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Toward Tensegrity: Young Women, Narrative Agency, and Religious Education

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M.A., Luther Seminary, 2004
B.A., Saint Olaf College, 2001

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that Christian faith communities are critical resources for young women striving to enact narrative agency within situations of meaningful cultural constraints. The first two chapters introduce a narrative approach to identity and present appreciative, transformative inquiry as a fresh method for research with young women that arises from feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational commitments.

Chapters three and four presents the results of Stories of Gender, a narrative- and small group-based research project in which young women told and discussed stories about their gender identities. Against the backdrop of popular, religious education, and practical theology literature about girls, Stories of Gender reveals the importance of a measured approach to young women's agency and narrative identity, that is, one that recognizes both the challenges young women face in constructing female identity and the means by which young women meet these challenges, particularly the way a girl's relationship with a loving and accepting God acts as a site of resistance in a culture where many young women struggle to balance being true to themselves with garnering acceptance for projecting a proper image of female beauty. Finally, a claim is made for tensegrity—a wholeness that finds its integrity through the balancing of tensive parts—as the *telos* toward which young women's narrative identity work should strive.

The final three chapters articulate resources that Christian faith communities offer young women in support of their narrative identity work. A transcendent, eschatological, and embodied theological anthropology provides young women with the *imago Dei*, made in the image of God, as a reparative narrative thread. Religious education grounded in critical reflection, exploration of new possibilities, and action for integration, as well as the exercising of imagination, promotes identification of damaged narrative threads and the construction of salutary narratives. Finally, the entire life of Christian faith communities mediates to young women their *imago Dei* status and invites them into formative and transformative practices, so that young women deepen their relationships with God and develop a stance of identity-constituting receptivity through which they learn to see themselves as God sees them.

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FOREWORD

I find it impossible to begin this dissertation without first narrating the stories

behind it. There are good reasons for the impetus to start autobiographically. First, others

who have worked with adolescents recommend listening closely to our own adolescent

experiences so that we do not import unresolved issues from the past into our research

and writing.[1] Throughout this dissertation process—conducting story-sharing groups with

young women, reading the literature about young women of faith, writing countless

drafts—I could not avoid self-reflection, as experiences I had not thought about in years

came flooding back with all the detail and emotion as if they had happened just

yesterday.

Second, I firmly believe that most projects begin out of our own desires and

interests.[2] To borrow a sentence from theologian Rebecca Chopp, "This book is written

out of my own journey, as all books are crafted out of a writer's life."[3] As ethnographer

and oral historian Elaine Lawless explains, "That is not to say that our research and

writing is 'merely' therapeutic, in a kind of simplistic formula, but rather in ways that

admit to our seeking knowledge and understanding where we most desire and search for

it."[4] A groundswell of passion arising intimately from one's life enables the sustained

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1. Patricia H. Davis, *Beyond Nice: The Spiritual Wisdom of Adolescent Girls* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) 9-12.

2. Lorrain Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 160.

3. Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 4.

4. Elaine J. Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 3.

attention to one topic that is needed for doing this sort of work. Put another way, we need to think that what we are doing matters.

To ignore the stories behind the project is to hide the way our personal trajectories shape our projects, belying the objectivist myth. I do not sit on high, somehow removed from young women, narrative agency, and religious education, able to speak about it without involving myself. I write about these topics based on human subject and library research but also based on my own lived experience. In order to better understand this project, you need to know a bit about me. As Lawless explains, "In our time, writing about one's self has become a professional imperative—that is, we are required now to acknowledge our cultural and social 'baggage,' our biases and our political leanings, to the extent to which we are able to recognize these and admit to them."[5]

But it is hard to know where to begin. There are so many stories about being a girl and then a young woman and now a mother of two precious boys that shape how I understand femininity. There are equally as many stories about being raised Catholic, struggling with this religious affiliation throughout adolescence and young adulthood, choosing to teach in a Catholic school, then pursuing master's and doctoral degrees in religion at Protestant-affiliated institutions, and ultimately baptizing my sons in the Catholic church that shape how I understand faith. This being said, there are a few stories that stand out as crucial points of influence for this project.

Never the Right Sort of Girl—Personal Identity

The seeds of curiosity about young women, narrative agency, and religious education that drives this dissertation were sown throughout my middle and high school

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5. Lawless, *Women Escaping*, 2.

years. For my first five years at the Catholic grade school I attended, I was relatively

popular, although I never would have used that term at the time. I thought of myself as a

happy kid who was friends with everyone. Then one day I came to school, and no one

would talk to me. The intensity with which I was ignored left me feeling as if I had

ceased to exist for many of my classmates. In my journal, I dubbed this event "the

H.C.R.," the Hate Claire Revolution, and I wrote for pages on end, trying to discern what

I could have done to make myself so odious. Ashamed that I might have done something

to cause this reaction, I did not tell my parents or teachers about it. For the first time in

my life, I applied the label "shy" to myself, although in retrospect a better label would

have been "shell-shocked and socially withdrawn as a protective measure."

While this was a painful and confusing experience for me, it was not as bad as it

could have been. I was a good student, and teachers responded well to me and found

ways to challenge me academically. I was a gymnast, so I had an identity and a peer

group apart from school. A boy in my class lived next door; he continued to invite me to

hang out with the boys in my class, even if the girls perpetually ignored me. I even liked

going to church with my parents and siblings and enjoyed being involved in mass as an

altar server.

Then, "when I was in seventh grade and preparing to help my grandparents

celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary, I had that 'click' moment made famous by

second wave feminists, that moment when you realize, for all the surface indications to

the contrary, patriarchy still rears its ugly head."[6] My grandparents planned an

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6. Another version of this story first appeared in Claire Bischoff, "The Tensegritous Experience of a Roman Catholic Feminist," in *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith*, eds. Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005) 165.

anniversary mass at their home Catholic parish, which was less than two miles down the road from my family's home church, and they were trying to involve as many family members as possible. They asked their priest if my younger sister and I could be the altar servers for the mass, but their request was denied. Even though my sister and I had been trained and were active as altar servers at our church, the Vatican had not yet officially approved female altar servers, and thus my grandparents' slightly more conservative church would not let two girls fill this role. Two boys from my grandparents' parish, boys no one in my family knew, ended up serving the mass, as my sister and I watched from the pews, hurt and confused.

While this opened my eyes to the sexism and strong patriarchalism in the Roman Catholic tradition, it did not sour me on religion altogether. At the Catholic high school I attended, I was fortunate to have high school religion teachers who saved religion for me.[7] When Mr. Gleich asked me to go on an Urban Plunge to visit a halfway house and serve lunch at a soup kitchen, my class consciousness was raised, as I realized that not everyone lives a comfortable middle class existence. I also started to see that religion was not just about attending mass but also about attending to the needs of others and that being Catholic was not only about right belief but also about right action in the form of a preferential option for the poor. When Mr. Watkins gave me Marcus Borg's *Jesus: A New Vision* to read as extra-credit over Easter break, I began to understand that religion involved deep thinking, honest questioning, and engaging dialogue. At a time when much of my identity was wrapped up in being a good student, it was a saving grace to realize that religion was worthy of academic study. Finally, on an overnight retreat for prayer

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7. I have written more extensively about the important role of these teachers in Claire Bischoff, "Saving Religion," in *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism*, eds. Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 152-159.

and spirituality class, Mr. Ruhland named where he saw God in each of his students, observing that he saw God in me when I performed my floor routine at gymnastics meets. From this, I learned to see God in myself and to connect God with those things in my life that I loved the most and in which I could be most myself.

In many ways, high school was a great experience for me. I was class valedictorian and enamored with learning new things; a three sport letter winner and team captain, who earned the respect of my coaches and teammates and who appreciated being able to be both strong and graceful in my body; involved in student council, the school newspaper, and community volunteering, enjoying the chance to work for change in my little corner of the world and to pursue my passions for leadership and writing. But as anyone who has been in high school knows, all of that counts for nothing if you do not associate with the right people. According to the unspoken lunch room seating chart, I sat at the smart girl table; every girl who graduated in the top ten students in our class sat there. Even though we were outsiders and viewed as unapproachable, I formed great friendships and still count two of these girls as my best friends.

Yet I was haunted by the sense of never quite fitting in. Freshman year my father asked me if I wanted a ride to see the boys' basketball team in the playoffs. I spent an hour agonizing and crying in my room; I loved basketball, but I was sure I would not know anyone there (or at least anyone who would talk to me) and would then have to choose between sitting alone or with my father, both of which would continue to mark me as an outsider. Even though we wore uniforms at my school, I sensed that mine never looked quite right, although I would have been hard pressed to name what separated my appearance from the appearance of those who moved with seeming effortlessness in the

crowd of the social elite. In an attempt to feel better about how I looked, when I got my license, I snuck my uniform jumper to a tailor over a school break to have it shortened, worrying every day until it was done that the tailor would call my parents house, alerting my parents to what I was doing.

Halfway through my sophomore year, I had an epiphany, a term I do not use lightly. I was processing into the gym and singing with other members of the spiritual team, that is, the students who worked with the campus ministers to plan school prayer services, masses, and service opportunities. As I walked past a group of popular students from my class, I was mortified. To be seen singing at a religious event… In a flash of realization, I knew I was never going to fit in, at least not in the conventional, high school sense of the term. I was never going to be a popular girl or achieve the right look or maybe even have a boyfriend. And I also realized in the same instant that this was okay, that I was okay how I was, that maybe being religious and academic and athletic and having a few close friends was better than worrying about whether I was in style or popular. I truly felt the hand of God in that revelatory moment. In a way I could not articulate at the time, in a way I could only intuit, I knew I was "right" with God, and that counted more than anything.

This is not to say that it made it any easier to be a high school student. Junior year I still sat home and cried as my younger sister, blonde and decked out to look the part of the perfect girl, went to the winter formal with the boy from my class who had asked her to be his date. But it is to say that my faith and gender identity intersected in such a way that I was given space to be myself, or at least to *try* to be more myself in the socially conforming world of adolescence.

Not Sure How to Teach—Professional Identity

Questions surrounding female faith identity were resurrected in my first job after college, as I took a position teaching middle school religious studies at the Catholic school I attended as a girl. At that school, it fell to the religious studies department to teach "family life," the Catholic school euphemism for sexual education. When I became aware that there was a particular group of young women in the seventh grade class who were known as the ones to go to for oral sex, I felt lost. None of the canned curriculum I had on hand was of use to me. I wanted to be able to talk to the girls not only about sex but also about who they were in their entirety, to initiate a conversation about how their emerging sexuality fit into their religious identity, but I did not know how to begin.

Later that year, I saw the Frontline documentary *Merchants of Cool* for the first time and was persuaded by the argument that in media and advertising the portrayals of young women are collapsed into the stereotype of the "midriff"—a perfect body whose sole value is derived from being a sexual object.[8] Given this cultural motif, was it surprising that a group of girls chose to be sexually intimate with their male peers in order to feel accepted?

I wanted the young women I taught to know that they were so much more than sexual objects to be used for others' pleasures, but I had more questions than answers. In a mass mediated society where women frequently are portrayed as sexual objects without their own agency, what resources are available to support young women in the "search for self in every dimension of being" that marks adolescence?[9] How do young women

8. *Merchants of Cool,* PBS Frontline Documentary, originally aired February 27, 2001.

9. Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*: *A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998) 17.

negotiate gender identity in a cultural environment where they are subjected to the contradictory messages that they can do anything they want but that to be properly feminine, they must be silent, submissive, and attractive to the male gaze? Recognizing that religious communities have often been responsible for keeping women from living into their full humanity, I also believed that religious communities could create safe spaces for young women to engage in the work of constructing female identities that challenge normative constructions of femininity and that integrate religious identity as a part of a positive sense of self. But I was not sure how one would create this sort of safe space, nor was I knowledgeable enough about Christian traditions, theologies, and practices to know what resources might best support young women.

Thus for both personal and professional reasons, I came to graduate school wanting to better understand the narrative identities of young women—how they are formed, what resources inform them, and how religious educators can best support the full flourishing of young women with whom they work.

Narrative and Identity, Femininity, and Pedagogy—Conversation Partners from the Literature

With these questions in mind, I arrived at Emory University, started studying identity, and almost immediately came in contact with the work of Erik Erikson. Largely, I was persuaded by his notion that adolescence is a salient time for questions of identity, a time for uniting one's past experiences, looking forward to a future that might be expected to build on this past, and coming to some congruence between one's self image

and how the self is understood by others.[10] However, my personal experience as a young

adult who still was working on questions of identity led me to challenge Erikson's

conjecture that young people should develop a stable and coherent sense of self by the

end of adolescence.

Neither was I persuaded, however, by the idea of a plural self, constantly in flux

to meet the demands of ever-changing environments, as I sensed that there was some

"Claire" who persisted throughout my life.[11] In my search for some middle ground

between rigid identity and identity constantly in flux, I found that "…'narrative' may

prove a helpful metaphor for understanding the nature of identities" since a narrative

sense of self allows for continuity and integration at the same time as plurality and

malleability.[12] I had found a key, a new way of thinking about identity that intrinsically

made sense. When I conceived Stories of Gender, a small-group empirical research

project that would enable me to listen to how young women understand their identities, I

approached identity in a narrative fashion, asking the young women to tell stories about

themselves that answered the question, "What does it mean to be a girl?"

My initial enthusiasm about narrative identity was tempered when I began to

think more specifically about young women's identities. Many young women are not

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10. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) 87.

11. For instance, Kenneth Gergen notes that a unified self may no longer be tenable or adaptive in an increasingly pluralistic and connected culture. Challenging the notion of the unified self, Gergen comprehends identity as "continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships." See Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 139.

12. Nancy Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 213.

encouraged to tell stories about themselves,[13] and when they are able to construct

narratives of female identity, the language available to them is the patriarchal, and often

damaging, language of our culture.[14] Yet the young women with whom I had worked as

an educator readily shared stories about themselves at the slightest hint of a willing

listening audience, and most of them had not seemed especially damaged. What I needed

was a way of approaching female identity that drew on feminist analysis of culture while

also attending to the voices of actual young women, which is what I found in the

literature of girls' studies. As I perused key girls' studies texts, I kept waiting to learn

about how involvement in religious communities shapes young women's sense of

themselves. Finding little, a key research question for this project was born: how do

young women who participate in Christian communities draw upon religious discourses

in constructing their female identity?

　　While I wanted to know more about how young women construct their female

identities, the vocal religious educator in me said, "Yes, yes, this is all very interesting,

but what can practitioners *do* to support young women in their narration of self?" In

answer to this question, I encountered two journal articles by religious educator Dori

Baker in which she introduces her process of "girlfriend theology," which is "shorthand

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13. As Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberg, and Jill Mattuck Tarule write, "[a]ll women grow up having to deal with historically and culturally engrained definitions of femininity and womanhood—one common theme being that women, like children, should be seen and not heard." See Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberg, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) 5. Using interviews with women to assess the connection between women's ways of knowing and their self-concepts, Belenky et al. found that many women had difficulty naming themselves.

14. As philosopher Judith Butler bluntly puts it, this is the language sustained by those in power to continue the oppression of those who are not. See Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 307–320.

for eliciting girls' autobiographical stories and reflecting upon them theologically."[15]

Baker's girlfriend theology method provided a pedagogical bridge between theories of

narrative identity and what I had been learning about transformative education, namely

that exposure to others' stories can be an effective means for stimulating

conscientization, that is, coming to critical consciousness about the causes of

oppression.[16] Convinced about the transformative potential of story-sharing groups, I

wanted a chance to try girlfriend theology, in order to learn more about young women's

narrative agency and how young women experience the process of story sharing.

Ultimately, this dissertation is the story of what I learned from meeting with and listening

to three groups of young women discuss their understanding of what it means to be a girl

and God's presence in their experiences of girlhood.

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15. Dori Grinenko Baker, "Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk across Religious Borders," *Religious Education* 95, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 322. The other article was Dori Grinenko Baker, "Future Homemakers and Feminist Awakenings: Autoethnography as a Method in Theological Education and Research," *Religious Education* 96, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 395-407.

16. Conscientization is a term coined by educator Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2003). Educators bell hooks and Maxine Greene emphasize the importance of exposure to others' stories for the process of transformation. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 186 and Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*: *Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995) 155-168.

CHAPTER ONE

GIRL POWER OR GIRLS IN CRISIS: YOUNG WOMEN'S NARRATIVE AGENCY

Young women in the United States today are the beneficiaries of the gains of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s and are growing up at a time when "the status of women status is at an all-time high" by many markers.[17] Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex in any educational program receiving federal funding, is a household term, and many young women have benefitted from its legacy of increased extra-curricular activities for girls. Today's girls also have profited from increased attention to gender inequalities in the classroom as the result of the groundbreaking American Association of University Women's report *How Schools Shortchange Girls* and the resulting public consciousness about the potential for girls' drops in self-esteem in middle and high school.[18] Girls hear the message that they can do whatever they want to do with their lives from parents, teachers, and the media, and many of them believe it. Psychologist Dan Kindlon has coined the term "Alpha Girl" to describe the talented, highly-motivated, and self-confident girls of this generation who exhibit "a psychology of emancipation," marked by independence, autonomy, self-sufficiency, ambition, competence, and a desire to be challenged and engaged.[19]

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17. Dan Kindlon, *Alpha Girls: Understanding the New American Girl and How She Is Changing the World* (New York: Rodale, 2006). As evidence of this, Kindlon cites that there are now more women than men in college and more women serving as elected officials than ever before.

18. American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls: The AAUW Report* (New York: Marlowe, 1995).

19. Kindlon, *Alpha Girls*, 89. "Alpha girls" met four of the following five criteria: (1) GPA of 3.80 or higher; (2) a leadership position in a school or community service group; (3) at least 10 hours a week of participation in an extra-curricular activity; (4) high score on achievement motivation questionnaire; and (5) "high self-rating for dependability." See Kindlon, *Alpha Girls*, xviii.

Unfortunately, this is not the full story of American girls. Despite major advances toward gender equality in the United States, young women still make sense of themselves in the midst of a gender-sex system that devalues females and the feminine.[20] As pastoral counselor Patricia Davis reminds us, "adolescent" and "female" are terms with a negative valence, since teenagers are exploited and devalued by marketing and girls are devalued through androcentric norms.[21] In their families, at school, with peers, in faith communities, and in the wider culture, young women encounter limiting and harmful master narratives about female identity, which also contribute to a cultural climate in which violence against women, if not permissible and encouraged, is at least ignored or not taken seriously. Davis pulls no punches: "The central fact of every North American adolescent girl's life (whether she realizes it or is mystified by it) is this: she is indeed a stranger in a strange land. She inhabits a world that presents itself as safe, but which will, in actuality, probably ignore, devalue, or hurt her."[22]

As journalist Courtney Martin articulates in *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, even the positive message that girls can do whatever they want can become twisted so that what girls hear and act on is a stringent demand to do everything, and to do so with effortless perfection.[23] Young women often play out this struggle for effortless perfection

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20. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 152.

21. Patricia H. Davis, *Counseling Adolescent Girls* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996) 17-18.

22. Davis, *Counseling*, 18.

23. Courtney E. Martin, *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*: *The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body* (New York: Free Press, 2007). Partly, Martin understands this shift from "good girl" to "perfect girl" as an unintended legacy of second-wave feminism. Women who took part in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s strove to have it all, families and careers, social lives and avocations, but they hit a brick wall in the 1980s, as the illusion of shared parenting collapsed and the "second shift" of child and house care left them exhausted. Many of these women still strove to take everything on, while

in a battle with their own bodies.[24] As their bodies change in adolescence, they become

identified with women, not girls, and with that identification comes expectations of

"physical and moral perfection."[25] Young women are looked at by others and learn to

look at their own looks and to listen to what others say about them.[26] Believing that

happiness, perfection, and beauty go hand in hand, young women may understand their

bodies as perfection projects, controlling their bodies as a means to happiness.[27] They

may develop patterns of disordered eating, obsessive exercise schedules, or self-

mutilation. How they feel about their bodies becomes how they feel about themselves.[28]

As girls' studies theorists Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris

highlight, confusion about the status of young women is mediated through cultural

representations of female identity.[29] Aapola et al. identify two common cultural

discourses about girlhood as reigning paradigms in the beginning of the twenty-first

century in Western cultures: girl power and reviving Ophelia. Like all discourses, girl

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hiding the hard parts from their daughters, so that they projected to their daughters an image of womanhood as involving rushing around, responsibility, and accomplishment. See Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 32-55.

24. Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 16.

25. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 164.

26. Ibid.

27. Joan Jacobs Brumberg's excellent *The Body Project* illustrates this shift in American girls' attitudes toward their bodies through an exploration of girls' journals from the late 1800s through the present. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

28. Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 30.

29. Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005). Aapola, Gonick, and Harris write that a cultural representation "…shapes how we come to think and produce new knowledge and facilitates shared understandings and engagements." See Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 18.

power and reviving Ophelia discourses are "both enabling and constraining" since they illumine some aspects of girlhood identity while hiding others.[30]

The girl power discourse was initiated by the riot grrrl movement's reclaiming of the term "girl" to distance themselves from patriarchy.[31] Initially anti-consumer culture, the riot grrrl movement used zines and the Internet to build community among and support the empowerment of likeminded women. The idea of "girl power" eventually was appropriated by consumer and media culture as a label for everything that involved young women. In media presentations of the movement, "The disruptive nature and threatening intent in the girls' voices and actions were ignored, while attention was focused on their clothing and their appearance," and cultural icons like the Spice Girls made girl power safe, sexy, and sellable.[32] Dan Kindlon's *Alpha Girls* is an example of a recent instantiation of the girl power discourse.

According to Aapola et al., coexisting with the discourse of girl power in cultural consciousness is the reviving Ophelia discourse, whose name is taken from the title of Mary Pipher's bestseller *Reviving Ophelia*. Pipher argues that the pressures of culture force girls to choose between living as authentic selves, complete with their full range of emotions and behaviors, and living the cultural script of girlhood, which is centered on being and looking nice. Her concern is that girls entering adolescence act as false selves, keeping their true selves hidden. She writes, "Most girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public

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30. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 19.

31. The riot grrrl movement took form in the 1990s in the United States among a largely white, middle-class, and queer group of women. See Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 18-39.

32. Ibid., 24.

they become who they are supposed to be."[33] This conflict is reinforced by the mixed messages girls receive: be beautiful, but beauty is only skin deep; be sexy, but not sexual; be honest, but do not hurt anyone's feelings; be independent, but be nice; be smart, but not so smart as to threaten boys.[34]

At the heart of the reviving Ophelia discourse, what I term the girls in crisis discourse, is concern about girls' loss of voice in adolescence. The idea that girls lose their voices in adolescence came to prominence in the early 1990s with the publishing of Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* and another bestseller, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan's *Meeting at the Crossroads*. As they interviewed girls at Laurel School for Girls in Cleveland, Ohio, in a longitudinal study, Brown and Gilligan noticed that in adolescence, "I don't know" entered into interviews for the first time.[35] Girls who had been unabashed in revealing knowledge about themselves, their relationships, and the world started to struggle to know what they know in adolescence. As the young women became well-versed in the "should's" of femininity—you should be nice, silent, selfless, and have relationships without conflict—they were caught in a double bind. They could voice their true thoughts and feelings and risk losing their relationships, or they could maintain "relationships," but risk losing an authentic sense of themselves.[36] Faced with this choice, many made the strategic decision to be silent, out of fear of being ignored, ridiculed, or losing relationships.

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33. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994) 38.

34. Ibid., 36.

35. Ibid., 4.

36. Brown and Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*, 165.

Given this brief portrait of young women in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are left to ask whether young women are in trouble or thriving, whether they lose their voices in adolescence or evidence girl power, whether they need adults to save them or already are saving the world and themselves. To put it bluntly, do we need to worry about young women or not? Since popular discourses about girlhood offer conflicting answers to this question, it is useful to turn to the stories of young women themselves, as I did in the Stories of Gender project, in the hopes of more clearly perceiving how young women understand themselves and exercise agency.[37]

Perfect Girl or True to Yourself? Iesha's Girlhood Dilemma and Her Turn to Theological Discourse

Even though we had the door closed for privacy, the noise of children engaged in Wednesday night religion class seeped into the cinder block room, providing a background beat as we snacked on chips and carrot sticks and sip juice. We were scrunched around a bare folding table in a cramped basement room of New Life Baptist Church, one researcher and five young women who by this third meeting were beginning to feel more comfortable sharing stories with each other.[38] Our first session making collages and the following week's discussion of Shantell's and Idana's stories about what it means to be a girl had piqued the young women's interest. Even though I had done this sort of work before, I continued to be amazed at the young women's willingness to be

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37. I conducted Stories of Gender in summer 2005 in the southeastern United States at an exurban Methodist congregation with three 15-year-old European American young women and at an urban Baptist congregation with five African American young women, ages 13-21. In fall 2005, I worked with a third group made up of five undergraduate women representing different religious and racial backgrounds at a large university in the southeastern United States. A further description of the method of Stories of Gender is in chapter two and analysis of this project is the focus of chapter three.

38. I use pseudonyms for the young women with whom I worked and for their congregations. All direct quotations are taken from transcripts of our group discussions.

honest with me and each other about their experiences, as well as the depth of their reflections on their gender and faith identities.

That night's story sharer was Iesha, a 19-year-old English education major who attends a small, historically black college in Georgia with her twin sister Idana. As I placed the voice recorder in the center of the table and called us to order, Iesha took a neatly folded piece of paper from her jeans pocket. Having reflected on what it means to be a girl, Iesha met the glances of the other participants and then shared her story:

> I am a girl. Is it because of my actions, thoughts, or the things that I do? Maybe I am a girl because of my physique, the clothes that I wear, or the way that I wear my hair. None of the above makes me a girl. I am a female because that is what God created me to be. Yet society has comprised their criteria of what a woman is or should be. Society makes the perfect woman analogous to Barbie.
>
> In my life, I have had to fight those false thoughts. As a young girl I was active and vibrant. My mother wanted to give us opportunities that she never had, so my sisters and I were models, ballerinas, gymnasts, and cheerleaders. We were all fairly thin until my body began to change. I began to gain weight, making me the largest of the three of us. Despite my weight gain, I continued to be a dancer, but dropped the other three of my activities. I specifically remember wanting to enter into a new genre of dance. I wanted to learn Pointe. So my mother and I went to the head of the company to ask if I could join a beginning class. The woman told my mother no because she didn't think I could hold my weight. That really hurt me. It made me feel less of a girl than all the others. After that year's recital, I remember changing companies where I learned more and became one of the best dancers performing in the company. I had danced there from the age eleven to the time I graduated high school.
>
> In addition to that, I picked up one of my old activities. In the ninth grade my sister was anxious to become a cheerleader, so she asked me if I would try out with her. My initial answer was no. I'm too big and I haven't done it in years. She built my confidence and lured me into telling her that I would. We did, and both of us made it. I could not believe it. Talk went around the school about the new big cheerleader. They didn't expect me to succeed because of my weight. In contrast to their negativity, I was the captain the next year. I gained all of my skills back and was a cheerleader for all four years of my high school career. I had proved that I could do what was expected of any other girl.

> I refused to succumb to society's thoughts. I did not feed into their thoughts about perfect women. Instead, I learned to accept myself for who I was. Because I realize that I am somebody no matter what my shape or size, people think that I have an ego. That's not true at all. That's just me loving myself.
>
> My advice to any girl who is going through what I went through would be don't stop doing what you do because of your circumstances. Love yourself; if not, no one will. Let people know that the things that they say or do will not hurt; it will make you stronger. Continue to step with pride, because they can only take your pride if you let them. Work at every task even though they expect you to fail. If I made it, you can, too. Just put God first and remember He loves.

A spirited discussion followed Iesha's story, with the other young women bemoaning how they also fall short of the ideal female body image. Shantell spoke poignantly of teasingly being labeled a beanpole and wishing for a shapelier figure, while Alexa identified with Iesha's experience of coming up against other people's expectations of larger women's capabilities. Idana talked of a war between small and larger people, with weight serving as just one more way of judging who belongs and who does not. Together we puzzled through the influencing factors and frustrating results of a socio-cultural equation of femininity with an impossible-to-achieve body ideal.

Iesha, Idana, Shantell, Ahnna, and Alexa participated in Stories of Gender, a narrative- and small group discussion-based research project in which I posed the question "What does it mean to be a girl?" to young women in three settings and asked them to answer it with a narrative from their lives. As illustrated by Iesha's story, a major challenge these young women face is struggling to be true to themselves while making sense of the message that image is everything for female identity.[39] These young women are ambivalent about projecting the proper image of femininity, as they desire both the social reward of acceptance that goes to those who best approximate the perfect female

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39. "Image is everything" was the catch phrase of a Canon camera advertising campaign in the early 1990s.

image and the authenticity that comes with being themselves. Their embodied struggle to balance being true to themselves with being the sort of girl who belongs because she projects the right image of girlhood centers on identity—on what it means to be a young woman in our society and in what young women can rest their faith.

After puzzling over how it is that young women internalize the message that they have to look a particular way to be the right sort of girl, the young women at New Life Baptist talked about what could be done to help young women accept and love the bodies they have. After talking about a camp where young women could learn about healthy nutrition and exercise and engage in dancing and other bodily performances to help them gain confidence, Iesha made a theological turn, suggesting that chapel services be a part of the camp so that young women would "get to know that God loves you for you who are because He's the one who created you." As Iesha explains it, God wants us to come to God and to church as we are. She says, "That's all that matters. You don't have to be a certain way or be a certain size…" Her sister Idana breaks in, "You don't have to, you know, be this typical person who goes to Him but just come as you are. Because like [Iesha] says, 'He's our creator.' "

Following their lead, I asked the young women where they could identify God's presence in Iesha's story. Idana recognized God in Iesha's gains in confidence, and Shantell believed God had empowered Iesha for leadership and made the connection between Iesha loving herself and God being love and with love being not proud and boasting. Iesha herself picked up on Shantell's language and talked of how she believes God has given her these challenges in life so that she might help other people through them.

At the end of each Stories of Gender session, the young women were asked to reflect theologically on their stories, specifically, to name where they identified God's presence in the narrative. In all three groups, the young women recognized God's presence at times when they were able to put aside worrying about the image they projected and instead could live in a way that was true to their self-understanding. Further, as evidenced by the quotations above from the discussion of Iesha's story, at times, the young women did constructive theological work together, describing God as creating people as God wants them to look and accepting everyone for who they are, just as they are. As Bethany, another Stories of Gender participant from Grace United Methodist Church (UMC) put it, "God sees you for who you really are and not what people want you to be and what you think you should be. He sees you, who you really are, no matter what happens."

For some of the young women, their theological beliefs and relationship with God act as a site of resistance in a culture where most young women feel they are not good enough just as they are. Further, the invitation to theological reflection opened space for developing corporate counterstories of "good enough" female identity grounded in God's love over and against an equation of femininity with an image of perfection.

Young Women's Narrative Agency: Thesis and Terms

The work of the Stories of Gender participants, illustrated through Iesha's story, sparked this project: as they practiced theological reflection together, the young women struggled against a potentially harmful and surely limiting master narrative of female identity as equated with one's projected image. They demonstrated that young women

desire and actively strive to live identities of integrity—to be true to their own sense of self while also being recognized and accepted by others for more than the image they project, a balancing act that a relationship with a loving God supports. In this project, I contend that the question of whether young women are thriving or in crisis requires a both/and rather than an either/or answer. Young women face struggles but they also enact creative and life-giving responses to these struggles. While there are cultural constraints that may serve to lower the volume or limit the range of young women's voices, young women are not voiceless. To think of young women thus continues to perpetuate the myth of young women as victims without their own agency. Young women *do* enact narrative agency, albeit within situations of meaningful cultural constraints.[40] Further, I argue that the *telos* toward which young women's narratives should strive is tensegrity, a wholeness that finds its integrity through the balancing of tensive parts.[41] A young woman's relationship with a loving God helps make a tensegritous narrative possible. This is because God confers upon young women an identity of being *imago Dei*, made in the image of God, an identity in which tensive parts of a young woman's identity can be held creatively together. To put it more simply, young women's faith identities support a healthy sense of themselves that includes the entirety of who they are. As such, faith communities are important resources for supporting young women in narrating their lives.

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40. Here I adapt Wynne Maggi's understanding of agency as having real choices within systems of meaningful cultural constraints. See Wynne Maggi, *Our Women Are Free*: *Gender and Ethnicity in the Hindukush* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001) 40-43.

41. Architect R. Buckminster Fuller coined the term "tensegrity." It is a contraction of "tensional" and "integrity" meant to indicate the integrity of competing tensions. See R. Buckminster Fuller, "Tensegrity," *Portfolio and Art News Annual*, no.4 (1961).

Young Women: Who and Why

Young women are the subjects of this dissertation; I begin by listening to them and end by speaking back to them and those who work with and care about them. By "young women," I mean those people who consider themselves and are considered by others to be of the female sex who are adolescents or young adults, roughly between the ages of 12 and 25.[42] Using this phrasing highlights age and gender specifically, while also indicating young women's connection to older women, in order to combat the tendency to treat adolescence as a treacherous time apart, somehow cordoned off from adulthood instead of being in continuity with it.

Focusing on young women of faith means that gender, age, and faith are placed in the foreground and other aspects of identity, such as race or economic situation, remain of necessity in the background. This bracketing is intentional, for reasons I explain more fully below. Yet just because I attend to gender, age, and faith does not mean that other identity narratives and categories are not operative in the young women's discourses.

As noted in the foreword, issues of identity arise in new and prominent ways in adolescence, with the development of formal operational thinking. As youth become capable of thinking about their own thinking, they notice discrepancies in identity, between who they were, who they are now, and who they want to be and between the selves they are in different settings and with different people. Many youth engage in active identity work, trying out varying roles and practicing telling stories about their pasts and projecting stories about their futures. At this time, habitual patterns of meaning-

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42. The complex gendered identities of transgendered individuals lie outside the scope of this study. Judith M. Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998) demonstrates how a simple male-female classification system fails to address the experiences of transgendered individuals.

making and stories of identity emerge, patterns and stories that may have a life-long influence.

In particular, adolescence is an important time for both gender and faith identity development. As a girl enters puberty and experiences the physical changes that take her from childhood to adulthood, she becomes aware of gender identity in a new way, as the female identity reflected to her in the media and possibly expected of her by peers and family is equated increasingly and narrowly with a sexualized physical appearance.[43] Further, young women must make sense of themselves as they experience the subtle and not-so-subtle consequences of a gender-sex system that devalues females and the feminine, a system that is "an essential way in which social reality is organized, symbolically divided, and lived through experientially."[44] At the same time, adolescents gain awareness about the values in which they are deeply invested and think about their faith in more abstract ways.[45] Then youth are able to make decisions about what is good and right for their lives and to develop faith perspectives that shape identity and action in the world. With the emergence of interpersonal perspective taking, youth look to trusted others to affirm their ideological and faith commitments.

To conclude this section, I note the ambivalence with which I adopt the labeling strategy of referring to the Stories of Gender participants as young women. Using a

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43. In their report, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls defines sexualization as when "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal of behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified —that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person." See American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, "Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary," American Psychological Association, http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx (accessed July 5, 2011).

44. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 152.

45. Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993) 80-90.

cohort term such as "young women" risks suggesting that all young women share the experiences on which I focus and marginalizing other aspects of their identities. It also risks inscribing "girlhood" and "youth" as essentialized categories.[46] Let me respond to these risks in two ways. First, in the larger culture, young women often are treated as a single group, with the image of the white, middle class, thin, heterosexual female standing in for the diversity of female experience. Inasmuch as young women are exposed to and must make sense of themselves in relation to cultural narratives that treat them as one group, it is conceivable to speak of "young women," all the while recognizing the gap between this category and specific young women's experience of this category.[47] In fact, asking particular young women to speak about their experiences of being young women already starts to challenge the hegemony of this category, because in their reflections young women are no longer embedded in these identity categories but rather are separate from them and because their diversity of experiences exposes the lie of essentialist logic.

Second, there are strategic reasons for speaking of young Christian women living in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a cohort group.[48] One

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46. Essentialism assumes that there are specific inherent, unchanging, and universal characteristics held by like entities; thus all women or all young people are believed to share certain traits whether they recognize these in themselves or not.

47. In her work on moral agency from an Asian American perspective, ethicist Sharon Tan makes a similar argument for using the category of Asian American to describe the people with whom she works. She writes, "North American society does treat these diverse peoples [East Asians, South Asians, Southeast Asians] as a single group, an experience that is one of racialization… Thus a hypothesis that informs this project is that 'Asian America' is a racial group in the context of the United States." Sharon Tan, "Complex Integrity: Moral Agency from Asian American Perspective," (paper presented at the Louisville Institute Winter Seminar, Louisville, KY, January 20-21, 2011).

48. Here I am indebted to Serene Jones's strategic essentialist approach, which "applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals altogether, since universals can be useful for political struggle." Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies*

reason is that the experiences of young women have not been included often in theological reflection on human identity; to continue to refer to them as a group allows new perspectives to be brought to this theological conversation.[49] Second, despite many young women's insistence that feminism is no longer necessary,[50] reflecting on young women's experiences as a cohort group unearths common experiences of oppression that are the result of living within a cultural gender-sex system in which females and the feminine are understood as lesser than males and the masculine. In order to make a critique of this gender-sex system and to transform it, we need to be able to speak of aggregate experiences, all the while recognizing that young women who live within this gender-sex system do not experience it in the same way.

Narrative Identity

The nature of identity is a central question of this dissertation. I ask questions such as: Upon what discourses do young women draw in talking about their gender and faith identities? In what ways is human identity understood in Christian theology? How can religious education support young women in their identity work? Beneath these questions is a grounding assumption about human identity: human identity is constituted narratively.

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of Grace (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) 44. Jones's strategic essentialism is similar to the "pragmatic utopianism" proposed by Seyla Benhabib in *Situating the Self*.

49. Evelyn L. Parker, "Introduction," in *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006) 3-4. Parker notes that Christian feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians have done minimal parallel research on adolescent women. An example of a typical work in feminist theology where age is ignored as one of the differences in people's experiences is Anne E. Carr's *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 1996).

50. Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron, "Introduction—In Search of a Feminist Faith," in *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith*, eds. Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005) xxii.

In the past thirty years, there has been a turn to narrative in many academic disciplines, and the study of human identity within philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology is no exception. Mary Jo Neitz's assertion that narratives are "constitutive: it is through them that we come to be who we are" sums up the core conviction of this narrative turn.[51] Positing a narrative sense of identity coheres with the basic temporal quality of experience.[52] All of our lives begin with birth, end with death, and seem to demand a story about what happens in between. As philosopher Richard Kearney explains, "Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative… Our very finitude constitutes us as beings who, to put it baldly, are born at the beginning and die at the end. And this gives a temporal structure to our lives which seek some kind of *significance* in terms of referrals back to our past (memory) and forward to our future (projection)."[53] Further, our human actions only have meaning within a narrative framework, as narratives enable us to explain the intention and context of an action. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre concludes, "Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[54] Through narrative identity, we make meaning out of what otherwise could be a relentless succession of lived experience and are able to share this meaning with others.

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51. Mary Jo Neitz, "Gender and Culture: Challenges to the Sociology of Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 4 (2004): 397.

52. Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (1971): 291.

53. Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002) 12, italics in original. For additional views on narrative identity and agency, see Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Narrative and Moral Life," in *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 288-305 and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 204-225.

54. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 208.

Even among scholars who are persuaded that identities are constituted narratively, there is debate, namely, around questions of authorship and coherency. That is, who gets to tell identity-constituting narratives about personal identity and how coherent do these identity narratives need to be? To put it more specifically in relation to young women and the cultural discourses of girl power and girls in crisis, are young women empowered to tell any narrative about their identities that they desire to tell, do they lose their voices in adolescence and the ability to name themselves, or is there a mediating position between these two extremes? Further, what is the narrative *telos* for young women's identity narratives—is narrative unity or narrative multiplicity crucial for a young woman's healthy sense of self?

Responses to these question fall along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, the burden of responsibility for narrating identity is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual, and the narrative a person tells about his or her life should demonstrate unity.[55] At the other end of the spectrum, the self is not individually but socially constructed, and a variegated narrative is the only logical possibility for narrating the self, as the self changes as often as people change settings and partners in social interactions.[56]

Adolescents, who are developing the cognitive skills with which to narrate their identities, often acutely feel the tension between these two positions. In the face of a confusing array of identity options, young people may find the promise of narrative unity attractive. A danger of narrative unity, however, is identity may be foreclosed, thus

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55. This end of the spectrum includes work such as MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and Dan McAdams's *The Stories We Live By* and *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

56. Representative of this end of the spectrum is James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

blocking the development of narrative identity into adulthood. Alternatively, a social self who changes with each social interaction may be appealing to youth in its plurality and adaptability. The danger here is that the young person's identity becomes totally diffuse, a danger that especially may plague young women.[57] What is needed is a mediating position, one that balances individual responsibility and the social construction of personal identity, as well the demands of unity and multiplicity for a life narrative. As Nancy Ammerman writes, we need a narrative understanding of identity that allows us "to include elements of continuity (being the same person over time), integration (being a whole person, not fragments), identification (being like others), and differentiation (being unique and bounded)."[58] We need a way "to talk about who we are and how we behave without reducing ourselves either to a single determining structural essence or to complete chaotic indeterminacy,"[59] one that allows for a continuity of self that is demanded by our tie to a particular body and mind over the course of a lifetime, while also making room for a fluidity of self-concept that changes as we negotiate the many contexts of our lives.[60] Philosopher Hilde Nelson's account of narrative identity in *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* is a particularly persuasive mediating position on narrative identity.

According to Nelson, personal identities are constituted by our first-person perspectives, the third-person perspectives of others, master narratives, and our

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57. See the notion of the soluble self in Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 7-46.

58. Ammerman, "Religious Identities," 209.

59. Ibid., 211. Similarly Paul Ricoeur is clear that narrative embodies the struggle between concordance and discordance. See Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991) 32.

60. Ammerman, "Religious Identities," 214.

membership in social groups. Our first-person perspectives "consist of a connective tissue of narratives—some constant, others shifting over time—which we weave around the features of ourselves and our lives that matter most to us."[61] In other words, as we look back and tell stories about what we care about—past events and experiences, personality characteristics, roles and relationships, and commitments—we explain who we are to ourselves and also create guides for future action. Identity is not a single story with a beginning, middle, and end, but rather bears the mark of "the untidiness of these accumulations of 'overlapping fibers' " of identity.[62]

In addition to being constituted by the narratives we tell about ourselves, personal identity is also constituted by other people's narratives about us, which are influenced by what they care about most. As Nelson writes, "Who we can be is often a matter of who others take us to be."[63] Put alternatively, personal identity requires social recognition. Further, other people tell their own versions of stories about our lives, stories that shape our narrative identity. At times, others' stories coincide with our own first-person narratives, but other stories may emplot events from our lives in different ways, from the other person's perspective.

In crafting first- and third-person identity narratives, people often draw, implicitly and explicitly, on master narratives from the broader culture. As Nelson defines them, master narratives are "the stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries

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61. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 72.

62. Ibid., 76.

63. Ibid., 81.

of socially shared understandings."[64] They provide accepted scripts and personae to populate the scripts, and in this way not only help us understand our experiences but also justify what we do and allow us to communicate with others. A master narrative "exercises a certain authority over our moral imaginations and plays a role in informing our moral intuitions."[65] While some master narratives are oppressive, it would be throwing the master narrative baby out with the sometimes tainted bathwater to attempt to extricate ourselves from all cultural narratives, as these are what help us communicate with and make sense of ourselves and others.

Finally, Nelson argues that personal identities are constituted by the groups of which we are a part. The master narratives of our culture characterize people as groups, and we and others understand our personal identity in relation to master narratives about our groups. Just as personal identities are dynamic, so, too, are group identities, both of which can change drastically or more incrementally over time. In fact, it is the changing nature of our personal and group identities that requires a narrative approach to identity, so that we have a way to make sense of who we are, individually and collectively, over time. As Nelson concludes, "Personal identities are constructed through the stories that concern the things we ourselves care most about, the things about us that other people

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64. Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 6.

65. Ibid. Nelson quotes philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers: " 'To some extent, people are captives of their culture's repertory of figurations. It takes a conscious effort to become aware of and to criticize ubiquitous figurations, especially those that are integral to a cultural worldview, and it takes a great deal of self-monitoring to begin to extricate one's thinking from these figurations.' " See Diana Tietjens Meyers, "The Family Romance: A *Fin de Siècle* Tragedy," in *Feminism and Families*, ed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routeldge, 1997) 239, quoted in Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 85.

care most about, and the things that we and others see as most important about the social groups to which we belong."[66]

Nelson's concern is not only to describe how identities are constituted narratively; her theory of narrative identity also examines how identities can be damaged and repaired narratively. While there are many ways that identities can be damaged narratively, Nelson focuses on unjust social group relations and how these relations harm self-understanding in two ways. First, "a person's identity is damaged when powerful institutions or individuals, seeing people like her as morally sub- or abnormal, unjustly prevent her and her kind from occupying roles and entering into relationships that are identity constituting."[67] Nelson names this damage deprivation of opportunity. An example of deprivation of opportunity would be if a male coach of a high school robotics team encouraged all of the girls to be part of the fundraising and publicity groups instead of the computer programming and robot-building groups, based on his belief in a master narrative that says girls are not as good as boys at computers, math, engineering, and other technical work.

Second, identities are damaged when a person "internalizes as self-understanding the hateful or dismissive views other people have of her."[68] This is what Nelson calls "infiltrated consciousness."[69] To continue with the robotics team example, a girl who initially was excited about the possibility of building a robot may come to believe that she is not capable of this, having internalized the master narrative upon which her coach

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66. Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 85.

67. Ibid., 20.

68. Ibid., 21.

69. Ibid., 28-34.

bases his decisions. Both deprivation of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness are supported by oppressive master narratives. Further, they happen to varying degrees and affect a person's ability to act as a moral agent.

While there will always be oppressive master narratives operative in a culture, Nelson argues that counterstories shift oppressive master narratives and change others' and the self's view of the self. She writes, "Counterstories, typically told within the moral space of a *community of choice*, are *stories* of *self-definition*, developed in response to the twin harms of *deprivation of opportunity* and *infiltrated consciousness*. Through their function of *narrative repair* they resist the evil of diminished moral agency."[70] The telling of a counterstory involves two acts: identifying fragments of the master narrative that have been oppressive and retelling the story about the person or group in such a way as to make visible morally relevant details that have been suppressed. Counterstories are about self-definition, and when they are told in such a way as to shift public perception, they eventually may become new master narratives.[71]

Following Nelson, when I write that personal identity is constituted narratively, I mean that it is shaped by first- and third-person narratives of identity, as well as by master narratives and the groups of which people are a part. Further, Nelson's explication of how identity narratives can be damaged and repaired makes her an invaluable

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70. Nelson, *Damaged* I*dentities*, 9, italics in original.

71. Counterstories challenge master narratives because of the inherent weakness of master narratives. The strengths of master narratives are that they are organic ensembles that have a life of their own and are strengthened by ties to other narratives; present a coherent worldview; assimilate opposition through blaming the victim techniques; and can perform epistemic rigging, that is, naturalizing, privatizing, and normalizing oppressive identities. However, these strengths also mark the weakness of master narratives, in that there can be tensions within and among stories and slippage between what master narratives say about groups and what real people actually do. It is these cracks that counterstories can exploit. Because of the power of master narratives to assimilate opposition, those attempting to tell counterstories need a community of support that can legitimate their new understanding. See Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 157-164.

conversation partner for my project, as I am not only interested in describing how young women narrate their identities but also in understanding the identity challenges they face and proposing responses to these problems in the form of pedagogical and theological recommendations to Christian faith communities. In particular, following Nelson's lead, I investigate how being part of the social group of girls may lead to the twin dangers of deprivation of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness and how girls exercise narrative agency even in the face of oppressive constraints.

One final point: a danger of using "narrative" to describe identity is that identity becomes reduced to verbal discourse. While focusing on the stories of young women, I would be remiss if I forgot that narratives are also enacted by "actual physical bodies in material environments," as Ammerman reminds us.[72] Embodied practices shape identity, and identities are lived out by real people in real bodies in the real world. As theologian Rebecca Chopp concludes, "Certainly the physical experiences of the body and the social experiences of institutions will always limit the metaphor of narrativity by reminding us of concrete physical and social realities, that, while they have to be expressed in words, always exist in excess of all discourse and words."[73]

A narrative understanding of identity is compatible with the work of girls' studies theorists who recognize girlhood as a constantly changing and socially constructed discourse that illumines some aspects of identity while hiding others.[74] In particular,

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72. Ammerman, "Religious Identities," 215.

73. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 34.

74. Jessica Taft defines discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e., a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic." See Jessica K. Taft, "Girl Power Politics: Barriers and Organizational Resistance," in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004) 69. "Discourse" refers to the type of cultural knowledge that is represented in master narratives and upon which people draw in their identity work.

Marnina Gonick's articulation of "the significance of processes of identification and disidentification with the discursive and social practices of femininity" in young women's identity work is illuminating.[75] Put more simply, female identity is formed through identification. Working with junior high students to script, act out, and film stories about the identity dilemmas girls face, Gonick discovered that the young women drew on hegemonic as well as alternative understandings of what it means to be a girl to construct their characters. To put it in the language I have been using, the young women built their stories from cultural master narratives, both identity-damaging and identity-supporting strands. As Gonick describes it, "This dynamic involves a double movement between a subject speaking/writing her way into existence by using the stories or discourses that are available and in the moment of doing so, also subjecting herself to the constitutive force and regulative norms of those discourses." [76]

Given the complexity of narrative female identity, it is impossible to study all aspects of it here. Thus I focus on the stories young women tell about their gendered identity and the cultural discourses upon which they draw as they work to situate themselves as young women in their various contexts. I am particularly curious about places where the young women experience slippage or a gap between their own self-understanding and cultural narratives about girlhood, as it is these gaps that counternarratives can exploit, and places where their religious identities and gender identities intersect.

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75. Marnina Gonick, *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 38.

76. Ibid., 10.

Christian Faith Communities—Denouncing Sin and Announcing Grace

In this project, my secondary thesis is that Christian faith communities are critical partners for young women striving to narrate tensegritous identities and live with integrity as young women of faith. By Christian faith communities, I do not mean only congregations, although this is most likely what first comes to mind. I purposely write about faith communities instead of congregations so as to include other places where people are united by a commitment to Christian faith, with families, religiously-affiliated schools, and small Christian communities serving as other important examples of Christian faith communities.

As Chopp explains, the Christian faith community, or *ekklesia* in her language, has the dual function of denouncing sin and announcing grace.[77] The faith community offers a corporate space from which to critique, along with resources for working against, patriarchy as "the disordering of creation"[78] and "a deep spiritual ordering that invades and spreads across the social order—through individual identity, to social practices, to lines of authority in institutions, to cultural images and representations."[79] Further, the faith community is a place of grace, where "new ways of human and planetary flourishing" are proclaimed and lived.[80] Here all are welcome to experience "grace as living differently."[81] Because of this dual function, Christian faith communities are

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77. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 61.

78. Ibid., 55.

79. Ibid., 56.

80. Ibid., 61.

81. Here Chopp draws on phrasing from Johannes Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, trans. Peter Mann (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See Chopp, *Saving Work*, 61.

crucial contexts for the identity work as young women, as they offer space for young women to challenge patriarchal master narratives as part of the sinful disordering of creation and to explore and celebrate the possibilities of living counterstories as an experience of grace.

