Landscape Study*, obtained at <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>2</sup> Notable in the United States has been the Sticky Faith initiative emerging from the Fuller Youth Institute, which has now been extended by their Growing Young program. This work has spring-boarded from the work initiated by Barna most represented by David Kinnaman's work in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

the influential work of Fuller Youth Institute's Growing Young initiative offers six pragmatic steps to address the decline of church attendance, all of them oriented toward furthering relational capital with young people.<sup>3</sup> Each of the six strategies provides actionable steps to investing more of the church's relational energy in building, developing, and sustaining relationships with young people for the sake of church maintenance. Given the range of research across the social sciences that stresses the positive impact relationships (e.g. coaches, teachers, neighbors, youth workers, etc.) have on young people, such an approach appears warranted.

While recognizing the warrant of such projects, our project pursues a different aim while looking at the same issue. Stated simply, we are interested in transformation. Certainly the strategies and programs related to young people staying within religious communities are also concerned with transformation. Yet, the more focused on functional questions of participation and how to capture young people's attention they become the further one moves from the language of transformation. This project seeks to refocus attention on articulating theologically why relationships seem to have the impact they do, not simply describing the measurable results of that impact. Through 16 life-history interviews with college students, we have begun this process.

The findings presented in this paper are preliminary in nature, and extend earlier research and theory construction. The beginning of this particular project emerged from a grant given by the Yale Center for Faith and Culture's "Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing

---

<sup>3</sup> Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016). The six strategies are: 1) Unlock keychain leadership; 2) Empathize with today's young people; 3) Take Jesus' message seriously; 4) Fuel a warm community; 5) Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere; and 6) Be the best neighbors.

Advisory Group.” Our contention heading into this research is that joy and transformation are integrally related. Joy is a dependent reality, contingent on connection, even communion with others. Joy, theologically speaking, centers in the union of human persons. This makes joy a spiritual reality in addition to any developmental description. To bear witness to the many expressions of joy is to encounter this spiritual union in and through relationships. A transformative spirituality of joy is thereby threefold.

First, a transformative spirituality of joy is narratable. Theologically understood joy emerges from the union of human persons, spirit-to-spirit, and as such a transformative spirituality of joy bears witness to this via story. In the embrace of another’s personhood a profound experience of communion occurs that generates a new story. The narratable aspect of transformation finds expression in constitutive modes of language by which one’s story is considered theologically, as a story of divine action. This sort of narration expresses a basis in human communion, pushing away from flattened forms of discourse that are merely representational. This was evident in our research where more profound narratives of shared personhood open into richer narrative depth, and led to more meaningful language of transformation. A brief interpretive engagement with of Charles Taylor’s theory of language in *The Language Animal* will be suggestive for future developments in this area.

Second, a transformative spirituality of joy is interruptive. The transformational power of the relationship rests in a *kenotic* act where someone enters into another person’s death experience (loss, confusion, pain, etc.) as an act of sharing in their personhood. By reenacting the narrative of Christ’s own life these instance of place-sharing become interruptive moments of ministry. This kenotic aspect comes not from within one’s own self by one’s own resources,

but in and through the interruptive presence of one's minister in the context of the relationship itself. The reality of negation thus becomes central to the transformative context of the relationship, and this too was evident in our research. In some of the interviews we conducted where a propensity to narrate meaningful experiences in terms of affirming one's basic needs, we discovered a more superficially pious or flattened narration. This is to say, little about their experiences interrupted the "normal" trajectory of their life, and thus the default seemed to be abstract and pious language. So, to access the richness of transformative language as communion seems to demand attention to the negation of human existence. This, too, calls for more attention.

Finally, a transformative spirituality of joy is ecstatic. To experience joyfulness, theologically speaking, is to be drawn into something outside of oneself to which one's joy bears witness. One of the questions we asked each interviewee was, "What is the good life?" doing so by contextualizing it to just after graduation, and then 10 years post graduation. For many it was difficult to escape the social imaginary in which they found themselves. The good life, one productive of joy, was relatively benign and intricately related to the social imaginary in which they found themselves. Yet, for those we interviewed who articulated something transformational, who clearly identified an experience of negation and who through another person were brought to a deeper place of narration, these social imaginaries were relativized. We posit that in this one sees the transformational impact of the relationship ecstatically. They are more apt to be drawn beyond themselves to identify meaningful possibilities beyond their social imaginary, and theologically this relates to being invited into the very life of God in the

world (*theosis*). The transformational language evident in their story bears witness to a larger vista of transformation for their world.

