Pivoting toward Hope: Interplay of Imagination, Fear and Life Experience
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“I just kind of heard God just tell me that: ‘This isn’t what you need to be doing, you just need to open your eyes and your heart and forgive and forget and move on and kind of go on with the rest of your life because I have bigger plans for you.’” (Sandra, age 15)

“[Peacemaking is] a question about how you make people aware of different kinds of violence without having to experience it themselves, you know. … I never really so much cared about sexual violence until it happened to me, but that doesn’t mean that everyone should experience it to know exactly what is going on.” (Hee-kyung, age 23)

The words of Sandra and Hee-kyung initiate us into the complexities of hope in young lives. The purpose of this paper is to explore what young people can reveal to the larger human family about hope, especially in a world fraught with violence, injustice, and ecological devastation. This overarching question begs many others. Do young people carry any residue of hope in such a world? If so, from where does it come, how does it function in their lives, and how might it be nourished? An important place to begin is with the narrated yearnings and hopes of young people. The present study seeks to understand youth’s hopes and the social values that are embedded in them. The social values and commitments of young people are an understudied phenomenon, compared to studies of their intra-psychic and interpersonal relationships; however, young people carry abundant wisdom, born of their distinctive life journeys, social locations, and religious experiences. They live as young people within complex matrices of culture, social class, nationality, physical location, and personal experience.

The very accent on hope has been contested in recent years, often blurring the distinction between the psychological phenomenon of optimism and the theological value of hope. Hope is
often associated with a psychological predisposition to optimism, as opposed to pessimism, and is often decried as naïve or as providing inadequate motivation in the face of evil. Hope, however, is not a psychological state; hope is a theological value or virtue, which is actively chosen. Mary Elizabeth Moore (2015) made a case for imagination as a factor that enables or encourages people to make decisions to hope. That paper drew upon 48 oral histories of world-changers. The present paper builds upon that earlier work, but turns to young people to learn about hope, especially to discover if and how an orientation toward hope in young lives is associated with imagination, fear, and life experience, including religious experience.

The study began with a thematic analysis of interviews with 59 youth and 14 mentors, as well as 2 youth focus groups with a total of 16 young people.¹ Youth participants (identified by pseudonyms) were aged 12-24; four lived in the United Kingdom, and the remainder in the United States. They were largely Christian in practice or heritage, but represented a cross-section of ecumenical affiliations and non-affiliations, urban and rural locales, women and men, and diverse ethnicities, social classes, and sexual orientations. The research team, similarly diverse, utilized an ethogenic approach to analyze the data (Moore 2007). Building on the primary analysis of young people’s stories, the authors then identified thematic strands that revealed the nature of hope in these young people. The thematization sharpened into three research questions: what visions do young people express; how are those visions embedded in their life experiences, and what do their visions reveal about the intersection of imagination, fear, and hope?

In this paper, we share our findings through portraits – two portraits of individuals and an aggregated portrait of youth interviews. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot influences this approach with her social science portraiture (2009, 1994). She studies human interactions in communities and families in relation to larger cultural contexts, drawing upon ethnography, interviews, and
phenomenological analysis to create portraits of a situation. She thus accents aesthetic wholeness as she interweaves her qualitative findings into moving pictures. Further, she seeks to analyze goodness, or the strong fibers of human lives and institutions (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, xvi). Lawrence-Lightfoot’s portraiture corresponds with the ethogenic method (Moore 2013, 99-100), both of which claim that qualitative observations, phenomenological analysis, and an aesthetic portrayal of wholes can open windows of insight into human experience. Both also claim that goodness provides stronger building blocks for a compassionate, just, and peaceful world than a solo focus on problems. With this background, we turn to the portraits, followed by theological and educational analysis.

Pivoting toward Hope in Young Lives: Meet Sandra and Hee-kyung

Young people live fragile lives in a fragile world. Yet they often pivot toward hope amid the dangers and fragility. How can that be? Meet Sandra and Hee-kyung, who vivify the themes we found in the several narratives of this study.

