SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE WILDERNESS:
WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO KNOW

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The Christian imagination can easily see the wonders of a Holy God within the natural settings which God has provided for God’s people. With anticipation of intimacy and awe, Christians move from the comfort of their Sealy Posturepedic beds to the bare earth; from their refrigerators to the campfire, from their luxury SUV’s to their own two feet. All this, in order to be in tune with what the voice of God is revealing through the wonder of the outdoors. For decades, churches have been taking young people to Bible camp, men’s groups on fishing trips, and women’s retreats to remote reaches. Why is this? There is a connection between God and our souls that becomes stimulated as we leave the familiar routine of everyday life and enter into a welcomed uncertainty of exploration. As Christians, we read in the Bible of the Prophet’s reverence for God’s power in nature; the formations of the natural world. The Psalms poetically name the grandeur of God’s thoughtful creation; those formations God has called into existence. The Gospels testify how Jesus himself retreated into the wilderness to pray; to be with his Father in an uninterrupted space. When the Holy Spirit moves in and through us as believing and willing Christians through the wonder of nature, we somehow better understand God’s work in the world and in our lives.

This is all well and good; a commonality amongst the majority of American Christians today. Another question remains, however. Does this revelation of the creative power and majesty of God stop there? What exactly is it that an atheist woman is experiencing when that inevitable sense of awe and wonder takes over her baffled mind as she stares into the perfection of the deep abyss of the Grand Canyon? What is it that moves an agnostic man to tears as he marvels at the sights in front of him when hesummits Mt. Whitney? Something
must be said of wilderness adventure experiences and how these experiences tug at the spiritual heartstrings of mankind.

Many people know wilderness experiences to happen at camps or retreats. In what follows, however, we will move beyond the structure and intention of camps and retreats. Sports camps, Bible camps, couples retreats, wellness retreats and the like, all have structured agendas and an end objective. Although camps and retreats benefit spirituality in their own way, the goal of this paper is to examine what happens in and to a young adult’s spirituality through the spontaneity and exposure of wilderness adventure experiences. In such experiences, the lack of structure offers room for both personal and communal exploration of the mind and body. Wilderness adventure experiences come in a variety of forms. For this purpose, a “wilderness adventure experience” here might refer to excursions of climbing, backpacking, whitewater rafting or canoeing, and mountaineering, just to give some concrete examples of what defines such an adventure. All of these examples suggest that those participating are being immersed in the outdoors for an extended period of time. Such excursions are most often done in groups rather than alone, but all offer time and space for solitude. It can also be assumed that wilderness adventure experiences come with the anticipation of both great peace and significant struggle: peace in the beauty of the natural setting, and struggle in physical demand as well as the potential for enduring severe elements of Mother Nature.

In a moment, we will be introduced to four young adults: Katie, Rob, Nicole, and Adam, who all ventured together on a wilderness adventure experience. These four individuals, ranging in age from 23 to 29, whitewater rafted and hiked their way through the 278 miles of
the Grand Canyon via the Colorado River. The excursion lasted thirty days and twenty-nine nights, with little to no contact with the outside world. Their trip began on December 30, 2012 and officially ended on January 18, 2013, although they would claim that the journey that began on day 1 might never end in their hearts and minds. Altogether, there were fourteen young adults on this journey through one of the Seven Wonders of the World. This group (some familiar with each other, some not) would have to work with themselves and with one another in order to safely experience all the Grand Canyon had to offer them.

On the afternoon of day 21, at river mile 172 (Mohawk Camp), Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam were all asked the same question: How does a trip like this, an outdoor adventure experience in the Grand Canyon, affect or speak to your spirituality? What does an experience like this do to your spirituality? Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam all come from families which taught them about the Christian faith, but none of them would define themselves as Christians today. As we will see, all four have found different ways of exploring their own spirituality. Because of this, Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam were affected by this wilderness adventure in different ways. In listening carefully to what these young adults reveal about their experience in the Grand Canyon, we hope to be able to think theologically about what is going on here, and how the church might be able to enter into those experiences. This is what they said:

