

IN PARABLES:  
THE NARRATIVE SELVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

by

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## ABSTRACT

I began with an interest in what makes a difference for girls who face challenging circumstances: What helps them to develop sturdy, resilient, and resistant selves? What role does narrative play in this process?

I set in motion a process of storytelling and reflecting by inviting girls and women to share stories together—their own stories, fictional narratives, and myths. The participants had faced particular challenges in adolescence, including economic hardship; disrupted social or family circumstances; mental health; abuse; or trauma. The girls and women had differing racialized, class, cultural, social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds.

Drawing on the work of biblical scholars who understand Jesus' parables as poetic metaphor, I identified 11 aspects of parables that helped me to hear and interpret girls' stories: participation, difficulty, metaphor, fractals, truth, emergence, performance, possibility, power, wisdom, and beauty. Listening with a parabolic ear, I came to experience girls' storytelling selves as participatory, metaphorical, fractal, truthful, and emergent; I observed girls' selves as artistic practices that are embodied performances of their wisdom, power, and beauty. And I discovered how such performances of the self create enlarged spaces of possibility for girls in the face of life's difficulty.

I discovered that storytelling selves *are* girls' power—power realized as storytelling, participation, mutual relation, meaning-making, enlarging spaces of possibility, disidentification, and embodiment.

I identified six elements that seemed to be important in nurturing girls' parabolic imagination. These are community participation, experienced observation, complexity, care, interpretation, and artmaking. These elements provide a framework for considering

how educators might support girls' selves but they do not provide a methodology. Taken together, they are more like a parable—an opening onto a particular worldview that invites participation in the world of a girl.

These six elements may be signs that point to places where parables of the self are already being told. They become questions that make sense only to those who already understand: Is this community? Is anyone listening? Is it complex? Is this a place of compassion and care? Is meaning being shaped and questioned and reimagined here? Is there art? Is there play?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*(ex nihilo nihil fit)*

*always something from something*

*always*

*a word before this word*

Any written work is a collaboration in the sense that one always builds on the insights and ideas that come before; the language that we inherit carries with it the meanings that we shape and reconfigure; the texts we read become the pieces we snip apart and paste down as a collage; the conversations of our lives are the voices that echo in every line we write. A thesis is even more collaborative than most writing because it is deliberately shaped in community—the community of mentors, peers, and teachers within an academic institution. I cannot begin to name everyone who has been a part of this process. I can only express my gratitude and offer a few names of those who have been most a part of this process.

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## A GUIDE TO THIS THESIS

This thesis diverges from the pattern of many dissertations in order to follow the natural flow of the narrative. As I worked with the stories of girlhood that I selected to present, it became important to situate each story in the context within which it was told, including data from interviews with the storyteller. As well, I needed to outline certain parts of the methodology, or relevant aspects of the process of my research, and some of my observations from that part of the process. And I needed to present descriptions of the conversations, insights, or themes that the stories elicited for girls and women, and for me, and to connect and ground each storytelling moment within a larger framework of theory and literature.

Patton (2002) says that interpreting lived experience entails understanding how participants remember, perceive, describe, feel about, judge, make sense of, and talk about their experience with others (p. 104). Presenting the findings of qualitative research requires that the researcher contextualize the stories that are told, and bring them back into a larger whole, rather than fragmenting and dislocating them. Qualitative research needs to tell a story—a thorough, careful, detailed, and straightforward story (Patton, 2002). This is what I have attempted.

Thus, rather than having a separation of data, method, and theory, I have put these elements into the thematic groupings that make up Part 2 of this dissertation (chapters 4 through 14). Each of these chapters contains some literature review, some methodology, some data, and some data analysis woven into a single essay. In any one of these chapters you will encounter theory, process, data, and interpretation. But there is no methodology chapter, no separate literature review, and no chapters called “data” or “data analysis.”

I choose this arrangement because I believe it makes for a better story, and story, after all, is the heart of my work. However, the process was not always easy. I agree with Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) that narrative analysis is far more than “just telling stories” (p. 21). Working with narrative is not a simple or easy way to represent one’s discoveries. Following Van Maanen (1988), my role is to present a narrative that faithfully represents the data I have collected but, always, such narrative is framed within my own interpretations—my own judgments about significance, meaning, and truthfulness.

## **How This Thesis Is Organized**

**Part 1: Opening** is a gateway to the rest of the work. It has three chapters.

*Chapter 1: Introduction* provides an overview of what I did in my research and why. It contains a summary of the research methodology, the four research groups, and an introduction to the narrative approach that guided my research and this writing. The introduction has one personal narrative—the story “Titanic” by Audrey.

*Chapter 2: Resilience* poses a question central to this work—what is resilience? This chapter also introduces the research participants and contains a second personal narrative, “The House Where I Will Live” by Ameilia.

*Chapter 3: In Parables* provides a theoretical perspective on parables and storytelling based on John Dominic Crossan’s (1973) book of the same name. As will be seen, Crossan’s understanding of the nature of parables provides a framework for this dissertation and a way of listening to the stories of adolescent girls.

**Part 2: Telling** is divided into 11 chapters (chapters 4 through 14). Each has at its centre one main story and one storyteller. The chapters are as follows:



*Chapter 4: Participation* (centred on the story “Sleepover” by Gabrielle)

*Chapter 5: Difficulty* (centred on the story “Oh No Shipwreck” by Ameilia)

*Chapter 6: Metaphor* (centred on the story “Hunger” by Sahira)

*Chapter 7: Fractal* (centred on the story “Broken Teeth” by Mikka)

*Chapter 8: Truth* (centred on the story “My Life with Steven” by Zoe)

*Chapter 9: Emergence* (centred on the story “The Spanish Hijab” by Maria)

*Chapter 10: Performance* (centred on the story “All the World’s a Stage” by Laila)

*Chapter 11: Possibility* (centred on the story “Science Class” by Serena)

*Chapter 12: Power* (centred on the story “Lunch Hour” by Jordan)

*Chapter 13: Wisdom* (centred on the story “Denton’s Hill” by Deborah)

*Chapter 14: Beauty* (centred on the story “Swimming the Wave” by Beth).

**Part 3: Conversing** is the part of the dissertation in which learning is consolidated, integrated, and carried back into daily living. It is here that I consider the connections, the significance of this research for teaching and learning, and possibilities for further research. This section is, as it says, conversation. Here, I talk back to what I have heard and enter into conversation and reflection on what I have learned from this research. I do so in four chapters, as follows:

*Chapter 15: Girls’ Selves as Artistic Practice*

*Chapter 16: Reimagining Girl Power in Parables*

*Chapter 17: Nurturing the Parabolic Imagination*

*Chapter 18: A Story for Another Time*

The remainder of the thesis is much as one would anticipate—front matter at the front, appendices and references at the back.

## PART 1: OPENING

They asked him, “Why do you speak in parables?”

He answered, “. . .The reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

(Mt 13:10-13)<sup>1</sup>

“I can’t imagine people being able to penetrate the human condition without knowing something about the play of metaphor in poetry,” said Bruner.

(Tetroe & Woodruff, 1980, p. 35)

“Every story is a kind of parable, or metaphor,” Ozick says, “and metaphor is imagination—they are utterly fused.”

(Bolick, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States, 1989).

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We are sitting around the table in the common room. Audrey<sup>2</sup> opens her purse. It is of soft, white leather with gold-coloured buckles and two gold-coloured rings where the straps attach. Hers is a well-organized purse. From one compartment she produces a sheaf of blue-lined binder paper written in her tidy hand. She unfolds it and begins to read.

### **Titanic, by Audrey**

It's about my cruise to the Mediterranean that I did last winter, okay.

Travelling was difficult for me because I couldn't decide what to bring. I normally loved packing, but this time I was nervous to leave. The ship could sink, I could lose my things, I could lose my ticket and therefore not be able to get on the boat with my family. Those were only a couple of my thoughts. Mainly, I wished I didn't have to leave my friends.

So, I packed my clothing and the essential trip things and left my favourite childhood snuggle toy, a little black stuffed lamb, back on my bed where it should stay. I said goodbye to the people I knew as if I might never see them again and left for the airport. We flew to Rome to meet our extended family at the docks. The monstrous boat left the docking station with me on it. I hadn't lost my ticket as I thought I might have. My parents guided me through hallways that were decorated with golden framed paintings and red paisley carpets.

This boat was nice. They led me right to our room where we would be staying for the next week and a half. As we came in, our luggage was already there to my surprise and it hadn't been lost. My bed is hanging by hinges on the side and 4 feet in the air above my parent's bed, it had no bars on the side to catch me if I fell during the night while the boat rocked. What if I fell and broke my leg.

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<sup>2</sup> At my invitation, most participants chose pseudonyms for themselves. In some cases, when they declined to do so, I chose a pseudonym for them. Identifying information, including particular details about the participants, has been altered or omitted.

Maybe I worry a bit too much. I did sleep soundly after all on that thin mattress lined with Egyptian cotton.

A few days later, while I was bored and walking around the ship, I found a library that had a small coffee bar and an Internet connection. I took out my ear buds from my iPod and ordered a hot chocolate. I wandered over to a bookcase that held many old books. Mostly, they were biographies. I didn't see any that I was interested in so I went to go send some emails to my friends back home. I remember finishing my hot chocolate and the emailing at the same time, so I was bored again. I took out my iPod once more and wandered. The staircases were nice and also decorated with art. I read all the brief descriptions that were given and I even saw a famous sketch that our family friends had in their staircase. Oh no! Friends on my mind again.

Later I spent time with my two young but annoyingly cute nieces. If I just stayed with them I would be busy and wouldn't be alone. Time passed and we visited small towns and such and historic places. You know. After coming back from the visits on land, we docked in Rome and it was dinnertime. My great aunts passed me a bracelet that had golden charms in it. It seemed like gold was a big part of this cruise. This bracelet had charms for every place we visited on the trip; they told me that they would get me another charm for each place that we visited. Now I have about eight charms.

My aunts inspired me to learn about the world and its many beautiful places and to live life to its fullest.

Although she had volunteered to be the first girl in the group to share her story, Audrey was shaking slightly as she read. She admitted to being scared but said she wanted to “get this over with.” Most of the other girls in the group watched her silently as she read aloud from her paper; Zoe and Gabrielle, however, had a fit of giggles in the middle of her story, and we had to take a break. Audrey continued bravely without looking up.

I admit to being initially apprehensive about Audrey's story. I had invited her into my research because of what I perceived to be commonalities with others in the group—in her case, struggles with shyness, identity, family conflicts, and her past experiences of

being socially ostracized. However, the story she chose to tell accentuated her privilege. Her family's wealth and status stood in stark contrast to the life situation of others in the group, particularly that of Zoe and Gabrielle. Zoe lives in subsidized housing. How would she relate to Audrey telling a story about something only the very rich experience? I worried that the other girls might see her only as a spoiled rich girl.

It was Gabrielle who dubbed Audrey's story "Titanic." I had asked for reactions and responses to Audrey's story and before anyone else spoke, she said one word, "Titanic." The others in the group agreed. Audrey nodded her assent. It hadn't been in her mind when she wrote the story, but she could see the fit, she said.

It seems Gabrielle had been listening after all, and more deeply and intuitively than I had noticed. I heard a story I thought I knew; the girls in the group heard Audrey.

When Gabrielle said the word *Titanic*, I asked what she meant.

"*Titanic* like the movie. You know, Kate Winslet and what's his name," said Beth.

"Leonardo DiCaprio," said Audrey.

"Oh," I said.

While I had sat through *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) only once, the girls had watched it at least five times. For me it was just another movie; for them it was iconic. When Audrey described the opulent corridors of the cruise ship, the cabins, the "gold," the others immediately connected—story to story to their own stories.

In Audrey's narrative, I heard a story about wealth and power; they heard a subtext of powerlessness, of events being out of one's hands, of selves being shaped by forces and structures that seek to define them over against the selves they are striving to become. While I had wondered at Audrey's unappreciative boredom, they had seen the danger and wondered how Audrey would escape.

The conversation went deeper, to reveal how debilitating it can be to try to forge a coherent sense of self under the heavy-handed expectations of others. “All my mom wants is for me to be just like her and grow to do what she does,” said one girl. “She’s very good at [her profession] but she has no idea how that’s so completely impossible for me.”

## Discourses of Girlhood

As I analyzed and reflected on data from the studies in the first two years of my research, I became increasingly interested in how girls interpret and respond to contemporary discourses of girlhood—both secular and religious—as they narrate resistant and resilient identities for themselves.

Gee (1999) understands a *Discourse* as a “dance” (p. 28)—a coordinated pattern—of words, deeds, values, beliefs, symbols, tools, objects, times, and places. Discourse is a construct, an abstraction and yet, in the here-and-now, it is a performance that is “recognizable as just such a coordination” (Gee, 1999, p. 28). I like the word *dance*, which implies a participatory, coordinated social activity. A dance has certain structures, forms, and expectations, but at the same time, it moves and changes. A discourse is never completely fixed in space and time, but neither is it ever free of social expectations, histories, conventions, and even censures. A review of the literature from girl studies suggests that there are four dominant discourses that define what being a girl can be in contemporary Western culture.

The four are called Girl Power, Reviving Ophelia, Mean Girls, and Bad Girls.

*Girl Power.* The idea that young women can do or be anything they desire is not new. However, the Girl Power phenomenon swept into mainstream culture in the mid-to-

late 1990s. This optimistic discourse of endless possibility for females is expressed in everything from media messages about girls' and women's achievements to consumer products aimed at girls. It depicts a "sassy, don't-mess-with-me, adolescent spirit" (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 28). Not coincidentally, the rise of Girl Power coincided with the recognition that adolescent girls represented a sizeable new consumer market.

A British pop band, the Spice Girls, popularized Girl Power with lyrics that advocated equal rights and the power of sisterhood (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005). The cute but powerful girl became a cultural icon. However, Girl Power is a dangerous notion because it encourages girls to identify with positive feelings about girlhood while deflecting attention away from the serious injustices and inequalities facing women and girls worldwide (Taft, 2004). It does a disservice to girls who may experience multiple forms of oppression, stripping them of their voice, alienating them, and failing to provide them with critical tools. Taft notes Girl Power's invocation "to describe the world as a meritocracy, void of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism" (p. 73). In the world of Girl Power, girls can be whatever they want to be as long as they are white, middle class, smart, able, 10 pounds underweight, and, above all, sexually attractive to men.

*Reviving Ophelia.* An equally compelling but very different discourse is that of girlhood in crisis. Gilligan (1982) observed that girls begin to grow silent at about age 11, as they lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, and their sense of themselves. Numerous studies and reports followed Gilligan's work (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005). Pipher's (1994) best-selling book, *Reviving Ophelia*, brought this discourse into the mainstream—drawing on the story of Ophelia's drowning, in *Hamlet*. Pipher

painted a disturbing picture of girls age 12 to 15, in what she called the “girl-poisoning culture” (ch. 3) of North America. Their problems, according to Pipher, are complicated and metaphorical—depression, eating disorders, school phobias, self-inflicted injuries, a fragmented sense of themselves, and a radical silencing. She writes,

Studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and their optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic, and “tomboyish” personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies. (1994, p. 19)

*Mean Girls.* Alongside the discourses of girls as cute but powerful and as girls in crisis is a third discourse that says girls may not be so nice after all (Bettis & Adams, 2005). The *Mean Girls* discourse was visible in a slew of popular media products in the early 2000s, such as *Queenbees and Wannabees* (Wiseman, 2002); *Odd Girl Out* (Simons, 2002); and *Mean Girls* (Michaels, 2004), a motion picture based on Wiseman’s book. These cultural products characterize adolescent girls as cliquish, shallow, and willing to inflict life-long harm on one another’s self-esteem as they claw their way to the top of the social pyramid.

*Bad Girls.* In the late 1990s, the North American media increasingly presented images of dangerous adolescent girls—girls as violent criminals; girls who fight physically alongside the boys; girls who join gangs, carry weapons, and deal drugs; girls who kill one another. These media-constructed images were distortions of reality—distortions of the size of the threat, the level of violence, and the numbers of girls involved—but that did not prevent the notion of girls as bad and mean from becoming a widespread and compelling idea (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; 2008).



Ultimately, these four discourses position girls and women at opposite poles, just as they have always been positioned: madonna or temptress, virgin or whore, good girl or bad girl (Charlton, 2007). Girl Power holds out a promise—success, autonomy, independence—as an enticement for girls to conform to the norms of femininity (niceness and sexual desirability). *Ophelia*, *Mean Girls*, and *Bad Girls* reflect the social regulation of girls' subjectivities: rescue and fix girls if they fail, blame girls for girls' own victimization (and threaten non-conformers with social isolation), and punish resisters and Others.

These discourses of girlhood leave no space for girls on the margins; girls who are Other than the Girl Power ideal. Girls may be positioned as Other because of their race, class, economic resources, ethnicity, physical appearance, dis/ability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Trauma, emotional or psychiatric challenges, family background, disruptive life experiences, and gender or social non-conformity also push some girls to the margins. Girls face greater expectations than ever before for individual achievement combined with the heteronormative imperative that they also be sexually attractive to and attracted to men. Those who do not or cannot conform to this idealized form of girlhood are situated as victim, mean, or bad.

Girls must also contend with a culture that is increasingly hostile to youth. How a society understands its youth is partly determined by how it represents them. Depictions of youth in popular culture such as videos, music, and films help shape and legitimize how adult society sees youth and what it expects from them. While these media present different and even conflicting images of youth, as Giroux says, at their worst, they “demonize, sexualize, or commodify [youth]” (1996, p. 58). Popular representations of youth concur with larger public discourses about youth as being dangerous or bad. These

discourses feed a societal panic about youth and lead to policies that constrain and punish youth, especially youth who are already marginalized.

Gallagher's research with youth in urban settings in Canada and the United States shows that fear and alarm about youth has created an ever-present anticipation of risk in schools that has resulted in "increased surveillance, security-guard presence, and vigilance" (p. 31).

### **The Focus of This Research**

In my doctoral research, I explored the factors that enable or empower girls to construct resilient identities that move beyond the constraints of the contemporary discourses of girlhood and the challenges of their own life circumstances. In particular, I was interested in

- how girls adopt, resist, rewrite, or refute contemporary dominant discourses of girlhood;
- how girls create new spaces of possibility within and beyond existing discourses; and
- the role that literacy and narrative practices, including engagement with biblical and extra-biblical narratives, play in girls' identity formation.

I am interested in what makes a difference for girls, particularly those who face life challenges: What helps them to develop a sturdy, resilient, and resistant self, capable of withstanding the pressures of adolescence? What role does narrative play in this

process, since the self is itself a narrative construction and engagement with the narrative of others is key to the development of one's sense of self?

As a religious educator, I have a longstanding interest in the role that narrative plays in meaning-making—how people create and express meaning, including the meaning of their own lives, by sharing and interpreting stories within a faith community. The stories we tell mediate between two worlds—the world of the known and expected and the world of the unknown and the surprising (Bruner, 1990). Stories, both mythic and experiential, serve to hold, shape, and express meaning. In liberal Judeo-Christian religious education, stories are engaged metaphorically, interpreted, questioned, and juxtaposed with one another as pedagogical tools to shape and engage meaning (Groome, 1980).

Further study of the narrative structure of human consciousness and autobiographical memory led me to investigate how engagement with fictional and religious narrative shapes and influences identity, particularly for girls in challenging circumstances.

In the pages that follow, I trace a narrative path through the girls' own narratives. I tell my story by weaving together their stories with the theories, thinking, and storytelling of others, including myself. What began as stories ends in story—that is always how it is.