Sandra. At 15, Sandra is anchored in her Roman Catholic, white, Midwestern culture. Her life appears fairly smooth on the surface, but below the surface is her family life with an alcoholic dad and a mom who focuses most of her attentions on her husband. Sandra discloses many struggles as she shares her story. Early in her life, Sandra was verbally bullied in school, so her family arranged for her to change schools. Sadly, she experienced physical bullying in the second school, so she switched back to the first school, which seemed the less damaging. About this time, fully into her teenage years, she became depressed and suicidal. At the depth of her despair, when she was ready to give up on life, she had an epiphany moment, “I just kind of heard God just tell me that: ‘This isn’t what you need to be doing, you just need to open your eyes and your heart and forgive and forget and move on and kind of go on with the rest of your
life because I have bigger plans for you.’’ Sandra now looks back on that epiphany as a turning point in her life.

During the months of struggling with depression, her parish church was her lifeline. On a mission trip to South Carolina, Sandra participated with the youth of her parish in her first Adoration, which she describes in vivid detail:

I had never experienced it before, I didn’t know what it was. I was really scared and nervous and there was a monstrance on the altar … It’s like a gold thing, they put the host of Jesus in it and then it’s just really beautiful. And we get in there and you have the opportunity to go kneel at the altar if you want and you don’t have to, but I kind of felt like I should, I just kind of had this feeling. I told God before I went up: You have me in here for a reason, what’s the reason? I’ll do what you want, just tell me what I need to do. So I kept feeling like I should go to this altar, so I go up, and I kneel, and I stare into the monstrance and it’s just captivating, you’re in awe, you’re speechless. Every time I look into it I would just bawl, I couldn’t stop crying, like my body would collapse because I was crying so hard.

Sandra proceeds to describe her response.

I was like: ‘Ok, I’m at the altar, now what do you want?’ I was just like: ‘Is there someone here who I need to talk to, is there someone here who needs to hear your voice?’ And I kind of thought, I just kind of heard, ‘Yes.’ And I was like: ‘Ok, who is it? I know you won’t just come down and tell me who it is, but, who is it?’

As Sandra stood, her eye fell on a gentleman nearby.

And I get up and I go up to him and I hug him and I still have no idea what I even said, it was one of those moments where God was speaking through me and I couldn’t even control it, I just told him: ‘God loves you, God loves you so much and he never wants you to give up.’ And he just kind of told me this story of how he was doing drugs and he should’ve died and it was one of those times, where I told him ‘You shouldn’t be dead, God wants you alive, you’re here for a reason.’ That was the biggest moment of my religious life.

The hope Sandra drew from this transforming moment was soon tested. Shortly after, her best friend committed suicide; then, both her grandfather and her mother’s best friend, who was like a second mom to her, were diagnosed with cancer. She describes these events as devastating personally and also as challenges to her faith. She asked God:
'Why would you do it to somebody that’s never done something so wrong?’ I always kind of ask, and I always get the same answer: ‘You never know how strong you are until strength is your last option.’ And um, that just kind of helped me get through it, that little saying.

The power of these moments became clear yet again when Sandra was asked what she considered the most important contribution she has made in her life thus far. She responded with “serving God” and “being there for people.” At a crucial point in her life Sandra had an intense experience of the presence of God, and that gave her hope to keep going with her life and to enlarge her expectations for her life and her contributions to others’ wellbeing. Receiving the gift of God’s presence, re-inscribed by every experience of Adoration since the first one, she now sees her own role as sharing the gift of her presence with others.

**Hee-kyung.** Hee-kyung is a 23-year-old Korean-American living in a city on the East Coast. In telling her story, she describes a major turning point in her life when, at age 21, a church member raped her. This experience, together with what she describes as the closeness and yet exclusivity of her church community, has made her doubt God and her own identity:

It happened about two years ago, and that really changed my perspectives a lot. Right now, I am slowly beginning to realize that most of my problems at church is with people, and not so much about my relationship with God, because I don’t think I ever really had a strong relationship with God. Still work in progress, yeah., but also like Korean American culture, as much as I have come to accept that identity, I still go…I don’t know, Korean American church is…especially I have a lot of struggles with it. I am not exactly sure what about it is, but yeah…

When she told her father about the rape, he told her never to talk about it again. She did not remain silent, however. Even though she was afraid, she reported the incident and the perpetrator was brought to justice. Hee-kyung had not been the first to be assaulted, but she was the first who spoke up. She hopes that, through her actions, “other people can be healed and he will learn … to be a responsible man.”
Although Hee-kyung still has a positive relationship with her church and her congregation continues to be a place of connection for her, she critiques the inward focus of her community. Her experience of sexual assault has made her more critical regarding gender roles and views of women within the church, but also in society. The awareness of her own position has fed a growing awareness of the social and economic disadvantage of women in general. She is concerned not just about sexual violence, but also about poverty as a form of violence. She wondered with us:

How do you make people aware of different kinds of violence without having to experience it themselves, you know. Because again, I never really much cared about sexual violence until it happened to me, but that doesn’t mean that everyone should experience it to know exactly what is going on. Awareness … effective awareness.