*Katie*

“Spirituality to me, I guess, is something more powerful than myself, and I think being in the Grand Canyon speaks to that so well because not only is it big in size, but I do think that it has this power that I haven’t really figured out yet...being in here reminds me how there is always something bigger than you and greater than you that kind of gives you this energy, that even though we’re small, I feel the power that holds and I feel that I gain strength, then I am able to be greater than I think I am to do greater things.”
Katie had grown up in the Catholic church, as her parents desired. She embraced the tradition as a young person, and had good friends in the church as well. When Katie moved to college, she grew distant from the church. A couple years later, she moved out to Montana, and became quite skeptical of the church as a whole, which turned her off to the Christian faith.

Katie recognized the energy and the power of the reality of this wilderness experience. To her, being able to live in and move through something like the Grand Canyon as a group of 14 young adults reveals that there is something greater than her that “kind of, like, brings out the full potential in you.”

Later on in the discussion, Katie came back to this “power” that she has felt throughout her trip as it is connected to the power of the world as it has been in the past. “I just love all of the history that we have felt, because that just really puts you in your place. It’s like, yeah we’re part of nature and everything, but we are down here with a stocked bar and a stocked kitchen. We forget that this place was someone’s home. These walls were their home.” For Katie, the communal aspect of surviving down at the bottom of the Grand Canyon was powerful to her and tapped into her spirituality.

Rob

“It’s getting harder and harder to be out in the wild and getting away to measure what is important in life. Like your relationships with the people around you.”

Rob grew up in the Episcopalian church and remembers his mother giving him his children’s Bible. But Rob said that as he got older, he just did not identify with Christianity, and “understanding the world, its creations, and how we all relate to one another.”
Rob has more of a quiet demeanor. Everyone on the trip knew within a few days that it was not in Rob’s personality to be the boisterous, attention-getting guy, but that he did what was needed of him with gladness and a sense of duty. When talking about spirituality, Rob did not have all that much to say, but what he did say, he said with heart and passion. For Rob, this time in the Grand Canyon gave him space to look at the earth as what created him and let him contemplate on how he wants to live into being a part of that. He said simply, “it deepens me.”

This wilderness experience was “inspiring and deepening how I live.”

Nicole

“I feel like this trip is really helping me reconnect with the divine, I’d say. Like, for a long time I wasn’t that spiritual.”

Nicole, like Katie, had grown up in the Catholic tradition because of her family. She then went through a period where she actively turned away from that faith. Nicole revealed that at eighteen, she started to get into different kinds of spirituality, but in recent years, she admits, she has gotten away from even this. Nicole said, “Talking about spiritual things with people would make me, like, bashful. I don’t know, I just felt like weird about it.” She then began to open up about her most recent experience with the spiritual: yoga. Often times, in a yoga class, her practice is guided by a story. She claims that it is in these stories that she has been able to embrace the divine in a more personal way, even in the Grand Canyon. She recalled one particular story she heard a few months prior to the trip, and it had been a story she was thinking much about on the river. What Nicole took from that specific yoga practice was that, “when you know yourself, you know your own divinity, and you know that you’re safe, you’re perfect, you’re capable to do anything that you need to do. You have the love that you need,
you have what you need. You feel whole. You remember that you’re part of the divine. And when you forget that and feel lost, you should try to be of service and it will remind you.” This had become a guiding principle in her life, and especially on this trip. Being of service was what Nicole wanted her role to be on her trip, which grounded her in her daily routine. This trip was a bit different for Nicole than for the rest of the crew. She did not have the wilderness experience that many in the group had previously had, and she was very nervous about that. That awareness led Nicole to intensely prepare for this experience both mentally and physically. She turned to a mentor before leaving for the Grand Canyon. This mentor told her she was “like the tarot card of the fool, not that she was foolish, but that she was leaping into the unknown.” Nicole said that in preparing for this trip, she really felt that she was going to be the “weak link” of the crew; not knowing how to help out, not knowing what to expect at all. What this mentor said to her, then, allowed Nicole to embrace diving into an unknown adventure with a willing attitude.

