

The Gnostic Generation: Understanding and Ministering to Generation X

BY JOHN R. MABRY

At the 1998 Spiritual Directors International Conference, keynote speaker Howard Rice spoke about the special needs and gifts of the various generations alive today. Basing his comments on Strauss and Howe's groundbreaking work, *Generations*, Rice presented generations as age groups that share cultural assumptions that define their approaches to spirituality. He identified the special needs and perspectives of several generations, and suggested techniques for doing spiritual direction with each.

Rice spoke convincingly of the patriotic yet pervasively secular "religiosity" of the "Civic" generation (born early 1900s through mid-1920s), the solid and humanizing influence of the "Adaptive" generation (born mid-1920s through mid-1940s), and the creative, rebellious, and very spiritual "Idealists" (commonly referred to as "Baby Boomers," born

mid-1940s through the late 1950s). But when he got to the "Reactive" generation — commonly called "Generation X" (born early 1960s through the early 1980s) — Rice admitted he was at a loss. "They have no heroes and no myth," he reported. And although he could describe this enigmatic generation, he concluded that very little is known about its members, and that very few "Xers" are coming for direction.

Appropriately, many in the spiritual direction community are concerned about the spiritual needs of Generation X. They are the next wave of potential directees, since those who are part of the generation's "first wave" (those born in the early 1960s) are just now reaching their mid-thirties, a point when many people begin to reflect upon their lives and to ask questions about ultimate meaning. There are questions that, as spiritual directors, *we* should be asking: Why are Xers not coming for direction? What are the special issues they face and needs that they share? What unique gifts do they bring to the world? How can we as a community meet them at the point of their need?

In this article I hope to address these questions, and to offer specific suggestions for reaching out to Xers, particularly those in industrialized countries that share a common “Xer” culture. An Xer myself, I have spent the last eight years ministering to other young adults, trying to understand what makes this peculiar generation (including myself) tick, and facilitating ministries which offer effective forums for spiritual discernment and growth. The article is divided into two parts, “Understanding Generation X” which offers insight into the mindset and woundedness of Xers, and “Ministering to Generation X,” in which I offer two models and a tool for effective spiritual direction.

PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING GENERATION X

Just as there was a “generation gap” separating the Boomers from their Adaptive parents, Boomers and Xers experience their own significant gap. Boomers’ experience of Xers as being lazy and cynical is a source of significant frustration, and when Xers break their silence and assert their views and opinions they are often met with impatience, and dismissed as angry, ungrateful, or whiney. Building bridges to Xers will require directors to “walk a mile in their shoes,” with a willingness to see the world through their eyes. Elders should not expect to share Xers’ assumptions, but as spiritual directors it is imperative that we be able to listen with compassion to their experiences and needs.

A Generation with No Transcendent Mission

The term “Generation X” comes from the generation’s lack of identity, and an ambivalence about their future. Their parents, after all, were “hippies” driven to save the Earth from the ravages of environmental catastrophe and war; the parents of the “hippies” saved the world from fascism. By contrast, Xers work at McDonalds. Lack of purpose and the malaise that attends it pursues Xers as relentlessly as the Hound of Heaven.

Strauss and Howe describe members of this generation as the true children of the 1960s, and especially the 1970s:

. . . an awakening era that seemed euphoric to young adults was, to [Generation X], a nightmare of self-immersed parents, disintegrating homes . . . confused leaders, a culture shifting from G to R ratings, new public-health dangers, and a “Me Decade” economy that tipped toward the organized old and away from the voiceless young. “Grow up fast” was the adult message. That they did, graduating early to “young adult” realism in literature and film, and turning into . . . “proto-adults” in their early teens . . . At every phase of life, [Xers] have encountered a world of more punishing consequence than anything their . . . elders ever knew (*Generations*, p. 321).

The Condition of Xers’ Formative Years. Before Xers were out of diapers, they were faced with fears and uncertainties unknown to any previous generation. Being the first generation to be brought up under the threat of complete nuclear annihilation, Xers learned to “duck and cover” during bomb drills in kindergarten. Xers despaired over the fate of the earth while they were in elementary school, watching the statistics on environmental catastrophe grow grimmer as they grew up.

