

# The Curse of Awesome



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## The Curse of Awesome

The Miller Summer Youth Institute has a rather counter-intuitive approach to youth ministry. Over the years, we've found that the best way to explain this approach is through a couple of stories. These are not true stories – not exactly. They don't represent specific people, and they aren't accurate accounts of specific events.

Nonetheless, these stories are inspired by real experiences and take place during the typical kinds of games youth groups end up playing.

The characters don't represent specific people, but may look awfully familiar. You may have seen them in the mirror. If not, you probably have pieces of each in your own ministry. The purpose of writing these stories is to give you some anecdotes that you can use to bring the best out in your own ministry, and those you serve alongside.

## Jonny Awesome



Jonny was a young youth leader in the middle of his studies in seminary. He loved playing ultimate disc football with his youth group, and they loved playing with Jonny - mostly because Jonny was so good at it. I, on the other hand, hated playing with Jonny's group because Jonny always won. It wasn't Jonny's team that won. Jonny won.

Jonny wasn't actually a great player. At best, he played on a mid-tier intermural team in college, but compared to a group of people who had never played ultimate before, Jonny might as well have been a pro.

One afternoon, Jonny used one of his favorite trick throws to score early in the game. A visitor to Jonny's group had the misfortune to be playing on the opposing team. When this new teenager threw a pass that would have tied the score, Jonny pounced from nowhere and emphatically swatted it into oblivion. Throughout the game, Jonny made three interceptions. He only missed one pass which was overthrown anyway. Jonny was sure to point that out. As time was running out, already firmly in the lead, Jonny made a spectacular diving catch to provide an exclamation point on his victory.

Afterward, everyone got together and talked about what a great game Jonny played. The winners felt pretty good about being on Jonny's team. The losing team sulked a bit but wanted Jonny to teach them his trick throws so they could play more like him.

This game is emblematic of Jonny's approach to youth ministry. Jonny attracted youth because he was cool. Students wanted to hang out with Jonny, and they wanted to be like Jonny. This extended to the entire ministry, not just games. All the clever answers came from Jonny. The best questions came from Jonny. The best jokes were told by Jonny. The winning team won because of Jonny.

Everything was about Jonny.

This approach to youth ministry is both very popular and very limited. Let me explain the limits by introducing you to one of Jonny's youth, Darla Depth.

## Darla Depth





Once Jonny's been in the position of youth leader for a while, he'll hit his stride. The awesome one will spend a lot of time preparing for a specific event, and he'll have an insight he's never had before. Since it will strike Jonny as deep and profound, he'll structure the event around this insight. He'll gradually introduce some basic concepts to get people thinking. Then, at the perfect moment, he will quietly unleash his sagacious wisdom, dazzling everyone in earshot. At least, that will be his plan.

In reality, the event will begin, and then Darla Depth will appear. Two minutes into the conversation, she will dismissively blurt out Jonny's deep insight as if it was common knowledge. Then, twisting the knife, she will ask a question Jonny can't answer. Now he's cornered, and chances are he will make the following mistakes.

1. Jonny will not acknowledge insights deeper than his own.

Jonny has to dismiss Darla's questions and her comments. He has no choice but to defend his awesomeness; the structure of the event and his entire ministry depend on it. He may deflect the question, or offer an overly simplified answer, but he simply can't acknowledge its depth or complexity. If he admits that he doesn't know or that it puzzles him, he will seem less awesome – and that is catastrophic. Instead, he has to appear to be beyond Darla's thoughts. He will face the temptation to use humor at the expense of those

around him so he can save face. He'll have a tough time not giving in.

2. Jonny will not make space for other leaders.

Since no one but Jonny is allowed to emerge as awesome, there will be no one there to help when Jonny takes another position, sprains his ankle, has a crisis of faith, or winds up without an answer. When Jonny's not awesome, the ministry's not awesome.

At his worst, Jonny is like bad plant food. His youth program has lots of top growth, but no roots. There is no system to support it. Darla Depth wanted to put down roots, to explore the depths of her faith, to emerge as a peer leader, but Jonny couldn't allow it. So when he needs roots, they won't be there.

3. Jonny will be unintentionally exclusive, missing the extremes.

Eventually, Darla Depth will stop coming. She wants roots. Also, Mephibosheth Jones, who just moved from out of town, isn't very competitive. He'll get tired of losing games, and he'll disappear too. Jonny will appeal only to a small group of kids who enjoy being awesome, but not growing or being challenged.