For Nicole, it was this attitude and the remembrance of that yoga class that opened her up to the possibility of this wilderness adventure experience as a whole. When the conversation turned to how hard it is to “get away” these days, Nicole passionately stated that, “when you’re in a city you’re not really separate from other people; you’re not really separate from the earth, but it feels like you are. But being out here lets you remember that you’re a part of it all.”

Adam

“For me, spirituality has always been a realm of the outdoors, and I always have and still do, feel closer to divinity when I am as far away from civilization as possible.”
Adam grew up as a “part-time” Presbyterian, he called it. He said that he just never really engaged much in church. His whole life has been one giant exploration of nature. He grew up in a small town in Montana, and has embraced all that the land has to offer him. Adam’s love for nature has been a part of him since birth, and in is short twenty-three years of life, Adam has already taken nine trips down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and visited numerous countries and continents to enjoy their unique beauty.

Adam noted that from a spiritual side, the colossal nature of the canyon inspires awe and wonder in him. “The first time I saw it, I looked down and just stared into the abyss. I think that somewhere in our soul, there is a desire to see into the depths of the unknown, and figure out what lies there.” In talking about the escape that comes with a wilderness adventure experience, Adam revealed that for him, it’s not just about getting away from the world. What he enjoys most about this space is that the canyon is so large and awesome, that it allows him to take the time to ponder whatever it is that is on his mind. “That may be what’s for breakfast, or it sometimes leans towards larger questions. He defines his weeks on the Grand Canyon as time to “recharge.”

“For me, any trip outside is good for the spirit, and therefore a stepping stone in my own journey of spirituality. Whether I am standing in a silent snowstorm on the side of a mountain, or sleeping next to the incessant noise of a rapid all night long, being outside for an extended period of time is a spiritual act for me, that I think rivals going to church for others.”

Thanks to Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam, we have four different, personal views of how spirituality is awakened and engaged on a wilderness adventure experience. Obviously, these four young adults bring different meaning into such an adventure, and each one takes away a
different meaning as well. It is important to examine possibilities for why it is these young adults are saying what they are about spirituality. How did they come to these conclusions? Does their culture affect how they view spirituality in such a place as the Grand Canyon? If all four of these young adults have had some experience with Christianity, why is that none of them mentioned anything about the Christian faith in their spiritual journey here?

For Katie, the Grand Canyon spoke to her spirituality through the literal and figurative enormity and power of such a place. This tapped into her individual potential that was then converted into communal effort to survive the adventure. For Rob, the trip spoke to his spirituality in that it deepened his awareness of the world around him, and the relationships between all things which become inspired by time apart from reutilized life. Nicole also reflected on the strength and power that such a place grants you in order to live into the experience. This was done for her by keeping in mind the spiritual stories which she had learned and interpreted personally, and how such stories reconnected her to nature. Adam honed in on the spiritual richness that he finds anywhere in the outdoors. For this young man, the divine is revealed in the awesome wonder of the natural world.

What is going on in the lives of these four that would bring them to such conclusions? What might these young adults be revealing as they speak their minds and hearts about the effects of this trip on their spirituality? To break this down and explore different possibilities, we turn to a couple theories that might shed light on the what’s and why’s of the spirituality of young adults today. We will first bring into conversation the work of Dr. Paul Heelas, a professor Religion and Modernity at Lancaster University, and Dr. Linda Woodhead, a senior lecturer in Christian Studies at Lancaster University. Together, Heelas and Woodhead authored
The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality. After hearing what these two scholars have to say about spirituality today, we will bring Dr. Paul Heintztman into the conversation, whose doctorate work was on leisure and spiritual wellbeing. Hopefully these three voices will give insight into why Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam are experiencing the spiritual as they have described while on their wilderness adventure experiences.

