

# Accompanying the Young: The Souls our Hearts Seek

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**T**he story is told of a young novice in the desert who went to the elder, the holy man of God, and said, “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little Rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts. Now, what more should I do?” The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: “Why not be totally changed into fire?”<sup>71</sup> What, I wonder, would it mean to be “totally changed into fire?” What would it mean for those to whom I am called? What would it mean to serve the young with a blazing, all-consuming desire for their good? What would it mean to experience such desire as passion and then to live that passion as a process of becoming fire and calling others to become fire in their own lives of faith? What follows is an attempt to respond to these questions and to respond to them within the context of what is at the heart of the Salesian educational relationship: the fiery desire to walk with the young as they journey to that fullness of life promised them by Jesus.

When I was a young novice, one of the key attractors in the journey towards Salesian commitment centered around the passion I felt Don Bosco had for his cause, namely the coming

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<sup>71</sup> William McNamara, *Mystical Passion: The Art of Christian Loving*, Element Books, Rockport, Mass. 1991, 4.

to fullness of life of his young people. This passion was often expressed by the use of the term “zeal” in regard to Don Bosco.<sup>72</sup> Zeal is a good word to use for the passion that fired Don Bosco for the good of the young. It is a word that encapsulates his concern to meet the needs of his young people, his desire for their good, and his unwavering belief that such good would emerge if the right experiences were created for the young. It was out of this concern that the Salesian mission unfolded, nudged and nurtured by Bosco’s own life of prayer, his own experience of a loving God, present in and through the events and happenings of ordinary life.

This godly passion within Don Bosco cried out to be transformed into mission. It continues to cry out today in our own hearts. For when it is truly of God, this zeal, this passion has its own way of drawing us deeper and deeper into a vortex of apostolic energy and Christian love. This is the passion that both thrusts us forward and also draws us in, exploding and imploding in a dialectic of love. Indeed, by placing the word passion alongside the idea of becoming fire for the young we have all the permission we need to examine what is at the center of this indefatigable drive, this relentless reaching out for that which draws us in.

In our younger years it is the idealist’s dream, a utopian seducer of the best parts of us. We are carried on the waves of wanting to give our all for the cause. We work and pray and experience moments of the promised heaven, here on earth. Wonderful and exciting as it all is, as the busy days move into months and years we become aware that this is God’s work and that God will have God’s way in us only when we let go even of the dream. This is the beginning of wisdom. There grows within

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<sup>72</sup> So often this zeal is encapsulated in the motto “Da mihi animas...” and interestingly enough in recent years there has been a tendency to leave this slogan in its incomplete format. A “sign of the times” perhaps but one that limps in terms of the real implications of what this ministerial passion or zeal is all about for Don Bosco.

us that awareness which sears into our hearts. It tells us that what we do is not simply done in the name of God, but is God's work and this more than anything else so challenges us. It challenges the self-seeking within us. How do I let God be God in me except by letting go? This is a soul question. When we begin to intentionally ask the soul questions we know that we are beginning to grow in wisdom, a wisdom that does not seek the answers but seeks the depths where there are no answers, only greater wisdom.

This is the journey of our lives, the journey of our souls. When the events and experiences of life broaden and refashion our understanding to the extent that we become conscious of the passion in our hearts, then and only then can we dare to companion others on their faith journey. For it is at this moment that the dream takes second place to the passion, the love that has us seek out souls and truly not see a "rest" at all. Prior to this moment we have been friends of the young, present to them, actively engaged in their lives, but always from the dream perspective, wanting them to belong to God through the work of *our* hands, gazing out from the horizon of *our* dream. Like so much of the dynamic of the spiritual life however, it is only by losing the dream that we can hope to find it becoming reality. At the moment we can finally let go of the dream the emerging passion takes over and our action becomes fire, our accompaniment a true "walking-with-God-in-the-other" and others. Giving our lives over to God plunges us down the vortex walls of faith and propels us deeper into the sacred place within, that space and place where God is God in us. It is in those moments that we are called to the rekindling process, not simply as a return to the fire, but indeed as a means to become the fire. This paradoxical work of letting go and immersing ourselves in God is what makes of our activity with the young, a godly action. God's fire rages in the depths of our souls, and when we walk into it there, we realize that then and only then can we hope to become fire for others, warming and lighting up the soul of another and of others. This is our task; it is a task that

demands our own personal soul work. It demands that such work be done with a passion befitting one who is madly in love.