## **Gathering Stories**

In my doctoral research, I set in motion a process of storytelling and reflecting by inviting girls to tell stories of their own experience to one another, to read and listen to other narratives, and to reflect on themes that emerged. I wanted to know how they would

make meaning from this experience. It became evident from the outset that meaning-making was not linear. It was rarely a case of simply sharing a story and identifying what it meant. Meaning was layered, tangled with other stories, and richly metaphorical. Audrey's story illustrates this point well. She described a particular experience, but in her telling she evoked another story. Titanic became a powerful metaphor for girls' experience of self.

Audrey was part of a group of six young teenage girls who met in the third and final year of my doctoral research. In that final year, I also formed a group of adult women and used a similar methodology. Two previous studies, in the two previous years, used literacy and storytelling processes with girls who faced significant life challenges. In each of these studies, I used narrative-based methodologies that drew out participants' own stories and engaged the whole group in reflection on the meanings within the stories.

This dissertation draws together research with four groups of girls and women over a three-year period. In the first year, I conducted a study of digital literacy practices with girls who had experienced significant life challenges or trauma; in the second, I worked with a group of girls who had experienced relational aggression; in the third year, I formed two groups—a group of teenage girls and a group of adult women—to explore the storytelling, selfhood, and narrative that arise out of life challenges or trauma in adolescence. The four groups are described below:

***Group 1 (Digital literacy practices with girls who had experienced significant life challenges or trauma): Ameilia, Maria, Patricia, and Jasmine.***

The participants in Group 1 were in Grade 10 or Grade 11. Ameilia, Maria, Patricia, and Jasmine had each faced significant life challenges related to one or more factors including economic hardship; disrupted social or family circumstances; mental

health issues; abuse; or trauma. The girls had differing racialized, class, cultural, social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. They were Caribbean-black, white, Hispanic, Muslim, and Christian—some from economically privileged backgrounds and some living in lower-income situations; family configurations varied including one parent, two parents, and same-sex parents.

Group sessions took place over a 10-week period. Each participant completed a two-page questionnaire at the beginning of the study to identify her own personal narrative practices and experiences with e-literature. I interviewed each participant individually at the start of the study to determine her attitudes to and experience with literature in general and e-literature in particular. I also asked the girls to tell me something about themselves. Individual interviews with all participants at the end of the study inquired about their experiences with the digital literacy practices we had used and explored themes that the girls identified in their narratives. Interviews were semi-structured and took place in the participants' homes.

The group met seven times for a total of 16 hours. There were five structured sessions of approximately 2.5 hours each and two informal breakfasts, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study. For the group sessions, I arranged a circle of comfortable chairs around a central table that held the digital recorder and snacks. I invited the girls to talk about the events of their week, how they were, or what was new. We then moved to a time of reading or creating with a particular digital literacy format. I introduced the process, helped the girls begin working (if the format was unfamiliar), and gave verbal instructions for an open-ended task. For example, "Browse this site and read one of the hypertext stories that appeals to you" or "set up a personal blog on this site."

I began the study by asking the girls to read *Gathering Blue*, a young-adult dystopian novel (Lowry, 2000). The girls were introduced to e-literature by reading short pieces online. I then introduced a longer piece—*Patchwork Girl* (Jackson, 1995).<sup>3</sup> The girls were invited to respond to the experience and to talk about the ideas that emerged. We also listened to excerpts from the novel *Frankenstein* and compared Shelley's text with some of the passages in *Patchwork Girl*.

We used a literary response process (Luce-Kapler, 2004) to respond to digital literacy pieces. The responses included group discussion; online collective responses through wiki writing (open software for web page creation); and individual responses through writing in hypertext using blogs—online journals using the website LiveJournal<sup>4</sup> (Live Journal, 1999)—and Storyspace<sup>5</sup> (Eastgate Systems) the computer program in which *Patchwork Girl* is written. The girls were invited to continue reading or working on hypertext projects at home. However, most of their work took place during group sessions.

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson's 1995 novel, *Patchwork Girl*, uses a central character of the same name. She is a female version of the monster created by Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel. Patchwork Girl is stitched together from various body parts that her creator gathered from a graveyard.

<sup>4</sup> LiveJournal.com is a site that relies on income from users and advertisers to pay for servers and bandwidth to support the site. The LiveJournal code remains free, and LiveJournal uses open source software. Users can create a blog (small personalized website) on which they can post journal entries, graphics, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Storyspace is a hypertext writing environment in which users can easily link, revise, and reorganize texts without having to know hypertext coding.

We alternated between working individually on tasks and gathering to share impressions. Throughout this study, I observed how girls used different e-literacy technologies such as reading hypertext novels, wiki writing and blogs to create self-narratives. Sessions were informal—I moved around among the computers we were using, helping girls navigate unfamiliar programs or talking with them one-on-one. In one session, we moved from computer to computer as each of the girls showed and read aloud from a hypertext piece she had created.

Data sources for this study included initial questionnaires, audio recordings, field notes, and the girls' Storyspace (hypertext) writing and blogs (on-line web journals). Audio recordings were made and transcribed for each group discussion and of all individual interviews.

***Group 2 (Experiences of social exclusion and bullying with girls age 14-16): Keylie, Natasha, Laila, and Serena***

For this study, I recruited girls who had experienced social bullying, ostracism, or other forms of what is now coming to be termed *relational aggression*. Keylie, Natasha, Laila, and Serena were in Grades 8 to 11 at the time of the study and ranged in age from 14 to 16. They were American-Asian, African-Canadian, and white and had different family, social, and economic backgrounds. The girls had all been active members of a youth group in their home congregations.

Drawing on Baker's (2005) process of *Girlfriend Theology*, I invited participants to write a story about an experience of inclusion or exclusion, to share their story with others in the group, and to reflect on these stories with my help as group facilitator. We began with group gatherings at which each girl read aloud the story she had prepared while the others listened. I invited others in the group to share responses, reactions, and

points of connection to the story they had heard. Then, we worked collectively to identify theological themes and connections with biblical stories and with experiences within the girls' faith traditions and practices.

Group members listened and reflected on several biblical narratives about girls and women including the story of Hagar (Gen 16), the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11), and two parallel stories about daughters and concubines (Gen 19: 1-11; Judg 19).

The group met four times over a five-week period. After our group sessions ended, I conducted an individual follow-up interview with each girl. Using a semi-structured protocol, I asked the girls to tell me more about themselves and their experience, and to describe what it had been like for them to tell their story in the group. I also encouraged them to share any additional thoughts or insights about the stories the other girls had shared and the discussion that had taken place in the group.

Sessions and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data from this study included transcripts of group sessions and individual interviews as well as the stories that the girls wrote.

***Group 3 (Storytelling, selfhood, and narrative with girls in challenging circumstances):  
Audrey, Beth, Gabrielle, Laila, Maria, Zoe, and Marta***

Participants in this group had experienced significant life challenges including poverty, childhood abuse, adoption as an older child, being a refugee, family addiction, and bullying. Audrey, Beth, Gabrielle, Zoe, and Laila were in Grade 8 or Grade 9 at the time of the study. Laila had participated in the study one year previously as a member of Group 2. I also invited two older teenagers to be part of this group: Maria, a young woman who had been part of a research study two years earlier, and whom I now involved as a research collaborator, and Marta, who participated in the weekend session.



I deliberately chose participants from differing racial, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Their ethnic/cultural backgrounds included African-Canadian, Hispanic, Palestinian, European-Canadian, Christian, Muslim, and Aboriginal. Family configurations varied including one parent, two parent, and transgender or same-sex parents.

The girls' group met five times over a four-month period, including one weekend event. The weekend included social/recreational time as well as shared meal preparation and cleanup, in addition to the more structured sessions. Most sessions were 2-3 hours long. The total session time was 14.5 hours, not including social and informal time during the weekend event.

I used a process adapted from Baker's (2005) methodology, which she calls "girlfriend theology," combined with a literary response process developed by Luce-Kapler (1999, 2004). Participants were asked to prepare and share stories from their own experiences, reflect on the stories in the group, and identify issues of identity and girlhood. The group members also heard and responded to other narratives related to identity and girlhood.

Group members were all given a notebook that was used for writing activities and journaling, and also as a scrapbook to collect items such as art that they made.

I used a variety of writing prompts and other art-based activities to elicit writing, storytelling, and reflection. These activities included: creating "self-portraits" from a variety of art materials; making "hands" by drawing around, cutting out, and decorating paper hands; a button exercise in which the group selected buttons and created a character to write about; responding to one another's stories with watercolour painting; a carrot exercise in which participants chose a carrot and identified ways in which the character

was like them; a picture selection activity—choosing a picture as representative of one’s experience as a girl; and letter writing to oneself. Art supplies were always available and the girls often doodled or created art pieces during group sessions.

We read from a selection of narratives. Participants each read or listened to the novel *So Much to Tell You* (Marsden, 1987). I read aloud from the children’s picture books: *Please Is a Good Word to Say* (Josse & Plecas, 2007), *Sticks and Stones* (Dubé & Joli, 1995), *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka & Smith, 2003), *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Trivizas & Oxenbury, 1994). We listened to an audio recording of selections from the teen novel *Away Laughing on a Fast Camel* (Rennison, 2006) and selections from the biblical narratives about girls and women that were used in Group 2—the story of Hagar (Gen 16), the story of Jephthah’s daughter (Judg 11), and two parallel stories about daughters and concubines (Gen 19: 1-11; Judg 19).

I interviewed all the participants individually before and after the series of group sessions. Many of the interviews were quite lengthy, some as long as 3 hours. Although I had an initial protocol for the interviews, I let the conversation follow where it led. I audio-recorded the interviews and group sessions and transcribed the recordings into print. I also collected participants’ writing and their journals and photographed any artwork they created.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Journals and artwork were returned to participants at the end of the study, after I made copies.

***Group 4 (Storytelling, selfhood, and narrative with women who had experienced significant life challenges or trauma as adolescents): Deborah, Jordan, Mikka, and Sahira.***

Participants in this group were adult women ranging in age from 24 to 69. They were white, Caribbean-black-Canadian, Asian, and African-European. Their religious backgrounds were Christian and Hindu. They had experienced a range of circumstances and difficulties in adolescence that included living in poverty; experiences as an immigrant; family conflict or breakdown; death of a close family member; and bullying. The women were all active members of the same Christian faith community. The women had different occupations. One was retired, one was a full-time care-giver and homemaker, and two were employed full-time outside the home.

The women's group met five times in sessions 2-4 hours long, for a total of 15.5 hours. The process I used was similar to the process used for the girls' Group 3, with the following differences.

The women's group had more in-group writing exercises and these were typically longer than those used in the girls' group.

Writing prompts and other art-based activities included: a button exercise in which the individuals selected buttons and created a character about which they wrote; choosing a picture as representative of one's experience as a girl; letter writing to oneself; responding to letters written by girls in Group 3 (identifying information was removed from the girls' letters and the letters were not retained by the women); written responses to short writing selections from literary narratives. We read from a selection of narratives. Participants each read the novel *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (O'Neill, 2006). I read aloud selections from *For the Time Being* (Dillard, 1999) and *An American Childhood*

(Dillard, 1987). We listened to an audio recording of selections from the teen novel *Away Laughing on a Fast Camel* (Rennison, 2006) and selections from the same biblical narratives about girls and women (see Groups 2 and 3, above).

As with the previous groups, all participants were interviewed before and after the series of group sessions; all sessions and interviews were recorded and transcribed; and data included participant writing, journals, and artwork.

### **Process for Selecting Stories to Include in the Dissertation**

I began the process of data analysis with a methodology I adapted from Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) and K. Oliver (1998). I spent many hours immersed in the transcripts, re-reading and listening to the narratives and conversations and reviewing notes and participant writing, drawings, or other art creations. I liken this experience to an experience of immersion in a second language—the way I found myself suddenly and surprisingly beginning to dream in French when I was first learning it. I thought, breathed, listened, and lived with the data until I began to dream in them. Only then did I decide which stories and which research participants to include in this dissertation.

It was not possible to present *all* my data or all the stories created by girls and women in the research groups. Thus, not all girls' stories and not all the participants are described in depth in this dissertation. However, I wanted to include as broad a representation of stories and participants as possible and to cover the full range of issues that were raised in the groups. In the end, I have included 13 stories that I felt best represented the overall data. In presenting these stories, I have situated them in the context out of which they emerged—the experience and situation of the girl whose story it was—and the context of the group in which it was presented, including the

conversation it elicited. When I had to choose between stories that addressed similar themes, issues, or experiences, I opted for stories I found to be more vivid and compelling—ones I felt were more likely to draw the reader or listener into the experience of the storyteller.

In this dissertation, I have included 13 stories by 12 participants. I introduce the participants later (see Chapter 2, “Resilience”), but I list them briefly here.

1. Ameilia—Participant in Group 1 (digital literacy, girls); Narratives used in dissertation, “The House Where I Will Live” and “Oh No Shipwreck”
2. Audrey—Participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “Titanic”
3. Beth—Participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “Swimming the Wave”
4. Deborah—Participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women); Narrative used in dissertation, “Denton’s Hill”
5. Gabrielle—Participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls), Narrative used in dissertation, “Sleepover with Daphne”
6. Jordan—Participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women); Narrative used in dissertation, “Lunch Hour”
7. Laila—Participant in Group 2 (relational aggression, girls) and Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “All the World’s a Stage”
8. Maria—Participant in Group 1 (digital literacy, girls) and Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “The Spanish Hijab”
9. Mikka—Participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women); Narrative used in dissertation, “Broken Teeth”

10. Sahira—Participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women); Narrative used in dissertation, “Hunger”
11. Serena—Participant in Group 2 (relational aggression, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “Science Class”
12. Zoe—Participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls); Narrative used in dissertation, “Me and My Life with Steven”

### **Myself as a Researcher**

In my research groups, I promised that I would not ask my research participants to do anything that I was not willing to do myself. Therefore, I will introduce myself here. I am happily married to my same-sex spouse. My youngest daughter, age 16, spends half her time with us and half her time with her father in an amicable joint-custody arrangement that has been in place since she was 3. I have two older children, both adopted when they were school age, who are now in their mid-20s. I also have two grandchildren, one of whom lived with my partner and me full-time for a year (as a Children’s Aid Society foster child) and spent weekends with us for nearly five years after she returned to the care of her birth mother.

The social categories that have shaped my identity include white/European, Canadian, female, lesbian, middle class (affluent by global standards), university educated (including a graduate degree in theology), Christian, and English-speaking. At 51, I consider myself middle age. The girls in my research groups think of me as old. Soon I will be. I am able bodied, but, as a friend of mine who uses a wheelchair once pointed out, that is only ever a temporary condition.

My interest in research with adolescent girls begins with memories of myself as an awkward and depressed teenager, putting on invisibility in the back of the classroom, facing the gauntlet of school halls, or alone in my bedroom reading novels and writing, persistently writing. It begins with my own adolescent crises and struggles, but it coalesces around my experiences as a parent of teens in crisis.

Sometime in the spring of 1995, I wrote in my journal<sup>7</sup>

*It is 1 a.m. and I do not know where my daughter is. At 11 p.m. she left with a friend, both of them wearing their heavy black eyeliner, black lipstick, and hard smiles. Smoking. Drugs. Truancy. Sex. Theft. Assault. Anger. Her grades have dropped. Her teachers tell me she is hanging out with a bad crowd. The police tell me they know her friends.*

*I have to work tomorrow. At 2 a.m. I lock the door and go to bed; 10 minutes later, I go downstairs and unbolt the door. I sleep fitfully.*

*At 7 a.m. my alarm goes off. My daughter is asleep in her room, her clothes on, her eyeliner smudged. On the wall of her bedroom, in lipstick and black permanent marker she has written, "Fucking homo lesbian slut. You are not my mother." She means me.*

*I do not bother to wake her up for school. I am too tired to fight. I eat buttered toast standing in front of the TV. Karla Homolka has made her bargain; Paul Bernardo is on trial. I learn that Leslie Mahaffy, one of their victims, met Bernardo late at night on the street outside her home. Her parents had locked her out when she did not keep her curfew. My daughter is almost exactly the same age as Leslie Mahaffy was when she was murdered (CBC, 2004).*

*I am consumed by fear.*

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<sup>7</sup> I use this font to reflect the informal, hand-written nature of my journal entries. I have edited journal writing for style, grammar, and punctuation.

Even though I had experienced adolescence first hand, as a parent of adolescents I found myself in a terrain that was utterly foreign. True, there are books on how to deal with such crises and endless advice from endlessly well-meaning professionals, much of it contradictory. I attended workshops on addictions and parenting and adolescence. I consulted helping professionals—social workers, psychologists, adolescent crisis teams, psychiatrists, adoption support groups, as well as other parents. I read anything anyone suggested. In 1994, I threw a parenting book at the wall in a fit of rage. The author was smiling a little too smugly on the back cover and I felt judged, condemned.

There were people who praised me for “being such a saint” (as though caring for my children was somehow altruistic) and others who had lots of advice. And there were friends, relatives, and acquaintances who were going through more or less the same thing.

I remember sitting once in a coffee shop with a friend. We were at the table by the window, soaking in the early April sunshine.

*A server glides by, fills our cups without asking, without interrupting. I listen as my friend Kate tells me the latest about Lucy, her daughter. Lucy was abused as a toddler and adopted by Kate at age three-and-a-half. She now flounders in the pain of being 15. Lucy's anger turns on herself in life-threatening ways and outward at the one who loves her best. Kate tells me of going to Chapters, determined to stay in the bookstore until she had read everything she could, until she knew what to do to help her daughter.*

*“There was nothing there,” she tells me. “There are no books for this.” Tears come to my eyes. I know. That's what the tears mean: I know about ambiguity and complexity and pain. I have watched my own adolescent children and felt that wave of helplessness wash over me. I know what it is like to read every book on the shelf and still know nothing at all. I know what it is like to be the parent of an adolescent in crisis. I know, we both know, there are no maps for this.*



*It is not just a case of there being no map in the sense that no one has made one: There cannot be a map because the very ground is shifting.*

*Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994) was one book I didn't throw across the room or throw away, perhaps because Pipher seemed to understand that what was going on in my house was somehow reflected in the larger fabric of North American consumer society. Pipher didn't explain everything I wanted to know and she offered no solutions, but for me, her book was the beginning of a different kind of knowing—not knowing the answers or finding immediate solutions but beginning to develop an empathetic imagination. Pipher sparked in me an appreciation of difference, of the vast differences between my own mindset and the worldview and experience of my own children, the chasm that separates one consciousness from another; the difference in one's horizons, as hermeneutics has it.

Something in what Pipher (1994) had written helped me to turn from a search for a roadmap to a willingness to follow where the path led. "A path is made by walking," the Buddhists say. Somehow, that path led to this dissertation.

In my research, I was constantly in the process of coming to terms with a culture that was not my own, seeking to "braid the knower with the known" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 101). This dissertation is necessarily based on my own perspective. This is the world of the girl as I have come to understand it. This is, as Van Maanen would agree, an impressionist sketch of what I have experienced. It is an interpretive act, my own body acting as the bridge between the worlds I experienced with these adolescents and you who read this text.

I am in some sense telling a story three ways (Wolf, 1992)—a braid of three strands: I am accountable to the girls and women whose stories I am relating; I am committed to upholding what I name as a feminist commitment (to being about the liberation of women); and I am seeking to find meaning within the stories that I tell.

First, I am trying to maintain truthfulness, which is not the same as understanding my narrative as anything but the story it is. All stories are interpretations; that is a given. However, I am not creating a work of fiction. I am writing the truthfulness of my own experiences in this research—what I have seen and heard, which is to say, what I have come to understand.