In their work about emerging spirituality, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead survey and theoretically synthesize religious involvement in both Great Britain and the United States. What they find is that it appears that traditional forms of religion are giving way to new forms of spirituality. Throughout their book, The Spiritual Revolution, Heelas and Woodhead dissect and compare what they call “life-as religion” and “subjective-life spirituality.” “Life-as” traditions, namely Christianity, typically emphasize a transcendent source of significance; people being guided by a higher authority to find fulfillment. The “subjective-life” position emphasizes a very inner source of significance, where individuals live out their lives in their own unique ways to find the deep truth in what lies within this world.¹ Right away, the book dives into the differences between and effects of these two dimensions; religion and spirituality. Although Heelas and Woodhead do affirm that some congregations may attend to the subjective needs of congregants, “individuals are not encouraged to pursue their own spiritual paths on the basis of their own deepest experiences, but are guided by way of clearly defined, extensively articulated and tightly regulated roles and duties.”² What Heelas and Woodhead found in their research was an overall decline in congregational attendance in Great Britain; “a decline of almost exactly one third over just 20 years.” And the same trend, although not as severe, has

² Ibid., 19.
occurred the in USA since the 1960’s. While this decline in church congregational life is taking place, the holistic milieu of spiritual practices has steadily been on the incline.

Just from this introduction to what Heelas and Woodhead set out to explore, it is clear to see that Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam already seem to fit the description of following “subjective-life” forms of the sacred. These authors also suggest, from their findings, that moves to the “subjective-life” were being made more so by young people than older people in congregations, as older church members were more comfortable with the structure and patterns of “life-as” forms of the sacred.

Later on in their work, Heelas and Woodhead get into the cultural influences that prefer a “subjective-life” way of being. Our culture today is very much about our own personal experiences. This is very evident in today’s world of advertisement and entertainment. The culture of subjective-wellbeing focuses greatly, if not solely, on the value of uniqueness. “Many advertisements emphasize the experiential rather than the utility value of the products.” With this information and understanding, we begin to see just why it is that Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam are attributing their individual, unique experiences to the spiritual, and not the collective tradition of Christianity.

A Gallup and Jones poll published in 2006 asked the question, “Do you think of spirituality more in a personal or individual sense, or more in terms of organized religion and church doctrine?” 72 percent opted for the ‘personal or individual sense’ That is a large number, but that number represents all of the young adults we met in the above interviews.

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4 Ibid., 84.
5 Ibid., 74.
“Subjectively oriented selves seek forms of the sacred which enable them to monitor their progress in life by reference to the quality or authenticity of personal, experientially informed knowledge and authority, rather than by reference to the standards of an overarching order which, since it is not of one’s own making, is therefore alien. Such an ‘inner’ sacred offers people the freedom to find their own path rather than telling them the path which they ought to follow, and it enables them to test activities to find what works best for their experiences of life.”

Through this description of “subjective-life” spirituality, it is clear to see that this is how Katie understands wilderness adventure experiences to speak to her spirituality as potential growth for her as an individual. This description offers up explanation of the “deepening” that Rob feels as he makes the Grand Canyon home for a month. For Nicole, it is obvious that the subjective-life allows her to connect her yoga to the natural world as a wilderness trip helps her connect to the divine. Lastly, this description explains Adam’s knowledge of the spiritual in his various meaningful outdoor adventure experiences.

To help understand how the outdoors/nature fits into this spiritual equation, we consult the work of Paul Heintzman. All four of our interviewees would confidently say that the sheer landscape of the Grand Canyon is enough to invoke an intimate spiritual experience. In his chapter, “Experiential Education and Spirituality,” Heintzman digs into how a place in nature can actually embody a sense of purpose and belonging. Such places “suggest that spiritual experiences are the result of complex interactions between an individual and the setting, including both the social and physical environment.” In speaking to the benefits of solitude as well as group experience, Heintzman observes that both are beneficial to spiritual growth in a wilderness setting. It is in the solitude of natural settings that men and women are able to find time for self reflection and to look inward, creating space for individuals to “contemplate life’s

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deepest questions.” To speak to the communal aspect of a wilderness adventure experience, a study done by Stringer and McAvoy in 1992 resulted in findings where “the sharing of different experiences, opinions, and ideas that each participant brought to the group was an important factor that contributed to their spiritual experience.” This resonates with what Katie and Rob mentioned in their shared experience of the spiritual within the walls of the Grand Canyon. For both of these two, the ability to work as a crew, and to value each relationship, meant hearing each other’s experiences and using these for the benefit and safety of the entire crew. When fourteen people spend one month together at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, countless opportunities arise to share stories and personal life experiences; a chance for friendships and camaraderie’s to form, which fosters individual spiritual wellbeing.

