



SPRITUAL  
FORMATION



**YOUNG PEOPLE,**

# **DIVORCE**

**AND YOUTH MINISTRY**

LEVERAGING THE  
ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY  
TO CREATE ONTOLOGICAL  
SECURITY

BY ANDY ROOT



I was 24, a graduate student and had been engaged for five months when my dad called me on Memorial Day. The lazy ethos of the holiday floated through my Los Angeles apartment on the currents of the summer heat. I responded to his call with the annoyance of the obligation of the holiday family phone call. It was all routine until I asked him how things were going back home. After a pause, he explained that he and my mother were ending their 25-year marriage.

“What?” was the only response I could come up with. The idle holiday ethos turned haunting; I began to choke on the Los Angeles heat. Divorced?! It made sense in some ways; I knew their marriage was much less than ideal. But I was shocked. I was stunned; I felt like I couldn’t move. I could only listen. As I sat, horrified, I remembered Jake, a childhood friend who had lived up the street from us. Jake was the first kid I knew whose parents divorced.

I spent summer days in his basement playing Legos, watching *The Price is Right* and eating uncounted bags of potato chips. But what I remember even more was that look he had in his eyes, the hollowness that surrounded him and flooded from his brokenness when we talked about his *real* dad (he always said “real” when talking about his birth father). I could now feel that hollowing sting myself. I could taste it as strongly as the salt on any potato chip. The emptiness that had seeped from Jake now blanketed me.

The months following my dad’s news were more than intense. I was getting married in what felt like literally the crater of my parents’ marriage. Both parents tried to talk with me, desiring openness after a marriage of denial. All I wanted was for them to shut up and stay together. I remember sitting on the living room couch one night, talking with my mom. She explained that she was sorry their marriage was ending, sorry it was happening when it was, but then she said these words: “I think we just got married too young. If I could do it all over again, I would do it differently.”

*Do what differently?* I thought, feeling the hollowness wrap more tightly around me. I couldn’t say it because its truth wound long fingers around my throat and squeezed it shut. *If she hadn’t married him, I wouldn’t exist. I am alive because they were together. If she regrets the union that created me, then who am I now? And where do I belong in the world?*

## An Ontological Reality

As my mom talked, I felt pulled from the scene, out of body. I felt like I was losing something core to me, like I was losing my being, becoming hollow. It reminded me of *Back to the Future*, when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) looks at his hand and sees it dissolving all because his 1955 teenage parents appear to not be falling in love, meaning he will never exist in 1985. With my mom’s words, I too felt like I was becoming translucent, like their act of divorce was a threat to my own existence.

That was the hollowness I saw in Jake’s eyes so many years earlier, with potato chip crumbs on his cheeks. I could viscerally see this same feeling when we discussed his real dad, the dad who, in union with his mother, made Jake real; who, by their communion, gave him his being. But now these two who became one to give him existence lived divided in animosity, and it appeared that this division now cut right through Jake’s own being; after all, he was part of both as both were part of him. The father and mother who made him real in their union now were irrevocably divided, a divide that cast a shadow over him.

And this is what divorce does. It thrusts us, the children of divorce, into what some thinkers have called “ontological insecurity.”<sup>1</sup> As human beings, security and safety are fundamental to our very existence; we need to feel secure to feel real. Object relations psychologists say that infants actually need relationships to feel real at all. In anxiety and fear, it can feel like our humanity is under threat, as though we are losing our very selves. And this ontological security is a social, or relational, reality. In communities of care and love, we are given our being. Newborn babies need to be held by their mothers to find the strength to be. It is the attachment of one to the other that makes us human, makes us real.

## Theological Interpretation: *Imago Dei*

Our theological tradition has said something similar.<sup>2</sup> In the first few chapters of Genesis, our tradition asserts, we see that to be human is to be human *with others*. Humans were built for community. We are told in Genesis 1:26-27 that the very image of God reflected in humanity is itself a relational reality.<sup>3</sup> God uses the plural, “Let us” (showing community

within Godself), when proclaiming that humanity should be both male and female.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of this maleness and femaleness, this fundamental sign of their relational/social connection, is played out further in the second creation account (Genesis 2). Here, in search of a counterpart, another with whom to be in community, the human creature is invited to name the animals. But when all the animals are named, tragically, none is found to be an adequate partner for the human. With no partner, no *other*, the human being is not complete. So God speaks a word of judgment. “It is not good for the human to be alone.” God’s assertion is essentially, *There is no humanity without community*.