The First Wave of Research on Young Women of Faith

A surprisingly spiritual commentator on young women given the dearth of attention to religion or faith in secular and popular literature on girls, journalist Courtney Martin argues that young women's desire for acceptance and love can be met only through religious or spiritual means, something also suggested by Iesha's story and the group's discussion of it.[82] As Martin explains, girls are hungry to be accepted, to feel they belong, and to know that their bodies deserve to take up space in the world. But they strive to meet this intense hunger in unsustainable and ultimately unfulfilling ways, believing that they must look perfect and act perfectly to be good enough.[83] Instead of searching for and experiencing God, girls often turn themselves into little god projects, striving to be perfect humans, even though this is a contradiction in terms. Martin's solution, that we need to celebrate our fallibility as beautiful and recognize the ordinariness of everyday life as the dwelling of divinity, points to the role that feminist

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82. Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 250-270.

83. Martin writes, "We, the perfect girls, try to fill these gaping holes with food, blue ribbons, sexual attraction, trendy clothes, but no matter how hard we try, they remain. We have called this insatiable hunger by many different names—ambition, drive, pride—but in truth it is a fundamental distrust that we deserve to be on this earth in the shape that we are in. A perfect girl must always be a starving daughter, because there is never enough—never enough accomplishment. Never enough control. Never enough perfection." See Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 5.

theology and faith communities need to play in supporting girls in their full flourishing.[84]

In their report addressing the sexualization of girls, the task force of the American

Psychological Association comes to a similar conclusion: "Organized religious and other

ethical institutions can offer girls important practical and psychological alternatives to the

values conveyed by popular culture."[85] Put slightly differently, from my perspective as a

religious educator and practical theologian: one gift that Christian faith communities can

offer young women is alternative narratives of who they are as human beings. As such,

further research is needed in order to better understand how religious belief, belonging,

and practice influences young women's narrative identities and how faith communities

can best support young women in their full flourishing.

However, in the girls' studies literature, the primary location for academic

discussions of girls' identities, consideration of the place of faith identity in the formation

of female identity is almost completely absent.[86] In the few places where religion is

discussed, it is assumed that religion can only propagate negative and restrictive

messages about female identity.[87] This is an important omission, given Martin's and the

APA's recommendations.[88] There is need for research that operates out of the most

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84. Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 259, 268.

85. American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, "Sexualization of Girls."

86. For example, in Aapola et al.'s *Young Femininity* and Gonick's *Between Femininities,* which I have been considering here, religion is never mentioned.

87. Stacey Elsasser, "In the World But Not of It: Gendered Religious Socialization at a Christian School," in *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, eds. Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005) 137-154. In personal communication with me, Elsasser wrote that she was not aware of anyone else who situates themselves in girls' studies who focus on the overlap of girls' identity and religious faith, practice, and belonging.

88. Joyce Mercer has also noticed the absence of consideration of religion in the lives of young women, writing, "In the recent flurry of 'girl literature' by psychologists and educators, there is virtually no

current understandings of gender identity formation, while also respecting how faith identity shapes and challenges notions of girlhood. Unfortunately, this sort of research is not happening in girls' studies, as concern about the potentially harmful effects of religious identity and belonging on female identity seems to bias scholars, leading them to ignore the important role that religion plays in the lives of many young women.

Further, we might expect to find consideration of young women's female faith identities in feminist theological anthropology, which takes up the question of "what it means to be a human person before God through Christ in the power of the Spirit."[89] Importantly, feminist theological anthropology offers a corrective to the lack of attention to gender in classical theological anthropology by beginning from women's experience to offer new interpretations of what it means to be human made in God's image. However, a similar critique can be made of feminist theological anthropology as feminist theological anthropology makes of classical theological anthropology. While contemporary feminist theologians are aware of the danger of essentializing women's experience, that is, claiming that there is one experience all women share despite differences in race, class, religion, and sexual orientation,[90] most feminist theologians assume that adult women's

evidence that religion is in any way significant for who girls are and how they live… Moreover, in their bias against religion, these researchers fail to recognize that for many young women religion operates as a simultaneously limiting or constricting force and also as a location of empowerment." See Joyce Ann Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls…and Their Parents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) xxi-xxii.

89. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Part 2: Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal or Complementary?" in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2002) 33.

90. While the first wave of feminist theologians (mainly white, middle class academics) spoke rather freely of a common "women's experience," this category has been contested by a second wave of theorists, particularly feminists of color and of the third-world. See Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007) 91-96.

experiences are the normative female experience. Thus the experiences and narratives of *young* women, who are at the beginning of their journeys toward female faith integrity, rarely have been used as a resource for addressing the question of what it means to be human, made in the image of God. [91]

Encouragingly, there is a new wave of writing from religious educators and practical and pastoral theologians about young women's experiences of themselves and their faith that begins to address the questions of how young women are shaped by religious belief, belonging, and practice and how faith communities can best support young women's identity work. By focusing on the voices of particular young women, these works add complexity to the cultural dichotomy of girl power and girls in crisis and help to dispel the myth that girls are voiceless in adolescence. While this attention to the voices of young women is an important first stage in correcting the inattention to age in feminist theology and to faith in girls' studies, much of this writing lacks a nuanced conversation with central questions from feminist theological anthropology, a lacuna addressed through the constructive theological anthropological work in chapter six.

Introduction to the Conversation Partners

In her first book about girls, *Beyond Nice: The Spiritual Wisdom of Adolescent Women*, pastoral counselor Patricia Davis reflects on interviews she conducted with girls about their spiritualities and images of God. From analysis of these interviews, Davis develops two theses. First, girls are taught to be nice, which involves hiding their true feelings and acting as they think they are supposed to act and which does not build the

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91. See note 49 above.

authentic relationships with self, others, and God that undergird spirituality.[92] A second and related thesis is that girls need adults who will listen to them and affirm them—even when they are not projecting the right image of girlhood—so that they can better experience a loving and accepting God. Ultimately, Davis argues that spirituality based in relationships with adults who truly listen and with a God who is stable, loving, and accepting can contribute to a girl's positive sense of self.[93]

Davis intends *Counseling Adolescent Girls*, her second book, to serve as an outsiders' guide to adolescent girls, so that those who provide care to girls learn to listen better and to see the problems girls encounter in all of their multi-layered complexity.[94] For Davis, listening to adolescent girls is a subversive act in a culture that often silences girls and one that can result in new learning for the church. By exploring some of the common problems girls encounter—negotiating family relationships, experiencing sexual violence, and treating their bodies as projects to be worked on—Davis aims "to normalize the pain, anger, and frustration they may feel."[95]

While Davis considers the broad cultural contexts of girls and the problems they encounter, ethicist Barbara Blodgett focuses on young women's sexualities in our current climate of changing sexual norms. In this environment, young women struggle to understand themselves and act as sexual beings, particularly when they intuit that being erotic does not go with being a girl and feel torn between being connected (and engaging sexually as may be demanded of them by a romantic partner) and being an individual

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92. Davis, *Beyond Nice*, ix-x.

93. Ibid., 119-121.

94. Davis, *Counseling*, 13.

95. Ibid., 27.

(and naming their sexual identity on their own terms). Critiquing feminist theologies of the erotic as a personal solution to a structural, social problem, Blodgett recommends a sexual ethic for young women based on "establishing appropriate vulnerability and trust."[96]

Christian religious educator Evelyn Parker's edited collection *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender* seeks to fill a hole in theological literature noted above, namely, the lack of research Christian feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians have done on adolescent women, by exploring adolescent female spirituality in light of systematized oppression in North American society.[97] What unites the essays in this volume is that the authors base their analyses on conversations with girls and that the diverse girls pictured here try to make sense of injustice while clinging to belief in God, as they are pushed to margins of society where white, middle-class, heterosexual girls are the model for what a teenage girl should be.

Methodologically similar to Davis and Parker, pastoral theologian Joyce Mercer listens to girls through interviews she and other conducted with attendees of the Youth Theological Initiative summer theology program at Candler School of Theology. *Girl Talk/God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls… and Their Parents* is her reflection on these interviews, from which she draws four conclusions: a) girls desire to have spiritual conversations with adults, where they can ask hard questions and be apprenticed into faith; b) gender oppression is still a problem for girls, particularly since so much sexism is tacit and remains unexamined and unnoticed; c) "parents matter greatly in the

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96. Barbara J. Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic: Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002) vii.

97. Parker, "Introduction," 3-4.

religious lives of their daughters" and are called to engage in contemplative listening; and d) girls crave authenticity, strive for integrity between actions and beliefs, and actively create meaning of their faith.[98]

Finally, in *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*, religious educator Dori Baker aims to address a similar issue as many of these authors, that is, the missing voices of youth in emancipatory theologies and the silenced selves of girls (particularly white, middle class girls). To translate feminist consciousness into a curriculum that promotes girls' voices and resistance, Baker develops a method she calls girlfriend theology, which "is shorthand for a method of eliciting girl's autobiographical stories and reflecting theologically upon them."[99] In the end, she hopes that girls are able to lead fuller lives because of a connection to their feminist inheritance and that their souls expand as they learn to see the world theologically. There is no one understanding of gender or faith that unites the girls represented in these diverse projects, but, as Mercer summarizes, "Being female and being Christian were two key aspects of identity, and both aspects were integral to the sense of self that defined who they were in the world."[100]

Methodological Commitments in Work with Young Women

Most centrally, these authors commit to listening to young women and doing scholarship that arises from this attention. Listening to girls helps combat the cultural

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98. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 126-127.

99. Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005)18.

100. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 46.

message girls receive that their voices are not valued and creates "an opening, a space where God might be encountered," as Mercer describes it.[101] These authors listen in a variety of ways—including reading others' writing and research on adolescents (Blodgett), conducting interviews (Davis, Parker, Mercer), and running girlfriend theology groups (Baker)—but all agree that listening enables young women to find out about themselves through the telling of their stories and faith communities to learn from girls' views from the margins.

A second methodological commitment of these authors is to recognizing the multi-layered nature of problems young women face, with personal, familial, social, and theological layers that need to be taken into account. As such, the issues girls deal with require multi-layered forms of analysis and multi-layered solutions. Listening closely to girls enables these authors to name the personal components of challenges girls encounter, and they draw on a variety of resources such as developmental psychology (Davis, Blodgett), object relations theory (Davis, Blodgett), and emancipatory theologies (Baker) to better understand familial, social, and theological layers.

<div align="center">Themes of Female Identity</div>

Four themes of female identity arise in the work of these authors, themes which anticipate the results of Stories of Gender and which illustrate the struggles girls face. First, there is a strong correlation between what it means to be a woman and looks. In fact, when Mercer asked girls about femininity in their interviews, it was hard for them to name what femininity means beyond the bodily changes of adolescence. While they "talked about not buying into male-defined notions of womanhood or beauty," critiqued

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101. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 10.

popular culture, and desired to talk about womanhood beyond bodily definitions, they struggled to imagine and live into these convictions.[102] Further, young women have paradoxical relationships with their bodies. On the one hand, their bodies are battlegrounds for identity, as they learn to mold, manipulate, and use their bodies to their best advantage. On the other hand, their bodies are also a place to experience God.[103]

Second, young women across these projects struggled with the conflict between being true to themselves and maintaining their relationships. Blodgett discerned this conflict at the heart of girls' struggles to live as sexual beings, as girls feel they must decide between being true to their desires or doing what their partners desire.[104] Mercer found that girls often did not ask hard questions that arose from their experience out of fear of breaking relationships with their parents and churches.[105] Numerous essays in Parker's edited collection speak to the complex challenges girls of color and lesbian girls face as they strive to find acceptance in a world in which being the right sort of girl is equated with whiteness and heterosexuality.[106]

Third, maintaining relationships with parents is complicated for young women. Communication problems and role rigidity can lead to conflict as parents struggle to

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102. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 53.

103. Su Yon Pak, "I's Wide Shut: Eyelid Surgery as a Window into the Spirituality of Korean American Adolescent Girls," in *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006) 15-42.

104. Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic*, 119.

105. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 21-22.

106. See Laura E. Donaldson, "From 'Wanton Girlie' to the Woman Who Fell from the Sky: The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls," 71-85; Daisy Machado, "Latina Adolescents: Sliding between Borders and the Yearning to Belong," 87-106; and Patricia H. Davis, " 'Okay with Who I Am': Listening to Lesbian Young Women Talk about their Spiritualities," 131-160, all in *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

relate to their growing, changing, increasingly sexual daughters.[107] Often it is girls'

relationships with women mentors (Davis), othermothers (Parker), and strong women

leaders in the community (Mercer) that serve as the foundation of their spiritual

wellbeing. Adult women offer the amazing grace to young women of being listened to

and accepted for who they are, which is crucial for the development of a positive self-

image, and provide inspiration and support against racism and homophobia.[108]

Girls' experience of violence is a fourth theme across these works, an experience

that contributes to girls' silence, since they fear they will not be listened to or that they

will be blamed for what occurred. Even if they have not experienced violence

themselves, girls live in constant awareness of violence, believing that victimization is a

normal part of life that they will likely experience.[109] They learn to navigate this world of

violence, including sexual and gang violence, but they cannot think about it too much

because they feel powerless to stop it. In more subtle ways, girls also experience the

violence of sexism, much of which remains tacit and thus goes unnoticed or under-

analyzed.

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107. Davis, *Counseling*, 50-65.

108. See Evelyn L. Parker, "Gods and Godmothers: Spiritual Values of Resistance to Racism among African American Adolescent Girls," in *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006) 43-69 and Davis, " 'Okay with Who I Am.' "

109. Philosopher Susan Brison names the fear of potential sexual violence a prememory of rape. She explains that this is a fear that may "not only haunt the present…but also reach into the future in the form of fear, a kind of prememory, of what, at times, seems almost inevitable: one's own future experience of being raped." See Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 87.

Themes of Faith Identity

While the girls of these studies surely face struggles, they also describe relationships with God that serve as the basis of their faith identities. As Davis puts it, "a girl's spirituality radiates from her relationships with God."[110] Girls across these studies describe relationships with a God who is stable, loving, and accepting and who offers solace in times of crisis. By relating to diverse images of God and believing that God was on their side, girls found support for being themselves.

Authenticity is of central importance to the young women in these studies, so that personal and communal actions match personal and communal beliefs. Girls want faith to matter in their day-to-day lives and to have the words to describe their experiences of the transcendent and mysterious. Girls also appreciate when their churches feel like family, enable them to connect to other worshippers, introduce them to women as leaders, and undertake youth services so that they can actively contribute to worship. Overall, young women are dissatisfied when the church refuses to answer their questions or has too many answers to questions. Ultimately, young women do not want to be told what to think; rather, they want to know what others believe and to discuss these beliefs in open ways. When girls have positive, open, and trusting relationships within their faith community, they are offered a positive reception in their larger social world, which supports their thriving.

Recommendations for Practice in Communities of Faith

Unlike "secular" writers who largely have ignored the presence of faith in girls' lives or assumed it only can function restrictively vis a vis female identity, these writers

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110. Davis, *Beyond Nice*, 25.

believe that particular forms of relationships with God, grounded in love and acceptance, as well as relationships with faith communities in which girls are accepted as they are, allowed to act as agents and ask their hard questions, introduced to female mentors, and encouraged in their endeavor to live authentically serve to undergird a girl's positive sense of self. Further, young women are hungry for rituals, practices, ideas, and relationships that assist them in connecting their faith with the concerns of their everyday lives. As Mercer writes, "In touch with the ordinary, and drawn toward transcendence, girls in the teen years have the potential to tap these spiritual resources, which can take them into a vigorous and meaningful young adult life."[111]

For faith communities to support the young women in their midst, these authors offer three suggestions. First, they recommend that faith communities practice listening to girls, for the sake of girls and the communities. Adult women mentors can serve as listening posts, hearing young women's stories into being, helping them deal with the messiness of life, and celebrating goodness where it is found.[112] What girls learn when we do not listen is "that our relationship with God can't bear the weight of real scrutiny; that the church isn't the proper place for doubts; that real and intense feelings such as pain and anger and joy and gratitude are not appropriate for the community of faith."[113] Further, in a cultural context where young women often feel they have to choose between being true to their emerging identities and keeping their relationships intact, listening involves greeting the newly emerging identities of girls with acceptance. In turn, this may

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111. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 126.

112. Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, 163.

113. Ibid., 121.

mean expanding our ideas about what is healthy, positive, and faithful—because God

always is speaking in new ways to new generations and each individual.[114]

Second, these authors advocate that girls receive help in understanding their

cultural context and acknowledging and normalizing the pain that may go with this

exploration. As Mercer recommends, it is important to create opportunities for girls "to

articulate their tacit understandings of gender, both with peers and with concerned,

contemplatively listening adults," since they are not often given the chance to examine

their gender perspectives.[115] This is what Parker terms realization, as girls gain critical

consciousness about systemic issues that affect them.[116] This task includes asking girls to

become more aware of the God images they use, as well as the images of God used in

their faith communities.

Third, girls need to be exposed to other models of understanding gender that can

build on and complement the ways they already are working to re-story their female

identities. One way to do this is to introduce young women to what Baker terms a

"useable past," that is, texts that provide alternatives to a "predominant, androcentric

worldview."[117] Resources here include women's autobiographies; emancipatory

theologies, such as *mujerista*, womanist, and Asian American women's theology; and

relationships with adult women who can serve as mentors and role models. In the end,

these authors hope that young women can be supported as actors in the world, living out

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114. Davis, *Counseling*, 37.

115. Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 50.

116. Evelyn L. Parker, "Conclusion: Nurturing the Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls," in *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006) 165-170.

117. Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, 69.

of an authentic and integrated sense of self and supported by relationships with a loving God, accepting faith community, and adults who listen carefully. They believe Christian faith has the potential to authorize transformation of oppressive gender systems, support women's empowerment, and offer a vision of love and justice on which girls can draw as they narrate their identities.

This brief literature review serves to complicate the question of whether young women are in crisis or thriving and begins to challenge the myth of girls' loss of voice in adolescence. The young women whose voices are represented in these studies were not silent; they were able to talk about themselves, their faith, and their place in the world once offered the invitation to do so by adult women who were ready to listen. While the girls' stories offer glimpses into the challenges girls face in developing a healthy narrative identity, such as maintaining relationships with parents and friends as they grow and existing in a world in which violence against women is frighteningly commonplace, they also illumine how a young woman's relationship with God and her faith community can contribute to her thriving. Further, we begin to gather ideas about what faith communities can do to further support young women as they narrate their identities and live their lives.

Overview

This opening chapter introduced this project on young women's narrative agency and the role religious identity plays in their agency; unpacked the assumptions with which I approach key terms, such as young women, narrative identity, and Christian faith communities; and reviewed the relevant literature on young women of faith within

religious education and practical theology. Chapter two begins with a description of the research participants and story-sharing research method of Stories of Gender, which itself is one piece of the appreciative, transformative inquiry method of this dissertation. Appreciative, transformative inquiry is a fresh research method that arises from interdisciplinary research conducted at the intersection of feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational approaches. This tensegritous method is crucial in research with young women, as it balances attending to the realities of young women while partnering with them to articulate and live toward a future of fuller flourishing.

Chapter three opens with a narrative introduction to the Grace UMC group from Stories of Gender, which is meant to invite the reader into the practice of story sharing and the life worlds of the young women who participated in this practice. Then the results of Stories of Gender are presented, with a focus on the discourses-in-practice and discursive practices of the participants as they narrate and discuss female identity. Named here are images that inform the content of female identity, as well as processes through which the participants make sense of themselves as young women. Also considered are the theological language on which the participants drew in their narratives and themes that emerged in the participants' exit interviews.

Drawing on the results of Stories of gender, chapter four argues for a measured understanding of female identity, that is, one that recognizes at the same time the challenges young women face in constructing female identity and the means through which they meet these challenges. This measured approach makes sense of young women's tensive and ambivalent experiences of female identity and enables the recognition but also critique of the prevalent cultural discourses of girlhood, namely, girl

power and girls in crisis. Nelson's work on narrative identity is affirmed as an appropriately measured approach, and also amended, with the addition of a girl's relationship with God as a fifth source of identity-constituting narratives (along with first-person narratives, third-person narratives, master narratives, and the groups of which people are a part). Finally, a claim is made for tensegrity—a wholeness that finds its integrity through the balancing of tensive parts—as the *telos* toward which young women's narrative identity work should strive.

Given that the Stories of Gender participants made theological anthropological claims about their identities, that is, focused on what it means to be a human person in relation to God, chapter five articulates a theological anthropology that is responsive to both the experiences of these young women and Christian traditions. Drawing on the work of Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Janet Martin Soskice, and Elizabeth Johnson, I outline a transcendent, eschatological, and embodied theological anthropology that affirms the humanity that young women share with all people, while recognizing the unique way each young woman reflects divinity in her being. At the heart of this theological anthropology is these three salutary statements: (1) young women exist between their human finitude and openness to the infinite, (2) young women both know and do not know themselves, and (3) young women's embodied and differentiated existence is reflective of God. Additionally, I use the work of Mary Grey on women's spiritual journeys as a resource for understanding young women's journeys toward *via unitiva*, that is, living as a unified self.

In chapter six, I argue for girls-only religious education, in which the aims of religious education and pastoral care are woven together intentionally. Paramount in

girls-only religious education is fostering the faculty of imagination through aesthetic, narrative, and embodied pedagogies, as this supports young women's ability to envision and live into alternative possibilities for their narrative identities, including a transcendental, eschatological, and embodied anthropology as *imago Dei*. In this chapter, I also propose two modes of religious education, modes through which young women are formed in and transformed by their faith traditions and, conversely, work to transform their faith communities and their worlds. In conversation with educators Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Robert Kegan, the first mode invites young women to practice an identity-constituting process of reflecting critically, exploring new possibilities, and acting for integration in communities of support. The second mode involves apprenticing young women into prayer practices of the tradition, such as *lectio divina* (sacred reading) and *askesis* (silent waiting on God), in order to deepen their understanding of God's narrative for their lives.

In the final chapter, Christian faith communities are presented as places of prevention and restoration, that is, as communities of support for young women striving to live identities of tensegrity. Christian faith communities are called to function as places where young women encounter and are invited to live into an alternative ethic and logic and as places where young women can encounter God's face in the faces of other people and have their status as made in God's image mediated to them. Through their corporate lives, Christian faith communities can mediate to young women the following four identity-constituting narrative threads: (1) you are made in the image of God, and God accepts and loves you as you are; (2) your body is a temple of God and part of God's good creation; (3) you belong to the body of Christ; and (4) you have freedom to choose

God but must exercise this freedom in a world in which sin operates. Also considered here are directions in religious education with young women still to be explored, namely, offering daughter-parents groups in faith communities and expanding on post-high school ministry with young women.

CHAPTER TWO

APPRECIATEIVE, TRANFORMATIVE INQUIRY: A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHIC

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

In our third week together, Kathleen, a slight, red-haired senior majoring in psychology and religion, was our story sharer. In response to the question, "What does it mean to be or become a woman?" Kathleen wrote about her experience of menarche, or first menstruation.[118] The four other Southeastern University students, two adult mentors, and I settled into the conference chairs we had arranged around the square of tables, interested to hear Kathleen's unique experience of this rite of passage.

When she first got her period, Kathleen whispered the news to her mother, embarrassed and afraid of the changes it signaled in her body and her life. Menstruation was a topic shrouded in secrecy, so Kathleen quickly learned to hide feminine products under other items in her basket at the store, avoid male cashiers, and be as discrete as possible in the bathroom she shared with her three brothers. As the first one in her peer group to begin menstruating, Kathleen worried she was not normal. Teen magazines became her one trusted source of advice and comfort as she puzzled over whether something was indeed wrong with her. Her attitude toward menstruation shifted in college, as she befriended young women who spoke openly about menstruation and exposed her to the idea that menstruation is healthy and cleansing. She slowly distanced herself from the idea that menstruation is dirty and came to accept it as a natural process of which she does not need to be ashamed.

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118. In the Southeastern University group, the young women elected to change the focus question from "What does it mean to be a girl?" to "What does it mean to be or become a woman?"

When Kathleen finished her narrative, the room erupted with period stories from the other participants. Almost everyone had worried that they were abnormal, afraid they started menstruating too early or too late. They laughed together as they rehearsed strategies they had used to smuggle tampons into the bathroom, cover leaks, and lessen cramps and crankiness. At one point, Sabrina stepped back from the discussion to observe, "This is great! We are a circle of women talking honestly about an experience all women share." Rather than the shame many participants felt growing up, there was a sense of camaraderie, as they recognized similar elements in many of their stories, like mothers who did not share as much information as they wished they would have and boyfriends who had to be educated about feminine hygiene products.

After this initial burst of stories, the group moved to analyzing cultural messages about menstruation. They noted that advertising campaigns emphasize the diminutive size of feminine products, thus undergirding the sense that menstruation is a secret and linking women's empowerment with hiding this embodied reality of their lives. Further, cultural discourses about PMS (premenstrual syndrome) enable the dismissal of women as irrational and overly emotional. There was no shortage of references to popular culture, either, as they discussed the popularity of *The Red Tent* and the infamous line from *South Park* that you should never trust something that bleeds for seven days without dying.

In addition to these cultural messages, the group also dealt with religious associations with menstruation. Lisa mentioned Old Testament laws that enforce the idea that menstruation is dirty, since women were required to cleanse themselves after menstruation before lying with their husbands, as well as the Genesis 3 text in which God

curses women with painful childbirth. Kathleen was clear that menstruation was not a religious experience for her, since the God of her church was a male God with no feminine characteristics with whom she could connect. Despite aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition that support a negative, shameful view of menstruation, a few participants felt there was room within Christianity to redeem menstruation as healthy and life-giving. For Carolyn, God was present in the very private moment when menstruation began. She believes that our bodies are part of God's good creation, thus menstruation must be good, too, as it is a bodily process. Elizabeth noted that Christian salvation in the form of Jesus Christ comes to the world through the body of a woman, which she believes indicates the divine potential in all of us, a divine potential signaled monthly by our periods.

Throughout the time together, the young women worked on constructing discourses that emphasized the positive and life-giving elements of menstruation. Sabrina tried on the language of menstruation as a "season of wisdom," in which a woman connects with the knowledge held in her body, and Sheila talked about menstrual blood as "life blood," something sacred which makes new life possible. The group even planned a hypothetical period party, where women could celebrate and relax together, eat chocolate, experience things like massage and yoga that would pamper their bodies, and talk openly as we had been doing about this important aspect of female identity.

What does this vignette from the Stories of Gender project have to do with the method of this dissertation? The movement of the story-sharing groups—from narrating personal experiences, to analyzing these experiences through cultural and theological lenses, to constructing liberating discourses and practices that help re-story experiences—

mirrors the movement of this dissertation. In other words, the young women were doing

in microcosm and in a less formalized way what I do throughout this project: present and

listen to stories of young women; explicate them more fully using theoretical resources

from girls' studies, theological anthropology, and transformative and religious education;

and make recommendations for how Christian faith communities can support young

women in their narrative agency.[119]

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the research participants and research

method of Stories of Gender, the small group- and discussion-based empirical research

project at the heart of this dissertation. The method of Stories of Gender is part of my

overall method, which I name appreciative, transformative inquiry and describe in the

second section. This fresh method arises from holding myself accountable to standards of

feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational scholarship, as I explain in the third

section. Finally, I conclude the chapter by reflecting on what I learned by holding myself

accountable to these various disciplines and projecting toward future research aimed at

more completely illumining the narrative agency of young women of faith.[120]

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119. It could also be said that the young women were engaged in doing practical theology together. Practical theologian Pamela Couture describes the method of practical theology as "a more formalized version of the thinking process through which an average person attempts to bring social science, cultural tradition, and religious convictions into dialogue with one another." See Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991) 23.

120. Philosopher Jane Flax defines a discipline as "a delimited area of intellectual discourse in which a general consensus exists among its practitioners as to subject matter, appropriate methodology, and desirable outcomes." See Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 20.

Stories of Gender: Research Subjects and Method

Kathleen, whose story of menarche opens this chapter, participated in the

Southeastern University story-sharing group, one of the three story-sharing groups that

made up Stories of Gender. Three research questions guided this project: (1) What

discourses do young women use to construct female identity? (2) Do they use any

religious discourses to construct female identity? (3) How do young women experience

story-sharing groups on female identity? In this section, I describe the three settings in

which I conducted research, provide brief introductions to the research participants, and

elaborate on my research method.

Research Subjects

Stories of Gender took place at three sites, based on the communities to which I

could gain access and then on the young women who were interested and able to commit

to being part of each group. The research subjects evidenced diversity in age, class,

ethnicity, and religious affiliation, thus giving me a window into the narrative identities

of a variety of young women.

Grace United Methodist Church

The first story-sharing group took place at Grace United Methodist Church

(UMC), located in Eastview, Georgia.[121] Eastview, population 12,500, is located

approximately thirty miles east of a major metropolitan area and is comprised of 50%

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121. As indicated in note 38 above, I use pseudonyms for the Stories of Gender participants and their congregations. Here I also use pseudonyms for cities and for the university at which the third story-sharing group took place.

white non-Hispanics and 45% African Americans. While the median household income and house value in Eastview are both below the state average, there are affluent pockets of Eastview, especially near the historic downtown area. Grace UMC is located on the outskirts of Eastview, about one mile from the freeway and in between a relatively affluent area and a low-income housing development. It serves a largely white, non-Hispanic population that represents the class diversity of Eastview.

After I received permission from the pastor to undertake Stories of Gender, I made phone calls to all of the young women from Grace UMC who had participated in previous research projects with me.[122] The following three young women, named in the order in which they shared their stories, made up the Grace UMC group:[123]

- **Bethany:** a white, non-Hispanic, fifteen-year-old sophomore at Eastview High School, who participates in praise band and Bible study at Grace UMC and who lives with her grandparents. She describes herself as someone who likes to have fun and who is there for her friends. Her narrative centers on relationships with boyfriends.

- **Emmy:** a white, non-Hispanic, fifteen-year-old sophomore at Eastview High School, who participates in praise band and Bible study at Grace UMC and who lives with her grandparents. She is outgoing and says that she will start a

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122. In fall 2004, for "Theology and Psychology of Faith Development" with Dr. James Fowler, Almeda Wright and I conducted interviews with six young women from Grace UMC focusing on how media culture, faith, sexuality, and relationships influence identity development. In spring 2005, for the core seminar in the Religious Practices and Practical Theology concentration taught by Dr. Elizabeth Bounds and Dr. Joyce Flueckiger, I ran a focus group with five young women at Grace UMC on the practice of television watching in which we watched and discussed the portrayal of gender and sexuality on *The OC*, a now-canceled teen drama on the Fox network.

123. Appendix A contains the full text of all of the Stories of Gender participants' narrative responses to the question "What does it meant to be a girl?"

conversation with anyone. Her narrative focuses on the images that girls must project.

- **Lauren:** a white, non-Hispanic, fifteen-year-old sophomore at Eastview High School, where she is the student manager of the wrestling team, and participant at Grace Methodist UMC. She lives with her mother, father, and younger sister, who has severe learning disabilities, and she describes herself as a tough girl who is into skateboarding. Her narrative illustrates prominent images of women at different ages and offers a theological reading of people's identities.

New Life Baptist Church

The second story-sharing group met at New Life Baptist Church, which is located in a primarily residential, middle-class, African American neighborhood in a major city in the southeastern United States. After being invited by a colleague to address the congregation's women's group on encouraging leadership among young people, I obtained the pastor's permission to conduct research here. With the help of the youth Bible study leader, I held an information session for interested young women and their parents. All five young women who attended the session agreed to take part in the project, and they are introduced below, in the order in which they shared their stories:

- **Shantell:** an African American, seventeen-year-old senior at a performing arts high school, where she runs track and sings choir, who is an usher and choir member at New Life Baptist. She lives with her mother and three older brothers and works 25 hours a week at a recreation center. She describes herself as a crazy grandmother, that is, someone who likes to have fun but who also looks out for

her friends. Her narrative includes first boyfriends, first kisses, and first menstruation, as well as her relationship with her mother and reflections on gender inequality in her family.

- **Idana:** an African American, nineteen-year-old sophomore social studies education major at a small, historically black college who has been involved at New Life Baptist for her entire life. When she is not at college, she lives with her mother, father, twin sister Iesha, and two older brothers. She describes herself as ambitious and determined. Her narrative focuses on the struggle women face in maintaining relationships and asserting their individuality.

- **Iesha:** an African American, nineteen-year-old sophomore English education major at a small, historically black college who has been involved at New Life Baptist for her entire life. When she is not at college, she lives with her mother, father, twin sister Idana, and two older brothers. Iesha's story, introduced in chapter one, centers on her efforts to overcome people's perceptions of what larger women can accomplish.

- **Aasha:** an African American, thirteen-year-old eighth grader, who lives with her mother and two older brothers in a suburb of a major city. She does not attend New Life Baptist but became involved in Stories of Gender because her aunt is the youth Bible study leader. She describes herself as a smart girl who likes to be happy and to have fun. Power is a central image in her story of what it means to be a girl, and she describes her first menstruation, her first boyfriend, and her relationship with her mom.

- **Alexa:** an African American, fourteen-year-old ninth grader, who has been involved at New Life Baptist for a few years.[124] She describes herself as a quiet girl who keeps a journal for her thoughts. In her story, she talks about the depression that followed her parents' divorce and the challenge of having friends who expect you to do things you do not want to do.

Southeastern University

The final story-sharing group met at Southeastern University, a private, mid-size university in a large city in the southeastern United States. Here I put up fliers around campus and e-mailed an announcement about Stories of Gender to the e-mail lists of the women's center, the women's studies department, and the religion department asking interested participants to contact me. While over a dozen people made initial contact, in the end, the following five undergraduates were able to attend scheduled meetings of the group. In addition, two adult women joined me as mentors for the group. The participants shared their stories in the following order:

- **Lisa:** a white, non-Hispanic, nineteen-year-old sophomore majoring in women's studies and Russian and Eastern European studies who grew up in northern Virginia with her parents. There she attended a non-denominational church, but since starting college, she does not frequent church. She describes herself as a very motivated young woman who is involved in activist work and who likes to be able to laugh at herself. Her story centers on her decision to have an abortion in

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124. Alexa's family was moving at the time the story-sharing group began. She missed the session in which the participants filled out the questionnaires, so what I know about her is gleaned from her participation in the group discussions.

high school and her struggle to forgive herself and her boyfriend in the aftermath of that decision.

- **Kathleen:** a white, non-Hispanic, twenty-one-year-old senior majoring in psychology and religion, who works close to full-time each week between Starbucks and the women's studies department. Her parents, three brothers, and she were very involved in an Evangelical Free church, but currently she is "between traditions." She labels herself introspective, creative, and a people pleaser. Her story, narrated at the beginning of this chapter, focuses on her menarche.

- **Sheila:** a white, non-Hispanic, twenty-one-year-old senior majoring in women's studies and sorority member. The only daughter of divorced parents, she has never been involved in organized religion. She narrates her experience of overdosing on pills after a rupture in her relationship with her mother brought on when her mother caught her being sexually intimate with her boyfriend at age thirteen.

- **Carolyn:** a white, non-Hispanic, twenty-year-old junior majoring in philosophy and religion who serves as a mentor at the local juvenile detention center. She attended a Lutheran church with her parents and two sisters until her parents let it be her choice at age twelve, and now she is not involved in organized religion. In her story, she shares her feeling of being stripped by harsh and crude comments yelled at her by men in a passing car when she was a freshman in high school.

- **Monica:** a Haitian American, nineteen-year-old freshman major in and employee of the women's studies department. The only daughter of her single mother, she

has had virtually no involvement with organized religion. Her story speaks of the complexities of a living a multi-racial identity.

- **Elizabeth:** a white, non-Hispanic, adult graduate student in religion. Her story revolves around her changing relationship with her mother as she increasingly has rejected the conservative religious roots of her childhood.

- **Sabrina:** a white, non-Hispanic, United Methodist, adult staff person in a Southeastern University-affiliated youth program and graduate student in social work.[125]

Research Method[126]

The research method of Stories of Gender is adapted from Dori Baker's method of girlfriend theology. In response to young women's exposure to the message "that she must quiet down, lower her voice, learn to make herself pleasing to others, no longer express her own feelings," Baker develops a religious education methodology that enables young women's full voices to flourish.[127] Baker calls this girlfriend theology, which is "shorthand for eliciting girls' autobiographical stories and reflecting upon them theologically."[128] Baker's girlfriend theology groups consist of four to five young women, an adult mentor, and Baker. Each session begins with one young woman sharing

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125. Due to commitments to for her social work program, Sabrina did not attend our final session, which meant that she did not have an opportunity to share her personal narrative with the group.

126. Appendix B contains copies of the permission letters that the Stories of Gender participants and their parents signed. The letters include an overview of the research method written for a lay audience.

127. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Foreword," in *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*, Dori Grinenko Baker (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005) vii.

128. Baker, "Girlfriend Theology," 322.

a story from her life about which she is curious. After the story is told, the group

responds with "experience near"—feelings and associations that the story evokes, as well

as symbols and themes from the story. Then Baker asks participants to invoke

"experience distant"—"themes, theological concepts, and issues embodied in the

story."[129] The final step is going forth, in which the participants ask, "How might this

story and our conversation around it change any future action?"[130] Story-sharing groups

create safe spaces in which girls can be heard to voice as they tell and reflect on their

stories.

Similarly to Baker, in Stories of Gender, I met weekly with groups comprised of

three to five young women—a number chosen to promote reflective and respectful group

conversation. In the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups, I was the only adult, as I

did not want the presence of an adult from the church to hinder the young women's desire

to share openly and honestly from their experiences. It was only with the Southeastern

University group that I was joined by adult mentors, as two adult women responded to

the e-mail invitation I circulated, expressing a desire to be a listening presence in the

group.

In order to promote a sense of safety and confidentiality, the Grace UMC and

New Life Baptist groups met in private rooms in their respective churches, and the

Southeastern University group met in a private room at the university's women's center.

Further, we did not begin story sharing right away. At the first session, we reviewed what

would happen in the group, and participants had the chance to ask questions or raise any

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129. Baker, "Girlfriend Theology," 325.

130. Baker, "Future Homemakers ," 404.

concerns. Participants were introduced to the focus question of the group: "What does it

mean to be a girl—to you, to your family, in our society, at your school, in media culture,

and in your faith community?" Participants were asked to write a personal narrative that

responded to this question in their own time outside of the group. While specifically

asking that stories not tell of intimate sexual behavior, I suggested that stories might be

about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with friends, relationships with parents,

being allowed or not allowed to do something because of gender, or any other story that

connects to what it means to be female.[131] My aim was to give participants enough

guidance so that they would have a place to begin their reflections, but also enough

leeway to write about that which the topic of girlhood identity elicited for them.

At this first session, participants also completed a questionnaire I designed to

gather information about their families and neighborhoods; their participation in school,

work, and church activities; and their use of a variety of media.[132] The intent of the

questionnaire was to give me a more fulsome understanding of each young woman's

context, in case this information did not arise naturally in the group discussions.

At the second meeting of each group, participants made collages using clippings

from popular magazines to answer the focus question of the research, "What does it mean

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131. For ethical reasons, I asked that participants not share stories of intimate sexual behavior. Participants under the age of eighteen are considered vulnerable research subjects by Emory's Institutional Review Board (IRB); thus I hoped IRB would be more willing to approve my study if I excluded this potentially volatile conversation topic. Further, in the state of Georgia at the time of my research, consensual sexual intercourse between minors was considered a misdemeanor. I was also trying to protect myself from the potential of hearing stories of "criminal activity."

132. Appendix C contains a copy of this questionnaire.

to be a girl?"[133] The purpose of this activity was to initiate thinking about our focus question in a way that did not feel as intimate as reflecting on personal stories. After scanning, cutting, gluing, and calling time, we discussed the collages. Those who had not created the collages first said what they saw in the piece, and then the creators shared their intentions for the words and images. Framing the discussion this way was meant to stimulate participants to think about how symbols related to girlhood and femininity may take on different meanings for different people and when they are viewed in conjunction with other images.

Each subsequent week focused on story sharing, and the groups usually met for between sixty and ninety minutes. In the Grace UMC and Southeastern University groups, we had only one story sharer each week; at New Life Baptist, there were two weeks when we had to split the time between two story sharers. In these cases, we still devoted time to discussing each story individually.

Each story-session began with one young woman reading her story to the group or having us read a printed copy of it silently. After the story was shared, we moved through three stages of discussion, modeled after Baker's "experience near," "experience distant," and "going forth" categories. First, we discussed how the story made participants feel and associations the story raised for them. Second, we talked about themes and practices from the larger culture and their faith traditions that shed light on the story. We concluded by naming places we saw God in the story and the insights we would take from the story as

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133. I adapted this exercise from the Rule of Threes, developed by religious educator Mary Hess. See Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All that We Can't Leave Behind* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) 133-136.

we went forth from the group.[134] This movement of discussion was designed so that participants would begin with appreciation, that is, an empathetic engagement with the story; then move to inquiry, that is, wondering together about how the story is formed by and speaks back to broader cultural and religious themes about girlhood; and finally conclude with transformation, that is, naming how they might understand themselves or act differently given that week's discussion. Additionally, theological reflection on the story, that is thinking about the story theologically and discerning God's presence in it, was intentionally built into the process so that the participants would be encouraged to view their own and others' stories through a theological lens.

Once the story-sharing groups were complete, I conducted one-on-one exit interviews with the participants. While the story-sharing groups enabled me to learn about how the young women narrate female identity and the discourses they draw upon in doing so, the exit interviews were designed for me to gather data on how the young women experienced the pedagogy of groups.[135] Thus I asked participants to reflect on specific aspects of the research design, focusing on what they most liked and what they might suggest changing for future iterations. I conducted interviews with the Grace UMC participants at the church in one afternoon; with the New Life Baptist participants at their respective homes; and with the Southeastern University participants in a private meeting room at the women's center.

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134. Appendix D contains a copy of the questions that guided the story-sharing discussions.

135. Appendix E contains a copy of the questions that guided the exit interviews.

Appreciative, Transformative Inquiry

The specific research method of Stories of Gender is one part of the broader method of this dissertation. I name my method appreciative, transformative inquiry, and it guides my approach to human subject research with young women, engagement with scholarly texts, and the writing of this dissertation.[136] Through it, I hold myself accountable to feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational disciplines, as I explain in the next section.

An appreciative method is grounded in recognition of and gratitude for the wisdom of others. It begins from a place of wanting to understand the world as it is understood by another—whether that person is a young woman or the author of a scholarly source. Appreciative research is interested in what is working well for people, what is useful in sources, and highlighting ideas that contribute to full human flourishing. Specifically, Stories of Gender was appreciative in its intentional structuring around the telling and discussing of young women's stories, so that I could learn to understand gender identity as the young women understand it and begin to glimpse what contributes to young women's thriving. My engagement with scholarly texts is also appreciative. Instead of exhaustive literature reviews, I look for sources that resonate with and speak to what I have heard and learned from the young women, using the soteriological principal

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136. Appreciative inquiry is an organizational development method that focuses on all parts of an organizational system, looking to highlight what is working well instead of what is going wrong in order to transform the organization. David L. Cooperrider is credited with coining the term. See David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005). A full review of appreciative inquiry in organizational development is beyond the scope of this project.

articulated by feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, namely, adjudicating between sources based on what contributes to the well-being and salvation of women.[137]

 A crucial tool for appreciative research is what pastoral theologian Christie Neuger terms feminist listening.[138] Feminist listening is grounded in affirmation, that is, beginning from a starting point of belief. Crucial for feminist listening is remaining with research subjects and sources over a course of time, so that one comes to know these subjects and sources well enough to understand their view of the world. An important component of the Stories of Gender research design was meeting with the young women over a series of weeks, so that I had an extended opportunity to listen empathically to them. Further, throughout the analysis and writing stages of this research, I continued to listen to recordings of our sessions and read the transcripts of our discussions, so that the young women's voices continually were informing my work.

While I begin from a place of appreciation, my method is also one of inquiry or investigation. As such, I bring a critical lens to my research sources. Here what Neuger calls deconstructive listening is an important tool, as I step far enough away from the sources to question taken for granted and problematic assumptions evidenced in them.[139] When it comes to analyzing the young women's narratives of gender identity, I not only try to understand them as the young women understand them but I also listen to the narratives cognizant of the cultural discourses of female identity discussed in chapter one.

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137. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998) 78-79. For this soteriological principle, Johnson draws on "*Dei Verbum*: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter A. Abbott (New York: American Press, 1966).

138. Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) 88-92.

139. Ibid., 88-92.

Using feminist and deconstructive listening in tandem enables me to respect young

women's self-knowledge while also exercising a hermeneutics of suspicion that

recognizes the way young women's narratives are shaped by the gender-sex system

which governs much of their social worlds. Similarly, using feminist and deconstructive

listening with scholarly sources allows me to claim what is useful from them, albeit not in

a naïve manner, as I also name where the resources fall short in terms of addressing the

life situations of young women.

      Finally, my method is transformative, as is already anticipated in the

soteriological principal I utilize of looking for resources that support and extend young

women's salvation and full flourishing. In other words, the appreciative inquiry into the

lives of young women and scholarly sources is toward the end of envisioning a future of

even more robust flourishing for young women and discerning what gifts faith

communities have to offer young women in support of this vision. Stories of Gender

invited the participants to experience a transformative model of religious education, one

in which young women practiced intentional and theological reflection on their gender

narratives in supportive groups. In so doing, the young women learned more about

themselves and each other, came to greater cognizance about the influencing factors of

female identities narratives, and practiced skills of intentional and theological reflection

that can serve them for a lifetime. Learning from the young women's experience in

Stories of Gender and extending this knowledge through an exploration of scholarly

sources, in the second half of the dissertation I name theological, pedagogical, and

ecclesial gifts faith communities have to offer young women. In naming these gifts, I

begin from and extend what I have seen the young women do to promote their own flourishing.

Approach: A Feminist Ethnographic Theological Educational Endeavor

This fresh method of appreciative, transformative inquiry arises from my commitments to feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational scholarship. It is informed by the following commitments.

Feminist

First, this project follows the feminist commitment to valuing the experiences of women as a valid source of truth. In other words, the everyday lived experiences of young women, in all their complexity and variety, and the stories they tell about these experiences is "a multidimensional source" of truth that can be accessed through a number of disciplines.[140] Further, my feminist approach leads me to focus on young women's experiences *as* young women, given that gender is an important identity category through which people experience the world. Despite the insistence of many young women that feminism is no longer necessary,[141] labeling this project a feminist one keeps focus on how sexism, patriarchy, and phallocentric logic continue to shape the identity-constituting narratives of young women.

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140. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011) 61.

141. See note 50 above.

As such, this project shares a fundamental goal of other feminist work, which is to analyze gender and to explore how it is structured and experienced,[142] and takes as its critical principle the liberation and full human flourishing of all people, with a particular focus on young women.[143] If there is anything that can be said to unite feminists, it is a political commitment to women that "begins with the struggles and dreams of people in order to anticipate transformation for all."[144] In this project, this commitment takes the specific form of listening appreciatively to young women in order to hear both the struggles young women face and the empowerment they already evidence in their lives, and then working from this knowledge to articulate how Christian faith communities can support them best, theologically, pedagogically, and communally, in further transformation.

Finally, I appreciate that feminists are not immune from the way that gender can obscure our thinking. As philosopher Jane Flax argues, "Any feminist standpoint will necessarily be partial and will to some extent merely reflect our embeddedness in preexisting gender relations."[145] In other words, I am embedded in the same cultural patterns that shape the young women's gender narratives, and thus my ability to listen deconstructively is necessarily limited. This is one reason I operate with multiple conversation partners—to raise my own self-consciousness about how my feminist

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142. While feminist theory is not a discipline in the strictest sense, Jane Flax argues that feminist theory is united by a fundamental goal of analyzing gender. See Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 20.

143. Here I extrapolate for my context the critical principal that guides Joyce Mercer's practical theological exploration of childhood. She writes, "This lens comes from the vantage point of feminist practical theology and takes as its critical principle the liberation, thriving, and well-being of children." See Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming the Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005) 5.

144. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 4.

145. Flax, *Thinking Fragments,* 27.

commitments shape my work and to what they might make me blind. Just as my feminist

standpoint is partial, so, too, are all of my standpoints.

Ethnographic

In this dissertation, I also hold myself accountable to ethnography, aiming to

"write the culture" of the young women who participated in Stories of Gender.[146]

Ethnography, particularly as it is being used by theologians, is

> a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people—their words, practices,
> traditions, experiences, memories, insights—in particular times and places in
> order to understand how they make meaning (cultural, religious, ethical) and what
> they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships,
> and the divine, etc. The aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and
> the world look like from their perspective—to take them seriously as a source of
> wisdom and to de-center our own assumptions and evaluations.[147]

Ethnography is an inductive mode of inquiry that discovers truth in particular times and

places. As theologian Christian Scharen and ethicist Aana Marie Vigen put it, "Learning

deeply and authentically from the field is a central commitment of ethnographic

study,"[148] and ethnographers are called to practice "humility amidst sustained, attentive,

and careful observation."[149] As such, I approach the Stories of Gender participants and

my academic conversation partners with a spirit of generosity, ready to learn from them.

Often this means bracketing what I think I know, so that I can be surprised by others.

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146. Ethnography literally means "writing culture." As John Van Maanen writes, "An ethnography is written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)." See John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*: *On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 1.

147. Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 16.

148. Ibid., 236.

149. Ibid., 17.

In addition to humility as a first tool and value of ethnography, I practice reflexivity, a second tool and value of an ethnographic approach that involves a researcher looking at one's own role in research, including one's biases, social locations, and relationships. As such, I follow the advice of feminist ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran, who challenges ethnographers to attend to how their standpoints affect how they do their research and what they think they know through their research.[150] Along with taking field notes, I have kept a journal in which I record reflections about my involvement in the research and stories from my own experience as a woman of faith that are raised by my involvement in this project. This value of reflexivity is present most clearly in my writing, as I strive to name and claim my standpoints, choices, and analyses.

Third, I cultivate of relationships of authenticity, intersubjectivity, and collegiality, another tool and value of ethnographic approaches, both with the young women who participated in Stories of Gender and with scholarly sources. As such, I approach both the young women and texts not "as objects of study, but rather as collaborators—experts in their own right who have valuable knowledge that the

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150. Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). In feminist ethnography, this attention to standpoint arose out of the feminist critique of positivistic science, which included an objection to the idea of value-free research, a moral objection to the objectification and exploitation of research subjects, and a practical concern for how the interests of the researcher and research subjects often were opposed. Based on this critique, feminist theorists claimed that no form of research is value-free, that research is always affected by the position of the researcher, and that the researcher can never completely know or describe what he or she studies. An early version of feminist standpoint theory claimed an epistemic privilege for women's knowledge, implying that women *qua* women would have special insight when studying other women. As more women of color and women of the third world began conducting ethnographic studies, it became apparent to most feminists that the differences among women were just as great as the similarities between them. This led to recognition of what Donna Haraway calls the "epistemology of location," that is, the idea that all knowledge is situated by the knower's multiple subject locations. See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 195. See also Diane L. Wolf, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork,* ed. Diane L. Wolf (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) 4-8.

ethnographer needs."[151] Rather than looking for what is wrong with young women and tearing apart the arguments of other scholars, I enter into authentic, intersubjective, and collegial relationships with these sources, approaching them as bearers of knowledge from whom I can learn and to whom I can speak back in order to extend the scholarly conversation about young women of faith in a variety of disciplines.[152] As such, I find myself doing that for which ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod advocates, that is, challenging the divide between insider and outsider and between self and other.[153] My ethnographic stance is not of the traditional kind, in which a self goes abroad to study the other as an outsider trying to gain insider knowledge. Rather, I operate from an understanding of people's multiple subjectivities and entertain the complexity of seeing similarities between myself and my conversation partners without too easily erasing the differences.

Theological

This project is also theological inasmuch as I approach it as a believing and practicing Roman Catholic Christian and explore how young women ground their understandings of girlhood within their relationships with God and Christian discourses

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151. Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 22.

