

Transcript Segment, Part 3
“Toward a Meaningful Life”

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So then the bigger question then becomes, how do you navigate towards a meaningful life? How do you get there? This is a tricky thing. What you're trying to teach basically is how you engage people in loving in the world. How do you get them to believe that that's the thing to do, when so much around them speaks a contrary story? So much around us says that really, what's most important is get what you can for yourself, or get what you can for at least the people you like, right? But not risk loving, especially don't risk loving people you don't like.

Certainly don't risk loving people who you disagree with. Certainly don't risk loving people who look different from you. And so it's very challenging to keep encouraging people to live and love, even to know that that's a thing to do.

So I'm going to suggest some strategies for faith formation with adolescence. And this is where you get out your notebooks, because oh, good, now she's giving us the answers.

The first task you need to do is interpret and connect. So if I said, one of the challenges of an adolescent is to figure out how to interpret the world well, you've actually got to help them interpret. How do you make sense of the world that's around you?

Now sailing looks like an easy thing. Wind pushes the sails, right? Isn't that how it goes? Easy peasy. No, it's not. You have to constantly interpret how the wind isn't pushing the sails but interacting with the sails. And when you add more than one sail, it gets even more complicated, because now the two sails are interacting with each other, which then means that the wind that's around them is interacting with it, and that's what's going to determine if your boat's moving. You have to learn how to interpret that and interpret the relationship between them.

You also have to interpret the water. I've been sailing races some nights that there's so little wind, the tide is moving us backwards, and you're like, "Oh no, we're crossing the start line again." You have to be able to interpret forces that are moving at counter-purposes and figure out, how do I use them in a way that benefits me? How do I use them so that we go forward in a way that's helpful and appropriate?

Interpreting the landscape around you is essential, not simply for sailing, but for life. What do people expect of me? How do I figure out what they're saying? How do I understand what's going on here?

What happens in adolescence is that it becomes much more important that people talk to you and that you listen to them, because you need people who maybe have a clue as to

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how to read what's going on. And so it becomes really essential in adolescence that you begin to have people who will take the time to listen to your own concerns and respond to them intelligently. Listen to your own ideas and give you feedback and encouragement. You need someone to help you interpret the world well.

Now the first thing you're interpreting is yourself. Am I worthwhile? Am I of any value? Am I anything? Does anybody care?

Interpreting ourselves and others along a horizon of love is careful work. It's grace-full work, meaning it's full of grace. It gives us the opportunity to give and to receive love.

Call to mind those people in your life, significant and minor, who helped you see the value in yourself. Let's offer up a quick thank you for who they are.

Another thing that's an important element within the Christian Tradition is that my value cannot come at the expense of somebody else's, which is also often a common way of looking at life. If I'm supposed to be good, then you've got to be bad. If I'm supposed to be great, then you have to be small.

But the Christian Tradition says, "No, your value is grounded in the value of the other. If they're not valuable, then you're not valuable. But your value is wonderful and unique and beautiful and their value too is, you've just yet to see it."

John Zizioulas, who is a Greek Orthodox theologian, talks about our discovering our personhood in relationships. That we're just humans. Our nature as humans is just one of close to eight billion right now. There's nothing special about being human. He said, what makes us discover our unique humanity is when somebody recognizes us as a person. When they see us ourselves and they say, "Yes, you."

I hope and expect everybody in this room has had somebody create that experience for them. That our sense of our value-- our unique value only comes when somebody else recognizes us and sees us for ourselves. If we're lucky, this doesn't happen just once, but it happens again and again over time with multiple people. And this helps us ground our sense of our value in ourselves.

We cannot talk ourselves into our own value. We actually need other people to help us discover it within ourselves.

Another thing I would suggest is ballast. You have to provide ballast. My favorite part of the boat is the keel on the bottom because it means my boat won't tip over when the wind is strong. But one of the things that's problematic today is we expect a lot of young people to do things on their own and go out there in the weather on their own. And smaller boats, while agile and fun, also tip over very easily.

So if you think about the Tradition as ballast, then we can think about how do we offer that ballast in a meaningful way. So we have here-- one of the things that we have that's really valuable is our stories of who we are as a community of people. Alasdair MacIntyre says, "For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with the past, and to try to cut myself off from that past is to deform my present relationships."

