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## Taking Our Chances: A Reflection on YAC

by Amanda M. Hughes

*“We learn to risk our weakness so that God can be our strength.”*

On the last hot days of August, Jennifer, my oldest daughter, emptied her closet and removed the clothes from her dresser drawers. She sorted through her high school memorabilia. She laughed at pictures of school plays, most notably one photograph of herself in the eighth grade musical. She had played the leading role in *Hello, Dolly*. Her portrayal of the marvelous Dolly Levi was a striking combination of Jennifer herself, a lot of Barbra Streisand and a bit of Ethel Merman. She was delightful, electric and fun to watch as she did her best to bring life to the outgoing, matchmaking Dolly. In this particular photograph, she is smiling her widest smile, singing—and doing her very best to keep the costume she wore from falling off of her body. The cut of the dress was such that, had she been a bit taller, a bit wider, or even a bit more buxom, the dress would have fit her perfectly. As it was, she was held in by hidden safety pins, Scotch tape and Velcro tabs. Together, we laughed over the memory of her singing, “. . . It's so nice to be back home where I belong . . .” as she herself worried that any minute the eighth grade production of *Hello, Dolly* might take on the qualities of Gypsy Rose Lee! Jennifer was ready to sing, “Well, hello, fellahs . . .” but not as a glorified strip tease.

Together we packed her duffle bags, boxes, suitcases with virtually every bit of her important stuff. We washed and folded all of her favorite clothes. We boxed a few treasures and put them in the attic. We checked and double-checked our list of essentials: soap, toothpaste, shampoo, aspirin, three-by-five cards, pencils, pens, paper, vitamins, pillows. Jennifer was going away to college.

My middle child, Emily, watched with sheer delight as the bedroom she had shared with her sister seemed to double in size and potential as Jenn moved the last of her things out of her room, out of our house, and into the car. William simply watched and wondered. Once, and only once, he asked if Jennifer was ever coming back. I assured him she'd be back many times, and with a lot of dirty laundry. “Why,” he asked, “is she taking everything out of her room? Doesn't she live here anymore?”

There is no easy answer to that question. I wanted to explain to William that while this would always be Jennifer's home—we would always be glad to see her—she was going to live somewhere else. I wanted to explain to him that this was the beginning of one of the biggest changes in her life and in our lives. Jennifer was setting out on the adventure of her own life. It would always be connected to us. It would always bear some, however distant, resemblance to our life as a family, but it would belong to her. To be honest, I don't remember what I actually said to him. Whatever it was must have been thoroughly mingled with my own ambivalence over her leaving—knowing that she had to go and wanting her to stay forever. Any wise sayings I might have liked to utter in that small teachable moment were clearly lost to the flurry of activity, another run to the drug store, and my own sweet melancholy in the face of this undeniable and necessary transition in all of our lives. Jennifer was going away to college. Jennifer was going away.

In all the years I've worked with young people and their parents, one of the most common questions has always been, “Why are they acting this way?” The teens want to know why their parents are so strict, so worried, so given to long and boring lectures at the breakfast, lunch, and dinner tables. They ask, “Do they have to tell the same stories over and over again? Why don't they trust me? Why do they act as if I've never done anything right?” And the parents predictably ask,

“Why are they so stubborn? Why won't he talk to me? Why does everything have to be a challenge? Why does she say these outrageous things when she knows it will upset me?” Ultimately, they all ask, “Why are they acting this way?”

The answer is the same for all these questions: “You are going away,” I say to young people. “She is leaving you,” I say to the parents.

It may seem, from the outside looking in, far too simplistic an answer to such complex problems. But, everything I know about parenting and family and being someone's child, reminds me that in the last years of high school, parents are desperate to correct any mistakes, teach all the unteachable lessons and get in the last word on their love and care for their baby. I myself can look at my darling Jennifer: She is a lithe and elegant, even glamorous young woman. I can see her for the twenty-year-old she is, but with the eyes of love and time, I also see the four-year-old going off to the first day of kindergarten. I see the infant in the bassinet. I see the fourth grade report card in her shaking fingers. I see the first two-wheeler, the Easter baskets, the prom dresses, the rompers, and the tears over spilled milk. It is hard not to want to retrace every step—to tell her all my stories again, to restate all the rules and all the consequences. It is difficult to resist the temptation to re-teach all that I hope I have already taught. In the last year of high school, as she reached out into her life, it was difficult to silence the whispering of my heart. With each passing month, day, hour, I became increasingly aware of the countdown to her leaving.

I did not do a bad job during those months. She was grounded a couple of times. She slammed the bedroom door closed once or twice. I only gave my sex education Use-A-Condom speech six or eight times. I made a few ridiculous rules. I hugged her a lot. I raised my voice in frustration. I reminded her in anger that she was still a part of this family and that meant that she could . . . you can fill in the blank.

As for Jennifer, she spread her wings. She established close friendships with other adults whose wit and wisdom she found at least as compelling as my own. Having missed a Confirmation experience with her peers because of our move to Durham, she attended adult Confirmation classes. She made friends I never met. She missed her curfew by ten minutes. She cried into the telephone, making secret confessions to her friends.