152. Research participants' knowledge is their primary form of power in research settings. For further reflection on the power wielded by all research subjects, see Sondra Hale, "Feminist Method, Process, and Self-Criticism: Interviewing Sudanese Women," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 121-136 and Jayati Lal, "Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity, and 'Other' in Living and Writing the Text," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane L. Wolf (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) 185-214.

153. Abu-Lughod understands this as a key feature of feminist ethnography. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1 (1990): 26.

about who human beings are as created by God.[154] Specifically, I work in conversation

with feminist and practical theology.

Feminist Theological

      In "Keeping Feminist Faith with Christian Traditions," Joy McDougall

enumerates three commonalities in the work of feminist theologians, all of which are also

evident in my work.[155] First, I approach Christian traditions with what Serene Jones has

named a "double vision,"[156] through which I recognize that all Christian confessional

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154. Here I draw on Anne Carr's definition of theology as "knowledge or discourse about God and all things in relation to God." See Anne E. Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993) 6.

155. Beyond these commonalities in approach, McDougall outlines three strategies used by feminist theologians for walking the middle ground of challenging the patriarchy of their traditions while also trusting the "tradition's salutary possibilities for women today," (105) allowing their feminist and ecclesial commitments to operate as "mutually informative dimensions of their theological identity" (104). McDougall outlines these three strategies in an effort to move beyond the outdated typology of revolutionary versus reformist feminist theology. In this typology, revolutionary feminists deem the Christian tradition too patriarchal for redemption and look to other religious traditions that can support women, and reformist feminists look for a useable past that is untainted by patriarchy. As McDougall argues, this typology "lacks a fine enough grain to map the complex and contested terrain of feminist approaches to their theological traditions" (104).
      The first strategy of feminist theologians is to "dispute a patriarchal theological tradition's legitimate continuity with the past," exemplified by Elizabeth Johnson's challenging of christotypical interpretations of Mary in the Roman Catholic tradition in her book *Truly Our Sister* (105). In the *Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, Wendy Farley confronts the inherited view of the soul's bondage to sin using medieval women mystics' notion of the soul's bondage to desire. This represents a second strategy through which feminist theologians "claim a rival authorizing past and demonstrate its salutary implications for present practice" (105). In a third strategy, feminist theologians "reconfigure the same cultural elements of their hegemonic tradition for feminist ends," as Serene Jones does in her essay on an aesthetic approach to Reformed doctrines in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (105). See Joy Ann McDougall, "Keeping Feminist Faith with Christian Traditions: A Look at Christian Feminist Theology Today," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2008): 103-124.

156. Serene Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, eds. Serene Jones and Amy Pauw (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 39. As McDougall notes, this double vision is made possible by "the recognition that ecclesial traditions are not homogenous fixed deposits of faith passed down error-free from generation to generation, but rather are always and everywhere what [Kathyrn] Tanner describes as a 'social construction,' that is, a selection among disparate elements of one's tradition that reflects the ideology." See McDougall, "Keeping Feminist Faith," 105. As such, no religious tradition or faith community is homogenous or unchanging, but

traditions both provide "powerful resources for feminist innovation and advancing women's concerns" and possess "a dangerous potential for disordering women's desires, deflating their agency, and diminishing their well-being."[157] Second, I recognize the androcentric bias of Christian traditions and the need to address this bias in theological work. To do this, feminist theologians "give a prominent role to women's voices, female imagery, and feminist social concerns in their works."[158] By attending to women's experiences and the empowering and subversive presence of the Holy Spirit in these experiences, feminist theologians use a gendered lens to reinterpret Christian traditions anew. Third, feminist theologians are invested in "developing their doctrinal traditions for the good of the whole Christian community."[159] As such, their work involves "re-envisioning Christian doctrines and symbols so as to address new cultural realities and intellectual challenges of the present time."[160]

Holding myself accountable to feminist theology means that I listen carefully to young women discuss their experiences of girlhood, beginning from the assumption that young women draw on the resources of their faith communities in complex ways, ways that simultaneously support and deflate their agency and contribute to healthy and harmful identity narratives. Further, despite its andocentric nature, I believe that elements of the Christian faith tradition can be redeeming for young women. As mentioned

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rather shape and are shaped by the individuals who belong to them and the cultures of which they are a part.

157. McDougall, "Keeping Feminist Faith," 119.

158. Ibid., 120.

159. Ibid., 121.

160. Ibid., 122.

already, in adjudicating between the life-giving and life-denying threads of Christian

tradition, I follow and extend the soteriological principal articulated by feminist

theologian Elizabeth Johnson, namely, using the lens of salvation for women in order to

interpret Christian scripture, theology, and practice.[161] In other words, I focus in this

dissertation on the aspects of Christian traditions that can be liberating for young women

living in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My attention to the

liberating possibilities of Christianity for young women is not only soteriological but also

pragmatic, as I work to counteract the operative assumption in much "secular"

scholarship about young women that Christian identity functions only negatively vis a vis

female identity. Finally, I operate from the conviction that doing theology in conversation

with the voices of young women is not only for the benefit of young women, but also for

the larger community, which learns from and is formed by encounters with young women

and the theological anthropology that is attested to in their experiences.

Practical Theological

This project is also an exercise in practical theology, which I understand as "the

study of God and world by way of reflection on action (past or present practice) and

reflection for the sake of future action (future practice)."[162] While there is much diversity

in definitions, aims, and purposes of practical theology, Mary Elizabeth Moore names

three common concerns that unite practical theology: "that theological reflection be

focused on the data of concrete experience and action; that theological constructs be

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161. See note 137 above.

162. Mary Elizabeth Moore, Syllabus for Constructive Practical Theology Seminar, fall 2004, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

shaped, at least in part, by these experiences and actions; and that theological reflection

contribute understanding of experience and direction for action."[163] These three common

concerns of practical theology form the basis of my presumptions about what it means to

do practical theology in this project.

First, practical theology attends to the embodied experiences of human beings, as

I do in approaching the experiences of young women as a key source for theological

work.[164] Second, in practical theology, theology itself is influenced by the concrete

experiences and situations of people.[165] As such, rather than beginning from theological

abstractions and then applying them to the context of young women, I start by listening to

what young women say about their female faith identities through the Stories of Gender

project and then construct theological anthropology in response to what I have learned.

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163. Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Purposes of Practical Theology: A Comparative Analysis between United States Practical Theologians and Johannes Van Der Ven," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. Van Der Ven,* eds. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary E. Moore (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2005) 182.

164. As Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman put it in their map of the field of practical theology, "Practical theology focuses in every instance especially on the *current events* and the *concrete settings* that must be faithfully encountered." See Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman, "Mapping the Field of Practical Theology," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008) 66, italics in original.

165. Of the three common concerns of practical theology Moore names, this is the most contentious, as theology often has performed namely a "normative task" in relation to people's lived experiences. Practical theologian Richard Osmer names the normative task as one of four core tasks of practical theological interpretation, explaining that it involves "using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from 'good practice.' " See Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008) 4. Even in practical theology, theological constructs often are used only to illumine people's lived experiences so that these experiences can be better understood and so that theologians can make recommendations for bettering people's situations. The relationship between human experience and theological constructs that Moore suggests is more radical and complex than this. Not only does theology enable us to interpret more faithfully and fully people's life experiences, but people's life experiences enable us to interpret theological categories more faithfully and fully, given the sacramental principal that God reveals God's Self to the world through the concrete particularities of people's lives. For more on the sacramental nature of human life, see Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004) 9-10 and Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) 128–132.

Third, practical theology aims to understand current experience toward the end of making recommendations to transform this experience.[166] As such, the aim of practical theology, "the intention toward which it is oriented,"[167] as Joyce Mercer puts it, is "the construction and engagement of strategies and tactics of action and hope that can participate in God's transforming work of love and justice."[168] Thus this project ends with proposals as to how Christian faith communities can better support young women as they construct narratives of female, faithful selves. Overall, this project reflects the praxis-theory-praxis trajectory of much practical theology, in which theorizing from thick descriptions of praxis yields recommendations for future praxis, which then becomes the ground for more theoretical analysis.[169]

<center>Educational</center>

It surely would be enough if this project was a feminist ethnographic theological one, but it is also educational. This project is educational in that I am interested in formation: how young women form and are formed in their identities, how faith communities can better support their formation, and what formative resources Christian traditions have to offer young women as support for their journeys toward identities of integrity and their ability to tell counterstories of graced female selfhood. As Chopp

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166. Cahalan and Nieman describe this dual task as the indicative and subjunctive mood of practical theology, that is, "interpreting *what is*" and "interpreting *what might be*." See Cahalan and Neiman, "Mapping the Field," 82-83.

167. Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 13.

168. Ibid., 37.

169. James Fowler names the "praxis-theory-praxis" trajectory a common characteristic of much practical theology. See James Fowler, "The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology," (paper presented to the International Academy of Practical Theology, Bern, Switzerland, June 1995). See also Don S. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) 7.

recognizes, "Education, whatever its form and understanding, presupposes some process of forming, constructing, or developing human subjects."[170] I contend that young women are formed in their girlhood identity—in their families, peer groups, schools, faith communities, the broader culture, etc.—through explicit, implicit, and null curricula. While educator Elliot Eisner develops this three-fold typology to detail the curricula of schools,[171] it can also function as a lens throughout which to think about how young women are educated about what it means to be female.

The explicit curriculum is the expressed or promised curriculum. In other words, girls are formed in their female identity when others set out to teach them something about girlhood through statements and practices that are fully and clearly expressed. According to Eisner, the null curriculum is "…what schools do *not teach*."[172] In the context we are considering here, girls also are formed in their female identity by omissions and mutual exclusions, by what is never talked about or practiced in relation to young women.

Finally, the implicit curriculum speaks to the way in which "…the culture of both the classroom and the school socializes children to values that are a part of the structure of those places."[173] In the case of school curriculum, students learn implicitly by the way the architecture is structured, rewards and punishments are meted out, and the institution organizes itself. Further, as religious educator Maria Harris explains, "There is a set of

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170. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 34.

171. Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1985) 87-108.

172. Ibid., 97, italics in original.

173. Ibid., 88.

processes through which this body [of knowledge] is communicated—processes that *as processes* are teachings in themselves."[174] In other words, processes and practices are formative in their own rite. Because all of these characteristics are "…salient and pervasive features of schooling, what they teach may be among the most important lessons a child learns."[175] In the case of young women's gender identity formation, the implicit curriculum is vast and powerful, as young women learn from how their mothers, other female family members, and female friends act and are treated; how girls' experiences are dealt with in textbooks and by administrators at school; the roles women take on and the way in which God is named in their faith communities; and how women are portrayed visually in the media, to name only a few examples. Further, they are formed by embodied practices and processes of girlhood.

Another way of understanding education as formation is to think of education as constructing subjectivity. As Chopp describes it, "Education is a process of forming the necessary conditions for persons to know and be able to articulate their needs and for persons to learn these processes and ways of corporate life."[176] Following this sense of education as constructing subjectivity, a second way this project is educational is that it is concerned with engaging young women in a process through which they construct their female subjectivity. As a scholar, I want to learn about young women's identities; as an educator, I want to help *them* learn about their identities through educational practices and processes that run counter to cultural processes and practices that undergird the

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174. Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989) 111.

175. Eisner, *Educational Imagination*, 97.

176. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 70-71.

association of female identity with beauty perfection. Since constructing narrative identity is a lifelong task, these are practices and processes which can serve young women throughout their lives and support them in living identities of female faith integrity.

The question, though, is toward what end is formation and reflection on experience directed. In other words, why is it important that young women be formed in their Christian traditions and become reflective subjects? This is important because it leads young women and their faith communities toward new possibilities. Herein lies a third way in which this endeavor is educational and also feminist and theological: it promotes pedagogical resources that offer the possibility of leading young women and their faith communities toward new possibilities of liberation, humanization, and the living of fuller life. As a feminist theological educator, I have some clear ideas of what new possibilities I would like to see young women embody. I want them to live with greater consciousness about how they draw on popular discourses of femininity in living as girls and to know that God loves them as they are and empowers them to live with integrity. Yet I also actively try to hear the possibilities toward which they wish to move in their lives, offering what resources I can to help them toward their goals.

The point is that education is not only about formation and identity construction; it is also about transformation. We are changed when we learn something new, see in a new way, or participate in a new practice. Ultimately, feminist theological education cannot be only about formation, as Christian faith traditions as well as the patriarchal culture in which young women are formed hold both promise and problems in terms of the resources they offer for the construction of healthy female faith identity narratives. As

such, religious education with young women needs to include a transformational thrust, not only of young women as individuals but also of faith communities and traditions and society at large.

There is a final way in which this project is educational: it creates space for groups of young women to work together. While strictly speaking an educational moment can happen anywhere, we tend to associate education with educational spaces, like classrooms, lecture halls, meeting rooms, libraries, or the church fellowship hall, where people are gathered together to learn from and with each other. While I do not wish to promote too close an association between education and school, I do appreciate the *space apart* connoted by education, particularly for the young women with whom I work. They are busy, striving to get ahead and trying to figure out who they are and how to live. They need a space apart, a space that is directed toward their needs and that invites them to reflect and act on their experiences, as they often do not have the time or opportunity to do so in their daily lives.

Crucially, this space is not just for individuals or for a one-on-one interaction between student and teacher. These are spaces for young women to interact with each other and trusted adults, creating and sharing knowledge together. This reflects my understanding of knowledge as communally held and created, a view of knowledge promoted by many philosophers, educators, and theologians.[177] This view of knowledge is also represented in my method, by the fact that I draw on human subject research with adolescent girls along with library research into a variety of fields in order to create a

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177. See, for instance, philosopher Code, *Rhetorical Spaces,* 23-57; educator Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage To Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 101-106; and theologian Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 132.

conversation about female faith identity between multiple partners, many of whom might not normally talk to each other. Both methodologically and educationally, dialogue is a crucial tool. As Chopp explains, "Dialogue involves learning how to become bicultural, to really hear the cultural experiences, beliefs, symbols, patterns of meaning in another person's religious experience."[178]

Tensegritous Research: Practicing Appreciative, Transformative Inquiry

When I began Stories of Gender, I did not see any conflict between my two aims of listening to young women tell their stories of female identity and testing story sharing and theological reflection as a religious education method. Having always associated the study of religion with the study of texts, I was new to the idea of human subject research and excited to learn about religion in a new way, so I jumped into Stories of Gender, combining ethnographic and educational commitments. Working with the young women, however, I sometimes felt unsure about how to proceed, an uncertainty that resulted from attempting to hold myself accountable to feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational disciplines and practices at the same time. For example, when I noticed that the Grace UMC participants referred to God in exclusively male terms in our story-sharing groups, I felt torn. As an ethnographer, I could simply note this trend in their language and reflect upon it later as I worked to analyze the young women's narratives and discussions. As a feminist theologian and educator, however, I wanted to bring this to their attention and introduce them to a broader range of language and metaphors with which to refer to God. Ultimately, since I had presented myself as a researcher and did not serve as their pastor or youth minister, I did not feel it was my place to challenge their

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178. Chopp, *Saving Work,* 71.

theological perspectives. Even having made this decision, I worried. Would Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren eventually find male God language limiting to their ability to see themselves in God's image? Would they become frustrated with this patriarchal aspect of Christian traditions and walk away from Christianity all together? As I asked these questions, I came to realize that a challenge of doing research at the intersection of different disciplines—of holding oneself accountable to ethnographical tools and values as a theologian and educator—is that the aims and normative commitments of Christian religious education, feminist theology, and ethnography do not align easily always.

All scholars and researchers have normative commitments, whether these are implicit or explicit, but the ends toward which the normative commitments are put differ. Ethnographers have normative commitments about *how* they conduct research and approach their research subjects, commitments I named above as humility, reflexivity, and cultivating relationships of authenticity, intersubjectivity, and collegiality. These normative commitments shape how research is conducted toward the end of producing an insightful account and analysis of the people or culture being studied. In addition to "being responsible to the subjects it explores," social science "is normative in the sense that in the description it offers, there is often (implicitly if not explicitly) hope for certain outcomes," argue Scharen and Vigen, two theologians who have used ethnography in their research.[179] In other words, while the emphasis in ethnography frequently has been on responsible representation of the people and communities studied, most ethnographers undertake their work—with varying degrees of self-awareness—with some idea of a greater good to which their work might contribute, at least indirectly, such as better cross-cultural understanding or a diminishment of poverty and suffering.

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179. Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, xxiii.

A major way that work in religious education and practical theology differs from ethnography is in the explicit desire to make normative recommendations for future practice out of descriptive and analytical work. While religious educators and practical theologians surely do more than this in their scholarship, one reason we align ourselves with these fields is that we want to be able to say, "Based on what I learned studying these people and reading these sources, I recommend that we do this so that we can improve the lives of these people." Thus the conflict I felt at times in the field resulted from bringing two sets of normative commitments to the Stories of Gender project.

Out of this conflict, however, my sense of a fresh method has arisen. Appreciative, transformative inquiry is a tensegritous research method, one that enables me to hold together the sometimes tensive commitments of feminist, ethnographic, theological, and educational approaches to research in order for new knowledge to emerge. A tensegritous research approach such as this one can have (at least) a dual emphasis. In my work, this dual emphasis takes the form of (a) a commitment to listening to and learning from the participants' stories of gender and faith identity toward the normative end of offering a realistic description of female faith identities grounded in the actual discourses of young women and (b) a commitment to inviting the Stories of Gender participants into a process that I believed would be beneficial to them. As they wrote, shared, and discussed stories about their experiences of girlhood, I hoped they would gain greater consciousness about how they construct their gender identity and which discourses they draw upon in doing so. As they talked about where they saw God in each other's stories, I hoped they would become more comfortable with theological reflection and thus more readily identify God's presence in their lives and the world

around them. While I imagined the process of Stories of Gender would be valuable for the participants, I also aimed to learn from their experiences with the story-sharing model in order to make recommendations to practitioners wishing to support young women in their journeys of female faith identity.

Holding these commitments together in creative tension through appreciative, transformative inquiry has revolutionized my work as an educator. Prioritizing empathic listening in Stories of Gender meant that I began to understand the world as the participants saw it, to understand the implicit rules that govern their social worlds and what is at stake for them in making choices about how to present themselves as girls. Had I been their pastor, youth minister, or religious educator, I could have built from this understanding, involving the young women in discussions and activities meant to address the identity challenges with which they were faced and to build on the strategies for thriving they already evidenced in their lives. This was the first time that I experienced listening to youth as a different moment from teaching them something. Prior to this experience, I intellectually assented to the importance of meeting students where they are. Now I have become convicted by this and understand that making ample time for listening enables educators to do what they can do best: provide youth with resources to support them on their journeys.[180] A true gift that appreciative, transformative inquiry offers practical theologians and religious educators is a mindset that encourages us to set aside our desire to help long enough to pay close attention to the expressed needs and desires of those we want to help.

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180. For other religious educators and practical theologians who share this commitment, see Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*; Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic*; Davis, *Counseling Adolescent Girls* and *Beyond Nice*; Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*; and Parker, ed., *Sacred Selves*.

This, however, is not to jettison the expertise that religious educators and practical theologians bring to research. For instance, the method of Stories of Gender reflects some of my primary commitments as an educator, such as creating a community of learners where youth can learn from each other through dialogue across difference and inviting youth to think about God's presence in their lives. Further, while I cannot guarantee that the young women gained any long-term benefits from taking part in the research, having an educationally-informed design helps increase the chances that they gained something from it in the short-term and that, at the minimum, it meets the guidelines for ethical research in terms of respecting the participants. Finally, my theological perspective that each person deserves to be treated with the respect due to them as a bearer of the *imago Dei*, that is, the image of God, enhances my desire and ability to listen to the young women and to respect them as research subjects. A robust theological anthropology of the type I propose in chapter five undergirds the feminist ethnographic commitment to attend to the complex subjectivities of research participants, in that we recognize that we share with all people an identity as made in the image of God but that this image is reflected in our human diversity. In the end, the tensegritous method of appreciative, transformative inquiry is not only well-suited for research with young women but is effective any time researchers and practitioners wish to balance attending to people's realities and partnering with them to articulate and live toward a transformed future.

Commitments for Future Research

At the end of this chapter on method, I name three commitments for future research with young women aimed at correcting deficits in Stories of Gender.

These commitments then are instantiated in the educational vision I propose in chapter

six as a model educators can use to learn about the lives of the young women with whom

they work, while also providing young women with resources that will be most

supportive for their particularly situated identity challenges.

Use More Than Verbal and Written Analysis

As noted above, a commitment of feminist and ethnographic approaches to

research is attending to standpoint, that is, naming and examining the social location of

the researcher and how this influences research.[181] An important way that my standpoint

shaped Stories of Gender is that it traded heavily in written stories and verbal analysis,

possibly marginalizing group members who find communicating in writing or in group

discussions difficult and surely insuring that I collected namely verbal-linguistic answers

to my question "What does it mean to be a girl?" As a graduate student and former

educator, I have learned to excel in written communication and verbal analysis, thus my

standpoint shaped the design of Stories of Gender with a bias toward these forms of

knowledge and communication. My consciousness about the almost exclusive reliance on

verbal-linguistic forms of inquiry in Stories of Gender was raised particularly by

Lauren's exit interview. Lauren, who was not present for the collage activity, suggested

that I include collage making or another form of artistic expression in future iterations of

this project because she felt the linear nature of written narratives did not allow her to

express the overlapping and open-ended aspects of her female identity. Lauren's

reflections along with the fact that many participants named making collages about

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181. Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, 48-49. For the more on the context of the
development of this commitment, see note 150 above.

female identity as their favorite part of the research indicates that including a wider

variety of activities would go a long way to drawing on the multiple intelligences and

favored learning styles of research participants so as to help them access multiple

understandings of their identities.[182]

Further, in terms of eliciting reflection on identity, written narratives may not be

the best match for young women's sense of themselves. Many participants indicated in

their exit interviews that they had difficulty composing their stories, often putting the task

off until the night before they were scheduled to share their narrative. A few, like Lauren

as discussed above, felt that written narratives did not represent their sense of the

multiplicity of girlhood identity. While the narratives of the college-aged students

centered on one important incident in their lives that spoke to their sense of female

identity, the narratives of the younger participants read like a set of snapshots of different

aspects of their understanding of girlhood. These results taken together lead me to

propose that while narrative is a useful analytical category for understanding young

women's identities, pedagogically speaking and in research settings, the activity of

writing narratives, at the very least, should be combined with other opportunities for

reflection on identity. As I take up further in chapter four, this is partially because the

form of written narrative comes with an expectation of coherency that does not match

many young women's experiences of themselves. More useful would be photo-voice

methodology, where participants take photographs of their social worlds and then discuss

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182. The notion of multiple intelligences comes from Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Here Gardner names seven forms of intelligence: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Since first publishing on multiple intelligences in 1983, Gardner has added one more form of intelligence: naturalistic. While there have been mixed responses to Gardner's theory, it has received support from educators who agree with its implication that not all students learn best through the same modality.

the photographs,[183] or other "new creative methods."[184] I explore this and other possible methodologies for promoting reflection on identity in chapter six.

<div align="center">Build Participant Interpretation into the Research Process</div>

Another aspect of attending to standpoint in feminist and ethnographic research is being cognizant of power dynamics, both in terms of systems of domination in the site or culture studied and power relations between the researcher and research subjects.[185] Issues related to power dynamics are present at each stage of research, as the researcher makes choices about how to conduct research, relate to research subjects, interpret and write about research, and give back to participants once the research is complete. When feminist ethnographers Lila Abu-Lughod and Judith Stacey ask, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" their question points, at least in part, to concern about the extent to which power can be shared between researchers and researcher subjects as feminist ethnographic projects strive to live into the commitment to authentic, reciprocal, and intersubjective research.[186]

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183. For an example of using photo-voice methodology in research with youth, see JingJing Lou and Heidi Ross, "Pathways to Peace: Imag(in)ing the Voices of Chinese and American Middle School Students," in *Transforming Education for Peace: A Volume in Peace Education*, eds. Jing Lin, Edward J. Brantmeier, and Christa Bruhn (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008) 3-21.

184. According to David Gauntlett, a "new creative method" is a way of gathering knowledge "which allows participants to spend *time* applying their playful or creative *attention* to the act of *making* something symbolic or metaphorical, and then *reflecting* on it." See David Gauntlett, *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences* (London: Routledge, 2007) 3, italics in original. Gauntlett has garnered fame for having research subjects build representations of their experiences with Legos.

185. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds*: *Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 6.

186. Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be?" and Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, (New York: Routledge, 1991) 111-119.

In an attempt to balance power and to offer more fulsome analysis, a number of feminist researchers have experimented with asking subjects for their own interpretations and including the subjects' interpretations in their written ethnographies.[187] For example, in her work studying Himalayan folktales, Kirin Narayan collected the folktales of Urmilaji Sood, presented them along with Urmilaji's interpretations of the tales, and gave Sood credit as a co-author.[188] However, as much as reciprocity is built into the interpretation process, in a majority of cases, it is still the researcher who ultimately commits the research to writing and thus has the final say in interpretation.

I built some reciprocity of interpretation into Stories of Gender by asking the young women to reflect together on each other's stories each week and conducting exit interviews in which the participants offered analysis of their experience in the group. Yet as I worked on analysis and writing once the groups were complete, I wondered how aspects of my standpoint were coloring my interpretations in ways of which I might not be aware and of which the young women might disabuse me.[189] Particularly, as a feminist researcher with formal theological training, I wondered if I was noticing feminist or theological themes in their stories that the young women themselves would not recognize.

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187. For examples of building reciprocal interpretation into the research process, see Valerie Matsumoto "Reflections on Oral History: Research in a Japanese American Community," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane L. Wolf (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) 160-169 and Elaine Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 57-83.

188. Kirin Narayan in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

189. For a discussion of interpretive conflict, see Katherine Borland, " 'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 63-75.

While I considered sending the participants drafts of my writing and asking for feedback and indicated in the permissions letters that I would do so, ultimately I decided against this course of action for a few reasons. First, the young women already had given a lot of time to the project and further time commitments were not part of their agreement to be in the study. Second, by the time I had a written product to share with them, a year and a half had passed since their involvement with the group, thus I doubted our conversations would be fresh enough in their minds for them to provide the sort of helpful feedback I would need. Finally, I discovered that by practicing appreciative listening, I was able to put some of my own preconceptions aside to hear deeply into the young women's stories. While this is not the same as checking my interpretations with them, I was confident that I could honor the young women's voices while still being the one who offered the final analysis.

This being said, a commitment I have for future research is to build more participant interpretation into the research process. While it is important to remember that research participants never completely lack power,[190] it is also crucial that research with youth evidence as much power sharing as is possible, given the prevalent exploitation of youth culture.[191] One relatively straightforward way to include another level of interpretation from participants arises out of a process I have used as an educator. To promote continuity from one educational session to the next, I begin each session with a brief recapitulation of themes from our previous week's discussion and invite students to

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190. See note 152 above.

191. For instance, in the practice of "cool hunting," new trends that start on the margins of teen culture are soon packaged and sold back to teens for the profit of large corporations. For more on the practice of "cool hunting," see Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003) 41-45. For a theologically-oriented take, see Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

comment on, add to, and correct the list based on their understandings.[192] In a research

setting, a similar process could be used, with the researcher testing initial interpretations

from the previous research session with participants. A second way to build more

participant interpretation into the process is to conduct participatory action research, as I

discuss below, where research participants are involved intimately in the planning and

carrying out of the research project and thus can give feedback throughout the research

process.

<div align="center">Do Homework and Participatory Action Research</div>

How to relate to research participants once the researcher leaves the field is

another power-related question that feminist social science researchers consider. Grateful

for what they have learned from participants and often having developed close

relationships with them, researchers question how they can give something back to the

people with whom they have worked. While research subjects may be empowered by the

attention given them by a researcher, particularly when a researcher takes the time to hear

the subject's story, this benefit can be short-lived, since it often ends when the researcher

leaves the field.[193] A common way researchers may try to give back in the long-term is

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192. The process I describe here is a less formalized version of Stephen Brookfield's process of using a classroom critical incident questionnaire, in which students respond to a series of questions at the end of a class period to give feedback to the instructor on aspects of the class that are engaging, distancing, affirming, confusing, or surprising. The instructor then analyzes these questionnaires and shares some of the main themes with students the following class, either in writing or aloud. See Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995) 114-139.

193. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, "Introduction," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 1-5.

through challenging stereotypes.[194] For instance, while Lila Abu-Lughod doubts that the

stories of Bedouin women she has collected will be valued in their own country, she

hopes to challenge stereotypes about Arabs held by a reading audience in the United

States.[195]

After Stories of Gender was complete, I was in contact once more with the young

women, sending them thank you cards containing personalized notes and gift cards in

small amounts to express my gratitude for their participation. I hope that the young

women benefitted from their participation in the project, but I cannot assume any benefit

accrued had a lasting effect. This knowledge has prompted me to adopt a posture of

thankful acceptance, graciously receiving the gift the participants have given me.

Theologically speaking, these young women have graced me with their presence and

stories from their lives. This posture of grateful acceptance is important to adopt because

it reflects what I have read and continually affirm in my writing: that young women are

not helpless, always needing assistance from those who are older and wiser, but are fonts

of wisdom themselves, fully capable of making the decision to give of themselves

without expecting something in return. It has also led me to write this dissertation in a

particular way, foregrounding the narratives of the young women in the hopes of

challenging stereotypes about adolescent women held in our culture. In a culture that

glorifies youth as an age of beauty and unbridled sexuality while ignoring the complex

specificity of young people's lives, I aim to introduce readers to young women who are

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194. See, for instance, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 22-26 and Elaine Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence*, 9-14.

195. Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds,* 36-42.

aware of and struggle with our beauty culture, who are so much more than sex symbols, and who have thought-provoking stories to tell about their lives. Further, in a culture that tells girls to be whoever they want to be while also treating girls as if they need to be saved from themselves, I hope to demonstrate that at least some young women are thriving and dreaming big dreams while also, at least implicitly, questioning the individualization discourse in which they are embedded. Finally, in a culture that assumes religion holds no interest or promise for young people, I show how some young women's positive sense of self is undergirded by the language and narratives of their faith traditions.

In order to give back, feminist researchers also make recommendations for changing where and how research is conducted. One recommendation is to do homework instead of fieldwork, that is, to situate one's research in one's own community.[196] For example, oral historian Karen Olson has conducted interviews with steel working families in the town in which she teaches at a community college.[197] Based on this research, she has held community forums and faculty development workshops to help those in the community see that they possess wisdom and knowledge from which everyone can learn and to encourage the studying of the community so that they can propose solutions to their problems based on their own work.

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196. Lal, "Situating Locations," 185-214.

197. Karen Olson and Linda Shopes, "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History among Working-Class Women and Men," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 189-204.

A second suggestion has been to adopt strategies of participatory action research in which research participants help shape and conduct research.[198] A widely cited example of this sort of research is the El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City, which works to empower Puerto Ricans through native-language literacy training. Researchers are involved in all aspects of the program, which includes having the participants write autobiographies to share with fellow participants.[199] Through the process, researchers gain knowledge about the life experiences and self-concepts of the participants, and the participants gain literacy. Because participants and researchers are connected to the program over an extended period of time, they build relationships of trust and mutuality that undergird their cooperative work to better the life situation of Puerto Ricans in New York.

For most ethnographers from the United States, Stories of Gender would not count as fieldwork, since I was working in my home country with populations of women with many similarities to myself. However, I "entered the field" in the southeastern United States knowing I would not live there forever and thus would be involved only temporarily with the communities in which I was doing research. As I have worked on this project, I am amazed by the great gift the Stories of Gender participants gave me in terms of their willingness to share their stories and reflections with me. I often feel regret that I cannot give back to them more directly. I mention this here because it is this feeling

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198. Feminist researchers are enthusiastic about participatory action research since it promotes mutuality between researcher and research subject and arises out of and addresses concerns of the research subjects. Difficulties of participatory action research include its intensive time commitment and the fact that current academic systems are not set up to reward this type of work. See Wolf, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas," 26-31.

199. Rita Benmayor, "Testimony, Action Research, and Empowerment: Puerto Rican Women and Popular Education," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 159-174. This study is cited, for instance, in Wolf, "Situating Feminist Dilemmas," 29 and Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 23-24.

that leads me to consider how I might design future research projects with young women so that I am doing "homework," that is, research in my own community, a community in which I am committed to living and in which I could have longer-term relationships with research subjects and their faith communities. Further, a commitment to sharing power with research subjects combined with my own commitments as a religious educator and practical theologian leads me to ponder how future research designs might be closer to a participatory action research model, so that the research experience itself could more directly meet the needs of the young women with whom I work.

This seems particularly important in research with youth. It may be empowering for youth to be listened to and to know that researchers think their lives are worth paying attention to, but it bears further reflection to think about what happens when a researcher leaves, particularly if this means that youth go back to feeling as if they are not listened to or appreciated. Research strategies that enable researchers and research subjects to work cooperatively on mutually articulated goals seem particularly promising for religious educators and practical theologians who "are dedicated to the notion of pursuing knowledge for the sake of something—well-being, understanding, justice, or as we would put it, 'to have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10)."[200]

My commitment is for future research with young women to be participatory action homework research. I want to work with one group of young women over a longer period of time in a location to which the young women and myself are committed, be that a faith community or a geographic location. Drawing on the conventions of participatory action research, in this project I would listen closely to young women sharing their life experiences through a variety of media (written narratives, photographs, music, collages,

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200. Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, xxv.

etc.) over an extended period of time. Then, I would partner with them, serving largely as

an advisor and resource, in a project that addressed an area of concern for them or that

enabled them to share their stories with other constituencies that might benefit from their

experiences. Let me offer two brief examples of the types of projects I am envisioning. If

I had been able to work with the New Life Baptist group over a longer period of time, I

could have assisted the young women in developing a retreat based on their idea of a

camp that teaches girls to have more confidence in their bodies by learning about

nutrition and exercise, taking part in embodied performance activities, and participating

in prayer experiences aimed at undergirding their sense that they are loved by God just as

they are. Then the young women could have offered the retreat to other young women at

their church or another local church or school. Alternatively, we also could have

undertaken a video project, with the young women creating digital stories about their

female identities, including their theological reflection on these identities, stories that

could be shared with their congregation or with a larger audience through a site like You

Tube.[201] Ideally by combining my roles as an ethnographic researcher and religious

educator in a longer-term project utilizing the appreciative, transformative inquiry

method, I would be in a better position to give back to the young women with whom I

work. Religious educators and practical theologians would do well to think further about

how to conduct tensegritous research of this sort, that is, research that creatively balances

the interests of the researcher with the needs and desires of those being studied.

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201. This idea for a video project is inspired and informed by Gonick, *Between Femininities*; the Center for Digital Story-Telling, http://www.storycenter.org/index1.html (accessed July 11, 2011); and TVbyGIRLS, http://www.tvbygirls.tv/the_site/home.htm, (accessed July 11, 2011). For more on the work of TVbyGIRLS, see Claire Bischoff, Rebecca Richards Bullen, Molly Nemer, and Rachel Quednau, "In the Flow of Media, Religion, and Culture: A Case Study with TVbyGIRLS," *Religious Education* 106, no. 4, (2011): 384-397.

CHAPTER THREE

LISTENING TO GIRLS: RESULTS FROM STORIES OF GENDER

Let Me Introduce You to Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren of Grace Methodist Church

When I decided I wanted to learn more about young women's narrative agency and girlhood identities, I knew I could read the research others had done. However, I also wanted to talk to actual young women about the details of their everyday lives, which meant finding young women who would be willing to talk to me. Immediately, Grace United Methodist Church in Eastview, Georgia, came to mind. Having worked with young women from Grace UMC on two previous research projects, the pastor, youth director, young women, and their parents and grandparents had grown accustomed to having me around.[202] I hoped this familiarity would serve my research and their experience well because we would be delving into a potentially more sensitive topic in this project, namely, the question of what it means to be a girl. Numerous phone calls, messages, e-mails, and one information session later, I had my group: Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren. Although I knew the four of us would have great discussions, I also was annoyed at myself for not having been able to gather together the four to seven participants I had anticipated forming our group. Knowing that Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren were anxious to take part in this project and unsure of what other faith communities I might easily be able to partner with, I decided our small group would have to be good enough.

Each Wednesday afternoon for six weeks in the summer of 2005 I met Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren in the deserted parking lot of Grace UMC. Usually the three rising

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202. See note 122 above.

high school sophomores would help me lug bags of snacks and drinks up to the youth room on the second floor of the fellowship hall, where we would rearrange the couches so that they made an intimate U surrounding the snacks, drinks, and my voice recorder on the floor. Lauren and I always got our own couches, facing each other, and Emmy and Bethany, best friends since the fifth grade, would sit on the middle couch.

At our first gathering, I further explained the research to the young women, and they completed a questionnaire I had written in order to learn more about the contexts of their lives. Even though I knew all three young women from previous research and all three knew each other well from attending the same church and high school, at our second meeting we did not yet jump into the heart of our work. Instead, I brought a stack of popular magazines and asked each young woman to create a collage answering our central question, "What does it mean to be a girl?" using three images and three words from the magazines.[203] The following conversation took place.[204]

Viewing Emmy's collage, Bethany interprets the salad and yogurt drink as a sign that women need to be healthy, the Natural Glow lotion as skin needing to be tan and shiny, and "In Style" as girls wanting to buy fashionable clothes even if they cannot afford them. I pick up on "The Look," assuming that it refers to girls adorning themselves with the right clothes, makeup, and hairstyles. Largely, Emmy concurs with our readings, adding that even when women feel like indulging in ice cream, it has to be healthy and that she understands Kelly Clarkson as an ideal, someone who is attractive but not too

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203. See note 133 above.

204. Lauren was not present at this session. My descriptions of the conversations that took place in this story-sharing group are taken from my field notes and transcriptions from the audio recordings of our sessions. I have mixed paraphrases and direct quotations from the young women to preserve the young women's voices while also offering an appropriately abbreviated account of our sessions, each of which last between one and two hours. All direct quotations come from the transcripts of our conversations.

thin, as are Nicole Richie and Nicole Kidman, the other stars on the collage. She notes that girls have to be skinny to be popular and sexy; if you are skinny, then guys want you more.

Similar words and images echo in Bethany's collage. Noticing the long list at the top of the collage of skin, hair, lips, eyes, face, and fragrance, Emmy says, "You have to have to have it all perfect. It all has to be perfect, and you have to have love," (perhaps consciously, perhaps not, equating the image of beauty perfection with receiving love). She is also emphatic that young women "have to have" shoes, accessories, boys, and beauty in order to be the right sort of girl. According to Bethany, this long list of words is what the majority of girls worry about the most, and she remarks that girls fall in love and get hurt easily and that they try anything they can to lose weight.

As the Emmy and Bethany leave, I hope that this collage activity has stimulated their thinking about what it means to be a girl, the topic they have been asked to write a personal narrative about for the next week. As I look at the collages one more time, I notice a major theme emerge from Bethany's and Emmy's collages: that part of being a young woman is projecting a particular beauty image that involves being thin, eating healthy, wearing fashionable clothes and accessories, and maintaining tan and blemish-free skin. In other words, being a girl means being perfectly beautiful.

"Looking for Mr. Right": Bethany's Story

After these two preliminary weeks, Bethany is the brave volunteer who agrees to share her story first. In response to the question "What does it mean to be a girl?" Bethany discusses her romantic relationships with boyfriends, the heartbreaks these

relationships have caused, and the difficulty of dating when parents insist on giving their approval. She begins her story, "Growing up I have liked a lot of different kinds of boys, but when I finally started getting real boyfriends, it seemed to me that I couldn't find one that my parents approved of." She describes how difficult it is for her to convince her family, especially her grandfather, to see beyond the surface to what she values in a particular boyfriend. While having a boyfriend is fun, Bethany also says it can be "a pain because you have to worry about if he's cheating on you and if he really means what he says," particularly since she believes girls are more serious in relationships than boys. Bethany recognizes that "finding the right boyfriend is always hard to do, because you don't know if you really like someone 'til you get to know them." When she was in seventh grade, Bethany's grandmother predicted she would have many boyfriends and lots of heartaches; Bethany now believes her grandmother. As she concludes her story, "My heart has been broken many times, and I'm still looking for Mr. Right!!!!!"

Our discussion following Bethany's story encompasses many topics, including why parents are so protective of their daughters and seem intent on judging their daughter's friends and boyfriends on external appearance and reputation. As Emmy comments, "What you dress like does not say who you are… [Parents] don't see what is really in them." However, the central topics of our discussion are friends who are boys and boyfriends.

The young women enjoy hanging out with boys more than girls. Boys are carefree and do not gossip, whereas girls tend to make everything into a big deal. Boyfriends are a different story, though. They believe that boyfriends are apt to cheat and say "I love you" without truly meaning it, yet the young women blame themselves for break ups and for

not learning from past experiences of being hurt. Despite the pain associated with break-

ups, all three acknowledge that being popular and accepted in high school necessitates

having a boyfriend and that having a boyfriend meets a need to feel loved. Further,

particularly for these young women, all of whom struggle with challenging home

situations and mention how they have grown distant from their father figures in their teen

years, boyfriends represent a caring male who will be there for them. Lauren puts voice

to the groups' thoughts, saying,

> Girls really strive for acceptance. I think girls have a hard time with actually
> being accepted and, you know, really, some girls will do whatever they have to do
> to be accepted… You, you know, if you have a boyfriend, then you, you know
> that at least one person really accepts you.

> And I think that as far as having a guy that's there for you, if you don't have a
> good father figure in your life, that can really affect your relationship and that,
> you know, at least you have some kind of male figure, whether it's good or bad,
> you—you have it there. If you don't—if your dad isn't that good to you or if he's
> not there, then it can change things and you know, you can act different from that.

Lauren even provides a theological explanation for her desire to have a boyfriend, saying

that God created girls and guys so that they could "mix and intercommunicate… If you

only have one part of the equation, then you're not—you're always going to feel like

something is missing."

As we would do each week, we conclude our discussion by naming where we see

God in Bethany's story. The young women believe God is there for you in the dark times

and loves you, even if it feels like no one else does. As Emmy shares,

> If you can—if you just think about Him, then you know that you're safe. Like
> whenever you're hurt or whatever, yeah, you might think, "Oh, I want to die," or
> something, but you might listen to sad songs, you might, you know—but if you
> just think to yourself that He's there, then you know, you can get through… And

you at least know somebody loves you, if nobody else does. If nobody, not even your parents do, you know that He loves you.[205]

Thus the young women end our discussion affirming the importance of their friendships with each other and recognizing God's presence in these friendships. Friends act in God's stead as those we can call when we need to cry, pray, and receive support.

<div align="center">"You Have To Be a Certain Way": Emmy's Story</div>

While Bethany is shy and was nervous to share her story, her best friend Emmy, our story sharer the following week, is outgoing and relishes any opportunity to be the center of attention. Emmy is clear that being a girl has much to do with appearances: "Well to me to be a girl you have to be a certain way!!" Dressing a particular way helps insure a girl will find a boyfriend and fit in with the right crowd, and girls get emotional when they do not look the way they think they should. Beyond stressing out about looks, Emmy says girls have to worry about getting pregnant, a worry that does not plague young men. Emmy questions why girls have to look a certain way and ends her story on the hopeful note of wanting to change this someday.

Our discussion of Emmy's story focuses on the importance of physical appearance for female identity. The narrow limits of how young women are supposed to look, defined in large part by the women they see in the media, becomes apparent as the girls discuss how clothes should be tight but not too tight and make-up should be worn but not too much. Erring on either side of the perfect middle can get you labeled as a nerd

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205. I want to recognize here that the young women used exclusively male language for God in our conversations. As I discussed above in chapter two, this was not something I felt comfortable problematizing for them. I have come to understand their reliance on male God language in light of their conversation about the importance of having trusted male figures in their lives. I hypothesize that for these three young women, all of whom have difficult relationships with their fathers, a loving, male God serves an affirming role in their lives. The relationship between young women's female faith identities and their gendered images of God is a promising area for future research.

or a slut, so girls carry mirrors with them to check their looks constantly. When I ask them what they would like to see changed so that life might be better for their daughters, Emmy is quick to respond: "Girls aren't thinking they have to look a certain way. They can look any way and still be pretty." Lauren adds that she wants people to be judged on inside beauty, not just what is on the outside.

These young women have been told not to listen to what others say about their appearance, and they express a desire to be whoever they want to be. They want to be independent, but also know that acting flirty, innocent, and stupid, particularly around boys, is what is expected of them. Stuck between a desire to be themselves and a desire to garner the approval of others, they turn to their belief that God makes people as God wants them to look. As Bethany says, "God made you a certain way, and He's going to love you no matter what. I mean, it says in the Bible that you're supposed to have your body be the temple of God," by which she means staying in shape and improving yourself in small ways, like make-up, but not in large ways, like plastic surgery. While looks are crucial for female identity, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren take solace in the knowledge that God accepts them just as they are.

<center>"Can't a Girl Just Be Herself?": Lauren's Story</center>

Lauren, the most introspective one of the group, is our final story sharer. She begins by assuring us she could never capture her total experience of being a girl on paper, adding that being a girl can be "the greatest or the worst thing in the world, depending on the situation." For instance, "Girls have the opportunity to bring God's children into this world, but they just go through the pain physically and mentally to do

it." Similar to Emmy, Lauren takes up the theme of stereotypical categories into which women are expected to fit, naming dressing up and playing with Barbie dolls as a prevalent image of young girls, and identifying "predominant businesswomen, soccer moms, or stay-at-home-take-care-of-the-kids moms" as the options for adult women. Societal images of the "normal girl" are frustrating to Lauren, who wants to know "what happened to the happy medium" and asks "Can't a girl just be herself, who she wants without having to adapt to what people see her as or want her to be?" Parents confuse the process further by wanting their daughters to stay little girls forever. With all of these expectations, Lauren bemoans how hard it is "to find the real girl inside yourself." Recognizing the importance of balance, Lauren writes, "I want to be a strong chick but with needs. I want to be independent but have people there to catch me if I fall."[206] Finally, Lauren believes that God made girls for a reason and that God "made us what we are and no matter what happens we should be what we are and not fall victim to the views of society or other people. And if there is no one else in the world who will accept you for who you are God will."

Our discussion of Lauren's story revisits and expands on themes from our previous sessions. The young women touch on the protective nature of fathers and the contradictory messages about girlhood they receive from their mothers, who want them to be themselves but without being too different from other girls. They also consider how the images of femininity Lauren has named will play out in their futures, as they are

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206. During our conversation, I interrogate Lauren's use of the word "chicks" for girls. Lauren says she used the word in her narrative when she wanted to make a strong point about girls, and Emmy and Bethany explain to me that girls who are friends often use this term for each other and that boys tend to use the term for girls they like. I then admit to them that the reason I am pushing this point is that I get upset when I hear men referring to women as chicks, seeing it as a term that belittles women. Their polite response is that older people (like me) tend to take language more seriously than young people do and that young people simply have a lot of nicknames for each other.

adamant that their daughters will have both Barbie dolls and trucks to play with and that

they will find a way to balance careers and time with their families.

At the very end of our conversation, I ask them to think about the way in which

Lauren concluded her story. Their personal theologies provide a place of resistance

against a culture that tells them they have to look a certain way. All three are convinced

that even when no one else does, God sees who you are deep inside and loves you. It is

worth quoting their exchange at length:

Claire:	Where did you hear or see God in Lauren's story?
Emmy:	The whole part about being who you want to be and not what other people think you should be.
Bethany:	Yeah, and how you're His child, too.
Emmy:	How you're His child no matter what. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, He will always love you.
Bethany:	And He sees you for who you really are and not—not what people want you to be and what you think you should be. He sees you, who you really are, no matter what happens. And no matter what you do to yourself either or do to your body, with tattoos and piercing, He still see who you really are.
Emmy:	He sees through all the bad things that you do. He sees deep down inside of you.

Working together, these young women draw on their religious tradition to find

acceptance for who they are in the transcendent figure of God.

Exit Interviews

After our story-sharing sessions were complete, we met one final time at the

church. Two of the three young women hung out in the youth room upstairs while I

conducted the closing interview with the third one in the barren ground floor of the

fellowship hall. After Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren each had their turn to talk with me

about their experiences in the group, the four of us went out to dinner at a Japanese steak

house (the girls' choice) to celebrate our work. And Emmy, who is friends with everyone, got us a table with a chef she knows there who put on quite a show for our little group.

Through the exit interviews, the young women express their enjoyment of this novel opportunity in which they had a formal space to reflect on their personal experiences, gender as a generalized experience, and how God is present in their life stories. While they were already friends, all three indicate that the group brought them closer together, as they came to know more about their similarities and differences and were able to interpret anew tough times they had experienced together in the past. Despite largely positive experiences, the young women mention the challenge of choosing what to write about and their nervousness about sharing their stories. This nervousness was dispelled once each received affirmation of her story from the rest of the group, affirmation they found comforting and supportive. In the end, our story-sharing group was a safe, girls' only space where they could construct and try on understandings of female identity away from the judgments of parents, classmates, and the larger culture and where they could appeal to God as a way of finding acceptance for their true selves.

The foregoing narrative offers a glimpse into the dynamics of the story-sharing groups of Stories of Gender. In what follows, I offer results from the project, articulating content themes that arose across the young women's narratives, common processes through which the young women construct a sense of self, and the theological language upon which the young women drew. Then I survey the exit interviews, considering particularly how the young women experienced the story-sharing pedagogy of Stories of Gender.

The Content of Female Identity: Themes from Stories of Gender

In discerning common themes about female identity from our discussions, I do not wish to imply that every young woman or even each participant would identify with the theme or experience it in the same way in her life. This was something about which the Southeastern University group was cognizant. While many of them identified with particular categories of experience, such as menstruation, all of their individual experiences of that category varied based on the particularities of their selves and situations. That a particular theme of female identity does not apply universally to all young women, however, does not make the act of identifying themes meaningless. By listening closely to the similarities and the differences in these young women's experiences of gender, we can identify the prevalent and influential discourses of female identity upon which they draw. Each of the themes below is identified with a gerund phrase, which connotes the active and ever-changing aspects of narrative identity. The themes that arose in Stories of Gender largely mirror the themes of female identity presented in the literature review in chapter one.

Being Yourself

The young women were clear that girls are supposed to be themselves as opposed to the selves others might expect them to be. "Being yourself" was code for making independent decisions and embracing the entirety of one's identity and was linked to a belief that people have a true self that resides deeper than the surface images a person projects. The young women were realistic about how challenging this is, placing partial blame on social groups in high schools. In having to choose between social groups, Idana

felt like she was "being untruthful and dishonest with myself and others," since each group meant she had to deny other important aspects of herself.

Creating the Right Look

No matter how many times they are told they are good enough as they are, the young women feel pressure to make themselves look like the women they see in the media. Being a girl means being perfectly beautiful—being thin, eating healthy, wearing fashionable clothes and accessories, and maintaining tan and blemish-free skin. The New Life Baptist girls add an additional feature to this sketch of the perfect look—skin color, for which lighter is deemed better than darker.

Nowhere is this image more precise than when it comes to body weight and shape. Girls are expected to be thin, but with large breasts, and the African American participants at New Life Baptist stressed that curvaceous rear-ends and legs were also desirable. The difficulty of trying to achieve the "perfect" middle ground leaves few young women comfortable with their bodies.

Striving to achieve the perfect look takes its toll. Monica gave voice to the importance that each decision ends up taking, saying "In a day and age where we superficially have so many options, I feel like every decision I make has to be calculated and precise, and I always have to be ready for people's insecurities and criticism." Beyond a psychic toll, projecting the right female image also takes time and money. Shantell admitted that a number of her friends steal clothes because "It was… like in high school, you have to dress a certain way to fit in."