Second, I agree with Wolf (1992) that feminist research should be in some way of benefit to women. It should have something to do with breaking silence, giving voice to the voiceless. It should continue the feminist task of naming issues of power and powerlessness, injustice, structural inequity. It should continue to attempt to unmask the false stories that have been told about women and for women and at the expense of women. While there may be no absolute truths in a postmodern era, there are certainly falsehoods. I concur with Wolf that it is also essential that we begin “to construct new, less false stories” (p. 126).

And third, I am taking responsibility not to merely pass on the chaotic and disorderly swirl of data with which I first began the writing task. Not for nothing did I live for months in that primordial sea of unsorted papers and unresolved questions. I am daring to claim some meaning in this sea. I am taking on the responsibility of a researcher—revealing something of the meaning I have found without hiding the contradictions or the instability of this “truth.” I am hoping “to reduce the puzzlement about one or two unfamiliar places” (Wolf, 1992, p. 127).

I am willing to accept that truth is partial and particular, and at the same time I speak about the times when, after peeling back the layers of meaning, I have been momentarily less puzzled, and, briefly, satisfied.

This is the thrice-told tale: committing to women's empowerment, questioning modernism's "eternal truths," and discerning with care in order to disclose what may be disclosed, however partial. I situate myself as a researcher in the framework of feminist research—within a community of practice in which learning emerges from and within the messiness of experience. In such a framework, knowledge is not the property of an individual consciousness; meaning is situated, communal, partial, emergent, and embodied.

*I dreamed about my research last night. I suppose it is natural that this work would eventually take up residence in my nights as it has in my days. In my dream I was an actor on a bare stage, alone with my drama coach—Rebecca (my doctoral supervisor). She was critiquing my performance, trying to get me to act the part of a young girl who was immersed in pain. She demonstrated for me and I practiced walking, following her lead. Robed in black, head bowed, I walked but still I could not get it right. I paused to breathe deeply, feeling my way into my role and letting the soul of the character inhabit me, the consciousness of this girl whose part I was playing. I felt myself sink into the inky black—it was that underwater feeling when your lungs are empty and consciousness is slowly replaced by the total darkness of unconsciousness. I felt that once, long ago, though I was not dreaming and I really did feel myself slip from life into somewhere else. It was like that in my dream, an experience of drowning.*

I am becoming aware of how much my own experience is intertwined with the experiences of the participants in my research. This is not an individual, isolated

experience and I am not removed by some objective researcher's distance from the stories I am hearing. Is that what this dissertation process is? Is it possible to let go of sense of self-consciousness, to enter deeply into the world of another (or let her world inhabit mine), the way a novelist or a poet might?

She walks in beauty...

## CHAPTER 2: RESILIENCE

*The notion of resilience is fundamental to this research and yet the concept is illusive, paradoxical. Traditional definitions are competing; they often seem to be circular, with factors that promote resiliency becoming merged with characteristics that define it. Resilience is that which is life sustaining and also it is survival through life's difficulty, that is, it is life itself. Thus, I have come to think of resilience as a something that can be recognized but not fully defined; resilience is known only through story.*

### **The House Where I Will Live, by Ameilia**

And this is my house—I want my house to look like this when I am old.

I want real shutters (because what is the point of fake ones); a huge study, the walls lined with book cases, old desks so I can read and write, maps and globes; and hardwood floors with green velvet rugs and curtains; pink walls on the top with wainscoting with zebra print wall paper on the bottom.

And a big old fashioned costume trunk with silver jewellery and blue taffeta prom dresses from the '50s. A '65 pink Ford Thunderbird, a '50s style diner kitchen, black and white checker floors, red vinyl booths, and tin wall ornaments with vintage ads for Coca Cola and cigarettes.

A wooden veranda wrapping around my whole house where I can sit and paint and listen to music. Purple shingles, vines growing up the side of my house, and a big garden with purple forget-me-nots, winding sunflowers, petunias, tulips, and a cherry tree too.

This is where I will live when I am old.

(Ameilia, age 15, from her blog).

*Figure 1: Ameilia's House*



I still browse Ameilia's blogs and web pages. Even though it is three years since she was a participant in my research, always in the back of my mind is a need to know she is still alive. The picture of the painted house is no longer on her blog, but there are still marks of her vibrancy, her humour, her creativity, her irrepressible spirit, her gift with words. I breathe with relief at these signs of resilience—the resilience that she showed three years ago when she was a participant in my first pilot study of narrative practices with adolescent girls. I described the research participants in that study as “girls in challenging circumstances.”

This was a vast understatement. It was an attempt to avoid the “at risk” label that schools use for girls whose lives have been profoundly disrupted by trauma, abuse, catastrophe, or difficulty.

When Ameilia was 15, her only sister was killed in a car accident that left Ameilia with a broken ankle and a shattered world. Her life, already challenged by family and economic circumstances, was forever altered. Yet a mere seven months after the accident, Ameilia was able to write about inhabiting a house and a future filled with creativity, humour, colour, and life. She wrote about building a house of cardboard and paint. She continues, as far as I can tell, to build a future filled with life and possibility.

*Resilience.* I write the word with no clear sense of what it means. When I look at Ameilia's blog, I am looking for something more than merely physical existence. I am looking to see if her life remains more or less intact. To say she is resilient is to imply that she has survived the ravages of a more than ordinary storm with something more than her skin and bones intact, yet I know there have been some lasting scars. A storm strong enough to warrant the claim of resilience must inflict some serious damage and indeed, Ameilia lost too much to escape unscathed. In the car accident, she lost her sister, who

was also her closest friend; her grandmother, who was probably the most reliable adult in her life; to some extent she also lost her parents, who became so consumed by their loss they could not fully support their surviving daughter in her grief; and she lost most of her friends, who were unable or unwilling to follow her into pain and disorientation. These are irreplaceable losses and when Ameilia says of the accident that “my life changed completely after that” she is saying that her sense of identity was fundamentally altered. I believe that she will continue to heal to some greater or lesser extent but she will never recover her former self. For Ameilia, the accident will always be a marker in time: There was before and there is after.

### **The paradox of resilience**

*I lie on a bed of soft needles at the base of the tree, looking up through dark branches to snatches of blue sky. At almost 30 metres to its crown, this white spruce is the tallest tree on the property. The brisk north wind off the lake assails it, as it has for 200 years or more. Mr. Lapointe comes over to my place from time to time to give me advice. It was he who estimated the height of the spruce and its age. Mr. Lapointe has lived on this lake and off the land around it for over 70 years, as did his father and his grandfather before him. He seems to have taken my city-slicker self under his wing. The last time he stopped by it was to tell me about a couple of trees that are likely to fall during the winter. The most vulnerable trees are the balsams, he explained; they grow fast but have a shallow root system and are easily toppled by fierce winter storms. The white spruce bends but does not break; he tells me that it will probably live for another 100 years. Resilience.*

In psychological terms, resilience is the human capacity to withstand life's contingencies, to respond with resourcefulness and flexibility to the buffeting of fate, to

overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Grotberg, 1995; Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000).

The resilient person adapts to adversity and copes with catastrophe, becoming a survivor, not a victim. Though abused, deprived, or traumatized, those who are considered resilient do not dwell long in dependence, poverty, violence, hopelessness, crime, or madness. If you suffer challenges as a child and somehow end up mentally and physically healthy, that's resilience. Drug free, not pregnant by 16, gainfully employed, more or less educated, not too desperate or desperately poor, not totally deranged—therefore, resilient (Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000).

That's it, more or less, although the measures and indicators differ. Some researchers define resilience as the *absence* of problems such as difficulties in school, unlawful or dangerous activities, mental illness, or substance abuse (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996). Some include teen pregnancy in this list; others don't. A number of different factors are associated with resilience: IQ and problem-solving skills; gender (boys are sometimes considered less resilient); attachments and interests outside family; early temperament and behaviour (e.g., not considered a "difficult toddler"); quality of peer relations. But defining resilience precisely remains a problem. If resilience is defined in terms of absence of criminality and encounters with the law, girls would tend to show up as more resilient because boys in general are more likely to demonstrate such behaviour. However, if another gender-specific indicator such as teen pregnancy or experience of violence in intimate relationships were to be used, it could be argued that girls are less resilient than boys (Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000).

As Grotberg (1995) observes, researchers have identified a number of specific factors that determine how well a child will respond to life challenges—factors such as



trusting relationships, emotional support outside the family, self-esteem, encouragement of autonomy, hope, responsible risk taking, a sense of being lovable, school achievement, belief in God and morality, and unconditional love for someone—the role and interrelation of these factors is poorly understood. It is also unclear which of these are indeed *causal* in nature (that is, factors that increase or promote resilience), which are *signs or indication* of resilience, and which are factors that *shelter* the child from the brunt of the storm.

While researchers generally agree that genetic makeup and temperament are fundamental to whether or not a child will be resilient, factors some theorists cite, such as a strong bond with a family member, are much more ambiguous. It could be argued that the absence of a strong bond with any family member is an indication of the severity of the stresses and challenges facing the child rather than an indication of resilience. Definitions of resilience and the factors that promote it seem strangely circular. For some, the strength and support of one's family or other reliable adults is a factor promoting resilience in the face of catastrophe (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996) but others define it as an indication of resilience, a sign that the child is able to form positive and supportive relationships (Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000). Family support could also be a buffering or shielding from harm—an indication that the catastrophe hits the child less severely rather than that the child is more resilient. The same is true of such things as physical and mental health, addiction, positive peer relationships, and school performance. Is a positive attitude to school a factor promoting resilience (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996) or an indication of resilience itself (Grotberg, 1995)? Is teen pregnancy a way to survive (and indications are that teen parents often do as well as their peers in the long term) or a sign that someone has failed? Is the resilient girl the one who survives the

harshest catastrophe with the least damage or the one who manages to avoid the full force of the hurricane?

The concept of resilience necessarily implies both survival and storm. And with storm come breaks and ruptures in the sense of self. Thus, resilience lies somewhere in-between complete loss of self and a self that remains completely unharmed. But that is unsatisfactorily vague.

Only marginally more precise is a definition of resilience as “normal development under difficult conditions” (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Higgitt, & Target, 1994, p. 234). But what of the girl who, though a parent before she is 17, manages to complete her education, get a job, and raise her child with love and good sense? Is this normal development? Statistically speaking it is probably not, but one might still want to count such a young person ultimately resilient. What of the girl who does all this, or more, but still bears deep scars—a greater than average fearfulness, or difficulties in relationships with men, or occasional bouts of depression? What of the teen addict who gets her act together in her thirties, the abused girl who marries a violent man but manages to escape with her baby in her arms, the successful professional who still breaks down and cries? Is this too a kind of resilience? It is trite to say, but we all bear scars. All of us make some poor choices, weave our dysfunctions into our relations, and break down sometimes to some degree. How resilient must resilient be for it to count? How could one measure the strength of a girl or a woman or calibrate the force of the storm she has endured?

Developmental psychology constructs childhood as a state of becoming something rather than a state of being (Kehily, 2004; Kehily & Montgomery, 2004). Children and adolescents are viewed as being in transition to some future state rather than living in present reality. Seeing them only as future adults, it becomes difficult to see children and

adolescents as persons in their own right. Also, our society's preoccupation with seeing children and youth in negative circumstances (Kehily & Montgomery, 2004) means that resilience is usually defined as a future outcome in relation to a past event—children are resilient if they eventually grow up to be happy and healthy adolescents or adults despite having faced difficulties as children. Resilience is rarely defined as an attribute for and in the present moment.

Researchers Alden (2002) and Shaw (2003) problematize traditional notions of resiliency as applied to female adolescents who are typically regarded as at risk. Alden notes that much of the literature assumes success in academic settings as a necessary characteristic of resilience. However, her findings suggest that there are other important characteristics that are signs of resilience. Resistant actions and attitudes such as a strong and assertive sense of self, anger, or rebelliousness could promote personal survival and well-being in difficult circumstances but might conflict with the conformity and compliance required for school success. Shaw notes other characteristics of resilience such as “fortitude to survive amidst danger, wisdom to create ways to survive, hopefulness demonstrated by an insatiable desire for survival” that do not necessarily result in academic achievement (Shaw, 2003, p. 10).

Who, then, is the resilient girl? What do I mean and how would I know?

These are not idle questions. The interest that prompted this research is in understanding how storytelling and other narrative practices empower girls to construct resilient identities—identities that move beyond the constraints of the contemporary discourses of girlhood and the challenges of their own life circumstances. I need to pin down a notion of what resilience is. But definitions elude me. All I know are stories.

## Twelve girls and women

This dissertation presents stories of girls and women who have suffered enormous challenges as adolescents and seem, somehow, to have survived. Some of them are still young; some of them are older. I cannot quantify their pain, though I know it is of varying degrees, any more than I can calibrate their courage. I know only what I have witnessed, filtered through the lens of my own consciousness. They are funny, brave, sorrowful, playful, wise, and wonderful girls and women whose stories have touched me and whose living inspires me. As I share their stories, I seek to tell you a little of what I think I know. But for now, I will simply describe the bare facts of their lives. I am too afflicted by postmodernism to claim these facts are all they are. Later, I will introduce them properly.<sup>8</sup>

### *Ameilia, participant in Group 1 (digital literacy, girls)*

Ameilia was 16 and in Grade 11 when she joined my research. She was Canadian, of European origin. She was living with both parents. Although she was above average intelligence, she had been struggling in school the previous year. Even before she was in a car accident in which her sister and maternal grandmother were killed, Ameilia's family circumstances were difficult—one parent had been recently treated for anorexia and the other had a history of addiction. The family was living at or slightly below the poverty line, based on Statistics Canada's 2005 figures (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006), and neither of her parents was employed outside the home at the time of the study.

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<sup>8</sup> All names are pseudonyms and identifying information has been changed or removed.

***Audrey, Participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Audrey was 15 and in Grade 10 when she participated in the third year of my research. Her parents were both highly educated professionals, working full-time outside the home. She was an only child. Although Audrey had not experienced a major life disruption, she was socially ostracized and a target of relational aggression in middle school. This experience, combined with her extreme shyness, left her cautious and vulnerable in social settings. She felt that her achievements in school and life did not measure up to her parents' high expectations for her. She was Canadian, of European origin.

***Beth, participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Beth was 15 and just finishing Grade 8 when the study began. She has a minor learning disability but was functioning well in school. Her mother had recently married, and Beth was living with her mother, a new stepfather, and a newly acquired stepsister (with whom she had been friends prior to their parents' marriage). She saw her father about once a week, although she had never lived with him, and described their relationship as "more of a friendship thing" than parental. She was Canadian, of European origin.

***Deborah, participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women)***

Deborah was 68 years old when she joined the women's group that was part of the final year of my research. She was married—a second marriage. Her first husband had died young leaving her to raise their three young adopted and foster-care children on her own.

Deborah had recently retired from work as a hospital chaplain, a career she took up in her mid-forties. At the time of the study, she was receiving treatment for cancer.

Deborah was born and raised in southern Asia, the child of Asian parents of European descent. The oldest daughter of an alcoholic mother, Deborah had been responsible for running the dairy operation on the family's large farm and taking care of her younger sisters from the time she was a young teen. When Deborah was 18, her parents sold the farm and immigrated to Canada along with her two younger sisters. Deborah went to England to take secretarial training and moved to Canada when she was 19 to work as a secretary.

***Gabrielle, participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Gabrielle was 13 and was finishing Grade 8 when she participated in the final year of my research. She had been adopted into her current family when she was 7. Prior to that, she had been sexually and physically abused over a period of several years before being taken into state care (she had been in several foster homes over a period of several years). In her adoptive family she has four siblings, ranging in age from 2 to 12, two of whom were also adopted. Gabrielle has fetal alcohol syndrome and pronounced attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. She attends school with a program assistant. Her cognitive and academic abilities are uneven—she is functioning four to five grades below her age level in mathematics, reading, and writing, but in other areas she functions within the normal range. She has strong aptitude for music and sports and enjoys these activities. She feels her adoptive parents are too restrictive but at the same time acknowledges that she is “not very mature and could get into lots of trouble” if they did not supervise her closely.

***Jordan, participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women)***

Jordan was 23 when she joined the women's group in the final year of my research. She was employed full-time in a professional position with considerable

opportunity for advancement; a graduate of political science, she felt her career was going well. She is recently married, with no children. Jordan describes her adolescence as “mostly OK.” She is still close to her parents and her younger siblings. She experienced harassment and social aggression from peers in Grades 7 to 9 and has no contact with her former friends from that time. She started dating her first boyfriend when she was 13, much against her parents’ wishes. A big issue during her teen years, apart from conflicts over her boyfriend, was her mother’s mental illness. Her mother recovered from a mental breakdown but was never able to resume employment outside the home.

***Laila, participant in Group 2 (relational aggression, girls) and Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Laila was 14 and in Grade 8 when she first participated in my research. A year later, by which time she had almost finished Grade 9 and had just turned 15, she participated in the final year of my research. She is Canadian. Her father, who was African, immigrated to Canada as a young adult, and her mother was of European descent.

Laila, her parents, and her younger sister, lived in Africa for three years when she was age 6 to 10. When her family returned to Canada she had considerable difficulty in school—she was ostracized, bullied, and tormented by peers for several years. The change of schools in Grade 9 had helped Laila considerably, and she was able to begin to form friendships with peers. However, she still considered herself to be “socially awkward.” Because her father was Hindu and her mother was Christian, the family participated in both church and temple activities. However, Laila’s main affiliation was with a Christian church community.

***Maria, participant in Group 1 (digital literacy, girls) and in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Maria was adopted when she was 18 months old by Canadian parents working in South America. She had experienced significant trauma, including extreme poverty as well as physical and sexual violence prior to her adoption. Over the subsequent years she had continued to struggle with anxiety and a fragmented sense of identity. When she first became involved with my research study, she was 15 and in Grade 11. When she first joined the study, she was in conflict with many of her teachers, failing some subjects, and frequently skipped school. The year before, she had begun to experiment with street drugs and some of her friendship group were involved in gangs. Her relationship with her parents was conflicted. As a visible ethnic minority and as a Muslim, she experienced racism and Islamophobia, as well as the identity issues raised by differences between herself and her adopted parents.

In the third year doctoral study, Maria joined the girls' group as a research collaborator. By that time she was 18 and her life had settled considerably. She was still living at home, had completed high school, and was in her first year at a local university.

***Mikka, participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women)***

Mikka was 43 when she joined the women's research group. Her mother immigrated to Canada from Trinidad before Mikka was born. Mikka and a younger cousin were raised by her mother, a single parent working full-time, in a low-income part of the city. Her cousin died 13 years ago by suicide. Although she considers herself to have grown up in poverty, Mikka felt that her mother was a strong and nurturing parent. When Mikka was 16, her mother became seriously ill and Mikka assumed an adult role in the family; her mother died when Mikka was 21 leaving her "essentially alone in the



world.” Mikka went on to complete a university degree and entered law school. At the beginning of her second year, she suffered a serious mental breakdown and was hospitalized for six months. When she recovered, she completed her law degree and a master’s degree in law. She worked full-time for several years. She is married to a business executive and is not employed outside the home, a choice she made so that she can care full-time for their two young children.

***Sahira, participant in Group 4 (narrative and identity, adult women)***

Sahira was a participant in the women’s group, in the third year of my research. At 47, Sahira is divorced and living with a teenage son who is autistic. Sahira was the oldest of five children (of whom four survive) born in Canada to Caribbean parents. Her mother was a practicing Hindu but her father converted to Christianity as a young man. Both her parents were well educated professionals who had moved into a predominantly white, middle-income part of the city when Sahira was 8 years old. Although her family returned to the Caribbean for three years when Sahira was 10, she has lived most of her life in Canada. She is a high school French teacher. At the time of the study, Sahira was having a difficult time. A week after the group commenced, her father died of complications from diabetes. Eight months earlier, her younger sister had died by suicide.