Xers are still annoyed over their cartoons being interrupted for months by Watergate, but the damage that the “fall” of Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal goes far deeper than mere annoyance. It is difficult to overstate the damage this episode did to Xers’ trust in public figures. The nightly horror of Vietnam on the evening news cast an apocalyptic shadow over Xers’ childhoods. It was very clear that this was no “Ozzie and Harriet” world they were born into. Instead, Xers experienced the world as fierce, dangerous, and doomed.

Subsequent Effects on Xers' Psyches.

Given all of this, it is not surprising that Xers are intolerant of authority figures. Xers' suspicion was reinforced and cemented as they watched their parents' renege on their marriage vows, and witnessed the excesses of Boomers' mid-life crises. As Melissa Hughes, a 22-year-old college senior in Vermont, says, "Adults no longer behave like adults. We have no models; they're talking about sex and therapy and substance abuse, just like us" ("The American Dream 1998," *Rolling Stone*, May 28, 1998, p. 96).

While Boomers can relate to Xers' distrust of authority, they are often impatient with Xers' pervasive cynicism. It is important for Boomers to realize that while they were themselves suspicious of authority, they also believed they could do better than their elders. Boomers criticized those in power, but also held a collective vision for a utopian society that they would bring about. Xers watched the idealistic dreams of their Boomer parents crash and burn in the "Me-Decade" 1980s, and have no comparable idealistic visions. As the recent '60s pop revival reveals, the only way Xers can appropriate the idealism of their parents is through camp (a playful fascination with the absurd) as if to say, "Wouldn't it be nice — but we know it's not real."

Having experienced more promises broken than kept, Xers are loath to trust in anything more than they can see with their own two eyes. Don't talk to them about heaven, or political dreams, or the promise of social security. They have heard it all before and trust none of it.

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are the first generation to truly internalize a post-modern sensibility. No one religion is seen as having all the answers, nor one political ideology. Instead, Xers are required to construct their own meaning, a chaotic process of assimilation, syncretism, and continuous self-conscious reassessment. This is too much work for some people, sending some Xers running for the cover of religious or ideological fundamentalism. But for most, there is "no going home again" because there never was a home there in the first place that feels trustworthy.

Instead of preachers, teachers, or televangelists who hold out "the answers," the prophets of Generation X are the existentialist bards of popular culture: singers, filmmakers, and writers who share and give name to their common experience of disillusionment and disenfranchisement. These prophets offer few answers, but instead are successful only when they are fully and authentically stating the questions, providing Xers with mirrors which validate their experience and hold out the meager consolation that they are not alone in their plight.

The despair Xers feel is no affectation, however much X popular culture seems to revel in it. It is pervasive because it is very real. Many Xers wear their feelings on the outside, dressing mostly in black. Xer music seems negative and often nihilistic to older generations. Yet "nihilism" is an inaccurate ideological label; most Xers are simply trying to get along as best they can, to find love and acceptance and peace wherever they can find it in a world which they perceive to be largely devoid of transcendent hope.

An International Phenomenon. Xer culture is not limited to the United States. Xers in every industrial-

ized country in the world share similar attitudes and embody regional “flavorings” of a common Xer culture. From Australia to Canada to England to Germany, Xers are similarly disaffected. Around the world, Xers live in distrust of their nations’ leaders. “They have no confidence in [their] countries’ social institutions. They see large social problems all around them, from poverty, racism and crime to environmental pollution, a troubled economy, and global conflict. In their words, ‘Everything is wrong’” (Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton, authors of *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today’s College Student*. Quoted in *The Witness*, Sept. 1999, p. 8).

“Bad Kids”

In his keynote address, Rice characterized Xers as cynical in the extreme, reckless, pragmatic, unsentimental, and highly dubious about their future. Since more than 50% of Xers are from broken homes, they are saddled with a deep-seated sense of insecurity, and will always wonder what they “did” that caused everything to crumble. The media does not help alleviate this insecurity either, since Xers have garnered an incessant barrage of negative press: Xers are portrayed as greedy, stupid, shallow, and apathetic. Among the generations, Xers have become “the bad kid” in the family, bearing the collective shadow of our culture. As Howe and Strauss write, “A quarter-century ago, kids called older people names. These days, the reverse is true” (*13th GEN*, p. 17). Xers cannot help but internalize the myths the press portray. As Kurt Cobain sang in the mid-’90s, “I feel stupid and contagious” (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”).

