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Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation

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*Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults:
Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation.*

Dunn, Richard R., & Sundene, Jana L. (2012).
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Reviewed by Jeff Strietzel



The complex and trending discussion of the stage of life known as *emerging adulthood* is largely familiar to student development professionals serving on college and university campuses. Intrinsic in exploring *what* emerging adults are is the question of *how* to appropriately engage them. Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene address the former questions and focus on the latter in *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation*. The authors' cathexis is apparent. If you are expecting a quick solution to your emerging adult quandaries, however, this book will leave you wanting. Still, *Shaping the Journey* is a well-timed consolidation of current emerging adult literature and a missional guidebook to motivate and empower caring, older adults to shepherd emerging adults in practical and meaningful ways.

The authors begin with an urgent call for disciplemakers, a term they utilize generously. Dunn and Sundene plead for experienced adults to speak into the season of younger adults' lives marked by searching and instability. Next follows a review of the sociological context and marks of emerging adulthood along with paradoxical pressures emerging adults experience. These include (a) identity exploration, (b) instability, (c) self-focus, (d) feeling in-between, and (e) being in a time filled with potential or possibilities. The authors aptly summarize the complexity and variability of emerging adults' experiences. If readers are not well versed in emerging adult literature this book's introduction serves as a good primer.

In Part One, entitled "Simplifying Our Vision," the authors propose shifting away from certain lackluster mindsets and tactics of past generations to what they consider more effective behaviors, namely (a) contextualized thinking, (b) disciplemaking relationships, (c) sharing life in grace and truth, (d) cultivating a sense of urgency, and (e) discipling proactively. The authors utilize the Apostle Paul and Timothy as a case study to contend for an "irreducible core" (Dunn & Sundene, 2012, p. 60) of trust, submission, and love, juxtaposed with "fad techniques" (p. 57). Then they introduce the "life-restoring rhythms" (p. 75) of discernment (Ch. 4), intentionality (Ch. 5), and reflection (Ch. 6). These three habits are then woven into Part Two of the book to help prompt disciplemakers' application of their principles into the lives of emerging adults.

In Part Two, Dunn and Sundene hone in on disciplemakers' application of the life-restoring principles to life's big questions so salient during the emerging adult stage: identity/purpose, spirituality, relationships, sexuality, and daily life-living. The authors argue that identity, vocation, ideology, and purpose are found in one's identity in Christ. They note that while spirituality is in vogue for emerging adults, attendance at religious services is not, which translates to a lack of Christian fellowship that is vital to spiritual growth and health. Another critical component of emerging adulthood is navigating relationships with parents, friends, romantic partners, and God. The authors contend, "The Christlife calls emerging adults to invest deeply in the causal and communal context in which they live" (p. 151). In addressing sexuality, Dunn and Sundene lead with case

studies and statistics but emphasize the healing truths found in the pages of scripture. They also propose a *leadership* model rather than behavioral *management* of human sexuality, embracing a greater vision of human flourishing as God's image-bearers. With a kind of chiasmic structure, the authors close Part Two speaking to the daily challenges of emerging adults and how disciplemakers sensitively shape their priorities and decisions.

The last three chapters of the book, Part Three, are aimed more directly at the readers, that is, disciplemakers themselves. Marks of a mature adult are compiled to provide portraits of ways in which disciplemakers should grow in their own journeys and leave spiritual legacies. The authors also expound on what they call "postures of effectiveness" (p. 224). These include trusting God, humbly submitting to Him, and loving both God and people through hope, care, and truth. Dunn and Sundene close with suggestions for disciplemakers to ignite passion and answer Christ's call to make disciples.

Christian higher education professionals are a considerable audience for this text which is intended to be relevant to anyone who both interacts with and cares about emerging adults. While not utilizing a formal academic methodology, Rick Dunn and Jana Sundene draw upon years of experience in different education- and ministry-related positions, offering poignant personal stories to illustrate their disciplemaking ideas and principles. Additionally, they incorporate quality emerging adult literature throughout and capably address emerging adults' areas of need for those who seek to shepherd them.

In some ways, however, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults* may not meet all readers' expectations. First, the authors are prone to mention an idea, action, or methodology with which they disagree in vague terms and deal with it dismissively. For example, "fad techniques" in chapter three are summed up with "Mimic the methodology, follow the fad—life change guaranteed!" (p. 57). The authors later conclude, "Faddishness eventually leads to new levels of foolishness—ones that corrupt vision and compromise the very types of relationship that actually build mature disciples" (p. 58). I would not argue that fads should be accepted whole-heartedly, but throwing the baby out with bathwater seems

contrary to the approaches of sensitivity and discernment the authors propose. Why not sift out valuable components and modify or enhance them, rather than making a complete shift? Also, contrary to their stated desire for their suggestions to be “a mentality, not a model” (p. 34), the rhythms and suggestions offered in the book still seem more like pat answers. Having intentionality and reflection built into the book reads as more packaged or pedantic than liberating.

In terms of style, Dunn and Sundene seemingly tucked every piece of their lives’ accumulated advice into this book. The reading thus felt fragmented at times, much like a bulleted list with a paragraph or two of explanation. They tried to do too much in one book and lost potency in the process. Another stylistic criticism was the format of the last chapter, in which the authors took a unique approach that seemed out of place. While understanding their desire to exemplify their message and ideas in a practical and personal manner, I did not find the authors’ script-like conversation compelling. It felt premeditated and stilted.

Regardless, I appreciated *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults* and what Dunn and Sundene are striving to accomplish. As a Christian higher education practitioner, I resonated with the authors’ postures and postulates. I agree that pouring time and energy into emerging adults *is* an eternally rewarding investment strategy. Dunn and Sundene’s book will benefit a range of professions and engages the difficult task of writing an intellectual, theoretical, biblical, and practical book for a devoted and diverse audience. Also, because the authors repeatedly implemented their three life-restoring rhythms of discernment, intentionality, and reflection, these three words, for me, are the most memorable takeaways. In retrospect, I likely expected too much. This book may not revolutionize the way you interact with emerging adults, but I would recommend *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults* as a complement to any Christian higher education practitioner already exercising an intentional lifestyle. 

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