

**Big Questions, Worthy Dreams by Richard W. McBride, University Chaplain 18070930**  
**Psalm 146 and I Timothy 6:2-12 NEB**  
**Elon Community Church, UCC Family Weekend 30 September, 2007**

I begin with a Confession. I borrowed the title of this sermon from a book of the same name by Sharon Parks, who had an early career as a campus minister before earning her doctorate and teaching at Harvard Divinity and Harvard Business Schools, the Kennedy School Of Government, and then moving on to serve as a faculty member at the Whidbey Institute, near Seattle. Hers is one of my favorite books about the young adult years. It is not written so much for a young adult audience as for all who care about them, especially during their twenties, most especially during their college years. The purpose of her book is captured nicely in its subtitle: “Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith.” So this is a book for parents and for faculty and staff of universities and for those people who serve as mentors when young adults launch their careers. It is for church folk who care how life looks and feels for this group sometimes called the “twenty-somethings.” It is about their struggles to make sense of the world and their place in it.

Sharon was one of the first scholars to identify the “Young Adult Years” as a distinct developmental stage – especially in our American culture. It is a threshold time, a time between an adolescence marked primarily by attention to satisfying personal desires and the life of adult commitments to larger communities. This period between, say, eighteen and thirty is a time of the on-going search for personal identity. “Who am I when mom and dad are not around to guide my every decision?” “How do I know what I believe, when I realize that I must do my own thinking since no one else can think my thoughts for me?” I recall that moment during my first year of college when I forged a bargain within myself between how my parents wanted me to behave and what they wanted me to believe *and* the new insights that were beginning to occur to me – new ways of seeing the world that had not occurred to me in my small Virginia hometown. Here’s the bargain I struck: I would behave conservatively and think liberally. I would not embarrass my parents by out-of-bounds behavior, but I would think my own thoughts. I would explore new ideas, new ways of thinking about my world and myself. That internal bargain was an act of liberation accompanied by fearfulness, because I had declared a measure of independence from my family. I had walked away from their safety net.

Sharon Parks identifies these Young Adult years as a time of experimentation, trying on new identities and testing new possibilities. It is a time of soft commitments and of the search for reliable competencies. “What deserves my attention?” “What am I capable of?” and “What exactly do I have to contribute?”

I think that the life agenda of the college years is to finish the process of graduating from adolescence and embracing the challenges of these young adult years. It is leaving behind the self-centeredness of adolescence with its primary attention to self and peer group and it is accepting the responsibilities of searching for the authentic self that is God’s personal gift to each of us ... the authentic self that seeks to express its uniqueness and in the very same breath seeks to be in community with others. Frederick Buechner says that our true vocation is to be found at the intersection between what we most need to do and what we perceive the world most needs to have done. “What do I need to do to fulfill my life?” and “What do I sense the world needs from me?”

In the Timothy passage we read earlier, St. Paul is sharing wisdom with his much younger colleague. He was perhaps, like me, sixty-something offering counsel to a younger man of twenty-something. I wonder if Paul wondered, as I sometimes do, whether he was making

any sense to his younger friend. What can a guy my age say that can be heard by students forty years younger than I? Given the pace of change in our culture, the influences that have shaped us are so very different. But Paul and Timothy inhabited a life world that was fairly constant. I suspect that the generational differences of today are much more pronounced. I wager that it's harder today in our culture for people of different generations to understand each other. Having said that, I also wager that generations who come together in church have a better chance of reaching some common understanding because when we come here – or to our usual places of worship – we share a desire that head and heart be fed. We want a holistic faith that causes us *to think compassionately* and *to feel intelligently*. Head and Heart need each other if we are to address the Big Questions of life and dream Worthy Dreams.

Paul counseled Timothy to avoid two things – endless verbal arguments that only seek to prove one person superior to another and, secondly, chasing after money that seeks endless pleasures. The first, says Paul, leads to jealousy and quarreling, “slander and base suspicions.” The pursuit of money leads to “foolish harmful desires that plunge men into ruin.” Shun all that, says Paul. Instead, “pursue justice, piety, fidelity, love, fortitude, and gentleness.” Paul certainly knew how to name the Big Questions, the Worthy Dreams.