Before we wrap up with Darla Depth and her threat to Jonny, it's important to highlight where Jonny will go wrong.

There's nothing wrong with the fact that Darla is deep.  
There's nothing wrong with the fact that Darla had a  
better grasp of a particular issue than Jonny.

The problem is that Jonny cannot accommodate Darla's  
insights, let alone nurture them.

## Why do we love Jonny?

The Jonny Awesome model of ministry has severe limitations. Nonetheless, people keep hiring Jonny Awesome, and they aren't likely to stop anytime soon. Here's why.

1. Jonny provides short-term gain.

People like to hire Jonny because he can provide short-term results that look tremendous.

Remember the comparison to cheap plant food? If you use the wrong fertilizer on your plants, they'll produce big, thick, dark green leaves. This looks great, but it may be bad news. If your plants don't put down good roots, there is nothing to support those leaves and your plants will suffer.

Jonny is like that. He may attract youth quickly, but in the long term, he can't keep them. More on this later...

2. It's easy to confuse Jonny and Jonny's work.

What people actually want (or should want) when they find someone to work with youth is a vibrant, dynamic ministry that proclaims the gospel to young people and mentors them in their faith.

People sometimes confuse the desire for a vibrant, dynamic youth ministry with the desire for a vibrant,

dynamic youth leader. They assume one will follow the other – they figure if Jonny is awesome, his ministry will be awesome. As stated above, it sometimes looks that way at first, but it usually doesn't last.

### 3. Jonny Awesome is easy to find.

It's tough to find a confident, mature, theologically adept youth leader. But it's easy to find Jonny. That's because being Jonny doesn't take much skill. Remember the ultimate game? Jonny was only a slightly above average player. He just looked great because he was competing with people who had never played before. The same goes for everything else. His theological acumen never needs to be deep. He just has to overshadow anyone deeper.

More tragically, being Jonny doesn't require confidence. Being Jonny actually stems from insecurity – a need for the constant validation of being awesome, a constant need to be right. Jonny is tragically insecure deep down, and it's not hard to find insecure people.

That's why people keep hiring Jonny Awesome. Who should they look for instead? On the surface, it might be good to consider someone completely different. It might be good to look at Background Baxter.

## Baxter Background



Baxter's approach to youth ministry can be exemplified by one particular pitch during a game of softball.

When I witnessed this pitch, Baxter was a little older than Jonny. He was leading an area-wide middle-school retreat at a campground. On Saturday, Baxter announced that they would be playing softball. He also declared that he would be the all-time pitcher and I would be the umpire. This made my stomach sink and my eyes roll.

For starters, I was hands-down the least qualified person on the field to be the umpire – I like baseball but I'm far from a fanatic. More importantly, I didn't feel up to an afternoon of watching this guy's "Jonny Awesome" impersonation as he pitched a no-hitter at the expense of 12-year-olds.

Then Baxter amazed me. He proceeded to pitch the absolute worst game of softball in sports history. Every batter hit the ball every time at bat. All except one.

There was one sixth-grader who just couldn't hit the ball to save his life. His swings were painfully late or shockingly early; his hands shook like he was holding a jackhammer and drops of sweat the size of marbles rolled down his face. After striking out several innings in a row, he stepped up to bat again. Baxter looked down at his glove and called a timeout. "Could you look at this?" He shouted at me. "I think a stitch is coming loose."

Before I could respond, Baxter jogged to the plate, shoved his glove into my chest and turned his attention to the batter. With something between a hush and a whisper he said, "Seems like you're having some trouble."

"I play softball all the time at school," the terrified batter stammered, kicking at the dirt. "I don't know why I can't hit the ball here. I'm afraid I'm going to look silly in front of everyone."

"Eh. Forget about hittin' the ball. We're playing to have fun. Save your competitive spirit for another game." Intentional disinterest dripped from every phrase. "Tell you what, next time, don't swing at the ball, just stick the bat out." Then Baxter turned to me, restoring his voice to its normal volume. "What do you think, glove look okay to you?"

Dumbfounded, I spit out a flustered, "Um, yeah. It's an old glove. All the stitches are loose; you'll be okay."