***Serena, participant in Group 2 (relational aggression, girls)***

Serena was 15 and in Grade 9 when I first interviewed her for the second year study. She was living with her mother full-time; her parents had separated some years earlier and increasing conflict with her father led to her decision to live full-time with her mother. From Grades 5 to 7 she was the target of serious social aggression, including a false accusation that she had brought a weapon to school. This accusation led to her expulsion from school and difficulty getting into Grade 9. (The weapon had been planted

in her locker; although the police, teachers, and her principal all believed she was innocent, and charges were never laid, the “zero tolerance” policies of the board meant that the accusation remained on her school record). She was being treated for clinical depression at the time of the study. She was Canadian, of European origin.

***Zoe, participant in Group 3 (narrative and identity, girls)***

Zoe was 14 years old and in Grade 9 when she participated in the final year of my research. Both her mother and her mother’s same-sex transgender partner were recently recovering drug addicts. They lived in a low-income, government-supported housing complex in part of the city renowned for high levels of substance abuse and crime. Zoe’s mother had lost custody of her two children when Zoe was 7, at which time Zoe and her brother went to live full-time with her brother’s father—a stepfather with whom she had no biological relationship. Zoe described her stepfather as physically and mentally abusive. When she was 13, Zoe fought for the right to live full-time with her mother and her mother’s partner, which she now does. Although there is some conflict in her relationship with her mother, and Zoe is frequently “grounded,” Zoe is happy about her decision. She is an average student but sometimes engages in risky behaviour, particularly in her choice of friends and social activities. She is of European and Canadian-Aboriginal descent.

## CHAPTER 3: IN PARABLES

*The work of Crossan, and other biblical scholars who understand the parables of the Jesus tradition as complex and metaphorical stories pointing to the kingdom of God, became a significant theoretical framework for my work. As I reviewed this body of literature on parables, I identified 11 characteristics of the parable that were helpful tools to listen to girls' stories and to begin to interpret them. These 11 characteristics I have termed participation, difficulty, metaphor, fractal, truth, emergence, performance, possibility, power, wisdom, and spirituality.*

*I have spent several days rearranging data on flipchart paper, testing out the fine felt tips of my new markers as I struggle with various configurations. The 12 stories I have chosen to include seem to resist categorization. As soon as I place a story under one heading, it claims space under all the others. My multicoloured Venn diagrams collapse into a single blob; everything contains everything else. I peer into a story as into a pool of light. All that I want to say is there, every facet of a girl's life, of all girls' lives. In these worlds within worlds, the interior is larger than the space outside. I love these stories, so rich with metaphor and meaning. But today they torment me.*

*Other researchers seem to be able to group their data tidily, under headings and subheadings. Why are these stories so stubborn? I lean back in my chair and let my eyes wander to the bookcase. I pull from the shelf a book I have not opened in over 30 years—*In Parables*, by John Dominic Crossan.*

### Turning to Parables

In his book, *In Parables*, Crossan (1973) expounds a particular understanding of the nature of the parables Jesus told. Crossan's scholarship is based on the premise that a clear understanding of the characteristics of Jesus' style of parable can help scholars distinguish the authentic words of Jesus from other layers of tradition that appear in the

Bible<sup>9</sup>. Crossan (1973) notes that the first century Palestinian rabbis used parables extensively as teaching devices to illustrate a point of law or clarify an interpretation of scripture. Such parables, says Crossan, were “didactic stories poised somewhere between example and allegory but inevitably linked to the problem of life or text in a specific and precise fashion” (p. 20). These rabbinic stories were useful for teaching purposes, but they were expendable in the sense that the principle being elucidated could be, and typically was, expressed in a more direct form outside of the story. This kind of parable expounds, exemplifies, or reinforces a teaching moment but is not, in itself, the main message. Crossan does not denigrate the rabbinic teaching, which he holds in high regard. However, he claims that the parables that originated with Jesus himself are different from other parables of the same period, both in their form and their purpose. The parables Crossan points to as Jesus’ own compositions have a way of revealing things that cannot be expressed in a simpler form. Jesus uses story the way a poet uses metaphorical language, Crossan says, not as ornament or illustration, but as the *only* way to speak.

Crossan (1973) says that Jesus’ parables, like poetic metaphor, cannot be reduced to simple interpretation. While I remain sceptical about the possibility of being able to discern the *authentic* parables of Jesus from other parables attributed to him in the Christian scriptures, I agree with Crossan that some of the parables in the Christian scriptures have distinctive characteristics that set them apart from others. I find helpful Crossan’s observation that some parables are like poetic metaphors, while others are more

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Gospels contain fragments of the teachings of the early church, the perspectives and editorializing of those who compiled the gospels, and stories and sayings from other sources as well as material that may have come from Jesus and his immediate community.

like allegories or illustrations<sup>10</sup>. In my research, thinking of the parable as poetic metaphor has become important as a way to hear and understand the girls' stories and to think about how girls create meanings and selves by hearing and telling stories.

As I began to listen to the girls' stories in the same way I had learned from Crossan how to listen to certain kinds of biblical parables, I became convinced that the stories of the girls in my research group shared many of the qualities of the parable-as-poetic-metaphor that Crossan and others describe. While recognizing that there are many kinds of parables both within and outside of the Bible, from this point forward, I frequently use only the word *parable* to refer to parables that Crossan and others consider to be parables of Jesus, the ones situated in the realm of poetic metaphor.

### **Eleven characteristics of Jesus' parables**

As I reviewed the literature on parables by Crossan and others who have a similar perspective on parables, I noticed certain qualities or aspects of Jesus' parables that seemed particularly relevant to my research. While not an exhaustive list, each of these 11 characteristics has helped me to hear the girls' stories and to move with them into a deeper and richer understanding of girls, girlhood, and resilience. They are

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<sup>10</sup> I do not claim, as Crossan does, that so-called parables of Jesus are necessarily the work of a single historical figure called Jesus of Nazareth. Individual biblical writers or groups of writers often used distinct literary forms as patterns for their writing. The epistles and psalms for example, had many authors. The same may be true of the form of parable Jesus is said to have told—that it is a literary genre rather than the work of a single individual.

*Participation.* Parables are participatory. Meanings are enacted in a relationship between listener and storyteller. The parable acts as a portal, inducting the listener into participation in the worldview of the storyteller.

*Difficulty.* Parables do not make life seem simpler or more resolvable than it is. They meet life in its essential difficulty.

*Metaphor.* Parables, like poetic metaphors, are irreducible. Rather than the story illustrating a concept, the story is itself integral to its meaning, the way the meaning of a poem requires the poetic metaphor.

*Fractal.* Parables are fractal; a single parable has a scale independence that replicates the patterns of a larger world of meaning.

*Truth.* Parables cannot be read literally; they point to meanings and significance beyond themselves but cannot be reduced to a singular truth or univocal interpretation.

*Emergence.* Because parables exist within an oral tradition, they are emergent iterations: always changing with each retelling.

*Performance.* Parables are a performance art, not a static representation. They are the performance of self, the self of the storyteller.

*Possibility.* As with other artistic practice, parables create spaces of possibility for the storyteller and his or her world. They open up subjunctive spaces, creating possible worlds.

*Power.* Parables challenge authority; they contest and disrupt the givens of power.

*Wisdom.* Parables are part of the wisdom tradition of the Bible—they are embodied wisdom.

*Beauty.* The parable has a quality of transcendent beauty that does not bear the listener out of this world but more deeply *into* it.

As I describe each of these characteristics in more detail, I identify how each became a lens through which I began to hear and interpret personal narrative. Later, I explain how the stories of girls that I have chosen to present in this dissertation can be heard and understood within a parabolic frame.

### *Participation*

Some stories are told to teach; they employ a didactic mode that creates a dyad of student and teacher—a speaker and a listener, one active and the other passive. This kind of parable creates distance between the storyteller and audience—between the agency of the teacher and the receptivity of the listeners. Jesus’ parables, on the other hand, served to draw listeners into the life, feelings, and experiences of the storyteller. They invited participation in a shared event—the storytelling moment—and led to mutual understanding. According to Crossan (1973), this kind of parable creates participation and engagement. Those who hear the story find that they are taken up by and taken into the world of the parable.

The fact that parables were enacted before a live audience at a particular moment in time obviously helps draw listener and storyteller closer together. But there is another way that parables invite participation. Crossan (1973) suggests that the parables of Jesus point to a way of understanding that is so new, so radical, and so strange that it can only be grasped within the metaphor itself. The hearer cannot gain any information from the metaphor until he or she has, as it were, entered into the metaphor and experienced it from the inside. From the outside, the parable might sound nonsensical. The writer of Mark’s gospel reflects this notion, suggesting that some are able to hear things from within the framework of the parable, but for those outside, everything seems to be

incomprehensible. “They may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand” (Mk 4:12).

Participation in the worldview of the parable must precede understanding. The function of the parabolic metaphor, Crossan (1973) says, is to enable participation in the metaphor’s referent. He says, “A true metaphor is one whose power creates the participation whereby its truth is experienced” (p. 18). The parable, as poetic metaphor, opens deep communication between the storyteller and the reader or listener.

### *Difficulty*

The parables of the Jesus tradition—the ones that are considered to have originated with Jesus of Galilee—refuse to offer truth in platitudes or simple explanations (Crossan, 1973; Scott, 2001). Jesus’ followers were first century Jewish peasants living in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire. Taxes were high, extracted by local elite who siphoned off a generous portion for themselves. Unemployment may have been upwards of 30 per cent. Life was brutally short: A man’s average life expectancy was less than 30 years and, because death in childbirth was so common, life expectancy for women was considerably shorter. These were people who were living and dying in the shadow of Empire (Brock & Parker, 2008).

A parabolic worldview addresses the difficulty and complexity of life. Jesus’ parables meet life in its essential difficulty. For example, in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20), workers hired late in the day received a full day’s pay—exactly the same amount given to those who started work early in the morning. That seems unfair to those who worked a full day in the hot sun. When the workers complain, the owner explains that no one has been cheated and that he has paid them exactly what they agreed to. The meaning of this parable is ambiguous—some suggest that a parable in which



everyone receives enough to eat points to the kind of radical sharing and inclusivity that marked the early Christian communities, who shared everything in common. Whatever it means, though, it is clear that this parable is neither a simple moral tale about the virtue of showing up early and working hard, nor a suggestion that those who manage to survive in harsh times are the ones who deserve to. In this parable, everyone receives a day's pay—enough to buy food for one day—regardless of what others think they deserve.

The parable does not give easy answers to the struggle to survive in harsh times. It offers no quick fixes, only questions. As McFague (1975) observes, a theology that is grounded in Jesus' parables is necessarily inconclusive and indeterminate. It lives more with open-ended reflections than tidy truths. Such a theology makes people uneasy because it disrupts preconceived notions. The parables in which such a theology is based, she says, insist both that life in this world is difficult and that it is in this world that God is experienced. Parables are difficult for the listener. They are hard to understand, requiring of the audience a tolerance for ambiguity, openness to paradox, and appreciation of metaphor.

To hear girls' stories as parables is to be faced with the essential difficulty of girls' lives—senseless suffering and abuse, dislocations and ruptures, broken promises and shattered truths. Listeners cannot remain impassive or detached, certainly, but they must keep still and listen. They must not offer quick fixes or solutions. Experiencing the layers of meaning and metaphor in girls' self-narratives leads one away from simple answers to girls' problems.

### ***Metaphor***

McFague (1975) says that the genres most closely associated with Jesus' parables are the poem, the novel, and the autobiography—since these genres best illustrate how

parabolic metaphor operates in language, belief, and life. A metaphor is a way of *knowing*, she says, not just a way of telling a story. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same; there is no way *around* the metaphor; it is not expendable.

Crossan (1976) agrees that seeing Jesus' parables as poetic metaphors is fundamentally different from interpreting them as allegory. Following Ricoeur, he observes that allegories can always be translated back into a text that can be understood without use of figurative language, whereas metaphors cannot. Once a textual translation has been made that adequately explains it, the allegory "falls away like a useless garment" (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 163). While one might argue that certain metaphors are not the best fit, or are the wrong ones to use, one cannot dispense with metaphor by simply replacing it with its referent. One can no more tell a parable without poetic metaphor than one could write a poem, a novel, or, as I am discovering, a self-narrative.

To hear a story as parable is to recognize it as a poetic metaphor that somehow bears meaning that requires the story itself. The story becomes both event and interpretation, experience and its meaning. The parable, like poetic metaphor, is never singular or simple; it leads to multiple, inexhaustible possibilities for interpretation.

The artist as artist does not engage in reductionism, making life seem simpler and more resolvable than it is. The central element of parables is complexity—life as paradox. When a story has been completed there must be an irreducible paradox left. This complexity should be visible at any and every level of reading (Crossan, 1976). According to Crossan, the parable does not merely clarify and elucidate some moral point. In fact, it often serves to obfuscate and confuse.

Early on in the research, I noticed a metaphorical quality in the stories of adolescent girls. The stories played with symbols and images and meanings. It was not just that they were rich in the *use* of metaphor but that the stories pointed beyond themselves to something larger and more profound. Like the parables, they were poetic metaphors—literary creations with vision and purpose.

### ***Fractal***

Part of the complexity of parables is the way in which they convey meanings much larger than themselves. Parables have a fractal<sup>11</sup> shape. In a small story, the contours of a much larger whole can be experienced. Jewish rabbis of the 1st to 5th centuries CE talked about parables as a means through which the whole of scripture might be revealed. For example, in the Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah<sup>12</sup> is the following teaching: “Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable, one can master the whole of Torah” (Bacher, 2002).

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<sup>11</sup> The term *fractal* was created by mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot to describe a geometrical form that is similar in all detail except scale—a property called “scale independence” (Davis & Sumara, 2006). An example is the branching and sub-branching of tree branches and twigs. Fractals will be discussed more fully in Chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> The Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah is a collection of rabbinic homilies on the book of Canticles. It is part of the Aggadah (also called *midrash*), which is a collection of commentaries on different books of the Jewish Bible. The books of the Aggadah comprise legends, historical events, moral guidance, practical advice, and other non-legalistic material dating from the second century to the middle ages (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2008).

Parables of the Jesus tradition point to a vision of the “kingdom of God” (e.g., Mk 4:11) not merely by explaining or illustrating it but by enabling those who hear the parable to experience it. The parable is a portal into a different world—a way of kingdom thinking and being. Parables have a capacity to make present the kingdom of God, that is, to create and re-create worlds (Crossan, 1973). I think of the way a hologram uses light to replicate an image as though it is still present in three-dimensional form; similarly, a parable makes present a multidimensional representation of the kingdom of heaven.

Parables have a nested quality: An account of a single experience or event reveals not just the particular context in which that narrative is situated, but the larger social world, and beyond that, it reveals meanings and purposes for life itself.

I found that same fractal quality in the narratives I heard from girls and women. Like Russian dolls, the same in all but their size, the stories were fractal—similar in form, different only in scale. To listen to a girl’s story as a parable is to discover, within a singular experience, the whole of her life and of the world that she inhabits.

### ***Truth***

As Crossan (1973, 1976) observes, the gospels were never intended to be read as factual accounts, nor can they be read as true in every detail. In all the gospel accounts, details have been changed; small snippets of a remembered event have been elaborated. Parables in the gospels can be considered true if they are true to life; that is, their truth value lies not in their literal factuality but in the larger meanings to which they point.

Scott (2001) agrees: “Parables are not autobiographical; they are not real life events. They are fictions told by the storyteller” (p. 5). Parables are stories that ring true, if they do, only from a believer’s point of view. A believer who is immersed in the story may experience a sense of connection to her or his own experiences, longings, and

commitments. Truth may be experienced, but it is relative (in the sense of relational) truth.

I must clarify what I mean by the word *believer*: The verb *to believe* in its Old English ground meant *to hold dear, to love*. To believe in this sense meant the place of one's heart, one's passion, one's faith. Faith, from Latin *fidere*, has a double connotation—both to believe and to trust. Belief is faith is placing one's trust in what one loves. Belief in this sense is not a mental act of ascribing to a set of doctrines or creeds, nor is it the acceptance of some external truth. Rather, it is participation (Brock & Parker, 2008). The believer is a participant in an unfolding story through which truth and meaning are experienced. To say I believe a story—this story—is true is to understand myself as a participant in its unfolding conversation. It is to participate in the world of the storyteller, to place myself where she is.

Some parts of the stories the girls told were certainly not *literally* true. Of course, no life narrative can ever be literally true any more than a painter or photographer can capture a scene perfectly—there is always the omission or addition of detail (depending on the scale), a choice of which elements to include and which to exclude, a decision about what to emphasize and what to ignore. No life story perfectly replicates life. The truth of self-narrative lies not in its literality but in its coherence (Kerby, 1991). A self-narrative is true if it fits, if it makes sense, if it coheres with the meaning of life as it is understood, experienced, and embodied by the storyteller. But sometimes stories stretch even that notion of truth, deliberately distorting the facts. To discern the truth in girls' stories, one must listen with parabolic imagination, not for factual accuracy but for truth as coherence, truth that makes sense of the whole, and truth that points to larger meaning and purpose.

### *Emergence*

It is commonly accepted by biblical scholars that not every saying attributed to Jesus actually originated with him (e.g., Crossan, 1973, 1976; Scott, 2001). The texts in the Christian scriptures come from an oral tradition. There were no recording devices; no one was standing on the hillside taking shorthand through the lengthy sermons that are recorded in the gospels. Even those parables that are short enough and memorable enough to be potentially authentic to Jesus could not have been recounted word for word. Rather, they would have been told and retold as any oral story is, keeping the original structure but put into the storyteller's own words.

Because parables have their origin in an oral tradition, I am suspicious of attempts to get to the "original" words of Jesus behind the written text. Although it may be helpful to distinguish the inflections and nuances of the Gospel redactors,<sup>13</sup> there is most likely not an original parable to be found. To posit that a single *original* exists is to presume that Jesus told each parable once and only once. It is likely that, as an itinerant storyteller, Jesus had an emerging repertoire of stories that he told over and over. Understanding the parables as performance art underscores that each time they are told they are enacted slightly differently.

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<sup>13</sup> Biblical scholars say that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were compiled from prior collections of source material, both written and oral, that included parables, sayings, and narrative accounts. The term *redactor* refers to the person (or people) who compiled and edited the gospels into their current form by stringing together source material and adding bridging, explanatory, or contextual information to stitch together the fragments of the tradition into a single gospel account (Spivey & Smith, 1974).

Some words credited to Jesus are more likely to be proverbs or popular sayings of the day; others are direct quotations from Hebrew scripture. Still others are interpretations, background information, or explanations provided by the gospel writers themselves. The compilers of the gospels used a variety of such narrative devices to knit fragments of oral tradition into a whole narrative—a process akin to what I do as I weave together this text from fragments of interviews, conversations, and stories by inserting bridges of explanation, context, or interpretation. The gospels were never intended to be taken as historical accounts or biographies (Crossan, 1973). Scott (2001) expresses it simply, “None of the gospel writers was a stenographer interested in preserving the exact words of Jesus. They retell the parables in their own way, just as we would expect” (p. 50).

Scott (2001) asserts that parables get more complex rather than simpler over time; that is, telling and retelling stories increases the complexity.

Many of the stories the girls and women told in my research groups had been told several times in different forms. For example, I heard Maria’s story told twice—once in an individual interview and then, three years later, with a group of girls. Zoe said of her story that she had told it many times before. In one of the individual interviews with me, she repeated the same story that she told the group. Repetition gave the stories the emergent and fluid quality of parables.