The young women expressed frustration and dissatisfaction that they and others are judged by their looks. As Emmy put it, "What you dress like does not say who you are. One thing that ticks me off about some parents is that when they look at the guy, all they see is personal appearance. They don't see what is really in them." Even with their expressed frustration at looks being the benchmark for judgment, the young women also use the same standards in judging others, with varying levels of awareness. For instance, the Southeastern University women were acutely aware that they judged other women based on looks, even while they wished to not be judged that way themselves. Sheila shared a funny story of being critical of other college students at a Halloween party who were dressed in what she termed "skanky costumes," when she and her friends had been dressed similarly and provocatively the night before. These young women are caught in the tension between the reality that looks are a central and crucial marker of female identity and their desire to be known as so much more than just a pretty face.

<div align="center">Reaping Social Rewards of the Right Look</div>

While they do not want to be judged solely on their looks, the young women are realistic: there are important social rewards that go to those who best approximate female beauty perfection, particularly the entwined rewards of being popular and having a boyfriend. The New Life Baptist participants put it bluntly: if girls do not live up to the image of women in the media, then they are not suitable wife or girlfriend material, and by association, not suitable girls. In a culture where being a girl is so heavily defined by achieving the right look, boyfriends play the essential role of affirming girls in their attempts to project the image of the proper girl. Thus "having a boyfriend" is not

necessarily an end in itself but a way in which young women meet their need to feel accepted and loved. As Shantell put it, "When a girl is with a boy who respects her and then she feels comfortable with it, she kind of feels better about herself. She's kind of a bit more confident."

The Southeastern University participants considered two downsides of too close a link between female identity and boyfriends. First, Sheila was concerned that relationships with boyfriends can supersede all other relationships, leaving young women relatively isolated from friends and family. Second, Carolyn's story about being catcalled led to discussing the fine line between flattering and intrusive attention from men. These young women face a double-bind: needing the attention of men to affirm that they are the right sort of girl but being blamed if the attention they get from men leads to unwanted sexual advances.

Maintaining Right Relationships

Young women also are expected to take responsibility for maintaining relationships, particularly with parents and peer groups. In all three groups, this aspect of female identity was second only to the theme of creating the right look and getting a boyfriend as a result. The Southeastern University participants put this emphasis on women's relationships into a larger social context, noting that while there are cultural tropes about men as loners and leaders, women are more often and more centrally defined by their relationships.

A major difficultly the young women named in maintaining relationships with their parents was balancing the desire to be themselves with the expectations parents had

for them to be the right sort of girl. This involved deciding whether and how to live up to gender norms set and modeled by their parents and negotiating parents' overprotection. In the Southeastern University group, almost every participant shared a story of a conflict with parents centered on religious or political beliefs, leaving them to feel as if they had a mutually exclusive choice between being true to their emerging sense of self and beliefs and preserving familial relationships.

An additional aspect of maintaining relationships with parents is being called upon to take care of parents emotionally. This theme was implicit in the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups, as participants shared stories of comforting parents in the aftermath of divorce, injury, and job loss, and explicit with the Southeastern University women, as they questioned whether tending to relationships with parents necessarily involved taking responsibility for parents' emotional well-being.

Maintaining relationships with female friends has much to do with projecting the right female image, since friendship groups, especially in high school, cluster around how girls look. Particularly in the New Life Baptist group, protecting relationships with friends included making choices about how to act, as peer groups often pressured the young women to do things they found immoral, like stealing or drinking. In all three groups, the participants talked of limiting their number of female friends, since, as Shantell put it, girls can be "too much drama," talking behind your back and making a big deal out of nothing.

Feeling Isolated

Despite their striving to maintain relationships, these young women feel isolated and sense that there is no one for them to talk with about the most important things in their lives. Even high school counselors or pastors did not seem like safe confidants, as the young women were concerned that their parents would eventually find out what they were talking about and get angry with them for sharing family secrets outside the home. In the Southeastern University group, after Carolyn shared her story of being cat-called, the participants realized they all had had similar experiences but rarely talked about them with anyone, afraid they would face judgment or be blamed for what happened. As Carolyn articulated, "Everyone's feeling kind of the same thing, but none of us are saying anything publicly, so everyone just feels ostracized by themselves." In all three groups, sharing their stories of female identity helped the young women to realize that they did indeed share experiences with others and were not as alone in their identity struggles as they may have imagined.

Striving for Independence

Participants in all three groups evidenced a strong desire for being independent women. Among the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups, striving for independence was connected with being able to do what you want to do in life. They also connected independence with having a career, seeing staying home with kids and being wives as dependent and passive life choices. The New Life Baptist group members were clear that they wanted to take responsibility for their own finances as adults, so that they would not be dependent on others for financial security. As Iesha said, "I deserve to be able to go

out and make my own money, to have money to provide for myself, to take care of myself. I need to know I can take care of myself, without a man, in my wealth and my well being." While valuing independence, the Southeastern University women questioned its possibility, particularly as this connects with agency and empowerment. At our first session, we discussed the "right hand diamond ring campaign," which encouraged women to purchase diamond rings for themselves as a sign that they did not need to depend on men.[207] While some participants wanted to affirm that an agentive act is whatever feels empowering to an individual, such as buying a right hand diamond, others wondered to what extent our desires are our own and to what extent they are shaped by marketing campaigns designed to turn us into consumers.

<div align="center">Experiencing Menstruation</div>

While menstruation is something they share, these young women also experience menstruation as just one more way that girls compare themselves with other girls and find themselves lacking. Whether starting early or late compared to their friends, "Is there something wrong with me?" was a question asked by almost all the participants, partially since it was not until they were older that they found out there was a normal and wide age range for starting one's period.

While recognizing the critiques of teen magazines, the Southeastern University participants praised these magazines as at least one place they were able to find pertinent and frank information about menstruation and puberty. Lacking information and conversation partners with whom to this discuss this important life event contributed to

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207. This campaign was launched by diamond producer DeBeers in 2001 and encouraged women to use their right hands for displaying gifts to themselves.

the culture of silence around menstruation many of the young women experience. Breaking the silence, the participants laughed together as they shared strategies for carrying and using feminine products in such a way that no one would know that they had their periods.

Living Responsibly

This final theme of living responsibly brings the discussion full-circle and also names an undercurrent of much of it. Across many areas of their lives, these young women experience a heavy burden of individual responsibility, while also feeling isolated from important adults in their lives who might be able to support them or provide a safety net for their decisions. They sense that they are alone and that the consequences of their decisions will land squarely on their shoulders. Given this, it is no wonder that in describing the differences in how boys and girls think, Lauren mentions that boys are carefree while girls constantly have a string of what ifs running through their heads.

A crucial area of their lives for which these young women feel responsible is for romantic relationships and sexuality. The New Life Baptist participants know they must protect their reputations, an ambiguous category made up of things like how you look and those with whom you associate. For instance, some of Shantell's male friends have told her to stop associating with two of her female friends who have "bad reputations," code for being sexually promiscuous, because they do not want Shantell's reputation to be tainted by association. If young women choose to become sexually active, they know that they alone will be held responsible for the consequences.

Among the Southeastern University group, the discussion took on additional sophistication, as they questioned the language of "getting yourself pregnant," a phrasing of biological impossibility that allows people to hold onto the attitude that "you got yourself into this, so get yourself out of it." They also rehashed the sexual double standard within which young men become men by being sexually active, whereas young women stay young women by being sexually attractive but not sexually active. Finally, they expressed frustration at the double-bind women face: having to look a certain way to be the right sort of girl, but then having this look be pointed to as the reason that they experience sexual harassment and violence, the unfortunate logic being that a girl who dresses a certain way is somehow to blame for the unwanted sexual advances. A few of the young women even went so far as to say that they would rather be punched than sexually harassed, their reasoning being that friends would go after a guy who punched a girl and that they would get sympathy for an evident physical injury, whereas it is almost impossible to get people to believe that you were sexually harassed, let alone receive empathy or be able to hold the perpetrator responsible.

Girls, but Not Only Girls—Background Themes in Stories of Gender

While gender identity is in the foreground in Stories of Gender, other important identity categories intersect with gender, even if only in the background of the participants' stories and their discussions. As such, the young women's experiences of gender can never be isolated fully from other identity categories that contribute to their hybrid sense of self, in which they are always more than just girls.

Racial Identity and Being a Girl

Monica, the final story sharer and only non-white participant in the Southeastern

University group, narrated her experience of multi-raced identity and of people's

fascination and fear of not being able to categorize her easily into one racial category.

She wrote, "It is not as though we can separate [aspects of our identity] and decide which

one we are going to deal with right now, which one we can handle today," since "all of

these forms of oppression are interconnected, different tones of the same voice." The

group appreciated Monica's willingness to raise their racial awareness, and they

discussed the relative power people have to name their own identities and what they can

do when people put labels on them that they do not use for themselves. While whiteness

is a racial identity for her, Sabrina recognize that she has a freedom to not be aware of

this identity, a freedom that reflects the racial power dynamics of our culture.

In the Grace UMC group, where all the young women identify as white, racial

identity did not come up, nor was it discussed explicitly in the New Life Baptist group,

where all the young women identified as African American. In that group, I suspect that

racial identity did not come to the fore because (a) the participants were working with a

white researcher who did not raise the issue of race and (b) an assumed similarity of

racial identity was operative in the group. However, implicit racial aspects of female

identity become apparent in comparing what the Grace UMC participants and the New

Life Baptist participants said about what constitutes the perfect beauty image of

femininity. The African American women at New Life Baptist recognized that the perfect

figure for African American women allowed for more curves than the image of white

beauty in popular culture, and they also commented that lighter colored skin is better.

Therefore, implicitly the image of perfect female identity involves being white or being the closest approximation of white, meaning that young women of color may come to understand their racial identity as a liability to their ability to be the right sort of girl.

Class Status and Being a Girl

Class status arose mainly in relation to how much money it costs to live up to the image of female beauty perfection. Almost everyone in the New Life Baptist group had friends who had stolen clothing items, feeling that dressing in a certain way was crucial for their acceptance in high school. In the Southeastern University group, the participants bemoaned the multiple ways that living up to the perfect image costs girls, in terms of time, energy, and money. They were clear that very few girls they knew actually had the time and money resources to project the beauty image they felt popular culture demanded. In other words, the image of the perfect girl is connected to upper-middle class status, leaving girls without the same financial resources scrambling to find ways to approximate the image of female beauty perfection.

Sexual Identity and Being a Girl

While they likely would not use this language, the Stories of Gender participants experience the culture of compulsory heterosexuality in high school.[208] In the high school groups, there was no mention or discussion of alternatives to this normative heterosexuality. Likely many factors contributed to this silence, including my expressed

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208. For more on culture of compulsory heterosexuality in high schools, see John E. Petrovic and Rebecca M. Ballard, "Unstraightening the Ideal Girl: Lesbians, High School, and Spaces to Be," in *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, eds. Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005) 195-209.

expectation that the young women not share stories of sexual encounters. It is also possible that young women questioning their sexuality may not have felt comfortable raising these questions in a church setting. Developmental and cultural components may have been at play also; as Barbara Blodgett found in her study of young women's sexuality, adolescents are much more likely to talk about romance than sexuality.[209]

In the Southeastern University group, Carolyn identified as bisexual in passing, but most of our discussion of sexuality surrounded the issue of young women being held responsible for negative sexual attention they receive in the form of catcalls, inappropriate touching, and, in extreme cases, rape. While the way sexuality was discussed differed between the high school groups and the college group, in none of the groups did the discussion ever become more personal, that is, with the young women thinking about their own personal sexual identities and experiences in relation to their female faith identities. This does raise the question of what faith communities can do to create more space for girls to discuss their sexual identities, given the desire expressed by girls to connect sexuality and faith.[210]

Processes of Constructing Female Identity

Within a narrative understanding, identity includes both content and process, that is, *what* people say about who they are and *how* they make sense of who they are. While the question in the previous sections was what it means to be a young woman, the question here is the nature of young women's agency in narrating their sense of self.

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209. Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic*, 104-113.

210. Davis, *Beyond Nice*, 79-96.

Forming Narratives, Taking Action, and Encountering Reactions: An Interplay

Chapter one opened with Iesha's story of struggling to overcome people's perceptions of what larger women can accomplish. As a young girl, Iesha understood herself to be "active and vibrant," a self-definition encouraged by her mother, who wanted to make sure her daughters had opportunities that had not been available to her. During puberty, Iesha put on weight, leading her to encounter a narrative that challenged her vibrant sense of self, particularly when the head of her dance company would not allow her to learn Pointe because of her size. At the time, Iesha experienced a diminishment of identity, feeling like "less of a girl" because of her size, and she had to make sense of this new story of being a "bigger girl."

This image of being too big stayed with Iesha. When her twin sister asked her to try out for cheerleading in high school, her initial response was no because she was out of practice and did not have the right body for it. Encouraged and coached by her sister, Iesha regained confidence, made the cheerleading squad, and eventually was promoted to captain. While still encountering expectations that she was too big from peers, her decision to try out and her actions of working hard on cheerleading enabled Iesha to believe that she was, in fact, not too big and that she could succeed at her current size. Through this process, Iesha came to accept and love herself as she was, realizing that she is somebody even though she does not fit with society's idea of the "perfect woman."

Iesha's story is also book-ended with theological glosses, which provide an overarching framework for her current self-understanding. While recognizing that her thoughts, actions, and looks are all part of being a girl, she claims that she is "female because that is what God created me to be." Putting God and God's love first in her life

has contributed to her ability to love herself and to challenge a societal push for women to be Barbie dolls. Further, grounding her female identity in her relationship with God has enabled Iesha to incorporate her previous self-image as "too big" into her story in a new way. She believes God gave her this challenge in life so that through it she could help others.

Working with this one thread of Iesha's identity gives us a glimpse of how complex the process of identity negotiation is for young women. It involves:

- Forming images and stories of the self;

- Acting on these images and stories;

- Encountering affirmation or denial of self-narratives in relationships with family, friends, trusted adults and through interactions with larger social groups and cultural forces;

- Forming new images and stories and taking new action based on affirmation and denial of previous self-narratives;

- Reincorporating previous and possibly discounted images and stories in new ways based on new images, actions, and reactions.

Narrating Identity—Becoming Conscious and Experiencing Healing

As intimated in the previous chapter and discussed further in the following chapters, heavy reliance on writing and discussing narratives in educational and research settings with young women limits the aspects of personal identity that may be explored. Yet this does not mean that the act of narrating identity—done through written narrative and small group discussion in Stories of Gender, but also possible to do through a variety

of pedagogical means—is itself problematic for young women. In fact, across all three story-sharing groups, the act of composing and sharing their stories with an affirming audience aided the young women in coming to new awareness about aspects of their identity as they claimed implicit or previously unimportant aspects of their identity for themselves. Further, a few of the participants took steps on the path of healing from hurtful past events by telling and reflecting on their stories, as was the case with Idana at New Life Baptist.

In her story, Idana told of becoming good friends with three other young women her senior year in high school. When one of the girls started talking behind another one's back, a fight ensued. Despite Idana's efforts to keep the group intact, the group broke up. Idana was not aware that this conflict still bothered her until she wrote and shared her story with the group. The process of telling her story not only enabled her to become conscious of an important aspect of her identity—her role as a relationship maintainer—but also helped her feel "more calm" about the situation.

<center>Encountering Stories of Self in Relationships</center>

These young women also encounter what Nelson terms third-person identity narratives. In other words, parents, friends, and other important people tell stories about their identities, and they then must make sense of these stories—rejecting them, living into them, or some more complex combination of these two options. For instance, Bethany's grandmother told her when she was in seventh grade that she would have many boyfriends and broken hearts. At the time, Bethany did not believe her grandmother, thinking her seventh grade boyfriend would be "the one forever" and

rejecting the image of the oft-brokenhearted. While resisting this story at first, Bethany uses it as a central idea in her narrative of girlhood. For Bethany's fifteen-year-old self, this image of the broken-hearted girl looking for love, drawn from conversations with her grandmother, clearly has explanatory power, helping Bethany make sense of who she is as a young woman.

Significant figures in the young women's lives also live identity narratives the young women wish to adopt for themselves. For example, when New Life Baptist group members asked Aasha to talk more about her relationship with her mom, Aasha lifted her mother up as an example of an independent woman who is able to provide for her family as a single mother, an image Aasha hopes to emulate some day by having the ability to provide for her family regardless of whether or not she is married.

Third-person identity narratives also can make it difficult for the young women to name their own identities. In her story, Lauren enumerates the many images that girls must live up to, from societal images to expectations from boyfriends and parents. She then writes, "Of all the images girls get and all the space they are to fill… it gets hard to find the real girl inside yourself." All of the narratives of girlhood reflected to young women from others may crowd out their own sense of self, thus limiting their ability to tell their own identity-constituting narratives. Further, as the young women try to live up to these various images, they may find themselves, as Idana did, being "untruthful and dishonest" with themselves and others, ignoring parts of themselves in order to maintain relationships and the right image.

Reflecting, Projecting, and Subverting Cultural Narratives

The young women also named images and narratives that exist in the broader culture of which they must make sense and to which they are held accountable by peers, primarily, but also by parents, teachers, and ministers. Largely through the messages of advertising and the social worlds of their high schools, the young women have discerned that who they are understood to be as young women is based largely on external appearance. Choices they make about how they are going to adorn themselves with clothes, accessories, and make-up are also choices about how they are going to define themselves in continuity with or against the image of the "perfect girl." As one example, Bethany talked about how she changes what she wears to match how she feels, dressing preppy, gothic, or country, depending on how she wants to be understood. Naturally blonde and large busted, Lisa now dies her hair red so that she can be "a force to be reckoned with" instead of a "dumb blonde;" never wears low-cut tops because she has noticed she gets taken more seriously when she does so; and dresses as a nurse/trained assassin, a character from a Quentin Tarrantino film, for Halloween to subvert the image of the slutty nurse on this increasingly sexualized holiday. In a culture where female identity is tied closely to physical appearance, these young women voice themselves through physical appearance, making choices in order to tell particular stories about themselves.

Comparing to Young Men

Young women are what young men are not: this is another way young women make sense of their gender identities. According to the New Life Baptist participants,

girls are good decisions makers, expected to spend money wisely and to do well in school so that they can attend college, whereas the boys they know waste money on lottery tickets and drop out of school. In the Grace UMC group, we discussed how girls are more emotional and enter into romantic relationships in more depth than their more stoic male counterparts.

These young women also come up against cultural narratives about men's and women's roles, which are played out in their families. The New Life Baptist participants discussed social and historical expectations that men be breadwinners outside the home and that women stay home to take care of the house and children. In almost all of their families, this translates into the expectation that female children do the cleaning, while male children are not held to the same standards. While most of the young women fulfill their roles as house cleaners, they express anger about this double standard and envision sharing the cleaning tasks among all family members once they have their own families.

A final way the young women make sense of their female identity in comparison to men is through the male gaze. In other words, their assessments of their own female identities are tied intimately to how they are viewed by men. As we discussed in the Southeastern University group, the right kind of male attention (not too intrusive) could bolster their sense of self-esteem whereas the wrong kind of male attention, in the form of catcalls, inappropriate touching, or other unwanted sexual advances, shook their confidence.

Reacting to Major Life Events

As the young women looked back on their lives through their stories, it was clear that major life events, such as parents' divorce or beginning menstruation, often disturbed their current narratives and provided the impetus for them to re-imagine themselves, although not always in positive ways. For instance, Alexa described herself as a "skinny, happy little girl," but this story changed in the wake of her parents' divorce. She experienced depression, felt isolated, and started eating more and gaining weight. The three days Sheila spent in a psychiatric hospital after a suicide attempt occasioned self-examination. She realized that she had neglected her relationship with her parents and friends while dating her boyfriend, which left her isolated after her boyfriend broke up with her. Sheila felt that she became a woman through this experience, since she had to "take responsibility for her actions in a completely different way." While this clearly was a painful experience for her, as Elizabeth reflected, Sheila emerged from it as a beautiful young woman for whom this event was defining, although not in a wholly negative or limiting way.

Thinking Anew in New Surroundings

In new surroundings, young women often reinterpret previous experiences and self-narratives. Kathleen's story of experiencing menarche that opens chapter two is an excellent example of this dynamic. Her first period was an occasion shrouded in embarrassment and fear, and she recalls barely being able to whisper to her mom that her period had started and waiting a few months to tell her best friend. Moving away from home to attend Southeastern University, Kathleen met people who had been raised with

very different associations for menstruation as a cleansing and life-giving process to be celebrated. While she would not go so far as to wear a t-shirt saying she is on her period, Kathleen has come to feel that this a natural and beautiful part of who she is as a young women, a change in attitude that has bolstered her self-confidence.

"God Wants Girls to be Themselves": Girlhood Identity through the Eyes of Faith

In this section, I detail how the Stories of Gender participants drew on faith-based language in narrating their female identity. In the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups, the participants evidenced relationships with God and their faith communities that were supportive of a positive sense of self. In the Southeastern University group, the young women's relationships with faith were more complex, as many had experienced both liberating and oppressive stands of Christian traditions in relation to their female identities. It is worth noting that the religious contexts of the three groups varied, with the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups taking place within established faith communities of which the participants were a part and the Southeastern University group occurring in a seemingly non-religious environment. This likely influenced how faith was discussed in relation to female identity.

God Knows, Loves, and Accepts Girls as They Are

This was a resounding theme in the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist story-sharing groups. For instance, it was raised by Lauren, who argued in her story that girls should see themselves as God sees them, that is, as acceptable and loveable just as they are, which she contrasted with girls falling victim to the views of society or the opinions

of others. A relationship with God undergirds a young woman's ability to be herself, since, as Emmy puts it, "God wants girls to be themselves." Further, as the Stories of Gender participants struggle with being accepted as the right sort of girl, the love and acceptance they feel in their relationships with God is redemptive. Put slightly differently, when God loves you, then you can love yourself, as the theological bookends of Iesha's story indicate. In the fickle world of high school relationships, the love of God is something that cannot be taken away. As Iesha said, "So long as you have the love of Jesus and the love of God inside of you as well, then everything's ok."

God Is Present, Particularly When Girls Face Hard Times

In contrast to their often-felt sense of isolation, many of the Stories of Gender participants were confident that God is there for them, even when they cannot feel God's presence or get angry with God. Here Lauren gives voice to the importance of God's presence when she is hurting:

> I think that when you are hurt by something, and you do get really upset and depressed and have all these crazy thoughts that you may have about it, that sometimes you can feel like, you know, God might not be there. You can think that and you can be really mad at God, but then if you… like sometimes, I've just been really, you know, I couldn't take it anymore, you know. And you might do all these stupid things, but then, you know, I just… I've grabbed a Bible, where you open it up at some random page, and there's always something on that page that you can relate to and you can… you know, if you read it and think about it, then it'll help you through. And you… He's always there, even though sometimes He may seem distant, but it can really help you through your problems whether or not you want Him to or not.

The presence of God is only a comfort for those who express a belief in God. After Sheila shared her story of attempted suicide, the Southeastern University participants considered where they saw God in her story. Carolyn, who is agnostic,

argued God was not present because Sheila felt abandoned, one of the factors that led to her suicide attempt. In response to this, Sheila, who considers herself religious, although not affiliated with a particular denomination, said she knew God was present with her because she survived. This interchange between Carolyn and Sheila demonstrates that belief or non-belief in God provides an interpretive lens through which young women understand life events. In other words, in addition to feeling God's presence in times of hurt and pain, young women's belief in God enables them to re-story past events through a redemptive lens, as Iesha did in interpreting her struggle with weight as a character-building experience that she can now use to help other people.

God Is Present to Girls through Their Friends

According to these young women, God works through friends to support them. Emmy and Lauren articulated that God gives us friends for this reason and described how they call each other when they are in tears, knowing the other one will pray with and comfort them over the phone. Idana understands friendship as spirits connecting, implying that God is there in relationships of mutuality. Because of God's presence in friendships, friends can bring each other to God. For instance, Aasha's first boyfriend got saved while they were dating, something the group attributed to Aasha's influence.

God Has a Plan for Girls' Lives and Does Everything for a Reason

Even as they faced the uncertainty of the future, the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants expressed the logic that God has a plan for young women's lives. Emmy indicated that God has a written plan for everyone when they are born, and that

"God knows what you are going to do when you grow up." In the midst of their own confusion about what the future will hold, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren take comfort in the certainty that God has a plan for their lives. An aspect of God's knowledge, expressed by Shantell, is that God does not put more on people than they can handle at a given time. This belief assisted Shantell is weathering the depression she suffered in the aftermath of her parents' divorce.

While initially they might not like God's plan or find it mysterious, the young women believed that everything happens for the good, whether they can understand the good or not. When Alexa related a story of getting caught shoplifting, the group decided that God made sure Alexa got caught to put an end to her behavior. Similarly, while she was hurt by broken friendships, Idana remained confident that God puts people into and takes people out of our lives for good reasons. Through these broken friendships, she has learned about the value of listening, a lesson she believes God wanted her to learn.

Not only does God have a plan for the young women's lives, even the very existence of girls is part of God's plan, according to Lauren. As she wrote in her narrative, "[God] didn't take Adam's rib to create another set of people for nothing. He has a reason and place and jobs for all of us, and no matter how many obstacles His little girls have to tackle, we will always tackle them." At least for some of the Stories of Gender participants, their female identity is part of their God-given identity, that is, part of who God created them to be with a reason in mind. In other words, their identity before God gives meaning to the particularity of their identities, as who they are in all their specificity is part of God's plan for their lives and the means through which God is working in the world.

God Makes and Blesses Girls' Bodies

While the Stories of Gender participants articulated the great lengths to which girls must go to project the proper image female beauty, they also believe that girls should simply accept the bodies that God made for them. For instance, Bethany referred to young women's bodies as "temples of God" and uses this theological interpretation of the body as an argument against plastic surgery. Emmy tied this in with the logic that God has a plan for everyone, saying, "God made you a certain way, and that's the way that He wanted you to be."

God Is a (Loving) Father-Figure

Many of the Stories of Gender participants used exclusively male language for God and understood God as a father figure in their lives. For the Grace UMC participants, experiencing God as a loving father contributed to their sense of self-confidence. As Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren all experienced strained or non-existent relationships with their real fathers, God served as a surrogate father, showering them with love and acceptance in which they could rest and which was in sparse supply in their current family situations. Conversely, God's identity as a father made it harder for Kathleen to identify with God. As she explained, "The first time I had my period was not a religious experience in any way for me… because God was a guy. And there was no talk of anything really feminine associated with God's characteristics." Kathleen's story suggests that a broader range of images for God would assist young women in connecting their life experiences with a theological perspective.

A Strong Relationship with God Means a Stronger Relationship with Yourself

Particularly for the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants, a strong relationship with God and a strong sense of self were correlated. Emmy indicated that when you have a strong relationship with God, it is easier to care less about what you look like and to focus more on what is really important, that is, being yourself. Reflecting on where she saw God in her sister's story, Idana linked God's presence with Iesha's gains in confidence, arguing that God works in us to create change. Iesha overcame a bad temper and limiting external expectations, which Idana argued must be the work of God based on the fruits of the change, that is, Iesha's love for herself as she is. As Shantell concluded, God is love, so when girls love themselves, there is God.

When Religion Leads to Further Isolation—The Limits of Faith in Young Women's Narratives

While relationships with God and their faith community functioned primarily positively vis a vis female identity for the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants, the same was not the case for the Southeaster University participants. The Southeastern University participants experienced faith as limiting when it led to silence about or improper treatment of important issues in their lives. For instance, in the congregation in which Lisa grew up, the only way sexuality was talked about was to inform youth that their choices were "abstinence or going to hell." When she was sexually harassed by a male member of the youth group and reported it to the pastor, Lisa got tips about how to avoid further unwanted attention, and the perpetrator was never confronted. Further, when she was pregnant, Lisa believed she had to make a decision about what to do about the pregnancy on her own, without input from her parents or faith community. While the

abortion counselors told her she would feel only relief afterward, Lisa indicated, "I felt like shit. I didn't feel empowered." She still struggles with forgiveness, wanting to forgive her boyfriend for abandoning her with this decision and herself for making it. A narrative of forgiveness and healing could be available to Lisa through a faith community, if she believed there was a community in which she would not be shunned for her decision to have an abortion. Lisa's experiences demonstrate that when young women perceive that aspects of their life experience—menstruation, sexual harassment and assault, depression and other mental health issues, relationship conflicts with friends and parents, etc.—are off limit or somehow too much for their faith communities to handle, then young women are more likely to experience their faith traditions as oppressive and to miss out on the very aspects of faith traditions that could be liberating.

"We Got to Experience Each Other's Spirits": The Pedagogical Process of Stories of Gender

In this section, I present themes from the Stories of Gender participants' exit interviews. In the interviews, the young women reflected on what they learned about gender and faith identity through the story-sharing groups and how they experienced the pedagogy of the group.[211]

Sharing Is Fun and Empowering

The young women said it was fun to talk about their stories with other girls; it was interesting to hear others' perspectives; it was exciting to have a chance to be in the spotlight; and the discussions were uplifting and empowering, even when the topics

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211. The questions used in the exit interview can be found in Appendix E.

discussed were painful. While they may talk about "girl stuff" with their friends, broach some relatively safe gender-related topics with parents, or analyze gender in academic settings, Stories of Gender was unique in that it struck a balance between personal sharing and more systemic analysis. Stories of Gender invited them to reflect on the experience of being a girl instead of just "being girls." Further, the structure of attending to one participant's story at a time insured that everyone felt listened to without being a burden to others or being selfish, which was especially important to the Southeastern University participants who noted that personal sharing among friends can be construed as whining or bitching.

Struggling To Write and Share

Composing and summoning the courage to share a narrative from their life experiences was the most challenging aspect of Stories of Gender. All of the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants had trouble deciding what to write. While part of the difficulty likely stemmed from the novelty of being asked to reflect on their lives as girls, Aasha and Lauren also said they did not know how to collapse everything in their lives to one piece of paper.

While a few of the participants relished the spotlight, most of the young women were nervous about reading their stories. Some generally disliked reading aloud, and others were concerned about the reaction their story would receive. Lauren clearly articulates what many of the participants felt before sharing:

> I remember when I first started to share it I was kind of thinking, "I got this all on paper and I really want to share it with everybody, but I don't know what everybody's going to think about it. I don't know. Maybe I'm totally off on this and maybe it's just me. Or, I don't know." So then I read

> it and like nobody would really say anything. So I was just kind of okay, well maybe I'm not right. But then somebody – I don't remember if it was Emmy or Bethany was like, "Well she hit the nail on the head." I was just like, "Yes. I did it right."

Across all three groups, participants feared that their stories would be criticized and not recognized by others as the right sort of story.

Discovering Confirmation and Contradiction

The fear of sharing their stories was outweighed by the joy and comfort the young women felt when their stories were accepted and confirmed by their peers. This sense of solace held true even when the experience confirmed was a negative one, like an unequal division of household labor between boys and girls. For instance, Carolyn indicated that knowing others had been on the receiving end of cat calls helped her to blame the perpetrators and not herself. While it felt good knowing that they shared experiences of girlhood with others, the young women also were enthusiastic about hearing the differences between their experiences. As Iesha puts it, "Sometimes it is hard for me to accept the lives of other people. Sometimes I get close-minded because I think everything is how I live. Just hearing the different stuff—that the things they said were actually true, in their life, you know—helped me to broaden my horizons and think about other things." Particularly among the Southeastern University participants, learning about differences through personal narratives provoked changed and more empathetic attitudes about often stigmatized subjects, such as abortion, mental health, and suicide.

Helping Others through Your Story

While it took a slightly different form in each group, the young women trusted they had made a difference in each other's lives by sharing their stories. For instance, Iesha spoke of wanting to be "an inspiration" for the younger Alexa, who also struggles with weight issues, and Alexa *was* inspired, as she used almost a direct quotation from Iesha's story in writing her own. While some participants came into the groups hoping to help others through their stories, others came away with the empowering realization that others could learn from them.

Building Trust and Respect

Trust in and respect for the other group members were important conditions of the groups that contributed to the participants' positive experiences. The ability to build trust in the group did not seem affected by whether the young women knew each other before participating or not. While knowing each other created a foundation for trust for the Grace UMC participants, the Southeastern University young women said the relative anonymity they felt in the group enabled them to share intimate knowledge about their lives. Trusting me as a leader was important, and the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants appreciated that I was an outsider to their faith communities, as they perceived I would not share what they said to their parents or church leaders. It also held true that a respectful reception of the first story in each group sent the message that the group was a safe space where personal experiences would be accepted.

Expanding and Re-Learning Gender

The young women expressed that their views on gender had been expanded and that they noticed gender more while in the group. As Shantell put it, her ideas of what it means to be a girl have broadened, "So now instead of just having my ideas of what's a girl, I have, like, each and every one of their ideas, too." Further, while all of the participants are familiar with how advertising skews the portrayal of women's bodies, being in the group reminded them to notice this or to "re-learn" it, as Lauren expressed it.

Connecting Gender and Religion

An important connection was made in their minds of the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants, namely, that God was a part of their lives. Asking them where they saw God in each others' stories gave them permission to do theological reflection on their own lives, something most had never been invited to practice. Thus implicitly they began to put their gendered and religious experiences in conversation, articulating a belief that God accepts them as they are, regardless of what they look like. While not explicitly a statement about female identity, heard in the context of our group discussions, this theological belief has much to do with these young women trying to make sense of being female in a context in which it is extremely difficult to be accepted as the right sort of girl.

No longer embedded in their home communities, the Southeastern University participants evidenced a more nuanced view of the promises and challenges of participation in organized religion as young women. Mainly they were critical of the judgment they felt adhered to church-goers who did not conform to the community's

norms and the mishandling of sensitive situations such as eating disorders and sexual harassment. While they did not often discuss religion explicitly, the young women spoke to a sense of experiencing the sacred in our time together, which Elizabeth articulated thus: "There was a lot about what's meaningful and sacred even… Well, I really felt like we were, I mean, we were talking about spirituality; we got to experience the spirit, each other's spirit… so it is a special space where you come in and, kind of, let your spirit, kind of, be shown or speak."

Engaging Experience and Listening without Judgment

The final question the young women responded to in the exit interviews was what advice they had for people who work with youth in faith communities. Two clear themes emerged. The first was the importance of engaging young people's life experiences and providing opportunities to discuss these experiences both on their own and in conversation with the Bible and faith tradition. The second was the importance of listening to the experiences of youth without judging. As Kathleen perceptively commented, youth need to feel that there is a sensitivity to the complexity of their stories since everyone comes to church with a whole life story behind them. These thirteen young women long for a space where they are listened to; where their experiences are acknowledged, respected, and considered important enough to warrant serious discussion; and where religiously committed adults will help them connect their lives with religious meaning, ritual, and community.

At the end of this chapter on the results of Stories of Gender, there are two important points to highlight. First, the young women who participated in Stories of

Gender certainly were not voiceless. When asked to write, share, and discuss narratives about their female identities in an environment where they knew that their stories would be listened to and affirmed, the young women were articulate about who they are as young women. While they acknowledged challenges they face, such as striving to maintain relationships and feeling isolated, they also evidenced their narrative agency, thus demonstrating that they are not only in crisis but also empowered.

Second, a particular way the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants evidenced their narrative agency was in their cooperative theological work. In other words, as the young women together strove to make sense of what it means to be a girl, they constructed a theological view of female identity as grounded in God's love and acceptance. Stemming from their relationships with God, their faith communities, and each other, this identity narrative served to lessen the pressure young women feel to project a proper image of femininity and to support their positive sense of self. In the next chapter, I build from these two important results of Stories of Gender, articulating more fully a balanced view of young women's narrative agency.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARD TENSEGRITY: A GIRL-FRIENDLY APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

IDENTITY

The Balancing Act of Female Identity

At 2:45pm this particular Monday afternoon, I find myself laden with bags of art supplies and snacks, trudging down the long hallway past the counseling center to the somewhat hidden elevator that deposits one at the even more hidden Women's Center of Southeastern University. Given that my research project focuses on young women's gender identities, the Women's Center graciously agreed to let us use their conference room for our sessions. The slate colored walls, white boards, and conference table with rolling chairs make the space feel more like a classroom than a gathering place for the spirited sharing of stories. But it was ours to use for free, it was quiet, and I hoped the food I had brought would make this feel more like a gathering of friends at a coffee shop than a school activity.

I scurry around, arranging tables, setting out food, pouring drinks, putting our art supplies in order, keeping busy so that I will not feel too anxious about our first real session together. Since I have never run a group where all the participants are relative strangers to each other, I am not sure how our conversation will go. I come armed with a favorite teaching tool, the trio of triads collage activity; a long list of questions, the idea being that at least one will spark discussion; and the avid hope that all will go well. As people arrive, I greet them by name and encourage them to grab food. When everyone is seated around the make-shift rectangle of tables, I invite them to partner with another

participant to make a collage that answers the question, "What does it mean to be a girl?" They can use three words and three images from the magazines on the tables.

At the end of thirty minutes, I ask them to display the collages for others to see. After discussing each collage individually, we place all three collages in the center of the table and consider the common themes about girlhood that emerge. Kathleen is quick to note that girls are called to "balance different, sometimes, conflicting expectations," for instance, to "do their own thing" but also to live up to a perfect image, using products marketed through mass media to help them accomplish both of those aims. Similarly, Lisa points to two juxtaposed figures on her collage, a confident-looking, impossibly thin cartoon drawing of a woman placed next to a normal-sized woman standing in her underwear looking down at a scale, together symbolizing how young women live in the tension between the ideal and the realistic.

Another balancing act young women have to manage is between being innocent and being seductive, which includes finding a way to make even the most non-sexual actions appear alluring. Lisa draws our attention to an image of a woman wearing make-up and a little black dress pulling nails out of a board and expresses her wish that being sexy and seductive was not so much at the heart of female identity. Yet at the same time, she admits it can be empowering to be attractive, evidencing the ambivalence she feels about the sexualized nature of female identity.

A final component of the balancing act of female identity involves the expectation to do and to be everything. Across the collages we see images of women as mothers and career women, as athletes and scholars, as appearing perfect while also caring for the needs of others. These particular college students are concerned about how they will

possibly manage to have children, maintain relationships, and thrive in their careers, knowing that, as we had discussed earlier, they will have to look good, both physically and more metaphorically, doing all of it.

This first theme of balancing conflicting expectations leads to a second theme: the place of fear in female identity. Lisa begins by naming the embodied fear young women carry of sexual violence and emphasizing another contradiction young women must manage: they are expected to present a sexually appealing image to the world, but they know that they then will be blamed for any inappropriate sexual conduct advanced against them. Further complicating the picture, Carolyn argues that there is a cultural fear of strong women and women's sexuality, while Kathleen shares how some women fear the changes in their bodies that come in adolescence. More mundane, but just as disturbing, is the fear young women have of not doing enough, not being accepted, and being labeled a failure if they cannot succeed in the balancing act of female identity. As Sheila concludes, "There's this fear of what will happen if you don't have the perfect body type. What will happen… I think there is an underlying fear of what will happen if you fail. If you don't do it all."

For the Stories of Gender participants, a major balancing act of female identity involves attempting to project a proper image of girlhood while also remaining true to oneself. On one hand, for these young women, image is everything for female identity. Being recognized as a girl necessitates projecting a particular image of one's self that includes clothing, hair, make-up, and accessories; body shape and size; those with whom you associate; and how you act. Girls must read the messages they receive primarily from friends, parents, and through mass media about what it means to be a girl and make

decisions about how to act on those messages, as identity necessitates recognition by others.

On the other hand, image is not everything, as the young women repeatedly returned to the theme in their discussions that who they are on the outside, their projected image, is not the same as who they are on the inside, what they believe to be their true selves. To put it in slightly different language, the young women know that the stories of themselves include so much more richness and depth than the two-dimensional beauty image by which they often are judged. The young women have a sense of themselves that includes identity categories assigned to them, such as gender, race, class, ability, and so forth, but that also supersedes these categories. They have a sense of themselves drawn from what they know about themselves from others, but who they are is more than the amalgamation of these assessments. As we talked about in the Southeastern University group, these young women attempt to live into their full identities, into the full stories of their lives, while the world around them often pushes them toward compartmentalization, with the young women sometimes complicit in this drive toward compartmentalization, living (consciously or not) into the roles assigned to them. For example, Kathleen told us how she shuts off her liberal political views when she goes home for breaks, feeling that this is a part of herself that would discount or detract from her role as daughter and sister. Part of what is at stake for the young women is maintaining relationships, as they fear that living into the full narratives of their lives might jeopardize their relationships with friends, family, and other important people.

Playing Twister

Thinking about the Stories of Gender participants narrating their female identities, the image that comes to mind is one of the young women playing a game of Twister. The Twister "board" is a giant mat containing rows of different colored circles—red, green, yellow, and blue. The Twister spinner dictates players' "moves"—left foot yellow, right hand green, right foot blue, and left hand red. The fun and challenge of the game is for players to contort their bodies to reach the appropriate colored circle with the appropriate hand or foot, while avoiding being knocked over by other players attempting to do the same thing.

Imagine the Twister board serves as the totality of narratives that young women hear about what it means to be a young woman, with each circle representing messages received from family, friends, school, religious community, media culture, and the larger society. In other words, there are culturally determined discourses about female identity to which the young women are called to respond. Young women exercise agency on the playing field, choosing which circles to reach for and influencing the circles by their involvement with them.

The Twister board image reinforces the idea that female identity is not monolithic—for any young woman as an individual or for all young women as a group. In other words, each young woman understands her own female identity in multiple ways and does not understand female identity as the totality of her identity. Further, while there are commonalities about female experience, these commonalities are not the same as equalities. Each young woman experiences her female identity in its uniqueness, while also recognizing similarities with other young women's experiences. Even while she

draws upon different discourses of female identity through which to define herself, the young woman is not wholly defined by these discourses, as she is still an embodied subject interacting with these discourses, influencing them and being influenced by them.

Just as Twister is not a solitary activity, neither is the living of female identity. Far beyond a simple biological fact, female identity necessitates the acknowledgment and acceptance of others. Co-players do more than play alongside each other; they both make challenging moves possible and block desired plays of others. The fun and frustration of the game exists not only as an individual stretches herself but as she stretches herself in relationship with her co-players. Similarly, a young woman must negotiate female identity within her relationships with others, and she may find herself either supported or blocked in her efforts to live into particular aspects of her female identity.

This image exemplifies the tensive nature of female identity, as young women are stretched and strained in their efforts to be the proper sort of girl while also being themselves. As young women strive to be in contact with various circles, that is, various aspects of their identities, they may have to let go of other circles or may discover that holding onto two or more circles at one time stretches them in way they did not anticipate. This image of tensive female identity returns us to the question with which this dissertation opened: are young women in crisis or are they thriving? When it comes to physical bodies, stretching can be healthy or painful, helping to heal our bodies or leading to injury. Similarly, the stretching young women do in maintaining female identities gives them practice in adaptability and flexibility that is useful in our current times. Further, as we saw in the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist groups, the ambivalence they felt around projecting the right image of girlhood led to creative

theological work, as the young women together articulated beliefs in a creator God who loves and accepts them as they are in their entirety. As such, tensions in identity can lead to new possibilities, as young women work creatively to balance different aspects of their narrative identities.

However, in being flexible, young women at times may find themselves pulled beyond what they are capable of comfortably accomplishing. Tired of balancing, they may decide that projecting the proper image of femininity is all that matters, thus losing the chance to live into a more fulsome sense of self. Or in deciding to be true to one's self, young women may find it necessary to let go of and mourn relationships that stand in the way of this sort of actualization. Further, young women may encounter, feel called to respond to, and, at times, feel forced to live into identity-constituting narratives from important people in their lives, master narratives, and the groups of which they are a part that do not speak to or are harmful to their sense of self.

Struggling and Thriving: A Measured Approach to Female Identity

In answer to the question of whether young women are struggling or thriving, the answer is both. Much of what it means to be a girl is based on receiving approval from peers for the female image they project, so in order to be accepted and have a sense of self reflected back to them by others, they have to play the game of projecting female beauty perfection, at least to some extent. This means subjecting themselves to images and discourses of female identity that are impossible to achieve, leading to a vicious cycle that results in never feeling like an acceptable girl and person. Further, at the same time as they feel responsible for maintaining relationships, young women feel isolated,

lacking trusted conversation partners with whom they could discuss that which is most important in their lives. In the midst of this all, they sense that adults are worried about them, which only adds to the pressure they feel to live responsibly in all areas of their lives.

Conversely, the Stories of Gender participants have been encouraged to be themselves, and many expressed the desire to find out who they really were so as to live as their true selves. They hear and strive to live into a cultural discourse of girl power that tells them to be whomever they want to be, with its concurrent message that they should not listen to the judgment of others. They have learned to be critical of the standards held up for young women to emulate, even if they have not yet been able to lay a plank between intellectual knowing that their bodies and selves are good enough as they are and practices that allow them to live this way.[212]

Further, while the Stories of Gender participants struggle with the dilemma of how to be themselves while also projecting a proper image of girlhood, they already evidence two important qualities that serve to support their surviving and thriving. First, they are not blind to the tensions in which they are living their female identity, thus they already have a certain level of self-awareness. While perhaps not as sophisticated in their arguments as senior scholars on identity, the young women are articulate about the rules which govern the game of female identity, the rewards for attempting to play the game, and the consequences of trying to change the rules or to opt out entirely. They know that identity categories are important, but they also know that identity categories are not the full picture of their identities and they sense, with varying degrees of sophistication, that

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212. Journalist Courtney Martin argues that laying the plank between this intellectual knowledge that girls are good enough as they and practices that support them as living as such is the task for this current generation of young women. See Martin, *Perfect Girls*, 54.

these categories are not set in stone but are part of shifting, contextually-determined realities. To put it in the language I use in chapter six, when I discuss inviting transformation through religious education, the young women, at the very least, are aware of the gaps between master narratives of girlhood identity and their own experiences of it, an awareness that opens them to further consciousness raising around gender identity. To return to the metaphor of girlhood identity as playing Twister, the young women are aware of the game they are playing, to varying degrees. Their awareness is an important first step toward transformation, as you cannot change the game or leave it behind if you are embedded in it still. In chapter six, beginning from this clue from Stories of Gender—that self-awareness is an important requisite of female narrative agency—I explore how religious educators can invite young women to reflect critically on their female identity narratives, as well as explore new possibilities and act for integration as they continue to story themselves.

Second, particularly the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants used theological language to reframe the tensions in which they live so as to make them more palatable. While they struggle with being themselves and garnering acceptance for being the right sort of girl, they also articulate belief in a God who made them as they are and who accepts them for this self. Surely a relationship with God and this theological take on identity does not remove the very real tensions that mark these young women's gender identities. It does, however, demonstrate that young women already are grasping toward ways of exercising real girl power and finding ways to re-story their identities in order to meet their own desires for relationships of love and acceptance and identity narratives of integrity. It is also important to note that the solution toward which these young women

are living is a spiritual, religious, or faith-filled one. Beginning from this clue from

Stories of Gender—namely, that a relationship with a loving God undergirds young

women's positive sense of self—in chapter six I articulate several prayer practices into

which young women can be apprenticed in order to develop their relationships with God.

While young women face real challenges in terms of living female faith identities

of integrity, they also already are meeting these challenges in their own ways in their

lives, specifically, in faith-filled ways that radiate from their relationships with God.

What they need, then, is not saving but rather trusted adults who can help them expand on

what they are already doing—that is, coming to self-awareness and re-narrating their

identities through a theological lens. What they also need, to anticipate chapters six and

seven, is to belong to a religious community that supports their re-storying of self and

adds to the narrative possibilities that are available to them. From the space of an

accepting community that projects an alternative system of values and understanding of

human identity, girls can gain more critical purchase on the tensions through which they

live their female identities, as well as find some respite from the straining and a way to

understand the stretching they do as indeed part of the very definition of what it means to

be human.

The point of this discussion is the recommendation to take a measured approach

to studying and working with young women. In other words, it is crucial to recognize

both the challenges young women face and the ways through which they are meeting

these challenges and finding ways to thrive in their own lives. It is also important to

recognize the spiritual lives of young women as potentially important sites not only of

identity challenges but also of resistance to harmful understandings of identity. Doing so

enables the articulation of a realistic view of young women's agency, namely, that they

do exercise agency, albeit within systems of meaningful cultural constraints. [213] For

example, young women are not simply victims of a mass-mediated flattening of female

identity to a narrow image of beauty perfection.[214] Rather, young women make choices

about how to present themselves in a world in which mass-media culture limits the

narratives of female identity to which they are exposed and also may infiltrate their

consciousness to varying extents. As we shall see in the next chapter, this understanding

of agency also makes sense within the context of Christian understandings of human

personhood.

Importantly, this measured view of young women's agency enables the

recognition of and also challenge to prevalent cultural discourse about girlhood, namely

girl power and girls in crisis discourses. A measured view of young women's agency

celebrates the power that girls exercise in their lives, while also critiquing the current

construction of the discourse of girl power as highly commercialized so that girl's power

is narrowly equated with making choices about what look to project. Further, balancing

respect for young women's agency with attention to relational, social, and cultural

constraints highlights the highly individualized nature of current girl power discourses, as

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213. See note 40 above.

214. For more on the flattening of girls' images in media, see also American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, "Sexualization of Girls;" Kathleen Engebretson, "Young People, Culture, and Spirituality: Some Implications for Ministry," *Religious Education* 98, no. 1 (2003): 5–24; Don C. Richter, Doug Magnuson, and Michael Baizerman, "Reconceiving Youth Ministry," *Religious Education* 93, no. 3 (1998): 340–358; Bert Roebben, "Do We Still Have Faith in Young People? A West-European Answer to the Evangelization of Young People in a Postmodern World," *Religious Education* 90, no. 3/4 (1995) 327–345; and Bert Roebben, "Shaping a Playground for Transcendence: Postmodern Youth Ministry as a Radical Challenge," *Religious Education* 92, no. 3 (1997): 332–348.

these ignore the way individual power is situated within larger relational and socio-cultural systems of power, particularly the way the gender-sex system continues to reinforce the notion that all things feminine are of lesser worth than all things masculine.

Conversely, a measured view of young women's agency can acknowledge the challenges to young women's voices in adolescence without portraying young women as helpless victims. As reviewed in chapter one, Mary Pipher, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Carol Gilligan have written about girls' loss of voice in adolescence as one result of girls making sense of themselves in the midst of a cultural situation in which they are exposed to sexist master narratives. In *Counseling Women*, pastoral theologian and counselor Christie Cozad Neuger provides an insightful explanation of why young women's voices become muted in adolescence. First, the androcentric language of our culture excludes young women.[215] While this is beginning to change slightly, it is still the case that "man" can be a reference for all humanity (even "humanity" has "man" as its base) and that many Christian communities use almost completely masculine references for God. Using this language, young women learn that they are secondary citizens who do not have a right to name themselves. Second, young women are encouraged in a loss of selfhood,[216] as mass media culture and heteronormative discourses encourage young women to see themselves through the male gaze, thus objectifying themselves. They also are inculcated with an understanding of the "good girl" who is above all nice and attentive to the needs of others. As she learns to be attuned to others, this good girl may ignore her own needs and desires and live primarily out of the third-person narratives others tell of her identity.

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215. Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 73-75.

216. Ibid., 75-78.

Finally, girls learn that they lack credibility; in other words, they do not expect to be heard or to be believed if they give voice to their experience.[217] School is one important place where this lack of credibility is mirrored to young women, as their experiences are not reflected in textbooks and curriculum.[218]

What is useful from the work of Brown, Gilligan, Pipher, and Neuger work is the recognition of how oppressive master narratives of girlhood affect individual girls' senses of selves and the articulation of the struggle girls face between living as an idealized perfect girl and being true to themselves. While the girls is crisis discourse draws important attention to the way in which "individuals internalize structural inequalities" through low-self esteem, eating disorders, and high risk behaviors, the deep problem of this discourse is that "…girls are represented as simply victims of society," without their own agency.[219] Aapola et al. also raise the additional issues with girls in crisis discourses: much of the research is based on middle-class white girls; it is questionable whether girls face these cultural constraints only upon entering adolescence; it draws on the stereotype as adolescence as a time of bodily chaos; and it may be more about what happened to adult researchers than what is currently happening to young women.[220]

Further, in the early twenty-first century, the girls in crisis discourse has taken a turn, with the new vulnerable girl identified as the victim of mean girls who use social aggression to win popularity. The popular teen movie *Mean Girls*, whose screenplay was written by Tina Fey, and bestselling books *Queen Bees and Wannabes* and *Odd Girl Out*

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217. Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 78-82.