Hee-kyung does not have a clear vision for her future yet, but she knows that her own awareness of violence is a key in shaping her identity and her future contributions. She knows that she wants to help people, in some form or another, even as she realizes that the reality of the issues she wants to address is very complicated.

Hee-kyung’s life was colored by one traumatic experience of fear and violation. Even in the midst of her own trauma, she could imagine, a world where violence does not have the last word. That awareness freed her to speak up and report the person who had raped her. In the present moment, she is still uncertain about her Korean-American identity, her relationship with God, and her future; however, her outlook is being transformed by hope. She hopes that others will not have to have the same experience of violence that she had, or any other experience of violence, in order to gather together to end violence altogether.

An Aggregate Youth Story

Sandra and Hee-Kyung represent themes that run through the interviews and focus groups, though each young person has a different story. The analysis of youth interviews and
focus groups reveals wide-ranging social concerns among the youth, seemingly influenced by their wide-ranging social contexts and personal experiences. Based on the frequency with which they named issues, the following hierarchy was revealed, from the most to the least frequent: (1) broken family and community relationships, including family conflicts, community splits and divisions, mental illness, and a deficiency in empathy; (2) violence, including bullying, violence in families, military torture, police violence, rape and street fighting; (3) broken global relationships, including war, imbalance of power, and economic disparities; (4) condemnatory attitudes toward homosexuality, including abuse, exclusion, and sharp community divisions; (5) poverty and consumerism, sometimes linked; (6) racism and sexism; (7) drugs and alcohol; and (8) ecological destruction.

The ordering of these concerns is revealing but not definitive, given the qualitative research design. The issues and experiences were embedded in larger youth narratives, and they reveal two telling features: (1) the extent to which their personal experiences correspond with their awareness and analysis of issues and visions; (2) the imaginative power with which they reconstituted destructive experiences as well as experiences of fear and adversity into a platform of hope. The hopeful reconstruction often propelled them into a trajectory where they saw themselves addressing larger social issues that were close to their own stories, as Hee-kyung did in reporting her rapist and in raising multiple issues of violence with others in her church. The interviews abound with other examples. Chung Hee, who grew up in a family in which his father beat his mother, envisions himself as a global “peacemaker.” Calvin, who is African American and has experienced years of overt and covert racial taunts, wants to address the “hateful violence” in our world. Duk Hwan, who grew up immersed in a culture of drinking, smoking and fighting, wants to be a business man who shapes the world to be more peaceful for all people.
Valerie, whose boyfriend is hooked on drugs, sees herself as helping people to break their drug habits and to develop communities that minimize temptations. Jorge, who was bullied as a child, wants to eliminate bullying among children. Mary, who has had many life-challenging experiences, wants to be present with anyone who faces life-challenging situations. Mary, for example, helped her family adapt to her mother’s physical disability over a period of many years; she experienced her family’s confusion when her aunt “came out” as a lesbian; and she witnessed extreme poverty when she travelled with her church’s work team to Haiti. These experiences have not only broadened her perspectives and attitudes, but she now sees her future in helping people build better understanding and better lives for themselves. These are but a few examples of a major thread in the youth research. Youth seemingly care about that which they know best.