To attend to this parabolic quality in girls’ stories is to recognize that life’s narratives are a process, not a singular, static event (Kerby, 1991). The self that reveals itself in story is a self always in process, always emergent and fluid. The self told and retold in story emerges in increasing complexity.

### *Performance*

A parable is not a “thing” and it is not static. A parable in the Jesus tradition is first and foremost an event (Crossan, 1973, 1976). The parables were told and retold before live audiences, which is to say, *performed*, for years, perhaps even decades, before they were written down (Crossan, 1973, 1976; Scott, 2001).

Crossan (1976) claims that Jesus didn’t just *speak* in parables; Jesus, as storyteller, was becoming parable. In that his storytelling was an invitation to participate in an unfolding event that he called the “kingdom of heaven,” Jesus’ life *was* parable. The early Church understood how inextricably Jesus’ life and the story he told were bound up in each other. Matthew’s gospel says that Jesus did not say anything without a parable. “Jesus told the crowds all these things . . . without a parable he told them nothing” (Mt 13:34-35). In this sense, Jesus did not merely perform the story before an audience; his very self was the story, without which nothing at all could be known of his intentions and his message. Crossan (1973) suggests that rather than thinking of the parable as that which points to a *real* referent the parable itself is the foreground, that which is *real*. As Crossan says

This is the deliberate question of whether there is any other way to live and any other way to know reality than *in parables*. It evokes the possibility that “in reality” means no more and no less than in parables, that reality is parabolic. (Crossan, 1973, p. xiv)

Parables are a performance art that requires active involvement—an imaginative engagement on the part of both the listener and the storyteller to bring into being the story as a lived event. Listening to girls’ stories in a group was different from reading the written versions they prepared. In the performance of self-narrative, the girls and women



were enacting their gender identity, an identity that is always a lived process, not a static entity (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). To hear in girls' stories the parabolic performance is to encounter gendered identity as variant and unsettled. The performance of narrative is the performance of self—self becoming story.

### *Possibility*

Parables were public and participatory events. The listener and storyteller were engaged in a mutual interaction, a play of words and gestures through which meaning emerged (Crossan, 1973; Scott, 2001). Even in their more solidified written form, parables still rely on the reader to complete the story. Like any fiction, parables recruit the reader's imagination to bring the story to life. As the readers of parables, the audience becomes participants as co-authors of the text (Iser, 1978).

Experiences with metaphorical or non-literal literary forms, such as the parable, cultivate the capacity for developing the self. As Crossan (1973) observes, a direct and didactic form of teaching does not increase a person's capability; it merely adds to the person's knowledge. However, indirect communication, through the metaphorical play of the parable, jolts the person out of mental routines and opens up alternative possibilities. Crossan argues that far more than simply providing knowledge or information, parables change consciousness. Parables, as with other artistic practice, open up spaces of possibility for the storyteller and his or her world.

It is evident from cognitive studies that human consciousness itself—and the very sense we have of a discrete identity that is coherent through time and space—is formed through the telling of stories. That is, the self is formed through the ongoing creation of a coherent self-narrative (Donald, 2001; Kerby, 1991). Narrative experiences—the hearing and telling of stories—also have an important role to play in enlarging and expanding

possibilities for the self (Luce-Kapler, 1999; Sumara, 2002). The act of storytelling, in the larger parabolic sense, is an avenue into enlarged consciousness and awareness.

Gee (1999) talks about the building tasks of language—that is, the power of language to create meanings, identities, and relationships, to distribute social goods, and to increase knowledge—thus language itself can shape new possibilities. But with possibility there is also ambiguity—the power of the subjunctive spaces between knowing and not knowing.

### *Power*

There are many references throughout the gospels to Jesus as an iconoclastic and prophetic character who confronts and challenges contemporary religious and Roman authorities. Thus, Jesus' parables are about power. They challenge authority; they contest, disrupt, and transform their listeners and the world around them. For example, the parable of the mustard seed appears in slightly different versions in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and in the extra-biblical gospel of Thomas (Mt 13:31-32, Mk 4:30-32; Lk 13:18-19; Thomas 20). In all versions of the parable, the story begins with a question about the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God, followed by the words, "It is like a mustard seed..." Luke's version of the parable, which scholars suggest is probably the closest to the original (Scott, 2001), tells of someone deliberately planting the mustard seed (a weed) in a field. Sowing a noxious weed in one's field is not only rather stupid, it is also prohibited under the Levitical purity codes (Lev 19: 19). So we have Jesus suggesting that the kingdom of God is a subversive and disruptive intervention into the religious and political powers of the day.

Examples from the gospels illustrate this kind of transgression, the mixing up of holiness with the world of the profane, a kind of deliberate infecting of the sacred with

the bodily. In many of the parables, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom (*God time*) is always plural, a hybrid. It is always a mixing of the now and the not yet. This hybridism, this mixing, is Jesus' invective against a certain strand within 1st century Judaism that insisted on things not being mixed. This tradition within Judaism had become preoccupied with a kind of radical purity—ritual practices that separated and distinguished Jewish practice and faith from that of its Gentile neighbours. Strict adherence to purity rules including not eating impure food, not wearing clothing made of mixed fibres, not mixing two kinds of seed when planting, and separating oneself from those who were ritually “unclean” people; as for example, menstruating women, people who worked in unclean professions, foreigners, and people with certain illnesses. Jesus was always mixing things that should not be mixed—touching an *unclean* woman, healing lepers, having meals with sinners, picking grain on the Sabbath, associating with Gentiles and foreigners. Jesus, who embraced not the purity cult but the prophetic tradition within Judaism, contested the strict, exclusionary, and sometimes hypocritical practices of religious practice.

In the short parable of the yeast in the dough (Lk 13:20, Mk 13:33), Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who mixes a little leaven (old dough containing yeast) with about 40 pounds of flour. She mixes and mixes until the new dough starts to rise. At first this might look like a simple comparison (the kingdom of heaven is something that starts small and grows big) were it not for a few features of the parable.

First, there is the oddness of the vast quantity of flour the woman uses. As Scott (2001) observes, the parable's earliest audience would have immediately started to wonder what on earth this woman is doing. The second oddity is the leaven itself. Leaven, in Jesus day, was the old dough saved from the last batch of bread making—much like

sourdough. It was kept moist but of course there was no refrigeration. With the addition of sugar and flour, the yeast it contained continued to grow. When the next batch of bread was prepared, the yeast culture was added. As one can well imagine, in a hot climate the leaven grew other things besides yeast—bacteria, moulds, and other fungi. Yeast, in first century Palestine, was not clean. It was associated with contaminants—it made things go bad. Leaven thus had a rather unsavoury image. For many centuries prior to Jesus' parable, the Jewish tradition had associated yeast with impurity and contamination. True, it was useful for making leavened bread, but in the holy season of Passover, one of the cleansing rituals was and still is to purify dwellings by *removing* the yeast—that is, a ritualized and symbolic cleaning out of those things that contaminate. The holy bread of Passover is flat; it contains no yeast.

Scott (2001) argues that through this parable, Jesus associated the reign of God not with the purity of unleavened bread (as Jesus' Jewish audience might have expected) but with the impurity of yeast mixed into a huge quantity of flour. How much flour? Forty pounds worth! In other words, *all* the flour. Nothing remains clean and uncontaminated. Furthermore, it is a woman, also associated with ritual impurity, who does the mixing. Something has been twisted and reversed; the listener's prior expectations (prejudgments) are troubled. The contaminated (yeast) and the holy (kingdom of heaven) are placed side by side. As Scott points out, the metaphor that Jesus employs here is one that would have deeply offended most of his listeners. Parables are not gentle or passive; they are powerful interruptions of the status quo. The parabolic joke jolts the audience out of prejudgments. Instead of being left with an easy moral teaching, listeners are handed a paradox. The parable carries them, willingly or unwillingly, toward undiscovered dimensions of self and world (Crossan, 1976).

To encounter a story as parable is to have one's assumptions overturned, one's prejudgments disturbed. The world reimagined in parables, shifts on its axis.

Girls' stories are also always about power. The girl as story is a contestation of power with power—the power of narrative to come into being against the forces that constrain and subjugate the girl. The power of self-narrating, the creative rearranging and reconfiguring of the givens of the social self, is an act of resistance and resilience, of non-compliance. Thus girls' stories and storytelling are disruptive and uncomfortable.

### *Wisdom*

The parables of Jesus are part of the wisdom literature<sup>14</sup> of the Bible (Scott, 2001). They share with this body of literature its concern about life as it is lived in the here and now and its quality of embodied knowing—knowing that does not create a separation between mind and body, world and spirit; knowing that is both readily accessible in daily experience and yet is closed to those who do not have “ears to hear” or hearts to receive.

Wisdom literature does not concern itself with the nation of Israel, its history and deeds, or covenantal or prophetic theology. Instead, it addresses a human desire to understand the world, especially the physical and social environment, and to maintain relationships in the community (Washington, 2001). Wisdom texts are not concerned with faith or religious observance but with challenges of daily life.

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<sup>14</sup> Biblical wisdom literature flourished from about 400 BCE to 100 CE. It comprises the Hebrew biblical books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs/Solomon, many of the Psalms, apocryphal books such as Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom of Solomon, and some parts of the Christian scriptures. Wisdom literature is not a coherent body of texts within the Bible (as compared to the Pentateuch, historical writing, or prophetic books): The various wisdom texts differ widely from one another in form. They include poems; extended narratives, such as the book of Job; proverbs or other short sayings; and parables.

Biblical wisdom literature differs from Hellenistic wisdom philosophy of the same period in two important ways. First, there is no separation of body and spirit in the Hebrew wisdom texts—the created world is good; wisdom is embedded, and can be discerned *in* the created world; wisdom is incarnate (here and now). Second, and related to the first, Wisdom is personified in female form: “I am the mother of true love, wonder, knowledge, and holy hope” (Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach 24:18 cited in Shapiro, 2005). Wisdom is revealed in creation and present in human affairs; she is both a divine being (although she is not God) and worldly. Lady Wisdom cries out on a busy street corner (Prov 1:20), and she is also “a breath of the power of God” and a “spotless mirror of the working of God” (Wis 7:25-26).

The early Christian church explicitly identified Jesus with Wisdom. For example, the apostle Paul writes of “Christ Jesus who became for us Wisdom (*Sophia*)” (1 Cor 1:30); and the writer of the Gospel of John retells the creation story from Proverbs 8, identifying Jesus with Wisdom and understanding both as synonyms for creativity (Brock & Parker, 2008).

In early Christianity, Wisdom was seen as accessible to all—“she wanders the streets, offering the joy and delight of the paradise garden” (Brock & Parker, 2008, p. 36). Those who knew her could draw on her power and enlist her assistance; however, Wisdom could refuse to give power to those who were not ready to receive her.

The stories of girls and women that I heard in the course of my research held this quality of embodied knowing—knowing that is experienced in and through sensory experience, knowing that is accessible through women’s bodies. Their stories and conversations are filled with images of women’s bodies—bodies that bathe in bubbles, dance, touch, cry, connect, put on makeup, dress up, move, and break.

To hear the wisdom in girls' stories one must listen for the embodied knowing: truths that are found in daily, sensory experience; knowledge that is encountered and expressed in women's bodies; knowing that integrates body and mind, world and spirit; knowing that is ordinary transcendence.

### ***Beauty***

Wisdom is closely allied with beauty. Many passages of scripture extol Wisdom's virtues, power, strength, and splendour, as in this passage: "[Wisdom] is more beautiful than the sun; she excels every constellation of the stars" (Wis 7:29). Wisdom is beloved and desired. This embodied, feminized form of knowing is depicted as a powerful force. Wisdom is depicted as being with God as the creative principle of Creation (Brock & Parker, 2008).

To consider parables a kind of poetic metaphor, as Crossan does, is to appreciate the way in which they engage not just the mind, but the imagination and heart and soul. It is to appreciate their beauty. The beauty in parables—the beauty of language and of living—is complex, multidimensional, even contradictory. The parable has a quality of transcendence that does not bear the listener out of this world but more deeply *into* it. The parable dwells in the holy by ascending to the particularity, as art does—moving into the specific *this* and *now* of the aesthetic moment.

There is a broad scholarly consensus that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God (also called the reign of God or kingdom of heaven) is fundamental to his purpose and mission. Jesus did not proclaim this heavenly realm as a future event, as place set apart from this world, or as an abstract idea of what God's rule or reign might be like. Rather, he announced it as divine activity within this world. The early church

understanding of heaven is not set apart from this world but situated within it (Brock & Parker, 2008).

The world of the parable bridges the worlds of the everyday and the transcendent. Parables encompass both secular and the religious experience, our world and God's love (McFague, 1975). McFague's insight is that the parable does not merely point to or inform about that which is unfamiliar (that is, about the transcendent or spiritual realm), it *includes* the unfamiliar within its boundaries. As she explains, some mystical traditions encourage adherents to leave behind the temporal world and all that is secular, bodily, desired, and human. The secular world, on the other hand, admits no possibility of Otherness or spirituality, being *only* human and temporal. McFague says that the parabolic world is neither of these—it is neither secular nor religious but both at once. And, by implication, no human experience is entirely secular or completely religious. Human life is both at once, sacred and worldly, body and spirit.

McFague (1975) says that a theology informed by parables is necessarily ambiguous. It is messy and complex precisely because it bridges the divide between the minute-by-minute moments of our own bodily experience and the timelessness of our encounter with the transcendent. Parables admit to the complexity and ambiguity of life as lived here and now and also assert that it is in *this* world that holy Otherness can be encountered.

Many times, the stories of girls in my research moved deeply into the texture and beauty and detail of a particular moment in a particular life and, in so doing, moved into the realm of the transcendent, the spiritual. To listen to girls' stories with a parabolic ear is to risk being touched, awed, and awakened, by the holy, the Other.



*I fold up my flipchart paper, put Crossan aside, and spend the rest of the day reading poetry and parables. I let Dame Helen Gardner lead me down mossy paths I haven't travelled in years. I feel the sudden smack of salt air in Venice and am filled with recollections of adolescent romance and my long-forgotten conversations with poets I adored. I open favourite texts to visit worlds inhabited by treasure seekers, roadside vandals, unjust stewards, torch-banished bridesmaids, feasters and revellers, farmers, scoundrels, children, beggars—all the while absorbing the odours of rising dough, labouring bodies, goats, and pigs; all the while reflecting the glow of golden olive oil and lamplight and new wine.*

*I have no idea how to compose this thesis, but I know how it is possible to be transported worlds away by a few, well-chosen words.*

*I am looking for poetic metaphor.*

*And I remember a story.*

## **Smoke that thunders**

Working in Zambia in 1987, I grew to love lumpy *nshima*<sup>15</sup> drenched in spicy sauces of collard greens or boiled pumpkin. Every day, we sat on wooden benches beside the Zambezi River, listening, talking, drinking piping hot black tea, and eating bowls of *nshima*. Above the treetops, we could see the drifting plumes of mist from the falls. Dr. Livingston named these falls after Victoria, his queen, but locals still call them *Mosi-oa-Tunya* (*smoke that thunders*). They are indeed a magnificent and thunderous performance: A wall of water nearly two kilometres wide crashes against the rocks and tumbles 100 metres into the heart of the gorge. The misty smoke can be seen for miles around.

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<sup>15</sup> *Nshima*, pronounced with the consonant sound *n* followed by *she-mah*, is a coarse, thick maize-meal porridge.

There were 30 or so women in our group, most with their youngest child on their back or at their breast, or a snotty-nosed toddler hugging their knees. Most were from the countryside, from some of the poorest parts of Zambia. They had gathered to discuss the micro-businesses in which they were engaged—small collaborative projects to make shirts and tunics so their children could attend school, to bake bread to sell to migrant workers, to grow small communal plots of maize for food or sugar for sale. They had come to learn more, to develop solutions to common problems, to share their stories of survival against the odds.

Loveness was the oldest woman there; she had no baby at her breast. I do not know how old she was. With her brown face carved like a relief map, she could have been 50, or 80.

Mr. Harare was also there. He had come from the city to teach organizing principles—record-keeping, running meetings, taking minutes. He lectured with firmness and vigour, but it was hot and attention wandered. His lessons were not sinking in. The women often drifted back late from tea breaks and meals. Finally, Mr. Harare tried a different tack. He asked for three volunteers, whom he sent to wait outside the door. Then he told the rest of the women a story. Although he called his story “Braided Hair and the Three Elephants,” I quickly recognized it as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” The women, who did not know this story in either version, listened attentively. Mr. Harare called the first volunteer back into the room. He pointed to a young woman sitting at the front of the group and asked her to tell the story of Braided Hair to the first volunteer. She did so, haltingly and with much embarrassed laughter. She made a few mistakes. Mr. Harare summoned the second volunteer and asked the first volunteer to tell the story to the second one. She did so, but she forgot the part about the hot, cold, and warm nshima.

By the time the third volunteer told her version of the story back to the group, it was a different tale indeed. The women laughed uproariously to hear her description of a herd of elephants invading the house of little Braided Hair and breaking all her furniture.

“There,” said Mr. Harare triumphantly. “You see now why it is important to keep written records of your meetings.” The women nodded obligingly; it was time for lunch. “And,” came Mr. Harare’s final volley, “it is important to be on time. If anyone is late back from lunch, she will have to tell the story of Braided Hair.” The women smiled and nodded.

Loveness did not get up from the wooden eating bench when the bell sounded to convene the group. She continued to sip her tea as the other women hastened back to the meeting area. Then, with unruffled calm, Loveness came in and sat down. “Loveness, you are late,” declared Mr. Harare. “You will have to tell us the story of Braided Hair.”

A smile flickered across her face as Loveness stood and faced the group. She told the story as only a skilled Zambian storyteller can, with her face, her voice, her whole body. The little girl, Braided Hair, took form and breath; wild elephants filled the room. The women, and I, were riveted. She transformed the story into a living event, yet she changed not a single element of the original order. She missed not a single detail. When the story was over, she looked the women over carefully to see if they were paying attention. “You must to learn to listen,” she said finally and with satisfaction. She sat down.

In the context of the rural women of this group, in which paper was scarce and impermanent (it went mouldy in the rainy season), where literacy and numeracy were rare, and where an oral storytelling tradition still thrived, a well-told and well-remembered story was more viable record than words or numbers on paper. Loveness

knew this. Her truth made sense for a poor rural setting in a way that Mr. Harare's did not. She had never learned to read and so she knew the importance of listening and remembering. She knew the power of telling the truth of experience, and the tenacity with which truth endures when it is incarnated in story. The truth is, you have to pay attention. The truth is, stories and storytelling have power.

Mr. Harare told a story with a moral. It was a teaching moment, for he was a good teacher, but like any story designed to illustrate a lesson the story was redundant. Crossan (1973) makes this point; when used as a didactic device, the story itself is not absolutely necessary. It helps to get the point across but is not essential. The lesson could be explained in other words.

Loveness' story was different. It embodied its truth rather than simply illustrating it; it was a story in which all were invited to participate, especially Mr. Harare (although if he did, I could not tell). Mr. Harare used a story to teach, to give information and instruction. Loveness invited us to enter her world, the world of oral tradition and African experience that is so vastly different from my own. In her world, the elephants were a real and present danger, moving, breathing, great and wild. In her world, records on a paper are fragile things, trampled under the feet of the beasts of fate, lost in a careless moment. In her world, nothing is as powerful as a story; nothing is as strong as a people who remember. The story is remembered because it has first been heard, then held, then unfolded like a blanket around our shoulders. How could one ever forget the maize once one has tasted it coarse and salty and just-right upon the tongue? How could the pattern ever go awry when one has felt its rhythmic patterns as solid and steady as village drums? How could one ever forget whose house it is with the trumpeting of elephants still ringing in one's ears?