218. American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, 101-144.

219. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 55, 52.

220. Ibid., 42-55.

are works that have captured the public imagination about this phenomenon.[221] As the

bad girl becomes defined as the white, middle-class social aggressor, there has been

increasing criminalization of those who not fit this category, particularly women of color

and working class women. As Aapola et al. explain, the mean girl discourse "…presents

girls who due to their racialized and classed positions are actually comparatively quite

privileged, as hapless victims. In doing so, it further marginalizes girls who are socially,

economically and politically disadvantaged."[222] Girl power and girls in crisis discourses

have in common an implicit recommendation that girls work on themselves, either by

buying the right products to demonstrate their girl power or by undergoing therapy or

participating in self-esteem workshops to seek the help they need from adults to deal with

the inevitable crises that will befall them as girls in their adolescent years.

Girl power and girls in crisis discourses also have in common an underlying

assumption of what Aapola et al. term individualization, which "promotes a social world

where the individual is fully self-responsible."[223] Since girls are what they make of

themselves, some girls are at a distinct disadvantage since they cannot be simply who

they want to be due to class, race, sexuality, and ability. As Aapola et al. put it,

> Embedded in the concept [of individualization] is a sense that a life of success and
> happiness is within reach of girls who learn the skills and/or have the
> characteristics necessary for continued self-invention. The constraints of gender,
> race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity on this bright future is covered over

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221. *Mean Girls*, DVD, directed by Mark Waters (Paramount Pictures, 2004); Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002); and Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).

222. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 55.

223. Ibid., 36.

by the suggestion that an individual can overcome all with the right attitude and drive.[224]

Of course, it is wonderful to hear the Stories of Gender participants evidencing in their identity narratives self-confidence in their ability to achieve their dreams. The problem with the individualization root of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses is that it sets girls up, at the very least, for an unrealistic view of their place in the world, as what they can accomplish as individuals is always affected by relational and socio-cultural factors. Believing anything is possible given the right attitude (or the right look), girls may not learn skills of critical analysis and resistance that will be necessary for them to recognize and challenge systemic forms of oppression that they face.

A further problem with the discourse of individualization is that young women are held solely responsible for the choices they make in constructing their identities. The Stories of Gender participants spoke to this through the theme of living responsibly, as they expressed the burden of choice they feel since they know they will be held responsible for the outcomes of their decisions. For instance, in the area of education and work, young women are expected to make the correct choice about higher education, to take advantage of the growth in jobs utilizing "feminine" skill sets, and to invent themselves to fit the new labor market. Yet, as Aapola et al. conclude, "The narrative of choice biographies in relation to education and employment tends to devolve responsibility for work on to the individual, and hence disregard the structural conditions that make opportunities in the new economy a highly selective experience."[225] While it is true that many youth "enjoy greater flexibility in imagining their life trajectories," they

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224. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 39.

225. Ibid., 78.

also have to balance choice and risk in a time that offers them far fewer structural supports.[226] For the Stories of Gender participants, this took the form of feeling they had to make important decisions in isolation without support from trusted adults. Even when young women's choices are constrained by structural factors, failure still is understood as the individual's fault.

Young women also face the pressure of individualization in the realms of family and sexuality. In their families, the Stories of Gender participants must negotiate between their roles of dutiful daughters, living as they believe their parents want them to live, and independent, young adult agents, living into their own beliefs and commitments. Even as high school and college students, the young women already are worrying about how they will do it all in their adults lives, devising plans for how they will balance having a career and having a family. In the realm of sexuality, particularly the Southeastern University participants struggle to live in the midst of their sense of women's sexual vulnerability and their desire to be healthy, sexual beings. This requires managing their bodies and sexual activity in a heteronormative culture that draws a fine line between arousing male desire and "going too far" sexually and that holds young women responsible for "safe sex." As Aapola et al. summarize, "We have shown how the heteronormative demands of femininity produce contradictory positions for girls: to both work at presenting themselves as sexually attractive at the same time as to protect her reputation."[227]

Even as young women face forces that serve to lower the volume on their voices or restrict the range of which they can speak, the Stories of Gender participants continued

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226. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity* 61.

227. Ibid., 164.

to story themselves, albeit not always in the ways we might expect. While they might struggle with voice in relation to some aspects of their identities, they still found ways to story themselves, not only through their bodies—dressing, adorning, moving, eating, and interacting in ways that express how they understand themselves—but also through their appropriation of theological language to address this particular identity issue. A more complex understanding of young women's agency, as I develop here, allows recognition of how master narratives influence girls to stay quiet about what they know while also searching for how girls continue to speak, resisting or creatively claiming cultural messages for their own narrative work. As such, "loss of voice" is an increasingly unhelpful metaphor in relation to young women, as it tends to reinforce the notion of young women as victims without subjectivity and agency. Better, instead, are the categories Nelson articulates, that is, deprivation of opportunity and infiltration of consciousness, both of which happen to varying degrees and through which a concept of agency is retained alongside acknowledgement of the complex web of relationships and cultural influences within which individual agency is practiced. As narrative identity theory helps us understand, there is never simply one true self that gets supplanted by a false self. Rather, as young women story themselves in the face of sexist master narratives, some of the many strands of their identity-constituting narratives may decrease in heft or seem less plausible, even as they continue to thrive through other aspects of their narrative identities.

This measured approach to young women's agency also is in concert with postmodern media scholarship. When female identity is equated with physical beauty, it is tempting to point a blaming finger at media culture. Those who want to blame the

media have what religious educator Mary Hess calls an instrumental view of how media

delivers messages. The metaphor behind an instrumental understanding of media culture

is trucks carrying messages, where producers create media with a particular message that

is transported unaltered to consumers who passively imbibe the original message. In this

understanding, young women lack agency in responding to a media culture that desires to

flatten female identity into an image of beauty perfection so as to sell more products. In

contrast,

> postmodern media scholarship suggests that mass media are best described as naturalized aspects of our cultural environment, raw materials we use in shaping our identities, our relationships, and our communities. Rather than being reliably produced and predictably consumed, mass media "texts" provide space for creative negotiation and even resistance between the author of a given media "text," the receiver of that text, and the context in which the text is produced and consumed.[228]

In the postmodern understanding, the medium of communication affects the message, as

do consumers, who exercise agency as they appropriate aspects of media culture for their

own purposes. This is a media savvy generation; many girls have been taught to critique

the ubiquitous image of female beauty perfection, explaining with some sophistication

how airbrushing or composite imaging works, and they even hear from advertising

campaigns to love their own bodies.[229] Again, rather than painting young women as

victims, it is more useful to highlight young women's agency in interacting with media

culture, while also recognizing the ways in which media culture may lead to deprivation

of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness for young women.

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228. Mary E. Hess, "From Trucks Carrying Messages to Ritualized Identities: Implications for Religious Educators of the Postmodern Paradigm Shift in Media Studies," *Religious Education* 94, no. 3 (1999): 273.

229. The most prevalent example of this is the "Campaign for Real Beauty," which was launched by Dove in 2004 with an aim to increase girls' self-esteem.

Approaching young women with this double vision, that is, seeing both the challenges they face and the ways they meet these challenges, changes the ways we are called to work with young women, be it in research settings or faith communities. Instead of pessimistically focusing on the problems young women face and endeavoring to find solutions to these problems, or blithely celebrating young women while ignoring meaningful cultural constraints they encounter, we are called to listen closely to young women so that we can hear the problems they are facing as they experience them, understand the solutions they are already enacting to these problems, and work with them to strengthen and multiply these solutions toward the end of even fuller flourishing in the world.

Identities of Tensegrity: A Narrative Vision of Female Faith Integrity

Given the measured approach to young women's agency for which I argue, recognition of the importance a girl's relationship with God may have for her self-confidence, and the results of Stories of Gender, what notion of narrative identity makes the most sense for young women and what distinguishes the narrative goal toward which young women strive in their identity work? To answer these questions, I return to the spectrum of positions on narrative identity presented in chapter one, naming what is useful from, as well as critiquing both ends of the spectrum, before returning to Nelson's mediating position, in order to affirm and extend it.

Theorists like Alasdair MacIntyre and Dan McAdams represent the end of the narrative identity spectrum at which the burden of responsibility for narrating identity is placed largely on the shoulders of the individual, and the narrative a person tells about his

or her life should demonstrate unity.[230] There are four useful aspects of their work, although each of these aspects also brings with it a critique. First, their recognition that all of us are at best co-narrators of our lives, shaped by the various communities we are a part of and accountable to others, acknowledges that personal identity is never constituted solely by an individual while also protecting the role of the individual in telling identity-constituting narratives.[231] Given the concern about young women's loss of voice, it is important that a theory of narrative identity accord some agency to the individual for constructing identity-constituting narratives. Second, MacIntyre highlights that mature adult functioning requires understanding our station in life,[232] which mirrors the recommendation of religious educators and pastoral and practical theologians that young women receive help in understanding their cultural context.[233]

However, MacIntyre and McAdams do not recognize how relational and systemic power and oppression affects the narrative abilities of individuals. Most notably, McAdams' image of the cultural menu from which individuals can choose an identity does not account for the fact that certain identity choices may not be available to people by virtue of their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability etc., nor does it acknowledge the fact that people have varying degrees of freedom to choose from the

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230. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue* and McAdams, *Stories We Live By* and *Redemptive Self*.

231. As MacIntyre writes, what we are "…able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives…We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making." See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213.

232. Ibid., 216.

233. See Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 50 and Parker, "Conclusion," 165-170.

menus.[234] In the case of young women, sexist master narratives and other aspects of patriarchal culture mean that certain identity narratives may not be available to young women (deprivation of opportunity) and that young women may come to believe harmful stories about themselves (infiltrated consciousness). Further, MacIntyre's notion that the good life means discovering the good for someone of my social situation ignores social situations from which people need liberation in order to experience a good life. In other words, MacIntyre fails to pair reflection on social station with a liberating impulse that seeks to transform social stations. Young women need to develop critical thinking skills not only to identify their social station in life but also to critique the ways in which this social station limits their full flourishing.

Third, McAdams argues that making ideological commitments is crucial for the development of narrative identities and that the ability to do so first arises in adolescence.[235] In a postmodern world where there is a crisis of confidence, as Holstein and Gubrium put it, young people may have a difficult time making commitments or even finding anything worthy to which to commit.[236] Yet we all need beliefs about the world and ourselves, as it is these beliefs that enable us to act in the world and also to adjudicate between different choices and possibilities for the self. Although they are not the sole sources of coherent ideologies, faith communities are important cultural

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234. McAdams, *Redemptive Self*, 289.

235. McAdams, *Stories We Live By*, 80-86.

236. According to Holstein and Gubrium, postmodernism has ushered in a crisis of meaning, leading us to question ideas about truth, scientific method, the world, and the self. They posit two possible responses to this crisis of meaning. First, we can react to it, either enthusiastically or cynically. As examples of this type of response, they offer Kenneth Gergen's concern about the multiphrenia caused by increased social saturation and Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, in which there are no more events, just the staging of events. Second, we can attempt to reform it, which is what they try to do in situating the social self within Jean-Francoise Lyotard's notion of language games. See Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By*, 56-80.

institutions for the passing on of values that are worthy to serve as guides for narrative identity work. Faith communities are themselves the result of ongoing conversations about what is good, true, and just. Young people need to be invited into these conversations, both so that they adopt moral guidelines for life, as McAdams deems so important, and so that they can contribute to these ongoing conversations from their own experiences. As we saw with many of the Stories of Gender participants, their beliefs in a loving God is what enabled them to feel accepted as they are, even when they do not garner this acceptance in the social world of their peers.

While recognizing with McAdams the importance of ideological commitments for narrative identity, I understand ideological commitments as plural and open to change, as opposed to singular and needing to be set by the end of adolescence, as McAdams understands them. In a globally connected and postmodern world, making a singular ideological commitment that lasts for life contributes to the foreclosure of identity. Ideological commitments, in the plural, are necessary, but they should not be impervious to change, as they will shift and evolve as we go through life, thus contributing to the development of our narrative identity. Young women need ideological commitments that address the dilemmas they face in their adolescence, but they also need to hold these ideological commitments in such a way that they can be added to or perhaps adjusted or corrected as they face different dilemmas during other times in their lives.

Fourth, I appreciate MacIntyre's assertion that integrity is the virtue of human life, for it corresponds to the desire of the Stories of Gender participants to live with integrity. Yet MacIntyre's equation of integrity with narrative unity differs from the integrity young women seem hungry for, which involves living in the tension between

one's self-understanding and how you are taken to be by others and between how one understands the self and how she acts in the world.[237] Further, MacIntyre's model of the quest narrative as a narrative genre through which people come to tell good stories of their lives asks for a unity of identity that does not correspond with the sorts of stories the Stories of Gender participants told about their identity. For many of the participants, their identity narratives involved various strands of self-identification, strands that did not always cohere easily with each other. To offer just one example, Lauren discusses how being a girl can be "the greatest or the worse thing in the world just depending on the situation," an understanding of girlhood that cannot easily be collapsed into a unified narrative.

In "Treading the Narrative Way between Myth and Madness," Mary Stange makes a similar argument as I am making against MacIntyre's celebration of the virtue of narrative unity and integrity, writ large against the whole body of Western autobiography, a genre geared toward telling a story of a unified self. As Stange notes, in classical autobiography there is "trust in the ultimate significance of a unified ideal of the self."[238] This genre has deep roots in Christian literature, where knowing the "I" means knowing God, but it has morphed in secular autobiography, so that God becomes Self, the ultimate psychological unity. In looking at women's writing in general, and at Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in particular, Stange demonstrates that women have not been as persuaded by this notion of the unified self, as they draw on the narrative technique of revealing themselves through their relationships with others more often than

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237. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

238. Mary Zeiss Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way between Myth and Madness: Maxine Hong Kingston and Contemporary Women's Autobiography," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 15.

male authors do. As Stange concludes, **"**It is quite clear that women have needed and continue to need the stories of others to bring their own autobiographical narratives into being."[239] Rather than telling the story of a unified self, the narrative pattern of women's autobiographies has been "multiple images of self, interconnected and mutually reflective story lines, attention to details and fragments of meaning."[240] While some of the Stories of Gender participants' narratives cohered around one particular identity theme, many also wrote in ways that reflected the multiple images of the self that Stange argues is more indicative of women's experiences of the self.

Not only do the stories of others help bring the "I" into being for women, these stories contribute to women's very sanity, according to Stange. Stange quotes directly from Kingston: " 'The difference between mad people and sane people… is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over again.' "[241] Women in patriarchal cultures are caught between a rock and a hard place: they are judged unbalanced if they reject the norms of patriarchy or they may go crazy trying to conform to these norms. It is an impossible choice, really: "To capitulate to patriarchal demands leads a woman in the direction of literal madness. To overcome these demands one must be metaphorically mad, at least from patriarchy's point of view."[242] What women mystics (and more recently, feminist theologians) know is that re-membering, the gathering of all the impossible stories, is the key for sanity.

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239. Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 18.

240. Ibid., 25.

241. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) 184, quoted in Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 23.

242. Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 26.

Women are called not to flee the world, but to embrace "the reality of manifold possibility, multiple identity" and to re-imagine the "multiplicity of images of possibility."[243]

As Stange's analysis points out, it is not just the sexist master narratives about female identity that can be damaging to girls but also the genre of narrative that they are asked to tell about themselves. Asking young women to write an autobiography in which they set out their identity in a linear and unifying narrative may be damaging, as they will have to force their many stories and experiences into a form in which they do not fit. As Marnina Gonick found in her research with young women, and as the Stories of Gender participants also experienced, female identity is a category of ambivalence, because girls realize they can never fully embody this category nor can this category ever be the full story they tell about themselves. According to Gonick, ambivalence "refers to affective states in which intrinsically contradictory or mutually exclusive desires or ideas are each invested with intense emotional energy. Although one cannot have both simultaneously, one cannot abandon either of them."[244] Ambivalence is not necessarily a bad thing, unless the narrative standard is one of unified identity. Then ambivalence can lead one to feel as if she is going crazy. But if the standard of unity is rejected and the sanity-inducing potential of multiple stories of self is embraced, then young women's sense of ambivalence may, in fact, be a healthy way of experiencing what at times may feel like contradictory narratives of the self.

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243. Stange, "Treading the Narrative Way," 26, 28.

244. Gonick, *Between Femininities*, 14.

At the other end of the narrative identity spectrum, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium present a social constructivist view of narrative identity that demands we take seriously the great extent to which the self is socially constituted and the importance of a variegated narrative of self.[245] In relation to the female identities of young women, a social constructivist understanding of narrative identity highlights the ways that young women are shaped by their contexts, particularly patriarchal aspects of their cultures and the groups of which they are a part. Yet Holstein and Gubrium's depiction of the self as a changing conversational signifier does not make sense in light of young women's experiences of self for two reasons.

First, a fully social understanding of narrative selfhood only compounds challenges faced by young women. Holstein and Gubrium recognize that the social self holds negative possibilities, such as the conforming self, who instead of living out of her own established values constantly tries to meet the needs of others, and the emotionally managed self, who lives out of a false sense of self, hiding her true emotions from others in order to interact with them as she perceives they want to be interacted with.[246] These two negative possibilities of the social self resonate with concerns that psychologists have raised about young women living out of a false sense of self and losing their voices as they put the needs of others above their own needs.

Second, a fully social understanding of narrative identity takes away individual agency in narrative construction, a problematic assumption for youth, who are just

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245. Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By*.

246. Two other negative possibilities are the organizational self, a person who becomes so dedicated to the goals of the organization of which he is a part that he becomes no more than a drone for the organization, and the outsider, who does not fit in because he has bought into the labels society has given him, such as criminal, deadbeat dad, single mom, or junkie. See Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By*, 38-55.

beginning to develop the cognitive capacities to exercise narrative identity, and for girls, who are already subject to a girls in crisis discourse that negates their agency in an effort to protect them from all that may do them harm. Nelson privileges first-person identity narratives over third-person identity narratives when both adhere to the credibility criteria of explanatory force, correlation to action, and heft.[247] This makes sense in our westernized, postindustrial society in which "respect for autonomy, notions of personal responsibility, and individualist conceptions of moral agency" mark our moral context.[248] In the end, we lead our own lives and are accountable for them, thus we must be able to tell identity narratives that enable us to do so. In the context of the United States where an individual self is still a culturally operative assumption, a fully social sense of self ignores the responsibility that is placed on individuals for defining the self. This is a responsibility that the Stories of Gender participants feel keenly, as they articulated living responsibly as one of the main themes of female identity.

In order to protect young women's narrative agency while also recognizing the way that they exercise their agency within systems of meaningful cultural constraints, and also in order to make room for young women's tensive and ambivalent experiences of self, Nelson's mediating position on narrative identity is the most useful way to approach a narrative understanding of young women's identities. For Nelson, personal identity involves many stories. It involves first-person, third-person, and master

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247. To discern which stories constitute our identity, Nelson proposes using a credibility constraint, that is, "considering which narrative constructions of identity might or might not be *credible*, according to ordinary standards of what it's reasonable to believe." See Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 92, italics in original. For judging the credibility of an identity-constituting story, she proposes three criteria: (1) strong explanatory force, that is, the story offers the best available explanation of some aspects of who a person is (93-95); (2) correlation to action, that is, a story expresses how a person actually acts (95-96); and (3) heft, that is, the story is woven around what a person cares about most (96-97).

248. Ibid., 105.

narratives, as well as the groups of which people are a part. Even within each of these identity-constituting sources, Nelson recognizes that there will be a multiplicity of stories, some of which cohere with each other, some of which do not. Narrative identity as Nelson presents it is dynamic, changing over time and across place, as people tell, encounter, and incorporate new stories of the self.

The narratives of the Stories of Gender participants and the work of religious educators and pastoral and practical theologians who study young women of faith indicates a fifth identity-constituting narrative source that needs to be added to Nelson's list of four identity-constituting sources (personal narratives, narratives of others, master narratives, and the narratives of one's social groups). For Christian believers, a fifth source of identity-constituting narratives is a transcendent narrative God tells about who we are. That we do not have what we might call direct access to transcendent narratives is not necessarily a problem; we also do not have direct access to master narratives, but we still can say with some confidence what they are by studying cultural artifacts like advertisements, news stories, art, and other media. Transcendent narratives can be accessed through prayer practices (broadly construed to include any act through which a person can be in touch with God) in which a people connect with God's story about their lives.

As seen above, given the cultural situation in the United States where individual are held responsible for the self-narratives they articulate, Nelson preferences first-person identity narratives. So what happens when a person's relationship with God is introduced as a fifth source of identity-constituting narratives? On the one hand, this source holds a trump card, in that God knows us in our entirety in a way we cannot even know

ourselves. On the other hand, our knowledge of how God knows us is always mediated

through ourselves, and as Nelson clearly articulates, the self is not always a reliable

narrator.[249] From a theological perspective, this transcendent narrative of identity does

hold the trump card. But in practice, since the self is a less than perfect narrator, this

source as related by the individual must be balanced with other sources of identity-

constituting narratives and judged using the three credibility criteria of explanatory force,

correlation to action, and heft.

As was the case for many of the Stories of Gender participants, this theological

source of identity-constituting narratives is particularly important, and Stange's analysis

of women's narratives indicates one reason why. In our cultural context in the United

States, the category of girlhood takes on such importance that it can feel to young women

as if this aspect of their identity eclipses all others, thus leading to a sense of the insanity

of a singular narrative. As there is sanity in multiple stories of the self, theological

narratives insure that girls are not only girls but also are children of God, sisters of Christ,

and members of communities of faith that can mediate for them a multiplicity of identity.

Young women strive for integrity, but not integrity defined as unity. Instead, they

long for integrity marked by tensegrity, a wholeness that finds its integrity through the

balancing of tensive parts, much like a building has integrity because all of its parts

contribute to the whole.[250] This is why a mediating position of narrative identity is so

important, as it enables us to keep in vision both wholeness and the different parts at the

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249. As Nelson explains, our first-person narratives are plagued by ignorance (we might not know the reason why something happened to us); capable of major mistakes about our motives, intentions, and beliefs; subject to self-deception; and may include lies we tell about who we are. See Nelson, *Damaged Identities*, 99.

250. See note 41 above.

same time, thus resisting the temptations to force disparate parts to unite in a seamless whole or to dismiss continuity in favor of complete diffuseness. An identity of integrity involves finding the tensegrity, that is, the creative and unifying tension, between:

- the past, present, and future, that is, one's sense of who I was, who I am now, and who I will be in the future;

- first-person and third-person accounts of the self, along with master narratives and identity-constituting narratives from the groups of which one is a part;

- first-person identity narratives with actions in the world;

- and between all of the above and one's self-understanding as reflected through a relationship with God or the transcendent.

Given that identities can be harmed and repaired narratively, an identity of tensegrity also involves developing processes of questioning how identity-constituting sources may be damaging; coming to cognizance particularly about how master narratives may result in deprivation of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness; identifying master narratives that can support a healthy sense of self and be a resource in the telling of counternarratives; and participating in communities in which these counternarratives are told and receive affirmation. The ultimate balance in an identity of tensegrity is one for which young women, and all of us, desperately long: between individuality and belonging. There is also realism to an identity of tensegrity, in that there is recognition of individual agency tempered by an understanding that agency is always only exercised within systems of meaningful cultural constraints. We can never be simply whoever we want to be, but we are also never reduced only to who others deem us to be.

In this messy middle is an identity of tensegrity, in which tensions do not pull young

women apart but rather creatively contribute to their flourishing.

CHAPTER FIVE

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: AN ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY NARRATIVE

In this chapter, I name a theological gift faith communities have to offer young women: an alternative identity narrative drawn from theological anthropology and the assertion that human beings are *imago Dei*, made in the image of God. My attention was drawn to theological anthropology by the counternarratives told in the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist story-sharing groups, as the theological statements the young women made were anthropological ones, that is, focused on what it means to be a human person in relation to God. As we have seen, the young women storied themselves in relation to a loving God who created them and accepts them as they are. Beginning from the idea that being made and loved by God is a crucial narrative for young women's sense of self, in this chapter I construct a transcendental, eschatological, embodied theological anthropology that is responsive to both the experiences of these young women and Christian traditions. In so doing, I trace one stream of the theological anthropological conversation in the Roman Catholic tradition, beginning with Karl Rahner's transcendental anthropology and continuing with feminist theologians Janet Martin Soskice's and Elizabeth Johnson's extensions of Rahner's work.

In addition to providing young women the gift of alternative identity narratives, that is, content for their identity work, faith communities also can help young women understand the process of their narrative identity work in theological terms. As such, in the final section of this chapter, I use Mary Grey's writing on women's spiritual journeys

as a resource for understanding young women's journeys toward *via unitiva*, that is,

living as a unified self.

Throughout this chapter, I utilize the work of Roman Catholic theologians. This

may seem an ill-conceived choice, given that the Stories of Gender groups all took place

in Protestant contexts. Even though my formal theological training has been in Protestant

institutions, as I spoke to in the foreword, my earliest faith formation was in the Catholic

church, and I continue to view the world through this Catholic lens and to participate in a

Catholic faith community. When I analyze the narratives of the Stories of Gender

participants, I cannot help but appreciate the connections to Roman Catholic sources.

Further, within feminist theology, there has been such cross fertilization between

Catholic and Protestant writers united by their commitments to retrieve and reconstruct

resources from Christian traditions to support women's flourishing that it becomes

difficult to untangle the threads of influence. While the theological anthropology I

advance here draws on Catholic sources and thus sounds a Catholic tone, the underlying

points about who human beings are would not be foreign or objectionable to feminist

Protestant theologians, even if they would make similar points with slightly different

emphases.[251] I understand my project to offer a different type of cross fertilization as

well. Much of what has been written about young women of faith comes from a

Protestant perspective, thus I hope that approaching female faith identity from a Roman

Catholic perspective adds to the conversation, highlighting different aspects of young

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251. For instance, a similar development in theological anthropology in Protestant feminist theology can be seen in Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 49-68 and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) 99-115.

women's experiences or understanding them in new ways. Finally, the themes and processes of female faith identity that emerged through Stories of Gender, such as the importance of physical image and maintaining relationships, seem general enough to also describe the girlhood experiences of Roman Catholic young women, a hunch that has been confirmed in a subsequent research project.[252]

Made in the Image of God: Our Essential Anthropology

It is the first thing written in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures about human beings: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen 1:26).[253] Much theological anthropology begins from this point as well: that humankind is created in the image and likeness of God.[254] Theologically speaking, this is what constitutes human sameness, that we are all *imago Dei*. Scholars with feminist and constructivist commitments are wary of universal claims about humanity, cognizant of how these claims can ignore and elide real differences in human experience and have been used in support of sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Yet from a Christian perspective, there is an essential claim to be made about our human identity:

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252. In the Image Is Everything project, I have worked with a group of young Roman Catholic women. In discussing female identity, many of the same themes have emerged as emerged in Stories of Gender. Likely this is because the media culture and high school culture in which most youth take part affects Catholic and Protestant young women similarly.

253. All scripture quotations are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

254. For instance, in their document on theological anthropology, the World Council of Churches takes as a common Christian starting point the affirmation that humankind is made in God's image. See World Council of Churches, *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document No. 199* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/v-theological-anthropology/christian-perspectives-on-theological-anthropology.html (accessed August 30, 2008).

all human beings share the basic human dignity that corresponds to being made in the image of God.

In this sense, the Stories of Gender participants at Grace UMC and New Life Baptist had their fingers on the pulse of theological anthropology, as they discussed how being created in the image of God undergirds their self-confidence and self-love. They also intuitively grasped how this aspect of their identity meant that they were accepted by God and belonged to the whole human family by virtue of sharing in sharing in this image. But simply saying that we are made in the image of God raises many more questions than it answers. What does it mean that our human nature is *imago Dei*, reflective of the image of God?

Between Finitude and Openness to the Infinite: Transcendental Anthropology

Karl Rahner's transcendental anthropology is not as strange a conversation partner for a project about young women's narrative agency as it first may seem. First, the tensive nature of female identity described by the Stories of Gender participants resonates with Rahner's central notion that human beings exist between our human finitude and the infinite ground of our being, a resonance that warrants further exploration. Second, for Rahner, anthropology is central to theology; he wrote, "Dogmatic theology today has to be theological anthropology."[255] He was clear that theology would not mean anything to people if it could not speak to their understandings of themselves. While Rahner did not consider people's gendered understandings of themselves, he does pave the way for this sort of extension of his work, writing that often

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255. Karl Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," in *The Word in History: The St. Xavier Symposium*, ed. T. Patrick Burke (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966) 1.

people have a problem with theology because "theological expressions are not formulated in such a way that they can see how what is being said has any connection with their own understanding of themselves, which they have derived from experience."[256] Inasmuch as his theological anthropology can help young women to understand themselves in new, salutary, and theologically-appropriate ways, I believe Rahner would approve of using his work as such and even revising it to respond to the experiences of young women.

Central to Rahner's transcendental anthropology are the following claims: human beings are (1) persons who ask questions about their own being, (2) transcendent toward God, (3) dependent on God, (4) free but also radically threatened by guilt, and (5) the event of God's self-communication.

(1) Human beings are persons who ask questions about their own being.

Central to Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith* is the question of who human beings are for themselves.[257] Rahner observes that human beings are those who ask questions about their own being. This questioning demonstrates that we are first and foremost subjects and persons, since personhood is connected with having consciousness and a relationship with the totality of the self.[258] In other words, we are a self as we transcend the self to ask questions about our being. For Rahner, being is being-able-to-be-known.

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256. Rahner, "Theology and Anthropology," 18.

257. Rahner uses non-gender inclusive language, asking who man is for himself. I use more inclusive terms, except when directly quoting from Rahner's writing.

258. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1978) 29-30.

(2) Human beings have transcendence toward God.

Our knowledge of our own being is made possible by what Rahner terms the *Vorgriff*, which is our preapprehension of the totality of all being and reality.[259] This pre-apprehension is a constitutive force of our being, as we always know our finite selves against the backdrop of infinite mystery. Because God is the absolute Being who fills the breadth of this infinite horizon, as we know the self and all knowledge, we also implicitly know God. While we can evade transcendence, we cannot escape it completely, because we always sense that there is "more" beyond us that we do not know. Thus God, as the horizon of infinite mystery, and the very structure of our knowledge invite us into transcendence, that is, stepping out of and beyond ourselves toward this infinite horizon.

(3) Human beings are dependent on God.

As the infinite horizon of God invites us into transcendence, it also informs us of our dependence on God. When we experience the ineffable, we no longer know ourselves as absolute subjects but as ones who receive our being. True self-understanding in freedom before God means accepting ourselves as disclosed and offered by the transcendent. Rahner writes, "Being situated in this way between the finite and the infinite is what constitutes man, and is shown by the fact that it is in his infinite transcendence and in his freedom that man experiences himself as dependent and historically conditioned."[260] Central to Rahner's theological anthropology is this assertion that human beings exist between our finitude and openness to the infinite. Thus, there is ambivalence to our being, as we are created and spirit, exist in the world and transcend it

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259. The *Vorgriff* is an a priori structure of the mind that allows us to know our own being a posteriori.

260. Rahner, *Foundations,* 42.

in our questioning of it, and are doers and makers and also receivers and those being made. Ultimately, without God there would be no humanity, as people would be mired in the world and in themselves. The unity of being and knowing means that through our knowledge of ourselves we know God and through our preapprehension of God, we know ourselves.

(4) Human beings are free but also radically threatened by guilt.

Paradoxically, it is through our dependence on God that we have a real freedom to be ourselves, thus our freedom comes from and is for God. As Rahner writes, "In real freedom the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself. Ultimately he does not do *something*, but does *himself*."[261] But our freedom is never separate from the way we are conditioned by our environment. We make our choices for and against God in our freedom but also in a world in which other people have said no to God. Thus, we are always co-determined by the guilt of others. This is "original sin," the fact that we never exist in a context where there is total freedom to make a choice for God.

Thus human beings are not only free but also threatened by the guilt occasioned by choices we make to close off God's communication to ourselves. In every act, we can recognize the infinite horizon of our being or we can stay locked in the self. Each decision we make shapes us, so that through incremental steps we become better or worse, more open to the infinite horizon or more closed off from it. We have the real possibility to say no to God, but since it happens slowly through the accumulation of our decisions, we can never point to a single moment of our guilt before God. Because God is the ground of our being, our saying no to God is self-destructive and self-contradictory.

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261. Rahner, *Foundations*, 94.

(5) Human beings are the event of God's self-communication.

While human beings are those radically threatened by guilt, we are also the event of God's "free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication."[262] This is Rahner's understanding of grace; God's own Being is the gift of grace, and grace is also the accepting of this gift. Since God is Being-present-to-the-self, in God's gift of grace we are present to ourselves. Through this grace, we participate in God's being, and God participates in our own without God losing God's infiniteness or us losing our finite nature. God's gift is gratuitous and unmerited, but this does not mean grace is rare. God opens God's self in absolute intimacy for the sake of immediate knowledge and love.[263]

We Are Who We Are Becoming: Eschatological Anthropology

In the final chapter of *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner deals with Christian eschatology, that is, "the doctrine about the last things."[264] At first blush, this doctrine may seem little connected to anthropology, yet Rahner insists that because of the very nature of human beings, "Christian anthropology is Christian futurology and Christian eschatology."[265] In other words, since human beings are those who are open to the future of God, we are none other than those who exist in the present toward our

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262. Rahner, *Foundations*, 116.

263. In traditional Catholic thought, grace is a supernatural occurrence that is not known in our experience and thus does not make much difference in our lives. Rahner challenges this view and proclaims that grace is communicated to us in our own reality; therefore it must have an effect on our consciousness. To explain how grace meets us in our consciousness, Rahner has to posit what he terms the supernatural existential. The supernatural existential is produced by God's grace and forms us in a way that we can then freely accept or reject God's offer of grace. That this must be already offered us is important to Rahner so that God can remain God in offering grace and so that we can remain human in accepting it.

264. Rahner, *Foundations*, 431.

265. Ibid.

future. As Rahner writes, "Man can say what he is only by saying what he wants and what he can become."[266] Thus eschatology is a view of the future projected from our present experience of God's grace.

Despite his strong claim for the connection between eschatology and anthropology, Rahner does not articulate fully what eschatology means for our anthropology. Here the work of feminist Catholic theologian Janet Martin Soskice helps flesh out the eschatological aspect of human identity. Like Rahner, Soskice argues that anthropology always is linked closely with eschatology, since we will know ourselves fully only when we know the glory of God.[267] Humans are, in our very being, eschatological and teleological—part of who we are is who we will be. Our human nature is dynamic and changing, for we are in the "process of being 'conformed to the image' of the Son" (Rom 8:29).[268] In other words, Christ reveals the image of God to us, and we reflect the *imago Dei* in the journey of more closely embodying this image in our own being.

While Rahner operates with an image of God as the infinite ground of our being, Soskice finds kinship metaphors, such as God as Father and Mother and Christ as brother and sister, to be compelling in the intimacy and stability they convey (e.g. once a father, always a father). This kinship imagery works well to help us understand the eschatological nature of our identity. In our roles as parents or siblings, for example, we already are these things while continuing to grow in our relationships. Therefore, the

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266. Rahner, *Foundations*, 431.

267. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 183.

268. Ibid., 38. See also 2 Cor 3:18.

eschatological dimension to human identity affirms both that we already are the *imago Dei*, and that we continue to become the *imago Dei*. Identity includes both stability and change. The implications for Christian life are important to Soskice: living as *imago Dei* is not about static perfection but about growth and transformation. Already loved by God, we will continue to be made lovely by God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Male and Female, God Created Them: Our Embodied Anthropology

As noted above, the first thing said about humanity in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures is that humankind is made in the image of God. Being made in the image of God is an identity all human beings share. Theologians like Rahner and Soskice help us understand what this sameness entails: we are persons who exist between our finitude and openness to the infinite and we are who we will be.

The second thing said about human beings in the Bible adds a layer of complexity. Genesis 1:27 reads, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."[269] Clearly, theologically it matters not only that God made humanity in the image of God but also that God created human beings in a sexually-differentiated way, as male and female. The experiences of the Stories of Gender participants give voice to the importance of living in the world in particular bodies of a particular age in a particular time and place. These factors matter very much for how they understand themselves and the struggles they face. Yet how are

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269. There is further complexity if we consider the other biblical passages that contradict the notion of sexual parity here, such as those that seem to imply female subordination as part of God's created order (Gen 2, 1 Cor 11:7).

we are to understand embodied, contextual identities theologically?[270] Rahner does not

deny the importance of the body for human identity. He is emphatic that we think of

human beings "as spirit and as corporeal being, as *both* a transcendental being bounding

on the absolute *and* as a being in time and space… as an absolute unity which cannot

simply be split up into body and soul."[271] Yet when Rahner refers to the body, he is

referencing a generalized, idealized, unspecified idea of the body, not actual and specific

bodies. He does not recognize that different human bodies are accorded varying levels of

status dependent on social-historical factors, and that this matters for who human beings

understand themselves to be. Thus he is not the best resource for understanding the

theological implications of human difference.[272]

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270. How to make sense of human difference vis a vis our status as *imago Dei* is by no means a new theological question, and it is often considered as theologians try to make sense of sexual differentiation. For an excellent summary of three patristic strategies used to make sense of the contrasting biblical notions of the parity of women and men in the image of God and of female subordination, see Kari Elisabeth Borreson, "God's Image, Man's Image? Patristic Interpretation of Gen. 1,27 and 1 Cor. 11, 7" in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Borreson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) 187-209.

271. Rahner, *Foundations*, 435, italics in original.

272. In contemporary Catholic thought, theologians deal with the fact of sexual differentiation in one of three ways. One strategy, most favored by the Vatican, is gender complementarity, which holds that men and women are equal as persons and complementary as men and women. In other words, while men and women equally share the entirety of human substance, men and women function differently, and it is in the intimate and self-donating love of husband and wife that divine love is especially reflected. For a contemporary attempt at redeeming gender complementarity from its connection to a gender hierarchy, see Sara Butler, "Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal and Complementary" in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2002) 35-44.

A second strategy for dealing with sexual differentiation is egalitarian anthropology, which focuses on the human dignity all people share before God. While he was not concerned explicitly with questions of sexual differentiation and women's status as *imago Dei*, Karl Rahner's work is a bedfellow with egalitarian anthropology inasmuch as his primary concern is explicating the one nature human beings share as those created in the image of God.

Various third options for dealing with sexual differentiation have been proposed by feminist Catholic theologians who want to affirm the equal dignity of women and men while also recognizing their bodily and social-experiential differences. In addition to Elizabeth Johnson's multipolar anthropology considered here, see Colleen Griffith, "Human Bodiliness: Sameness as Starting Point," in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2002) 60-67.

More useful is Elizabeth Johnson's multipolar anthropology, in which we celebrate that "All persons are constituted by a number of anthropological constants, essential elements that are intrinsic to their identity. These include bodiliness and hence sex and race; relation to the earth, other persons and social groupings; economic, political, and cultural locations, and the like."[273] In Johnson's multipolar anthropology, gender difference is just one of an interdependent set of multiple differences between persons that constitutes our human diversity. Johnson believes human difference has the potential to serve as a creative, community-shaping force, as people learn from the different ways others experience and relate to the world.[274]

However, Johnson's language for describing categories of difference, naming them "anthropological constants, essential elements," hides the ways in which categories of difference are constructed and valued differently within different social-historical contexts. For instance, while it may be true on a biological level that male and female sex are anthropological constants, the way in which male and female have been understood and valued has changed throughout time and place.[275] While I appreciate and draw on Johnson's multipolar anthropology, I am cognizant of the way categories of difference are constructed socially. While recognizing that categories of difference are constructed socially and ever-changing, we also can hold onto the idea that difference between human beings itself is theologically significant in that it is in our embodied diversity that we reflect the image of God.

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273. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 155.

274. Ibid., 156.

275. Even the idea of male and female as anthropological constants can be questioned, based on the existence of inter-sexed individuals, that is, those born with indeterminate genitalia. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), especially chapters 2 and 3.

All human beings are made in the image of God; this is what constitutes our human sameness. Yet we are only human in our embodied specificity; it can only be through this difference that we reflect God in our being. Catherine LaCugna's notion of the catholic self helps us to hold together the ideas that it is both in our sameness and in our difference that human beings are *imago Dei*. LaCugna argues that human selves are catholic, that is, universal, in connecting with all that there is in the universe and in the sense that each person is a full embodiment of humanity. In other words, every person we encounter exemplifies humanity. LaCugna writes, "The catholicity of the person enables us to embrace diversity enthusiastically instead of fearing it. Each encounter with another human being is an encounter with the truth of our own common humanity, even though human nature is always embodied under distinct conditions."[276] In other words, God is revealed to the world through particularity, first and foremost through Jesus Christ, but also through the embodied particularity of each human person.

Embodying God's Image: A Theological Narrative of Young Women's Identities

Given this exploration into theological anthropology, what can we now say about what it means for young women to be made in the image of God? It surely means more than we ever can explain, since God is Absolute Mystery, yet for young women of faith it means at least these three salutary things: (1) young women exist between their human finitude and openness to the infinite, (2) young women both know and do not know themselves, and (3) young women's embodied and differentiated existence is reflective of God. These particular ways of understanding what it means to be made in God's image

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276. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 290-291.

help us understand the identity work of young women in new, theologically-informed ways, and may be useful to young women as they strive for living with tensegritous integrity.

(1) Young women exist between their human finitude and openness to the infinite.

There are at least four important implications of this transcendental anthropology for young women. First, this transcendental anthropology affirms the subjecthood and personhood of young women, as that is the status of all human beings. Further, as young women do the identity work of adolescence, asking questions about their own being, they also do theological work, that is, coming to know God through themselves, as Elizabeth Johnson helps us understand. Since God and the self are intrinsically connected, "personal development of the self also constitutes development of the experience of God," writes Johnson.[277] So as women encounter the holy mystery of themselves, they come to know God. Johnson does not mince words:

> Given the negative assessment of women's humanity under patriarchy, this self-naming has the character of a conversion process, a turning away from trivialization and defamation of oneself as a female person and a turning toward oneself as worthwhile, as in fact a gift, in community with many others similarly changing.[278]

Young women who are striving to know themselves in the depth of their own being also are opening themselves to the mystery of God and their creation in God's image. To theologically affirm women's subjectivity as constituent of their very being before God undergirds young women's sense of self-esteem and subjectivity.

Second, this theological anthropology posits a transcendent aspect to young women's selfhood as beings having transcendence toward God. Inasmuch as they have a

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277. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 65.

278. Ibid., 62.

sense of themselves as "more than"—more than they can explain, more than the labels put on them by others or themselves, more than the selves that others know—they already experience this transcendent aspect of their personhood. Crucially, this transcendent property of identity enables young women to step outside of the current plane of their knowledge and existence in order to experience new possibilities of the self, offered to them by God. Because of God, not only can young women know themselves, they can also name cultural images of femininity as finite, and thus know themselves as more than the image they project.

Third, young women are dependent on God, paradoxically becoming more themselves and experiencing their autonomy through this relationship. This is an identity implication that must be dealt with carefully as too often in history women have been viewed as dependent creatures, without selfhood and agency. Along with Anglican feminist theologian Sarah Coakley, I do not concur with post-Christian feminists who want to jettison the concept of human dependence altogether. Rather, I want to redeem right forms of dependence, all the while staying cognizant of how difficult this task is, since, as Coakley points out, dependence on God easily becomes entangled with other forms of dependence, from an infant's dependence on a caregiver to a family's dependence on the wage-earner, and with themes of power and patriarchy.[279] Despite this difficulty, it is worth redeeming a sense of young women's dependence on God for at least three reasons.

First, an affirmation of dependence on God gives young women the comfort of depending on someone along with depending on themselves as they do their identity

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279. Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 55-68.

work. The Stories of Gender participants often felt isolated, without trusted conversation partners toward whom they could turn to help them sift through the voices and images vying for their attention as they strive to narrate their identities. These young women make sense of themselves in a context of an individualization discourse, that is, a discourse which "promotes a social world where the individual is fully self-responsible."[280] Another way of understanding their dependence on God is to say that young women are not alone and can depend on God to be with them on their journeys.

Second, as dependent creatures before God, young women receive their being from God. The notion of identity as given and received stands in stark contrast to identity as created and projected, which is how the Stories of Gender participants often experienced identity. For young women who are so aware of how they present themselves, a notion of identity as given by God and received by them may be greeted as good news. This is not to say that Christian young women who receive their identity from God will stop worrying about the image they project, but instead the hope is to lessen the weight of this worry with the assurance that God knows them in their deepest being and already and continually confers an identity upon them. It is also to affirm that God holds their identity; when they are tired of creating and projecting, they can rest in God and know that they will still be.

Again, we see how easy it is to fall into the trap of the girls in crisis discourse. Do we *really* want to recommend to young women a stance of listening to God for identity? Is this not to recommend an unhealthy passivity? Let me say three things in response. First, inasmuch as identity is not self-constituted solely but, at least in part, is conferred and affirmed through relationships, young women already are listening to others for clues

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280. Aapola et al., *Young Femininity*, 36.

to their identities. We should want God to be one of the sources young women listen to as they journey toward self-understanding. Second, listening is not easy to classify as an active or passive activity. To truly listen, to hear what another is expressing and take it to heart, involves both stillness and activity. Third, even as we know that we cannot know ourselves without God, we are also called to act with God as co-constitutors of identity. Young women do have freedom before God. God offers young women visions of themselves, but it is up to the young women to integrate and live this vision. To teach them to adopt a stance of receiving identity from God is not to take away their freedom but instead to situate freedom within their relationship with God and to recognize that freedom is most fully enacted within this relationship. As Rahner reminds us, freedom is doing/being the self, and in relationship with God, young women experience this freedom.

A third reason it is important to redeem the concept of human dependence on God is that this undergirds our recognition that human beings are not God. The problem is not that young women have God-complexes of which they need to be disabused, but rather that they face expectations of perfection which are not humanly possible to attain. Human beings are fallible, and imperfection is a mark of our very humanity. We are not created to be perfect; it is not who we are. For young women to acknowledge and accept their human fallibility and possibly even to celebrate their imperfection as part of who they are, made in God's image, may lessen the burden they feel to present themselves as the perfect sort of girl who does everything with effortless perfection.

A final useful aspect of a transcendental theological anthropology is the recognition it gives to the ambivalence of our human identity as we exist between our

finitude and the infinite horizon. As such, young women can develop a balanced realism about their narrative agency, affirming their human subjecthood, recognizing the sinful structures of the world, and acknowledging that some of tension they feel about female identity is result of trying to exercise their freedom in a sinful world. This balanced realism about our human situation is a signal advantage that a theological perspective on young women's identities offers. It enables us to walk a middle ground between girl power and girls in crisis discourses, tempering unfettered enthusiasm about young women's potentials with pragmatic attention to environmental influences and balancing utter despair about the destructive power of these influences with Christian hope in young women's ability to transcend these influences through the grace of God.

This is not to say that young women are great innocents. Like all human beings, young women make choices that close off God's communication to themselves. This may take the form of over-scheduling, so that there is never a quiet moment in which to receive one's being from God, or of over-emphasizing physical appearance to the detriment of paying attention to the spiritual aspects of being. It may manifest itself as looking solely to peers for the reflection of identity, and never to God or to one's true sense of self, or as isolating the self so that one cannot learn from those who are different than oneself. There are countless ways that young women can choose to stay locked in themselves and say no to God. And again, these no's to God are both free choices and choices made within a world in which meaningful constraints operate.

This brings us full circle, back to the central point in Rahner's transcendental anthropology: human beings exist between their finitude and openness to the infinite. Ultimately, this reminds us to take a both/and approach to young women's identities,

made in the image of God. Young women are both bodies and spirits, free and

determined by their environments, transcendent toward and dependent on God.

(2) Young women both know and do not know themselves, as they are oriented
toward their futures.

Soskice's eschatological anthropology, grounded in kinship metaphors for God

that carry with them both stability and recognition of change and growth, is useful to

young women of faith as they seek to ground their identities in narratives from their faith

tradition. When the Stories of Gender participants talk about wanting to know and be

their true selves, they intuit and strive to connect to the immovable part of themselves

that is grounded in God's love and God's image. Confirming with them that they are once

and always children of God and that God is constantly their Father or Mother and Christ

is always their kin provides a constancy of identity that can serve as bedrock as young

women negotiate the identity challenges of adolescence, where who you are and how you

present yourself may change with the fashion seasons or with the whims of fickle social

groups. Young women can rely on the facts that they have been created in the image of

God and that they are loved by God, no matter how much they struggle to fit in with

peers or are convinced their parents and other adults can never understand them. They

always can know this much about themselves.

Kinship metaphors also carry the connotation of already but not yet—that one is

already a child of God and kin of Christ but continues to grow as a child of God and kin

of Christ. When our anthropology is eschatological, static images of perfect identity are

named as false, and the process of growth and change is normalized as central to our

human being and becoming. This seems especially important for young women, as it may

help them to name narratives of self from beauty and consumer culture as false inasmuch

as these ubiquitous narratives are about achieving a particular, albeit impossible, end and not about a journey of growth. Further, recognizing the eschatological aspect of human identity may confer some of their not-knowing of self with the status of being theologically natural, thus normalizing and lessening the pain that can go with feeling as if one does not know the self completely.

This is another point to make with some care. There are relational, cultural, and systemic forces that can impede young women's self-knowledge. These forces are examples of sin in the world, and the lack of self-knowledge that results when these forces are at work is not theologically natural. We are right to work with young women to overcome forces that limit their ability to come to know themselves as made in God's image, as this is part of justice-making in the world.

At the same time, however, young women face an enormous pressure to know who they are (for example, so that they can sell themselves to the right college). It may alleviate some of this pressure to normalize healthy levels of not-knowing themselves, since, as Soskice writes, we will only know ourselves fully when we come to know the full glory of God.[281] To ease the expectation that young women come to know themselves fully and to highlight the fact that they will continue to grow, change, and know themselves differently throughout life may be of immense relief to them and help them to live more comfortably in their tensive identities.

Important here is Soskice's idea that human beings, already loved by God, are continually made lovely by God.[282] This offers young women an alternative narrative of loveliness to the narrative of beauty perfection they constantly encounter in the media

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281. Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 183.

282. Ibid., 187.

and also takes some of the pressure off of their individual responsibility for their beauty. In other words, while young women as individuals are held solely responsible for the image of femininity they project, young women of faith can take solace in the fact that God is working in, with, and through them to fashion them in God's lovely image. Again, this is not to take away their agency, as young women are called to work cooperatively with God in this project. But it does lessen the sole responsibility they feel for their self-creation and challenge the individuality discourses they so often encounter.

Finally, eschatological anthropology offers young women a hope-filled orientation to the past, present, and future that cultural images of femininity do not. Cultural images of femininity are about the image you project now, and we also learn through media that women "peak" in their twenties and that it is all downhill from there for female identity. Not only does Christian identity connect young women to a long history and thus a variety of models for femininity, it connects them to future versions of themselves and to the reality that they will be made lovely in God and fully know themselves in God in the *eschaton*.

(3) Young women's embodied and differentiated existence is reflective of God.