Heintzman noted the importance of the complete immersion within a wilderness setting as a “grounding’ factor that allows room for the spiritual to speak into the lives of those participating. Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam all mentioned how “being away” was indeed part of what first allowed them to tap into their spirituality in the Grand Canyon. The notion of transcendence is found here. “Long-lasting feelings of transcendence…lead to ‘empowerment, inner strength, inner peace, clarity, contentment, accomplishment, awareness, and connection.’ Similarly, Stringer and McAvoy observed that most spiritual experiences were accompanied by an increased sense of awareness of self, others, the environment and/or a greater power.”

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9 Ibid., 317.
10 Ibid., 318.
11 Ibid., 319.
Undoubtedly then, Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam were continually having spiritual experiences all along the Colorado River. These individual, subjective influences of the sacred came to them because of their intentionality in separating themselves from their everyday life, and allowing themselves to contemplate and connect with the natural world around them.

Although these four young adults would not claim that their sacred experiences in the Grand Canyon were on account of Christian spirituality, does that mean that this was not God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit speaking into their lives while they embraced what is so clearly God’s creation? No one can question the validity of Katie’s, Rob’s, Nicole’s and Adam’s testimonies as inspired by their month in the canyon. Is it fair to place this spiritual understanding under the banner of the Holy Ghost moving in and through these young adults as they interact with and ponder the world around them? Perhaps; and with that “perhaps” comes the chance to bring the Triune God into conversation with the spiritual encounters that young adults may have in wilderness adventure experiences. In order to do that fairly, we will consult the work of two theologians: Andrew Root and Jurgen Moltmann. Root offers up a theological perspective of the cross as found in the wilderness. Moltmann will be used as a resource for sparking conversation between “subjective-life” spirituality and how that melds with Christian spirituality. We may then turn to how the Christian tradition may bear witness to the realities of the experiences of Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam. It is only after all this that we may then draw conclusions on what theologically may have been going on with these four as they made the Grand Canyon their home for 30 days, and what the church can do about it.

In his book with Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, Dr. Andrew Root titles his twelfth chapter, “What are we doing in these Mountains? THE OUTDOOR TRIP AND
THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS.” Coming from the perspective of a Christian youth leader, Root emphasizes that when people go out on wilderness trips, they forget that nature itself is not God. Nature does not engage with the human creation through grace and love like our God does.\(^\text{12}\) Nature itself is certainly beautiful, but at the same time, nature could care less about each person as an individual. The reality of the natural world is that it is harsh. Had Katie, Rob, Nicole or Adam taken one wrong step on a hike, they could have fallen from the walls of the Grand Canyon to their death. Nature cannot interact with us like God can. Root notes that the love of God is a very active love, where nature itself is inert; passive.\(^\text{13}\)

After pointing out this paradoxical reality that nature is utterly beautiful yet overwhelmingly harsh, Root moves into the heart of Christ’s presence in the out-of-doors. He clearly states that such a paradox helps us to see why exactly it is that we take wilderness trips. “The point of looking at mountains that have been there for a million years and may be there a million more is not to see God in them but to recognize the thinness of our being in their shadow.”\(^\text{14}\) When Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam stare up and into the Grand Canyon, through the corridors of time, they may sit in their thoughts about their own life’s deepest questions, which then stir up deep longing for what is broken in their own worlds to be fixed. Perhaps we aren’t experiencing God in nature, but rather we are experiencing the reality of our finitude, our smallness and our brokenness. That dramatic realization, then, brings us straight to the cross. As Root concludes, “God is there, for God has acted through the thinness of death and brokenness to make our realities of thinness the place of God’s very action.”\(^\text{15}\) Christ himself

\(^\text{12\ Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 177.}\)
\(^\text{13\ Ibid., 177.}\)
\(^\text{14\ Ibid., 179.}\)
\(^\text{15\ Ibid., 180.}\)
knows all pain and suffering; all longing and finitude, which he took on as he died on the cross.