Elder generations do not help matters by endorsing or settling for superficial portraits of Xers, especially when such portraits only serve to confirm their own worldviews and advance their own agendas. Conservatives are quick to point to the growing number of Generation X voters as being fiscally conservative. Liberals are equally likely to highlight Xers’ concern for social justice. Neither side, howev-

er, really understands the underlying feelings and beliefs of Xers, and neither can predict how Xers are likely to vote. In reality, Xers are financially conservative because they distrust looming governmental systems which may or may not accomplish their goals, and socially conscious because they know what it means to be disenfranchised and are willing to work to make a difference in the here and now. Instead of seeking to understand the subtleties of Xers’ experience, others’ attempts to appropriate the Xer vote only serve to further alienate Xers, and to reinforce Xers’ distrust of “the system.”

This attempt to pigeonhole Xers as either liberal or conservative extends to the religious world as well. Writing about Catholics, Xer Tom Beaudoin notes that both

. . . conservatives and liberals want to cast Xers as supportive of their agendas. While some want to see the generation as mostly “young and conservative” . . . liberals want Xers to carry forward the Vatican II project as they interpret it

Most Xers embrace much more pluralism (spiritual, racial, sexual and so on) than conservatives would like. And they find attractive — often with an admixture of irony and sentimentality — many more traditional symbols than liberals can typically stomach. Similarly, Xers are often too politically and multiculturally sensitive (especially with regard to the politics of tolerance) for most conservatives, and too apathetic and bourgeois for most liberals (“Gen-X Refuses to Buy into Others’ Agendas,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 24, 1998).

In fact, to many Xers, such defining questions as “Are you Christian or Buddhist?” “Gay or straight?” “Conservative or liberal?” or even “Catholic or Protestant?” are meaningless. They are often all of the above, and are impatient with what they perceive to be their elders’ attempts to label them or to rele-

gate them to pre-existing categories.

Conversely, elders frequently misread Xers' political ambivalence as apathy, their sexual ambiguity as immorality, and their non-involvement in organized religion as unspiritual. Each of these is based on a misunderstanding of the Xer worldview, and labels do little to engender understanding. Instead, those of elder generations need to use every tool at their disposal to understand and help Xers navigate what feels like the most stormy era the world has ever known.

**Cultural Ancestors:
The Gnostics**

In all of the above, I am, of course, speaking in generalities, but generalities that are true for the majority of those who were born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s in industrialized countries. While it may be difficult for elder generations to truly understand — or sympathize — with the trials and culture of Xers, we need only go back a little further in history to find those who would. According to Strauss and Howe's research, the succession of generations (Civic, Adaptive, Idealist, and Reactive) are cyclic, and in *Generations* they chart the cycle within the United States from colonization to the present. Prior to this century's Civic generation was another Reactive generation, commonly called the "Lost Generation" (born early 1880s through 1900). The "Lost Generation" shared many of the same cultural assumptions of Generation X, ("The Wasteland" by T. S. Eliot is an excellent example) and inspired



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similar ire from their elders.

But it is the story of a much earlier reactive generation which may ultimately help us to get a grip on what drives Generation X. When Howard Rice noted that Xers have no myth, an idea sparked within me. I stood and announced that I believed that Xers *do* have a myth: The Gnostic Myth. Xers are simply not familiar with its classic form. At the time, I didn't understand why the *Nag Hammadi Library* had comprised my bedside reading for the past five years, nor why I kept discerning Gnostic themes in popular culture.

When Rice despaired over Xers' lack of a myth, however, everything suddenly fell into place. After much subsequent consideration, I believe that the Gnostic Myth can help us understand the precarious and fearful worldview of Xers (see sidebar on p. 40 for a brief synopsis of the Gnostic Myth). In the following section I offer a comparison of these two reactive generations which I hope will prove enlightening and instructive.

Xers as Neo-Gnostics

Gnostic Christians thrived in the second through fourth centuries of the common era. Their cosmology and soteriology were markedly different from that of the "orthodox" (literally, "correct belief/opinion") Christians, even though they used common religious language. Orthodox Christians perceived Gnostic teachings as a threat to the community and fiercely repressed the heresy. Conversely, Gnostics distrusted the religious authority of the orthodox Christians.

The Gnostic Myth

In Valentinus' Gnostic cosmology (second century c.e.), Sophia (God's Holy Wisdom), because of her extreme devotion, somehow "slipped out" of the Pleroma, where the fullness of the Godhead resides. Hoping to regain her place through imitation, she gave birth to a demiurge, Yaldabaoth (the Hebrew God Yahweh) and instructed him to create a world. This Yaldabaoth does, but then, having gained a taste of divine power, Yaldabaoth rebelled against Sophia and contrived to keep Adam and Eve enslaved forever.