While connecting to humanity through their shared transcendent and eschatological identities, young women also reflect the image of God in their distinctive, embodied femaleness. This means, first, that young women's bodies are part of God's good creation. We do not image God only in our spirits but also in our bodies—the very meaning of the Incarnation, of God taking on human form in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, there is a comingling of human and divine so that we can no longer separate the two. As Christ takes on a human body, we are clothed in God's love and

make our way to God through being conformed to Christ's image. As Soskice writes, "Our human bodies, once mapped on Christ's human body, are not obstacles to salvation, but its very means. The Word Incarnate embracing embodied life blesses its contingent and fragile nature."[283] Identifying the link between temple and kinship language, Soskice notes that God dwells in buildings and the human body of Christ. Thus, followers of Jesus, both individually and collectively, become the temple of God, our physical nature consecrated as God's dwelling place.

This should be good news to young women of faith—that their bodies are the good dwelling places of God. As we saw for the Stories of Gender participants, their bodies are at the heart of female identity as projects to be worked upon, adorned properly, and controlled. Theologically speaking, bodies are also central to our identity, yet differently so, as the holy place in which and through which we meet God. Understood this way, young women may be invited to approach their bodies with less judgment and more kindness, knowing that they are already lovely, loved, and continually made lovely before God, as Soskice puts it.[284] This is not to say that young women will be freed from making choices about what clothes to wear, how much make-up to put on, and whether to diet to achieve the proper figure of a girl. It is, however, to hold out hope that understanding their bodies as projects in need of work could become secondary to their understanding of their bodies as made in God's image, as kin to Christ, and as temples of God and that in so shifting their bodily understanding they would feel less pressure to conform to the stringent standards of the proper image of femininity, knowing that they are loved by God just as they are.

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283. Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 142.

284. Ibid., 181.

Second, because of the catholicity of human personhood, each young woman is a full embodiment of humanity, reflecting knowledge about humanity and God to those who are in relationship with her. In other words, each young woman has something to teach the world about who human beings are and who God is. Further, when we combine the catholicity of human personhood, Rahner's emphasis on the unity of being and knowing, and Johnson's affirmation of the creative and community-forming potential of human diversity, we realize the importance of young women taking part in communities in which people of difference strive to know each other through relationships of mutuality. It is through these relationships that young women can come to know themselves, other people, and God in ever-expanding ways. This is what LaCugna calls the exponential nature of personhood: our personhood expands as our relationships with others expand. Put alternatively, "With each new relationship we 'are' in a new way, we 'exist' in a new way, we have our being from another."[285] As Johnson affirms, these relationships can be the very source of creativity, as we come to see the world in new ways through the multipolar experiences and identities of others.[286]

This is an important note on which to end this section. Much of what I have explored through this theological anthropology and what I examine in the next section on young women's faith journeys focuses on the individual. But the identity work of young women of faith is not only about discovering the self as an autonomous entity but also about exploring relationships and how these shape the self and others. Here again we cannot escape the both/and nature of Christian identity. Young women image God in

285. LaCugna, *God For Us*, 291.

286. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 156.

their essential personhood but also in their differentiated selves, particularly as they are selves-in-relation with all those who are different than they are.

In conclusion, to return to where we began: what does it mean that young women are made in the image of God? Around the image of God coheres inherent human dignity that cannot be eradicated by human forces. The human sameness young women share with all people is a transcendent and eschatological identity, in which they stand in the middle ground between their human finitude and God's infiniteness as the ground of their being and between already knowing something of themselves but also accepting some not-knowing, since self-knowledge will only ever be fully realized when we see God face to face in redemption. At the same time as they share this human identity with all people, each young woman also has a distinct and embodied identity through which she reflects God's image in the world. To use language from Soskice, followers of Jesus, individually and collectively, become the temple of God, each stone beautiful in its uniqueness and also contributing to the beauty of the whole.[287]

Journeys of Becoming: A Theological Reading of Narrative Identity Work

As articulated in the previous section, an important aspect of our identity as *imago Dei* is the eschatological nature of identity. In other words, part of who we are is who we are becoming. This indicates that, theologically speaking, our human identity is not just about content. It is also about the *process* of living into the future of the person we are to become. In this section, I consider what the process of coming to know oneself made in the image of God might entail for young women. First, I outline the five movements feminist Catholic theologian Mary Grey argues are constitutive of women's journeys

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287. Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 187-189.

toward self-development and autonomy. Then I reflect on what these five movements illumine about young women's identity work. While this description may not fit the identity journeys of all women or the entirety of an individual's journey, it serves as a useful roadmap, as another resource for Christian faith communities hoping to better understand and support young women as they strive to articulate and live tensegritous identities.

<div align="center">Women's Spiritual Journeys: Toward the Via Unitiva</div>

According to Mary Grey, the journey toward redemption must begin by experiencing ourselves as God's good creation. She writes, "The very act of recovering a sense of being created in the image of God is, for women, a redemptive act, in reclaiming lost wholeness, and sense of self-worth."[288] Elizabeth Johnson has made a similar argument, noting that in a context of patriarchy, "a turning away from trivialization and defamation of oneself as a female person and a turning toward oneself as worthwhile, as in fact a gift" is actually a conversion process, as women move toward knowing God by valuing themselves.[289] Yet if women are exposed, however subtly, to the message that they are not made in the image of God, how is it that they eventually may be able to live out of the knowledge that they are, in fact, *imago Dei*? What marks their spiritual journey toward self-validation and self-knowledge that is also God-knowledge?

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288. Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989) 6. From a Reformed Protestant perspective, Serene Jones makes a similar point, arguing that the order of exposure to justification and sanctification be reversed for women so that women first hear that they are enveloped in God's grace and only then hear a word of judgment. See Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 112.

289. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 62.

Since there are so few models of "a responsible, self-directing personality,

capable of responsible choices specifically within a Christian context," Grey turns to the

feminist quests of literary heroines, asking whether their searches for a feminist self can

be considered spiritual quests.[290] Answering in the affirmative, Grey reinterprets the five

steps of the mystical journey in order to make sense of women's experiences moving

toward self-development and autonomy. Unlike the typical linear quest narratives of male

protagonists, who set off into geographical space to search for something, the spiritual

quests of women are often cyclical journeys inward made up of five movements.

First, there is *awakening*, marked by a transcending of the self, as a woman

experiences that there is more to herself that she used to think. Quoting from Carol

Christ, Grey notes, " 'The spiritual quest of a modern woman begins in the experience of

nothingness, the experience of being without an adequate image of self.' "[291] But then the

woman experiences something different, perhaps a moment of self-transcendence evoked

through a natural mystical experience or a vision of a hoped-for future, which invites a

deeper form of consciousness. Yet it is not enough simply to have these experiences;

Grey is emphatic that it is "the capacity to reflect on and integrate experiences," to recall

moments of being and to re-member bits of the self, that enables women to continue on

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290. Specifically, Grey examines the journey of character Martha Quest from Doris Lessing's five part saga, *Children of Violence*. The particulars of Martha's journey are of less concern here than what can be learned about women's journeys toward self-recognition.

291. Carol Christ, "Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience," *Anima* (1 February 1975): 11-12, quoted in Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 64.

the spiritual journey.[292] This initial stage is marked by waiting, not passively but with

focused attention, as a woman pays attention to and explores further her experiences.[293]

The spiritual awakening of the first movement leads to the second movement of

via purgativa, the way of purification, in which a woman holds onto the conscious

realization that she is made in the image of God while purging that which blocks this

realization. Traditionally for men, *via purgativa* involves stripping away false senses of

self. For women, who may have more trouble with self-abnegation than men, purification

involves recovering and reclaiming positive self-images, as well as "the stripping away of

all that stands in the way of our relationship with reality."[294]

When one perseveres on this journey, the reward is reaching the third movement

of *via illuminativa*, breaking through to new levels of consciousness. Grey is clear that

for women, the stages of purgation and illumination are not necessarily successive or

linear, for the more clear a woman's sense of self, the more likely she is to be in conflict

with the people and structures of her world. As part of her illumination, a woman

recognizes the interior self-hater as connected to the hatred of the world that leads to sin

and violence, without losing a sense of her deepest self.

The light of illumination may be short lived and followed by the fourth

movement, *the dark night of the soul*, a term coined by St. John of the Cross to describe

the joylessness, darkness, and withdrawal of all comfort through which the

transformation of desire takes place. Grey notes that "this place of impasse and despair"

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292. Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 69.

293. Grey is careful not to glamorize waiting, since there are many tragic forms of waiting, such as waiting in unemployment lines. Grey argues that "on the plain of spirituality 'waiting' can become a tool charged with hope," and also a tool of women's spirituality that helps to break down the active-passive binary. See Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 68.

294. Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 71.

is the experience of many Christian feminists who have experienced awakening, purgation, and illumination only to find that no one understands what she is trying to birth.[295] For these women, the male God of Christian tradition ceases to function, liturgy seems pointless, and she is left feeling alone and despairing. Like the feminists who cry "take back the night," Grey reinterprets the dark night as a time crucial for growth and transformation. She urges women to stay connected to physical and psychological growth processes, noting that the will, too, has its seasons, and to remember that God is with them in this growth process. Even as women experience God as absent, God is luring them toward deeper consciousness, challenging them further.

Grey is realistic; the spiritual challenge of the dark night, of feeling caught between the depth of God and the mundane and the unjust, can leave women numb and immobile. Yet if we trust that God is acting in this time of darkness, we can dare to hope that the darkness will lead to *via unitiva*, to the possibility of living as a unified personality. While the journey to the self continues throughout a lifetime, when women recognize that God holds them and that there is a greater reality than the self, then they are able to hold the poles of autonomy and interrelatedness together, living creatively in the tension between them. At this point in their journeys, women act as their own agents and cultivate relationships of dynamism, mutuality, and responsiveness with others.

Grey's vision of *via unitiva*—living as a unified personality, recognizing that God holds our being, acknowledging the transcendent in our lives, living creatively in the tension between autonomy and interrelatedness—has many similarities to the theological anthropology articulated above. It also has much in common with what young women seem to desire in their lives—living as their true selves while still being accepted by

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295. Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 76.

others—and thus points the way to considering how this journey toward *via unitiva* might illumine the identity work of young women of faith.

At first glance, living *via unitiva* may seem similar to the equation of integrity with narrative unity. However, Grey argues that the quest narrative, so often a model of the male spiritual journey, does not describe well the spiritual journeys of women, thus echoing the argument made by Stange and the results of Stories of Gender. Further, *via unitiva* implies not an achievable endpoint, as is suggested by a notion of narrative unity, but rather a continual journey. In other words, *via unitiva* is literally *a way*, a process of joining together that serves women as they cycle inward through the five movements of the spiritual quest. As Grey writes, "There can be no end-of-journey, until, in the attainment of the beatific vision, God's transformation of the world is complete," and as such, "any achievement will be in terms of an ever-deepening vision of the interconnectedness of divine and human becoming." [296] The unity of which Grey writes is akin to what I name tensegrity, as creative tension is at the core of *via unitiva*. While we never overcome the tension between autonomy and connectedness, redemption in Grey's schema means that "we are able to hold the two tensions in creative balance," which is made possible by our sense of "being held by a wider whole."[297] *Via unitiva* does not mean ignoring or rejecting aspects of the self that do not fit easily together. Rather it means embracing tensions, living as a "choice-making, judging and acting individual" while maintaining "that vital interconnectedness with the rest of creation."[298]

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296. Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 80.

297. Ibid., 81.

298. Ibid.

The Spiritual Journeys of Young Women

If the journey toward *via unitiva* begins with recognizing one's self as God's good creation, many of the Stories of Gender participants already are launched on this journey toward self-realization. Particularly in the New Life Baptist and Grace UMC groups, these young women who had been raised in and continued to participate in a Christian context evidenced a baseline sense of self-worth grounded in their belief in being made in the image of God. While their theology was not necessarily sophisticated, their belief that God created, accepts, and loves them as they are formed bedrock for their sense of self. Although they, like everyone else, are still on the journey toward self that will only be complete when God's redemption is complete, their participation in families and communities of faith seems to have borne fruit in terms of accepting themselves as God's good creation, despite narratives to the contrary to which they are exposed.

However, this is not all that there is to awakening. Awakening involves experiences of self-transcendence *and* reflecting on these experiences. In other words, many young women already have had experiences of self-transcendence that are central to awakening but they are not often asked to think about these experiences in any sort of sustained, serious, or analytical way. This was evident in the Stories of Gender participants' exit interviews, as many participants indicated that they had never before been asked to reflect upon their experiences as a girl or to think about God's presence in their life stories. By creating opportunities for young women to tell and reflect on their stories with each other and trusted adults, faith communities can provide important support to young women on their spiritual journeys. Ideally, if given sustained opportunities for reflection on their experiences, with some level of repetition over a

number of years with a trusted group of peers and adults, young women can be apprenticed into a pattern of living and reflecting on living that suits them well as they strive to live with tensegrity as young women of faith. They would be practicing what Soskice might call a spirituality of attention, patiently concentrating on what is happening in their lives so as to discern God's movement in it and to make choices for their future becoming.[299]

It is also important to note here that the young women of today are not beginning their spiritual journeys from the same place that women of previous generations did. When Carol Christ writes of the spiritual quest of a modern woman beginning in "the experience of nothingness," that description seems more applicable to the journeys of second wave feminists who were making a way for women out of no way.[300] Conversely, the young women in the Stories of Gender project have spent their lives hearing that girls can do whatever they put their minds to, and they live in a cultural context in which many people believe feminism is now passé. Their challenge is not beginning from an experience of nothingness, but beginning from the experience of too much information of not the right kind. In some ways, they have too many identities to choose from, as they are told that they can be whatever they want to be. But as they are inundated with literally thousands of advertisements a day with subtle messages about what it means to be a girl, they also realize that being the right sort of girl often boils down to one thing—projecting an image of female beauty perfection. Young women find this message wanting, since it does not seem to express who they are in their entireties, but they are still left without alternative narratives into which to live. This is why inviting young women to practice a

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299. Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 7-34.

300. See note 291 above.

spirituality of attention is so crucial, as its cycle of experiencing, reflecting, and waiting on God runs counter to a consumer cycle grounded in the rhythms of finding yourself wanting, feeling bad, and buying something to make the bad feeling go away.

While young women of today may begin their spiritual journeys from a slightly different place than their foremothers, the end goal of this journey seems to have remained constant, that is, living *via unitiva*, that is, in the creative tension between autonomy and belonging. Many of the Stories of Gender described their desire to live as a true self while also being respected and loved by their families and friends for being this self. While young women will continue to experience the cyclical movements of awakening, purification, illumination, and the dark night throughout their lives, *via unitiva* may be achieved in some relative sense as young women learn to accept themselves for who they are and to balance their first-person identity narratives with third-person narratives, master narratives, identities derived from then groups of which they are a part, and their relationships with God.

Iesha's story, which opens this dissertation, emphasizes that between awakening and *via unitiva* are stages of purgation, illumination, and the dark night of the soul, which can be painful, as young women must separate themselves from that which denies their sense of self made in the image of God. Iesha notes that she felt like less of a girl when she began to think of herself as too big to succeed at dancing, and it took some work and the support of her sister for her to move past this narrative far enough to have the confidence to try out for the cheerleading team in high school. For young women, the journey to self is neither simple nor painless, as the discourse of girl power may lead young women to believe. This journey takes place not in a vacuum, where everyone can

simply create the best possible version of themselves, but in the world, in which there are people and structures that can block young women's journeys.

A particularly challenging aspect of *via purgativa* for young women is the renegotiation of relationships with friends and families that is necessary as young women grow and change on their journeys. For instance, many of the young women in the Southeastern University group despaired about facing a seemingly mutually exclusive choice between being true to their developing religious and political beliefs and maintaining relationships with more conservative parents, friends, and other relatives from home. Many feared that important relationships would come to an end if they were to speak their emerging convictions, yet they were frustrated that they could not be their true selves with those whom they love. Figuring out the way of purification, of what to do about these relationships that appear to block the realization of self, is a central aspect of *via purgativa* for young women for which there will not be one answer or easy answers. Some relationships, even ones with dear loved ones, may need to end if respect for a young woman's emerging selfhood is not forthcoming. Hopefully, most relationships can continue, with attention given to reconfiguring the relationship to make room for who the young woman is becoming. Whatever the process, young women need support in this work, the sort of support that communities of faith may be in a position to provide, if by doing no more than serving as a listening post for young women to talk about their purgative struggles in a safe environment, or more ambitiously, training for and then mediating difficult conversations between young women and loved ones who are having trouble accepting who the young women are becoming on their spiritual journeys.

Communities of faith are also called to support young women who may be encountering dark nights. While they did not use this language, Lisa and Kathleen appeared to be experiencing an iteration of the dark night that may be common among young women who "go away from home," whether that leaving is in the form of going to college, moving into one's own home, entering the full-time workforce, or engaging in service or social justice work locally or abroad. Both Lisa and Kathleen had been raised in church-going families, and since attending college, both found it difficult to continue attending church with their families, as they heard things in this home context that did not support their emerging beliefs. For instance, Kathleen recalls sitting speechless as the pastor at her home church preached homophobic rhetoric. She and Lisa still believe in God, and even think they might want to be part of a church again someday, but both are struggling to find a way to belong, feeling as though the traditions in which they were raised have become meaningless. They do not feel as if God has abandoned them, but they do feel isolated as they navigate away from the churches and faith of their upbringing toward an unknown spiritual future.

This offers a real challenge to faith communities. How can we remain in place and walk with young women in their dark nights, without projecting the condescending attitude that we expect the young women will simply come back to us in time? How can we, as Grey recommends, "take back the night" as a time crucial for growth and transformation, all the while giving credence to the true pain and despair that often mark this time of darkness? How do we affirm with young women that God is there, luring them toward their future selves, while also empathizing with their sense that God or their faith or their faith community is absent?

I have focused here on young women's spiritual journeys toward an affirmation of the self and honest self-love; however, like Grey, I do not believe young women's well-being ends here. In fact, this has been the downfall of certain iterations of movements for girl power, that they have focused only on transforming an individual's understanding of herself without thinking about what constitutes transformed relationships and the social world in which young women exist. To encourage the self-development of young women without equipping them with ideas about how to transform their relationships and their world is only to invite frustration. However, this is not to say that young women are solely responsible for their own transformation and the redemption of the world. To do so would put us right back where many of these young women start: feeling responsible for everything and everyone; striving to achieve perfection in themselves, their relationships, and their world; and constantly fearing failure.

This is where the transcendent element of our human identities before God becomes salvific for young women. Young women have God as a partner in this transformative work, or better, God has young women as co-redeemers. Young women can trust that God will continue to offer new possibilities to themselves and the world, even when it seems as if their work for redemption is coming to naught, and from this trust springs hope. This is not a naïve hope, but instead a hope that holds in tension recognition of the sinful world that blocks self-realization, right relationships, and justice and belief in a God who will redeem all things. To use the language from the previous chapter, it is a tensegritous hope. It is this transcendent element of redemption that enables young women to balance the poles of autonomy and interdependence, so that they can affirm their role in transforming themselves, their relationships, and the world

while also acknowledging their dependence on God to empower them for this work. When their identities are held by God, young women do not need to collapse competing aspects of their narratives identities but rather can hold them together in creative tensions that lead to new possibilities for their self-narratives.

CHAPTER SIX

GIRLS ONLY: (TRANS)FORMATIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

For young women, identity is about identification, and as we have seen, many young women identify with the narrative of female beauty perfection. Even if they are critical of this aspect of female identity, often it is difficult for them to live out of alternative identity narratives. Theological anthropology offers young women an important narrative thread for their counterstories, the idea of being *imago Dei*, made in the image of God. While young women already embody the *imago Dei*, they are also on a lifetime journey of becoming more conformed to this image, as there is an eschatological aspect to their identities.

To aid young women in imagining and living into their eschatological identity as *imago dei*, we need to ask: what enables young women to tell counterstories about good enough female identity and how can they be supported in this task by Christian faith communities wishing to partner with young women on their eschatological journeys? In the concluding chapter, I address these questions in terms of the formative role of Christian faith communities. In this chapter, I approach these questions as a theological educator, mining educational resources for how best to support young women in the work of narrative repair for damaged identities. I am directed to these educational resources by the Stories of Gender participants, who were enthusiastic in their appraisal of the story-sharing process. Not only did they find the process of story sharing fun, but they also spoke of being empowered by narrating and reflecting on stories of their lives with other young women. Further, they talked about how their understanding of gender expanded through these conversations and how they learned to connect God to their life

experiences in novel ways. In as much as education is about learning new things, expanding our understanding of things we already knew, and empowering people to use their knowledge in their lives and in the world, educators can help us understand why pedagogical aspects of Stories of Gender worked the way they did and suggest ways of improving upon this process of story sharing so as to better promote young women's transformations toward living *via unitiva*.

Girl-Only Spaces: Caring for Young Women through Religious Education

While faith communities in their entirety are important environments of support for young women, as I explore in the concluding chapter, girls also need girl-only time and space to share with other young women and trusted adult mentors the challenges and joys specific to their age and gender. There are three reasons this girl-only space within Christian faith communities is necessary. First, as we saw with the Stories of Gender participants, one way in which female identity is constructed is through the male gaze.[301] That is, girls often understand themselves in relation to how they are viewed by boys and men. To remove boys and men from the educational space, at least some of the time, helps young women bracket the male gaze to that they can focus more clearly on how God knows them and how they know themselves.[302]

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301. That girls make sense of themselves through the male gaze is a theme also reflected in the literature on young women of faith. See Davis, *Beyond Nice*, 91 and Mercer, *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 53.

302. All of the Stories of Gender participants used exclusively male language for God; thus understanding themselves in relation to God seemingly continues to inscribe their identity through a male gaze. However, based on what I heard from the Stories of Gender participants, my hypothesis is that for many young women, a male God functions as an alternative to the male gazes of their fathers, boyfriends, and male friends. This male God is accepting and loving of them even when the men in their lives are not. Further, when young women take part in faith communities that expose them to a variety of images for God, as I recommend in the next chapter, then the maleness of the gaze of God is deemphasized. As

Second, since adolescence is a time of transition when questions of gender and sexual identity become increasingly important, girls need time to consider what it means to be a girl with other girls so that they can experiment with their identities and learn from each other.[303] Inasmuch as girls still encounter sexist master narratives, they need this space apart for consciousness raising about how these narratives can lead to deprivation of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness. As girls reflect on their experiences together, they come to see that troubling aspects of their own experiences are not only individual but also shared experiences that are the result not of some failure on their part to be the right sort of girl but of systems of oppression to which they are subject and within which others (and themselves) act. Having named the effects of sexist master narratives on their self-understanding, young women can work together to tell counternarratives featuring themselves as moral agents whose identities are so much more than the look they project or sexual objects for the enjoyment of others. As young women tell collective counternarratives and support each other in living them, the effects of sexist master narratives are, in effect, lessened, as there are now more alternative narratives with which sexist master narratives have to compete. Young women telling common counterstories thus not only helps them with living identities of tensegrity, but it also helps the wider culture, as the power of sexist master narratives will lessen only when the counternarratives told against them have enough heft to fully expose the oppression and lies inherent in them.

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mentioned above in note 205, the relationship between young women's female faith identities and their gendered images of God is a promising area for future research.

303. This is what Marnina Gonick provided to the female middle school students with whom she conducted research: a space apart in which girls could work on questions of identity together in the form of video projects. See Gonick, *Between Femininities*, 21-60.

Third, girls need a safe place to talk about issues that are harder to address in co-educational groups or in other settings, like at school or with parents. Many conversations could fall in this category, but I think particularly of the emphasis on menstruation across the Stories of Gender groups and on the fear that young women live with that is caused by unwanted sexual advances by men. Girl-only spaces provide privacy for talking about the most personal aspects of their experiences, like menstruation, and help to lessen the influences of power dynamics that may lead young women to stay silent about situations like sexual harassment.

This is not to say that conversations about menstruation, sexual harassment, and other sensitive topics need to be confined to girl-only spaces. To do so would cause more harm than good by continuing to treat these aspects of girls' experiences as taboo, unworthy of attention, or too difficult to be dealt with by the whole community. In addition to providing girl-only spaces for the discussion of sensitive topics, the silence around menstruation could be mitigated, at least partially, if menstruation was celebrated as a marker of womanhood and part of God's good creation of women's bodies.[304] Further, faith communities need to proclaim openly that violence against women, that violence of any kind in any form against anyone, is not tolerated, so that young women know that the community is on their side if they experience unwanted sexual advances or other forms of violence. Ideally, the identity work that young women do in girl-only spaces would become part of the larger identity of the faith community, as young women share who they are in the whole of their being with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

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304. For an example of a ceremony for the onset of menstruation, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 188.

In the recommendations for work in girl-only spaces that follow, I intentionally weave the work of religious education and pastoral care together. Certainly there are severe life circumstances and events young women encounter that require one-on-one pastoral counseling and, at times, referral to other mental health professionals. But there are also more mundane challenges that girls face—dealing with broken families, friendships, and romantic relationships; struggling to fit in while also being true to themselves; and feeling isolated from trusted adults and others with whom they could share their most personal experiences. To call these experiences mundane is not to say that they are not painful. It is to recognize the challenges that are part and parcel of everyday life and to affirm that working together with other young women to share and reflect on these experiences; to put these experiences into conversation with the Christian tradition; and to learn prayer practices that enhance one's relationship to God can promote healing and also give young women skills that will be useful to them as they continue on their identity journeys.

In a culture in which sexist master narratives still operate, it is likely that young women's identities have been damaged to some extent. As pastoral theologian Christie Neuger articulates, the patriarchal reality is that "every woman lives in a world that devalues her because of her sex."[305] Further, Mary Grey's work helps us appreciate how young women's journeys toward *via unitiva* involve some pain and struggle, as they must separate themselves from that which does not support their ability to be true to themselves as made in the image of God, including sexist master narratives. By combining education and care, young women can support each other as they work on healing. There are multiple examples of this sort of healing from the Stories of Gender

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305. Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 16.

project. A grave example was Lisa working to forgive herself and her boyfriend after her decision to have an abortion, but there were more quotidian examples as well. For instance, in her exit interview, Bethany said that talking about her ex-boyfriends in our group provided an opportunity to understand those relationships in new ways and to begin to laugh at the mistakes she had made in the past. Further, she felt that God was laughing with her, perhaps contributing to her healing process.

A major virtue of gathering young women together to share and reflect on their experiences is that they not only learn new things about themselves, each other, and their religious tradition, but they also benefit from a reparative process usually reserved for more formal and individualistic therapeutic settings.[306] Narrative therapist Martin Payne recognizes that techniques of narrative therapy can be used in non-therapeutic settings to assist people in coming to more healthy senses of identity.[307] Thus one way to understand the model of religious education for young women I articulate here is as narrative therapy done with small groups of young women in which they come to identify problematic aspects of their identity narratives, explore new possibilities for their identity narratives, and tell and act on counternarratives, all the while being apprenticed into prayer practices from their Christian traditions that are meant to stimulate their imaginations and assist them in tuning into God's narrative for their lives.

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306. From within the field of pastoral counseling, Barbara McClure also has written about overcoming an individualistic perspective in pastoral care. See Barbara J. McClure, *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care: Reflections on Theory, Theology, and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

307. Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors (*London: Sage Publications, 2000) 193.

An Argument for Imagination

There is a faculty that is central to transformative education with young women

on their journeys toward *via unitiva*: imagination. Speaking to the importance of fostering

imagination through education, Rebecca Chopp writes, "Imagination, the ability to think

the new, is an act of survival. Yet the imagination is rarely explicit in the educational

process."[308] First, imagination is necessary for young women to reflect critically on their

experiences. In her writing on imagination, Mary Elizabeth Moore highlights the

importance of imagination for critical reflection on texts in the classroom, arguing that it

is only when we can inhabit imaginatively the context of the text that we can offer a more

nuanced critique.[309] Building on Moore's argument, I contend that young women need

imagination in order to understand critically their experiences as young women. Being

able to look imaginatively at women of the past and present, as well as their own

situation and relationship to this history, is part of the conscientization that leads to

transformation. As theater educator Augusto Boal puts it, in order to transform

something, we must first know it,[310] and imagination can help young women to better

understand their current situation in all its complexity and nuance.

Second, imagination is a vital aspect of empathy, which enables young women to

inhabit the narratives of others as they explore new possibilities for their own identities.

This breaking from individualism promotes young women's connection with each other

as a community of care, enabling the overcoming of isolation as they recognize their own

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308. Chopp, *Saving Work*, 108.

309. Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Imagination at the Center: Identity at the Margins," *Process Studies* 34, no. 2 (2005): 282-300.

310. Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 2nd ed., trans. Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 2002) 207.

experiences in the experiences of others and tell collective counterstories that challenge harmful master narratives. Conversely, by imaginatively understanding each other's realities, young women also come face to face with difference, as no one else's experience is identical to their own. By encountering this difference imaginatively and empathetically, they are more likely to allow this difference to serve as a new possibility for their own identity work rather than striking out against it or denying it.

Third, imagination is crucial if we are to see the world not as it is, but as it could be. We need imagination in order to work for justice and to believe that a radically transformed future is possible. As educator Maxine Greene notes, social change only can happen when we are able to think in new ways, and we will only think in new ways when the imagination has been released.[311] It is imagination that allows us to make new connections, to see the world as it could be but is not now, and to recognize that what seem to be givens are actually contingencies toward which we can act for change. In this context, imagination is necessary for young women to recognize that there is more than one way to be a young woman, to integrate new and old understandings of themselves, and to work toward conditions that support the full flourishing of young women and all people.

In developing imagination that critiques the past and present, supports empathetic relations with others, and offers a new vision for the future, young women are invited to develop what those in Christian communities might call a prophetic imagination. The prophets were not blind to their context; they were realistic about the cultural evils in which people were mired. Yet they announced the reality of the kingdom of God and urged people to work with them and God to take away the power of these cultural evils.

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311. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*. 23.

Similarly, young women are called to be attentive to their context and to imaginatively name the forces that work against their full human flourishing and the flourishing of others. But they are not bound to this context; instead, they can live imaginatively into the reality of God's vision of equality, mutuality, and justice among people.

Like any faculty, imagination must be exercised in order to perform at its best. Aesthetic, narrative, and embodied education are particularly well suited for exercising the imagination.

Aesthetic Education

By aesthetic education, I mean engagement with and the creation of art—dance, music, poetry, literature, and visual art. Educator Maxine Greene, a major proponent of aesthetic education, recommends starting with students' first impressions and impulses, and then engaging art rigorously as its own form of knowledge.[312] Then art resists a single interpretation and invites a multiplicity of voices, ultimately "releasing the imagination," as Greene puts it. She writes, "In part, I argue for aware engagements with the arts for everyone, so that individuals in this democracy will be less likely to confine themselves to the 'main text,' less likely to coincide forever with what they are."[313] Aesthetic education fosters the crucial skills of seeing in multiple ways and seeing what we had not seen before, an experience that may introduce us to new choices and prompt new beginnings. Referring to the desire art provokes for "what *ought* to be," Greene explains,

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312. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 122-133.

313. Ibid., 135.

> Clearly, provoking this desire is not the single role of the arts when they become objects of our experience, although encounters with them frequently do move us to want to restore some kind of order, to repair, to heal. At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed.[314]

Engagement with art invites a form of wide-awake living that is grounded in self-reflection, naming of values, and being open to the possibility of revising our vision. As people lurch out of the taken for granted, an opening for a new beginning, for a new way of being or acting, emerges.

Aesthetic education is important for young women who live in a largely visual culture, where they are exposed to, and then expected to project, a relatively narrow range of images of what constitutes acceptable girlhood. Encountering images of women from other times and places through a variety of art forms—song, poetry, painting, sculpture—helps young women identify the narrow images to which they are expected to conform and imagine other ways of living into their female identity. Further, asking young women to use collage, photography, or music to think about their own experiences—of girlhood, of faith—assists them in seeing their own experiences and the experiences of others through new eyes and creating artifacts that speak to their complex understandings of self.

Narrative Education

By narrative education, I mean the reading, constructing, telling, and discussing of stories, either fictional or narratives from people's life experiences. Stories of Gender is an example of narrative education in that its pedagogical focus was the sharing and

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314. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 123.

discussion of the young women's personal stories about what it means to be a girl.

Narratives are an important source for encountering new possibilities of narrative threads.

Through stories, we are introduced to other people, places, ideas, and ways of being,

some of which resonate with our own experience and some of which seem foreign.

Because narratives move beyond rational explanation, pat answers, and immediate

understanding into half-tints and complexities, we are more likely to encounter the

difference we find in them empathetically. In other words, because stories draw us in, we

are less likely to distance ourselves from those telling them. Having stepped into the

world of another empathetically, we are more likely to allow this difference to work on

us, thus providing fodder for the imagination.[315]

Reflecting on her own engagement with literature, Greene writes, "Becoming

aware of the ways in which particular works of literature defamiliarized my experience, I

came to see that the taking of odd and unaccustomed perspectives can indeed make a

person a stranger and able to 'see' as never before."[316] By inviting imaginative

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315. I acknowledge here that empathy can be tapped for negative ends as well as positive ones. In his consideration of theater and other similar forms of entertainment, Augusto Boal argues that empathy can be the most insidious device of entertainment culture, since once empathy has been developed, an audience may give their decision making power over to the characters. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal contends that Aristotle's system of tragedy purges antisocial elements. In a tragedy, the tragic hero has one bad characteristic, a tragic flaw that draws empathy from the viewer and makes the viewer feel as if what is happening to the character is happening to himself or herself. As spectators follow the assent of the tragic hero and empathize as the hero recognizes his error and suffers the consequences, they experience fear and pity and are purified of their own tragic flaws. The problem is that the characters make their choices in a virtual world, whereas real people have to make decisions in a world where there are real consequences for decisions. To take a prevalent example from teen dramas like *The OC* and *Gossip Girl*, when the female characters are bored or feeling depressed, they often go shopping to alleviate the boredom and depression. In the real world, this option is not necessarily a viable one, since many young women do not have the financial resources to shop their way out of boredom or depression and since it models a consumerist and potentially unhealthy way of dealing with negative emotions. I raise this point namely as a reminder to be conscientious about the types of narratives with which we ask young women to engage and empathize, as some will do a better job of supporting their journey toward full flourishing. For more on tragedy and purgation, see Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 1-51.

316. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 92.

engagement with another person's reality, stories help to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, opening the way to transformation. One only has to think about the parables Jesus told to discover the potential of stories to invite imaginative participation. Intimately tied to the life worlds of those to whom he preached, Jesus' parables defy easy interpretation and challenge assumed categories about right and wrong.

There are multiple benefits of narrative education for young women. First, in as much as identity is an increasingly important question for adolescents, young women need opportunities to practice telling aspects of their life stories in groups of peers and trusted adults. Not only does this give them a chance to do reflective identity work and to see themselves as agents of their own histories, it also provides the opportunity for them to be exposed to the stories of their peers. The similarities they encounter may lessen their sense of isolation and lead to the forming of bonds with each other, while differences may challenge them to see their own experiences in a new way.

Second, similarly to aesthetic education, narrative education can expose young women to a range of possibilities for female faith identity. In her work on women's development in communities of faith, Carol Lakey Hess articulates the importance of exposing young women to the stories and lives of a variety of women and of affirming the different choices that women make.[317] This sort of exposure provokes the imagination and enables young women to envision possibilities for their own future beyond options that have been modeled for them at home and through the media. Young women can study biblical women such as Vashti and Esther, Ruth and Naomi, and Deborah; the writings of medieval mystics like Hiledgaard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg;

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317. Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997) 147, 151-181.

and biographies of contemporary women such as Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa.
Ultimately, exposure to the stories of other women—real and fictional, historical and
contemporary—provides grist for the mill of young women's imaginative identity work.

Embodied Education

Embodied education, that is, activities that involve bodily movement as a form of
reflection, invites embodied imagination. Theater educator Augusto Boal is a leading
proponent of unleashing embodied knowledge through a series of bodily educational
practices, which he details in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* and *Rainbow of
Desire*.[318] According to Boal, the body is a unity of the physical and the psychic,
although there are many forces that challenge this unity. As embodied creatures, one way
we know is through our bodies; in this sense, "a bodily movement 'is' a thought."[319] Put
slightly differently, one way people think and know is through their bodies.

Further, knowledge can be enhanced when people engage in embodied exercises
in the aesthetic space of theater. There are three properties of the aesthetic space of
theater that make this possible. First is the plasticity of aesthetic space, which encourages
creativity because anything is possible.[320] The future can be now, the dead can come back
to life, and time and space can be manipulated at will. Memory and imagination are
liberated. Second, aesthetic space is dichotomic and it creates dichotomy.[321] Actors are
both here and now, in an auditorium doing theater exercises, and transported to another

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318. Boal, *Games* and *Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1995).

319. Boal, *Games*, 49.

320. Boal, *Rainbow*, 20-22.

321. Ibid., 22-27.

time and place by virtue of the dramatization that occurs. Further, as a person tells her

story through theater techniques, she experiences the dichotomy of being both the person

to whom the original story happened and the person who is now acting it out. Since the I-

today is not the I-yesterday, the I-today can observe already a change in self. As Boal

writes, "In enabling, and indeed requiring, the patient to observe himself in action—since

his own desire to show obliges him to *see* and to *see himself*—this theatrical process of

recounting, in the present, and in front of witnesses 'in solidarity,' a story lived in the

past, offers, in itself, an alternative."[322] Thus, the very structure of theater invites

reflection. Third, the aesthetic space is telemicroscopic, meaning it allows human actions

to be brought close and made large so we can observe them better and see that which

might not otherwise be seen.[323]

The demechanization,[324] Image Theatre,[325] Forum Theatre,[326] and Rainbow of

Desire[327] exercises described by Boal and the embodied knowing they promote are also

particularly important for young women. The pressure to achieve a perfect image of

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322. Boal, *Rainbow*, 25.

323. Ibid., 27.

324. Demechanization exercises seek to disrupt the way our bodies have become sensitized to experience the world, such as asking people to run a slow motion race in order to become more conscious of how they use their bodies. See Boal, *Games*, 50-90.

325. In Image Theater, Boal invites participants to illustrate subjects, such as love or oppression, with their bodies through individual and group body sculptures in order "to *feel* those images, to let our memories and imaginations wander." See Boal, *Games*, 175, italics in original. For more on Image Theater, see Boal, *Games*, 174-216.

326. In Forum Theater, groups act out situations of oppression and practice resistance to oppression and liberating action by experimenting with the scene. For more on Forum Theater, see Boal, *Games*, 241-276.

327. Rainbow of Desire techniques are very similar to Forum Theater, but they are used in situations where oppression is more internal than external. For a detailed description of the Image of Cops in the Head and Their Antibodies, a central Rainbow of Desire technique, see Boal, *Rainbow*, 136-149.

femininity leads young women to distance themselves from their bodies; many of them understand their bodies as projects upon which to work.[328] Education that takes embodied knowledge seriously invites young women back into their bodies in order to recognize the wisdom that is housed there.

Demechanization exercises assist young women in feeling how they carry their bodies in a patriarchal culture in which they are often portrayed as sexual objects. For instance, being asked to walk as if they were a teenage boy, an elderly woman, a doctor, or a robot and as if they were in the hall at school, in a church, in a dark alley, or at a party helps young become more aware of how they carry themselves and to question why this is so. Through Image Theater, young women sculpt a limit situation they face and the overcoming of that situation, isolating and experiencing their embodied reaction to this limit situation and the feeling of moving beyond it. In Forum Theater, young women dramatize this limit situation and practice acting out alternatives to it. Finally, using Rainbow of Desire techniques, young women get in touch with the "cops in the head" that limit their ability to match desire with will and practice acting against these voices in their heads in preparation for doing so in their lives. Overall, this series of embodied exercises invites imaginative possibilities, as young women learn more about situations of oppression, envision a new future, and engage empathically with each other.

For What Can We Hope?

When young women exercise their imaginations through aesthetic, narrative, and embodied education, for what can we hope? On the individual plane, young women overcome what Greene calls the problem of submergence, that is, understanding

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328. See note 27 above.

contingencies as naturally given. In her analysis of women and freedom, Greene indicates

that submergence in the culture has impeded women's decision making and freedom

throughout history.[329] "Unconcealing" is necessary for young women to learn that

"natural" aspects of femininity are only naturalized contingencies and that they can make

choices about which discourses of femininity they wishes to draw upon in identifying

themselves.[330] As we saw with the Stories of Gender participants, the seemingly

omnipresent image of female beauty perfection leaves young women struggling to

articulate and live out of alternative, yet still acceptable, female identities. Exposure to

other images of femininity through art, narrative, and their own embodied work can help

young women better understand their present situations and recognize the myriad of

options they have for living into their female identity with integrity.

Developing the ability to see otherwise has social implications, as well. Young

women with strong imaginative faculties tell counterstories about female identity that

challenge and serve to eradicate sexist master narratives. They work for social, political,

and religious change in the world, tapping into new ways of being, knowing, and acting

to address troubling issues like poverty, addiction, ecological degradation, and war from

new perspectives.[331] When young women tap into the knowledge of arts, literature, and

the body, they are empowered to view themselves and their worlds in complex, nuanced,

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329. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988) 57-86.

330. Ibid., 57.

331. Maxine Greene notes that while science and technology have made amazing discoveries over the centuries, in this era of environmental degradation and globalization, we are beginning to see that science and technology do not hold all of the answers to global and local problems. With Greene, we ask, "What kinds of intelligence are required to remedy homeless and addiction," to reverse or at least slow ecological destruction, and to promote peace among people and nations? See Greene, *Releasing*, 172. With Greene and Boal, we can answer that young women and all people need to develop the aesthetic and embodied intelligence.

and varied ways and to work toward bringing into reality all that they can imagine the world and themselves to be.

Story-Sharing as a Model of Transformative and Imaginative Education

Given this exploration of imagination, I assess the story-sharing pedagogy of *Stories of Gender*. Four aspects of the story-sharing pedagogy make its potential for promoting imaginative transformation strong. First, story sharing begins where young women are and affirms their life experiences, which educator Paulo Freire claims is crucial for inviting transformation.[332] Within the general framing question about what it means to be a girl, the topics for discussion each week were spurred by the young women's stories, thus their discussions were always close to their concerns. As the non-story sharers chimed in with tales of similar experiences, the story sharer had her experience affirmed.

Second, story sharing promotes three forms of critical reflection, all of which are crucial for transformation. First, young women reflect on their life experiences through the lens of the more general category of girlhood. Asked to write a narrative about what it means to be a girl, the young women exercised imagination and stepped out of the stream

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332. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire tells this story to explain how he came to this conviction. In the 1950s, Freire was working with families to address the issue of corporeal punishment. He thought his talk to a gathering of parents in a fishing village was going well until one father spoke up. The man proceeded to describe Freire's home, which the man correctly assumed had a number of bedrooms and plenty of space for people to spread out, and Freire's work life, which he assumed was challenging mentally, if not physically. Then the man rhetorically asked Freire what Freire knew of the man's situation. The man described waking up before the sun rose and going to work at sea, doing backbreaking labor in order to try to feed his family, a task at which he did not always succeed. His home was a crowded place, so when he returned exhausted from the day's work, there was no place for a minute of peace, and he was also always faced with his hungry wife and children, who were irritable, too. Spanking a child, although not desirable, looks different in this man's context than it would in Freire's home. Hearing this man speak of his situation taught Freire an important lesson he would never forget: as educators, we must know the situation of the people with whom we work so that we can meet them in that reality. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving* Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 2004) 18-27.

of their existence to put words and a story to their experiences. No longer held by the category of girlhood, they examined their experience of girlhood, some of them for the first time. As Shantell put it in her exit interview, she used to just be a girl; now she thinks about what it means to be a girl. Second, conscientization was encouraged, as sharing and discussing stories of girlhood together led the young women to think about the category of girlhood itself, its content and the influences that shape it. As the young women identified commonalities in their experiences, such as the pressure to project a perfect image or the fear of unwanted sexual advances, they came to see that their own experiences were not only personal and isolated but also particular instantiations of larger systemic problems. Finally, participants practiced theological reflection, as we ended each story-sharing session with the question of where we saw God in that week's story. Through this process, the participants collectively began to articulate counternarratives of female identity grounded in God's love and acceptance.

Third, through story sharing, young women imaginatively explore new possibilities of female identity. As they listen to the stories of others and others' interpretations of their own stories, they see the world and their own lives in new ways. In this particular case, the Stories of Gender participants found that girlhood meant different things to different people and that their assumptions of gender givens were not the eventualities they took them to be. For example, Kathleen was delighted to discover that the shame and embarrassment that surrounded menstruation in her youth was not the story of everyone's experience with menstruation. Further, others' narratives opened possibilities for new plot lines in their own narratives. Particularly powerful was Alexa's

adoption within her written narrative of Iesha's motto that when you love yourself, you can do whatever you put your mind to, no matter what your size.

Fourth, critical reflection and exploring new possibilities took place in an environment of safety. I promoted this by making it clear that I would not share the young women's stories with anyone in their family or in their church, encouraging them not to discuss group topics outside of the group, and beginning with their stories to communicate respect for their personal knowledge. More importantly, however, the young women together created a space of respect with their honest reflections and thoughtful engagement with each other.

The strength of story-sharing pedagogy is its grounding in the constructing and sharing of personal stories, which engender a multiplicity of vision. Faced with narratives from each other's lives, the young women were able to affirm their common girlhood while also encountering girlhood beyond abstractions and generalities and in all its specificity. Not only did this insure that the groups began where the young women were and invited critical reflection and exploring new possibilities, but it contributed greatly to the respectful and empathetic relationships that formed or were nurtured in the group. As each young woman shared authentically from her experience, the rest were invited into the complexity of her life, and thus could not categorize, simplify, or otherwise distance themselves from her. Story sharing encourages taking multiple perspectives, and as Greene writes, "Learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform."[333] As young women engage their own life

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333. Greene, *Releasing*, 167.

stories and listen to the stories of others, the strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange, opening the way to transformation.

While the potential of story sharing to invoke transformative imagination is strong, there are a few ways in which it falls short of reaching its full potential. First, while story sharing promotes critical reflection, it does so primarily through verbal and written discourse. This is a pedagogical limitation. That many of the participants named the opening collage activity as their favorite part of the group indicates that activities other than story sharing that draw on alternative ways of accessing experience, such as aesthetic and embodied exercises, would have broadened the means for their reflection, enhanced their self-knowledge, and increased the new possibilities for identity to which they were exposed. Further, trading heavily in written narratives is also risky in that it can imply to participants that their experiences of girlhood need to be linear, coherent, and organized, thus reinforcing a narrative genre that does not fit most young women's experiences of themselves.

Second, while story sharing invites the exploration of new possibilities for female identity through the stories of other girls in the group, the new possibilities still come only from within the peer group. This means that young women may stay embedded in aspects of girlhood that seem natural for a particular generational cohort, geographic location, religious denomination, or other similarity shared by the girls who make a particular story-sharing group. In addition to hearing each other's stories, as Carol Lakey Hess recommends, young women need to explore new possibilities for girlhood through

women from other times and place whose lives can reveal the situation-specific aspects of young women's experiences that are, in fact, contingencies.[334]

Third, the story-sharing pedagogy utilized in Stories of Gender lacked sustained opportunities for integration. Freire calls it critical action,[335] and Boal discusses practicing action through improvisation,[336] but they both agree that making choices and living out of new narratives of the self are crucial for transformation. While the Stories of Gender participants *may* have integrated things they discovered about themselves into their life stories or developed new gendered or theological perspectives on their lives and the world around them, story sharing as we practiced it did not actively assist young women in this integrative work.

Part of the problem was that the story-sharing groups were short-lived, lasting only five to eight weeks and then disbanding, which did not provide a sustained amount of time together in which integration might take place. When practiced in faith communities over an extended period of time and not as short-term research, story sharing's transformative potential would be heightened. As I describe below, young women could begin with story sharing, then identify problematic aspects of their narratives, and finally work together to tell counterstories of female identity meant to resist and correct these problematic aspects. This would be integrating work, particularly if the counterstories were presented to a wider audience like the entire faith community.

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334. See note 317 above.

335. According to Freire, critical reflection leads to critical action, or "to speak a true word is to transform the world." See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 87.

336. At the heart of Boal's theater exercises is the practice of enacting solutions to oppression. For instance, Boal writes, Rainbow of Desire techniques have two aims: "(a) to help the spect-actor transform himself into a protagonist of the dramatic action and rehearse alternatives for his situation, so that he may then be able (b) to extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theatre." See Boal, *Rainbow*, 40.

Further, while story-based pedagogy can promote new narratives, it is not as good at insuring that new actions or new choices will be made based on these narratives. As Boal's work demonstrates, we often need to practice the changes we are going to make in life. A more transformative model of education would create situations in which young women could practice together and support each other in acting out their counterstories, either in practice with each other or in their real lives. For instance, in the New Life Baptist group, the young women began brainstorming about a camp that girls could attend in order to gain confidence in themselves and their bodies, a camp which includes prayer services to expose girls to the idea that God loves them as they are. Integration could have been promoted further with these young women if they had had the opportunity to plan and carry out a retreat or workshop for other young women in their congregation, school, or community that embodied their goals of increasing girls' self-confidence and their knowledge of a creator God who loves and accepts girls no matter what image they project. Integration may happen on its own, but educationally speaking, integration is more likely to happen when people use their knowledge and share their knowledge with others.

A final limitation of the transformative potential of Stories of Gender is that the caring community was only together for a short period of time. To identify damaged identities, to tell counterstories, to make choices about actions that reflect new self-narratives takes time and support that a research setting could not provide in its fullest. Here, faith communities can play a critical role in providing excellent holding environments, and small groups of young women within them, excellent communities of care and education. To envisioning the tasks of religious education in girl-only spaces I

turn in the next two sections. I propose two modes of religious education with young women, modes through which young women are formed in and transformed by their faith traditions and, conversely, work to transform their identity narratives, their faith communities, and the world.

Eschatological Education: Transforming Identity Narratives

Inasmuch as there is an eschatological aspect to our anthropology, that is, inasmuch as human beings always are in the process of becoming, young women need to be apprenticed into habits of thought that will serve them on their identity journeys throughout their lives. Further, given the reality of sexism and patriarchy, these habits of thought need to include a transformative edge, so that young women learn to critique sexist and patriarchal master narratives and work cooperatively to tell counternarratives that shift master narratives in more liberating directions. What I propose here is a mode of eschatological education, that is, education that assists young women in living into the eschatological aspects of their identity. This process involves three movements: reflecting critically, exploring new possibilities, and acting for integration, all done within a community of support.

Reflecting Critically

This eschatological education starts with young women's experiences, using a variety of pedagogical means to invite young women's reflection on their experiences.[337]

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337. Religious educators have described this first movement of transformation in diverse ways: making explicit students' pre-understandings, creating occasions for students to name their experiences in the world and the themes of their existence, giving attention to our own biases and emotions, starting with students' realities to achieve conscientization, and the need for historical and political critical

This helps promote what Paulo Freire names conscientization, that is, coming to critical knowledge about one's relation to the world, a crucial first step in transformation.[338] In particular, young women should be invited to reflect critically on their current identity narratives, identifying aspects of the narratives that are problematic and considering the sources of influence for these problematic aspects and what resources they already draw upon to address these problems. The very act of critical reflection counteracts systemic forces that seek to limit young women's self-reflection,[339] and also promotes young women's further self-knowledge. As Boal puts it, "To transform something, first one must know it."[340] In a culture where sexist master narratives operate, young women cannot help but draw on these in their identity work, thus importing damaging self-understandings. In reflecting together, young women can name the ways their opportunities have been deprived and their consciousnesses infiltrated, so that they can address this together. Further, inasmuch as female identity involves drawing on cultural master narratives and our anthropology is eschatological, young women need to develop skills for making reflective identity choices. Through practice, the skill of critical

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consciousness. See Eileen Bellett, "Religious Education for Liberation: A Perspective from Paulo Freire," *British Journal of Religious Education* 20, no. 3 (1998): 133–143; Charles Foster, "Teaching for Belief: Power and Pedagogical Practice," *Religious Education* 92, no. 2 (1997): 270–284; Liam Gearon, "Human Rights and Religious Education: Some Postcolonial Perspectives," *British Journal of Religious Education* 24, no. 2 (2002): 140–151; Mary Elizabeth Moore, "The Myth of Objectivity in Public Education: Intersubjective Teaching of Religion," *Religious Education* 90, no. 2 (1995): 207–225; and Heinz Streib, "The Religious Educator as Story-teller: Suggestions from Paul Ricoeur's Work," *Religious Education* 93, no. 3 (1998): 314–331.

338. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47.

339. In their study of women's ways of knowing and self-concepts, Belenky et al. found that many adolescent and adult women were embedded in their lives and relationships in such a way that they were unable to step outside of their world to do the sort of meta-analysis required for self-naming. See Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, especially chapters 1 and 2 on silent and received ways of knowing the self.

340. Boal, *Games*, 207.

reflection can become habitual, so that young women gain a skill to utilize in their identity work over a lifetime.

To promote critical reflection, the educator must recognize the knowledge young women already possess and commit to learning about and affirming how young women encounter their worlds.[341] As discussed in chapter two, this is why an ethnographic stance is useful, as it encourages educators to listen well before attempting any educational interventions, or rather, to listen *as* the primary educational endeavor. When their reality is attended to and recognized, young women have their experience reflected back to them in a way that invites more awareness of their reality and different consciousness of their identities and place in the world. Starting with critical reflection insures that educational efforts with young women begin where young women are. As we listen closely to young women, we are better able to introduce them to resources from Christian traditions that will be useful for their identity journeys.

In fact, if I could make only one recommendation to religious educators working with young women, it would be to spend copious amounts of time on this first step, inviting young women to tell and reflect on their stories with each other and with trusted adults through a variety of pedagogical means. Young women do not have many opportunities to do this sort of sustained thinking about their experiences in the midst of their busy lives. It is an excellent use of religious education time to give them opportunities to do so. One way to do this is to ask young women to compose and share a story from their lives and then to invite theological reflection on these stories, as was done in Stories of Gender. Yet I caution against using only verbal and linguistic reflection, as this can exclude less extroverted young women and confines self-

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341. See note 332 above.

exploration to one form of the multiple intelligences. Other possibilities include inviting young women to take photographs, make collages, or engage in theater games in order to answer questions about their lives. The bottom line is that young women need the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, as reflection is an important aspect of awakening on their spiritual journeys.

These opportunities for reflection should involve both individual and communal aspects. In other words, individuals need a chance to do their own reflection, but they also need to share their reflections with others while hearing others' reflections. The sharing of reflections enables young women to receive feedback about the sense of self they are developing from others who know them, feedback which is important to their process of coming to know the self. Further, when young women share together, inevitably they discover commonalities and differences in their experiences. Commonalities help them feel less isolated in their journeys of becoming, and differences help them understand themselves and others in new ways.

Everything I have recommended thus far about inviting reflection could be done in a secular girls' group just as well as in a faith community. So why does it matter that this reflection be done within a faith community? In some sense, *all* personal reflection is theological, as it is God as the transcendent ground of our being that makes it possible. The ability to reflect on our experiences is part of what makes us human and through this reflection we come to know ourselves and God.[342] When we begin with young women's experiences and highlight their ability to reflect on their experiences, we reflect to young

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342. According to Paulo Freire, the ontological vocation of every human being is to become a Subject, that is, a human being who can reflect and act upon the world. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43-44.

women through our pedagogy their status as *imago Dei* and promote their self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Understanding this, faith communities have a special responsibility to promote the humanization of their members by inviting them to live into this aspect of their human personhood before God.

More particularly, however, faith communities have the signal responsibility of inviting specifically *theological* reflection on experience, for if they do not, no one else is likely to do so. At the most basic level, inviting young women to do theological reflection on their experience teaches them that their lives are connected to God and that their lives matter to God. As theologian Mary Fulkerson indicates, "Christian theological reflection at its best has been discernment of God's *living* presence in contemporary situations."[343] Through theological reflection, young women develop the religious imagination "to recognize the holy ground of their lives, to see God working through, in, and with themselves, others, and the world."[344] Again, this practice can become habitual if young women repeatedly are asked to reflect on their experience through the eyes of faith. Inasmuch as women's sanity is connected to having multiple stories to tell, as Stange found in her examination of women's autobiographies, and inasmuch as there is a liberating thrust to our Christian narratives, theological reflection promotes the development of an alternative perspective on life experience and resources for telling counternarratives that challenge oppressive master narratives. Perhaps most importantly, theological reflection assists young women in becoming aware of the ways in which God

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343. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Foreword," in Scharen and Vigen, eds., *Ethnography*, xiv.

344. Claire Bischoff, "With New Eyes to See: Helping Youth Develop Religious Imagination to Encounter Holy Ground," in *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008) 169.

is at work in their lives, which, in turn, can lessen their sense of isolation and support their positive sense of self.

<div align="center">Encountering New Possibilities</div>

Second, to invite transformation, young women need to explore new possibilities for their identity narratives. As adult educator Robert Kegan writes, "Psychologists tell us that the single greatest source of growth and development is the experience of difference, discrepancy, anomaly."[345] This can happen through any number of means, such as material presented by the educator or artistic and embodied practices, such as the ones introduced above, that invite young women to see their own experiences and stories in a new way. Certainly, through the process of reflecting on experience in small groups, young women already will encounter new possibilities in the experiences of their peers, so that novel possibilities for self-understanding are available to them. But young women who participate in the same faith community often share very similar social worlds of school, media culture, peer relationships, work environments, and sports teams and other extra-curricular activities. In order to tell counterstories that resist damaging master narratives about themselves, they need additional resources for this work. They need new ways of seeing the world that the histories, stories, beliefs, practices, persons, and communities that are part of their faith tradition can offer them. For instance, theological narratives, such as the one explored in the previous chapter about human beings as *imago Dei*, are important sources of narrative novelty that faith communities can offer young women.

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345. Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) 210.

Putting young women's experiences in conversation with faith traditions involves helping young women identify salient themes, issues, and questions from their discussions of their experiences and identifying art, songs, biblical stories, religious and prayer practices, historical times and people, and theological ideas and writing from their faith traditions that have resonance with these experiences. This resonance might be positive or negative; it might be explanatory or liberating. The point of this process is two-fold: (a) for young women to gain greater clarity about their experience by connecting it with their faith tradition and (b) to be exposed to resources that can inform their reparative counterstory work.

Since normal responses to new possibilities include ignoring them or making them fit into our preconceived categories, care must be taken to help insure that new possibilities are encountered respectfully and that young women are open to being shaped and challenged by these possibilities. This requires taking others seriously, being open to the potential for change, and having a certain level of trust.[346] As suggested above, aesthetic, narrative, and embodied activities are powerful ways that young women can be invited into critical reflection and exploring new possibilities for their narrative identities.

Acting for Integration and Transformation

Finally, to invite transformation of identity narratives, there must be opportunities for integration of and action based upon the self-reflection and exploration of new possibilities that has gone before. New knowledge about the self and new possibilities for narrative threads and action must be appropriated as part of a new narrative. This is

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346. Theodore Brelsford, "Christological Tensions in a Pluralistic Environment: Managing the Challenge of Fostering and Sustaining Both Identity and Openness," *Religious Education* 90, no. 2 (1995): 174–189.

young women's chance to work together to tell common counterstories that serve to repair the damaging master narratives they have encountered. While telling a new or altered narrative is important, this narrative has a better chance of becoming permanent when young women practice acting on it with each other and then support each other in acting on it in the rest of their lives. As in Freire's theory of transformation, critical reflection must be paired with critical action.[347] In other words, young women need practice acting in concert with their new knowledge of themselves so that their knowledge is more likely to be translated to their lives outside the educational space. Boal-inspired theater exercises are one forum through which young women can "train for 'real-life' action" and "learn the possible consequences of their actions. They learn the arsenal of the oppressors and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed."[348] Clearly, many young women in the United States live comfortable lives, thus it may seem out of place to speak of training them to resist oppression. But Boal, who has worked with everyone from illiterate farmers to the Royal Shakespeare Company, writes, "My feeling is that all oppressions are of equal importance…to the people who are being subjected to them."[349] It may be that the oppression young women need to work against is having been convinced that one can only be an acceptable girl if she projects a look of female beauty perfection.

As such, young women can be encouraged to develop projects that allow them to integrate what they are learning about themselves and their faith communities and to put their knowledge into action. While these projects emerge within girls' only groups, they

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347. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

348. Boal, *Games*, 244.

349. Ibid., 268.

must be shared with the broader faith community (and perhaps, even a wider community), so that the young women's wisdom can contribute to the well-being of the body of Christ and work to counteract harmful master narratives.

In Communities of Support and Care

Transformation can be difficult, risky, and painful; it may involve owning up to parts of ourselves and our lives to which we do not want to admit and facing changes in relationships based on our transformation. To return to Iesha's story with which this dissertation began, the process of moving from understanding herself as a girl who was too big to go on Pointe to a girl who could work hard to succeed at cheerleading involved moving on from the painful encounter with her dance teacher and making a gamble that she would not encounter similar prejudice from the cheerleading coach, other cheerleaders, and others at her school.

While nothing can mitigate fully the challenge, pain, and risk associated with transformation, a supportive community can help. Adult educator Robert Kegan is helpful here, as he articulates the importance of what he terms "holding environments" to support people in their growth. Holding environments change throughout life; the main caregiver and the immediate family make good holding environments for infants and young children. For teenagers and adults, communities make the best holding environments because they have the "capacity to recognize a person, a marriage, a family, over time, and to help the developing system recognize itself amid the losses and recoveries of normal growth."[350]

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350. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 217.

To support transformation, the holding environment has the threefold task of holding on, letting go, and staying in place. In other words, the holding environment first recognizes the person for who she or he is, holding onto that person as part of the relationship or community. As Kegan explains, "This, as always, is the first function of the culturing environment: recognition, confirmation of who the person has become. A holding environment must hold—where holding refers not to keeping or confining but to supporting (even 'floating,' as in an amniotic environment) the exercises of who the person is. To hold without constraining may be the first requirement of care."[351] Then the holding environment lets go of the person, releasing the person to differentiate from what they once were. Crucially and finally, the holding environment stays in place, supporting continuity and integration by recognizing both who the person was before and who the person is now after their transformation.

Young women working to transform damaged identity narratives and to practice narrative repair need supportive communities that serve as the holding environments within which their transformation can take place. The signal task of these holding environments is to be a place of continuity as young women work on counterstories of good enough female identity, recognizing who young women were before, celebrating who they are now, and giving them enough room in between to do the work of transformation.

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351. Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 162.

Image Is Everything: An Example of Eschatological Education

To give a better idea of how this movement might work, let me describe Image Is Everything, a curriculum unit I have developed for exploring female faith identity with young women. The first two mini-units promote reflection on personal experience (reflecting critically), the third invites putting personal experience in conversation with the faith tradition (encountering new possibilities), and the fourth centers on integration projects (acting for integration and transformation). In the first mini-unit, participants explore what it means to be a girl or young woman. They start with the collage activity with which Stories of Gender began, in which young women use three images and three words from popular magazines to answer the question of what it means to be a girl. This helps them name images and narratives of girlhood from media and culture. Then the young women are invited to bring an artifact (e.g. photograph, song or video clip, written narrative, clothing or jewelry item) that represents an aspect of their female identity to share with the group. After sharing the artifacts, they talk about commonalities and differences in their experiences of girlhood and compare these to popular cultural images of girlhood from the previous week.

In the second mini-unit, the young women explore what it means to be a person of faith. They begin with body sculpting, that is, using each other's bodies as the medium to create images of what it means to be Christian. They also sculpt images of their faith communities and their relationships to them. After sculpting, they discuss commonalities and differences that emerge in the various images of Christianity and faith communities. Then participants are invited to take and share photographs about what it means to them personally to be a person of faith. They conclude by naming themes that emerge about

faith identity and consider how these themes match up with the images of Christianity from the previous week.

The third mini-unit, in which the girls' experiences are put in conversation with the tradition, always varies depending on themes that emerge in the first two units. Some general suggestions of activities include:

- Examining a variety of resources or artifacts that can be found in the local faith community, such as bibles, hymnals, church bulletins and websites, to see what images of women and people of faith are presented;

- Encountering Christian women throughout the centuries through written and artistic depictions, discussing what images of female faith integrity emerge;

- Exploring stories of women in the Bible and practicing *lectio divina* (sacred reading) in order to discover what these women have to teach us;

- Engaging in a feminist spiritual practice, such as body-focused guided meditation, in which young women are introduced to biblical, historical, or theological ideas that resonate with their experiences.

The fourth mini-unit involves returning to the question of what it means to be a young woman of faith and creating products to be shared with the group and the larger faith community that allows the young women to process what they have been learning in the group. Examples of integration projects include:

- Making artistic representations of yourself as a young woman of faith through painting, music, dance, collage, or written narratives;

- Producing videos using still images, video footage, and sound that introduce one's self as a young woman of faith or that depict situations and themes that are central to young women's understanding of themselves as women and people of faith;

- Interviewing adult mentors and role models about what it means to be a female person of faith;

- Engaging in theater games inspired by Augusto Boal in which young women act out limit situations in their lives and practice responding creatively to these situations.

Inviting young women in Christian faith communities to reflect critically, encounter new possibilities through conversation with their faith traditions, and work toward integration helps them to be more reflective about the discourses upon which they draw in narrating their identity, creates space for the naming and healing of damaged identities, and provides them with resources upon which to draw and pedagogical means for crafting counterstories that serve to transform their own self-understanding and others' understandings of them. Through critical thought and critical action, young women separate themselves from the damaging cultural narratives that limit their choices and infiltrate their consciousness. As long as sexist master narratives are told, this type of transformative work will be important for young women's journeys toward identities of tensegrity.

Transcendent Education: (Trans)Formation through Feminist Prayer Practices

Transformation does not happen only through critical thought and critical action. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood's work with Egyptian Muslim women points to the

Western bias in this understanding of transformation and helps us understand how transformation also happens through formation.[352] Contrary to the assumption that Egyptian women converting to Islam are operating out of false consciousness, unaware of how they will be shaped by an association with patriarchal Islam, Mahmood discovered that these women take on practices of the Islamic tradition in order to live up to the example of the Prophet and become the people they want to be. To become a good Muslim woman means aligning one's own desires with those socially prescribed by Islam, such as humility and charity. In other words, these women are forming themselves to be modest and virtuous Muslims by acting modestly and virtuously. Their agency is not expressed in resistance, but in taking on practices, such as veiling, that allow them to become the people they desire to be.

There is an important similarity between the Egyptian women Mahmood studied and young Christian women in the United States: the assumption others hold about them that they operate out of a false consciousness and that to live as agents, they need to critique their patriarchal religions and split themselves from it. Mahmood's work helps us see that the picture is not this simple. There is no absolute ignorance or absolute knowledge, no absolute consciousness or completely false consciousness, as these are humanly impossible. Thus, any groups we approach, including young Christian women, have varying levels of consciousness about certain aspects of their experience and lack consciousness about others. It is possible for young Christian women to critique patriarchal aspects of Christianity, while still finding the tradition as a whole life-giving. Young Christian women do not exercise agency only through resisting oppressive master

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352. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*: *The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

narratives from culture and from their faith traditions; they also act as agents as they engage in practices of their faith tradition that support them in becoming the young women they desire to be.

The Stories of Gender participants expressed a desire to live with integrity, to be true to themselves while being accepted by others. They were able to achieve this in relation to a God who knows, loves, and accepts them in their entirety, who created them as they are, and who continues to work with and through them to make them lovely. But young women cannot benefit from this sort of relationship with God if they are not apprenticed into prayer and worship practices that strengthen their relationships with God and deepen their understanding of God's narrative for their lives. Further, as members of Christian faith communities, young women are asked to live into their status as *imago Dei*, which means aligning their own desires with the desires of God. Christian practices, such as partaking in the Eucharistic celebration, are meant to help believers conform to the example of Christ. Christian prayer practices can assist young women in being open to receiving their identity from God, a stance of receptivity that can counter the pressure they feel always to project a perfect image. Thus young women benefit from being (trans)formed through the practices of their faith tradition.

The cultural context of Christian young women in the United States requires the dual understanding of transformation I articulate here. In the United States, an expectation of an autonomous self whose desires are its own still functions, as do sexist master narratives. In order to make themselves known in this world, young women need to know themselves, which requires the skills of critical thinking and critical action so that they can challenge the damaging narratives they encounter. But these young women,

for whom a relationship with a loving and accepting God may be the most salutary source of a counterstory of female identity, also need to be formed in their religious tradition so that they can be transformed through their relationship with God and the faith community. Here I focus on three specific prayer practices with young women through which they can develop their relationship with God.

Lectio Divina

Lectio divina, or sacred reading, is a Roman Catholic practice, which can be traced to the early patristic period, through which people read the Bible meditatively.[353] There are usually four stages to *lectio divina*: reading scripture, reflecting on scripture, praying to God about scripture, and listening for God's response. In *lectio divina*, the focus is not on theological study or exegesis but on a relational encounter with God through the biblical text. The practice stresses speaking, knowing, and listening with the heart instead of with the head. It is about becoming attuned to the movement of the Spirit, who inspired the writers of scripture and who continues to enliven our lives today. While *lectio divina* traditionally is practiced as a private and individual dialogue with God, it has more recently been developed for both silent and dialogical group settings.

Lectio divina encourages young women to engage scripture, explore connections between scripture and their lives, and meet people, stories, and ideas from the biblical tradition to use in their own identity work. It creates a space for them to listen to what God has to say to them, but in a relatively structured manner that apprentices them into this stance of prayerful receptivity to God, a stance that may be new and unnerving at

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353. For a helpful introduction to the practice of *lectio divina*, see M. Basil Pennington, *An Invitation to Centering Prayer: Including an Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2001).

first. Further, when *lectio divina* is practiced communally, young women benefit not only from their own encounters with God but also from hearing what others are learning in their encounters with God. What follows is the text for a *lectio divina* process I have used with young women in a group setting that can be adapted for use with any scripture passage:

- Breaths and invocation: Begin to become aware of your breathing, paying attention to breath filling your lungs and then being expelled fully. We ask that the same Spirit who inspired the author of this passage inspire our reading of the text and speak to our hearts today.

- First Reading: Listen to the passage being read aloud once, attending to what is meaningful to you. During one to two minutes of silence, hear and repeat the phrase that attracts you, silently to yourself. When I ask, please share a word or phrase with the group from your reflection.

- Second reading: Listen to the passage read aloud once. During two to three minutes of silence, consider where the content of the reading touches your life today. When I ask, please share one sentence with the group from your reflection.

- Third reading: Listen to the passage read aloud once. During two to three minutes of silence, consider what God is asking of you in response to this passage. When I ask, please share aloud any part of your reflection that feels appropriate.

- Silence: During four to five minutes of silence, focus on resting in God's love and listening to the ways God is speaking to you today.

Guided Meditation

Whereas *lectio divina* focuses on an encounter with God through scripture and is structured in form, guided meditation helps engage imagination and the body by walking young women through a series of images or a narrative upon which to reflect and inviting them to pray with God in whatever manner best suits them. A virtue of guided meditation is that theological concepts can be introduced in visual and story form, making them more accessible. For instance, in order to introduce young women to the idea of *imago Dei*, being made in God's image, I wrote the following guided meditation based on Psalm 139, in which young women reflect on God knitting their bodies together in their mothers' wombs and consider what difference it would make to live out of this knowledge throughout their daily lives:

> *Close your eyes and relax. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the breath leave your body, carrying tension away. Concentrate on your breathing, breath going in and out.*
>
> *As you breathe, bring your attention to your head and face. As you breathe out, let go of any tension you feel there.*
>
> *Pay attention to your neck and shoulders—let them relax.*
>
> *Feel your breath flow down your arms, through elbows into hands and out your fingers. Relax.*
>
> *Concentrate on your back and chest and stomach. Let go of anything you are holding here.*
>
> *Feel the relaxation spread into your legs, through your knees, down your shins, into your feet, and out your toes.*
>
> *As you continue to attend to your breathing, please take in these words: (Psalm 139: 1-16)*
>
> O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
> You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far
>   away.
> You search out my path and my lying down; you are acquainted with all my
>   ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
    even then your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become
    night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the
    day, for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's
    womb.
I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are your works;
    that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately
    woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days
    that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

Start with your toes and your feet. God knit these together in your mother's womb. Imagine God making your toes and your feet and loving your toes and your feet. God knew these were the feet that would ground your life, that would allow you to stand firm in the Lord.

Feel your legs. God knit these legs together in your mother's womb. Imagine God making these very legs and loving these legs. God knew that these were the legs that would move you through life, that would allow you to continually journey toward God.

Bring your attention to your chest and stomach and back. God knit this chest and stomach and back together in your mother's womb. Imagine God making your chest, and stomach, and back, and loving your chest, and stomach, and back. God knew that this trunk would allow you to twist and bend with the winds of change, the winds of life.

Feel your arms and hands and fingers. God knit these arms and hands and fingers together in your mother's womb. Imagine God making your arms and hands and fingers and loving them. God knew that with these arms you would embrace the world and all of God's children.

Bring your attention to your neck and face and head. God knit your neck and face and head in your mother's womb. Imagine God making your neck and face and head and loving them. God knew that this would be the face that you present to the world.

And God did not just knit your body together in your mother's womb. God also made you, your spirit, your very inner self. God knit this self together in your mother's womb. Imagine God making this self and loving this self. Imagine God telling you about all God put together to make your very self. What personality did God give you? What weaknesses and strengths did God pick out to make you you? Spend a minute dwelling in this knowledge that God knit your inner self together in your mother's womb.

Holding onto this knowledge that God knit your body, yourself, allow it to radiate from you while you imagine the beginning of a regular day. Does this radiation change how you feel as you get ready? Does it make a difference for how you start your day?

Imagine yourself moving through a normal day, whether at school or at work or at home. What do you usually do in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon? Does this radiation change how you feel as you go through the day? Does it make a difference in your actions throughout the day? Take a minute to feel how parts of your day may alter as you live, knowing that God knit you together.

Imagine your day drawing to a close. What do you do to mark the ending of the day? Does this radiation change how you feel as you conclude your day? Does it make a difference in your actions as you close the day? Imagine yourself laying down for sleep, awash in God's love for you.

I'm going to ask you to take a minute to refocus on your breathing, coming back into each part of your body.

When you are ready, I ask you to open your eyes and join us back in this room.

Askesis

After young women have been apprenticed into practices of *lectio divina* and guided meditation, they may be ready to practice *askesis*, or the silent waiting on God in meditation in which the structure of *lectio divina* and guided meditation is removed so as not to distract from the act of listening to God in prayer. An advocate for the practice of *askesis*, Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley is not naïve about the arguments of its detractors, namely the potential danger of the negation of the self that marks *askesis*. However, Coakley contends that it is a special form of self-effacement that "marks one's

willed engagement in the pattern of the cross and resurrection, one's deeper rooting and grafting into the 'body of Christ.' "[354] *Askesis* begins with agency, with a person making the choice to place herself onto the life of God to be empowered and fulfilled. It is possible that self-deception and confusion can result from *askesis*, but the fruit it bears, such as the traditional Christian virtues of peace, joy, and love, and also "personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry,"[355] enable us to make judgments about the "success" of its practice. The power of *askesis* is its ability "paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment *together*, precisely by creating the 'space' in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself."[356]

Askesis is an important spiritual practice for young women for a few reasons. First, it helps counteract the cultural message that you are who you create yourself to be by opening a space in which young women can learn to receive identity from God, which really is the truth of their being. Second, silence is crucial for the practice of *askesis*, and most young women rarely experience moments of silence in which they can rest and simply be. Finally, in as much as young women already are themselves but will continue becoming themselves through their lifetimes, *askesis* is a tool for their spiritual journeys of becoming through which they learn to work with God to integrate new possibilities of the self into their lives.

I recommend that young women be introduced to *askesis* only alongside other prayer and reflection practices introduced in this chapter for two reasons. First, as

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354. Coakley, *Powers*, 35.

355. Ibid., 38.

356. Ibid., 5.

Coakley recognizes, there is a danger that we will mislead ourselves when we practice wordless prayer. History gives us numerous examples of people who claim to have heard God calling them to do abhorrent and inhumane things but who nevertheless believed they were doing the will of God. To help mitigate the risk of misleading ourselves, I commend practices of story sharing, theological exploration, and aesthetic and embodied creating in small groups of young women led by trusted adults in which young women can test out what they believe God is empowering them to do and be further empowered by each other. A triune emphasis on listening to God, to others, and to themselves may give young women the best chance of truly understanding God's will for their lives.

Second, many young women lead busy lives in the world of the everyday. To privilege *askesis* is to ask them to remove themselves from their daily realities in order to connect with God's purpose for their lives and thus to further separate their everyday lives from their lives of faith. Wordless prayer will be important for them as it gives them the opportunity to step back from the everyday, but they also long to connect to God in their world and their lives and through their relationships. Thus it is important to create opportunities for them to come to know themselves and their purposes and to be empowered through their relationships with others and the visions of themselves reflected back to them from these trusted others.

In addition to introducing young women to prayer practices from the tradition, we also need to help them identify experiences of transcendence in their own lives so that they become more aware of the ways in which they already connect with God in the midst of their lives and through their participation in their faith communities. For instance, one girl might connect with God through physical movement, like running or

dancing. Another might feel closest to God in nature or when she is connecting

emotionally with her friends. The possibilities here are virtually endless, if we truly

believe that God meets us in the everyday realities of our lives. Girls could be invited to

introduce their peers to practices that are important to them, perhaps leading a

contemplative nature walk or teaching a yoga class. A one size fits all approach to

teaching spiritual practices simply will not work. When we take the time to listen to

young women, we will be in a better position to identify practices that may be most

supportive of them.

Prayer practices such as *lectio divina*, guided meditation, and *askesis* are also

means through which to introduce young women to a variety of images for and narratives

about God, images and narratives that can complement the variety of images for and

narratives about God they encounter in song, preaching, scripture, and worship with their

faith community, and to support their deepening relationships with God. When young

women are exposed to a variety of language and images for God and when they attend to

who God is calling them to be, they are more likely to see God in themselves. How

lovely if girls in faith communities were exposed to the whole biblical range of imagery

for God! How lovely if girls in faith communities learned to see themselves through

God's eyes, a proper girl who beautifully reflects the image of God in the world! This

truly would be preventative and restorative care for young women, the sort of care and

education that would release into the world young women primed to be themselves while

also living in interdependent relationships with others and with God. These young

women would lean into the sanity of a multiplicity of stories about how to live with faith-

filled integrity in the midst of the tensions that mark our lives as those made in God's

image, existing between our human finitude and openness to the infinite, between our knowing of ourselves and our openness to the future, and between the common humanity we share we all God's children and the very specificity through which we reflect God's image in the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MEDIATING GOD: FAITH COMMUNITIES AS CRITICAL PARTNERS FOR

YOUNG WOMEN'S NARRATIVE IDENTITY WORK

Pointing to a problem continues to inscribe the problem. In the case of young

women, as we worry about them and the problems they face, we risk reinforcing the girls

in crisis discourse that operates on the assumption that girls do not have agency through

which to help themselves. Thus while this concluding chapter is responsive to the

challenges that the Stories of Gender participants revealed through their narratives, I

focus on Christian faith communities as places of prevention and restoration, that is, as

communities of support for young women striving to live identities of tensegrity. In other

words, instead of faith communities focusing on the problems of young women, they are

called to do what they do best, namely, articulating and living out of an alternative value

system grounded in love of God and love of neighbor.

Even more specifically, it is the responsibility of Christian faith communities to

mediate to young women their status as *imago Dei*. At the heart of this is treating young

women with the respect, love, and acceptance due to them as children of God. The entire

life of a faith community can function as the face of God and an "envelope of grace" in

the lives of young women, continually mirroring for them an identity grounded in God's

love for them.[357] As such, it is not only the job of youth ministers to care for youth; it is

the call of the whole community and requires a comprehensive ecclesial response. It is

crucial that young women are not treated as spiritual beings in waiting but as active,

contributing members of the body of Christ made manifest in their particular

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357. Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 64.

communities. It is important that they learn from and are in relationship to those who are different than themselves—in age and gender, most obviously, but also in the myriad of other ways that marks the diversity of humanity. It is also important that they be invited to share their wisdom and experiences with the community for the sake of the community.

In what follows, I act as a consultant, articulating a comprehensive ecclesial response through which faith communities can support young women in their striving to live identities of tensegrity. I enumerate four claims of good news that Christian faith communities have to share with young women that serve as identity-constituting narratives and threads for young women's work in telling counterstories of good enough female identity. These faith claims are important not only as theological statements but also as guides that inform community practice with young women.

Implicit Curriculum: Comprehensive Ecclesial Response

While it is important for young women to have time alone with other young women, as I explored in the previous chapter, young women also need to be part of the life of the whole community, and their needs should be taken into account by the whole community. The entire faith community—in the rhythms of its life together, the relationships it promotes, the practices that shape its being, and the beliefs that bring people together—has wisdom to offer young women that can help young women to avoid circling in the logic of their social groups and instead see the world and themselves through different and theological lenses. Further, young women have wisdom to offer the entire community based on their own experiences, wisdom that is lost when young

women are always only with their peers in the youth room and not involved in everything that marks the life of the community.

Young women need two main forms of support from their faith communities. First, young women need their faith communities to function as places where they encounter and are invited to live into an alternative ethic and logic. At school, with their peers, in extra-curricular and work environments, and even in many of their families, the logic that reigns is one influenced mainly by popular, individualistic, secular culture, in which young women are judged based on their projections of the proper image of femininity. As the American Psychological Association's task force on the sexualization of girls put it, "Organized religious and other ethical institutions can offer girls important practical and psychological alternatives to the values conveyed by popular culture."[358] In the Stories of Gender project, we saw that the young women made sense of themselves in new ways when they were in new surroundings. Faith communities can function as "new surroundings," where young women experience a different ethic and way of understanding themselves and their world that helps them think about themselves anew.

In understanding faith communities this way, the risk is further separating faith from "regular life," something which the Stories of Gender participants and other young women already experience as a problem. But this does not necessarily have to be the result of what I am recommending here. Surely, faith communities are influenced by the broader culture, but one thing that sets faith communities apart is that, at their best, an alternative value system grounded in God's forgiving and unbounded love functions. This alternative value system is a major gift faith communities have to offer young women, as

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358. American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, "Sexualization of Girls."

it both breaks down the hegemony of cultural images of femininity that equate girlhood with beauty perfection *and* offers other identity options, beginning with young women's status as *imago Dei*, made in the image of God. The value systems of Christian faiths can become the eyes through which young women see themselves and their relationships and which guides their action in the world. In this sense, their faith communities are very much connected to their being in "everyday life." It is the task of those who work with young women in their faith communities to find ways to make theological language and practice relevant to the lives of young women and to allow our theology and practice to be shaped and informed by their lives.

In addition to functioning as a place apart guided by an alternative system of values, faith communities also need to be a place where young women can encounter God's face in the faces of other people and have their status as made in God's image mediated to them. What does this mean exactly? In the most general sense, it means that young women know and have relationships with people of all ages who are on Christian journeys, striving to live with faith-filled integrity. It means that young women are treated with respect, love, and acceptance so that they know they are worthy of this sort of treatment as those who bear the image of God.

What I am talking about here is something that can be even more powerful than explicit religious education with young women, that is, what young women learn from the very life of their faith community, what can be called the implicit curriculum of the faith community.[359] Practical theologian Mary Boys affirms the influential nature of

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359. For more on implicit curriculum, see Eisner, *Educational Imagination*, 87-97. As Eisner explains, "The implicit curriculum of the school is what it teaches because of the kind of place it is." See Eisner, *Educational Imagination*, 97.

implicit curriculum: "Process is important, since the way in which the curriculum structures teaching learning situations may well have more impact on learners than specific content."[360] Similarly, religious educators Gabriel Moran and Maria Harris write, "Most of the teaching in the world is done nonverbally and even unintentionally. Every religious tradition has known that the way to teach the young is to immerse them in the practice of the group's way of life."[361] In other words, young women learn just as much about what it means to be a young woman of faith by who leads, the roles people take, the scriptures that are read, the music that is sung, etc. as they do by the explicit curriculum we attempt to teach in youth-centered events.

Young women are used to reading subtle (and not-so-subtle) cultural master narratives about girlhood identity and responding to these messages as they make choices about how to present themselves, and we can be assured that they do the same thing in their faith communities. What is encouraging about this notion of the life of the faith community as implicit curriculum is that faith communities do not necessarily need a dedicated youth minister or a program geared toward young women to support young women in their identity work. By simply striving to be who they claim to be, a community of people empowered by the Spirit, united in a belief in God, and striving to follow the lived example of Jesus Christ, faith communities do the important work of reflecting an alternative system of values and mirroring the face of God for young women.

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360. Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989) 118.

361. Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 33.

However, inasmuch as our faith communities are not perfect, the challenging part of the implicit curriculum is that young women also are imbibing less than helpful and even harmful lessons about living as young women. The Stories of Gender project demonstrated that an important way young women make sense of themselves is through a complex interplay of forming images and narratives, taking action, and encountering reactions. Because of this, one of the most important things we can do in our faith communities is to raise our own consciousness about the relationships into which young women are invited in our faith communities and the images of female selfhood that are reflected to them. For instance, do young women hear preaching about female biblical characters or female figures from their faith tradition? What do they learn about women's roles by the work that women and men do in the community? Who do they see in leadership roles and how do these people lead? These are just a few questions that get us thinking about the narratives from which young women can draw as they work to discern their identity in the midst of a faith community.

This complex interplay also points to the importance of how we react to young women within our communities, since young women will be looking to gauge the reactions of others as they try on and try out new aspects to their identities. For instance, how do we decide which young women are invited to practice active leadership roles in our communities? Are those chosen to serve as lectors, choir members, Sunday school teachers, and any other number of roles judged on a culturally-based standard that they look physically appropriate for the part (i.e. are dressed in the way we find most appropriate for church?) or are they asked to participate based on our knowledge of their gifts and talents and our relationships with them? The more we can react to young

women in ways that respect their entire personhood and inherent dignity as children of

God, the more we can mirror for them this understanding of self.

Based on the theological language of the Stories of Gender participants and the

exploration of theological anthropology in chapter five, I lift up the following four

theologically-informed identity statements as good news that Christian faith communities

have to offer young women. It is important that young women be exposed to these

statements—explicitly through curriculum geared toward their particular needs and

implicitly through the whole life of the church. Further, these statements should serve as

a theological grounding for decisions faith communities make about their work with

young women and the whole life of the community. What makes faith communities

different than other organizations is our theology—our belief in God and our struggling

to decipher what that belief means for our lives—and thus it is important that we work so

that theology shapes the decisions we make as communities of faith.[362]

(1) You are made in the image of God, and God accepts and loves you as you are.

More than anything, the Stories of Gender participants evidenced a strong desire

to be true to themselves. They know they are not only the image they project, but they

often had trouble articulating what constitutes their sense of self as "more than" this

image. From a Christian perspective, being true to yourself means recognizing that you

are a human being created by God in God's image and living into God's love and

acceptance of you. Particularly for the Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants,

their belief in a creator God who loves and accepts them as they are served as bedrock for

identity. This identity buoyed their self-confidence, even as they struggled to be accepted

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362. Mark Miller-McLemore, "TheoPragmatics," (paper presented at the Louisville Institute Winter Seminar, Louisville, KY, January 20-21, 2011).

for who they are in the social world of high school. For young women who know that female identity is more than beauty perfection but who struggle to articulate other models of female identity, for young women who long for acceptance, the fact that they are made in the image of God and that God loves and accepts them is good news.

Living into this identity narrative requires that faith communities evidence a welcoming, affirming, loving, and accepting attitude that is extended toward all who seek to be part of the community and even toward those who do not. This point is worth emphasizing, since the longing for acceptance drives so much identity work of young women. No matter where they are on their faith journeys, young women already are accepted by God for who they are and accepted as part of the body of Christ. Faith communities need to reflect this acceptance to young women. An important way of doing this is to create a "come as you are" environment, in which youth are welcomed and not judged based on their appearances. Even more importantly, to be accepted as they are indicates to young women that they have worth beyond the external image they project and beyond their ability to live up to the standards of proper girlhood. It reflects back to them their inherent worth as *imago Dei*, enabling them to feel accepted and loved as they are, something for which they, like all of us, desperately long.

Historically, a "come as you are" attitude has been a white, middle and upper class marker of hospitality in Christian congregations. In other communities, dressing up for church has been a counter-cultural act, as this sort of appearance has not always been expected of people of color and those of the lower class. What counts as counter-cultural clearly varies with context. I argue that for young women in the United States, who so constantly receive the message that proper femininity is tied with dressing a particular

way, a "come as you are" attitude is an important counter-cultural marker for faith communities to adopt. While the young women in Stories of Gender by no means represent all young women, the Grace UMC and the New Life Baptist participants clearly indicated that this "come as you are" attitude was something they valued about their faith communities. For the Grace UMC girls, who felt the pressure to have the latest styles from Abercrombie and Fitch and Hollister but who could not afford them, coming to church meant a break from scrutiny about their appearance. For the New Life Baptist participants, "come as you are" did not mean dressing down for church, but it did mean that the young women felt they could make choices about how to present themselves in a way that allowed them to be true to themselves. For instance, Shantell indicated that she wore dress pants to church instead of skirts because skirts do not feel like her.

While a "come as you are" mentality was associated most closely with dress in our conversations, underneath this was a base note of acceptance. The Grace UMC and New Life Baptist participants felt accepted and valued by their faith communities for who they are as people. People in leadership and regular people in the pews had known them for a long time and let them be themselves. Knowing, loving, and accepting young women as they are is an incredible gift that faith communities can offer.

Faith communities can do much to reflect this theological idea to young women, but it is also necessary for young women to hear this identity stated in explicit terms, to encounter it through prayer, and to discuss it in relation to their lives. Young women should read the first creation story in Genesis 1 and spend time discussing what it means that God created humankind in God's image. Additionally, the prayer practices explored

in the previous chapter invite young women to consider what their status as *imago Dei* means for their life.

(2) Your body is a temple of God and part of God's good creation.

Many young women, including many of the Stories of Gender participants, understand their bodies as projects for constant critique and improvement. Admittedly, Christian faith communities often have not helped in this realm, as there is a long history of distrusting, ignoring, and demeaning the body. Yet within Christianity there are resources for making claims about the goodness of the body and the body as a temple for the dwelling of God.[363] To help young women reframe their understandings of their bodies with this knowledge in mind provides them with a new standard of judgment to use in making determinations about what counts as healthy or unhealthy behavior. Instead of asking whether eating this food or engaging in this form of exercise will help them achieve a better figure, young women can think about how their eating, exercising, and resting habits help them show the proper respect for their bodies.

To be supported in this, young women need to experience body-affirming practices in their faith communities. Seemingly small acts—serving healthy snacks and setting up comfortable seating at social and educational events, for example— communicates to people that the church is interested in nurturing bodies and souls, both of which are constitutive of our humanity made in the image of God. Further, community members can reflect on the ways that they are involved bodily in worship already, from different prayer postures to singing to eating the Eucharist. The goal is to create an

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363. For example, in *Honoring the Body* Stephanie Paulsell considers "embodiment as a sacred gift" and explores resources and practices from the Christian tradition that assist in honoring the body in daily living. See Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

environment where young women are supported in experiencing their bodies not as external projects for work but as integral to their spiritual selves.

Experiencing menstruation was one of the eight main themes of female identity discussed by the Stories of Gender participants. While each young woman had her own relationship with this monthly, bodily event, all young women grow up in a culture in which much silence, shame, and misinformation adheres around menstruation. In fact, the Southeastern University participants praised teen magazines such as *Seventeen* for being one of the few places they could get accurate and helpful information about menstruation and other aspects of the physical changes brought on by puberty. To counteract this culture of silence and shame around menstruation, Christian communities can help young women claim menstruation as a biological process linked to the possibility of new life and part of God's good creation. We can help reframe menstruation not as a medical event in need of hygienic solutions but as part of the life-giving force of the universe.[364]

More specifically, it would be useful to develop a ritual that young women could do in the privacy of their own homes at the onset of menstruation and monthly with the coming of their periods.[365] This would allow them to celebrate menstruation instead of treating it as something to endure, at best, or to suffer through and be embarrassed about, at worst. The onset of menstruation is an important marker in a girl's journey toward womanhood, and in the absence of faith communities, it tends to be ignored or ritualized

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364. For more on the medicalization of menstruation, see Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 27-55.

365. For an example of a ceremony for the onset of menstruation, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 188. In some reformed Jewish communities, there has been a reappropriation of the mikvah, a ritual immersion to insure purity after menstruation, similar to what I am arguing for here. For an example, see Rabbi Dr. Goldie Milgram, "Ritual of Welcoming Bodily Change," http://www.reclaimingjudaism.org/life%20cycle/menstruation.htm (accessed July 13, 2011).

with period parties, focusing only on what red food to serve and how to play tampon basketball or pin the chocolate on the menstruating women's mouth.[366] My point here is not to discredit period parties per se, as period parties can foster an open and celebratory atmosphere around menstruation. It is, however, to suggest that faith communities have a role to play in creating rituals that give menstruation a greater meaning within a girl's life by couching it within an understanding of the beauty and wonder of bodies and bodily processes.

(3) You belong to the body of Christ.

A third piece of good news we have to share with young women is that by virtue of their baptism they are part of the body of Christ. Even as they experience themselves as isolated, even if this isolation is a dark night of the soul on their journey of becoming, God is with them. Further, through their baptism they are connected to and held by the body of Christ, both their present Christian community and the greater communion of saints. Even as they are struggling to find trusted conversation partners, God is with them and countless others are praying for them, whether they know this or not. This is part of the Christian good news: we are never truly alone and can trust that God is working, even in moments when we feel utterly abandoned.

Anthropologically, Christians have a way to speak about the humanity that binds us together as people, even as we recognize and celebrate our difference. While young women may feel isolated in their experiences of femininity, they do share an essential experience of humanity with others, an experience of inherent human dignity, of existing between their finitude and the horizon of God's infiniteness, and of both knowing and not

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366. Judy Morse, "How to Throw Your Daughter a Period Party," Associated Content from Yahoo!, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/524401/how_to_throw_your_daughter_a_period.html (accessed December 26, 2010).

knowing themselves. This has the potential to lead to a sense of deep connectedness with humanity, all the while recognizing that each person's experience of these human essentials is different. Further, even the frustrating, depressing, or sinful aspects of humanity that we share, such as our propensity to say no to God in our decisions, may be cause for feeling less alone. This was the case in the Stories of Gender groups, when participants felt relief, empowerment, and even joy when they discovered they shared even similarly painful experiences, such as being catcalled or having to do a disproportionate amount of household chores because of being a girl.

It is important to note here that if young women never are allowed to participate in worship or rarely or never see other women in leadership roles, their sense of isolation may be deepened. Faith communities need to be honest about the history of women's leadership in their denominations, as part of discussions about the influence of patriarchy in Christian traditions, since this is an aspect of Christian traditions that comes to trouble many young women. We cannot change this part of Christian traditions, but we can own it with young women so that we can discuss it and work together to name and change current instantiations of patriarchal power and privilege.

While young women implicitly may feel they belong to a faith community simply by showing up and participating in worship, it is important that young women also be invited into more personal relationships in the community. In addition to developing relationships with their peers through girls' only groups, it is also important that young women have relationships with adult female mentors, women who can share their own journeys of faith and support young women and who are also willing to learn from young women for their own journeys.

Additionally, young women need to be introduced to women throughout the history of the church. This is important because the body of Christ is not just a here and now entity; it is made up of the communion of saints, that is, all the people who have come and gone who are parts of the body of Christ. This extends the models of faith-filled living and female integrity to which young women are exposed. Not only do they belong to the here and now church but they belong to a whole history of church made up of "friends of God and prophets," as Elizabeth Johnson describes it.[367]

Promoting young women's relationships with other women in their congregations and throughout church history should not be to the exclusion of supporting young women's friendships with young and older men. As related in chapter three, when the Grace UMC participants explained why having a boyfriend is so central to their female sense of self, Lauren provided a theological explanation, saying that God creates girls and boys so that they can "mix and intercommunicate… If you only have one part of the equation, then you're not—you're always going to feel like something is missing." Those of us with feminist commitments tend to have the automatic reaction of being critical of young women defining themselves over and against men, such that we often fail to consider that girls' relationships with men might also have a positive and important theological function. Particularly when we consider LaCugna's concept of exponential personhood, as well as Johnson's multipolar anthropology, we realize the importance of young women's relationships with those who experience the world differently than they do. If a young woman's personhood expands in relationships with others, we do not need to caution young women against relationships with all sorts of people but rather to help

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367. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

them discern the qualities of relationships that will contribute to their self-expansion, qualities like dynamism, mutuality, responsiveness, and respect.

> (4) You have freedom to choose God but must exercise this freedom in a world in which sin operates.

It might seem strange to consider the heralding of sin as good news for young women, but the acknowledgement of sin is important for young women's self-understanding. The cultural language young women have available to them to describe their freedom and agency is that of being able to do whatever they choose to do. From a Christian perspective, this language is problematic on at least two fronts. First, it emphasizes the importance of autonomy to such an extent that the sociality of our personhood largely is ignored. It denies the facts that we are beings only as we are beings in relationship and that we need to strive for balancing autonomy with interdependence in our relationships with God and with others. While human beings do make choices, we never do so in a vacuum, as we are shaped by our context, our relationships, and our God. This balancing act of autonomy and interdependence and the recognition of how our own choices are influenced by the choices others have made in the world are key components to Rahner's theological anthropology, an anthropology that paints a more complete picture of human autonomy, situating autonomy properly within a relational context.

Second, to equate freedom with making one's own choices is a limited and limiting notion of freedom in which freedom is only about our self and not about our relationships with others and God. In Rahner's theological anthropology, freedom, instead, comes from and is for God, as it is through our dependence on God that we find our autonomy. Theologically speaking, freedom, like autonomy, is a relational concept.

A robust and relational sense of autonomy and freedom is an important gift theological anthropology has to offer to young women who largely exist in the world of individualization discourses, where people are what they make of themselves. It allows us to make both/and claims about who we are as human beings grounded in an optimism about what human beings can accomplish *and* a realism about the personal, relational, and systemic forces that are at work against us. Young women are autonomous beings open to the infinite horizon of God who can make choices to remain open to God *and* young women make their decisions in a world in which others and they themselves have made decisions against God. Young women are both free *and* determined by guilt. Holding these paradoxical notions in tension is crucial for young women, so that they affirm and experience their own autonomy, freedom, and personhood, while recognizing the forces that work against them, including the ways in which they may work against themselves. This way, when they run up against forces that limit their ability to live *via unitiva*, as all human beings are wont to do, they will not put all the blame on themselves but rather have an understanding of systemic sin, for it is only in the recognition of these forces that human beings can begin to work against them as co-redeemers with God.

If we are to recognize young women's real freedom and agency, this means inviting them to take on real roles of responsibility within the congregation. This does not mean only asking them to plan a special teen service or to baby-sit during adult education events, although it can include this. It means getting to know the young women well enough that we can call them into positions in which they can contribute their gifts to our communities, whether that be singing with the choir, reading as a lector, serving as a

board or committee member, coordinating service and outreach efforts, teaching children, or any host of roles that often are reserved for adults in faith communities.

If we are to recognize that all people operate with freedom within a world in which sin still operates, we also must be willing to take a hard look at our faith communities, as young people are notoriously good at finding the forces of sin at work in the world. As they learn to think about the ways that sin can operate through structures, they may very well point a critical eye at the community itself, and it is important that they have a way to share what they are discovering with a receptive audience and to work with other members of the community to bring the community into closer concordance with a vision of justice and peace.

Finally, it is important to think about practices of forgiveness. As girls learn to see how sin operates in the world, they will need to ask forgiveness for themselves for their own sinful behavior and may want to contemplate forgiveness of people who have wronged them. Within the Catholic context, one obvious suggestion here is to make a special invitation for young women to partake in the sacrament of reconciliation. Within a Protestant context, ceremonies or prayer services centered on the idea of forgiveness would be useful to young women.

Communities of faith should be forewarned that imaginative young women will demand change within their faith communities, as well as in society. Young women who have developed the capacity to critique the past and present and to imagine new alternatives for the future understand the church as a site of critique and re-visioning. Having imagined themselves as subjects and practiced working for change, they will not be content as passive members of the congregation and will seek to be involved in the

decision making processes of the community. Yet this is for the good of the young

women and for the community. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this sort of

imaginative engagement is a prophetic witness, which our churches need as much as

society. Further, at the heart of Christianity is belief in the resurrection of Christ, the

already of God's kingdom, and the reality that we live in God's grace. Since the main text

of our existence tells us that death triumphs, that God's kingdom is not yet, and that we

live in the midst of sin, imaginative and empowered young women can be vital examples

of living our Christian faith.

Directions Still To Be Explored

Given what I learned from the Stories of Gender participants, I offer two more

ideas for how faith communities could support the young women in their midst that invite

future research. First, faith communities could offer girl and parent groups, in which girls

and their parents together go through the transformative process of reflecting on

experience, putting experience in conversation with tradition, and making integration

projects and through the formative process of practicing *lectio divina*, guided meditation,

askesis, and other prayer forms. A theme of the Stories of Gender participants' stories

was their isolation; most felt they could not talk to their parents about the most important

things in their lives, a theme that resounds in the literature on youth, in general, and girls'

spirituality, more particularly.[368] Mentors at church can only do so much, as they do not

spend nearly as much time with youth as parents do. Doing activities like the collage,

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368. The isolation of teenagers from trusted adults is a major theme of Patricia Hersch's *A Tribe Apart*. Girls' desires for adults, including their parents, who can talk to them about faith and other important issues was a major theme in Joyce Mercer's interviews with young women. See Mercer¸ *GirlTalk/GodTalk*, 127.

artifact, body sculpting, and photography ones described in the previous chapter would

give young women and their parents the opportunity to learn more about how they each

see the world. Praying together would help couch their parent-child relationship within

the broader context of a relationship with God, a broadening that could serve to lessen

tension and promote their ability to see each other as God sees them.

For this sort of teen and parent work to be successful, however, it would be

important to establish ground rules and expectations for the group so that the emphasis

was on the young women sharing and the parents listening, at least at first, so as to

counter young women's experiences of feeling as if they are isolated and ignored. It

would also be useful to start with relatively low-risk sharing, so that parents and

daughters can practice these roles before the topics for discussion become more risky and

personal.[369]

Another way of organizing parent-daughter groups would be for the young

women to teach their parents about what they are learning. This would shore up the girls'

knowledge, as we tend to learn something better when we have to teach it to someone

else, and help the parents stay attuned with what their daughters are learning so that their

own knowledge would expand and so that they could extend what is happening in the

faith community to their homes.

Learning more about how to conduct daughter-parent groups in faith communities

is an important area for future religious education research. As mentioned in chapter one,

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369. Here I am inspired by a local Catholic high school, which requires all first-year students to take a course called TLC: Thinking, Learning, and Communicating, in which youth learn skills that help them to be more successful in their personal relationships and school experiences. Parents are invited to take a companion parent course, so that they, too, learn the skills their children are learning. From this experience a textbook has been developed: Paul Bernabei, Tom Cody, Mary Cole, Michael Cole, and Willow Sweeney, *Top 20 Teens: Discovering the Best-Kept Thinking, Learning, and Communicating Secrets of Successful Teenagers*, 2nd ed. (Saint Paul, MN: Top 20 Press, 2008).

congregations are not the only important faith communities in young women's lives.

