

Tale of two T-shirts: More connected than critical

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

Mom and Dad, you won't believe what they put on the official T-shirt we bought. I won't ever wear it!" Our 17-year-old son was calling from Governor's School, a six-week summer program for which he had been nominated by his high school. He was appalled because the "official T-shirt," which he had ordered as a remembrance of his experience, had two phrases that he found appalling. The front of the shirt says, "Accept nothing." The back of the shirt says, "Question everything."

"Those sayings are just wrong," he said. "They're not what I believe." While we too were troubled by the motto printed on the shirts, we were delighted that Nathan had the insight and judgment to be critical of them.

Our conversation took us back to the previous summer, when Nathan had attended the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. He had found that to be a wonderful, life-giving experience that enabled him to claim Christian faith for himself in powerful ways—perhaps despite the fact that he is a preacher's kid "squared." He spent the next month reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Augustine, Barbara Brown Taylor, Roberta Bondi and other Christian writers to whom he had been exposed. He also bought a T-shirt that became one of his favorite shirts to wear to high school. It is black, with bold white letters that say "loser." On the back are Jesus' words: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Our son had discovered that there is something more important than self-interest, or even a posture of relentless criticism and questioning. He had discovered a call to a way of life that invites and requires commitment. His "loser" T-shirt led him to articulate that discovery.

Throughout the year, I marveled that he would wear such a shirt to high school. He showed a maturity and confidence that I lacked in high school—I couldn't imagine having worn such a shirt. But he was also displaying a conviction that there is something for which he stands, a way of life that he wants to make central to his

identity.

As I reflect on these two T-shirts, I wonder whether there are broader implications. These two shirts also reflect generational sensibilities, contrasting ways of envisioning what we most urgently need to communicate to young people.

Such divergent sensibilities were reflected in an exchange on Duke's campus following a lecture about the Roman Catholic tradition. The speaker, an older Catholic priest, had spoken briefly about the value of tradition and authority, but spent most of the lecture focusing on the need to be prophetic and to challenge the assumptions of the church and its authority. After the lecture, a young Duke student rose to ask, "With all due respect, Father, is it possible that you emerged out of a settled pre-Vatican II culture in which the challenge has always been to be on the cutting edge, to be unsettling that which had been taken for granted, whereas we younger people have grown up in such a chaotic world that we are really wondering if there is anywhere we can stand, anything worth believing in?"

The room fell silent; the student had asked a profound question. For even beyond his particular, intra-Catholic question was a much broader sensibility—a sense that younger people today have been exposed to so much change and turmoil in their young lives that they are tempted to become premature cynics. They need someone to trust, something or someone in which to believe. Christian groups on many college campuses are growing when they offer a compelling vision, embodied in particular disciplines and practices of a faithful way of life.

To be sure, it would be a mistake to suggest that there once was a settled world that was good, and that we just need to return to such a world. Those "settled cultures" were marked by sin and brokenness in their own ways, and a "chaotic world" can often be a time of ferment and the Spirit's work in bringing about new life.

Yet my son's T-shirts, and the Duke student's question, point to a crucial issue for adults: Are we naïvely assuming that young people's experiences of the world are the same as ours were? How are changing family dynamics, changing patterns of technology and mobility, cynical judgments about leaders, and other cultural shifts affecting young people today? Are we living, preaching and teaching in a way that invites young people to find a way of life that can be believed, trusted, sustained? Are we helping them find firm ground on which to stand? Are we enabling them see the God in whose arms we can find "the life that really is life"?

I'm relieved that my son doesn't want to take the cynic's posture of "accept nothing, question everything." I hope that, like Bonhoeffer and others, he will learn to challenge and question the blindness, the self-deception, the injustice that marks not only our world but each of our lives (his included). I hope he will be passionate in his questioning and prophetically challenge what needs to be challenged.

Yet I hope he will do so as one who is committed to God and a way of life that give him a faithful and faith-filled perspective from which to do so. Michael Walzer's characterization of the Hebrew prophets as "connected critics" reminds us that they were profoundly rooted in a tradition and connected to a community called forth by God. In our day, young people are insistently pointing out to us that they hear and experience more about becoming "critics" than about being "connected." In that light, the challenge for us is to help make those connections.