

# **DISRUPTING TEENS** *With Joy*

*Helping youth discover Jesus-focused, gritty faith*

**Dave Rahn & Ebonie Davis**

## **Disrupting Teens with Joy**

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## DEDICATION

I am so grateful for you, Clay, Caleb, and Lillian. Your love has given me great joy. I also thank God for my students (past and present) in Trinity Youth Group. I have no greater joy than to hear that you walk in truth. Finally, I love you, Mom and Dad. God redeems everything...everything.

—Ebonie

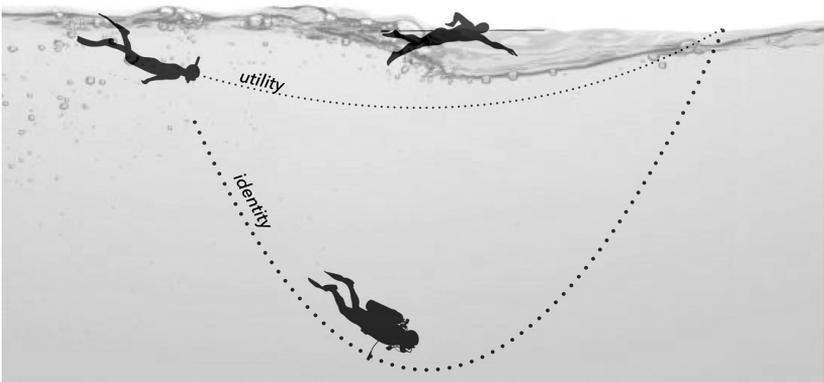
Susie, Jason, Ali, Whit, Jake, Brigham, Preslee, Silas, Sullivan, and Ivy: I thank God so much for you. Grandpa joy is a whole different flavor! And my gratitude for the privilege of serving heroic Youth For Christ leaders for so many years is a gift of joy that still amazes me.

—Dave

## INTRODUCTION

We believe we can show teens how to gain durable joy. This sort of joy is a faith-authenticating “brand” for followers of Jesus Christ. Let’s face it, Christianity could use a credibility boost, especially among teens. Durable joy will not be attainable through a six-month curriculum, a weekend workshop, or slick programs supported by glorious graphics and technological wizardry. It is only do-able if we adults who love young people are willing to disrupt how we spend our time in ministry. Most of us will need to personally sign up for Jesus’s tutorial intervention before we can be helpful to young people.

When Matt Croasmun, an architect of Yale’s joy research with whom we were privileged to serve, used a diving analogy in a lecture, we became instantly captivated by how useful it might be in framing this book. His purposes were a bit different than ours; we hope we’re faithful to his directional intent.<sup>1</sup> Too much of our time is spent in unreflective surface swimming, where we “do what we do because that’s what we do.” The first section of our book addresses the likelihood that young people, especially, are aimlessly splashing about on life’s surface. It is our contention that their way of life needs to be disrupted. Further, if we adults who love them cannot demonstrate authentic and attractive faith we will likely fail to be the agents of disruption they need.



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If we can coax teens to become a bit more thoughtful, we might gain access to more useful strategies and grow in our effectiveness. This gives us underwater access, but only to snorkeling depths. Too much youth ministry lives in the shallows of usefulness, settling for something less than Jesus intended. Our disruption needs the sonar skills of Jesus, who is especially adept at locating where, when, and how to interrupt our hurried and restless pace in order to get our full attention. This is the focus of section two.

Finally, we hope to exploit this underwater metaphor by describing how the good life of joy with Jesus requires deep diving. We will only retrieve what we need in the cool, quiet places where Jesus speaks insistently to our very essence. As the psalmist expresses it, when life drives us downward—inward—we can know God’s unfailing love.<sup>2</sup> We secure our identity with Jesus when we meet him in the depths of our being and resurface with new perspective to do differently what we once did thoughtlessly. The book’s third section invites us to become acquainted with scuba gear.