The earth, for the Gnostics, was a prison-planet ruled by an evil tyrant. The soul would continue to reincarnate in this insufferable vale of tears until the power of Yaldabaoth could be broken. To prevent the soul's escape, Yaldabaoth surrounded the globe with evil angels called "archons" who served as prison guards, returning escaping souls to the earth for another round of transmigration. Dismayed by Yaldabaoth's actions, Sophia placed a spark of true divinity within Adam and Eve. Forever after, they and their kind would also feel the ache of separation from the fullness of the Godhead, and would long to return to it.

Meanwhile, the "true" God, observing these events from the Pleroma, decided to help humankind, and sent the serpent to the garden to help Adam and Eve in their plight. Acting on the serpent's wise counsel, the pair ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and their eyes were opened to their incarceration. But before they could eat of the other tree which would break the archons' power, Yaldabaoth interceded and succeeded in keeping them captive, though no longer ignorant of their plight.

In the fullness of time, the true God from the top of the Pleromic hierarchy, sent the Christ to teach humanity how to break the power of the archons once and for all, and to woo Sophia back into the Pleroma. Christ, in the Gnostics' view, was not God, but was not human, either. Being a divine, angelic being, the Christ could not contaminate himself by actual contact with matter. This obscenity was avoided by merely seeming to be human. Far enough down the divine totem pole to live as a spiritual being amongst creatures of flesh, Christ nonetheless had no corporeal nature of his own, but took on the appearance of flesh in order to teach against the archons and thereby to liberate humanity. z

They felt betrayed by the clergy for keeping the "truth" from them, and viewed the God preached by the church as an ego-inflated pretender to the throne. Since they believed the Creator to be corrupt, they viewed creation in the same way. Thus, most ancient Gnostics were radical dualists. Only spirit was good, and the Gnostics longed to be free of the evil flesh and be reunited with the spiritual fullness of the Godhead, humanity's true home. Gnostics felt like "strangers in a strange land," aliens on this planet, from which they desperately hoped to escape. Freedom from the power of the archons — the evil angels under the demiurge's command — involved

receiving the "gnosis" or secret, ecstatic knowledge which cannot be transmitted in words, but only experienced.

Most Gnostics formed an elite circle in the midst of otherwise orthodox Christian churches, often betraying themselves by behavior which followed logically from their dualism: extreme asceticism or extreme licentiousness. Either the flesh was evil and a thing to be shunned, as the ascetic Gnostics claimed, or the flesh was irrelevant and could be used as an instrument of spiritual ecstasy, as practiced by the hedonistic Gnostics. Although Xers find Gnostic dualism unacceptable, their worldview resonates with that of

the Gnostics through their social experience, religious experience, and eschatological hope.

Social Experience. We can discern from their writing that the early Gnostics also believed they lived in a world where “everything is wrong,” that the entire “system” was against them, from the scheming demiurge, the “god of this world” and his archons, to the religious authorities who unwittingly serve them; from the highest positions of government to local politics. Everyone was “out to get them,” to keep them down, to keep them in ignorance and perpetual servitude.

This describes the experience of the Xer well. The God of their parents demands them to toe the traditional line and betray their essential selves in the process. The “archons” have transmuted into faceless multinational corporations, intent on holding the world in their inhuman thrall. There seems to be no place for Xers in business or social “institutions” and Xer disaffection towards institutionalization is more than simply sour grapes. It is an “opting out” of the system altogether. Those Xers who are “making it” in business are those who have enough entrepreneurial drive to do it “their way.” The rest of the Generation languish. Like the Gnostics, Xers reject “the system” because “the system” (*kosmos*, in Greek: “the world”) has largely rejected them.

The world for Xers, as for the Gnostics, does not feel like “home.” It does not feel welcoming to them, it has little to offer them, and they are suspicious of those who try to convince them otherwise. Postmodernism creates a chaos of meaning and ideology into which Generation X was born. This puts Xers into the same situation as Sophia upon her descent into matter: lost, alone, and adrift, desperately seeking to regain the paradise lost of earliest childhood, the fullness of the Pleroma.