He returned to the mound, and I watched the most precise, skillful pitch of all time. Baxter wound up, and this petrified preteen started his slow, terrified swing. Baxter then reversed the entire sport of softball.

Baxter hit the bat with the ball.

He actually bounced the ball off of the bat. Naturally it didn't go very far, but by the time Baxter hopped



forward and made a slow but respectable throw to first base, our batter was safe.

When the game was over, the middle-schoolers grabbed snacks and talked about what an amazing game each of them had played. Meanwhile, Baxter faded into the background. I still don't remember what he did after the game – he probably cleaned up the field.

Some people will challenge Baxter's approach immediately, saying that he didn't push everyone, and thus he didn't get their best. Nothing could be further from the truth. Baxter did get their best, just not their best softball.

Baxter never wanted to create great softball players. His goal was to get youth to interact with each other. To do that, he had to make them feel comfortable in their own skin. He needed to disarm the fears of an awkward batter about "looking silly." Baxter made it clear that even when this shy 12-year-old felt like shutting down or pulling away, all he had to do was try his best and Baxter would get him back into the game – or conversation, Bible study, group, activity, whatever.

Naturally the analogy isn't perfect, but it highlights a fundamental difference between Jonny and Baxter. Jonny's goal was to perform his best. Baxter's goal was to make everyone around him better.

In youth ministry, Baxter's approach takes a lot longer than Jonny's. To help that batter consistently feel comfortable would take weeks and months and years. But over those weeks and months and years, the youth develop a sense of who they are and who they are called to be. Baxter's youth group will always be filled with leaders because Baxter will help them become leaders.

Baxter is not awesome. His youth are.

## How to Be Not-Awesome and Hit Bats

So having these fictional characters in mind, how can those in youth ministry quiet their inner Jonny, and let their inner Baxter shine? Here are a few practical tips to help you hit some bats.

1. Ask questions you can't answer.

No one likes the game “guess what’s in the leader’s head.” Too often, our conversations and discussions become nothing more than that. When your questions are designed to produce a specific answer, it’s not a discussion; it’s an exam.

Some situations call for that kind of exercise, but if your participants don’t know the right answers, it can be frustrating. Another approach that generates true discussion is to make sure your questions have a wide variety of possible responses. Questions like, “What from today’s lesson made you think?” or “Which character from this passage did you identify with and why?” provide lots of great options for thought.

## 2. Don't answer questions someone else can.

This applies to deep discussion about scripture or theology, but it can be easier than that. I saw this in action on a train. A group of teenagers was riding to a tourist destination for a field trip. One of the teens, Marcy, was sitting next to the leader. Marcy was focused intently on the map, noting every stop.

In the row behind her, Jay interrupted his video game to tap the youth leader on the shoulder. "How many stops till ours?" The leader responded immediately. "Marcy, Jay's asking how many more stops there are."

The answer was three. I knew it. The leader knew it. Almost everyone on the train knew it. But Marcy knew it too. In that five-second exchange, this youth leader hit the bat. She gave Marcy a chance to shine.

## 3. Let others lead.

The key to leading leaders is to let your leaders lead. It's a mouthful, but it's true. It's also very hard to do. Once you know where they excel, give other adults, or even youth, a chance to lead a discussion. Let them plan a game or an event. Doing so will show trust and also take

you out of the spotlight. To do this right is much easier said than done.

Letting others lead takes a tremendous amount of work and self-control. It's not an excuse to have someone else do your job. In fact, if you find that letting someone else lead means less work for you, then you're doing it wrong. Before you let someone else lead, you have to go out of your way to set them up to succeed (more on that in a moment), and have several plans ready just in case they don't. You need to be sure that whatever happens, it will be a positive experience for everyone involved. This means more work, not less.

#### 4. Be a mega-glove.

I worked in a kitchen during my time in college, and I remember the day that the mega glove was stolen.

The mega glove was some sort of cut resistant fabric that the prep cooks wore when chopping vegetables. When it disappeared, we started going through a lot more bandages. The mega glove had addressed the potential for a problem before it became a problem. By the time our cooks needed bandages, the damage was already done.

In youth ministry, it's better to be a mega glove than a bandage. There are lots of folk sayings that get at this same concept. An ounce of prevention is better than a

pound of cure. A stitch in time saves nine. Pick whatever saying works for you, and apply it. Set your youth up to succeed.