Their families also can function as supportive faith communities, but may fail to do so

when young women do not feel as if they have relationships with their parents in which

they can talk about the most important things in their lives. In order for young women to

benefit most from the gifts faith communities have to offer, it is important that the

implicit curriculum of Christian congregations is mirrored in young women's families.

As such, supporting young women and their parents in developing relationships in which

they can reflect critically, encounter new possibilities, and act for integration and practice

prayer together is part of the mission of congregations hoping to educate families as the

primary place of faith formation.

Second, faith communities could offer more specific ministry to young women

who are transitioning out of high school and into the next steps in their lives. The

transition after high school is often one of leaving home, whether literally—moving to

new apartment or moving away to college—or figuratively—encountering new ideas and

new people in new jobs, school, and relationships. The Southeastern University group

showed that a major challenge for young women of this age is maintaining relationships

while being true to their newly emerging beliefs and practices. Keeping this dynamic in

mind, faith communities that have been in the habit of offering girls' groups could

continue to offer girls' groups geared toward the needs of post-high school young

women, perhaps meeting over school breaks and in the summer in congregations where

young women are away at college during the school year. Virtual communities could also

be utilized, so that young women could continue receiving support from their peers and

adult mentors as they face new challenges in their identity work.

Faith communities up for this challenge of extending their ministry to more specifically meet the needs of post-high school young women also need to expect that the young women are going to be negotiating their relationship to the faith community as well. We would do well to ask how we can create space for this sort of renegotiation, for young women to ask hard questions that may come up and to express their frustrations. It may be that they ultimately choose to worship elsewhere or not at all, but can we hold them lovingly and lightly enough that they know we support them no matter what they choose? Can we function as a truly supportive holding environment, continuing to know them even if their journey takes them beyond our community? Can we find creative ways to help them see how they can stay engaged in the community?

Post-high school ministry may also be a time to address the issue of taking care of parents emotionally. If the Stories of Gender participants are at all representative of the larger population of young women, a majority of them have been asked to be emotional caretakers for their parents at some point in their adolescent lives. Those who have taken on this challenge live under the burden of trying to protect their parents, and those who wisely have decided this is beyond their ability still live under a sense of guilt, feeling that they *should* be doing more to support their parents. This is an important opportunity for pastoral care in our faith communities. Young women need safe places to talk about these challenges in the presence of a trusted adult who can listen empathetically and also provide some guidance in terms of how to negotiate these challenges.

In this conclusion, I have fleshed out the thesis with which this dissertation began: faith communities are critical partners for young women striving to be their best female,

faithful selves. As we saw with many of the Stories of Gender participants, their relationships with and belief in a loving God who accepts girls just as they are, regardless of the image of femininity they project, serves as a site of resistance and a resource for telling counterstories of good enough female identity. Yet in an oftentimes girl-denying culture in which such strong emphasis is put on girls' physical appearances, a girl's relationship with God needs nurturing and support, so that she truly can consider God's vision of herself as an important identity-constituting narrative. Her ability to do so is enhanced greatly when her faith community mediates to her through its entire life her status as *imago Dei*, that is, made in and reflective of the image of God; lives out of an alternative ethic and value system that enhances her ability to see herself otherwise; and invites her into formative and transformative educational experiences through which she is apprenticed into habits of thought, action, and being that can serve her throughout her life's journey toward *via unitiva*, that is, living with tensegritous integrity. Ultimately, faith communities are called to undertake this work not only to support young women but also for the greater good of the community, as young women creatively embodying tensions and imagining and living new identity narratives will be forces with which to be reckoned, forces that reveal something of God's very being in our midst.

APPENDIX A

NARRATIVES FROM STORIES OF GENDER

Grace United Methodist Story-Sharing Group

Bethany's Story:

Growing up I have liked a lot of different kinds of boys, but when I finally started getting real boyfriends it seemed to me that I couldn't find one that my parents approved of. It has always been hard to find the right boyfriend. One thing my parents don't understand is what I see in a guy, because they may not see what I see in him. Having a boyfriend is fun, but it can also be a pain because you have to worry about if he's cheating on you and if he really means what he says. Breaking up with a guy is really hard because you have to worry about seeing him with other girls in school or out in public or you may see him a few days later with a new girlfriend and it really hurts. Meeting the guy's parents for the first time can be scary too because you want them to like you. Finding the right boyfriend in always hard to do, because you don't know if you really like someone till you get to know them. Girls tend to be more serious in relationships than boys. Guys can tell you they love you and they don't mean it. They tend to fall in love over night. I've always tended to go with guys who are younger than me, because I started school so late so they tend to be younger. My grandmother told me in the 7th grade that I would have lots of boyfriends and many heartaches, but I didn't believe her. I thought my boyfriend in middle school would be the one forever. Boy was she right. My heart has been broken many times and I'm still looking for Mr. Right!!!!!

Emmy's story:

What it means to be a girl…Well to be a girl people think you have to act/look a certain way! Girls get emotional sometimes when they don't look how someone wants them to! Why do we have to look a certain way? Well that brings me to relationships…relationships…well they are great! But guys think there is a game to see who can get the hottest chick or whatever! Lame huh? Guys well some guys see relationships as a game! They just want to get a girl who is hot! Which is stupid! To them you have to dress a certain way or something to get a guy! Now that brings me to friendships... you have to dress, look, act like someone to get in the right crowd! If you want to be popular you have to look like a dern pou! Literally! Well girls have to worry about a lot! Moms and dads worry about girls getting pregnant as for guys they don't have to worry about! Well to me to be a girl you have to be a certain way!! But we are gonna change that one day!

Lauren's story:

First I want to say that being a girl is so much more than I could ever begin to write on paper. Being a girl can be the greatest or the worse thing in the world just depending on the situation. Girls want to be strong yet gentle and soft at the same time. Girls have the opportunity to bring God's children into this world, but they just go through the pain physically and mentally to do it. God has made chicks so unique and complex that you have to be one to understand.

Today's view of the average girl depends on her age. Children that are girls are seen to be putting on dress up clothes and mommy's heels while playing with Barbies.

Adult women are either predominant businesswomen, soccer moms, or stay-at-home-take-care-of-the-kids moms. Then you get down to the even more complex teenage chicks. We are girls with small figures, tight shirts and jeans and love the color pink or we are (sorry for the language) sluts who want to be with guys and only care about what we want in the present. There are many other images these are just a few of the most popular.

I want to know what happened to the happy medium in all this. Can't a girl just be herself, who she wants to be without having to adapt to what people her as or want her to be? Society today has their images of the "normal girl" and sometimes/a lot of the time it is nothing like the normal girl. Guys see girls completely different that what most of them are too. Guys see girls as what they want or what they can get or who they would look better with. I'm not saying there are no good guys out there but even good guys look past "real girls" sometimes. I think parents have a different outlook as well. Dads always want to have their "little girl" forever and moms want their daughters to be good girls and girly but strong willed and not willing to give in to the norm.

Of all the images girls get and all the space they are to fill and thing they are supposed to fill it gets hard to find the real girl inside yourself. Personally I always want to be a little different. I want to be a strong chick but with needs. I want to be independent but have people there to catch me if I fall. I think that a girl can do anything a guy can do if she puts her mind to it.

To end this I just want to say God made us girls for a reason. He made girls special for a reason. He made us what we are and no matter what happens we should be what we are and not fall victim to the views of society or other people. And if there is no

one else in the world who will accept you for who you are God will. He loves all of his daughters and always will until the end. He didn't take Adam's rib and create another set of people for nothing. He has a reason, place and job for all of us no matter how many obstacles his little girls have to tackle, we will tackle them.

New Life Baptist Story-Sharing Group

Shantell's Story:

My experiences of being a girl are much like the average girl. I had my first crush in first grade, my first boyfriend in second, my second when I was 12, and my first kiss when I was 15. Being a girl has its ups and its down. One of the upsides of being a girl is the advantages that you get, and one of the downsides are the things that you're not allowed to do just because you're a girl. Being a girl is great though.

When I was younger, my mother used to always tell me "one day you will become a young woman and that that day would be when you get your period." I remember when that day came, and I remember like it was yesterday. I was at the grocery store shopping with my mom, and my stomach started hurting really bad. It was hurting so bad that I couldn't stand up and I was literally bent over. When I got home, my mom told me to go to the restroom and that was where I discovered that I was now a young woman. I had started my cycle.

I won't touch up on my past crushes, because they're old and not important, and because I have a new crush. This is someone that I really like and that I've been friends with for three, going on four years. We've been talking since the first semester of 11th grade, and this person that I went to the prom with. His name is Billy Ray, and he's the

sweetest person. To me, he's not like a lot of boys. He doesn't smoke or drink, but instead he sings and he sings well.

Anyway, another experience is my relationship with my friends. My friends are all smart and great people. Out of my friends, I'm the outspoken, crazy grandma. They call me grandma because I always think of the consequences before I do things. And when they want to do crazy stuff, I tell them that they need to think of what will happen if they do it. They come to me for advice or when they just need good encouragement.

My relationship with my mother isn't all that great. Although I wish it was; I wish it was better. We usually argue all the time, but lately we've been getting along well. My mom's been letting me hang with my friends a lot. Sometimes she wouldn't usually let me do every weekend and throughout the week. One of the things me and my mom don't see eye to eye on is what I am and not allowed to do because I'm girl. My mom lets my younger brother go places and stay out late, and when I ask to do the same, it's always "no" or a lot of questions. Another is the chores. My brothers sit around the house all day and do nothing. My mom tells me, "You need to get up and clean up, and it's your job as a girl to always keep the house clean." We argue because I don't think it's fair that since I'm a girl, I always have to do the work and they don't. The End.

Idana's story:

What does it really mean to be a girl? Does wearing makeup, certain clothes, or natural beauty make one a girl? Well, society seems to think so. In today's society a girl has to wear the latest fashions, straight hair, and have a perfect shape to be recognized by her peers. However, I feel that society has overlooked the more crucial issues. There is

more than being a girl that maintaining a pretty image. For many different reasons, being a girl is an arduous task. Nonetheless, maintaining relationships and individuality are two issues that have had major effects on my life,

First, maintaining relationships is a hard job for all women to undertake. In my situation, I became good friends with three other females my senior year of high school. The three years before, I kept my female acquaintances limited because where I'm from, girls kept up too much drama. All of the girls were in my sister's homeroom, Candace, who she'd been friends with since ninth grade, Aasha, and Shaquela. One evening, we decided to go to a basketball game together, all five of us. That night, our spirits just connected and we all became best friends. In the fall, we all went to college and remained friends even though Candace and Shaquela went to X College, Aasha went to Y University, and Iesha and I were three hours away in Anytown, Georgia. They even came to visit. I knew it was too good to be true when Shaquela started saying things about Candace behind her back. They seemed to work it out, but things fell apart again. Aasha decided not to communicate with anyone while I tried to keep the friendship going, but then I realized that the situation was not going to change until Candace found it in her heart to forgive Shaquela, which she has not yet done because she still holds anger in her heart. Thought I am still friends with Candace, it is not the same without Aasha and Shaquela.

Second, girls struggle with their individuality daily. For instance, a girl may have different personalities and may enjoy being around diverse people. The dilemma with this is that people may control her decisions because she may try to please everyone, which is impossible. For an example, the movie, "Mean Girls" conveys how the main character,

played by Lindsey Lohan, enjoys being with the girls who are popular because it made her popular, but at the same time, she attempts to sustain a friendship with her friends she had before she was popular. The main idea was that she had become so popular and the student body expected so much out of her, she didn't know who she truly was anymore. I've had an experience parallel with "Mean Girls." There was a group of girls like the "plastics" at my high school. Because I was involved in so many activities, I got to know them and we associated at school, but I also had normal 8:30-3:30 friends, athletes, geeks, and friends into performing arts. I was well known and most seen with the "plastics" and athletes only because we were in a lot of the activities together. It used to be stressful when people saw me with a geek or someone who had "lame" written on their forehead because I was supposedly popular, but I didn't think I was popular because I was friends with everyone. People used to say to me, "I thought you were cool with so and so, or tight with person and that person." I couldn't just be Idana, the student who knows everybody. According to them, I had to choose. I found myself being untruthful and dishonest with myself and others.

Iesha's story:

I am a girl. Is it because of my actions, thoughts, or the things that I do? Maybe I am a girl because of my physic, the clothes that I wear, or the way that I wear my hair. None of the above makes me a girl. I am a female because that is what God created me to be. Yet society has comprised their criteria of what a woman is or should be. Society makes the perfect woman analogous to Barbie.

In my life, I have had to fight those false thoughts. As a young girl I was active and vibrant. My mother wanted to give us opportunities that she never had, so my sisters and I were models, ballerinas, gymnasts, and cheerleaders. We were all fairly thin until my body began to change. I began to gain weight, making me the largest of the three of us. Despite my weight gain, I continued to be a dance, but dropped the other three of my activities. I specifically remember wanting to enter into a new genre of dance. I wanted to learn Pointe. So my mother and I went to the head of the company to ask if I could join a beginning class. The woman told my mother no because she didn't think I could hold my weight. That really hurt me. It made me feel less of a girl than all the others. After that year's recital, I remember changing companies where I learned more and became one of the best dancers performing in the company. I had danced there from the age eleven to the time I graduated high school.

In addition to that, I picked up one of my old activities. In the ninth grade my sister was anxious to become a cheerleader, so she asked me if I would try out with her. My initial answer was no. I'm too big and I haven't done it in years. She built my confidences and lured me into telling her that I would. We did, and both of us made it. I could not believe it. Talk went around the school about the new big cheerleader. They didn't expect me to succeed because of my weight. In contrast to their negativity, I was the captain the next year. I gained all of my skills back and was a cheerleader for all four years of my high school career. I had proved that I could do what was expected of any other girl.

I refused to succumb to society's thoughts. I did not feed into their thoughts about perfect women. Instead, I learned to accept myself for who I was. Because I realize that I

am somebody no matter what my shape or size, people think that I have an ego. That's not true at all. That's just me loving myself.

My advice to any girl who is going through what I went through would be don't stop doing what you do because of your circumstances. Love yourself, if not no one will. Let people know that the things that they say or do will not hurt, it will make you stronger. Continue to step with pride because they can only take your pride if you let them. Work at every task even though they expect you to fail. If I made it you can too. Just put God first and remember he loves.

Aasha's story:

To me a girl means power. All girls are very powerful. We are also independent. We can do anything we want to do if we set our minds to it. Lastly we are all different shapes and sizes. Let me tell you the story of my life as being a girl.

First, I am 13 years old and I love my life as being a girl. I started my first menstruation when I was 12. Here's what happened. I was at home and was about to take a shower when I noticed that I was bleeding. I told my mom and when she told what was happening I was happy for some reason.

Secondly, I was 13 when I went with my boyfriend. His name is Alex. We went together for 8 months. He met my mom and my two brothers. He even got saved. When we were going out. Now we are friends and he still is cool. I go with this boy name Keith. It is cool too.

Next, my relationship with mom is great now. At first we did not get along that well. We did not agree on anything. Now we get along fine. My relationship with my

friends is cool. I have two best friends that are girls and 3 that boys. I love all of them and my family.

As you can see, my life as being a girl is cool. I like most of things except that I have to clean up the whole house by myself and I have to cook just I am the girl. Other than that my life as a girl so far has been great.

Alexa's story:

Have you ever been asked the question: What does it mean to be a girl? Well to me a girl means to have the upmost respect for yourself and others. To carry yourself in a way that other would one day say I want to be like her, or be your friend. For all my life I have been expected to live like a young woman. Living with an older sister and brother, it's been hard. See when I was young I was a skinny happy little girl. My mother and father got a divorce and when that happened I was depressed and I started to eat which made me pick up weight. Now I am over that. When you have friends, they expect you to do certain things. I had a couple of friends that did everything, and me at that time wanted to fit in so I tried to do what they did. I found myself stealing out of stores and I didn't want to be like that. So I had to drop those friends and do better for myself. I have no problem with peer pressure because I tell any friends of mine that I have my own mind and they respect that. I feel good about myself and nobody can change the way I feel. You can do anything if you set your mind and heart to it.

Southeastern University Story-Sharing Group

Lisa's Story:

I know this story is heavy, especially being first, but when I look back on the experiences that have really shaped my life as a woman, the most influential was a decision over a third of women will make. When I was 17, my first boyfriend moved to Chicago, and a week later I found out I was pregnant. I also found out he was not coming back. I do not want to make excuses or vent my anger at anyone, mistakes we both made led to this situation, but I had never felt so abandoned in my life, and probably never will again. The most influential experiences in my life as a woman have left me feeling utterly helpless and confused. Whether it was the first time I really encountered sexual harassment in middle school or this more extreme situation, it seemed to me that being a woman was more or less equal to being powerless. In the end, pressured by his friends and a real fear of my parents, I chose to terminate my pregnancy. There were so many factors that make everyone's situation in the case of unwanted pregnancy, but as I said in the beginning, many women will face this decision in their lives and I think it is an important experience to include when I think of becoming a woman, pregnancy forced me right out of childhood and into the biggest decision I have ever made. My feelings toward everything that happened have changed over time, I have moved away from the intense guilt I first felt to a realization that I was trapped with few options. I made a decision that I did not take lightly and gave myself a second chance that I won't take for granted. Though I am coming to terms with what happened, it is still very personal and I don't want this shared outside the group.

What has become important to me as I grow up is learning from my mistakes and the power of forgiveness. I know no matter how hard I try to be perfect it will never happen, and I really think the most important thing that I can do is make sure I do not repeat my mistakes and try to help others avoid them by sharing my own. I thought I was invincible two years ago, and I know now that I am not. I have to take the first step to protect my body and heart, and I have found strength in knowing that I do not have to be helpless. I have taken control of my own life. Though it has proven extremely difficult, I am working to forgive the person that I hold responsible for what happened. I also have to forgive myself for what I did, something I do not think I deserve forgiveness for. I am realizing that forgiveness is never deserved, but it is necessary, maybe even more so for the person hurt than the person forgiven.

Women are placed in so many situations where they are meant to feel helpless, then the tables are turned and they are to blame for whatever happened. Sexual harassment was a big problem in my high school that wasn't well addressed. I don't know if many other girls had the experiences I did, but I did not dress or act like I wanted that kind of attention. When some guy whispered in my ear or physically held me down, though I was never attacked to the extent of being raped, I always felt like it was my fault these boys were after me. People seemed to have the mindset that boys can't help it and what we (as females) did pulled this kind of behavior out of men. This left me and probably many other girls afraid to tell people and faculty what had happened even though these boys were clearly in the wrong. I think this kind of blame shift also happens in the more extreme cases of rape, which many of my friends have had to deal with. Acts of violence, and especially sexual violence, are such a taboo topic that so many women

carry the burden alone. I can't imagine carrying such a secret; it is not fair that we must be so afraid to stand up and speak against such terrible actions, It is certainly difficult to really find, but empowerment to me as a woman is not being able to sleep with whoever I want or make my extra quarter per dollar, but to know that I can protect myself and try to avoid situations that might put be back in a place where I am helpless again.

Kathleen's Story:

My story is about my experience with menarche or whatever. Whenever I first started my period and how embarrassed I was. And how afraid I was of everything that was changing, and how slowly that fear and embarrassment sort of changed, but how long it took. And the first time that I got a period I could barely even tell my mom. I had to like go up and whisper it, and I had trouble getting the words to come out of my mouth. It was just such a – like, I don't know I was just embarrassed about it.

And I didn't tell anyone else in my family because I had – it was just my dad and other brothers so it didn't make any sense to talk to the males in my family about it. And even – I only told one other person outside of my family. That was my very best friend. Because we always – when we would stay the night at each other's houses, after everyone else had gone to sleep, and you're like chitchatting about little girl stuff. We would always like check in with each other to make sure. Like have you started? No. Have you started? Okay. No. And then move on. And there was nothing else.

And then when I finally told her it was just – did you start? Yeah. Did you start? No. And that was it. And we didn't say anything else. It was just sort of like okay, we don't know what's going on.

But then there was the whole trauma of buying like the female products at the store, and that I couldn't go in to buy just a box of tampons. I'd have to get something else and like cover it up in the cart while I was walking around the store, and you could never go to like a line that had a male cashier because that would just be weird. And I was wary about my brothers knowing when I was on my period in the house, so it was like you know, it was all very taboo to me.

And I think, looking back on it – because I started when I was 11 and that was before almost everyone else in my cohort group had started and so I think that was probably why I was so worried. It was because I didn't have basis for comparison. And I was worried about being normal. I remember being very afraid. You know, wondering if everything was going right, or if this was how it was suppose to be. But being too afraid to ask for fear of people being like no, that's weird.

And a lot of when I was thinking about where to get advice, a lot of it came from teen magazines. Because I would like just flip to that page and like read it and close it back up. And so after a few years, I think a lot of it I got too lazy to be so worried all the time. I just got used to it. And then everyone else started so it was like not as much an ordeal.

And I think that major changes is when I left for college and that was the first time I heard positive things about your period. About how it's a cleansing thing for your body. I don't know. There was always a stigma of it just being more dirty than anything

else. And like hearing people talk about period parties, and celebrating it, and that was something that I never heard of before.

And now I can tell my guy friends about it, you know. Or not, if I don't feel like it. But I can just say that to anyone. And it – it feels okay now. But before it was a lot of embarrassment for no reason and a lot of fear and so I – now I finally feel like I can feel it's a natural part of me. Which is good considering that it is essentially a natural process.

Sheila's Story:

This story is about a particularly difficult time in my life, the summer between 7th and 8th grade. I was 13, and I had my first real boyfriend. We were absolutely in love, in that way only 13-year-olds can be, and we spent as much time together as possible. Eric and I had the same friends, the same interests, and the same intensity. I was completely convinced that we were going to get married, and after about 6 months of dating we grew extremely close and became fairly intimate. However, this story is not about that experience but rather the consequences and events following it.

Eric was over at my house one evening, while my mother was downstairs. Unbeknownst to us, my mother came upstairs and peeked in the door, while we were engaged. She did not confront us, but waited until Eric went home to icily insinuate that she knew what had happened. She told me she was going to tell Eric's parents, which terrified Eric and me. I was so scared of what would happen, and I felt guilty and dirty from my mother's accusations and innuendos. I knew that Eric's parents would be much harder on him than my parents would be on me, so I made a stupid and hasty decision. I took an overdose of over-the-counter pain medication and waited. I did not take a large

overdoes, only about 20 pills, but my intent was clear. My mother came in and saw the open bottle, and she quickly surmised what I had one.

I was taken to the hospital immediately, where I had my stomach pumped, possible one of the most unpleasant experiences imaginable. I was then taken to a mental hospital where I spent 3 days in the geriatric ward, since I was the only teenager there, and placing me in the adult ward was not an option. I learned many things from my hospitalization, not the least of which was the dismal condition of mental health care in America. If I, a fortunate white girl with insurance, was basically neglected for the very short period of time I was in the hospital, I couldn't begin to imagine what other people go through.

Not surprisingly, Eric broke up with me while I was in the hospital. It hurt me more than anything I had ever experienced, but it also taught me some important lessons. Ultimately, I believe that women are socialized to value their relationships with men over everything else. Throughout my relationship with Eric, I had neglected most of my other friends and my family. I had become completely wrapped up in our relationship, which wasn't healthy for either of us. I'm not proud of what happened, and I wish I could saw that I never made the same mistakes. Unfortunately, my teenage years saw me repeating some of the same self-destructive behavior, although I became more cautious. In some ways, I think I've become almost too cynical when it comes to men and relationships. However, this is the first time that I felt completely alone in my life, and it really scared me.

I think I became a woman in some ways that day, because I had to take responsibility for my actions in a completely different way. I learned some very hard

lessons about relationships, and it was also the first time my parents really disappointed me. It shocked me how judgmental my own parents could be about my sexuality, although I understand their fears. I do think that things would have been different if I were male, and that still angers me. I still find myself, 7 years later, struggling to forgive myself and my family for the events of that day.

Carolyn's Story:

I've always been a confident person. I've had the good fortune to be surrounded by supportive, strong friends and role models, and very early in my life have been made to feel ashamed or even particularly conscious of my body. It is not to say that I've never spent hours looking over every inch of myself in the mirror. This would be inhuman. But overall, I had a pretty good feeling about the whole package.

When I was a freshman in high school, however, a 30-second interaction permanently altered the entire way that I as a woman assess myself. It was a pretty normal Friday – a girl's night out with one of my best friends from home. We had decided to get all jazzed up with little fun dresses and heels, and why not? We were celebrating life and feeling confident and frankly, sometimes it's just fun to get dressed up for no reason. I was wearing this little yellow and white striped dress that I'd never had a chance to wear. It was a bit tight, but since it was just my girlfriend and I, it seemed like a perfect night to wear it. I wasn't showing off for anyone or trying to get attention.

However, on our way to the restaurant when my friend and I were walking on Main Street, a car full of unidentified men yelled suggestive words to us. It was nothing new to me. Like any woman, I'd spent the better part of my life seeing, hearing little

winks, gestures, whistles and words that men would send my direction. And for the most part, I was naïve enough to take them as complimentary. I felt pretty when men would turn around to watch me walk by on the street, as they were not only seeing my body, but praising my confident walk and my poise. I felt empowered by my ability to turn heads, to control what had always been upheld by my parents' social reign to be the power of players in society. If I had that much power to gain respect from just my physical appearance, the combination of my intelligence would surely certainly knock their socks off.

But when this car of men on this certain night yelled at us, it was different. For the first time the yells weren't subtle, or as the others had seemed to feel – complimentary. These were harsh and crude. The men offered money at us, leered, yelled what they wanted to do to us at a level so that the interaction was not, in fact, one at all, but a public announcement to the street and anyone on it, of what they wanted to take – what I had no control to stop them from taking, because I could not stop their yelling.

I've never felt so stripped in my whole life. When my friend and I finally made it to the restaurant, I crept into a booth and wouldn't budge for the whole night. I didn't want anyone to see me. I felt like every negative stereotype I could imagine. A tramp. A sleaze. A streetwalker. A bimbo. A prize.

My friend laughed the whole ordeal off. They were drunk. They were assholes. They're idiots who weren't going anywhere, and don't have anything better to do than make other people feel bad. They are a waste of time. That we should forget about it.

But the feeling of insecurity stayed, and my perfect naiveté when it came to the reality of male leaders crashed. I was a woman who men looked at not because they couldn't help themselves, but because they didn't feel they had to. I was a body that was appealing, perhaps a one-night fantasy. That feeling of being used, it made me feel that when those men in the car yelled at us as if we were prostitutes that they were right. That when I went out in a sexy dress, I was essentially selling my image for a glance or a drink, but definitely not for respect, and definitely not for myself.

It's a level of confidence that I've never been able to find again. It affects how I dress, how I act. It keeps me away from respecting or having the ability to fully allow myself to do what I want without doubting how it will appear to those around me. And I have never worn that dress since that time.

Monica's Story:

Growing up in the leftover grains of sand of the post-civil rights movement and in the midst of a very ambiguous period of feminism, as a young Haitian American woman, my life has been an extremely complex phenomenon.

In a day and age where we are supposed to be so advanced and open minded as a society but people are still so held up in scorn against people who lead multi-racial and same sex relationships, I am caught in somewhat of a dilemma of intersecting messages of what it means to be a woman and the trajectory I am supposed to undergo in order to achieve it, in order to get there. The real question is what I am trying to achieve, and where on earth is "there."

In this day and age, it is almost though everything needs a seemingly logical explanation. Well he must be dating outside the race because his mother slept around or was an unfit parent/role model and she must be attracted to women because her father was abusive or absent. I feel like yes in some cases these scenarios might be true but they might be just as true as a child who comes from a very loving and nourishing family environment and is attracted to an individual of the same sex and God forbid someone from another race. It amazes me how through very specific examples and experiences we are made out to rationalize and make sense of everything that does not fit in the norm of what people are used to, have been conditioned to, and have been socialized as being absolute truth.

In a day and age where we superficially have so many options, I feel like every decision I make has to be calculated and precise and I always have to be ready for people's insecurities and criticism and I should be ready to come up with a comforting explanation, ready to confine myself to a box; like someone is always going to be digging deep back into my childhood for the reason why I am alive and breathing. Isn't the fact that I was born enough?

Being a multi-racial female is a lot more complex than a lot of people realize. The origin of the world mulatto speaks very loudly in itself. The origin of the term is that it derives from "mula," the Spanish word for mule, accentuating the belief that multi-racial offspring from the systematic rape of African slaves by their white masters, could not reproduce, like mules.

In the media being bi-racial or multiracial is extremely overrated. I think society often glamorizes the idea of being racially mixed when really there are so many complex

ideas, emotions, and responsibilities that come with it. In my opinion, that fear of not being able to place multi-racial people in any specific box translates into intrigue and fascination but this being said, multi-racial people still have to deal with the mixed emotions that come as a result of being socialized as something "different" and "exotic."

When it comes down to it, as a racially mixed individual, are you expected to represent all the different aspects of your identity, or what you have constructed as your own personal identity? Often the complexities of being multi-racial are completely overlooked and the sheer exoticism of being mixed is over dramatized and multi-racial individuals are asked to choose. It absolutely baffles me to think about the fact that a person should have to choose between different aspects of their identity in order to make other people more at ease and to facilitate the sinking back into their comfort zones.

When it comes down to it, I still deal with the discrimination of being a woman of color living in a very black and white society but I also deal with discrimination from "my own people" along with the discrimination that all of us in this room face just by being women. Like everything else in life, it is not as though we can separate them and decide which one we are going to deal with right now, which one we can handle today. All of these forms of oppression are interconnected, different tones of the same voice. Another important element that is of grace importance is class. Being an economically marginalized multi-racial woman is very different from being in the spotlight of the media where that authority gives you a little more validation to overlook the fact that you might not be "black enough" or have un-definable features.

For me, these intertwined elements along with many more have been some of the deciding factors that have created my sense of womanhood. Without all of these colliding

factors, I would not be who I am today. I would not be striving to overcome many of the things that define me and essentially I wouldn't be me. I might not be as invested as I am in the study and true meaning of identity and I might not mold so well into other cultures; perhaps as a sort of refugee from my own culture and the freedom I obtain in the formation of my own identity. A great mind once said that the most awful prisons are the ones we create for ourselves in our minds and that being said I believe that all of the intertwined factors that create the reality of what I call my life are worth embracing for that they are, for what I can do with them, for the sheer fact that they serve as a vehicle for my growth.

APPENDIX B

STORIES OF GENDER INFORMED CONSENT LETTERS

Appendix B includes four versions of the consent letters signed by Stories of

Gender participants. Per Institutional Review Board guidelines at Emory University,

participants who were 16 years old and younger and participants who were 17 years old

at the time of participation had to sign different versions of an assent letter, as they were

not old enough to sign an official consent letter. In these cases, a parent or guardian

signed a consent letter in addition to their daughter's assent letter. Participants who were

18 years old or older at the time of participation signed their own consent letter.

**INFORMED ASSENT, PARTICIPANT COPY (AGES 15-16): Stories of Gender—
What It Means to Be a Girl
Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator, Emory University**

Date

Dear _____,

I invite you to take part in the Stories of Gender project. The main purpose of this
research project is to learn from you about what it means to you to be a girl in our
society.

What Will Happen
There are four basic things I will ask you to do as a part of this project. (1) You
will be asked to fill out two surveys about your self-image. The surveys will each take
about 5-10 minutes to complete.
(2) You will be asked to write a story about your experiences of gender on your
own time. The story should be 1-2 pages in length. You do not need to spend more than
two hours writing it. I am requesting that these stories exclude telling of intimate sexual
behavior. Instead stories might be about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with
friends, relationships with parents, being allowed or not allowed to do something because
of gender, or any other story that seems to connect to what it means to be female.
(3) The heart of this research is our story sharing groups. Each week one young
woman will share the story she has written. Then the group will talk about the story with
her. The story-sharing group will meet once a week over the course of 5-8 weeks,
depending on the final number of participants. It will be important for group members to

commit to being at each session. Each session will last approximately one and a half hours.

(4) You will be asked to participate in an individual exit interview. You will be asked questions about your experience in the story-sharing group and what you might take away from your participation in it. This exit interview will last approximately one hour.

Your Choice

It is your choice to be part of this study. Your parent or guardian cannot force you to participate. You may stop participating in the study at any time. You may skip any question that is part of the project.

Your Privacy

I will keep your records private. The only time I will share anything about you by name is when state law requires me to report incidents of abuse. I will share that information only as state law requires. I will be the only one who will hear the tape of our story-sharing sessions and your interview and to see your written narratives and surveys.

I will refer to you with a false name on all documents, never by your real name. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. The purpose of all these safety measures is to preserve your privacy.

Also, we will talk at each story-sharing session about the importance of not sharing what we talked about in the group outside of the group ("what we say in the group, stays in the group"). It will be very important for you to respect the privacy of others in the group and for them to respect your privacy.

Staying in Touch

Please contact me if you have any questions about this study. I can be reached at 404-633-1428 or at cebisch@emory.edu. Feel free to contact me at any time before, during, and even after the project. Please also talk to your parents if you are ever worried about what happens in this project.

If you are willing to take part in this study, please sign this letter. Then, keep one copy for yourself and return one copy to me in the enclosed, stamped envelope. My address is: Claire Bischoff, 2460 Harrington Drive, Decatur, GA 30033.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

_____   Date_____
Claire Bischoff, Graduate student, Emory University
Principal Investigator

_____   Date_____
Participant's Signature of Assent

INFORMED ASSENT, PARTICIPANT COPY (Age 17): Stories of Gender—
What It Means to Be a Girl
Claire Bischoff, Principle Investigator, Emory University

Date

(Your) Name
Address
Phone
E-mail

Dear _____,

     I invite you to take part in the Stories of Gender project. The main purpose of this research project is to learn from youth about their experiences of being a young woman in our society. I especially want to understand what is important to you and how you see the world. I invite you to be a partner in this project by sharing about your life and ideas.

Description of the Project

     The goal of this project is to listen to young women's stories of what it is like to be a young woman and to reflect on these stories with a group of young women. Our story-sharing group will meet once a week for 5-8 weeks, depending on the number of participants. We will meet at your church. Each session will last approximately an hour and a half. Also, you will be asked to do one individual interview that will last approximately one hour.

     You will be asked to do four things for this project. (1) You will be asked to fill out two surveys about your self-image at our first meeting. The surveys will each take about 5-10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to complete the same two surveys again at our final meeting.

     (2) You will be asked to write a story about your experiences of gender on your own time. The story should be 1-2 pages in length. You do not need to spend more than two hours writing it. I am requesting that these stories exclude telling of intimate sexual behavior. Instead stories might be about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with friends, relationships with parents, being allowed or not allowed to do something because of gender, or any other story that seems to connect to what it means to be female. You will be asked to compose another story of the same length at the end of our time together.

     (3) The heart of this research is our story-sharing groups. Each week one young woman will share the story she has written. Then the group will reflect upon the story with her. It will be important for group members to commit to being at each session. The story sharing sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed. My plan is to work with three groups of young women, with each group made up of 4-7 young women and myself as a participant-observer.

     (4) You will be asked to participate in an individual exit interview. You will be asked questions about your experience in the story-sharing group and what you might take away from your participation in it. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Participant Feedback Opportunity

You can tell me at any time if there is anything you say during story-sharing sessions or the interview or anything you write in your stories that you do not want me to include in my analysis (because it is embarrassing, private, etc.). You can contact me even after the study is finished. I will then delete it from the transcript or from your written narrative.

I will send you a copy of your interview transcript in the mail. You will have a chance to read through it to make corrections (for example, if I have misquoted you) or to delete any sections that you wish to delete (for example, because they are private, embarrassing, etc.). You will receive a final copy of your interview with the changes if you would like it.

I will send you a copy of any presentation I will do about this research project. I will highlight parts of the presentation that have to do with what you said in the story-sharing groups and interview and what you wrote in your narratives, as well as any direct quotations I use from you. I will ask you to check how I have quoted you and to provide feedback about the analysis I have done of our story-sharing groups. Your feedback will help me to more accurately analyze the story-sharing groups. I will use your feedback in the final version of my presentation.

Potential Risks and Benefits

If you choose to take part in this project, you will be asked to share with the group a story about your personal experience of gender. You will also be asked to reflect on the stories of the other young women in the group and to give an exit interview about your experience with the group. The story-sharing groups and/or exit interview could involve some stress. You may ask to change the subject of conversation, to leave, to skip a question, or to the end the story-sharing group or the interview if the stress is too much.

There is a chance that members of the story-sharing groups will talk about what is said outside of the group. At each of our meetings, I will stress the importance of confidentiality ("what is said in the group should stay in the group"). I cannot completely control how information from the story-sharing group is used outside of the group.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research is voluntary. Your parent or guardian cannot force you to participate in this study. You have the right to refuse to be in this study. If you decide to be in this study and change your mind, you have a right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions.

Confidentiality

I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The only time I will share anything about you by name is when state law requires me to report incidents of abuse. I will share that information only as state law requires. You may ask for copies of your audiotaped interview and transcript. Audiotapes will not be used outside the research process.

I will refer to you with a false name on all documents, never by your real name. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. The purpose of all these safety measures is to preserve your privacy.

Communication

Please contact me—Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator—if you have any questions about this study. You can reach me at 404-633-1428 or cebisch@emory.edu. If you have any further questions about my study you may contact my advisor Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore at 404-727-6388 or at mmoore3@emory.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact Dr. Karen Hegtvedt, Chair, Social, Humanist, and Behavioral Institutional Review at 404-727-7517 or khegtv@emory.edu. This review board works to protect people who participate in human research, like these story-sharing groups.

Thank you for thinking seriously about taking part in this project. I expect a lot of value to come from it. If you are willing to participate, please sign this letter to give your assent. Then, keep one copy for yourself and return one copy to me in the enclosed, stamped envelope. My address is: Claire Bischoff, 2460 Harrington Drive, Decatur, GA 30033.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

_____ Date_____

Claire Bischoff
Graduate student, Emory University
Principal Investigator, Stories of Gender Project

_____ Date_____

Participant's Signature of Assent

INFORMED CONSENT, PARTICIPANT COPY (Age 18 and older): Stories of Gender—What It Means to Be a Girl
Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator, Emory University

Date

(Your) Name
Address
Phone
E-mail

Dear _____,

      I invite you to take part in the Stories of Gender project. The main purpose of this research project is to learn from youth about their experiences of being a young woman in our society. I especially want to understand what is important to you and how you see the world. I invite you to be a partner in this project by sharing about your life and ideas.

Description of the Project
      The goal of this project is to listen to young women's stories of what it is like to be a young woman and to reflect on these stories with a group of young women. Our story-sharing group will meet once a week for 5-8 weeks, depending on the number of participants. We will meet at Southeastern University. Each session will last approximately an hour and a half. Also, you will be asked to do one individual interview that will last approximately one hour.
      You will be asked to do four things for this project. (1) You will be asked to fill out two surveys about your self-image at our first meeting. The surveys will each take about 5-10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to complete the same two surveys again at our final meeting.
      (2) You will be asked to write a story about your experiences of gender on your own time. The story should be 1-2 pages in length. You do not need to spend more than two hours writing it. I am requesting that these stories exclude telling of intimate sexual behavior. Instead stories might be about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with friends, relationships with parents, being allowed or not allowed to do something because of gender, or any other story that seems to connect to what it means to be female. You will be asked to compose another story of the same length at the end of our time together.
      (3) The heart of this research is our story-sharing groups. Each week one young woman will share the story she has written. Then the group will reflect upon the story with her. It will be important for group members to commit to being at each session. The story sharing sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed. My plan is to work with three groups of young women, with each group made up of 4-7 young women and myself as a participant-observer.
      (4) You will be asked to participate in an individual exit interview. You will be asked questions about your experience in the story-sharing group and what you might take away from your participation in it. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Participant Feedback Opportunity

You can tell me at any time if there is anything you say during story-sharing sessions or your interview or anything you write in your stories that you do not want me to include in my analysis (because it is embarrassing, private, etc.). You can contact me even after the study is finished. I will then delete it from the transcript or from your written narrative.

I will send you a copy of your interview transcript in the mail. You will have a chance to read through it to make corrections (for example, if I have misquoted you) or to delete any sections that you wish to delete (for example, because they are private, embarrassing, etc.). You will receive a final copy of your interview with the changes if you would like it.

I will send you a copy of any presentation I will do about this study. I will highlight parts of the presentation that have to do with what you said in the story-sharing groups and interview and what you wrote in your narratives, as well as any direct quotations I use from you. I will ask you to check how I have quoted you and to provide feedback about the analysis I have done of our story-sharing groups. Your feedback will help me to more accurately analyze the story-sharing groups. I will use your feedback in the final version of my presentation.

Potential Risks and Benefits

If you choose to take part in this project, you will be asked to share with the group a story about your personal experience of gender. You will also be asked to reflect on the stories of the other young women in the group and to give an exit interview about your experience with the group. The story-sharing groups and/or exit interview could involve some stress. You may ask to change the subject of conversation, to leave, to skip a question, or to the end the story-sharing group or the interview if the stress is too much.

There is a chance that members of the story-sharing groups will talk about what is said outside of the group. At each of our meetings, I will stress the importance of confidentiality ("what is said in the group should stay in the group"). I cannot completely control how information from the story-sharing group is used outside of the group.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to be in this study. If you decide to be in this study and change your mind, you have a right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions.

Confidentiality

I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The only time I will share anything about you by name is when state law requires me to report incidents of abuse. I will share that information only as state law requires. You may ask for copies of your audiotaped interview and transcript. Audiotapes will not be used outside the research process.

I will refer to you with a false name on all documents, never by your real name. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when I present this

study or publish its results. The purpose of all these safety measures is to preserve your privacy.

Communication

Please contact me—Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator—if you have any questions about this study. You can reach me at 404-633-1428 or cebisch@emory.edu. If you have any further questions about my study you may contact my advisor Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore at 404-727-6388 or at mmoore3@emory.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact Dr. Karen Hegtvedt, Chair, Social, Humanist, and Behavioral Institutional Review at 404-727-7517 or khegtv@emory.edu. This review board works to protect people who participate in human research, like these story-sharing groups.

Thank you for thinking seriously about taking part in this project. I expect a lot of value to come from it. If you are willing to participate, please sign this letter to give your consent. Then, keep one copy for yourself and return one copy to me in the enclosed, stamped envelope. My address is: Claire Bischoff, 2460 Harrington Drive, Decatur, GA 30033.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

_____   Date_____

Claire Bischoff
Graduate student, Emory University
Principal Investigator, Stories of Gender Project

_____   Date_____

Participant's Signature of Consent

INFORMED CONSENT, PARENT/GUARDIAN COPY: Stories of Gender—What It Means to Be a Girl
Claire Bischoff, Principle Investigator, Emory University

Date

(Your) Name
Address
Phone
E-mail

Dear _____,

      I invite your daughter to take part in the Stories of Gender project. The main purpose of this research project is to learn from youth about their experiences of being young women in our society. I especially want to understand what is important to your daughter and how she sees the world. I invite your daughter to be a partner in this project by sharing about her life and ideas.

Description of the Project
      The goal of this project is to listen to young women's stories of what it is like to be a young woman and to reflect on these stories with a group of young women. Our story-sharing group will meet once a week for 5-8 weeks, depending on the number of participants. We will meet at your church. Each session will last approximately an hour and a half. Also, your daughter will be asked to do one individual interview that will last approximately one hour. This interview will take place at a location convenient for you and your daughter.

      Your daughter will be asked to do four things for this research project. (1) She will be asked to fill out two surveys about her self-image at our first meeting. The surveys will each take about 5-10 minutes to complete. She will be asked to complete the same two surveys again at our final meeting.

      (2) Your daughter will be asked to write a story about her experiences of gender on her own time. The story should be 1-2 pages in length. She does not need to spend more than two hours writing it. I am requesting that these stories exclude telling of intimate sexual behavior. Instead stories might be about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with friends, relationships with parents, being allowed or not allowed to do something because of gender, or any other story that seems to connect to what it means to be female. Your daughter will be asked to compose another story of the same length at the end of our time together.

      (3) The heart of this research is our story-sharing groups. Each week one young woman will share the story she has written. Then the group will reflect upon the story with her. It will be important for group members to commit to being at each session. The story sharing sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed. My plan is to work with three groups of young women, with each group made up of 4-7 young women and myself as a participant-observer.

(4) Your daughter will be asked to participate in an individual exit interview. She will be asked questions about her experience in the story-sharing group and what she might take away from her participation in it. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Participant Feedback Opportunity

Your daughter can tell me at any time if there is anything she says during story-sharing sessions or her interview or anything she writes in her stories that she do not want me to include in my analysis (because it is embarrassing, private, etc.). She can contact me even after the study is finished. I will then delete it from the transcript or from her written narrative.

I will send your daughter a copy of her interview transcript in the mail. She will have a chance to read through it to make corrections (for example, if I have misquoted her) or to delete any sections that she wishes to delete (for example because they are private, embarrassing, etc.). She will receive a final copy of her interview with the changes if she would like it.

I will send your daughter a copy of any presentation I will do about this study. I will highlight parts of the presentation that have to do with what your daughter said in the story-sharing groups and interview and what she wrote in her narratives, as well as any direct quotations I use from her. I will ask her to check how I have quoted her and to provide feedback about the analysis I have done of our story-sharing groups. Her feedback will help me to more accurately analyze the story-sharing groups. I will use her feedback in the final version of my presentation.

Potential Risks and Benefits

If your daughter chooses to take part in this project, she will be asked to share with the group a story about her personal experience of gender. She will also be asked to reflect on the stories of the other young women in the group and to give an exit interview about her experience with the group. The story-sharing groups and/or exit interview could involve some stress. She may ask to change the subject of conversation, to leave, to skip a question, or to the end the story-sharing group or the interview if the stress is too much.

There is a chance that members of the story-sharing groups will talk about what is said outside of the group. At each of our meetings, I will stress the importance of confidentiality ("what is said in the group should stay in the group"). I cannot completely control how information from the story-sharing group is used outside of the group.

There are no direct benefits to your daughter or to you for participating in this research.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research is voluntary. You cannot force your daughter to participate. She has the right to refuse to be in this study. If she decides to be in this study and changes her mind, she has a right to drop out at any time. She may skip questions.

Confidentiality

I will keep your daughter's records private to the extent allowed by law. The only time I will share anything about her by name is when state law requires me to report incidents of abuse. I will share that information only as state law requires. Your daughter may ask for copies of her audiotaped interview and transcript. Audiotapes will not be used outside the research process.

I will refer to your daughter with a false name on all documents, never by her real name. Her name and other facts that might point to her will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. The purpose of all these safety measures is to preserve her privacy.

Communication

Please contact me—Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator—if you have any questions about this study. You can reach me at 404-633-1428 or cebisch@emory.edu. If you have any further questions about my study you may contact my advisor Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore at 404-727-6388 or at mmoore3@emory.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your daughter's rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact Dr. Karen Hegtvedt, Chair, Social, Humanist, and Behavioral Institutional Review at 404-727-7517 or khegtv@emory.edu. This review board works to protect people who participate in human research, like these story-sharing groups.

Thank you for thinking seriously about allowing your daughter to take part in this project. I expect a lot of value to come from it. If you are willing to let your daughter participate, please sign this letter to give your consent. Then, keep one copy for yourself and return one copy to me in the enclosed, stamped envelope. My address is: Claire Bischoff, 2460 Harrington Drive, Decatur, GA 30033.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

_____	Date_____

Claire Bischoff
Graduate student, Emory University
Principal Investigator, Stories of Gender Project

_____	Date_____

Parent or Guardian's Signature of Consent

APPENDIX C

STORIES OF GENDER PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Age:

If someone asked you to describe who you are or what your identity is, what would you tell them?

Who do you live with? Please name parents/guardians, siblings, pets, and other relatives who live in your home. Please give siblings' ages.

What do your parents/guardians do for work?

Please tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you live in. *Please tell me a little about the neighborhood you grew up in.*[370]

Where do you go to school? What grade are you in? What is your favorite subject to study? *What is your major/minor? What else do you like to study?*

Please tell me a little bit about your school. *How would you describe Southeastern University to someone who was not familiar with it?*

What activities are you involved in at school? (sports, clubs, music, theater, etc.)

Do you have a job? Where do you work? About how many hours do you work each week?

Do you attend church regularly? Which church? What are you involved in at church? (Bible study, youth group, service work, etc.) *Were you raised in a particular religious tradition? If yes, which one? How involved were you in religion growing up? Do you still practice a religious tradition? If yes, which one and how do you practice it?*

What do you like to do most in your free time?

What radio stations and music do you like to listen to? What you are favorite music groups?

What television shows do you watch regularly? Why?

What magazines do you read regularly? Why?

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370. Questions in italics represent different wording for questions posed to the Southeastern University students.

Do you have a cell phone? If yes, how often do you use it? Do you use it to text message? What else do you use it for?

Do you have an e-mail account? How often do you use it? What do you use it for?

Do you use IM (instant message)? If yes, what do you use it for?

Do you have access to the Internet? If yes, where do you have access from (home, school, library)? What do you use the Internet for?

Do you have a significant other? If yes, how long have the two of you been a couple?

If something serious were to come up, who could you talk to about it?

APPENDIX D

STORIES OF GENDER DISCUSSION GUIDE

Each session will begin with one young woman sharing a personal story about her experience with gender, which she will have prepared beforehand. She will have the option to tell her story, to read aloud from a printer version, or to ask another member of the group to read a printed version of her story aloud. After the story is shared, the group will reflect on the story in three ways: "experience near," "experience distant," and "going forth."

"Experience near" will involve sharing the feelings and associations the story evokes for the participants. Related stories and memories may be told, and participants may ask questions of each other and the storyteller to clarify, challenge, and expand the discussion. Questions that may be asked by the Principal Investigator (PI) to stimulate discussion include:

- How did hearing this story make you feel?

- What did hearing this story remind you of from your own life experiences?

- Were there any central themes, symbols, or messages in this story?

"Experience distant" will focus more explicitly on themes, symbols, and messages from the story. During this time, participants will be invited to draw on resources from their faith and cultural traditions to help understand the story. Questions that may be asked by the PI to stimulate discussion include:

- Does this story remind you of any stories from scripture or myth?

- Does this story challenge what you have been taught by communities of faith about gender?

- Does this story remind you of any stories that are part of popular culture— e.g. movies, songs, television shows, etc.?

- Does this story challenge what you know about what it means to be a girl from popular culture?

- Do you see God present or absent in this story?

"Going forth" will be the final step in the group process. This time will center on the question of how this story and conversation might change future thought and action. The purpose is not to achieve a grand conclusion that is relevant for everyone in the group, but instead to help each participant appropriate the story and conversation for their own lives.

APPENDIX E

STORIES OF GENDER EXIT INTERIVEW QUESTION SCHEDULE

1. Do you remember how you felt about participating in the group before we began?

2. Do you remember any expectations you had for the group?

3. Are there places besides this group where you have been able to tell stories about your experiences of gender? What were these places?

4. What words would you use to describe your overall experience of participating in this group?

5. What was it like to prepare a story about your experience of gender to share with the group?

6. What was it like to share your story with the group?

7. What was it like to reflect on your story with other members of the group?

8. What was it like to hear the stories of other members of the group?

9. What was it like helping other members to reflect on their stories?

10. Has your understanding of gender or what it means to be female changed at all as part of your participation in the group? How has it changed?

11. What themes, symbols, or messages about young women's experiences of gender will you remember from our discussions?

12. What have you learned from being in this group? What will you take away from this experience?

13. Have you learned anything new about how religion might relate to experiences of gender?

14. Have you learned anything new about how experiences of gender relate to the
    larger culture?

15. If you had to give advice to people in the church who work with adolescents, what
    advice would you give?

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