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There is much in the world to cause concern. Yet we find hope from a source that might surprise many people.

That source of hope is young adults;
at least many of those with whom
we have come into contact in our teaching
at Hesston (Kan.) College and Eastern Mennonite
University, Harrisonburg, Va.,
both colleges of Mennonite Church USA.

Young adults

We stand amazed in their presence

by Dwight E. Roth and Donald Clymer

This generation of young adults brings hope to two Mennonite teachers.

It is common for older people to talk condescendingly about young adults. It is an age-old practice that goes back as far as the Greek and Roman empires (Bertman, see box on page 25). Today this criticism primarily has to do with how young people are influenced by electronic technology and popular culture. The current generational divide, however, seems to be deeper and more profound than normal.

After 30 years as faculty members at Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite University, we have taught thousands of students. The current group of students is, however, generally a different kind of student than we have encountered previously. This difference results from completely shifting ways of viewing reality and interpreting experience.

In spite of the fears of many, we find in this difference a source of great hope. This hope can be found in three specific areas. First, many of our students are attuned to mystery and awe; they have a remarkable sense of the transcendent. This reflects a noticeable shift in the psyche of our times, embedded in the unconscious of this generation of students. The religion of material-

istic science, which since the Renaissance sought to explain everything by formulae and cause and effect, is breaking down. Life can no longer be interpreted in either/or terms. Ambiguity and mystery are the result. Young people are venturing into this ambiguity in search of an identity that is rarely recognized in the modern world of scientific materialism.

Because of this mystery and ambiguity, trying to prove or disprove the existence of God no longer appeals to students; they would rather experience God. Carl G. Jung, the renowned Swiss psychiatrist who anticipated the spirituality of current young people, was asked in a 1957 BBC interview by John Freeman if he believed in God. "I don't need to believe in God," he said, pausing to let his answer take effect. "I know God" (Dunne). Jung's answer describes a shift from what has been termed the modern age to postmodern thinking; the shift from propositional belief and pat formulae of faith to a knowing or an experience of God. This God becomes known even though the experience is shrouded in mystery.

In order to experience God, students are





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more open to ancient spirituality, which listens for and meditates on the voice of God.

“I clearly heard my name,” said one student. “The voice was a loud and obvious whisper, no one around me could have missed it. Yet they all thought I was freaking out. Whether or not anyone else believed me, I know that God called *my* name and spoke to *me*, and I have felt my faith grow so much because of this.” While our generation, steeped in scientific reasoning, may laugh this off as either a hallucination or a coincidence, young adults look for signs from God.

When asked its meaning, a young man on

In order to become more connected, today’s students openly express their weaknesses—their mental, physical and emotional struggles.

campus with a tattoo responded, “It symbolizes the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as seen in the Book of Revelation. It reminds me of the limits of humanity, of my mortality. It reminds me to live life fully.” While our generation may criticize the excess of using a tattoo to attract attention, the student has a constant reminder to reflect on the meaning of life and its fragile nature. We find this desire to experience God and the mystery of transcendence exhibited by our students to be a sign of hope and stand amazed in their presence.

Second, our students are familiar with the needs of our world and are responding accordingly. We have watched as students have become more service-oriented and caring for something larger than themselves. Many students visit frail elders in local nursing homes, work with agencies that deal with immigration, or work in homeless shelters and find that they receive more than what they give the elders, the immigrants or the homeless. In their working with “the least of these” (Matthew 25:35), they see not only Jesus but themselves. “We are called to live and work for others,” wrote a stu-

dent working with an immigration agency. “It is through working for others that we encounter our own humanity and God’s will for the world.”

According to a recent article in the journal *Presence*, today’s young adults are “interested in social justice.” As such, they want to “connect their own struggles and issues with larger concerns of the world” (Campbell). “I believe as Christians it is our central purpose to live and work for others,” said a student. “It is through engaging in mutually transformative relationships that we truly demonstrate God’s love.” In this desire to work for something greater than themselves, we see hope and stand amazed in their presence.

Finally, we see an increased desire for authentic community. This flies in the face of the glorified individualism of our culture, another carryover from the Renaissance. Like the religion of science, the myth of the individual doing everything alone is breaking down. “The gospel calls us to reject our independence and self-centeredness,” said a student. “We must sacrifice our own dreams to help other people realize theirs.”

Today’s young adults have inherited from us a world full of brokenness resulting from this individualism—family breakups, cutoffs, violence in schools, suicides of close friends, psychological maladies—not to mention the brokenness of wars and environment. From this brokenness many of our young adults are in pain. But in the depth of their pain, many young people are taking steps of growth through a commitment to spirituality and community.

How often we have heard students say, “Get real.” While reading students’ reflections in various settings, we have experienced the depth of their sharing, the genuineness of their brokenness and their desire to do something about it. A survey of over 100,000 college students by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute found that “75 percent of current college students are trying to figure out how to make their lives more connected, integrated and spiritual” (Campbell).

In order to become more connected, today’s students openly express their weaknesses—their mental, physical and emotional struggles—something our generation kept as hidden as possible. This kind of openness allows community to develop, something young adults long for in a church—a church that deals with the real issues of life, not just wearing Sunday suits and smiles. “When one [of our group] is in pain or in distress or grieving, we surround them,” reported a group of young adults. “When someone is ill, we

bring food, clean their house, go to the grocery store for them. When we experience pain or sorrow, we pray for each other, surrounding the individual and laying on our hands.”

Despite the concern that electronic technology is minimizing interpersonal skills of young people, we find many students and young adults have an unusual ability to listen to others and empathize. They show a desire to form authentic relationships in which honest disclosure with peers can encourage trust, connection and safety. “We are called to live and work for others,” wrote a student. “It is through working for others and the relationships we make with them that we encounter our own humanity.”

This openness and empathy is manifest in many new forms of church that are developing. Brian McClaren, guru of the “emerging church” movement states, “Postmoderns are at the beginning stages of moving away from the hyperindividualism of high modernity and toward a bringing of the self and society together in new configurations” (Sweet). These configurations are more communal. In one local church, a Sunday school class for young adults meets not only on Sunday mornings but every other Wednesday evening, along with frequent potlucks and campouts. “Our Sunday school class relates to each other during times of joy, celebration, disappointment, pain, the mundane,” they said. “We create spaces to ask hard questions related to our faith. We want to know what it means to be church, to follow Jesus. We

want to extend Jesus’ love to each other and beyond.” This is community. In this desire to work for community rather than individualism, we see hope and stand amazed in their presence.

Young adults face a complex world, a world they did not create. They face many challenges, perhaps the most glaring being the excesses stemming from the most materialistic and unspiritual society that the world has ever known. These spiritual young people need and want the abiding care of their elders as they seek healthy, Christ-oriented alternatives to these excesses. Are we ready to meet these challenges?

As we listen to news in our media, it seems the larger society right now contains more than a few aspects of a nightmare. In contrast, many of our students are examples of wonderful dreams that are awake—waking us with hopes of a brighter world for tomorrow. We stand amazed in their presence.



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Works cited in this article

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