The human is put down and then resurrected, missing a rib but given the hand of another. Now, in and through their community, he is made truly human. And so these two will come together and form one community that is so rich, that knits them together so deeply, that they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

In community we are human. It is most primarily and originally from the community of mother and father that we are pushed into the world, given their community of one flesh as our own, as our place to embrace our being. To be made in the image of God is to be in community as God in Godself as Trinity is community.

To be human is to have our being, to be made real, as this person belonging to these people. And this is what’s so painful about divorce. It ruptures the “this people” that provides children the strength to embrace their own “this person.” It ruptures ontological security.

### A Closer Look at the Ontological Crisis

If divorce is an ontological issue for young people, how do we get our arms around its impact on young people, and what actions can the church take in ministry?

As counterintuitive as it appears, it might help to explore these very questions by looking at four points from the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger has spoken at length on the idea of being, and Heidegger believes, like the biblical text, that we have our being in relationships (as Heidegger says, we have our *Dasein* through *mitsein*).

### “My Being is Mine”<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to exploring what it means to *be* (to have *Dasein*, as Heidegger would say), we human beings are more than just thinking creators. Heidegger contends that the core issue for us is not that we *think* but that we *exist* and exist as unique persons in time and space. Our issue is not that we *think* but that we *are*.

So often in youth ministry we assume that if the divorce happened before the kid was in the youth group, or before the kid was really cognitive of the parents’ divorce, then it is really not that big of a deal. Yet the research reveals that when the divorce occurred before the young person was cognitively aware of it, it nevertheless became an issue.

We are more than our cognition; we are *being* bound together through connection. Judith Wallerstein has found this reality in a 30-year longitudinal study.<sup>6</sup> Calling it “the sleeper effect,” she explains that, even for people whose parents divorced when they were two or three years old, invariably, at some point, issues of divorce rise to the surface.

Elizabeth Marquardt is one of those people. She explains in *Between Two Worlds* that she thought all her life that her parents’ divorce wasn’t impacting her; they separated when she was still a toddler.<sup>7</sup> But on her wedding day, out of nowhere, she found herself in frantic tears, mourning the end of her parents’ marriage, which she had never known. To follow Heidegger, we can mourn what we don’t know because we are more than our cognition. Elizabeth found herself mourning not *knowledge* but her *being*; the fact that her being lived not *with* her parents but *between* them. She interacted not with the bond that brought her being forth but voyaging back and forth through the dark waters that separated the two who became one to create her.

This has major implications for our ministries. So often we look at a young person whose parents have been divorced for 5 or 10 years and assume it’s water under the bridge for the student, so why bring it up? In fact, in the Marquardt/Glenn national study,<sup>8</sup> when young adults were asked if anyone in their churches ever said anything to them about their parents’ divorces, an amazingly high number said that no

---

---

one—no youth worker, pastor, Sunday school teacher or anyone else—had said anything to them. This study then found, not surprisingly, that an overwhelming majority of these young people left the church.

### “I am How I Live my Life in the World”

As esoteric as Heidegger is to read, his thought really surrounds the practical; he believes we have our being in the very practical operations of our lives, as we act in our day-to-day lives. And the major shake-up of our day-to-day lives is what makes divorce so painful. We often think that young people want their parents’ marriages to be filled with romance or visible closeness. They may want that but only because it is a sign of the dependability and stability of the families they live in. The family secures young people’s ontology because it is a place of action (even ritualized action) that allows students to know themselves and claim their own agency in the world.

Often, when parents break the news about their divorces to their children, the children ask, “But what about my room?” or, “What about the dog?” Adults usually imagine that such questions are proof that divorce isn’t that big of a deal. But these questions are actually about *Dasein*, according to Heidegger; they are not insignificant but rather witness to the young person’s wrestling with his or her own being. The child is asking, *Who am I if I don’t live in this room? And, This dog is our family dog; how can he exist without this family? How can I act and therefore be now that all these practical ways of being are radically changing?*

Family moves, which so often accompany divorce, are not only an issue of social capital but also ontological. The young person *is* inside this family; she has her being as she acts with, for and from them.

