

## INTRODUCTION

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

I often say I love kids more than I love Jesus. I think Jesus is okay with this sentiment. In fact, I think Jesus prefers it this way. He can handle it. Jesus knows our young people are caged birds like the ones in Maya Angelou's poem. I write this book to change the way we think about our young people so that we might love them as they are, not as we think they should be. In some sense, this is a book about theology and ministry; but it is only a book about theology and ministry because it is a book

about young people. If you have come looking for a new program or a silver bullet, then you have come to the wrong place. If you have come to have your eyes, ears, and heart opened to young people in new ways, then read on so you might learn to recognize this song of the caged birds.

### Who Is This Book About?

Our practices of youth work grow out of our views of children and youth. I say *youth work* rather than *youth ministry* because I am including more than the church in this statement. Our views of children and youth influence the way we educate young people, the way we coach them, the way we raise them, the way we interact with them in the neighborhood, and the way we engage them in ministry. So, if we want our practices with young people to change and improve, then we must first examine our understanding of who they are. This book will help you do just that. It will change the way you understand who our young people are.

I intentionally use the term *young people* throughout this book for several reasons. First, it is meant to be inclusive of those we often consider children as well as those we call adolescents or young adults. We should not ignore the unique changes that occur during childhood and adolescence. However, too often we become fixated on these changes as the factors that define a person in these life phases rather than allowing the individual, as a child of God, to be the defining factor. The intention is not to wipe away the differences of people at these ages but

to intentionally move us away from the silos created by developmental stage theories, which I will critique in this book. I avoid the terms *adolescent* and *adolescence* except when referring to them as words used by certain theories to describe this age group. I also use the term *adolescent* as a descriptor for the caricature our society has of the typical teenager, “the adolescent.” *Adolescent* and *adolescence* come from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means *to ripen*. These words force us to understand this part of life as primarily about growth or ripening or becoming—as life yet to be achieved. This is a destructive way to think about our young people, so I refrain from using these words in this text. This book is not about children or kids or adolescents. It is about young people.

### What Will Happen in This Book?

Walter Brueggemann claims we all live our lives in bondage to the dominant script. This is the script of “therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism.”<sup>2</sup> It leads us to believe we should always be happy and comfortable (therapeutic), we can solve any problem (technological), we have the right to own and consume whatever we want (consumerist), and we have the right to use force to protect this “American Dream” (militarism). This dominant script promises to make us safer and happier, but it has not. It has failed us, and we are less happy and more afraid than ever before. The dominant script rarely, if ever, liberates. It most often enslaves. This book challenges the current dominant script of adolescence, which is threatening the well-being of our young

people. I will replace it with a theologically constructed counter-script of vocation and liberation for our young people.

As you will see in chapter 1, adolescence as we know it emerged during the same time Brueggemann's dominant script was taking root in the United States. The two, adolescence and

This book challenges the current dominant script of adolescence, which is threatening the well-being of our young people.

this dominant script, are inseparable. The same worldview that gave rise to this therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism also gave rise to the primary narratives that shape the way we think about young people: developmental-stage theories and materialism. Both have had devastating effects on our understanding of young people and, therefore, also on our practices of ministry with young people.

This book weaves two disciplines, positive youth development and critical youth studies, together to (1) illuminate how our understanding of young people is rooted in both stage theories and materialism, and (2) begin constructing a counterscript, a story of our liberation from bondage to this dominate narrative. The discipline of positive youth development has become an important corrective in response to traditional developmental-stage theories. Richard Lerner tells us "we simply can't argue for the existence of a 'typical' teenager or believe that any single conception [or stereotype] of adolescence is generally true. . . . Development isn't simple but incredibly multifaceted."<sup>3</sup> The

field of critical youth studies has also offered an important corrective to the materialistic ways of understanding our young people by lifting up the ideals of youth voice and agency. Critical youth studies refuses to see young people as passive recipients of oppressive culture but rather sees them as empowered agents of change. The third, and most potent, strand woven into this counterscript is the theological concept of vocation, or God's call to serve our neighbor in freedom. This book offers you a vocational theory and theology of young people.

The dominant script gives rise to a particular stereotype of young people—which I will call the *undeveloped consumer*. The vocational theory of young people offered in this book helps us construct the counterscript, or antidote, to the undeveloped consumer. I will refer to this antidote as the *called cocreator*. Each of these, the undeveloped consumer and the called cocreator, seeks to answer young peoples' most pressing questions, but they do so in very different ways (see figure 1). Our assumptions and stereotypes of our young people perpetuate this myth of the undeveloped consumer, telling our young people they are undeveloped, identity-less, self-centered consumers. Our current practices of ministry are also unknowingly dependent

The same worldview that gave rise to this therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism also gave rise to the primary narratives that shape the way we think about young people.

upon this myth. Therefore, this project seeks to liberate our young people and ourselves from this myth. The called cocreator is not *undeveloped* but *called by God*; not *identity-less* but a *child of God*; not *self-centered* but *relational*; not a *consumer* but a *cocreator*. Our young people are singing like caged birds. Our young people find themselves trapped in the cage of the undeveloped consumer, but they are singing because, deep in their bones, they know another way to live. They are singing of the freedom that comes from God. The called cocreator embodies this freedom.