As I write this, I am painfully aware of the inadequacy of this portrait. I can speak of my own experience of those months and be certain of the quality of my time—I am not so sure about Jennifer. She was demanding, adorable, diffident. She was challenging. She was delightful one minute, boring the next, and unavailable at the moments when I most wanted to just sit and talk with her. Why was she acting this way? She was going away. She knew it. I knew it. We all knew it.

Developmental psychologists are quick to say that the struggle to leave the nest is a very painful one. They remind us that much of the rebellion of adolescence, youth, and young adulthood is designed to enrage the parent and distance the child. One therapist friend of mine, in response to my own tearful confessions over the telephone, said, “Unless she figures out ways to hate you, or at least strongly dislike you, she will never be able to leave you. You're her mother and, no matter how much you might want to stay together forever, her fundamental task is to break away. Yours is to let her go.”

“Great,” I said. “That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Amanda,” my friend continued, “if you two don't do this work now, you'll be doing it ten years from now. It's unavoidable.”

And as another of my wise friends often says, “Healthy families self-destruct.” Not the most comforting words I've ever heard, but nevertheless true. Absolutely true.

The problem for me as a parent and for Jennifer as a daughter rests in where to put our trust. Can she do it? Is she up to the task of Life? Am I able to trust in her unique abilities? Can I trust that she will utilize the lessons that she's learned? As I ask these questions, Jennifer asks them as well. Can I make it on my own? Will I be able to live out my dreams? Have I got what it takes? Will it be enough?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus took his disciples out to a hillside in the region of Galilee:

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

*John 6:1-13*

When Jennifer wonders to herself, “Will I be enough?” she is like the young boy with five barley loaves and two fish. When I ask myself, “Is she up to the task of Life?” I am like Andrew in the gospel.

As faithful people, our task is to ask these questions not only among ourselves but to ask the one who loves us, and to offer ourselves and whatever we have to his service. It may not be much, but it is ours to offer. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the young boy had refused to give his five loaves and two fish to the Master. Would Jesus have sent them all away hungry? We cannot know. What we do know from the story is that the one young boy offered the food he had—we might imagine that his mother gave it to him to sustain him on his journey. We might equally well imagine the boy purchased the loaves and fish to give back to his mother.

In either case, the young boy took the supreme risk of offering what had once been intended for himself and his family. He spread his wings. He offered what was his and his family's to the multitude. He offered it to the Christ present in the midst of the crowd. We do not know how Jesus gave thanks. We do not know what words he used as he bowed his head to the God and Father of all—but it is not difficult for me to imagine him giving thanks not only for the very matter of bread and fishes, but also for a young boy willing to risk what little he had in the face of the hungry crowd.

This is what I pray for Jennifer: that she might take the boxes of treasures, the books, the photographs, the riches of her childhood and her youth and offer them to the Christ. I pray that she will know, as I know, that her years with me were only a very brief time in her life. All of the lessons she's learned—all of the memories, both joyous and painful, all of her young wit and wisdom—amount to but a few loaves of barley bread and a few fish. I pray that she will take the supreme risk of offering these things to the one who, by his touch and by his thankfulness, not only turns them into enough, but into more than enough. I pray that when Jennifer's life is over, when her offerings are made and received and enjoyed and multiplied, she will be able to see the Redeemer gathering back to her all the fragments left over, enough to fill boxes and boxes, closets and cupboards. Even in leaving, even in sacrifice, nothing is lost.

This is the work of Young Adults in the Church (YAC)<sup>1</sup>. Our task as leaders is to help them to gather all that they have into boxes and bags. We must remind them, and their parents, that they head out into a world which is crowded and hungry. We must by our patience with them, and our example to them, remind them to offer all that they are, all that they possess—however meager and however frightening—to the one whose name is Love, Wonderful, Counselor, Provider, Ruler of the Universe.

It is not an easy transition, as I am convinced it was not easy for the boy to watch his fish and loaves being broken and distributed. It could not have been easy for the last of the five thousand to trust that the food would reach them as they sat on the outer edges of the crowd and waited. It could not have been easy for the mother and father of the boy to wait at home, wondering where he might be and whether there would be enough to eat.

As I read the gospel, I imagine the young boy carrying home a bushel basket filled to the brim with bits of fish, bone and skin, bread and crumbling bits. I imagine his eyes brimming with tears as he hands the basket to his parents. And I remember the first weekend Jennifer came home from college. She carried a basket filled with dirty laundry. She was very tired. And she said, "Oh, Mamma, I have so much to tell you." Tearfully, I gave thanks.

Amanda Millay Hughes is one of the creators of The Journey to Adulthood (J2A) youth ministry program. This excerpt is from the introduction to the last two years of the program when the young people are Juniors and Seniors in High School. You can learn more about J2A at [www.LeaderResources.org/J2A](http://www.LeaderResources.org/J2A).

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<sup>1</sup> YAC is the last two years of the *The Journey to Adulthood (J2A)* youth ministry program published by LeaderResources.