From there, new life comes forth as the promise of God is kept in Christ, the new covenant.

From a Christian perspective, the theology of the cross as seen in wilderness adventure trips richly yet delicately speaks to the experiences that individuals have on such excursions, and how that may impact one’s outlook on life. For four young adults who do not identify with the Christian faith, however, it is necessary to examine another approach to what Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam are experiencing as “spiritual” on their own outdoor trip.

Although Moltmann takes a different approach to how God reveals God’s self in creation, he intently speaks to the Holy Spirit as playing an important role in how human beings interact with and discover God in creation; “a pneumatological doctrine of creation.” This theological perspective in particular speaks to what Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam may have been experiencing. Perhaps Moltmann can continue the conversation Root started in regards to understanding these four spiritual experiences as God’s own movement a wilderness setting.

The way in which Moltmann speaks about the vitality and energy of the Holy Spirit as found in God’s creation resonates with what young adults are expressing in their agreement with “subjective-life” spirituality. “In the gift and through the power of the Holy Spirit a new divine presence is experienced in creation.” His idea of the efficacy of the Holy Spirit as found in creation reveals a Christian imagination about the way spirituality is harnessed on a wilderness adventure excursion. On page 100, he highlights four ways in which the divine Spirit reveals God’s own nature in creation through experience. The first experience is that of the sheer power of the Spirit; something that Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam all confirmed as present

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17 Ibid., 96.
in the Grand Canyon. Moltmann observes that in acknowledging this greater presence, the one believing in that presence is “born again” of the Spirit. The second experience of the Spirit comes in the communal aspect of what is taking place. He refers to Acts 4, when the new church is coming together, being made up of those who have everything in common. There is a deep communal aspect to wilderness adventure experiences, as Katie touched on in the sharing of her time in the Grand Canyon. “The fourteen of us together can do such amazing things, like if someone would have told me before that we were going to do 300 miles through the Grand Canyon, that sounds crazy and it is absurd, but I think being in this place gives us the power to do that.”18 Within the group dynamic of a wilderness adventure experience, all must be aware of one another’s gifts, weaknesses, and personalities so that the group may move successfully through the elements of the particular setting. There indeed is an aspect of commonality within a group that takes on an adventure experience in the outdoors, which may be expressed through the Spirit in the limitations and capabilities of the group as a community. The third experience of the Spirit which Moltmann introduces is that of individuation. Here, he recognizes the personal callings and gifts of each member as being attributed by the Holy Spirit. Nicole named this well as she shared how nervous she was to join the trip, based on her knowledge of her own personal identity. Throughout her time on the Colorado River, she honed in on what it was in which she was gifted, and how that individual gift could contribute to the whole. Rob and Adam also referred to individuation on the wilderness adventure experience, and how that spoke to their being grounded as human beings. The fourth and final experience that Moltmann identifies is that of the future. He asserts that through the Holy Spirit (as observed and felt in

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18 Katie Harmon (teacher) in discussion with the author, January 2013.
creation) a hope is instilled for the future; a hope of new creation. It is safe to say that Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam, on their thirty day trip, gain energy, hope, knowledge of self and knowledge of the world as they interact with each other and nature. There is an acknowledgment of the Spirit itself, community through this Spirit, individuation through this Spirit, and a hope for new creation from this Spirit.\textsuperscript{19}

Moltmann illustrates how the energy of the Holy Spirit is possibly revealed, exists, and moves into and through our young adults via creation. Though, is it enough just to say that the Holy Spirit is present in these moments? Moltmann also takes a different look at how Christ is present in nature as well. “In the light of creation, the cross of Christ means the true consolidation of the universe. Because from the very beginning the Creator is prepared to suffer in this way for his creation, his creation endures to eternity. The cross is the mystery of creation and the promise of the future.”\textsuperscript{20} In the mystery of the resurrection, we find the promise of new life; new creation. It is because of Christ that the Holy Spirit lives in and through us, daily creating anew, and forever promise new creation in our lives and in our world.