Our relationship with Creator God is “a friendship like no other”<sup>3</sup> and it will most assuredly disrupt the pace of our everyday lives. In fact, while we acknowledge that almost anything can get in our way—like the Amish cow I recently hit while driving home—there is something *necessarily important* about a life built around the Great Commandment that must be disruptive. Why? Because it’s not natural for us to love God with all we’ve got and love our neighbors as ourselves. I began serving with Youth for Christ nearly fifty years ago. Today our focus is to engage a million under-church-radar teens in authentic, Christ-sharing relationships. I believe we have a chance to accomplish this if we have a deep-diving companionship with Jesus and embrace the necessity of being disruptive.

This book explores how to disrupt the pace of life we’ve commonly adopted in order to gain the life for which we were created—a life of deep, lasting joy. Jesus masterfully altered the rhythm of those around him; we want his tutorial in this process. Our kids are victims of the shallow lives we offer them; we want to disrupt their pace by changing our own. God’s fourth commandment, to remember the

Sabbath and keep it holy, was an identity-defining pace disruptor for an entire nation. Its inclusion among the Ten gives it moral authority, and it has been incredibly fruitful for us to reflect on how this keystone habit—revisited in light of Jesus’s work—can anchor our pace disruption efforts. This book is written for those who’ve wondered whether life-pace change-ups are tactically crucial, *not* optional, for an authentic faith, fit for teen consumption. In the book’s final section we recommend the four habits we tested, and hope they offer practical footing readers can dig into for their own *quests* (a bit of foreshadowing here...).

Durable joy with Jesus is a legacy endowment to give the next generation. But an inheritance must be owned before it is bequeathed. This book evolved into its current form after its birth as a social science study, sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and administrated by the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. For more than a year we strained to apply social science research methodology to our inquiry about how habit practices can help teens experience resilient joy with Jesus. This included training cohorts for experimental practices together, collecting survey data, and hosting pizza-fueled conversations in small groups. We ultimately suspended these attempts in favor of a way of understanding that can only be gained by participating in faith’s journey. It was then that we experienced breakthroughs, both profound and personal. Now we simply offer this book as a story of what we found on our quest and how it changed us, first of all, most of all.

A word about the “we.” Writing together can be a tricky proposition at many levels but our chief goal is to make this book as readable as we can. Much of the time the “we” means Ebonie and I stand together in what we’ve written. But you may have already noticed how I (Dave) am taking the lead voice in the book. Many of the narratives, especially, are most easily told from a personal perspective. When Eb shares a story or insight from her own journey we set that up so you can easily discern who’s writing what. What we both want you to know—and this is crucially important to us—is that this book is the result of a collaborative journey that has enriched us far more than we ever anticipated. Eb’s vulnerability was far more courageous than

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any act I could have imagined, and it represents the profound fruit of our journey together. God is good, and he gets all the glory in this story.

At the end of each chapter you will find a couple of discussion questions that we call “Joyful Disruptions.” Our heart was to write this book for adults, to help them to model a deeper, more authentic faith for the adolescents they love. Use these questions around the dinner table, during youth group, or when you’re just hanging out to launch discussions that encourage teens to deep dive with Jesus. We hope these questions will disrupt the pace of your time together.

Our heartfelt testimony is that Jesus will make this journey worth your while, and that the teens you love will learn how to gain joy with Jesus that carries them through a lifetime.

**SPLASH NO MORE**  
**RESCUING TEENS FROM *Joy's* SHALLOWS**



Why is adolescent joy so easily shattered?

Why is youth ministry not known for growing sustainable joy in young people?

Dorothy Bass observed that too often our days are “lost to smallness.”<sup>4</sup> Many of us can relate to the deeply unsatisfying sensation of being busy all the time but not having a lot to show for it. Sometimes it’s because our efforts are being directed toward someone else’s agenda for our lives, as when we give forty to fifty hours a week to a job simply to earn a paycheck. Our work may put food on the table and a roof over our head, but if joy shows up at all, it’s a short-term surprise with a Red Bull shelf life, at best. Teens are especially vulnerable to life-as-trivial-pursuit.

