NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

The spiritual hunger of young adults: Where does it come from and what might they need?

Jamie Manson | Sep. 26, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Part three of a three-part series.

For the last two weeks, I have reported on an emerging community within the larger movement called new monasticism. The project is being led two young adults, Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, who were raised Catholic and who have been deeply influenced by the work of Bede Griffiths, Raimundo Panikkar, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Catherine Doherty.

At the heart of this latest interpretation of new monasticism is the desire to connect young adults with mentors -- spiritual teachers, monks, women religious, lamas and hermits -- from a variety of traditions. The hope is that out of these gatherings of young adults and spiritual elders will emerge small communities of friends who are committed to lives of contemplation and action.

After interviewing Bucko and McEntee and reading closely their extended essay on new monasticism [1], I am struck by how well-suited their vision is to the spiritual needs of many in the younger generations. Their project offers a multi-pronged response to what is most lacking in the lives of young adults: presence, mentoring and intimacy.

In past generations, most young people got their emotional and spiritual support from all of those entities that made up their community: families, neighbors and religious groups. They were born into a community, and the community gave them their identities and their beliefs.

But in our culture, today's young adults have been raised in an individualistic, post-communal worldview. Unlike their elders and ancestors, today's young adults are born into a culture in which their families and communities do not exert the same level of influence over their identities. They believe they have the right to decide what they believe in, what their values are and how they are going to live their lives. Often, young adults must find or create their own communities.

There are great benefits to the individualistic culture. It offers an abundance of personal freedom and equal opportunity. But there are a lot of losses that happen in this kind of culture. As free and contactable as young adults are, ironically, they are very hungry for the presence and intimacy that community can offer. In many ways, the deprivation is even greater than it was in previous generations.

This loss of intimacy can even be witnessed in the way in which we communicate. Young people today are more reachable than any generation that preceded them. Cellphones allow them to be accessed almost anywhere, anytime; emails and instant messaging can grab them when they're on a computer; text messaging allows them to "get answers" nearly free of the typical demands of interpersonal discourse; Skype and Facetime virtually beam another person into a room. Even though there are many modes of communication, opportunities for true communion with other human beings seem to be eroding.

Whenever I have the chance to speak to young adults, whether college students or young professionals, I always like to ask them what the ideal religion would offer them. I typically get the same two answers. Most young adults want a place where they can be quiet and practice some type of meditation. They also express a desire for a small group to meet with regularly just to talk.

It's not surprising. Young people are awash with noise, not only streaming from their computer speakers and ear buds, but also the constant stream of visual noise flashing on laptop, TV and smartphone screens. All of these distractions make it challenging to be present to any one thing and to be heard by any one person. Having the chance to be silent or to sit quietly with a small group and talk offers them what is lacking both in our culture and our church. McEntee and Bucko understand the challenge young adults face in finding emotional and spiritual intimacy, which is why they envision small communities based on the model of spiritual friendship.

What is also lacking for young people is the capacity to trust most religious authority. I think this is why Bucko and McEntee are so careful to insist on mentoring relationships between young adults and spiritual teachers rather than the traditional guru/disciple model. Who can blame young people for being suspicious of religious leaders? It is important to remember that today's 20-somethings were at an impressionable age when the sex abuse crisis broke 10 years ago.

When they were children, adolescents and teens, they were forced to hear about priests who were abusing of children, adolescents and teens and about bishops who were aiding and abetting the abusers. Whether or not they were raised Catholic, this is a stark image of the church they have known from childhood. How can they possibly believe in any kind of moral credibility or spiritual safety from the church when all they've heard about is children their age being violated by the church?

If there is anything about the church that still appeals to young adults, it is the social justice work, the outreach that many faith-based organizations offer to those in need and on the margins of society. The beauty of the new monastic vision is it encourages young adults to commit both to a contemplative life and to easing the suffering in the world. So it offers them what they want, which is to engage in the work of social justice, and what they need, which is a safe space for quiet contemplation and an opportunity to develop their own spiritual practice.

Of course, substantive spiritual practices can best be learned through the wisdom of those who have studied spirituality and lived the contemplative life. Here lies what I believe is the greatest strength in McEntee and Bucko's idea: They name the urgent need young adults have for spiritual mentors.

Although many young adults seem to want to break free of religious structures, there is still, I believe, a desire to be connected to what is great about our traditions. Very often the individualistic world, because it is post-communal, can also feel rootless.

Many long for help in enriching their meditative and prayer practices and want to benefit from the wisdom of religious elders whom they can trust.

The Catholic tradition is blessed with a rich resource of men and women religious, prophets and spiritual teachers. But many young adults have found it challenging to form a deeper relationship with our Catholic elders. Bucko and McEntee are offering a way for spiritual leaders, Catholic and non-Catholic, to give a portion of their time, gifts and influence to form and support new generations of contemplatives. Young adults will benefit greatly from the guidance and formation these mentors can offer. And I have little doubt today's spiritual leaders would benefit from knowing that all of their wisdom and experience will live on into the next generations.

Although they are rooted in the Catholic tradition, Bucko and McEntee believe the new monasticism should be

interspiritual, studying the wisdom and incorporating the practices of multiple spiritual traditions, like Buddhism, Sufism and Hinduism. Although an interspiritual movement might be less popular among young orthodox Catholics or evangelical new monastics, I believe it will appeal to a broader base of young adults who are less inclined to commit to one particular religious group but are eager to learn the wisdom and practices of both Eastern and Western traditions.

Increasingly, it seems more young people are gravitating towards the label "spiritual but not religious." Not surprisingly, many in traditional religious institutions have responded to this phrase with frustration, derision or a dismissive roll of the eyes. Many pastors and ministers see the label as a way to escape the need for serious theological convictions or an excuse for not wanting to commit to a religious community. Some theologians argue the phrase is a false dichotomy, that religious and spiritual can never be mutually exclusive.

But what if we saw "spiritual but not religious" as a starting place rather than a label? What if we heard the phrase as an invitation to engage new generations in a conversation? What if we approached it as an opportunity to help give substance and depth to their spiritual impulses?

This, I believe, is what the new monastic movement at its best can offer both newer and older generations of spiritual seekers. The opportunity for spiritual elders to know their wisdom will not be lost in an increasingly individualistic, secular age; a space where those doing the work of social justice can be centered and refreshed through peaceful meditation and spiritual practices; a sense of spiritual safety in a religious milieu fraught with exclusivity and fundamentalism; a community where contemplatives can find an intimate circle of spiritual friends in a culture where true communion is elusive.

Most importantly, it promises to help us hear the ways in which God is speaking to us through our work, through our presence to one another, and through what is most beautiful and true about all of our spiritual traditions.

Read more in this series

- Two young adults offer a new take on 'new monasticism' [2]
- New monasticism: Envisioning monks without borders [3]
- The spiritual hunger of young adults: Where does it come from and what might they need? [4]

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