Setting people up for success is not just keeping them from failing. If we really wanted to be sure the cooks never cut themselves, we'd just hide the knives. On the other hand, setting people up for success means giving them the tools they need to do a difficult job.

If one of your youth is terrified of public speaking, it's not fair to ask him to do the sermon by himself on youth Sunday. It'll be a lot harder to rebuild his confidence after a self-proclaimed disaster than it will be to set him up for success beforehand. Perhaps a team sermon would work better. Perhaps a lot of coaching could help. Perhaps he'd just rather play the piano—in which case he's succeeding in a different realm altogether.

To set your youth up to succeed, you have to pay attention to your youth. You have to know who is chronically late, has trouble reading, is likely to cry when scared, or has a difficult home life. You also have to know who is a gifted musician, critical thinker, inherent organizer, or a natural leader. You have to play to their strengths and strengthen their weaknesses.

## 5. Back up your backup plan.

One of the great pleasures of working with SYI is having the chance to be a part of an incredible youth ministry team. Our musician, Jeremy Fisher, is a great example of this fifth method for hitting bats.

Leading worship with Jeremy means that the music will always reflect the mood of the group. It seems to happen by magic. In reality, it's because Jeremy spends hours and hours selecting the music, the back-up plan, and the back-up plan for the back-up plan. Jeremy typically has three sets of music for a given service. When things don't go according to plan, there's no problem switching.

If you plan a deep, thought-provoking lesson, event, or experience, and your youth appear to be nervous, frustrated, or defensive, it's nice to have a different option. If you're planning for a light-hearted event to unwind, but your youth are ready to go with deep theological questions, you might want to switch to "plan b," or even "plan e."

The best way to switch your plan is to have another plan available. The best way to have another plan available is to put in the work ahead of time to craft a backup plan, and sometimes to back up your backup plan.

These are just a few ideas to help you think through how to “hit bats.” As new ideas and techniques occur to you, jot them down. The process of externalizing a natural course of action can help you analyze and repeat it.



## Background Boating Discussion Guide

### Getting in the water:

1. Start with easy warm-up discussion questions that are non-threatening: What did you do for recreation? Who did you hang out with? How was your day?
2. Move to slightly more informative questions: What did you remember? What did you learn? What did you like?
3. Then you may be ready to move to increasingly complex questions: What challenged you? What made you think? What made you uncomfortable?

### How to stay in the boat:

1. If you think you know the answer, don't ask the question.
2. Make fewer statements, ask more questions.
3. Students are here to discover what and how they think, not what or how you think.
4. Talk less, listen more.
5. No new information. Process what's already been thrown at them.

6. Show them the trails, don't choose one for them.
7. Some questions have answers. Don't be ridiculous.
8. The clock is your friend. When the time is over, it's over.

How to float when you fall out: (Try these questions)

1. What was your high point and low point of the day?
2. Who did you spend time with today that you didn't really know before?
3. What did you learn in (today's activity, Bible study, worship, etc.)?
4. What are you looking forward to tomorrow / next time we get together?
5. What surprised you today?
6. How has worship been a part of the experience for you?
7. Ask a silly comparison question. For example, fun experiences can also be overwhelming experiences. Sometimes you feel sleepy, or happy, even grumpy. So, which of the seven dwarves do you feel most like today and why?

Or, today was a pretty packed day. If you had to compare today to a flavor of ice cream, which flavor would you pick and why?

## MILLER SUMMER YOUTH INSTITUTE AT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Since 1997, the Miller Summer Youth Institute has drawn rising high school seniors from across the country to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary to ask deep questions about life and faith, to think critically about these issues, and to explore ministry from the pulpit and the pews.

The goal of SYI is that all who come in contact with the program have the opportunity to discover more fully who God is calling them to be and what God is calling them to do.

Additionally, SYI is venturing into new territory. Beginning in the fall of 2016 we are starting our SYI satellite programs, otherwise known as **SYI on the Road**. Through this program, we seek to take the outstanding theological and vocational training that is offered during the traditional SYI and share it with church youth groups in the Pittsburgh area and around the country. We have a number of different tracks and options for church youth groups. We can come to churches during youth group for several weeks, plan a retreat for your youth group over a weekend, or work with youth directors to bring our programming to you!

Also, beginning in June 2017, we will offer **college credit for SYI** for the first time. Know young people who may be interested in SYI? Tell them about the program!

Learn more:

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