I remember seeing our family possessions—things my dad got in the divorce—in his new condo in Palm Springs. It was ontologically shaking. These were tangible signs that he was different. Now that he lived in a new space, in new, practical ways, his very being was different, and different in a way that excluded my mother. By excluding her, he excluded the part of me that came from her, that was inextricably linked to her. They were now separate people, seeking to live two separate, practical lives. And now, I needed to find a way to live between them, to take on two distinct forms of action.

As youth workers, we should be aware of how this division in practical action is a division in the child’s being. We often complain about this, frustrated by how the weekends with Dad twice a month mess with the attendance of our programs. But imagine how this back and forth messes with the child’s ontology! This back and forth and forth again has become so common in society that, as adults, we often forget to communicate to young people that we recognize how hard it must be to simply manage two lives with two different parents and how this practical management pushes against their own senses of self.

### “I Care about Who I Am”

We care about our being; we care about who we are. Any youth worker knows that young people care deeply about their being and about how their being is interpreted by others. This is part of the operations of *Dasein*, as Heidegger explains. As humans who act in time and space, as beings that can conceive of ourselves in time and space, we care about our being. My golden retriever, while a loving lug of a dog, has being (*Sein*) but lacks *Dasein*; he doesn’t (as far as I know) lie on my kitchen floor contemplating his

To be human is to have our being, to be made real, as this person belonging to these people. And this is what’s so painful about divorce. It ruptures the “this people” that provides children the strength to embrace their own “this person.” It ruptures ontological security.

own existence. Heidegger explains that we humans search to know why and what we are. In other words, identity formation (answering the question *Who am I?*) is another operation of *Dasein*.

This is one of the most difficult consequences of parental separation. It throws division into a student's identity. Stephanie Staal says in her book, *The Love They Lost*, "Divorce plants splinter in our minds, and in response, we assemble our identities around it."<sup>9</sup> The young person now needs to figure out who he'll be in the future and who he'll be now that there is a division in the union of the communion that created him.

Of course, this seems more existential and introspective than most people operate at regularly. And this is true because this division, this pulling apart (as some young people call it) happens not at the cognitive or moral level but at the practical level, at the level of acting in the world (as we saw in point two). Jen Robinson says it this way. "At first, my mother would arrange not to be home when Dad picked us up and dropped us off, and I was glad. It was uncomfortable for me to be around them at the same time. I was a different person with each of them; each knew things about me the other didn't... It was obvious that they would not have seen each other if they hadn't had to because of me..."

Divorce then does the impossible to young people; it divides a child's *Dasein*. This is what I mean by *The Back to the Future* effect, feeling like, in the chasm that now separates your parents, your being is slipping from you. Nicole states, "I can't even remember my reaction. I know I couldn't understand what was happening. But I know exactly how I felt. Lost."<sup>10</sup> Because *Dasein* lacks the ability to provide coherent practical action and cannot answer the child's questions of who he'll be, divorce has the power to push him to wonder if his *Dasein* is more than a shadow.

This is a significant issue and one that youth workers may feel is out of their scope. But if this ontological issue is thrust upon the children of divorce because of the loss of (the primary) community, then ultimately what youth workers can do for young people is to give them another community to find their being within. The ecclesial community cannot replace, or wipe away

the wounds of the loss of, the familial community, but it can encourage the young person's identity by giving young people a place to be, a place to share their stories and have their sufferings shared. If divorce is really such an ontological issue, then what is of ultimate importance, what is *ontologically stabilizing*, is to have a place where it is discussed and faced in the name of Jesus Christ.

---

About a year after I first received the call from my dad informing me that my parents' marriage was in severe trouble, I received another call. This time it was my mother telling me that the papers had been filed and the divorce was official. As she spoke, I noticed I didn't feel the terrible ontological sting. Sure, it was painful and remains so. But that night, as my mom shared, I found myself focused on Kara, my wife and partner, the one with whom I had formed a new community that provided ontological security and gave me a "this people" that we all need. She sees me and knows me, and I belong to her. We still deal with the pain of our parents' divorces, but in the chaos and hurt, we have a "this people" to belong to, to return to, which holds us.

