Story time: How to be the kind of adult that youth actually want and need

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It was only the second night at the Youth Theological Initiative’s three-week Summer Academy, and one of the staff members, whom we will call Anne, along with four teenage girls living on her dormitory floor, were still getting to know each other. Anne wandered into their suite, sat down, and started to engage them in conversation. After chatting for several minutes, engaging in the typical “get-to-know-you” conversations, one of the girls asked Anne to tell them a bedtime story.

Anne accepted their invitation but decided that she wanted the girls to be part of the process—to be active, not passive. She invited them to think about different ways they could tell stories that would spread out the creativity—and responsibility. After some discussion, the group came up with the story-time format they would follow for the remainder of the program: each night a different person would be the storyteller, and the storyteller would narrate a tale in the “Mad Libs” style, asking the person next to her in the circle to come up with a word to fill in the blank, thus sending the tale in a new direction that the storyteller would then need to build on and follow until she asked the next person in the circle to supply a key word for a blank. This way, each person had a chance to be the storyteller, but the entire group helped to shape the story. Anne joined the group for story time every night, but she was not in charge of this activity. She was an adult participating alongside youth.

Over the course of the three weeks, Anne noticed several dynamics developing. First, in the minutes before story time commenced, Anne was able to engage in informal conversation that often yielded important insights into how the girls were relating to each other and how the community as a whole was functioning. By simply sticking around and being a part of the group, she was able to understand on a more complex level the social dynamics taking place throughout the community. But she had to listen; she had to be present without controlling the conversation.

Second, by the final week, the story-time girls no longer needed story time. After so many nights engaging in silly, informal conversation that served to create the space for building trust, the girls moved into deeper conversations with each other and with Anne—conversations in which they were able to become vulnerable, engage in self-critical reflection, and ask their most pressing questions about life, love, and God. They turned to Anne as wise-person, recognizing the resource she could be as someone with more life experience. By hanging out, being a participant rather than a leader in this space, Anne’s role as respected adult grew rather than diminished.

Having quickly sensed the value of this time in helping to develop trust with the girls who participated in story time, Anne had encouraged the other staff members to do something similar—to simply go into the halls and hang out with the girls as they transitioned to bedtime. The staff in the girls’ dorm resisted this idea, however. From their perspectives, the girls had spent the entire day in the presence of adults, and they felt strongly that the girls
needed space and freedom. Entering their suites to hang out felt intrusive and seemed like a form of “surveillance.” Yet, once a few of the staff members did go hang out, they realized this was not surveillance.

The girls wanted them there and welcomed them into their space. It was true that they had had enough of adults standing on the edges of the room, watching and judging without participating, listening, or contributing to their discussions. It was true that they didn’t want surveillance. It was not true, however, that they didn’t want adults. They wanted adults—fully present, caring adults, willing to cross over.

**Story Time as One Practice of Crossing Over**

What can we learn from Anne and the story-time girls? As the adult in the situation, Anne crossed over the gulf between adults and youth, and did so with no other agenda than to get to know the youth on their terms. Yet this is harder than we think. In *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, Chap Clark describes the way that “systemic abandonment” has left young people mistrustful of adults who reach out to them. Citing a youth worker who exhaustedly exclaimed her frustration that when she reaches out to youth, they don’t meet her halfway, Clark explains that, “whether they experience it from a coach, a schoolteacher, a parent, a music teacher, or a Sunday school counselor, adolescents intuitively believe that nearly every adult they have encountered has been subtly out to get something from them.” In light of this:

“A middle adolescent, then, simply will not come halfway—why should they risk more disappointment? An adult who wants to connect but demands that midadolescents come halfway only serves to confirm the mistrust they feel and deepen the divide between adolescents and adults. To the midadolescent, this attitude is yet another confirmation of abandonment.”

Adults need to not only reach out to young people; they also have to make themselves vulnerable and cross over fully into the space of young people, risking rejection, with an attitude of peacebuilding appropriate to the group in a conflict who has disproportional power and abuses it.

Anne’s way of reaching out is thus important. When Anne walked into that dorm room, she didn’t stand in the doorway, one foot in, one foot out, standing over the lounging girls as an adult coming to do a shallow “check in”—which, within the context of systemic abandonment, is more likely to be interpreted as suspicious surveillance rather than caring concern. Instead, Anne went fully into the room, plopped down on the floor, introduced herself, and then waited for the girls to invite her into the conversation they were already having. She didn’t come in with a set of instructions to give, preplanned lessons to teach, or a structured “icebreaker.” She didn’t come in to get the girls “pumped up” about the great experience they were about to consume at the Youth Theological Initiative. Instead, when invited to tell a story, she told one that sent the signal that it was all right for the girls to be uneasy about this new situation—that even the adults leading the activities were awkward and uncomfortable. She ensured that the conversation didn’t become one in which she became the star, the authority, or the impersonal representative of the institution. She signaled that she did not intend to be one more adult abusing her power.