Religious Experience. Generation X religious experience is also analogous to the Gnostics’. The idea that the image of God presented by the institutional

church is an evil pretender to the throne — the great secret which precipitated gnosis — is known to Xers intuitively. The god many Xers were given as children (through both conservative religious upbringings and Baby-Boomer-driven popular culture) is a false god, often perceived as a malevolent tyrant whose childish rantings and threats are designed to coerce subordinates into compliance. Since no alternatives to these images were given to Xers, they have largely rejected the institutional churches and synagogues — along with their gods — as a sham.

Instead of contenting themselves with the “received wisdom” of the church, Gnostics considered belief in the orthodox creed to be a superficial understanding of the faith, believing that only direct spiritual experience of the divine is truly salvific. In the same way, Xers are suspicious of dogma transmitted by others half a world and two millennia away, and are more likely to trust the ecstatic experiences they know first-hand through music, dance, community, sex, meditation, and mood-altering substances.

In relegating authentic religious experience only to this world, Xers are more accepting of the here and now than their Gnostic predecessors. Whereas the ancient Gnostics viewed the world as having negative value, Xers are more likely to see it as void of value. This ambivalence toward the world and the flesh has resulted in practices of self-mutilation such as tattooing, piercing, and scarification which seem incomprehensible to their elders. Yet far from being self-destructive, these practices are in fact the means by which Xers invest their bodies with meaning. A tattooed computer-circuit-motif armband is a symbol of belonging to a “tribe” amongst cyberpunks. A pierced tongue “sacralizes” and sets apart the mouth as an agent of sexual pleasure. Each of these employ ritual and covenantal marking of the flesh not unlike circumcision for religious Jews.

In this way Xers are different from the Gnostics, in that Xers typically reject the doctrine of the corruption of the flesh. Instead, Xers insist on the unity of

spirit and flesh, playing Aristotle to the Gnostics' Plato, trading a literal belief in myth for Darwin and an earth-bound and hardly consoling existentialism. If divinity is to be found anywhere, if meaning is to be made anywhere, it must be within. Of course, in locating divinity within, Xers are paradoxically again like the Gnostics, since the myth says that a spark of the True God resides in all human beings.

The void of transcendent meaning in the world has also led Xers into the two lifestyle extremes known to the Gnostics, asceticism and licentiousness. Where Xers so desperately long to feel accepted and loved, many have formed tribes, analogous to a group marriage, to experience the comfort, belonging, and support of their peers; a polyamorous arrangement which often includes sex. In the early '90s Xers in great numbers were attracted to raves, all night dance parties where one can lose oneself in hypnotic rhythms, feel a part of a much larger "tribe" and enjoy such feel-good drugs as Ecstasy, smart-drugs, and ethnobotanicals. At the other end of the spectrum are the ascetics, tribes such as the Straight Edgers, who fiercely abstain from alcohol, drugs, meat, leather goods, and casual sex, and who are notorious for going out in packs to beat up anyone who *does* indulge in such things.



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favor of an incorporeal presence in cyberspace.

Eschatological Hope. It is in cyberspace that many Xers find their eschatological hope. Just as the Gnostics were eager to someday shed their bodies to rejoin the fullness of the Pleroma, for Xers this salvation is even more real, for theirs is a realized eschatology. They need not wait for death to shed the body; they can (and do) escape the body for the Pleromic otherworld of cyberspace.

And it is a very real salvation. In cyberspace one is not judged by one's age, sex, or appearance. The Internet is the great equalizer, by means of which Xers can take on the archons, create website-castles more splendid (and useful) than the largest corporations. It is the battleground upon which Xers are the victors, the frontier upon which they are the pioneers, and the only place they have where they are the elders.

Most Xers, however, evince this dualism in more subtle ways. Their licentiousness is more likely to take the form of the pervasive practice of "serial monogamy" or "open" relationships. Xer asceticism is more likely to be of a technological variety, leading to the stereotypical unwashed and unclothed computer geek who utterly neglects his body in

Like the Gnostics before them, Xers salvation comes through knowledge (although they are more likely to call it data or information). The cyberpunk dictum “Information wants to be free” echoes the Gnostic eschatological hope of the sparks of divinity embedded in human beings longing for deliverance. In cyberspace data = divinity, and Xers’ drive to protect this fragile spark is a fierce one. Cyberspace, like the Pleroma, is the only place known to Xers where the archons have no power, and hackers have sworn that no government or corporation will invade or control it.