Squeezed between houses in a west side Indianapolis neighborhood is an empty lot that Youth for Christ City Life director Danny Marquez and friends turned into the “Purpose Park.” The really cool vibe emanating from this small space flows from the hull of a ‘64 Bonneville buried nose down near the front of the lot. On a warm mid-July evening, young people and adults gathered in this sweet location for one of the “Joy & Pizza” research conversations Ebonie and I convened around the country. Soon enough one of the adults created a stir among the teens sitting on tree stumps when he said that joy is a choice. Ebonie and I perked up. The debate around this question—is joy a choice?—had surfaced in other locations around

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the country and, frankly, it was really fun to watch.

Where we land on this is consequential. If joy is a choice, then we will need to become intentional about pursuing the good life. And if large hunks of teens' time—and ours—are spent bobbing around in life's surface waters, choosing joy may mean we need to disrupt whatever we're doing in order to find it. We're not getting enough quality of life return on our time investments.

Try a quick thought experiment. Recall an inconsequential experience in the last seventy-two hours that brought you a sudden rush of joy. For example, maybe you noticed a joy spike when you were stuck in a long line of left-turning vehicles but you squeezed through the intersection before the light changed. Or perhaps your normally high-maintenance dog was so unusually relaxed when you needed a break that a gratitude-joy mix arose in your spirit. Push yourself to reflectively search for minutiae in your memory files. Hunt among incidents that got tagged as “unexpected.” Chances are pretty good that little moments of joy flash in and out of most normal days, flying under the radar of your conscious perceptions. Usually triggered by some event or circumstance outside of ourselves, these cluster alongside bucket list experiences under the same category: *state of joy*.

If joy is *only* a temporary state, we don't want to miss it when it drops by. Like toddlers on life's beach we are vulnerable to whatever the next ocean wave brings as it splashes onto our lives. Intermittent pleasant surprises wash over us, but we are passive beneficiaries, not agents of control. Life is aimless when anyone bobs around atop the surface, doing what we do without much thought about why we do it. This picture fits too many teens today.

Ask young people to describe how they experience joy and they respond with halting uncertainty. Their default is to describe memorable moments, even surprises. Three high school girls we talked to had just won their first lacrosse game of the year in Waldorf, Maryland; their response to our question was to describe joy by referencing this recent rarity at the last game of the season. A nurse

in her mid-twenties who was in the same focus group as our lacrosse winners filibustered the entire room during another one of our “Joy & Pizza” conversations, insistently asking a counter-question as we probed about what joy meant: “Who’s to say?” As frustrating as this was for those gathered who were actually *trying to agree* about some universal properties of joy, it’s natural to be protective when it comes to some of our most treasured personal experiences.

Pinning down a definition that can explain the range of experiences we associate with joy isn’t easy. This difficulty has curbed the enthusiasm of joy scholars looking for clarity and understanding. But positive psychologists have recently tackled research projects and conclude our experiences of joy can be explained as either *states* or *traits*.<sup>5</sup> Consider the euphoria of countless Cubs baseball fans when, after 108 years, their team finally won a World Series in 2016. Our lacrosse girls’ experience may have been less dramatic, but it was certainly a similar celebration. It doesn’t take a research degree to declare that such occasions brought joy to those who won and those who cheered them on. These are states of joy, riding the circumstantial coattails of countless big and small events every day, all over the world.

