



FAITH AT THE CROSSROADS: THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

by Karen Wright Marsh,
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I know that you care deeply about the intersection of college and faith. Like me, you are curious about the spiritual lives of college students. You might be a parent (I've got a son in college and another on the way), or you might be a grandparent, an educator, a pastor, a friend—a number of you were recently college student yourselves.

As a director of Theological Horizons with my husband, Charles Marsh, a UVa religious studies professor, I have the great privilege of knowing many college students. When I hear them talk, I often recall the verse from Jeremiah:

¹⁶ *This is what the LORD says:
"Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16*

When a teenager arrives at the university on that first day of the first semester, he steps out into four years of life at the crossroads. He stands there in front of his dorm and he looks, peering down the paths that head off into different directions, and wonder: Which way now?

This young traveler has left the stability of family, the only life she's known. The beliefs she's grown up with are about to be challenged on every level. She will encounter unfamiliar ideas in the classroom and negotiate tricky social dynamics on Friday nights down Rugby Road. He will spend four years interacting with professors and classmates from diverse religious and moral and ethical points of view.

He will probably have some shipwreck experiences along the way: the unraveling of something has held his world together—the loss of a romantic relationship, maybe a physical injury or illness, a failure, perhaps the discovery of intellectual concepts that call into question things as he has perceived them, or as they were taught to him, or as he had read, heard, or assumed.

During these four years, will she ask for the ancient paths? And if she finds the good way, will she walk in it? Will she find rest for her soul?

I'd like to speak very briefly about three things:

- What the experts say about young adults at this developmental stage of life;
- What college students themselves report about their spiritual lives; and
- How Theological Horizons ministers at the very intersection of faith, thought and life.

Professor Sharon Daloz Parks examines the lives of twenty-somethings in her book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*.

Drawing from development psychology, leadership theory and theology, she examines the patterns of this unique time of life, the years of college and into the 20's—when one is no longer an adolescent and not yet quite fully adult.

Parks tells us that college age people are pushing off from the safe dock of the beliefs they've always held and thinking critically about God, about themselves and the world—and that this is a necessary process.

She writes: *"To become a young adult in faith is to discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited socially received assumptions about how life works—what is ultimately true and trust-worthy, and what counts—and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery."*

It's a time of questioning. It's what Parks describes as a process of "the formation, loss, and recovery of faith itself." The challenge for students is to venture forth and to return well.

At our Friday Vintage group at the Bonhoeffer House, a student recently said, "I know that my faith is different now than it was when I was in high school. But now that I'm questioning things, where will I end up? What will I believe about God when I'm through this?"

College students have told researchers a lot about themselves. A major study out of UCLA found that 76% of students report that they are "searching for meaning and purpose in life" and that they "desire to become more engaged in their spiritual journey at college".

The study found that while 8 out of 10 students believe in God, 65% feel distant from God and more than half question their religious beliefs.

Being spiritual doesn't mean that more students are flocking to church for answers, though. The UCLA study found that college students' attendance at religious services drops by almost half, from 44% percent in high school to 25% percent in college. This is a painful thing for many parents who have raised their children in the church and know that their kids are sleeping in on Sunday mornings—but this is not the end of the story. An intense struggle for transformed faith is underway.

I checked out these statistics with a college friend named Lee. Lee is in her 5th year, adding on a business degree at UVA. I told her that 76% of college students say they are spiritual, and asked her if this described her classmates. She said first of all, that because tolerance is such a strong value, conversations about religion can be risky, because there is fear of offending anyone. But Lee went on to say that yes, they are interested in spirituality, but not in a churchy way on the one hand or in a purely intellectual way on the other hand. Her friends are looking for authentic spirituality, for faith, even faith in Jesus, that is integrated into people's lives and work, for belief that connects on the ground.

I find it interesting that the national study found that students do want and even expect their universities to create opportunities for them to find purpose and meaning— But fewer than 1 out of 5 of public university professors say that "colleges should be concerned with facilitating spiritual development". Within administration and faculty, belief is most often considered a personal matter outside the sphere of academics.

While universities foster "outer" accomplishments in the fields of science, technology, and commerce, colleges most often neglect their students' "inner" development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, self-understanding, and spirituality.

This separation of outer and inner spheres, (the intellectual inheritance of dividing reason from faith and the secular from the sacred), is a great tragedy for students living at the crossroads who want to tackle the big questions and work through them with adults they respect. Instead, too many students are encouraged to chase success without ever examining the wider context in which their academic and career choices are being made. They are vulnerable to the demands of an entertained, consumerist and anxious society and lose this opportunity to wrestle through what kind of life they will truly choose to pursue.