Though the analogous relationship between Generation X and Gnosticism has never before — to my knowledge — been suggested, Xers are intuitively drawn to this ancient heresy. In the past year, three popular films have been released which feature explicitly Gnostic themes, evidence that the myth is alive and active in the imaginations of Xers. *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, and *The Matrix* all involve protagonists trying to escape from an artificial reality in which they are imprisoned. In each film it is knowledge which unlocks the key to their prison, and allows each to foil the power of the archons.

Both Gnostics and Xers are underdogs, religiously and socially. Understanding the Gnostic myth, and the cynicism and alienation that it expresses, can help Xers feel less alone in the world, identify their transcendent hope (liberation/escape) and suggest the means of their release (self-knowledge). A grasp of the Gnostic myth and its relation to Xers can also help elders reach out to Xers in the void of meaning in which they find themselves.

PART TWO: MINISTERING TO GENERATION X

Just as it is in the nature of Xers to reject and be suspicious of the agendas of their elders, it is the nature of Adaptives and Boomers to nurture and help their children, if only Xers would let them. Yet most elders, as Howard Rice admitted in his keynote

address, are at a loss. Generation X is like a fear-stricken dog whose leg is caught in a steel trap, unable to free himself and ready to tear out the throat of anyone who tries to get close enough to help. Anyone who truly understands the peculiar position which Xers feel themselves to be in cannot help but be sympathetic to their plight. They feel abandoned and blamed, and find little hope in political or religious ideologies. When they try to speak from their experience, they are often discounted, and so fall silent. Naomi Wolfe writes, “What looks from the outside like an inert generation whose silence should provoke contempt is actually a terrified generation whose silence should inspire compassion” (quoted in *13th GEN*).

The irony is that like every one of the generational types, Reactive generations have spiritual gifts that are valuable and even necessary for our survival, if only they could be heard. As spiritual directors, we can assist Xers in finding their voice and contributing to the spiritual evolution of humankind, as well as helping Xers find a place in religious society which feels authentic and meaningful.

Xers and Religious Institutions

As discussed above, Xers generally are not coming to spiritual direction. In addition, mainline churches are scrambling to come to grips with the fact that so few of the children raised in their churches are continuing to practice their spirituality in mainline contexts. The institutions in which elder generations have invested so much seem pointless to most Xers. They don’t trust hierarchy or the institutions they support, in politics or in the church.

If religious institutions truly value Xers and want them to be involved, church leaders are going to have to make the first move, to meet Xers as equals, and to truly listen to what it is they think they need. Mohammed is not going to come to the mountain. Unless church leaders can address Xers as important people with real, but very different needs, Xers will

not be darkening the doorways of our churches in great numbers anytime soon.

Xers frequently equate “religion” with hypocrisy, and prefer to speak of “spirituality.” Religion (at least in the Christian tradition) hangs its hopes on what seems to most Xers to be a denial-based never-never land in the far-flung future. Xers are unlikely to hang their hopes on anything beyond the unsentimental here-and-now, and often develop an individual, and oftentimes idiosyncratic, spirituality based on internal authority rather than one which is externally determined by a hierarchy.

This distrust of hierarchy extends into the spiritual direction session as well. Wherever there is a “director” and a “directee” there is an implied power imbalance. However much we speak of redefining the relationship as “companioning” it is not likely to be perceived as such by Xers. This is especially true when the director is seen to represent an institutional ideology, or works at a direction center sponsored by the Roman Catholic or a mainline Protestant church. The power imbalance in the director/directee relationship is unacceptable to Xers. They will meet as equals, or not at all. This leads me to believe that, unless they undergo a profound and unexpected shift in their collective psyche, *the traditional model of one-on-one spiritual direction will not work with most Generation Xers.*

Two Models and a Tool for Spiritual Direction

Any model of spiritual direction which hopes to be successful in reaching Xers must be sensitive to this power imbalance, and if at all possible, eliminate it.

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Toward this end I offer two models for companioning Xers: Mentoring and Wisdom Circles (a form of group direction).

Mentoring. The most traditional model, and the method that will come easiest to elders, is the age-old practice of mentoring. In a mentoring relationship, both parties respect and treat one another as equals.