While contemplating temporary states of joy, consider this jewel from brain scientists: When our most important relationships are right, joy juices our minds so they work at peak performance levels. Neuroscience has lunged forward in recent years, allowing researchers to map the two distinctly different working systems of our brains. Some locate these functions within a physical space and often talk about how the right brain operates as the faster control center for left brain activity. Nobel Prize winner and renowned psychologist Daniel Kahneman prefers to describe the two distinctively different ways our brain operates as systems, with one being automatic and the other being effortful.<sup>6</sup> What’s not in dispute is that the “fast track”<sup>7</sup> (right side/automatic) portions of our brains run operations most of the time by working in the background. There is significant support for the idea that this control center is wired to work best when we are experiencing relational joy.<sup>8</sup> In fact, “The brain knows only two ways to generate motivational fuel—a joy bond or a fear bond.”<sup>9</sup>

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Here's how Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder summarize this:

The critical point between the brain functioning well or starting to fail is where it runs out of joy and begins to run on fear as its motivation...Joy is a renewable energy source that the brain is wired to prefer...

The conclusion of this new science is that relational joy is the natural means for growing a strong, resilient mind. Joy is a natural and sustainable fuel for engagement and the most desirable and powerful of motivating factors in our lives over the long haul...<sup>10</sup>

When we are comfortably related to those we care about and those with whom we are in immediate contact, the brain's control center pumps fuel into all of its other operations. That fuel, as it turns out, is joy.

Now might be a good time to pivot back to thinking about the adolescents we know and love. We've long known how important friendships are to teenagers. As they navigate who they are and where they're headed, they are especially vulnerable to social influences.<sup>11</sup> Youth workers hope to be counted among those who make a difference in the lives of young people.

Unfortunately, we adults may have a credibility problem. We grind our way through each day and our slogging is not lost on young people. They see their parents come home a bit more diminished. It's as if their hopeful enthusiasm leaked out like radiator coolant during the day's work. The pep in our step is barely enough for other obligations and they—the kids we love—start to wonder if *they* fall into the category of "obligations." Quietly, desperately, a deep resolve is born in their hearts: "Not for me."

Kids are broken. Unfortunately, some of this is due to how we engage them. A whopping 32% of kids point to their parents' technology use as one thing that makes them feel unimportant.<sup>12</sup> A recent study indicates that average users touch their phones about 2,617 times per

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day. Adolescents take their cues from us. The heavy users, like most of our teenagers, touch their phones about 5,000 times per day.<sup>13</sup> Downstream of this “cauldron of stimulus” is an alarming spike in adolescent depression and anxiety.<sup>14</sup>

Psychologists have coined the term “technoference” to describe the disruption that technology causes to our relationships:

Adults have built their daily life around the miserable premise that they can always be on—always working, always parenting, always available to their spouse and their own parents and anyone else who might need them, while also staying on top of the news, while also remembering, on the walk to the car, to order more toilet paper from Amazon. They are stuck in the digital equivalent of the spin cycle. Parents should give themselves permission to back off from the suffocating pressure to be all things to all people. We are likely to find that we can do much more for our children simply by doing less.<sup>15</sup>

A conviction about the life we do *not* want is not yet a clear pathway leading to the life we *do* want. Chap Clark concluded that in spite of unprecedented programs and resources thrown their way, adolescents feel systemically abandoned by adults.<sup>16</sup> Princeton professor Kenda Creasy Dean’s analysis of the data from the National Study of Youth and Religion led her to reinforce this storyline with a haunting observation: If young people have a flimsy, inarticulate faith, they learned it from adults.<sup>17</sup> We’re modeling for teens a way to live that is exhausting, unappealing, and a poor representation of the rich life God intends us to enjoy with him. Adolescents are surface bobbing in an ocean of aimlessness and our ministry efforts have largely failed to be of help to them.

For everyone’s sake we think it is time to disrupt the pace: Less hurry to become more deliberate. More deliberate to love better. Loving relationships need to expand, not shrink; this is especially true of how we connect with God. Only when we cooperate with our Creator’s relational joy hardwiring can we be ushered into the best versions of ourselves. When teens experience abandonment, we dare not dismiss

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it as a growth phase they will move beyond. That sort of passivity practically guarantees kids' flimsy faith. The story below from Ebonie's ministry is all too familiar.

Jason showed up at youth group for the first time with his older brother on a cold Wednesday evening. Why the two brothers came to our church we didn't really know. They knew some of our church teens from school, and we'd been trying to reach out to the neighboring trailer park community where they lived. Whatever their initial reason, we knew what kept them coming: dinner.