This threefold aspectual overview of our research and early theory construction is sufficient to set the terrain for moving deeper into these themes. To that we now turn.

### **Three Themes for Further Exploration**

Given the preliminary nature of this research there is likely more to pursue than these three themes alone. With our focus on transformation and joy (oriented toward consideration of the good life), these themes appear most germane. These themes also offer a constructive proposal for greater theoretical work that both researchers intend to do. In what follows we will expand on the outline above elaborating our early theory construction and explicitly connecting it with our research.

#### *Narratability: Transformational Language*

At the heart of our methodology is the telling of stories so it may appear somewhat suspect that narrative factors so significantly in our theoretical analysis. The burden of this section is to show how narrative matters theologically, how this conveys more than an expansion of methodology, but actually gets to the heart of looking at relationships transformationally, and thus, theologically.

Charles Taylor's vast work draws attention to how one of the impacts of a secular age's focus on *exclusive* human flourishing has been the hollowing out of transformational language. This is at least part of his disenchantment thesis, and a thread to which he turns explicit

attention in his latest work, *The Language Animal*.<sup>4</sup> Without delving too deeply into the intricacies of Taylor's linguistic theory, addressing a few essential elements will set the parameters for how narratability factors in our analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor contrasts his own account of language to what he calls designative accounts. These latter accounts of language follow from Descartes and might also be categorized as epistemic accounts of language. Language arises as representation of some other thing (e.g. ideas, behaviors, associations, etc.) and so language gives us control over the associative process. Our language designates reality.<sup>6</sup> In the distance connoted by designation language flattens out. Our words cease to participate in the reality to which they refer. They are objective, lifeless, facsimiles of rightness or wrongness. They are also therefore functional, instrumental, and inert.

One sees this assessment on display in one of our interviews, where the participant, after recounting a considerably harrowing experience in which her father, to whom she was particularly close, was found to have a massive tumor on his brain, in need of emergency surgery. This led her to a kind of extended discussion on the problem of evil, which resulted in her sharing the story of losing a cousin with whom she was also close in a car accident. At a relatively young age, this person shared stories of potential and real loss, yet defaulted to abstract theological deliberation. She makes sense of this profound loss via some version of free will, letting God off the hook even saying, "It kind of makes it a little easier, like okay, so its

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that some of the following discussion will utilize Taylor's terms, while in other places we will employ some descriptions suitable to our theological use, that nonetheless capture the essence of Taylor's concepts.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4ff.

not just God putting his foot down.” Theological language is here flattened into either God did this or didn’t do this. Language functions to objectify God, and in a sense, control one’s associative process in relationship to God. Thus, no matter how we tried to access the emotive core of these experiences, and see how other people may have ministered to her, the narrative was always resolved in a kind of representational way.

This particular example was illustrative of multiple interviewees who seemed trapped in flattened language. Their stories were often quite compelling, yet lacked narrative richness and depth. For instance, one interviewee glossed over meeting her biological dad when she was 16, whom she had never really known, and who is now in prison. She simply framed her life in terms of a “transformation from not being a Christian to being Christian,” but couldn’t really elaborate much on nature of the transformation. Her language represented something “right” about being Christian, and went on to talk about “following God right now,” but offered little in terms of explicit detail. These phrases designated and signaled the right things, but remained relatively unconnected to the narrative richness of her life. This is, of course, not to question their legitimacy, but to demonstrate how a recovery of theological language around significant relationships may serve to not only represent transformation, but participate in the transformative reality itself. This is to anticipate Taylor’s turn to narrative in language.

Taylor suggests that language’s primary reality is constitutive and expressive. By this he means that language helps to constitute the reality to which it speaks as a mode of expression, and thus language is more eventful, actualistic. Language in this mode (Taylor would argue its proper, highest mode) does not create distance but moves toward and into reality, becoming participatory. Hence language becomes a mechanism of communion between persons, which

makes language itself, particularly in the mode of narrative, transformational.<sup>7</sup> Language constitutes the relationship between human persons, and finds expression via narrative.