### **A passion for souls**

The real question facing us at this time is how to become fire for the young people we are called to accompany in a time when so many other things attract and lure and warm and light up their lives. What follows will attempt to speak of spiritual accompaniment of the young in the light of our Salesian calling. To speak of spiritual accompaniment is in many ways to speak about a new phenomenon which is emerging in the field of youth ministry and spiritual education<sup>73</sup> today. Undoubtedly the next few years will sharpen and shape our understanding of what it really means to continue to tend the souls of the future generations in times such as ours. For our purposes here it would seem important to, at least, clarify the terminology and the conditions necessary for spiritual accompaniment of the young to happen.

### **New wine in some old skins?**

Accompaniment is not new. It is a practice deeply rooted in the bible, present in classical literature and constantly cultivated in the history of both western and eastern spirituality. Indeed today we tend to talk less and less of “spiritual direction” and more and more of “spiritual accompaniment,”<sup>74</sup> understood as a

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<sup>73</sup> There is an emerging use of the term “spiritual” education with regard to children and the young today. The British authors David Hay and Rebecca Nye in their book, *“The Spirit of the Child”* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia – 2006 [second edition]) indicate the need for the introduction of spiritual education in an inter-disciplinary manner across the curricula of our places of education.

<sup>74</sup> André Louf suggests that the expression spiritual accompaniment “appears to have been born in protestant environments to express the service of listening and accompaniment of the terminally ill. It is a very important

service of listening, of compassion and hope, a systematic school of the interior life. In truth the term “direction” has always been a little problematic for no one “directs” another’s faith journey. The only “director” is the God who leads and cajoles, invites and entices along the way to holiness. The spiritual director’s task has always been about enabling the individuals to become more conscious of the movement of God within them, giving them the tools they need to “discern” God doing God’s work in their lives. It would also seem that the emergence of the term “spiritual accompaniment” better suits our post-modern concept of authority and service. Over and above this factor in the relationship between theology and the human sciences, especially psychology, a more neutral term, void of any of the overtones of tradition, is preferred.

Etymologically, the word accompaniment suggests the fact that someone accompanies another or others to arrive at a goal, or obtain something. Thus when we speak of accompaniment we are speaking of an interpersonal relationship. The companion accompanies, walks beside another, on the same path. The companion must neither go ahead nor go behind. The companion’s way is never a model for the person being accompanied. Each person’s journey is unique.

If we add to the word accompaniment the people we are targeting, namely “the young” and the adjective “spiritual” and mean by that word “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” we are being very specific about our task. Accompanying the young spiritually, in this context, means helping them discover and live Jesus as the unifying center of their existence and as the fundamental choice that directs their vocational orientation. This unification of one’s life with Jesus-Truth needs time and gradual ownership for the

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moment in the life of a human being, when the ill are faced with the unknown of death and the prospect of another life. These are situations which are disconcerting not solely for the sick person but also for the one accompanying the sick. Both are faced with ignorance, the unknown and it is doubly daunting for the one who assists the dying from the outside who must try to understand from what is heard said.”

integration of those factors that influence and determine the journey of human growth.

Obviously it would be a useless exercise to spend too much time on terminology. There is a long list of possible terms given to one who accompanies the faith journey of another. The words, "father," "teacher," "director" come to mind and their corresponding "son," "disciple," "directee" emerge and do not sound too pleasant to contemporary ears. However "each of these terms carries a part of the truth within it, but not one of them names in totality the content of this experience."<sup>75</sup> Indeed each of the titles carries a shade of explanation that enables us to see the complementary aspects of the process. Perhaps this difficulty regarding terminology serves to bring us face to face with the most essential element in accompaniment: "Do not call anyone Father, since you have only one Father. And do not call anyone Teacher, because you have only one teacher: the Christ." (Mt. 23:9-10) This then is a process in which the one who accompanies does so in the knowledge that he or she is an instrument, a means to bringing another and others to the real faith companion and object of the faith journey. To use our passion and fire terminology: the one who accompanies must be on fire in order to set fire to the other!