We did our best to connect with Jason, but it soon became clear that any relationship with adult youth leaders was going to be on his terms. His background was rough; his father was incarcerated. Day or night, he roamed the neighborhood, operating on his own at the tender age of fourteen. He'd obviously been wounded by life, and love was nowhere to be found in his vocabulary. Jason proved the adage, "hurting people hurt people." We learned the hard way how much havoc he could wreak in the church, like when he amused himself by convincing one third grader to punch another in the face during our neighborhood VBS outreach.

Each time he veered off track I'd say, "I love you, and God loves you, but this is not a good day for you. You need to leave today, but you can come back next week." Undeterred, he always returned. Jason persistently attended during his two-year tour of eighth grade, and continued when he finally got pushed through to high school.

We sought to tangibly express God's love by meeting some of his needs. He was the reason we created a tutoring program. We took groceries to his home. Gave him school supplies. I invested in him personally, and the whole team prayed relentlessly for him. Jason, ever

guarded, calmed down a bit. But he never let us think that we, or the gospel we shared, had made any inroads to change his heart. Still, he kept coming regularly, even after his brother stopped showing up.

Occasionally, Jason seemed to forget the wall he had so carefully built. We were privileged to peek in on a teen's unfiltered joy. Even after dropping out of ninth grade and hanging around a drug house, he came around, albeit infrequently. Around his eighteenth birthday he swung by the church to say goodbye. A burden to his single mom, Jason was told to move out. He would probably land far away.

Resistant to considering God's love beyond weekly youth group, even this small exposure kept tugging on him. He had splashed around with Jesus just enough to taste and see his perfect love. But his life story was all about the surface. He was trapped into a way of doing because that's what you do. Largely aimless, Jason's fleeting encounters with the love of Jesus never made enough sense for him to consider the possibilities below.

We were formed for relationships by a Trinitarian God who has always existed in loving, mutual interdependence. And, as tough as it is for us to get our minds around, God's foremost plan in our formation is for us to love him and enjoy being loved by him. We were created for this primary relationship with God, a need so crucial to our well-being that, as St. Augustine wrote, "our heart is restless until it rests in You."<sup>18</sup> Maybe these concepts make teens wonder. Maybe they will chew on these words. But too often, their lived reality dismisses the possibility of such joyful faith. Uneven waves of social joy come from undependable friends. Too many teens flail in the shallows, searching for relational footing. This is especially true among families that have exploded into fractured pieces—a too common experience among young people. The waves that pound away on their identity shores are erosive social forces, and their joy is fragile.

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“Vivid clarity” is C.S. Lewis’s writing specialty. An Oxford scholar who died in 1963, his books have become a faith baseline for many. Fittingly, his autobiography is titled *Surprised by Joy*. It was the “stabs of joy” taking place throughout his life that led him into a rigorous intellectual quest for answers. Eliminating worldview options, he describes late-stage discoveries that ultimately led him to faith in God. Lewis insightfully observes that a thought *about* something is distinct from the object itself:

It seemed to me self-evident that one essential property of love, hate, fear, hope or desire was attention to their object. To cease thinking about or attending to the woman is, so far, to cease loving; to cease thinking about or attending to the dreaded thing is, so far, to cease being afraid. But to attend to your own love or fear is to cease attending to the loved or dreaded object. In other words, the enjoyment and the contemplation of our inner activities are incompatible. You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment; for in hope we look to hope’s object and we interrupt this by (so to speak) turning ‘round to look at the hope itself. Of course, the two activities can and do alternate with great rapidity; but they are distinct and incompatible....