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So we have to think about, well, what are the sources of our stories? For me, it's Scripture, certainly, as a Catholic Christian, but it's also the stories of the Saints. And these are my patron saints. I call them my bench. So Saint Therese of Lisieux, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Anne, the mother of Mary, and Saint Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary.

These stories help and encourage us and direct us, and also, they companion us. I am not alone, even when I am by myself, for they are with me, even if I can't see them. They provide direction and encouragement. I'm not going to take the time to read this one here, but this was the reading from last Sunday, where the young man asked Jesus, what did he do to gain eternal life? And Jesus said, "Give everything away," and the guy left, downcast.

And how much is that like a story of today, where our real salvation is in what we own and what we can gain and our possessions and our income? Our real security's in our income. And Jesus is saying, "No, your real security isn't there."

The third thing that we have to offer are practices that keep these things up. Something that we share together. You can't just say to the adolescent, "Go do those things because I'm sure they're good for you," but never do them yourself. You actually have to invite people into practices as things that you find valuable yourself.

And to go on with one of my favorite lines is that you get good at what you practice and you never get good at what you don't practice. So if I'm looking here, these sailors in these around-the-world sailing boats, they're much better at sailing than I am but they spend a whole lot more time doing it than I do.

Similarly, when we're asking people to pay attention to the presence of God, it's something that we have to practice. And our liturgical spaces and worship and practices aid us in that. They help us see God's presence outside that space. But it also suggests to you, God's presence outside that space also informs what we bring to worship and prayer in religious spaces. Think of your religious practices that shape you or the things that you do on a regular basis to help keep you on course.

The last thing I want to point to is relationships. Central to adolescence is recognizing that people are out there and that maybe you want to have a relationship with somebody-- a friend, a romantic interest, even just business colleagues and coworkers. But one of the things that few people talk about-- they say, "Everyone's got to have relationships. You should have relationships. Young people should have relationships." Nobody tells you how.

And that's one of the really challenging things going on right now, is that adolescents and young adults are told to get themselves a relationship without any indication as to how to do that. We are made for relationships. This is shameless plug number two. We are made for relationships but we are not automatically good at them. In fact, we're lousy at them, much of the time. They require practice. They require practice like listening and speaking so as to be understood and to understand. They require vulnerability. They require forgiveness. They require all sorts of stuff, much of it messy but a lot of it grace-full, full of grace.

And I'd suggest to you in religious communities that a really important element of this is what I call in the book "robust relationships," particularly with non-parenting adults. People who see you, know you, and value you still. Parents can be lots of things for their kids. They can never not be their parent, and we all know that as children and as parents. You can

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never not be your parent and you can never not be the child of your parent, and that conversation is always loaded with all sorts of history and hopes.

But another adult doesn't come with that stuff for you. And so we need to encourage non-parenting relationships with young people so that they can begin to even hear themselves think with somebody. Test out ideas. Because in the world of relationships, everybody needs apprenticing. So there's my teacher there-- our sailing teacher.

Similarly, relationships with Jesus have to be preceded by relationships with real people who love you. Belonging to a church has to be preceded by a community that's invited and is worth belonging. So the onus is on us-- to reach out, to be present, to be inviting, to be there.

Edward Hahnenberg says is another place in his book, "Communal structures of support and accountability, a shared vocabulary, regular rituals, time with friends, and a place for fellowship, tasks to accomplish together-- this is the stuff of church. Participation is a doing with and being with others. It is also to take part, to have a stake, or to share something. Religion or church is not simply a resource from which I draw. It is an arena within which I act. I take part in something larger than myself, and I do it with others."

That's what religious communities are about. They're not simply membership groups. They're about something larger than ourselves and a community that shapes our vision and our interpreting of the world. So we finish with this thought.

Ask yourselves, what stories provide your ballast? How do you make sense of life? Who is your community? And can you ever imagine inviting an adolescent to that and telling them why you like it so much? I suggest that's how you might help somebody navigate towards a meaningful life. Share with them how you're doing it. Invite them into the practice, into the community.