Many young adults, even those who are privileged, are being cheated in a primary way. They are not being asked big-enough questions. They are not being invited to entertain the greatest dreams of their own lives or their times. Too many wander through this challenging time alone.

Nobody ever stops them and says:

"Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

How are young adults going to find the good way and walk in it?

Students' growth toward mature faith may just have something to do with all of us in this room.

Sharon Daloz Parks says that one's coming into an adult faith, a recomposed faith, depends in significant measure on the hospitality, commitment and courage of adult culture to play a mentoring role.

Mentoring, in its classic sense, is an intentional, meaningful relationship between one young adult and an older, wiser figure who assists that younger person in learning the ways of life. But according to the Harvard Assessment Seminars, students reported that their most positive learning experiences occurred not one-on-one but with a teacher and a small group of students—a network of belonging. A mentoring *community* offers a powerful setting and a critical set of gifts in the formation of meaning, purpose and faith.

A twenty something person has a developmental readiness for a new kind of belonging. Mentoring communities can offer hospitality and encourage worthy dreams of God and self and the world. In a mentoring community, the recognition, presence, care, and faith of others can make all the difference.

Theological Horizons is creating a Christian mentoring community at the heart of the university community. We know that all knowledge has a moral dimension and that learning that matters is ultimately a spiritual, transforming activity, intimately linked with the whole of life. It has been said that "God is always revising our boundaries outward." We want young adults to feel recognized as who they really are, and as who they are becoming. We offer a safe place for questions and yet can challenge students in their fragile faith.

I often hear the struggles of students who sit in the living room at the Bonhoeffer House and ask crossroads questions. Questions like these:

Who do I really want to become?
What is God, asking of me? Anything?
How do I work toward something when I don't even know what it is?
Am I loveable?
Why is there so much suffering?
Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things?
Do I want friendship or marriage? Is so, why? With whom?
What is the meaning of money? How much is enough?
What constitutes meaningful work?
Will I ever really heal from the ways I've been hurt?
What do I want the future to look like—what does Jesus want my future to look like?
What are my real talents, my skills, my longings?
When do I feel most alive and creative?
What are my fears?
What is trustworthy?
Where do I want to put my stake in the ground and invest my life?



These are big questions of meaning, purpose, and faith. They are questions asked at the crossroads and they demand faithful responses from all of us.

Theological Horizons is centered at the Bonhoeffer House in Charlottesville. It is there that the hearth and a welcoming table offer places for comfort and lingering. Hearth-sized conversations can be meaningful where no lecture ever could. At the Bonhoeffer House we invite adults followers of Jesus to come and talk about how their faith is lived in many vocations and contexts—I think that they offer the examples of lived out faith that students are seeking.

Our mentors include speakers like

- Sheila Yoder, a young Christian woman of 23 who talked about her work with women affected by the sex trade in Kolkata, India.
- Kate Burke is a UVA drama professor who led students and faculty through an interactive workshop of speaking Scripture from the heart.
- UR professor Rick Mayes, who talks about how his faith has shaped his global health and public policy work.
- Commerce school professor Karin Bonding, who we've asked to come and discuss finances and faith.

Our Theological Horizons directors live life close to students. When I was writing this talk on Saturday night, there was a knock at the door so I got up. There was Christie a fourth year who lives up University Circle from us. She wanted to make pumpkin and said she'd need to borrow a couple of ingredients. I said, "Well, what have you got so far?" And she said, "A pumpkin!" I sent her off with nutmeg, cloves, flour an egg, and a loaf pan—and a recipe.

- Saranell, our very part time assistant director, is an ordained minister who leads the weekly Breakfast Bible study. She and her husband Tim have two young children and yesterday brought her two week old baby to join us at the table.
- Charles guides, teaches and advises undergrad and graduate student as a UVa professor but even more significantly, I think, he also lives the life of a public Christian intellectual in their presence.
- I offer some unexpected mentors in the persons of classic Christian writers we read at our Friday Vintage group. I present people like Augustine, Martin Luther, Julian of Norwich and CS Lewis. We hear these Vintage Christians in their own words, speaking to us as older brothers and sisters in the faith who have something real and personal to say. Students truly receive them in this way.

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written that *the chief function of the house is to protect the dreamer*. Charles and I have found that the ministry of Theological Horizons, centered at the Bonhoeffer House, provides a place of protection within which young adults may discover themselves in Christ and become more at home in the universe.

THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

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