Sharon Parks devotes several chapters to the work of *mentoring* and to the importance of creating “Mentoring Environments.” Paul was a mentor to young Timothy, providing him what every mentor provides: recognition, support and challenge. Paul *recognized* him as he helped Timothy to recognize himself. That is, he helped Timothy to “see himself,” to understand his calling from God. [Who is it in your life that really sees you, recognizes you, verifies you?] Secondly, Paul provided *support* by affirming Timothy’s potential, by championing his competence, by affirming him as a colleague. Furthermore, Paul consistently issued a *challenge* to Timothy, reminding him to keep first things first: “Run the great race of faith ... for to this you were called.”

And there is one more dimension to effective mentoring. The mentor serves as an “*adult guarantor*” that there is life beyond the uncertainties that beset a young adult. The mentor offers this promise: Beyond the searching for an adequate self-understanding, beyond the nagging questions and self-doubt, Yes, you will come to your own “place just right” ...

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gain'd,  
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come round right.<sup>1</sup>

A mentor encourages the “turning, turning” of the young adult years, accepts the legitimacy of this searching, and at the same time exhibits in his or her own life the possibility of a meaningful and fully committed adult life.

In my early years as a campus minister, I had a wonderful mentor who helped me to see myself inhabiting my new role. Ed Christman called me late in the evening many nights of the week and always began those conversations with the same question: “Well, Chaplain, how was your day?” He named my role; he helped me to be effective in it by challenging me to review the day and share whatever happened, both its struggles and its achievements.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Tis the Gift to Be Simple, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Quaker song

And we, as Church, must understand what we have to offer to the students who are brave enough to cross the street to be with us in this place. We have the challenge to serve as a mentoring environment, willing to ask with our students the Big Questions and dream with them the Worthy Dreams. We can provide a space where those Big Questions are welcomed because we ask them, too. And extravagant dreams are dreamed because we dream them, too! We provide recognition, support, challenge and inspiration.

We provide a place of belonging. We provide a home for the testing of new possibilities, a safe place where all of us – but especially students – can know, as the United Church of Christ is fond of saying, “No matter who you are; no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

We provide hospitality to the really Big Questions, the ones that require courage and an active imagination, since *seeking* the answers matters more than finding them. “What is life asking of me? Does anybody really love me? Why do so many people suffer? Why do we persist in making war? Will I ever heal from my inner wounds? How do I express my creativity? Am I responsible for the injustices around me? Am I responsive to them? How do I want to invest my life?”

We must be willing to entertain these enduring questions because the purpose of truly Big Questions is that they stretch us. They reveal the gaps in our understanding and lead us to a broader grasp of God’s emerging truths. Providing hospitality to questions like these is doing our part to keep faith alive. For faith is no static thing. Faith is renewed daily as each of us searches for meaning and purpose in our lives, as each of us listens for the voice of God, or pays attention to the nudges that send us out to spend our life energies meeting human need.

We don’t have to be perfect to be engaged in helping people grow in faith as they move along life’s journey. In my early years of campus ministry, I had a special friendship with one of my students named Glenn Hewitt. His mother died during his sophomore year. Before he left to go home, we stood in the hallway outside my office, clasped arms, put our foreheads together, and prayed for his journey home. After he returned, Glenn said to me one day, “You know; you’re one of my heroes.”

“If so,” I said, “I am a hero with clay feet.”

“Did you think I hadn’t noticed?” he replied. It was one of the most humbling yet life-affirming comments ever made to me. ... “Did you think I hadn’t noticed” that you’re only human?! Mentoring happens when we establish genuine companionship by simply being as authentic with one another as we know how to be, sharing the journey of seeking to be faithful, asking Big Questions and dreaming Worthy Dreams.

Martin Luther’s offers this summation about the journey of the life of faith:

This life, therefore, is not righteousness  
but growth in righteousness;  
Not health, but healing;  
Not being, but becoming;  
Not rest, but exercise.  
We are not yet what we shall be,  
But we are growing toward it.  
The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.  
This is not the end, but it is the road.  
All does not yet gleam, but all is being purified in glory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ~ Martin Luther, “Defense of All the Articles” Lazareth translation, as found in Grace Brame, *Receptive Prayer* (Chalice Press, 1985) p.119