There is something else which needs to be understood. Today it is becoming more and more obvious that teaching and accompanying others on their faith journey is not solely the task of religious "professionals." Lay people are taking a rightful and much needed place alongside clergy and religious and proposing themselves as teachers of both spirituality and the Christian life. In doing so the laity are bringing to the whole relationship a breadth of vision and wisdom that has been so lacking in the past. It is true, these lay people have always been present in this capacity in the church, especially in their parental role in

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<sup>75</sup> André Louf, *Generati dallo Spirito*, Magnano, Vercelli, Comunità di Bose, 1994, 53.

transmitting the faith,<sup>76</sup> but it seems that doors are opening for this to be made more explicit. Spiritual accompaniment, I believe, is a ministry for both men and women. It is the task of ordained, religious and lay... not just open to all, but calling forth that indispensable collaboration that creates the kind of relational environment for such an adventure to take place at all.

### Starting point for accompaniment

Any process which seeks to accompany the young in their human-Christian growth needs to start from an understanding of where the young are. The companion needs to immerse himself or herself in the complex world of young people today. What follows is by no means an exhaustive treatment of this world, but rather some aspects relevant to the drawing up of a kind of youth map of faith.

At one level we have young people who are satisfied, conformist, pragmatic and most often indifferent to religion. These young people have lost confidence in institutions and therefore have a limited association with them and very scarce participation in political life. They live in a pluralistic, divergent society which is the shifting ground of continual change. Young people today run the risk of going from one experience to another without putting down roots, without making stable choices and without defining their fundamental groups of

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<sup>76</sup> The role of the family in the process of the faith accompaniment of the young is not treated in this present offering. Its absence does not mean I am relegating it to the arena of irrelevance. On the contrary it is so important an issue I feel it requires a treatment by one much more qualified. Its relevance is reaffirmed by the most recent inter-faith research in the United States regarding the spiritual lives of teenagers. Indeed the published findings of the 2002-2004 National Study of Youth and Religion research on the spiritual and religious lives of teenagers found in a book which emerged in May of 2005 entitled "*Soul Searching*" (Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, Oxford University press, 2005) states that the majority of American teenagers do indeed follow the religious lives, or lack of them, of their parents. (cf. 208ff.)

belonging. The result is a young person who, while participating in a multiplicity of activities and enterprises is fearful, indecisive, uncertain about the future and incapable of making autonomous, clear and lasting decisions. We are looking at a young person who is fragmented and subject to moral relativism.

On the other hand there are many of these same young people who are trying to find themselves. They manifest new values such as the importance of the person, a new way of building relationships, based on friendship, freedom and justice. They demonstrate openness to diversity (tolerance, ecumenism, innate respect for those who are different) and justice (the new vision of peace and development, the totality and global nature of existence). They have a renewed sensitivity to cultural and religious situations and of course are children of an explosive technological progress. There are signs that within these same young people there is a desire for the spiritual, in the widest sense of the word "spiritual," and a spirituality which seeks to commit itself to the betterment of society through different forms of volunteering. Faith, for it to gain ground at all in the life of these young people, grows out of the experience of service to others.

Among these positive and less positive aspects we also have to admit that the landscape of young people projects ambivalence which has strong repercussions on the personal identity of the young. There is an innate sense of paradox hovering on the surface of youth culture and this creates enormous tensions. This affords the young of today the capacity to be generous and at the same time self-seeking, honest and deviant in dealing with rules and regulations, carers and custodians of the environment while at the same time given to outbursts of frustrated anger spilling over into bloody violence. This is probably one of the most confused generations of young people yet in terms of sense of self. It is also one of the most informed in terms of knowledge about life and peoples. The pressures of leisure time, partying and mass media take their toll heavily on the young, leaving them with multiple and superficial

stimuli but scanty possibilities of reflection and therefore of understanding or finding meaning in their experiences. They are young people with surrogate stimulation yet apparently bereft of long term nurturing. They are not to blame, even as they struggle to place blame on so many institutional ways of finding hope and meaning in the present day chaos. To speak of faith in such a milieu is at times to sing strange songs in a strange land.