Some of the examples named above emerged within families – an abusive or alcoholic father, a disabled mother, an aunt who came out as lesbian. Other examples have to do with the larger social location of the young people. The African American young people, taken as a group, expressed concern about violence more than twice as often as any other racial-ethnic group. They often named racially-targeted violence, and they analysed its causes and effects with sophistication. Renee, for example, recognized that violence brings trauma to a community. Peter and Christena, two Latino/a young people, expressed a similar concern about what violence can do to families, including their own. Indeed, Christena had lost her brother to violence. The issues for these young people were larger than familial. Renee and Christena describe their loving two-parent families and strong schools; yet they experience racism in their larger African American and Latino cultural worlds. Other young people know racially-charged violence at a farther
distance, but their social locations place them in proximity with visible racism. One young white man lives in a working class town, and he has become conscientized to racism by his friends:

In a lot of my friend’s neighborhoods and stuff the police are really racist towards black people and things. I’ve seen videos where it’s like you have a regular black man just walking down the street, not doing anything wrong, he doesn’t look suspect or anything, and policemen will hit them or keep on cursing at them, to make them do anything against the law so the police can bring them to jail. … Racism is definitely alive.

The social location of young people plays a large role in their experience and in their concerns and visions.

The aggregate youth story reveals a clear link between life experience or cultural experience and issues that concern young people. What is striking in the interviews is that the young people are not only aware of issues, but most of them have also pivoted toward hope. The very issues that trouble them in their personal and cultural lives are the ones for which they can imagine an alternative future. Further, they not only imagine an alternative, but they express determination to change the world in the direction of that alternative. Both fear and imagination seem to be linked to their life experience and to their concerns and commitments. They fear what the world will be like if nothing changes, but they can imagine alternatives. The combination seemingly contributes to their ability to pivot toward hope. One cannot draw a cause-and-effect conclusion from the qualitative research of this project, but the evidence points in that direction, suggesting the possibility of an empirical study that would test the hypothesis.

**Theological Questions Revisited through Eyes of the Young**

For the young people in this study, hope is a throbbing reality, and it does not seem to be based in naïve notions of a smooth, safe, satisfied world. Rather, all of the young people express deep concerns about the world in which they live, and the young people who make the strongest claims for hope are almost always the same youth who have experienced extremes of violence,
abuse, neglect, or hurt. Sometimes their ability to envision an alternative is a mystical gift, as in the case of Sandra, for whom experiences of God’s presence in an epiphany moment and in Adoration reversed her way of seeing the world and her practices of daily living. Sometimes the young people’s visions are acts of resistance, as in the case of Hee-kyung, who could not let the rapist in her congregation, nor the denial of her father or the congregation, have the last word; she felt compelled to resist silence or denial. These young people, with their determined decisions to hope, point religious scholars and leaders to revisit theologies of hope, which are imbued with new energy and insight by the youth.

Since John Macquarrie published *Christian Hope* in 1978 and Jurgen Moltmann published *Theologie der Hoffnung* in 1965 (later to be published in English as *Theology of Hope*), the theological theme of hope has been abundantly discussed, both as a source of vision and strength, and a lens on social critique. Both scholars were writing in times of cultural rebuilding, Macquarrie in the United Kingdom and Moltmann in Germany. Indeed, Moltmann (1993) saw his work as critiquing the emerging materialism of his day and the optimistic rebuilding of a cultural past. Instead, he encouraged people to open themselves to radically new possibilities for the world. His peculiar blending of existentialism and systematic theology opened him to theological constructions that honoured both the grittiness and the mysteries of life. Similarly Leonardo Boff turned to the ecclesial base communities as a source of hope for the church and society. He observed these communities in which people gather weekly to share their existential struggles and to find ways to navigate through those struggles with the help of their faith. People in the base communities make decisions for hope as they seek to navigate the oppressive forces in their worlds. For all three of these theologians, hope was drawn from the forces of life that flow within the devastations of their existential worlds.
The gritty realities that stood behind these three theologians were motivating to them and to their readers. Similarly, the young people of our study have expressed in words and actions that their most passionate commitments have emerged in the grittiness of their lives. Their narratives reveal that their rawest experiences have shaped the most authentic and energizing claims on their lives. Considered alongside the theological treatises, the young people add a more textured view of hope, especially regarding the existence, sources, and functions of hope in their complicated lives. In particular, their narratives reveal the linkage of hope with imagination and fear, and the linkage of imagination and fear with life experiences of oppression and desolation on the one hand, and experiences of life and promise on the other.

A longer paper would be needed to expound on the theological constructs suggested by the young people’s stories, and to consider those constructs in relation to dominant theologies in the present. What we can say definitively here is that hope is a theological construct that holds great meaning to young people, and that its function in their lives is not only to lift their spirits but also to sharpen their critiques of life-destroying realities in families, religious communities, and other social contexts and to fire their determination to change the world.