As stated before, none of the four young adults we met (Katie, Rob, Nicole or Adam) mentioned Christ or even “God” in their description of how their spirituality was being influenced and impacted by their outdoor adventure experience through the Grand Canyon. Theologians Andrew Root and Jurgen Moltmann, however, help to name the Christian influences that may have been at work in all four of their experiences.

What our theorists and theologians together reveal is that young adults want to make sense of their own experiences. Having a resource with which to do so would be helpful for

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 91.
them and should be a great concern for the church! Young adults, ages 18-30, are very much lacking in the vitality of most Christian congregations, especially in Lutheran congregations around the country. This age group is poorly represented in church pews, and church leaders need to ask themselves not only why this is so, but how we can engage and care for this particular community. In our final pages here, we will examine what it is churches should be aware of as the majority of young adults may be seeking the “subjective-life” of the sacred, and how it is that the church can connect with this age group in a relevant and authentic way. We must be mindful that our intentions are not to strictly convert young adults, but merely to learn from them and possibly lead them into a more Christian imagination about how they exist in the world.

For centuries, churches have been known to be communities of care. Their doors are open for people to come, receive care, and then be sent out into the world. In recent decades, young adults are not longer coming into the church to receive these things, yet they seek to find them elsewhere. The entire church must understand the shift in culture that has occurred over the past several decades. Young adults are staying in school longer, marrying later in life, and living into the postmodern, individualistic culture that has arisen in our country. “What all these...have in common is a concern with experience: the experience of good food, travel, health and self.”21 Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam are very experiential people, particularly when it comes to spirituality. As Adam stated, “Whether I am standing in a silent snowstorm on the side of a mountain, or sleeping next to the incessant noise of a rapid all night long, being outside for an extended period of time is a spiritual act for me, that I think rivals going to

church for others.”22 All of Adams outdoor experiences add up to make, for him, his spiritual
being. What Christians gain from a Sunday service sitting in a pew, Adam would claim to gain
from a Sunday float down a river. Being aware of the subjective side of the experience of God,
the church has a chance to be creative in how it could possibly reach young adults not
interested in a church service. No matter how wonderful the programming of the best churches
may be, it still necessitates that people come to it rather than it going out to people. This needs
to be remembered when churches start imagining how they will reach young adults who have
left the church for one reason or another.

If the church at one point possibly held the interest and excitement of Katie, Rob, Nicole
and Adam when they were children or adolescents, why wouldn’t the church be able to at least
invite them back in? It can. This takes just a little effort on the part of the church. Hopefully this
would be an effort worth putting forth. The effort comes in truly getting to know the young
adults in the community that exists outside the church walls. Once a congregational community
begins to know the young adults within their reach, that congregation may only then begin to
invest in programs, activities and outreach that would interest or excite young adults. If Katie,
Rob, Nicole and Adam have such an open mind about how the world impacts their spirituality,
then move the church to assist in that. Perhaps a congregation was to ask an experienced
church member to lead an outdoor adventure experience for one or two weeks during the year,
and open it up to young adults outside of the physical church. The trip could be advertised at a
nearby university’s Outdoor Adventure Program, or at the nearest REI. One example might be a
weeklong backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail. On this trip, intentional Christian leaders

22 Adam Ambelang (raft guide and journalist) in discussion with the author, January 2013.
could listen to the stories and experiences of young adults, and literally journey with them as they stroll through both the wonders and the trials that God’s creation sets before its travelers. With a Christian imagination leading the group, the goal would not be to convert young adults to Christianity by the time the week was over, but rather the goal would be to help the young adults make sense of the emotional, physical and spiritual transformations that take place on a wilderness adventure experience. Delicately, the idea of how nature opens up our sense of inner longing and broken reality could be introduced and begun to be named.