We live in times of exodus. Our young people are signs of this. As educators to the faith our task is an awesome one, some might say even an impossible one. Yet, faith may also prove to be the most timely of discourses in such a setting. Faith after all is gift, and the task of faith companions is that of encouraging the receiver to open the package and embrace the gift for all its worth, eventually praising the gift giver. This means that one who accompanies the young today on their faith journey is aware of how important the personal relationship is on this journey in which the young person has to become responsible for the gift. It is vital to continue to uphold who it is that gives the gift and directs the way. Knowing the problematic areas of youth culture and sustaining the positive elements is a really necessary step in this journey of accompaniment, so that the companion may truly make the journey alongside the young, until the young make the choices they need to take their own journey in hand.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> A look at the work of Sharon Daloz-Parks is extremely important in this area. In her book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, USA – 2002) she lays out a model of young adult faith. In it she describes the ownership of one's faith as the stage in which the young adult has arrived at "inner authority." The Mentor's task (her word for the faith companion) is to create the kind of relationship that enables such ownership to happen. Perhaps even more interesting in her work is her insistence that mentoring communities or congregations are vital in this process of claiming ownership of one's faith.

### Love as the indispensable condition for accompaniment

If it is true that young people need to become the protagonists of their own social and evangelical renewal, our ministry and outreach to them must begin from within their experience, from where they are. To this sensitivity of where the young are must be added empathy with them. This means not simply knowing their reality, but living it alongside them, knocking down physical, psychological and cultural distancing from them. We need to be close to them, listening to their need to be understood, aware that very often we adults are the ones making demands on the young more than making ourselves available for them. We must want their good, and encourage them to ask their questions in a constructive and meaningful way. A real education to the faith of young people begins in acknowledging and continually honoring the faith already in their hearts that a true educator will know how to discover.<sup>78</sup> The true educator will in his or her ministry use reason when necessary, and pastoral sensitivity, to understand the desires of God so often buried, but by no means gone from the heart of the young. This is a task of love, if love can be considered a “task.” The companion journeying with the young person must, in the first instance make himself or herself loved, knowing that the only way to be loved is to be in love, to love.

It is this loving acceptance which generates a mutual friendship, respect, and responsibility to the point of encouraging in the young the consciousness that as persons they do have value and meaning that is way beyond anything they ever imagined for themselves. It is this which energizes young people with the best quality of energy, with the most profound and self-giving passion. As one writer says so well, “Since adolescents seek a caliber of love no human can possibly sustain

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<sup>78</sup> Remembering that the word “ed-ducare” literally means to draw or lead out and NOT impose or even input.

without disappointment, the discovery of the one Love who really is worthy of sacrifice, who really *does* love us selflessly and extravagantly—the Love who never disappoints, who will not let them down, and who will not go away—is a discovery that reorders the self.”<sup>79</sup> This sense of being loved then needs to translate itself in love for others. Such an experience of love for the young is even more profound when the whole environment, the whole community accepts and loves the young in this way and proposes ways to the young person of showing over and over again that love for others which has become so much a part of their own lives. The more unified the environment that surrounds the young the more the possibility this unifying passion has for emergence. The relationship between the young person and his or her educator relies on the relationship that the educating environment, and the other adults involved in it, creates—and vice versa. In other words, the more unified the proposals and interventions of the community surrounding the young person are is relative to the young person’s growth in the experience of unity in life. The educator/youth minister is called on to pay close attention to both the personal relationship and the community in which the young person is immersed. Accompaniment is then both personal and communal in its dimensions.

### **Knowing the end of all our accompanying**

Every accompaniment process is defined by the goal that one wants to reach. We need to have a clear idea of the kind of young person the educational environment aims at calling forth to take his or her place in the real life situation. It needs to be recognized that the goal and ultimate aim of every process of accompaniment is to give unity of life to the young person

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<sup>79</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2004, 20.

around fundamental values which unify the person.<sup>80</sup> This unity of life for the young person is a need arising out of the convergence of the "spiritual life" (values and needs), with the "secular life" (family, friendships, school, work, social commitment, culture, etc). In order to safeguard the balance of the integral and harmonious growth of the person this unity of life can never be betrayed. Indeed unity of life is the characteristic that needs to run through the whole process of personality growth if dualism and false dichotomies are to be avoided.