Robert Bly, in the film *A Gathering of Men*, said, “If a younger man is not being admired by an older man, he is being hurt.” This truth points to the very core of much of Xers’ painful self-image. Xers are not seen as precious or admirable in their own right, but as inscrutable troublemakers and rebels. Elders who can see Xers’ defenses as the powerful tools for survival that they are, and can admire their demands for truth-telling and integrity, will go a long way in healing the breaches that divide both the soul of the Xer and the generations. Boomers especially can relate to much of the outrage at society that Xers experience. If elders can also feel compassion for the lack of hope that Xers feel, a bond of trust may be formed that would allow Boomers to impart the wisdom of their many years to Xers. I myself was fortunate to have such a mentor, and the healing I experienced, and the trust engendered between our generations, has been profound.

It is doubtful whether a “Mentoring Program,” as such will work. Xers who remain in churches will not take kindly to being artificially matched with an elder for “mentoring.” Mentors must be chosen, and by Xers themselves. A “Mentoring Program” which would work might involve a course of education for elders in Generation X culture and philosophy.

Guidance might be given on being sensitive to when an Xer is reaching out for mentoring and support. A mentor cannot make an Xer trust him or her. Prospective mentors can only search their own lives to see if they are being authentic, and try to discern how they are being perceived by the Xers in their midst. If the mentor is ready — and real — the Xer will come.

Wisdom Circles. More difficult for elders may be a model which, in effect, doesn't actually need them. In a Wisdom Circle, Xers (and those of other generations who wish to join them) meet as equals and companion one another. Activities in such circles usually include some combination of discussion, prayer, and ritual. Though one or two persons will need to organize such a group, these persons must not exercise control or authority, or the effectiveness will be sorely compromised for Xers. Books such as *Wisdom Circles* and *Sacred Circles* can be helpful in putting such a group together, but as anyone who has participated in such a group knows, it soon takes on a life of its own. The Spirit "blows where it will" and the group may end up being a very different sort of entity than it began.

I have been fortunate to be a part of three such communities. The Concord, California, USA chapter of Fundamentalists Anonymous (FA) (1991–1993) provided a space where folks of all ages came together to share their pain and healing around issues of spiritual abuse. Here I learned that no matter what religious background our members were from (Baptist, Catholic, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.) we all had nearly identical experiences of spiritual coercion and psychological abuse, and our pain was reflected in others' stories.

After much healing had been accomplished, a handful of us from the FA group felt we were ready to try to experience what a "healthy" spiritual community might feel like. Joining together with some students of Creation Spirituality, our mostly-Xer group formed the Berkeley Celebration Circle

(1994–1996). We made our decisions by consensus, using Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* as a "lectionary," and wrote our own rituals. The group provided a forum for self-revelation, expressions of acceptance, and opportunities for growth.

After two years, some of us felt we had healed enough to take on Christianity again. Thus, The Festival of the Holy Names (1996–present) was formed, and continuing in the consensus model we had been using, we re-wrote the Mass. Taking each part of the Eucharistic liturgy individually, we asked, "What was this section intended to convey, and why doesn't it mean that for us anymore? And how can we make it meaningful again?" Each word in our liturgies was argued over at planning meetings, and our worship times were punctuated with plenty of skepticism toward tradition and scripture, not to mention frequent expletives. In the Festival we tried to create a space where we were free to ask all the hard questions, and slowly, healing happened. Most of us can even call ourselves "Christians" now; a feat impossible for most when we began.

As seen from the examples above, the Wisdom Circle model is extremely flexible, and can accommodate a secular (Fundamentalists Anonymous), interfaith/universalist (Celebration Circle) or specifically religious orientation (Festival of the Holy Names). In each of these communities, though intimacy was high, numbers remained small and associations were sometimes brief. In what is sometimes called "old paradigm" thinking, these are indicators that these groups have not been terribly successful, but this is not the case at all. People would attend for a while, experience some healing, and then move on. In the case of the Festival, several people involved were seminarians, many of whom experienced great healing around their relationship with the church, which freed them to serve their church in creative and transformative ways. They then took the Festival model with them to their prospective ministries, creating more small, intimate groups for discernment

and healing; this creates a fractal model of community that evolves and replicates itself perpetually, eventually reaching many more people than one mega-institution ever could.

These groups are examples from my own life of how Xers perceived a need in their own lives, and took “church” into their own hands to meet this need. Elders who want to support Xers on their spiritual paths would do well to provide space and encouragement for Xers to “do church” in their own way, including (and especially) writing and performing their own rituals and liturgies. Although this will not pose a problem for Free Church traditions, it could be challenging for Catholics, Episcopalians, and others who reserve Eucharistic privilege for those who are ordained.