Such was the case when we interviewed Sarah.<sup>8</sup> Sarah described a relationship with her youth pastor, Marie, defining her as a “healer” for her family, someone she calls “saint-ish.” Sarah goes on to describe her older sister’s worsening mental health, how it was kept hidden from her by her mother, and how her youth pastor entered into her and her family’s pain as a comforter, as a presence. As Sarah narrates this story she articulates the transformation this presence meant for her family, and how she then became a comforter and care-giver for her older sister. The richness of the narrative is accessed via these terms as they are clearly constitutive of the transforming relationship between Sarah and Marie.

Here Taylor is helpful again. He writes, “[An] insight may come to us in a particular episode of heightened experience” where we may choose some particular word or proposition to convey this insight.<sup>9</sup> For Sarah this was the term healer. But, the formulation itself remains flat, unsatisfactory, because it does not adequately convey the experience. So we turn to narrative, not to illustrate, but to invite another person to experience something of the communion we ourselves experienced. The narrative opens into deeper communion as it is shared, and thus participates in the reality to which it bears witness. The healing communion between Sarah and Marie cannot be designated fully in the word healer. In fact, it cannot be designated at all, but must be expressed, for which narrative is the most apt. The narrative

---

<sup>7</sup> “A story, whether fictional or historical, will also involve human motivations, actions, interactions, differences of character, longer-term conditions, things good and bad that happen to people – in short, the vicissitudes of fortune, mutual sympathy, antipathy, and a whole gamut of attitudes to others. And more.” *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Name changed to protect confidentiality. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.



enacts the healing to which it refers, so that the interview itself becomes constructive and constitutive.

Sarah's was not the only interview that went in this direction. Another described the loss of a significant relationship, and the uncertainty entailed with such a loss, but described a kind of peace resulting from the decision made in the conversation with a mentor. He was able to convey the feeling of this experience, and in a certain sense, direct shared attention to it, so the articulation of the narrative became a shared space of human communion within the interview itself.<sup>10</sup> Another interviewee described an adverse interaction with her school principal while she was a teacher, which eventuated in her decision to enroll in college and pursue ministry. She describes initiating a program to feed hungry students at her school, which becomes a conflict between her and the principal of the school, who says he "needs her to teach." She internalizes this conflict as one of integrity of calling, saying, "I can't separate." The episode of conflict between her and her principal becomes an internal conflict drawing her toward a new calling. This episode was encountered even more profoundly in the context of a relationship with a significant mentor of hers. The awareness of not being able to separate her job from a deeper calling to serve the students in her school became the catalyst for a complete change of direction in her life. This awareness, though, came not simply as an internal voice, but was corroborated, even articulated in and through relationship. This insight anticipates the next theme to which we now turn: the interruptive nature of transforming relationships.

*Interruptivity: Affirmation and Negation*

---

<sup>10</sup> See Ibid., 335.

One of the persistent features of those examples highlighted above as more attuned to transformational language, and thus theologically richer, is the way in which the narrative proceeds from something interruptive of the flow of their lives. For Sarah it is facing the knowledge of her sister's worsening mental health, and invites her into the need for healing, realized by the presence of Maria as healer. Those willing to deal with the ambiguity, complexity, and mystery of their lives found a deeper well from which to draw as they narrated their experiences and relationships. Theologically this has to do, we contend, with the shape of divine action. If the narratability of transformational relationships conveys and participates in the hypostatic nature of personhood, the transforming agency of God inheres in the interruptive nature of these experiences, born witness to by the kenotic act of another person entering into one's experience of negation or loss.

Negation of its own is interruptive. Such disruptive experiences demand our attention because they bring to the surface our own finitude and contingency, as well as a recognition of not being in control. This is not unrelated to our discussion above. Nearly everyone we interviewed identified some experience of loss or negation as an important part of their relationship timeline with the person they were telling us about. The significant difference was how they narrated these experiences, and those who opted for more flattened language generally did so as a means of maintaining some semblance of control. We won't belabor the point already outlined above other than to suggest an intricate connection between these two aspects of our developing theory.

Those who were able to gain richer access to these experiences often articulated the presence of another person in the midst of the experience of negation. For instance, Louisa,

describes being confronted with the knowledge that her father was abused by her grandparents, with whom she lived in Mexico while her parents were in the United States. She describes one moment in particular where she is standing in front of the cross at a Roman Catholic church, and her grandmother confesses this to her, though she had at previous times denied it, and conveys her grandmother's sorrow, remorse, and penitence. Louisa conveys how this encounter truly changed her, allowing her to release a lot of anger, and how it continues to impact her, especially at Christmas. Her anger, we extrapolate, was related to not understanding this side of her grandmother, of not knowing how to deal with it, a kind of felt sense of negation. And yet through the confession, in the church, under the cross, there is a kind of kenotic act embodied by her Grandmother that continues to shape Louisa's outlook, one from which she cannot escape, that continues to interrupt her at various points throughout her life.

