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YOUTHFULNESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS

Age is a funny thing. It's something women try so hard to hide after 30 and something men forget to keep track of after 25. It's something that children count on their fingers before they can say it out loud. It's something that determines how much we spend on a Breakfast at Denny's on Sunday morning and whether or not we get to ride Steel Venom at Valley Fair, well that's actually more of a height thing, but I digress. Age is something a good wine must have a lot of and a good trophy wife must have little of. Age is a funny thing.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes:

“Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

So what does Paul mean by, “youth”? The Good Book is just so vague at times, isn't it? But there must be a reason for so much open-endedness. There must be a reason that God didn't look down on this book created by men and smite every one of them for misconstruing His voice. Perhaps, just maybe, it's because they didn't misinterpret anything and that the Bible is just that: something meant to be interpreted. A book for support and guidance, not for punishment and conformity. Maybe God is speaking to us through the Bible by helping us find how each verse speaks to us, what each word means to us, and what we learn from each parable. What if the reason we all come away with different and occasionally opposing viewpoints is because different isn't bad? Youth isn't wrong. We are all God's *children*. We are all God's youthful children. Why would God make us all so different if all He really wanted was an army of drones not questioning, not searching, not begging for answers? As the one and only all-powerful being, He had no restrictions, none. But we aren't drones, He made us individuals with individual thoughts, personalities, goals... lives. And with that individualism He must have intended on creating a people that would question and interpret and use His Word in the way they needed it. He speaks to each of us differently, He supports each of us differently.

So as for the question of “youth”. What could Paul have meant? I mean, you can't get a free meal on Tuesday at Perkins by saying, “I may not be under 10, but I *am* youthful.” Therefore, youth must be separate from age, right? Youth must be something you feel as opposed to something that directly defines you.

Example: My fiancé's 76-year-old grandmother could be considered, ‘youthful’. For Christmas, your typical grandma might ask for a commemorative spoon from Idaho, the last state she needs to fill her continental US collection. But Dorothy Frank asks for a chainsaw. Nothing says “Let's celebrate the birth of our savior” like tearin' down some pesky branches. This same woman, when her house was being broken into, grabbed a sledgehammer and stared down the would-be-thief at her front door. There you have it, a 76-year-old chalk full of youthfulness. Youth is not defined by age.

For three years now I have worked at a local daycare. This place has given me much more than a paycheck every week. Being surrounded by 25 germy 3-5 year olds, I have gained immunities to several different illnesses, I can expect a solid two-hour work out when we go out to the playground to play “Bob can’t catch me”, and I get to play Candyland on a regular basis. On top of all of those perks, I am also forced each day to test my patience, my creativity, and my youthfulness. Without maintaining my youthfulness how could I find any enjoyment in always playing the baby when the girls play house? How could I smile through the excruciating pain when “dogpile on Bob” is the game of choice? And without youthfulness pumping through my veins, how in the world would anyone be able to stand hours of Dora the Explorer? Actually, Dora sends me into fits of insanity, but the point is the daycare helps keep me young.

Augustana has certainly kept me young as well. In my four years at Augie I’m pretty sure I’ve gotten roughly 37 hours of sleep... total... all four years, attribute that to my youth, as well as lots of caffeine and No-Doz. I’ve been involved in more campus events, activities and groups than I can count on my fingers and toes combined while still maintaining some sort of study habits, attribute that to my youth, and maybe a deep-seated need to be in every issue of The Mirror. And I’ve made mudpies in the sand volleyball courts on a rainy afternoon, attribute that to my youth, and perhaps a large dose of boredom and procrastination. This place has no doubt kept me ‘young.’

And yet, Augie has tested that same youthfulness over and over as well. My naivety and innocence flew out the door when professor after professor forced me to question my ethics, my religion, myself. My curiosity was shattered when I first realized that the debt I will have after leaving this place will not be as pleasant as the experiences and gifts I will be taking away. And my passion was trampled upon when I watched senior after senior after senior struggle to find their place in the world outside of Augie.

But for four years, Augie has been my daycare. It’s been the place where I feel safe, where I can explore, where I can learn, where I can play, where I can eat thanks to Dorothy and Nancy in the Huddle, where I can push myself, where I can *be* myself. Professors who *actually* teach, faculty who refuse to let you walk past them without a five minute conversation on how the most recent Augie theatre production is panning out, students who not only ask “How ya doin’?” but actually care how you’re doing. This place is one of a kind. This place, the legacy I leave, and the memories I take with me will forever keep me young.

Augie embraces you; it holds you so close that sometimes all you want to do is make it angry. Like the time I parked in the circle for 16 minutes just to see what would happen. Or the time I stole a fancy pen from my work-study job because it just wrote so nicely. Or the time I slept through my Quantitative Reasoning class, and I mean every class, all semester, like, my head on the desk, out, cold. But Augie just holds you closer.

Unfortunately, I can’t stay here forever. And, oh my, is that a hard realization to make. But I’ll be ok and I will persevere through whatever I am faced with, because Augie has

also asked me to set an example. The years I've spent here have trained me day in and day out to not only believe in myself, but to *stand up* for myself as well.

"Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

Paul's writing transcends time. Why do we despise people for their youth? For their inexperience? For their creativity? For their passion? For their need to find that inner-peace, that inner-self?

I am well aware that I will be despised for my youth. I am reminded often. In writing a research paper: "That thought was perhaps a little *too* out of the box." In the job search: "We went with someone who had more experience." In planning my life: "No, you can't be married in this state. No, you can't share insurance in this state. No, you can't adopt in this state." But the youth they look down on me for is the very same youth that keeps me going, that allows me to persevere.

I'm reminded of the very first class I ever took here at Augie, Religion 110 with Dr. Murray Haar. Each day he would end the class with a catchphrase: "Stay sane out there." And each day I would walk out the door thinking: "How?" Now Augie is telling me to "stay sane out there" and instead of asking "how?" I find myself saying "ok, I will." Did Augie prepare me to go out into the world without a job? No. But Augie did prepare me to stay young and to never, under any circumstances give up my youth.

So yes I will get older, and yes, someday I will get the Senior discount at Denny's, and yes, the time will come for me to put away my Steve Maddens and get myself a pair of orthopedic walking shoes instead. But I will forever remain youthful. And I think that's who God wants me to be. Someone who doesn't let people despise my youth, but sets the believers an example in *speech* and *conduct*, in *love*, in *faith*, in *purity*.