## Listening With a Parabolic Ear

Loveness' story was a parable in the sense that Crossan (1973) means it—an enacted worldview. First one has to enter the world as Loveness knows and hears it, to enter the oral tradition. People who do not read but who do know how to tell stories have a different mind and experience a different world. Enter the world of meaning through the portal that Loveness creates and discover that stories themselves have changed.

Before I met Loveness, I had thought of oral traditions the way Mr. Harare did—as unreliable and impermanent. Didn't we all learn how the printing press and literacy pinned down flighty, malleable language, how it transformed the capricious word into something as solid and steadfast as a dictionary? In Loveness' hands, however, stories had power and resilience against change and the colonialists' arm. Stories resisted, talked back, in ways I never knew they could.

This is how I think of stories now: as water crashing down to impenetrable depths, as mist rising in the thunder, as a river carving a gorge, as wisdom's flickering smile across an old woman's face.

As Crossan (1973) notes, the parabolic story initiates participation in a radically different paradigm. Understanding, real understanding necessitates such border crossing. To listen to girls' stories with parabolic openness is to accept their invitation into the world of the girl; it is to cross the boundaries that separate one worldview from another. The stories I have selected for this dissertation have a quality of invitation—they act as portals, as openings into other minds. To accept that invitation means that understanding, to the extent that it may be possible, is predicated on openness to other ways of experiencing and understanding the world. This kind of listening requires of the listener

openness, flexibility of spirit, and willingness to move with the storyteller where she leads.

Truth first appears to us as the meanings anticipated by our prejudices, our foreknowing (Crusius, 1991). I first knew about stories as teaching moments, stories with a point and purpose. I have sat with Loveness' story for many years now, unfolding layers of interpretation. At first it was simply this: Mr. Harare didn't know what he was talking about; paper and pencil minute-keeping is not well suited to the life of poor women in rural Zambia. But now it is the world of the storyteller that I see more clearly. Stories have power—the power to transport the listener into a world of meaning and significance. It is the power of the word heard and spoken. Crusius writes of hermeneutics using auditory rather than visual metaphors, as hearing the world rather than seeing it, entering into and being entered by the world rather than observing it. In this sense, Loveness is thoroughly at home in hermeneutics, and hermeneutics is thoroughly at home in her stories. Hearing Loveness' story, the sounds of her world resonated in my bones.

This is a way of listening to the stories of girls. I consider what it might be like to hear the girls' stories as richly textured poetic metaphors, deep with meaning, possibility, and wisdom. Smoke that thunders, sound that moves my bones.

In the next 11 chapters, I consider what it might be like to hear girls' stories as parables, using the 11 characteristics of parables that I identified above as possible positions from which to hear 11 stories of girlhood. There is not an exact match, of course, as girls' stories are always multivocal. However, as I hear each of the 11 stories in turn, it is as though I am listening for a particular chord in a complex composition. I hear lots besides, but the chord I am attuned to resounds with particular significance.

## **PART 2: STORYTELLING**

Every morning  
the world  
is created.

Under the orange

sticks of the sun  
the heaped  
ashes of the night  
turn into leaves again

(Mary Oliver, 1986, p. 6)

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

(Thomas King, 2003, p. 2)

## CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPATION

*Stories in a didactic teaching mode create distance between storyteller and audience. Parables draw listeners into the life, feelings, and experiences of the storyteller. Parables of the Jesus tradition drew the listeners who heard them into deep participation in the parable's referent. Such participation was a necessary precursor to understanding. To listen to girls' stories with a parabolic awareness is to accept an invitation into the world of the girl; as with parables, such participation precedes understanding.*

### Meeting Gabrielle

*On first impression, the Des-Rivières household seems to be run by children. I half expect Pippi Longstocking<sup>16</sup> to ride up the front steps on her horse. On my first visit, 13-year-old Gabrielle Des-Rivières greets me at the front door. (Gabrielle was a participant in Group 3). As she opens the door, three other children head out to play. Carmen, the Des-Rivières toddler, is riding on Annie's back. No adult rushes out to stop them—this is a large city and we are close to downtown—but it looks as though the street too has been taken over by children. Bikes, tricycles, balls, and hockey sticks prevail over cars.*

*On the back porch, 12-year-old Ellen is taking clothes off the line and folding them neatly into a laundry hamper. She offers to show me around. Four rabbits live in hutches by the fence. The large vegetable garden is flourishing but one section appears to have been recently excavated by three child-sized yellow bulldozers. As we round the front of the house, where a hand painted sign declares the property to be pesticide free and child-*

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<sup>16</sup> A character created by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1975) in a children's book series published between 1945 and 1975. As a child, I read the books in English translation and was fascinated by Pippi, who lives without adult supervision in her own house, along with a pet monkey and a horse who sleeps on the front porch.



*friendly, a woman with long red curly hair rides up on a bicycle. She unbuckles Anthony, age 4, from his bike seat and introduces herself as Janet, one of the parents of this multitude.*

It took me awhile to orient myself to the Des-Rivières home because there were always so many people coming and going. There seemed to be several more children in the house than the five that actually lived there. As Janet ushers us into a room where Gabrielle and I can conduct our interview, she reassures me that it isn't always this hectic. On subsequent visits I find that, actually, it is. Gabrielle and I sit beside one another on the couch, in a buttercup-yellow sunroom. It is quieter here, but later, when I listen to the audio recording, I can hear 18-month-old Carmen babbling in the background, Annie and her friend arguing, and the rattle of saucepans. But the house has no computer games and no TV.

Gabrielle was 7 when she joined this family, after spending several years in foster homes. She still has some contact with her birth mother and a half-brother. At first, she was given a hard time in school about being adopted. "Yeah, because this one kid from school always kept on bugging me. She kept coming up to me, 'Are you adopted, are you adopted, are you adopted?' and I always told her 'Yeah,' but she just kept on asking me. My dad was there to tell her to stop though, because I didn't like it." (Gabrielle's father taught kindergarten at the same school.)

"What's school like now?" Gabrielle is in Grade 8, in a regular class, where she receives additional assistance with language and math.

"Well, I really like school."

"Mmm."

“Not the academic stuff but the sports and girlfriends and hanging out at recess. Geography is easy because it’s like all about the environment and all of that. Well, not Math and History, they are hard; or Language Arts, Science; but the sports, like Gym; and Art and Music—those are really easy for me.” Gabrielle loves music—she sings in a regional choir.

Later, I learn that Gabrielle has fetal alcohol syndrome and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Her cognitive abilities, as based on test scores, are uneven: her verbal reasoning skills are well within the normal range and her social abilities are strong, but she has poor concentration and organizational skills, and is prone to impulsive behaviour; her reading, writing, and math skills are well below grade level. “My mom thinks I’m very immature,” Gabrielle notes. “Yeah, I am.”

I ask her what else she would like to tell me about herself. “Well, I am really athletic. I have disabilities in some things. I don’t like reading. I don’t like typing on a computer. Yeah. And I’m very hyper.”

I ask her what she means. “Well, I usually, when I’m hyper, I laugh in a really weird way and I do mating calls and I jump up and down, and I scream around waving my arms around. Me and my friend, we’re known as like the kids that are like really hyper but that have a lot of friends because we’re always like screaming through the halls and acting like birds.”

In another visit, I experienced hyper for myself. Gabrielle had not taken her medication—she had stayed overnight at her grandmother’s house and forgot to take the pills with her. Her father apologizes that it is too late to take them now because they will keep her awake at night. During our half hour visit, although she seems pleased to see me, she cannot concentrate long enough to complete a sentence. She does not sit down for

more than a few seconds, and several times she runs out of the room to have snatches of conversation with other people. We talked in this way for awhile and then agreed to reschedule for another time.

When I asked her to tell me about something positive that has happened in her life she says without hesitation, “Getting adopted—that’s the best thing.

“Well, I wasn’t very happy when I was younger and then these people adopted me. Okay, I was abused.”

“Do you remember?”

“Yeah, I remember all of it. I was left with a pedophile. Well he wasn’t allowed to be around children. He had like a restriction around him, he was never allowed to be around children again.”

“But you were left with him?”

“Yeah. I remember him because he was a dude my mom knew.”

“And your mom?”

“She was gone for some reason to go drink. Oh, um, I think one of my dads—I had like several—but one of them got really mad, and we had a glass table in our kitchen, and he got really mad because he and my mom were arguing so he took the glass table and smashed it over her. She had a concussion. I was like 4, so I swept it [the glass] up.”

“Was being adopted a difficult thing for you?”

“Well when I was first adopted when I was doing my homework I used to throw things on the ground, like my homework, and I ripped it and I drew all over it because it was really difficult and I couldn’t concentrate on it, and I just didn’t understand any single thing, but right now when I do my homework, it’s not as difficult and I don’t do

that anymore. I just sort of like say I hate homework. But they [Gabrielle's adoptive parents] still make most of my decisions. I feel like I'm in a jail."

Because reading and writing are so challenging for Gabrielle, we had agreed that I would meet with her individually to help her write the personal narrative she has chosen to tell the group. On that occasion, the house was once again full of children, so we escaped to the sunroom. As we settled ourselves on the sofa, I reminded Gabrielle of the instructions I gave the girls for how to prepare a personal narrative. "Write a short description of a significant experience or event. Choose something that you do not mind sharing with others. It can be any experience from anywhere, any time. It does not need to be the most important thing ever, but choose an event that stands out clearly in your mind, something you can remember in detail." I had based my instructions for writing the personal stories on a process Baker (2005) used for her theological reflection with groups of adolescent girls. I encouraged the girls to use detail and rich description and to avoid explaining the story.<sup>17</sup> "Just tell us what happened," I had suggested.

We decide that Gabrielle will tell her story aloud and I will record what she says on my laptop. Gabrielle has chosen an experience and is ready to go. We work sentence by sentence. For the most part, she is satisfied with what she has said but she occasionally checks my laptop to see that I have written down what she wants. Sometimes she adds something or changes a word or two. Occasionally, I ask her to wait so I can catch up; twice I ask a question for clarification. We have trouble with the phrase *turos csusza*. I

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<sup>17</sup> I also gave the girls a written description of the task as well as a narrative example from my own experience. See Appendix B.

cannot get a phonetic version that pleases her—too-roo-too-sa doesn't come close and she has no idea how it is spelled. I have to look it up by Googling “Hungarian recipes” and “noodles.”

It has taken us about 35 minutes. Gabrielle is satisfied with the final version, which I'll email to her when I get home. She points out that she won't remember to bring it to our weekend gathering but that she will ask her mom to help. I say I'll bring an extra copy just in case.

We briefly discuss the upcoming weekend with the group. She reviews what she needs to bring—sleeping bag and pillow, snacks, personal effects and medication. She is excited about the weekend but her mother, who has just joined our conversation, is apprehensive. “Are you sure you're OK [with Gabrielle going]?” Reading between the lines, I know Janet is concerned about *hyper*. I assure her it will be fine. Maria and Tess, two university students, are coming as research associates. Maria was a participant in the pilot study I did three years ago. Maria's friend Tess, a child of Palestinian refugees, has a keen awareness of the complexity of life for young teenagers. I know how challenging it has been to keep Gabrielle focused and involved when we meet as a group—I will make sure she remembers to take her medication.

The girls' sleepover combined into one weekend several sessions of storytelling, artmaking, and reading and responding to fictional narratives. I proposed the weekend because it was difficult to find evening times when all the girls were available. However, the weekend together also provided a rich opportunity for interaction and informal time together.

## Hearing Stories: The Girls' Weekend

*I poke the coals, stirring up a small red glow of warmth before adding extra logs to keep the fire burning through the night. It has been a long day, with intense conversation and sharing of important stories. The girls are tired, curled up like puppies around the woodstove, some with blankets about them, some resting against one another or snuggled on the pillows on the floor. Maria is twisting Tess's hair into fine braids; Tess, in turn, is smoothing Beth's soft curls. Language may indeed be one form of social grooming but here some primordial ancestor has reasserted herself in the need to touch and be touched.*

*As the girls sprawl on the mattresses, I serve steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Then, I sit in the rocking chair and read two children's picture books—*The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Trivizas & Oxenbury, 1994) and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolf (Scieszka & Smith, 2003). The girls giggle and demand to see the pictures. I realize that our playful enactment of childhood rituals is also a kind of social grooming. And this time it is me who is responding to a primordial impulse to care for the young and the vulnerable, to help them experience a safe place in a difficult world, wrapping the protective blanket of night around them in the form of a story.*

*I ponder Dunbar's (2003) intriguing notion that language evolved when the size of human groups exceeded the capacities of social grooming to deal with the complexities of interpersonal interaction. In a small group of primates, mutual grooming functions to modulate interactions, resolve conflicts, and form bonds. However, as human beings started to live in groups of upwards of 80 to 100 members, it was impossible for each individual to physically groom or be groomed by all other members of the community. Dunbar proposes that language emerged—first in the form of collective chanting and then in more and more complex forms—to allow for collective social grooming. Sounds and, later, stories became ways of*

*establishing relationships between many individuals simultaneously.  
Telling stories about oneself and others mediates relationships in much the  
same way that physical grooming does for other primates.*

After the girls have eaten teenage-sized portions of eggs, toast, and pancakes, we gather around the woodstove to continue listening to stories. Zoe and Beth drag their sleeping bags and pillows into the circle. It is Gabrielle's turn to tell her story. She sits cross-legged, straight-backed, and, for once, serious. I remind the girls to give the storyteller their full attention. I encouraged the women and girls in all of the research groups to pay attention to the details of what other people said before they formed opinions or conclusions.

Unfolding the paper in her lap, Gabrielle begins to read slowly and evenly.

### **Sleepover, by Gabrielle**

This happened about a year ago when my cousins still lived by the school down the street. My cousin Daphne is a little girl. She's about 3 or 4. She has blond hair down to her shoulders and chubby cheeks; she is pale and rather cute. She is pretty hyper, like me.

I am really excited about this coming summer because I will see her when we go to Hungary. She lives in Hungary now because her parents moved there. They said they would only stay for the summer but they stayed for the winter and now they are staying forever. Hungary is where her parents are from.

Last summer, Daphne wanted me to have a sleepover with her, which I did.

We had pasta for supper; it was *turossusza* which is a Hungarian food. I love it; it's like my absolutely favourite meal. It has cottage cheese, sour cream, crunchy tofu bits, and those large egg noodles. We didn't talk much at supper because I was too busy shoving my mouth full of *turossusza*.

Her mom was there and her dad and Carl and Daphne and me, and her cat. The cat is black; it has some weird Hungarian name that I can't remember. Carl is about 8 or 9—the same age as my sister Annie. Carl likes to be very active. He has

short brown hair and is skinny. His skin is a little bit darker than Daphne's. He is friendly, but a tattletale. He tells on everything I do, or anything Annie does, but not much on Daphne.

After supper, me and Daphne had a bubble bath together. I taught her how to eat the bubbles and she liked that. She thought it was funny. Me and her ate bubbles together. She made bubble moustaches and then licked them off. Her mom thought it was a bit weird that we ate the bubbles but she didn't mind that much. Then I read Daphne some stories, things like Mary had a Little Lamb and Charlie Went to the Park. After that, Daphne wanted to go outside in the backyard to play. We played in a baby pool in our bathing suits and on her swing set. We played in her backyard for awhile; then we went back inside and played with her train tracks and Carl's big monster-people-things, transformer things, I think.

By then, it was 9 o'clock and we went to bed. But we didn't fall asleep! I liked talking with her and she was telling me stories. Then we tried to sneak into Carl's room. Her mom gave us about a hundred pillows just to make a mess. We piled them all around us and finally we fell asleep.

We woke up early in the morning. We got up and Carl came in our room; we took Daphne's mattress off her bed and piled all the pillows up. We took the bed into Carl's room and put the mattress like a bridge across it and we were doing belly flops and jumping, yelling, and laughing. Then we made a slide by piling all the pillows up. We put boards between each pillow, then we put the mattress on top and put a board to support it and we slid down.

For breakfast we had pancakes with berry sauce on them. They were yummy!  
It was a very fun sleepover.

## **Bubble bath memories**

Gabrielle finishes reading without looking up. She folds the paper and waits, her hands in her lap. I thank Gabrielle for her story and invite the girls to respond, as we have done with the other stories, beginning with things they liked and appreciated, then moving to connections with their own experience.

Maria begins, "Your aunt sounds nice. I really liked your aunt."



“I liked how much fun you’re able to have with your cousin Daphne even though she seems very young, you know,” continues Tess. “I thought it was really cool that you guys were able to talk and still have a cool sleepover. How young was she again?”

“Three or four,” Gabrielle smiles and looks up. Tess chatters on. “Yeah, I’m just imagining her because you were talking about how, um, was it Carl who used to tattletale? And how he tells on what everyone else, what everyone is doing except for Daphne, so I can imagine that she’s really adored in that family.”

Other girls join the conversation. Gabrielle’s story evokes positive memories of caring and being cared for. Beth talks of a special friend from Grade 3. “I went to Europe for a year and lived and my mom was still travelling a lot, and so like I’d stay over at [Helene’s] house and we used to always have bubble baths, and it was really fun.”

Then the conversation moves to times when girls have been caregivers for younger children. Laila shares an experience babysitting a rather difficult little girl and then adds, “You read [Daphne] stories too; she probably was pretty happy about that.”

“When I was younger kind of like me and my cousin, she’s in the hospital now though, like she’s dying for the last few years from needles and stuff and disease, but when we were younger we used to have like sleepovers,” says Zoe. “Yeah, she’s 18 now. We had like little sleepovers and pillow fights and bubble baths with our bikinis on, and we would start like water fights in the bathroom and we’d like flood the bathroom. That reminded me of fun times.”

It is striking how readily the other girls identify with Gabrielle’s story. I had tended to see her in the role of a little girl playing with her young cousins. Gabrielle’s sometimes immature behaviour led me to fear the girls would dismiss her story, and Gabrielle herself, as babyish. However, Laila’s statement affirms Gabrielle in the role of a

teenager, caring for a much younger child. I don't think Laila was being patronizing. In spite of their differences in cognitive and social ability, Gabrielle's story has allowed Laila and the others to see Gabrielle as a peer—a teenage girl like them, a girl who goes to sleepovers, who relates, who nurtures.

The girls continue talking about Gabrielle's story. They speak of complicated relationships with their mothers, longing to fit in or belong, and the way that Gabrielle seemed to be a sheltering presence for her little cousin, acting as what Laila calls a "guardian angel."

"There's always, no not always, but there can be sometimes a person that's sort of like a guardian angel that's there protecting you," Laila explains.

There *should* be someone like that, the girls agree, who is there always. Gabrielle picks up on this theme of protection and danger to reveal more of herself to the group.

"I get really mad sometimes and I say it's all my adoptive mom's fault, and like I say really mean things to her, but I told my psychologist that if she died my life would be happier, but that's sort of a cruel thing to say but it's sort of how I feel sometimes. It's like my dad gives me freedom but my mom doesn't because she thinks bad things are going to happen to me that I'm going to start drugs and all that. But I know I'm not going to because I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not," agrees Zoe.

"Exactly, and I have fetal alcohol syndrome and most of the friends I have don't have [fetal alcohol syndrome], and they smoke so doesn't that sort of show that I haven't started smoking, so like I'm more mature than them." This is the first time Gabrielle has spoken openly in the group about herself. Now she speaks at some length about the abuse when she was little, her disability, her many moves to different foster homes, and her

adoption. The other girls sit still, listening. She has invited them into her world; they have agreed to follow where she leads.

### **It's a safe place, and that is unusual**

Gabrielle's story bridged differences between herself and the other girls in the group, helping them to make connections between their own experiences and hers. Certain stories create participation, I think, recalling Crossan's (1973) idea that the parable opens deep communication between the narrator and the reader. Like a parable, Gabrielle's story acted as a portal helping those of us who listened to enter into the world as she experiences it. Her story built a sense of intimacy and trust. Like a parable, it broke down the barriers between storyteller and audience, enabling a co-creation of meaning and understanding.