Not only was Anne’s act of crossing over significant, but the actual development and structure of story time itself became significant as a peacebuilding practice. When Anne returned the second night, she refused to be the sole storyteller. She brought to the girls the possibility of coming up with a different model and invited their ideas.
Together, the girls and Anne came up with the “Mad Libs” format that featured rotating leadership and frequent contributions from everyone in the room. This was not only more creative but also much more inclusive and democratic—both in the way they came up with the idea and in the way they executed it—thereby sending a signal that the contribution of each person in the room was equally valuable. But once this was established, Anne could no longer control the choice of topics or the dynamics of the conversation. She had to trust that, as a group, the girls would develop a set of guidelines that would keep the game fun and inclusive. She offered the girls a way of having fun and getting to know each other that was not carefully planned, closely controlled, or dependent on her. She showed them respect and trust, and the result was a simple yet extraordinary practice of building community.

Moreover, she did this night after night, despite exhaustion, her other commitments, and the ambivalence she sometimes felt about her role in these conversations. Story time took place at 11:45 p.m., after a long day of activity. As the supervisor of other staff members and the one responsible for staying abreast of the issues of the entire dorm, Anne visited other dorm rooms and touched base with other staff members before she settled into story time, and it was not always easy to fit everything in before “lights out.” She sometimes stepped into the room in the middle of conversations the girls still weren’t ready to include her in, and she had to find a way to listen for pertinent information related to community concerns while not probing or engaging in gossip. She sometimes had to hold her tongue, resisting the temptation to lecture or judge, as she waited for opportunities to raise questions and share wisdom without dominating the conversation and shutting down the lines of communication.

She wrestled with finding a different way of being an adult in this space—neither detached monitor nor “one of the girls,” but a mentor, someone who has experience and wisdom to share, yet the humility and patience to sit and wait for the moments when the girls felt safe enough to invite her to share that experience and wisdom. She couldn’t have done this in one story-time meeting, nor even in a week of them. In fact, it was not until the third and final week that the girls began turning to Anne for her advice. She brokered a peace by proving that she was not one more adult using them for her own agenda, ready to abandon them if they didn’t meet it.

We can characterize Anne’s consistent gestures of respect and care as a practice of peacebuilding when we compare the dynamic that took place in the story-time group to that in other parts of the dorm at the same time. Where the other girls were “left to their own devices,” an uglier side bubbled up. Girls retreated into different rooms to engage in gossip. When staff members asked them to go to bed at lights out, they were met with indifference or outright disrespect. Cliques formed, and the rest of the community became aware of toxic interactions between individuals that spilled over from those nightly conversations. Staff found themselves engaging in power struggles with some of the youth. The larger societal conflict of adults—seen as stupid, uncool, naive—with youth—seen as spoiled, mean, and shallow—manifested itself in microcosm. Though on the whole this negative dynamic was mitigated by multiple mini-interactions between staff and youth comprised of genuine care and a desire for relationship, it was nonetheless clear that we were not immune to the larger forces that shape the way adults and youth see and relate to each other.

The resistance of the other staff to go into the girls’ dorm rooms and cross the divide that Anne had overcome comes out of this fact—despite our program’s clear commitment to working with youth in innovative ways that counter the dominant culture, we are nonetheless products of that culture and must constantly stay attuned to the ways we (perhaps unwittingly) accept and perpetuate its worldview. The staff members felt that to go into the girls’ space during this evening time was a violation of their privacy. Citing the way our society often treats youth as
suspect by constantly keeping them under surveillance, some staff members genuinely felt it was a sign of greater respect and trust to leave the girls free to be in their own space, without adult intervention. They were right in one respect—the girls didn’t want adults invading their space to monitor and judge them. But they were wrong in another respect—underneath the attitudes of indifference and hardness, the girls deeply longed for meaningful, caring presence from adults.

Adolescents don’t want to be “left to their own devices”; they want “regular contact with adults who care about and respect them” and who can be “part of the fun, not just monitors to keep order like they were at the mosh pit.” Adults who intentionally spend time listening to young people consistently report a “chorus of longing to be cared for and to be taken seriously” from youth.2 When adults assume that young people don’t want them, they buy into the “teenage mystique” and reinforce the dynamic that has created an adolescent tribe apart. No, young people do not need more guards monitoring the holding tanks we have put them in; but they do need adults willing to overcome the divisions—the myths, the stereotypes, and yes, the real negative experiences we have had with each other—to make a meaningful gesture of peace.