### Who Is This Book For?

If you have read this far, then this book is for you. It is for those who care deeply about young people and how we engage in ministry with young people. It is for those who recognize something is deeply wrong with our practices of youth work and youth ministry that we cannot easily fix, but who hold some hope that many things are also deeply right. This book is practical enough that people will find it immediately helpful in their ministry with young people. It is also provocative enough to create meaningful discussion in the classroom at the undergraduate or seminary level. It is for lay leaders, volunteers, pastors, and students of ministry. It will work best if read and discussed with other partners in ministry. Long story short, it is for you.

Pressing Question	Undeveloped Consumer	Called Cocreator
What can I contribute to the world?	You are <i>undeveloped</i> . You are unable to fully contribute until you have arrived at adulthood.	You are <i>called</i> by God to use your gifts and abilities to serve God's world right now.
Who am I?	You are <i>identity-less</i> . You must seek or construct your true identity before you can become a competent adult.	God names you and claims you as a <i>child of God</i> . This is not an achievement but a gift.
Am I connected to anyone?	You are <i>self-centered</i> , so it does not matter. You are only concerned for your own well-being and happiness, which makes it difficult for you to connect with anyone.	You are a <i>relational</i> being. God has created you for relationships. There is no other way to think of yourself than connected to everything around you.
What is the purpose of my life?	You are a <i>commodified consumer</i> . You can help society by doing your part as both a commodity that is consumed by capitalism and as a consumer who consumes other commodities to keep capitalism running smoothly.	You are a <i>created cocreator</i> . God has gifted you and called you into the holy work of cocreating God's kingdom with God. You have power and attributes that cannot be commodified or consumed.

**Figure 1:** The Undeveloped Consumer vs. the Called Cocreator

## How Is This Book Different?

I had the privilege of studying with Dr. Andrew Root while completing my PhD at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. One of the most provocative things I have heard Root talk about in recent years is his description of youth ministry as a technology. He says, “Technology is science used for functional ends, to achieve or solve some problem that will result in increased capital. This capital could be economic, social, or cultural [even religious].”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to critique popular practices of youth ministry as technology. We implement certain practices with the hope they will solve “some problems” for us. Most books about ministry today only offer another technology we hope will solve our problem, no matter how we define that problem. Instead, Root encourages us to leave the technological behind in favor of the theological. This book offers hope rather than technology. It is theological in that it seeks to construct a theological understanding of our young people. It is hopeful in that it takes root in God’s promises and presence. You will not find a new technology in this book, but you will find an old hope.

This book is also different because it is not simply diagnosing a problem or describing a current situation but is seeking to proclaim hope and good news into that situation. The narratives of adolescent development and emerging adulthood, which are narratives we love kicking around in ministry, are helpful in that they describe what is going on. However, they fall short in that they do not help us see “the way things really are” or “what really is.” Theologian Philip Hefner uses these phrases to

describe what it means to think theologically about our lived realities.<sup>5</sup> So, developmental-stage theory might help us understand how young people experience change in their lives today, but it does not help us understand who young people are in light of God's promises. This book offers a hope-filled theological construction of the way things really are for our young people as God's children.

### Who Is the Author?

Today, authors cannot and should not offer their opinions without also disclosing their social locations. My perspective grows from my life experiences in particular contexts. These experiences both illuminate and limit my perspective. I write as one who has known privilege and power in his life. I am a white, Christian, straight, cisgender male who grew up Lutheran in the American Midwest. I spent my childhood in the lower-middle class, but I now find myself as an adult in the upper-middle class. I have known hard times, but I have never known oppression. I understand many opportunities have come my way, including authoring this book, floating down this river of privilege I inhabit.

This book offers  
a hope-filled  
theological  
construction of  
the way things  
really are for our  
young people as  
God's children.

## INTRODUCTION

However, I also write as one committed to sharing my power and acknowledging how privilege grossly limits my imagination. Family members, friends, colleagues, mentors, and students have pushed back against my privilege and helped me see my place in our shared world in new ways. Therefore, I write as one who offers his voice to the long conversation, hoping that others will join it to affirm, challenge, deconstruct, and build upon what this project offers. Monologues do not usher in the kingdom of God, but dialogues might. I hope this book helps us all see where the holes are in our vision of young people so more people with other perspectives might come along and offer their wisdom into this conversation as well.