The fear of some elders that Xers will “do it wrong” or “drift into heresy” are missing the point. Xers need to worship in a way that feels authentic (even if that means they cannot “worship” at all in any ordinary sense). This involves an act of radical trust on the part of elder generations, and may well define whether a meeting of minds and communities will be possible. Elders who find that they can support and encourage — and even mentor — such groups will find the rewards great, and much of the Xers’ trust gained.

The Gnostic Myth as Tool. It is my belief that the Gnostic myth, if made conscious, may be useful to Xers. Once Xers are aware of the myth, the parallels and analogs to their own situation will become obvious. Once they become aware that the image of God they were given as children by church leaders, parents, and popular culture is not a helpful image, and not for them the true God, they are free to discover the God beyond and behind the image of the demiurge; a true God who calls all people (Xers included) to health and wholeness. It is at this point of transition that Xers can receive “teaching” regarding others’ authentic spiritual experience, and be encouraged to seek their own.

Popular culture is one avenue for bringing the myth into consciousness; the Internet is another. Novels such as Philip K. Dick’s *Valis* and *The Divine Invasion* are fine introductions, though more are needed. Some recent films with Gnostic themes have already been noted, and no doubt more will appear. Some rock-n-roll bands are also spreading the “Gnostic Gospel,” such as Norway’s White Willow. The band which I myself sing for, Metaphor, is preparing to release its first CD, titled *Starfooted*, a rock opera based on the Gnostic myth. These and other popular media are valuable means of bringing the myth into consciousness. Those spiritual directors who are fortunate enough to companion Xers one-on-one may find that exploring the myth together with directees may generate liberating “a-ha’s,” that invite the directee to a fuller understanding of self and to a deeper communion with the true God.

I am aware that some people may find my advocacy of the Gnostic myth alarming. While I feel that consciousness of the myth is important for Xers, adoption of it is not. The last thing I am advocating is an intensification of the Manichean-Augustinian dualism which already plagues our churches. Instead, much like Dante’s Hell, where “down is out,” I believe that only by entering the Gnostic myth can Xers hope to move beyond it. For so long as they are held in thrall by the demiurge and “his” archons, Xers will be powerless to truly throw off their shackles, and finally act, rather than simply re-act.

CONCLUSION

By understanding Xers’ well-founded distrust of authority, spiritual directors and other leaders can be truly supportive of their spiritual journeys, accepting that such journeys may lead into very different places than their own. After all, it is a very different world into which Generation X was born. The rewards of such ministry will benefit all generations, not simply Generation X. For if dialogue between the generations can be initiated and maintained, Xers can gain from the hard-won experience of their elders, while

elder generations will benefit from the very real and important spiritual gifts unique to Generation X: a prophetic voice that tolerates no guile and provides an important corrective to the idealism of the Boomers. The spirituality of Generation X entertains a distinctly realized eschatology, grounding spirit and vision in the here and now. Instead of painting vast visions of the millennial kingdom, Xers will be found in soup kitchens feeding the homeless in their own neighborhoods; rather than forging expensive governmental programs which may or may not benefit those they are intended to assist, Xers are more likely than any other generation to volunteer their efforts locally to help those less fortunate.

Far from being a morally corrupt generation, Xers have a deep sense of community and spirituality, one that tolerates no subversion, and is at the same time eager to make a difference where the difference can be seen. Spiritual directors can be powerful allies in helping this troubled generation reach their full potential by companioning them with understanding, mentoring them with equanimity, and supporting their efforts to find meaningful community on their own terms.

The Gnostic writer who wrote *Thunder: Perfect Mind* so many centuries ago may as well have been speaking for Generation X when he or she wrote:

Give heed to me.
I am the one who is disgraced
and the great one.
Give heed to my poverty and my wealth.
Do not be arrogant to me
when I am cast out upon the earth,
And you will find me in those that are to
come. z

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Questions for Reflection

1. What are your feelings about young adults today (Generation Xers)?
2. How is Xers' experience of the world different from Boomers (mid 1940s–late 1950s)? From Adaptives (mid 1920–mid 1940s)?
3. What implications for Generation X spirituality occur to you after reading this article?
4. What possibilities occur to you for ministering to Xers? How might you adapt your present ministry to reach out to them? What ministries might you initiate to meet their needs?
5. How might Xers' needs be different in the part of the world in which you live? How can you speak to that need?

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