Christianity is unique in that it is founded on the breaking through of the divine, of God into the human. This means that God is attainable in Christ, through the fullness of lived humanity. The paradox inherent in Christian life is that God is encountered in the human and through our relationships. Within the Catholic tradition the Second Vatican Council exhorted Christians who are citizens of both this world and the next to "strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith

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<sup>80</sup> William James, more than 100 years ago, wrote extensively on the unifying force of religion in personality. He concluded from his empirical data that "to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many processes which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto undivided...becomes unified." (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, London - 1902, 160.)

which many profess and their daily lives deserve to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, it is Christ who, for us and for our young people, becomes the unifying factor which leads to the “abundance of life” Jesus himself promised to all who believe.<sup>82</sup>

If we talk about spiritual accompaniment then we have to be explicit and say that the goal of the journey we are referring to is nothing less than a journey to build the personality with Christ as the reference point at the level of both the mind and the heart. In this way we are actually claiming that it is faith which becomes the unifying element and enlightens the personality of the young person. We are talking of establishing a profound experience of communion-communication between the educator and the young person in order to assist the unfolding of the potential of God’s project, aware that such a relationship is played out in the presence of the one true teacher: the Spirit.

This task is as difficult as it is delicate. On the one hand we are to help young people reflect critically on their lived experience so that they will be able to refashion the present in order that the future might be lived in a different way. On the other hand the task is to help the young person deepen his or her understanding of the mystery of Christ so as to discover the fullness of his or her life, its meaning and purpose in its totality, seeking always to identify with Christ and assuming the implications of such identification. This explicit proposal regarding Christ as the unifying point of the life of the young does not threaten the freedom of the young person. Christ respects the freedom of his followers, clarifying the conditions of the following even as he presents himself as model to be imitated. In fact in the process of accompaniment the young person is helped move towards a clear and enlightened vision of his or her inner life and of the motivations that determine

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<sup>81</sup> GS 43 The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* promulgated by his Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965 and one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>82</sup> John 10:10.

behavior, openness of heart, loyalty and docility which make way for the word of God becoming flesh in the person. For this reason a whole host of human attitudes open up, mature, and become natural within the young person. Such attitudes are respect and love for others, the capacity to give freely of oneself and be of service to the world which exudes a materialistic and utilitarian stance, one that demands immediate gratification to primary and so often confectioned desires and needs.

This balance between the inner life and the outer life will enable the young person to overcome the fragmentary nature of his or her life and arrive at unity of life or "wholeness." Such wholeness is manifested in wisdom, a capacity to live one's vocation, a peaceful relationship with God and understanding of his or her destiny in God. Such wholeness is in fact the exercise of faith, of hope and of love as style of life. It is faith lived to the full. And because this faith is about the unity of life, it is also life in its fullness.

**The key questions then are what is the basic goal of spiritual accompaniment and what needs to be accompanied?**

That which needs to be accompanied is truly the life within us, the inner life. It is a life in the strongest sense of the word. To speak of life is to speak of movement. We know that life can move in two directions: it can progress or regress, in the natural order it either grows or decays. The essence of life teaches us that one cannot remain in place: we are either pushed forward or thrown backward, growing or decaying. Life is never motionless; it must evolve one way or the other. To take life seriously means that we must be prepared to care for it, to cultivate it, to be attentive to it, to provide for its needs, to remove any harmful obstacles and thus allow it to develop and achieve its full growth.

What we accompany in the person who comes to us is the inner development of a life which requires special assistance.

It is the faith experience of the person that we are attending to. The faith experience, seen as essentially a life experience, concerns itself with the life of God within us, the light and strength of the Spirit. It is about that which unites us person to person and creator to created one. It is a discovery of the image of God that is within us, and assists us in imaging that God to those around us in our everyday lives. This is our “vocation,” our project of life, played out with different characters and themes but always on the stage of life lived in its fullness.

### **The journey of accompaniment: signposts along the way**

Within this unified vision of life and calling, there are a variety of facets that comprise the integral formation of the young, enabling them eventually to live fully their vocation, and ultimately to become in their turn companions of faith for others. These components are the “matter” of the accompaniment process. These elements require that the faith companion knows all about the ways of the heart and continues to experience for himself or herself, that “love is the cure—for our pain will keep giving birth to more pain until our eyes constantly exhale love as effortlessly as our body yields to its scent.”<sup>83</sup> This is the faith companion’s passion, to love with a love that cures and looks on the young with eyes that constantly exhale love, God’s love. Through this kind of loving the young person is gently invited to travel on the road of growth into wholeness that becomes holiness. There are indications when this is taking place. They are like signposts, not pointing away from the person, but pointing to greater depth, to the heart place of mystery where God is.

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<sup>83</sup> The poet Jalaludin Rumi (1207-1273).