... I saw that all my waitings and watchings for Joy, all my vain hopes to find some mental content on which I could, so to speak, lay my finger and say, “This is it,” had been a futile attempt to contemplate the enjoyed. All that such watching and waiting ever *could* find would be either an image...or a quiver in the diaphragm....I knew now that they were merely the mental track left by the passage of Joy—not the wave but the wave’s imprint on the sand. The inherent dialectic of desire itself had in a way already shown me this; for all images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon honestly confessed themselves inadequate. All said, in the last resort, “It is not I. I am only a reminder. Look! Look! What do I remind you of?”...Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value of all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring....And that is why we

experience Joy: we yearn, rightly, for that unity which we can never reach except by ceasing to be the separate phenomenal beings called “we.” Joy was not a deception.<sup>19</sup>

Lewis concludes by asserting that while a familiar “stab” of joy continued to come his way, “... I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Oxford scholar discovered Christ to be not only his source of joy, but the source of his *desire* for joy. Magnetically disruptive, Jesus pulls our attention to him. Only once this has happened can we know the joy of his love and experience the most important life-orienting relationship of all.

Think about Jesus’s interaction with the religious elite around their strict Sabbath-keeping rules. He offered his vintage, lovingly disruptive teaching, but they would have none of it. Their hard-hearted response both angered and saddened Jesus. What was meant to enhance life had, instead, become oppressive.

One Sabbath day as Jesus was walking through some grainfields, his disciples began breaking off heads of grain to eat. But the Pharisees said to Jesus, “Look, why are they breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath?” Jesus said to them, “Haven’t you ever read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He went into the house of God (during the days when Abiathar was high priest) and broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. He also gave some to his companions.” Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!”

Jesus went into the synagogue again and noticed a man with a deformed hand. Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus’ enemies watched him closely. If he healed the man’s hand, they planned to accuse him of working on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the deformed hand, “Come and stand in front of

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everyone.” Then he turned to his critics and asked, “Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?” But they wouldn’t answer him. He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts. Then he said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” So, the man held out his hand, and it was restored!<sup>21</sup>

The Gospels point constantly to Jesus’s disruptiveness. He challenges long-held religious practices and rigid ways of thought. We’ve noted that his disruptive efforts often target the *pace* of his listeners (is there any such thing as disruption that does *not* affect our pace... routines...rhythms...activities...hurry?).

Christ had cautionary words for followers who might have thought he was ushering in a systemic overthrow of all that had preceded him.

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. So, if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”<sup>22</sup>

Before Jesus entered the scene, the fourth commandment revealed how well God knows us, his beloved creation. He instituted a weekly disruption so life’s pace would not suck us into a vortex of endless work and relentless productivity. Don’t miss this truth just because it’s tucked inside the Old Testament system of laws and obligations: *restlessness will ambush us and wreak havoc unless we intentionally choose restfulness with God.*

## AIMLESS TEENS & FRAGILE SOCIAL JOY

Adult aimlessness has put teens in double jeopardy. They feel unloved and abandoned by people they need. And they have no clue how to rescue themselves. The religious elite of Jesus's day were burdensome, blind guides who had a similar effect on people. Corrupting God's intention for the Law, they equated love with duty. Unintentionally, our youth ministries often communicate the same thing. Jesus came to correct misguided practices and accomplish their purpose, so we might love God with every fiber of our being and love others without hesitation. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's summary? *Our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.* When we welcome the risen Christ as our indwelling, intimate Lord he regularly disrupts our pace, takes control, bestows grace, and unleashes joy.

This is vastly different from where young people live. They skim across the top of each day's water aimlessly, accepting fragile joy as a random life reality. Unaware or unconvinced about the possibility of abundantly joyful living with Jesus, they grow numb to any notion of life below the surface. The youth ministry challenge is to meet them in this splash zone, not to entertain them or make them feel better for a minute, but to lead them into the good life of disruptive joy with Jesus.

## **DISRUPTING TEENS WITH JOY**

### **Joyful Disruptions**

1. Who are the aimless teens you know well?
2. Can you describe what fragile joy looks like, maybe in your life or that of a friend?
3. Do you think joy is a choice? Why or why not?
4. What are your autopilot routines...the things you do without thinking about them?