Ironically, the focus on negation came to us by observing its opposite where in one interview affirmation was central. Certainly, any relationship should not seek to manufacture negation, and as human persons we are in need of validation and affirmation. Yet, one interview in particular stood out for the manner in which the significant relationship was outlined as one of almost constant affirmation. Joe was quite involved in his youth group and described it as a place where people who ordinarily – like at school – did not hang out, would instead be together, and have shared experiences. Joe talked extensively about trips taken, and how good his youth pastor was at planning these trips for participants, and this marked the impact she had on him relationally. Joe described her as someone who “listened to students” in order to hear their needs (e.g. getting together) and then creating a “platform” for them where

these needs could be met. Intriguingly, when pressed to detail experiences arising from these trips and programs, very little emerged. Joe described a functional, well-oiled ministry program, and a relationship with his youth pastor in which she was the purveyor of those goods. That is, very little, it seemed, within the ministry itself was designed to invite young people to face their own negation. In fact, much of the ministry seemed bent on doing exactly the opposite, affirming all the felt needs of students to keep them engaged. Joe even describes his faith as a “relationship with the church,” so that any talk of God redounds back to talk of church programming.

This is not to minimize Joe’s experience, nor to suggest there are no tangible goods in creating spaces for welcoming togetherness and friendship. Certainly Joe’s relationship with his youth pastor was important, but did it open into an experience of shared personhood through which transformation might arise? Could it, without giving attention to the experience of negation? When the ministry seems set up to only affirm, the interruptive aspect of transformative spirituality, leading to joy, is muted. One is not forced to encounter anything other than one’s own felt needs, and thus the absence of experiences of negation leads almost inexorably to church maintenance, programmatic emphasis, and ministerial placation. By orienting ministry around affirmation, the youth worker herself likely feels constantly on call, unable to attend to her own finitude and dependence upon others. Thus, since joy is a dependent reality rooted in shared personhood and relational union, the likelihood of her own joy in ministry seems slim. Speculative as such a conclusion might be, the high incidence of pastoral burnout may be related to this ministerial orientation. Tending to the transformational ground of experiences of negation may not only prove transformational for the person to

whom one is ministering, but may cultivate fertile ground for transforming ministry, where the minister's own finitude can be encountered and embraced. Hence, practicing ministerial presence by tending to the experiences of negation cannot only be thought of as a "best practice" of ministry. Rather, it suggests something theological in that it may be seen as mutually transformative, and thus a space of God's ministry foremost.

*Ecstasiticity: The Good Life and the Social Imaginary*

At one level the final implication is commonsensical: a perspective on the good life resides within the social imaginary of many of the young people we interviewed. Their articulation of the "good life" was directly related to the possibilities imagined from their particular social location. So, for instance, at one of the evangelical colleges where we did research, when asked about the good life, the first thing each of our four interviewees discussed was getting and/or being married. More research into the specifics of this institution would be needed, but something of a social imaginary presents itself in the form of marriage and family as the dominant possibility for a good life. In the southern California context, each of the interviewees described the good life as being rooted in that place, quite specifically in that very neighborhood. Each of them imagined the good life as one where they could live their lives near the beach, in a neighborhood that had structured their life quite well, and among people who gave significant meaning to their life.

The purpose of this final section, and the above descriptions, is not to analyze the specifics of their answers, which broker in a kind of idealism. Rather, it is to suggest how intrinsic their perspective on the good life is. In some sense, this is to be expected. The internalized values and moral norms which guide our lives come to us from within our social

imaginaries. There is really nothing terribly interesting about this observation. What does become interesting is when this is put into dialogue with Taylor's work on cross-pressures next to those young people who were quite able to articulate and narrate an experience of negation.

Charles Taylor describes powerfully how life in a secular age is conditioned by powerful cross-pressures, and how much of life is learning to navigate these cross-pressures. One's social imaginary becomes one way of such navigation, as it presents possibilities for one's life to which one offers almost tacit endorsement. Much of the tension and ambiguity of life gets backgrounded so one can move forward in life. To bring uncertainty and ambiguity to the foreground, to have it show up in one's life, can be challenging, which we discovered in some of our interviews.