### The sign: maturity this way

A journey of accompaniment seeks to create favorable conditions so that young people might open themselves to seek and accept truth and the desire for those authentic values which lead people to human maturity and enable them to become protagonists of their own life. The mature person is one who listens attentively to the questions that life and the world pose and manages to experience the mystery that surrounds life and searches for meaning through reflection and commitment to reaching certain goals. The mature person is never a completed project for there is always more to life, especially for one who knows that life is abundant.

Recently I challenged a class of young people on the threshold of adulthood to construct their personal worldviews. Their answers ranged from powerfully perceptive to shallow and tame. Each one engaged in the task from the place and space they were in, for good or for ill. I was left reflecting as I sifted through their offerings, how the concept of worldview was so new to them. I asked myself, these are maturing young people, at one end of the educational “process” and it seemed that thus far we had not asked them to summarize their values and beliefs and outlook on life. What does this say about our educational process? What does it say about our mania to fill minds at the cost of ignoring hearts? Maturity, the kind which faith shapes, is that emerging capacity to allow the heart to lead the mind into right action, right thought and right living. For our part as educators it is vital to note that “our ministry effectiveness with this present generation of young people demands that we understand the unique way that post-modernism shapes their values, attitudes and behaviors.”<sup>84</sup> This demands that we hone our skills regarding asking the right questions, and listen compassionately to the stories the young relate as answers.

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<sup>84</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, IVP Books, Illinois, 2006, 82.

**The sign: accepting and loving oneself**

For some young people acceptance of self comes almost spontaneously. People who find themselves in a world where they are surrounded by love, by people who love them, who dialogue with them and work alongside them to build their story, in the big things and the little things of life, arrive at a balanced and realistic sense of self and self-worth. For some people however, a healthy sense of self is much more difficult to attain and involves greater risks. Some begin to think that their lives have no value. So many educators of young people today are aware of the fragility of their sense of self. This is not solely developmental. It is rather a by-product of a world so image-powered that with a press of a button reality becomes virtual, and virtual the only reality that is accessed.

The implications of this image driven virtual reality in the lives of our young people are manifold. The typical adolescent “who am I” of the past has been turned into a “which image best suits” of the present. The real companion of the faith journey of the young is one who helps the young discover the “real” me. This can only emerge as they are encouraged to reflect on what is happening around them. It is a sorely needed reflective capacity for our day. Only a positive sense of self, in turn, can open them up to inter-personal relationships and give them the capacity to communicate what they are to others. Only an authentic sense of self gives them permission to recognize their worth, accept the other as different and acknowledge their limits, thereby encouraging them also to a positive relationship with their environment and the world.

**The sign: seeing life as it really is**

The virtual unreal holds a fascination for the young people of today. They tend to believe what they want to believe is true. What suffers in this is their potential. Easy access to unreality

points towards a distancing from one's body, one's story and one's own self. The image of self becomes so far removed from reality that it is impossible and useless to attempt to confront it from either perspective.

Young people need to be helped to listen to their own inner voice and be guided by a realistic reading of life so that they can reorder their existence. What is needed to be encouraged by every educator and every school community is a critical stance in the young towards life and media, indeed towards the whole of reality. Experiences of giving of themselves to others, of being less comfortable in order to assist others, of contemplating nature, or truth, or daily struggles, of poverty or suffering, of common life open the young to the mystery of God and allow their inner lives to grow strong and develop. A critical stance before reality needs to move the young to personal conversion, to the desire to transform their reality. From here the young begin to understand their responsibility towards others while at the same time acknowledging that their attitudes and their actions have consequences not only for them but also for the people around them.

### **The sign: freely giving myself to others**

We live for the most part in societies which offer us every kind of satisfaction. Advertising makes this apparent in a multiplicity of ways. For whatever need we have there is a marketable product to be consumed. There is a real problem here. If I am constantly led to believe there is a product to satisfy my every need then eventually my desires and needs for anything other than the consumable will be blunted. Within the general movement to satisfy our human needs it is difficult to hear a call to serve the needs of others. It becomes more and more difficult to hear a call to "higher" or more altruistic needs. Yet, once given a taste of what it means to serve another, there is no looking back. Our altruism has a way of enriching us, even of

taking care of us, to the extent that we can become so much more through what we give than through what we hold on to.