The level of trust in this group continually surprised me. Because the girls were so different from one another, I had been anxious about how they would get along. There were significant differences in family composition, life history, and culture. Their narratives underlined differences in social class: Audrey told a story about a family cruise to Italy and Beth wrote about a six-week family vacation in Costa Rica. Zoe, who lived well-below the poverty line,<sup>18</sup> told stories that highlighted the problems of life in a low-income housing complex. One of the biggest differences in the group was academic ability: Laila was achieving at a high level, Zoe and Audrey were both average students (although Audrey felt that she did not live up to her parents' high academic expectations);

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<sup>18</sup> Based on low-income cut-offs from Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006.

Beth had a mild learning disability but was a talented writer; and Gabrielle was reading and writing at a Grade 4 level.

However, early in our process, group members opened to one another the painful and hidden places of their lives. By the third session they had already begun to speak candidly; by the end of the weekend, which was our fourth gathering, they seemed to have formed deep bonds. Several of the girls said in interviews or in the group conversations that they trusted one another. “It’s a place I can be myself,” Audrey said of the group. “It’s a safe place, and that is unusual,” said Maria.

While the narratives these girls told were not fictional, they had qualities that mimicked literary fiction. The girls wrote richly descriptive accounts of their experience and they frequently used direct speech. The rich texture of their stories sparked the listeners’ own imaginations. Iser (1974, 1978) says that in considering literary work, one needs to be aware of not just the text itself, but also of the reader’s actions in response to the text. A text always has two poles, he says, the work generated by the writer and the meanings created by the reader. Thus a literary text is always dynamic, virtual, “set in motion” by the reader (Iser, 1974, p. 275). The literary text must recruit the readers’ imaginations to work out the text for themselves. The gaps in the text, the parts not written down, are those that engage the reader as active participant. Just so, Gabrielle’s text provides a context and frame—the bubble bath—but leaves spaces for the listener to participate as co-creator of the text. As Iser describes it, sentences set a process in motion that will reveal the full text—which is always a co-creation of the author and audience.

Narrative gives us more than just a description of behaviour. We are often given extra hints about a character’s state of mind. For example, Gabrielle’s narrative gives a “behind the scenes” view of her consciousness when she tells of her eagerness to see

Daphne again or her pleasure talking in bed late at night. These entry points increase our understanding of her.

The narrative quality of the stories was important in deepening the girls' relationships with each other. But I think there was another factor—the telling aloud.

The sensation of light is channelled through a single optic nerve, whereas we take sounds in through our whole body. Even the profoundly deaf can still experience sound. I have two young Jack Russell terriers. My daughter says both dogs are deaf—one cannot hear and the other just doesn't listen. The dog who has been deaf from birth cannot detect a child's cry or even a pot lid crashing on the kitchen tiles. He can, however, feel the thump of bare feet coming downstairs in the morning. When his brother growls, he feels the warning.

Sound penetrates whereas light stays on the surface. We feel sound; it gets under our skin.

In creating the transcripts, I had two versions of each story—a written text that the girls had given me prior to the session and an oral text picked up by the audio recorder. I knew it was important to record the girls' stories from the audio recordings, rather than the written versions they had given me, because speech says things that remain unheard on the flat page; because the speaking into being is different from the writing into being. As I listen to the voices of girls and women, I am drawn more intimately into their experiences. Crusius (1991) notes that horizon is a poor metaphor for philosophical hermeneutics because hermeneutics is so auditory. Sound enters our being in ways that make us participants, not merely onlookers.

## **Listening With a Parabolic Awareness: Participation**

When I first heard Gabrielle's story I heard it as being about a child playing with a much younger one because she wasn't as mature as her own age-cohort. "The Sleepover" may have child-like or even childish qualities, but that certainly isn't all there is to the story. My prejudgments about Gabrielle's disability deafened me to her capacity for insight.

Maintaining openness requires considerable mental discipline. In undoing our prejudices, we first have to bring back into conscious awareness those assumptions that our mind jumps to automatically. Our mind works to make cognitive functions as automatic and unconscious as possible, but sometimes this is limiting. This process frees up consciousness for other functions such as longer-term planning and supervision—roles with which it is occupied most of the time (Donald, 2001). Skills, such as walking, writing, and speaking, cannot be acquired without devoting conscious attention (Donald, 2001). However, repeated behaviour—recurrent patterns of neural activity—gives rise to cognitive structures that make the behaviours automatic. Perception and even such complex functions as ethical behaviour also become automated (Varela, 1992).

When I learned to play the piano, I was aware of the position of each of my fingers. Now that I am a little more proficient, I read a C major chord and my fingers automatically assume their position. But it can be difficult to undo automatic processes—if I play a wrong chord, it can be hard to play it correctly even after I am aware of my mistake. I must bring an automatic process back into awareness and pay careful attention as I relearn the passage.

The same effortful attending is necessary if I am to let girls' stories lead where they lead, rather than where my mind automatically takes them. Even when I *think* I am paying attention, my perception may be conditioned by the foreknowing that I take so much for granted.

Gabrielle's metaphor enabled the others in the group to become participants in her world, which is also their world. The sleepover, that quintessentially girl thing (Audrey says, it "should really be called *the stay-up-over*") is where girls cement their relationships with other girls. I missed the metaphor the first time around, but the group conversation clued me in. I began to accept Gabrielle's invitation and began to *participate* in the sense that Crossan (1973) speaks of participation—the way those listening to parables participate in the parable's referent.

To listen with a parabolic awareness entails letting go of what I think I know in order to participate in the worldview of the storyteller. Participation precedes understanding.

## CHAPTER 5: DIFFICULTY

*Caputo (1987) describes the task of radical hermeneutics as restoring life to its original difficulty. He asserts a hermeneutics that is grounded in this basic premise: life is hard. Likewise, the parables of the Jesus tradition refuse to serve up truth in platitudes and simple rules. They address the harshness of living and dying in the shadow of Empire. They meet life in its essential difficulty. To hear girls' stories as parables is to come face to face with the difficulty of girls' lives—senseless suffering and abuse, dislocations and ruptures, broken promises and shattered truths. The listener cannot remain impassive or detached, certainly, but she must keep still and listen rather than trying to solve or fix.*

### Meeting Ameilia

Ameilia was a participant in my first research group (Group 1: Digital literacy practices with girls who experienced significant life challenges or trauma). The first time we met as a group, Ameilia was wearing a ruffled, parrot-green skirt, hot-pink legwarmers, and an oversize tangerine-coloured T-shirt. Her hair was deliberately dishevelled, with an *I-cut-my-own-bangs* look about it. I was sipping coffee in the diner where the group had arranged to meet for brunch when she arrived, a few minutes early.

Ameilia looked around, found my booth, and greeted me with a warm smile. When I admired her outfit, she explained that she had made the skirt herself and that the leg warmers were arms she'd cut off an old sweater. She surveyed the diner, with its retro red vinyl seats, Formica table tops, and posters of '50s cars. "This is my kind of place," she announced cheerfully. While she waited for her order—eggs, bacon, pancakes, and a Coke—she chatted about the things she liked to make: decorated cupcakes, chocolate chip cookies with Smarties on top, outfits from clothing she bought at second-hand stores, collages, sculptures of cardboard and paint. "I like creating stuff," she said.



When I came to her house for our first interview, Ameilia was dressed up, ready to meet her boyfriend after our session. She had accessorized her father's black rubber boots with a blue-and-white-striped skirt and a large pink-and-white polka-dot purse. She was busy decorating cupcakes with sprinkles and icing. I noticed that the tiny kitchen had been hand painted in a variety of colours—one wall had yellow sunflowers against a sky-blue backdrop.

We held the interview in a room that served both as living room and dining room. As we sat down at the scratched wooden table, a clock rang out the Westminster chimes. The clock sat on an elegant polished wooden table, looking out of place beside the well-used couch.

“I hate that clock,” said Ameilia vehemently.

“It came from your grandmother's house?” I didn't really need to ask.

“Yeah,” she said. “It never shuts up.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I can imagine.”

In interviews, Ameilia told me about the problems in her life.

Last year was really hard, because I got in trouble a lot with my teachers and in my classes, but I had pretty good marks. But this year everything kind of went downhill and I failed a class. Yeah, last term I had a 46 average. I guess with all the changes in my life I was just kind of, unfocused, and, yeah, I just couldn't pay attention and stuff like that. There was a car accident and my little sister died and with that I sort of detached from all my friends and the whole life that I had before Annie. My whole, everything about me changed completely, I would say.

Her writing in our group sessions had already revealed not only the trauma of the car accident that had killed her sister Annie, along with the girls' maternal grandmother, but also the daily difficulties of life at home and at school. Ameilia's parents seemed

somehow absent, sometimes physically, often emotionally. Ameilia's mother had been struggling with a mental illness for several years; the death of her daughter and her own mother had made Ameilia's mother even less available. "All she does now is cry and read the Bible," Ameilia said. Her father seemed genuinely caring and he was pleased Ameilia was part of the pilot study group. But Ameilia was left to find her own way to the group sessions, while most other parents drove or arranged rides for their daughters. When I phoned to set up meetings, Ameilia's father often didn't know where she was or when she would be back.

Ameilia does have some supportive people in her life—a guidance counsellor, a former grade school teacher—adults who are willing to walk with her, to tolerate the tension, the ambiguity, the essential unruliness of her life. She does not tolerate sympathy. To pity her, or to attempt to rescue her like a drowning Ophelia, underestimates both her pain and her strength. Since the accident, she has drawn on her own creative resources.

I am someone who creates. I really like art and self-expression through writing and poetry and stuff like that, and I like painting and making stuff, and I like my journal. Yes, I have a bunch of journals, and sometimes I just, I write poetry and I have a bunch of magnetic poetry, so I just try to like, create anything, and I really . . . I started writing a bunch of Haiku and then I build off them, and stuff, and they just, I try to write stuff about, like things that I've known in my life, things about me, or things about other people, like personal subjects and stuff. And, well, I like to read anything, especially, right now I am into poetry, and I used to not like poetry so much, but I guess after August when [my sister] died, I took more of an interest in it, because I couldn't like, sit through and read a whole book, I just got frustrated and bored and tired.

## Hearing Stories: Patchwork Pieces

Ameilia told the group about her sister at our first session, after I invited the girls to introduce themselves to each other. We were sitting near the open window, with the warm spring sun pouring in upon our small circle of chairs and pillows. “There was a car accident and my little sister died,” she said evenly, looking straight ahead. The other girls said nothing, but I knew they had heard her. Patricia and Jasmine had given cursory introductions—name, grade, the school they went to. Maria was more forthcoming, talking about what she called her “issues” being adopted, the subsequent confusion about her identity, and the struggles she had in school.

When we worked on computers, Ameilia also took the lead. She was the most tech savvy member of the group and often helped solve computer glitches. She was the only girl with previous experience using Wiki. While I was still a beginner in the world of e-literacy, Ameilia was fluent. She knew of a better blog site than the one I had chosen and proposed a change.

During the session that we first did e-writing with the program Storyspace (Eastgate Systems), Ameilia helped the other girls get started. Although this program was new to her, she already knew how hypertext links worked and intuitively grasped the program’s features. Ameilia loved Storyspace. She used hypertext links to string together the pieces of her story, like patchwork pieces of her life, carefully stitched together, as in the following text.

## Oh No Shipwreck, by Ameilia

Oh No Shipwreck: That's the name of my blog, Oh No Shipwreck. My sister took this picture when we were in a boat. I cropped it and put it in black and white.

Figure 2: Heron in flight.



There is loneliness in the world so great that you can see it in the slow movement of a clock's hands.

### Me

I remember graduating from Grade 8. That year I wore a sweatshirt every day and refused to ask my mother to buy me a bra. And on graduation, I put Manic Panic Pink in my hair so it stuck out like a tulip when I spritzed it with blueberry hairspray, sparkling liberty spikes on the top of my head. Everyone else had curls and dresses with lace and polka dots but my pants were black and stuck to my legs because it was June in a small gym with 200 other kids and all of their parents and grandparents. My parents didn't come.

My teacher announced awards for best marks, I won Most Books Read.

I stood out among all the sweaty girls, showing too much skin: a white fish net tank top and red cheeks, leaving the graduation dance to go to the library.

### Her

I remember her when she was a baby. I fed her with a silver spoon sitting in a high chair, and years later, we'd take baths together in the sink, filling up yellow plastic toys with bubbly water and yelping and laughing at nothing, really. She had long hair: the type you always wanted to brush because it got tangled in the wind. It was silky and blonde and smelled like coconuts in the summertime. We were opposites: I had short brown hair I'd chopped off with safety scissors in the

bathroom mirror. I was tall and had broad shoulders, thick skin. She crept silently around corners to jump out and scare me from behind the kitchen wall, skinny and small.

### **July**

We spent 13 days beneath the sun at the cottage. We bailed out the blue plastic paddle boat to go to the middle of the bay and sunbathe. We jetted off in the motor boat to make friends. When it stalled and crashed to a stop we wailed our arms for help and smiled with dimples as a boat of boys approached. I deemed it the best time in my life, and it was.

We piled blow up swim toys and spent hours jumping over them into the water, shimmering blue and teal and beautiful, sand stuck between our toes. We painted rocks, yellow and red and purple, stacked them tall on the deck and smiled at the new found colour it brought. We danced along the shoreline and spied on our neighbours with binoculars before curling up in wool blankets with Grandma's cookies. I never wanted to go home.

### **August**

I said are you sure you don't want the front seat? and she grumbled no, pushing herself into the grey interior in the back, piling Cokes and crackers between her legs and dropping comic books to the ground. I didn't want to scream at her, I was too tired; the sun was tucked behind grey clouds and I wasn't wearing any shoes, a CD player in my pocket and eyes half open.

We spent all day watching *The Price is Right*, and collecting our underwear from the floor, bathing suits stuck behind couches and board games stacked on the dining room table that Grandma was piling into the trunk. If I had the inclination to look at the clock above the stove, I'd have realized it was 1pm, we called my mother telling her we'd be home by 3.

The night before, no one slept. It was hot, sticky, and the sheets got twisted up with our limbs and even after midnight, my sister and I were laughing and spitting out jokes in the bedroom we were sharing, acting as if it were the end of the world. That was at the crack of dawn on August second.

So I shove into the front seat and Grandma tumbles in beside me and sticks the key in the ignition and her wrinkly hands slip over the steering wheel. You ready to go? she asks, and I nod, knowing that this is the last time I'll be at the cottage this summer.

There is no sun today, but it sure is hot. All three of us are tired. My sister behind me, with a magazine clasped in her thin fingers, falls asleep crookedly across the stretch of the back seat, a pillow beneath her golden hair and feet shoved up against the car door.

### **Accident**

I remember falling asleep, too. The last thing I saw were tangy green hills and the cloudy grey sky spilling like secrets over the highway.

You see it on TV and you think, that could never be me. Then it happens and somehow I lost faith. I saw my mother crying every day, makeup running down her bony cheeks and she gripped a Bible in her tiny hands, but it wasn't for me because everything I believed in wasn't alive anymore, wasn't real except in my mind, in the obituaries, in the coffin. But she wasn't even real then.

I woke up: my eyes wide and my foot crushed. I had glass stuck into my face, where my hair was peeling back from my forehead, tears spotting my cheeks, once flecked with sunburns, now covered in oil. My seatbelt still over my chest, I turned gingerly to the right: a lady with purple fingernails crying was trying to comfort me as I screamed. I screamed and screamed, without hearing myself. I was saying through cut up breaths Where is my sister? Where is my sister?

I heard Grandma then. A sound I'll never forget. It was the only thing I did hear, her voice, it sounded pale and leaving: Oh God, help me, get me out of here. Oh God, help me. The windshield was split, and I soon realized what had happened. All I could say, over and over again, was Where is my sister?

### **Hospital**

It was the Jaws of Life, prying me out of that car in which I lay like a slinky, squished together, the bones in my foot breaking, a scar across my chest from the seatbelt that cut into my skin.

I was on a stretcher, the orange silhouette of the sun making my tears evaporate, overheating. Where is my sister? Where is my sister? I remember sirens, and a boy on his cell phone, he had bright blue eyes, burning me up, sirens and doctors.

When we gathered back as a group, I invited the girls to show the group a piece of e-literature they created. By then we had worked in Wiki, Storyspace, and on blogs. The

girls were all guarded with one another, even after several sessions, so I was careful never to push them to share more than they were comfortable with. I gave them a choice about what to share.

Looking back, it interests me how different this first group was from the final one. The members of this first group interacted very little and did not seem to trust one other or empathize with one another's experience. They spoke to me openly in interviews and were happy to share their writing with me—writing that spoke volumes. But in the group sessions and even at the informal gatherings that I arranged—breakfasts at the diner—they said little.

Ameilia was the most forthcoming of the girls. But on this occasion she did not want to read aloud from her writing, as some of the others had done. She showed us her blog, but she kept the Storyspace writing private. At the end of the session, she downloaded a copy of this piece to my zip drive for me to read later but she erased the original from the hard drive of her laptop, thus keeping no copy for herself. When I asked her about this decision in a subsequent interview, she said she couldn't risk having her parents see what she had written. "They wouldn't like it. They don't want to talk about her, it, any of it."

I tried various strategies to encourage interaction in the group—prompts, games, snacks, inviting the girls to share rides to the meetings, letting silences unfold. "We didn't exactly bond," Maria said. "I just feel they didn't, like, trust us enough." She was frustrated by the silence of two other participants, although, in point of fact, Maria herself did not talk much in the group.

Ameilia was the only person in the group that Maria liked; the only one that she thought was being "real." In an interview, she had this to say.

Alright, I'll be honest here. I like the girl that was sitting across from me [Ameilia]. She was really down to earth, and she was nice, you know. She was talkative. The other two kept to themselves. And then Patricia, I don't even know, um, she seems really self-conscious. Um, I don't know, she seemed to put her hair, 'cause of Media Studies, like I notice these things now, but like, she put her hair in her face, like she was trying to hide it, or hide herself, kind of, like not be in the limelight, is what I'm trying to say. And the girl beside me—I don't click with some people maybe, but just the way she talked, like it was so proper. And I was like, "Be a teenager—say 'like' and 'yeah' and stuff like that."

For Maria, Ameilia was a proper representation of a teenage girl, what a teenager is *supposed* to be. When pressed, Maria found it hard to pin down exactly what that was, but it had something to do with authenticity, "Like, being yourself. Not trying to pretend you're something you're not."

I smile thinking about it. Maria and Ameilia were both trying to be what they considered to be *real* teenagers, yet they couldn't have played that more differently. Maria sat back, reserved, her expression serious. What they had in common—this is what Maria sensed and what indeed drew her to Ameilia—was the difficulty in their lives. Of course, all the participants in this group had difficulties. Patricia wore her struggles in secret, like the scars on the inside of her forearms, almost always hidden beneath a baggy sweatshirt. She told the group almost nothing about her personal difficulties or about the complexities of her interior life. Jasmine told me (but not the group) about conflicts with her mother, the poverty of her early life, and her anxieties.

Throughout my research, the girls revealed stories of the immense difficulty of their lives. As Gallagher (2007) observes, many youth experience dangerous times. The interconnected forces of such things as "racism, classism, surveillance, and schooling" (p. xii), as well as sexism and homophobia, constrain and polarize youthful identities.