This is what youth workers need to do for children of divorce. We need to do this simple but profound thing that is really not *doing* at all but *being*—being together. Youth ministry has the potential to be the community that the children of divorce need in order to find ontological security because the church, as theologian James Loder liked to say, "knows of love greater than a mother's or father's." We can be their "this people," who share suffering and joy with one another.

We also need to go there with them, to face the pain and bring up the topic of parents' divorces, even when things seem fine. We should make opportunities too for them to talk about it; give openings for students to share, recognize it as a heavy and complex reality many kids face and give it as much air time as we do other issues. And we can simply acknowledge the complexity and difficulty of the situations in which they find themselves.

When my wife's mother remarried, one of the 150 guests at the wedding approached her sisters and said, "I am very happy for your mom. But I know this day is

really hard for you guys, and I am sorry for what you must be going through today.” Ten years later, they still talk about the profound impact of having just one person *see* them and acknowledge what they were feeling. We can be the community that *sees* young people, acknowledges their reality and embraces them in the fullness of their experience.

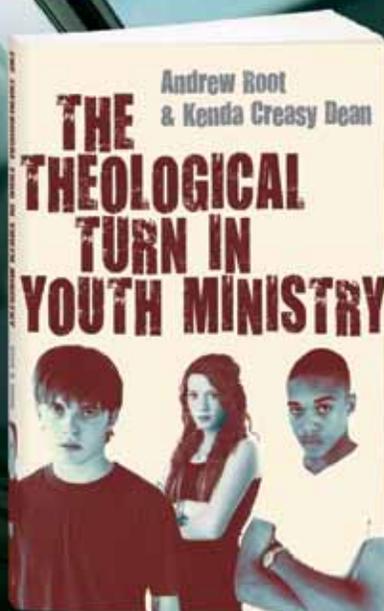
Andrew Root, PhD, is in the Olson Baalson chair as associate professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary (St. Paul). He is the author of *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*. For much more on the issues of young people and divorce, see this book.

1. See Anthony Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
2. See Barth's *Church Dogmatics*: Vol III.2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955), Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), Stanely Grenz's *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), Douglas John Hall's *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), Ray Anderson's *On Being Human* (Pasadena: Fuller Seminary Press, 1982), LeRon Shults's *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), David Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence: A Theology Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2009), and Kathryn Tanner's *Christ the Key* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3. Grenz asserts, "The relational understanding of the *imago Dei* moves the focus from noun to verb. This approach presupposes that a relationship exists between Creator and creature and views the image as what occurs as a consequence of the relationship—namely, the creature 'images' the Creator. Hence, *the imago Dei* is less a faculty humans possess than an act that humans do." Grenz, *The Social God and Relational Self*, p. 162.
4. "The image of God is something that 'happens' as a consequence of this relationship. The human creature images (used as verb) its Creator because and insofar as it is 'turned toward' God. To be *imago Dei* does not mean to have something but to be and do something: to image God." Hall, *Imaging God*, p. 98.
5. This section draws from and adapts an article called "Youth Ministry and the Children of Divorce: Wrestling With 'Realness,'" published in the summer issue of the UK's *YouthWorker* magazine.
6. Wallerstein, Judith S; Lewis, Julie M.; Blackeslee, Sandra. *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).
7. Marquardt, Elizabeth. *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).
8. A study that included 70 in-depth interviews with young adults between 18 and 35 and a national telephone survey of 1,500 persons of the same age (of which half experienced divorce). For results see *Between Two Worlds*.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

# Theology just got younger.

978-0-8308-3825-7, \$18.00



## THE THEOLOGICAL TURN IN YOUTH MINISTRY

Andrew Root, author of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, and Kenda Creasy Dean, author of *Almost Christian*, call youth pastors to take another look at their ministries—to see they are full of practical theologians. Once we recognize the potential in our students' natural mix of idealism, cynicism and prophetic intolerance, we are freed to follow their questions into new vistas of theological conversation.

"Theology . . . gives us a vehicle to talk about what matters most. And unless youth ministry deals with the ultimate issues—Why am I and why is God? What is worth living for and what is worth dying for?—it has no place in the church."

—From the introduction