The young people need to learn that personal gratification is always at best ambiguous. It deadens the desire for more and better and eventually it leads the one who is satisfied into isolation. Our young people today run the risk of living a culture of satisfaction that moves not to happiness but to loneliness, anguish and even death. Satiating all the desires in people is a sure way to bring them to the brink of suicide. Perhaps one of the real difficulties of this generation is that it has few really great desires. Needs which are immediately satisfied reduce a person to selfishness. Real desire instead opens the person up to what is beyond. It is real desire that enables a person to experience the infinite, to go beyond oneself.

When we as human beings open ourselves up to the dynamic of desires which are not simply needs to be satisfied then we are opened up to what is greater than us. Desire is satisfied by what is desired and not by the person doing the desiring. Desire will remain alive only if a healthy distance is maintained between the one doing the desiring and that which is desired. It is out of this distancing, ironically, that the relationship of accompaniment is born.

Respect for things, for one's body, and even for God are all elements which maintain this distance: the distance in which the desire is constructed. Education to our great desires needs to be part of this accompaniment of the young. Without it there will neither be the desire for great things nor the delight which comes from reaching out to another in real love.

### **The sign: experiencing God**

The service of accompaniment is then a service of educating the desires. It is about looking at the lack of satisfaction, the "disease" with one's life and recognizing the call to the transcendent which lies at the very heart of the desire: the spark of the divine. This is recognition of what is called "vocation." It

is the spark of the divine within the human heart that makes of spiritual accompaniment a process which is about far more than human growth. It is ultimately about a meeting with a person who is God: Jesus Christ.

Spiritual accompaniment of the young is not a way of helping the young to grow up. It is rather a way of helping them to grow into love. It is a way of assisting the young in their meeting and immersion into Christ, in whom God has become visible. The real work ultimately of the spiritual companion is to make himself or herself redundant. The aim is that the young comes to experience God as God is. The means to do this can be taught to a certain extent through listening to the word of God, through prayer both personal and communal, through an understanding of the content of faith and its implicit values and through attending to the law of love at the heart of God: to become that love for each other and others. This demands an education of one's affectivity and sexuality, and a constant seeking to build the life of God here on earth. All these are ways and expressions of the experience of God.

Once again the journey of accompaniment has always to be played out on two fronts. The first is the place where the young reside: the life of the young is departure point. The second is the centrality of Christ who becomes the way and the truth and the fullness of life to which the young aspire. This is a journey of faith, companioned by others who are on their own journey. The journey is never the same for any two people. What is the common element for all people is that the journey is allowed to unfold in day-to-day life. It unfolds in the laughter and the tears, the hellos and goodbyes, the successes and failures. Nothing is unimportant about this life in God, for in God all things are possible and valuable.

**Passionately tending the fire**

A poem attributed to Francis of Assisi runs thus:

*A tool  
in your hand I am, dear God,  
the sweetest instrument you have shaped my being into.*

*What makes me now complete –  
feeling the soul of every creature against my heart.*

*Does every creature have a soul?*

*Surely they do; for anything God has touched  
will have life forever,*

*and all creatures God  
has held.<sup>85</sup>*

Surely what makes us all complete is “feeling the soul” of the young against our hearts? For ours is a work of heart, that finds its home at the hearth of God’s love for each one of us. We are able to do God’s work of soul tending the young, only because it is a work that God is already doing in us. The fire that burns in our hearts, calls us to be consumed so that others may not simply feel that fire, but become one with the fire. It is the fire that burns and is never consumed, for it is nothing less than God’s love for each one of us. This is the love that Jesus came to ignite on the earth.<sup>86</sup> It is a love that is faith in one who is always present to us. It is the faith that enables us, in turn, to bring hope to those around us. It is a hope that love will indeed strengthen the faint-hearted and bolster the down-trodden and give voice to

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<sup>85</sup> Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God*, Penguin Compass, New York, USA, 2002, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Luke 12:49.

the voiceless. It is the very heart of our task as faith companions of the young: to love as Jesus did, to believe in the young as Don Bosco encouraged us to do, and to trust in the power of God working within us to do more than we could ever imagine.

Our task is an awesome one. It is as vital today as it is awesome. Only the fire of God's love will sustain our passion. Only this passion will be equal to the task of transforming our endeavors to lead the young into Christ. Our prayer, then, must be for this passion and for our hearts to burn with such passion. Our prayer must be that we be given the souls our hearts seek so that we might build in our world an almighty fire of love, not simply for the young, but more importantly together with the young.