Conclusions for Religious Education

We come now to the question of nourishing hope in young people and, through them, to others. Very practically, can religious education better prepare young people to be hope-bearers? This phrase “hope-bearer” resonates with visions of a “Godbearing life,” advocated by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (1998). Dean and Foster argue that the most important quality for leaders with youth is to live Godbearing lives and to invite youth into living their own lives as Godbearers. In our research, we also discovered Godbearing as important to many of the young people – a theme to be developed more fully in another phase of the study. The focus of this
particular study was on hope, and the thematic analyses revealed young people as hope-bearers and as eager for mentors and peers who will honor, inspire, and nourish their hope-bearing.

We also discovered that young people are still fragile in their hope. Again, the discovery resonates with Dean (2010), who makes a case that young people’s faith is not yet fully durable. She argues that Christian young people tend toward the benign faith of their benign churches; yet youth long for a consequential faith. Dean makes a case for a missional approach to Christian education, having discovered the importance of young people’s immersion in a significant community of faith, a personal story of God (testimony), a strong sense of vocation, and hope. Dean’s studies of Christian youth need to be brought into comparative dialogue with studies of young people in the global community of interreligious and non-religious youth. Though our study also focused on mostly Christian young people, the interviews and focus groups point to a much wider range of influences and implications than those of Dean. The young people, in narrating their lives, describe a wide range of life experiences and encounters with religion and the Holy that are significant for them; many of these are unconnected to their faith communities. Even in the complexity of their narratives, we discovered that hope is most commonly found among young people when they have a sense of a world beyond themselves; have faith in God or some version of a spiritual-moral universe; and have an active imagination. We also discovered the fragility of hope in the young people. Hope can be thwarted or suppressed by fear. This makes the role of religious educators all the more important.

To provide guidance for religious educators, grounded in the stories of youth, we have identified at least five key insights for religious education. First, young people learn from their life experience, and they need maximum opportunities to reflect deeply on those experiences with others. The gratitude that most youth expressed after the interviews, and the animated
conversations in the focus groups, reveal the yearnings of youth for reflective conversations, a conclusion supported by other research (Baker 2005; White 2005; Yust 2008; Bischoff 2011). A second insight is closely related: *young people learn from the social contexts in which they live, and their contextual experience can be stretched with pedagogies that expand their horizons.* Such pedagogies might engage youth with wide-ranging narratives of people and the earth, immersion experiences, and dialogues with people living in diverse contexts and circumstances. Third, *young people have formative life experiences which can become platforms of hope.* Teachers need to be role models from which young people can draw inspiration and encouragement. Fourth, *young people are capable of imaginatively transforming challenging and potentially damaging life experiences into a hopeful outlook for the social issues that concern them.* Finally, *young people learn from being in positions of responsibility and leadership, and they need mentors to listen, guide, and reflect with them on these roles, whether they have sought the roles or been thrust into them by life circumstances.*

Young people’s knowledge runs deep and wide, grounded too often in devastating experiences of violence, neglect, and oppression. Further, they often carry daunting levels of responsibility. At the same time, they express the yearning and capacity to stretch and deepen their knowledge to benefit themselves and others. For religious educators, young people are delicate flowers to be appreciated, protected, and nourished; however, they are also gardeners themselves, who have great wisdom about gardens and the dangers and possibilities therein. If young people are to continue pivoting toward hope, they will need the tender care of the good gardeners, and they will also need to be entrusted to care for gardens themselves. They need mentors who will honor their experiences, their fragility, and their wisdom. Most important, they need mentors and communities who will honor and learn from their own hard-earned hope.
Abstract

This paper explores transformative moments in the lives of young people, drawing from interviews and focus groups with 75 youth. We highlight the emerging theme of hope with portraiture drawn from two young women’s narratives as we give particular attention to the role of imagination, fear, and life experiences in their stories. Then we analyze more generally the interviewees’ narrations of hope and the influences that evoke, support, and/or discourage their hopes. In conclusion, we create a dialogue between the young voices and the theological literature to discover how they challenge and enlarge one another. The paper closes with proposals for educational practice.

References


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