Throughout the United States, cities and towns offer public jogging and hiking clubs and groups. A church congregation that wanted to utilize the natural world around them might start their own public hiking group, or better yet, get a group to join an existing one. Walking miles with another person (whether that is a stranger or a friend) allows for conversation to flourish and for the formality of relationships to burst open. Through this, Christians get the chance to literally walk alongside another broken human being like themselves, and speak the Gospel into another’s life. For young adults who have not yet “settled down,” this is a great opportunity for the church to become an influence and a positive experience for this age group, and it is all done in the natural world, which already resonates with so many young adults in a spiritual way. If God is speaking to young adults through creation in nature, then the church should be concerned with getting itself into that conversation, and beginning a dialogue with young adults such as Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam.

Outdoor adventure experiences, such as rafting and hiking through 278 miles of the Grand Canyon, may not be the true revelation of God in the world, but it is indeed a way for humanity to experience the nature of God: the creativeness, the power, and the glory. When
immersed in the natural world for any amount of time, the reality that there exists a greater power than our finite human selves becomes extremely evident. Four young adults we now know, Katie, Rob, Nicole and Adam, have experienced that greater power in both body and mind as they journeyed through the wonderment of that canyon, which proved its own grandeur. Something spiritual was indeed taking place for these four, and if we don’t name it as possibly Christian, than we have a problem with our own Christian imaginations and Spirit. The church cannot afford to and should not, as a Community of Christ, turn a blind eye what God is doing in the minds, bodies and souls of young adults as they encounter their own reality in God’s created world. Instead, the church should be actively seeking how it might interact with and learn from young adults in the greater community; keeping in mind one commonality amongst all created human life: our souls need the wild.
Bibliography


A "wilderness experience" is often a time of intensified temptation and spiritual attack. It can involve a spiritual, financial, or emotional drought. Having a "wilderness experience" is not necessarily a sign that a believer is sinning; rather, it is a time of God-ordained testing. A "wilderness experience" is often linked to a "mountaintop experience"; that is, the struggle follows a success of some kind. The period of trial comes on the heels of a period of accomplishment or achievement. Our faith will be tested. But the God of grace will meet us even in the wilderness. Missionary Amy Carmichael knew this truth: "Bare heights of loneliness... a wilderness whose burning winds sweep over glowing sands, what are they to HIM? Even there He can refresh us, even there He can renew us.

Young Adult Clients ages 18-25 years old experience an individualized program structured to their stage in life. Fostering strengths and improving upon weaknesses allows you or your son/daughter to focus on their intervention, treatment, academics, family involvement, and mastery. In addition to the Adventure Education embedded in the daily structure of New Vision Wilderness, we have specialized experiences encompassing rock climbing, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing. While focusing on communicating and incorporating all five senses, Adventure Education also encourages participants to engage in healthy lifestyles! We Help Young Adults Discover Their Path. Expanse Wilderness Therapy is a proven program designed to increase confidence and positive self-awareness in Young Adults 18-28, who are struggling to make transitional changes. Immersed in nature, our students find healing through the challenges and awakening experiences associated with wilderness living. If you are Young Adult looking for a program that will guide you step by step through the process of Self-Discovery, Expanse Wilderness can help. Our professional therapists and caring field staff are the best in the industry and have over 30 years of experience.

Participants completed precamp (n = 46) and postcamp (n = 36) online questionnaires including nature-related and holistic well-being measures. With increasing recognition of a spiritual dimension, some argue for a biopsychosocial-spiritual model [29]. Participants rated the frequency of experiencing certain thoughts and feelings in the past two weeks (0 = never; 4 = very often). Total scores range from 0 to 40; higher scores indicate greater psychological stress. Young adults in wilderness therapy are treated fairly, never yelled at, and given a fair chance to change. They are experiencing a fun and exciting lifestyle that promotes better mental health. Wilderness therapy is also more realistic than boot camps, as it more readily addresses a young adult's needs. Dr. Marty Beyer, a respected psychiatrist, wrote a blog entitled "Juvenile Boot Camps Don't Make Sense," in which he said: "Parents search for a wise balance of love and limits to meet their teenagers' needs. The adult criminal system in general, and boot camps in particular, fail the basic tes