For those young people we interviewed who were quite able to dialogue with an experience of negation, in which their person was upheld by a ministerial other, this was less clearly the case. Negation sparked a narrative basis to call into question one's social imaginary, and thus encounter cross-pressure in a different way. As they were able to find language that moved beyond flattened discourse into transformational language, they were likewise able to see cracks in the social imaginary in which they were embedded. Taylor's cross-pressures became moments of transformation of perspective. The expansion of their social imaginary was not simply epistemic, but ontological. One could argue it is purely noetic, but one cannot dispute the ontic force of such experiences.

Thus, for instance, when asked about the good life, one participant, shared about vocation, about finding purpose, stating, "There's a reason why you're here. Walk boldly." She did not convey a generic sense of knowing what this meant, but instead saw this as pulling you

outside of yourself, finding the reason in the walking. This led her to see the good life as one of accountability to one another, to be part of a larger community. We can extrapolate to say that the very relationships which proved so transformative for her, became the heart of calling to a life in which relationships serve as the ground of shared connection, and a truly good life with God. For her, cross-pressure was almost expected, and thus she sought to integrate it into a social imaginary of service to others. Hence, a lack of certainty or security was not something from which to run, but an opportunity to turn to others, to be taken out of oneself, and discover God's purpose for one's life. Transformational relationships of ministry beget further ministry.

### *Conclusion*

More work needs to be done around these themes, work we hope to take up in future endeavors. Perhaps the most fruitful line of development is to see the integrated nature of these themes. Ministry is an ecstatic experience. Ministry begins by turning away from ourselves to others, to discern the agency and presence of God with and for others. Such movement entails a kenotic act on the part of the minister, where one's very self is interrupted for the sake of the other. The eventfulness of this embodied act calls for narration, which can then be encountered in communion. The share story is to find space with and for another, to allow story to interrupt one's life, and thus to be pulled again outside of oneself. This flow becomes simultaneous and formative. Perhaps then the next piece of this work is to think through practices that could be intentionally developed to aid in the formation of relationships that can follow this pattern, where story becomes the lifeblood of transformational relationships opening into entirely new possibility for our lives.

## Appendix: Method

Our research method utilized semi-structured life-histories as developed by Rubin and Rubin in their book *Qualitative Interviewing*, combined with the “Critical Incidence Technique.” The interviews were semi-structured in that they were guided by a prepared list of questions, but relatively loosely, and we knew we would likely not proceed through all our questions. Rubin and Rubin liken this approach to planning a vacation – you plan enough to get going, but welcome new opportunities and directions as they arise. Rubin and Rubin explain, “The purpose of main questions is to encourage people to describe their lives, providing narratives, stories, and examples that the researcher can analyze and follow up on.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this approach is not to try and generalize or simplify data, but to discern the “richness” and “complexity” of those they are interviewing in hopes of offering a comprehensive explanation.<sup>12</sup>

The “Critical Incidence Technique” proved useful in orienting the interviews toward life-history.<sup>13</sup> In this interviewing technique participants are asked to generate a timeline of critical events in their life. We adapted this technique to our study by asking participants to identify three key moments or experiences shared with the influential person in their life and chart them along a timeline. This helped to structure the interview space reflectively, and allowed our participants to potentially access important content by taking time to process and think, rather than simply respond to the interview questions. The methodology remained semi-structured because the points along the timeline were generated by the participant themselves.

---

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Research: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 178.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> See J.C. Flanagan, “The Critical Incident Technique,” in *Psychological Bulletin* (51), 327-59.



For our research we interviewed 16 college students from three regional areas of the United States: New England, the upper Midwest, and southern California. Two of the universities with whom we partnered are evangelical liberal arts colleges, one a mainline liberal arts college, one was a mix of state, community, and parochial colleges. Each of the participants was nominated by someone in leadership at their context, and the assumption is each professes some sort of faith commitment.

Participants were chosen in coordination with key leaders at four different locales, and while we initially aimed to focus our research exclusively on freshmen in their first semester of college, we ended up with a larger cross-section of college students. This may prove serendipitous as some of the possible avenues for further research may wish to analyze these differences. While this paper may allude to important interpretations from the difference in age between some of our participants, it is not the focus of this paper. The preliminary nature of this research leaves much to be addressed, and certainly other methods of analysis are warranted. For our part, the interviews proved instructive toward the beginning of theory construction, which this paper has demonstrated.