## Reviving Ophelia

The discourse of girlhood in crisis says that girls face heightened psychological risk as they enter adolescence (Gilligan, 1982). Brown and Gilligan (1992) use the image of a “perilous divide”—a chasm girls must cross to reach adulthood. Some girls get trapped in trying to be good girls and conform to feminine stereotypes, therefore losing their sense of self and their voice.

The crisis of adolescent girls was seen by Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Pipher (1994) as symptomatic of broader issues—what Brown and Gilligan identify as “the pervasiveness of andocentric and patriarchal norms, values, and societal structures” (p. 15). However, as Reviving Ophelia became a mainstream discourse, the symptom became redefined as the problem. Girls, rather than society, became the problem—*their* lowered self-esteem, *their* loss of self.

Reviving Ophelia, as a socially dominant discourse, presents girls as passive victims in need of rescue. Like Shakespeare’s drowning maiden, when the branch beneath them breaks, they fall helplessly. The discourse reinforces the notion that girls and women are powerless to aid themselves. And it masks the reality that many girls do resist, challenge, and make changes in response to disruptions or catastrophe in their own lives and in the world (Bettis & Adams, 2005). One only needs to browse the shelves of mass-market bookstores to realize that the discourse of girls in crisis has generated a social panic about adolescent girls—backed up by helpful guides for parents on how to successfully manage their daughter’s crisis.

Our society's metaphysical roots are showing in the notion that science or pseudo-science can provide us with formulaic solutions to a complex problem that has been defined as *the girl*.

### **Original difficulty**

The philosophical hermeneutics of writers such as Crusius (1991), Caputo (1987), or Smith (1999) travels a different path. Against facile metaphysical thinking, which attempts to make life look easy, Caputo (1987) asserts a philosophy of radical hermeneutics that holds on to the ruptures, breaks, and heartrending difficulties of human existence.

That is the notion of hermeneutics with which I wish to begin: hermeneutics as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life and not to betray it with metaphysics...Hermeneutics is thus for the hardy. It is a radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out, which is especially suspicious that philosophy, which is metaphysics, is always doing just that. (pp. 1-3)

Caputo (1987) claims that metaphysics always wants to make life simple again, wants to foreclose the questions and contain their disruptive force, to replace the essential unknowingness of life with assurances of ultimate truth and certainty. In Caputo's view, hermeneutics is always in danger of being diverted by metaphysics away from the difficulty of life, which is to say, away from life's essential complexity. Ever since the philosopher Heidegger, he says, hermeneutics has been critical of the shallow promises of metaphysics, the easy way out—which is to believe there is an ideal perfected other to which we can turn for absolutes and certainty—the ideal teenager, for example, or so-called normal development.

To live in engagement with all of life—to live as “the conversation that we are” (Crusius, 1991)—is to accept life as ambiguous, intricate, difficult, and complex. The discourse of Reviving Ophelia is not willing to live into the difficulty of girls’ lives—it stands outside their lives, on the bank, waiting to rescue them.

Drawing on Foucauldian theory, Bettis and Adams (2005) observe that, while dominant discourses define what can be known (and played) in a given time and place, they do not cover the full range of what can be conceived. By moving outside the boundaries of existing discourses through her artistic expression, Ameilia gained a different vantage point and a way of seeing beyond her despair. She built herself a house (see Figure 1). It is a playful space, with its zebra-print wallpaper, and it is full of signs of growth and agency.

Just as she took cardboard and poster paint and built a house, Ameilia has taken pen and paper, keyboard and mouse. She writes and writes; she continues to design websites and write on her various blogs; she writes journals in a variety of formats. Always there is poetry.

Ameilia’s artmaking draws on resources other than the dominant discourses of girlhood. She could have sunk into oblivion with Ophelia. Certainly, she teetered on the brink, from what she told me. Ultimately, though, she continues to tap into a well of creative imagination.

Davis (2004) asserts that learning is not about convergence on truth but about divergence, which is to say, about increasing the complexity, enlarging differences, creating more spaces and multiple possibilities. And possibly, hopefully, increasing the capacity of learners to live into more of life’s original difficulty. I have come to believe that Ameilia’s creative responses are enlarging the landscape of her world. Through art,

she seems to be able to find some sort of space where she will live when she is old. She may sometimes look like Ophelia, needing to be rescued, but she is not a character trapped in someone else's tale. She is writing the play.

### **Listening With a Parabolic Heart: Difficulty**

There is a complexity to Ameilia's story that does not lend itself to tidy explanation. She does not fit neatly into the discourse of Reviving Ophelia. Even in the midst of the worst of her crisis, she was not a passive victim. Ameilia does not want to be rescued, like drowning Ophelia. Her life is too complex, too precarious, and too raw for a quick fix. Who would dare suggest that her life can be mended like a broken bone? Who would dare offer easy answers to her jagged pain? Life is harder than that and more complex.

But neither is Ameilia a hero, the prototypical resilient adolescent who weathers the storms of life. There is brittleness to her, and a manic-panic quality, like her changes of hair colour. What she has lost will never be regained. Before the accident, Ameilia had a sister. She told me this several times: her sister was also her closest friend. Before the accident, she struggled a bit but was basically happy and, as she puts it, "Doing OK." Now, she isn't sure.

To listen to her story as parable—with an engagement that leans to compassion but not quick fixes—I must be willing to hear the difficulty. I must be willing to hear the raw pain of her loss and the harsh brutality of what life has dealt her. A few seconds here or there and two cars might not have collided. A few metres here or there and one girl might not be dead.

Parables are about life as it is lived.

Parables do not tidy things up into easy explanations, though Ameilia has heard a few of these. One such platitude, she tells me, is that because her sister died at 13 she was spared any major suffering in her life. “Her sister got spared suffering while she lives on with a broken heart?” I think. “How fair is that?”

“My sister never got to fall in love,” says Ameilia.

Parables are not for the faint of heart.

To hear girls’ stories as parables is to be touched by the difficulty of their lives—senseless suffering and abuse, dislocations and ruptures, broken promises and shattered truths. It is impossible to remain unmoved by the stories girls tell. I find myself fighting back an urge to fix. But this is about listening. I must be still.

But just when I think I have grasped something of the difficulty of Ameilia’s story, she slips away from me. She puts on rubber boots, grabs a hot-pink umbrella—the transparent plastic kind that makes everything look pink when you look through it—and runs off to catch the bus.

The difficulty with parables is that they have at their core an essential paradox, something that defies easy explanation. Jesus did not tell parables as simple moral guidelines, solutions to the problems of the world. He told them as entry points into a radically new way of hearing, thinking, being. The difficulty with hearing girls’ stories as parables is that they do not lead to simple resolution. I awaken with a jolt to the difficulty of this dissertation—that it is not about finding *solutions* to girls’ problems. To listen with a parabolic heart is to enter into the difficulty of girls’ lives, not move them out of their present difficulty. It is not to discover how storytelling might *help* the girl but to realize how storytelling *is* the girl.

## CHAPTER 6: METAPHOR

*To hear a story as parable is to recognize it as poetic metaphor; it bears meaning that requires the story itself. Thus the story becomes both the event and its interpretation, experience and its meaning. Understanding the girls' stories as poetic metaphor is to acknowledge that each is far more than the recounting of a single event. Like parables, the girls' stories are neither singular nor simple; they lead to multiple, inexhaustible possibilities for interpretation.*

### Meeting Sahira

Sahira was the first to accept my invitation to be part of the women's group that I convened in the final year of my research (Group 4: Storytelling, selfhood, and narrative with women who had experienced significant life challenges or trauma as adolescents). The group followed the same process that I was using with a group of girls—write, use creative writing prompts, read narratives, write some more, tell the stories of girlhood, talk about what it all means. Sahira knew about my research with girls and was eager to begin. She had been through a terrible year, she said, and she needed to write.

Our first interview took place in the living room of her small townhouse. She apologized for the mess, but the house was not messy in the usual sort of way. It was not dirty. There were no unwashed dishes in the sink, no weeds growing in the tiny plot of flowers at the front step. There was an underlay of care and beauty—a low table held candles and a blue pottery vase arranged on an intricate Indian batik, art graced the walls. But, like a neglected garden, the house had been taken over by the detritus of life—books and file folders were stacked around the living room and dining room, piles of unopened mail covered the kitchen and dining room tables, and most other surfaces. “I need a wife, or a housekeeper or something,” Sahira says, laughing. “You know, someone to just come

in and organize me, pay my bills, buy me some groceries, do all the paperwork, because everything just got away from me this year.”

It is 8:30 p.m. and Sahira just arrived home from a rehearsal for a presentation on multiculturalism that she is coordinating at the school where she teaches. She has not had supper.

On the way home, she picked up her son, Malik, from his father’s house. Malik is sitting on the couch, strumming an electric bass guitar. He grins when we enter the room. She introduces me and he plays a complicated chord pattern for my benefit. When we are ready to start the interview, she settles him in an upstairs room where he continues to play for the next two hours. “He’ll be fine,” she says, “As long as he’s got music, he’s happy.”

Sahira always seems slightly breathless. Even when she talks, she pauses barely long enough to gulp air.

My sister took her life eight months ago. She took pills and two bottles of red wine. I don’t know how much I can say about that. (She pauses.) She was a practicing artist—she’s a painter—and she was trying to make her life as that and it just I think, in the end, it was too much. And her life just turned into so much pain. She had a lot of good things happening also and she was a real fighter, but I think, anyway. And my father died less than three weeks ago. And my sister, the one who lives here in town, is pregnant. And then there’s my brother’s wedding to Neil, which is, you know, he had a lot of misgivings about. Well, he had a lot of second thoughts about whether to tell Dad about Neil, and he never did. So presumably Dad died without ever knowing that his only son is gay.

I’m worn down. I’m amazed that I’m standing and I know that I’m looking after myself as best I can. The basics like food, rest, well, when I can manage. I meditate—that’s what has saved me this year I think, meditating every day. But the fall was unbearable. I thought I was going to die. I felt that psychically, I was going through my sister’s life. She’s only 13 months younger than me, so we’re very close. Something in me started sort of living her life for awhile and I thought, “Oh my God, if I don’t get a hold of this I might actually end up like her.”

I, too, am amazed that Sahira is still standing. She teaches full-time, cares for her teenage son (who is autistic and needs almost constant supervision), sits on the school board's diversity committee, and continues to live through her grief. Of her life, she says, "It doesn't look like exactly what it was supposed to be, what I'd hoped for. I'm not right off track—not in some completely other universe—but I'm not managing to actualize, I mean, it's not realizing itself."

Sahira was born in Canada, the eldest of five children. Her parents emigrated from Trinidad as young adults. She is of Asian ancestry, her great, great grandparents having immigrated to Trinidad from northern India. Her family lived in what she calls a kind of silence about their ethnic heritage.

My father refused to have anything to do with Hinduism. He became a Christian, because for them that was what being like white people was. He moved us to the suburbs for the same reason, so we could be like what he thought normal Canadians were, meaning white, European, whatever.

Sahira says that when she was a teenager, she was "completely isolated from people of colour." There's a kind of racism in that, she suggests, "that my parents wanted to raise us in a white community." She says that racism and her mother's illness were by far the biggest issues of her adolescence. Her mother became seriously ill with a brain tumour when Sahira was 8 and, as Sahira describes it, "she actually died slowly of paralysis over a six-year period."

### **Hearing Stories: The Sound of a Stranger's Heart**

Sahira is usually late for sessions and, on one particular Thursday, she arrives an hour after we have started. She apologizes profusely.



I'm really sorry. I thought my report card marks were due on Monday. And they're due tomorrow so I had to madly pack all my marking into the trunk of the car and look like I wasn't doing that so the admin people wouldn't see, because I thought I had all weekend to mark. So I'm going home to stay up all night. It's just stupid; I didn't look at the schedule because I didn't actually want to know.

"Come and have some coffee and just sit," Jordan urges. She always remembers to bring extra coffee for Sahira.

"I'm just going to put my breakfast and lunch in the fridge because I didn't eat anything yet. I'm so stupid; what a day," Sahira pulls two paper bags out of her briefcase. Jordan opens the coffee cup and stirs in sugar, while Deborah loads Sahira's plate with grapes, nan bread, and hummus. The group is gentle with Sahira, who is having not just a bad day, but a bad year.

Sahira volunteered to go first when I asked the women in the group to read aloud a story of their experience. I used the same instructions I gave the girls—to write with thick description and narrative detail about a particular experience in adolescence and read your story to the group. Sahira read the following account:

### **Hunger, by Sahira**

The gym was very dark with revolving spots of light from the mirror ball or disco ball as we called them back then, spinning around, illuminating moving blotches of winding teenage bodies. A bright crisp white shirt, torn jeans, black eyeliner, mascara, tottering high heels, freshly washed hair, or greasy and stringy, profuse sweating in some quarters, the tension, the perspiring excitement of the place.

Bill Thomas, someone said, asked every single girl in Grade 8 to dance and every single girl said no. That's the truth, that's true. It was a night of tremendous risks, of dreams and heartbreak, and heartbreaking vulnerability.

We mostly danced together my friends and I, all girls. The cool girls danced with boys. Some boys confidently plotted their strategy while the fluorescent gym lights were still on. Others, palms moist and mouths dry, were already wishing they were home watching TV like every other predictable and comfortable night. Lyn, my best friend, a little overweight, round face, short shiny bobbed haircut, smiled hopefully. Elizabeth Yinn, my other best friend (her family was the only Chinese family in Westhaven) never came to school dances. Non-white kids often skipped the dances at our school. I was the exception; don't ask me why.

By 10:30 the air in the gym was steaming hot, the music was heavy on bass, strobe lights, chopping dance moves into Michael-Jackson-like isolation exercises, darkness, no parents, teachers only barely visible ghosts hovering at the edges of the action, anything might happen. The moment of truth was always the slow dance, which in those days was inevitably my most hated song of all time, Stairway to Heaven.

The slow dance is what divided the sure and lucky from the rest of us. How I hated that song. As soon as it started, I and dozens of other girls who had happily abandoned our bodies to Dancing Queen, Do you Think I'm Sexy, and Disco Duck, as if on cue, dispersed to the sidelines, quiescent, to be replaced at the centre by the couples. Boys' arms began to snake around girls' waists or lower, girls' arms linked like chains around boys' necks. The rest of us watched, some in awe, some in envy, some in utter relief. We all wanted a boy to ask us even if only to give us the opportunity to refuse him should we feel so capriciously inclined.

It was never bearable to remain in the gym for more than the first verse of the song. We always stayed long enough to give the shy guys a chance to ask us. We'd give the potential Prince Charming up to the end of "Oh, makes me wonder" to summon up his courage to cross the floor. Once it became absolutely clear that nothing was going to happen here, then we would begin the single file procession out the door. The bright square at the end of the gym was our escape from private pain and public humiliation. Of course, we never made a beeline; it made you look rejected. Rather, we sauntered nonchalantly, a slightly meandering unhurried wending of the way from the Dionysian darkness to the Apollonian safety of the front lobby. Once having arrived at safety, some would head to the girls' bathroom, some outside for fresh air, and some of us—the most dissembling of all—to the vending machines. Here we could buy a root beer and a bag of Old Dutch Sour Cream and Onion chips and fill our deflated hopes with fizz and

flavour. Thus we reasserted our control; thus we enacted our girl's right to save her self esteem with food and drink.

We stood and munched and sipped and all pretended we'd chosen this light and refreshing repast over the groping and sweating going on in there. Thus, we crunched and sipped our way through that interminable song and when it was over finally, we crushed the empty chip bags, drained the last drops of root beer, tossed the refuse coolly into the garbage cans, and headed back into the darkness. Round 2.

## **Longing**

Sahira's story evoked a personal response from the group. It drew us into our own memories and transported us into the Sahira life-world. We resonated with the primal hunger, the longing to belong, the sexual embodiment and desire. The conversation that emerged was long, intense, and wide ranging. The women talked of experiences of inclusion and exclusion, their own emerging sexuality as teenagers, racism, girls' friendships, relationships with boys, heartbreaks. We had all met a Bill Thomas in some disguise or another and had seen the devastation caused by the unwritten codes that pin some girls to the wall while others are rated good enough for the centre of the floor. We had all danced under that disco ball, or something like it, even if, as with Deborah, we had never been to a high school dance in our lives.

Mikka hears Sahira's story, *Hunger*, as being about the false promise offered to girls and women that we can have it all—career, family, freedom. Feminism is about setting girls up by saying they can be powerful, independent, strong, capable, and then dashing their hopes in a world that still demands compliant femininity, she says. “Yes, like my sister,” says Sahira, “the one that died. She wanted to be an artist, she was. She

could have been, she was strong and independent. But not strong enough; and racism meant her art was never taken seriously.”

Hunger, for Sahira, isn't a story from long ago—longing and loss fill her with sadness.

Jordan is reminded of someone she loves who is longing for a relationship, for love.

“Yes,” says Sahira. “Like my sister. She was so alone.”

Deborah was fascinated by Sahira's story. She had never experienced anything like the school dance and yet, at a deeper level, she knew exactly what it was about. It evokes memories of her years as a parent and foster parent of teenage girls, and their hungering for what she calls “permanent love” in their disrupted lives. Like Sahira grieving her dead sister, they were struggling with loss of relationship.

And for me? Some part of me has never outgrown the excruciating awkwardness of adolescence. I did not go to school dances and almost never to parties, but on the one occasion that I did, I recall sitting in a back room of someone's house with the guy who played euphonium in the school band. He was as awkward as I was. The room was empty; the party had moved on without us. I remember asking him where everyone had gone. They were upstairs or outside necking he said. “Oh,” I said. I was relieved he was there and that he didn't want to neck. Years later, I discovered that he was also gay.

Sahira's story touched our individual stories and gathered them into a collective sense of knowing and belonging. It asked the questions that lurk in the background: Do I belong? Is this a place I can be safe? Will anyone dance with me? Hunger buoyed us up and brought us to our knees. From then on, the group began telling the stories they had never told before.

When Sahira said, “I love to dance,” we’d have known what she meant even if we’d never danced a step in our lives.

I love to dance; I have always loved to dance. There’s the freedom of fast songs where you and your girlfriends can dance, and let your body go and just enjoy dancing, and then these slow dances have to be this pairing up and who’s getting left on the wall and who’s getting picked first. Dancing shouldn’t be a rating of the opposite sex: Am I selected or not? Dancing is just letting your body be free with music. The fast songs and the slow songs were like two different universes, two different ideas of what dancing is.

## **Moon clarity**

As Sahira continued to reflect on the story, she discovered that the writing process had been clarifying for her.

I wrote this immediately after our very first meeting. I sat that same day and I wrote. It was something I didn’t understand—that’s the reason I didn’t want to write about it, that’s the reason I was searching for some *other* memory to write about because in fact I’ve never written about this. I wanted to understand, so I wrote.

In all of this turbulent past year, Sahira has been longing for some sense of meaning, for what she calls “moon clarity.”

I’ve gone through periods of extreme confusion, where I’ve just prayed desperately, “Let one, let at least one thing be clear to me, please, one thing in my life.”

At some fundamental level, things are settling and it’s not coming the way that I’ve approached my life in the past. It’s not big thunderbolts from Zeus; it’s little epiphanies.

I’m experiencing a very gradual sense of opening—but if you asked “Well, what are you clear about?” I wouldn’t be able to say. In the past, I’ve been a really rational person. But this is moon clarity, not sun clarity. I have a felt sense of things becoming more stable and more reliable, inside myself.

I look at the moon all the time now. Last night I was just staring (I can see the moon from my bedroom; I don't have curtains yet, you know) and I remember it was like reflected light; it wasn't that overwhelming sunlight, it was the light that comes as a kind of inner glow like, much more like the moon sheds than the sun. So clarity is coming from a different place. I think I've always been looking for clarity from somewhere, but I was never going to get it in a rational way. I'm learning to listen from deeper places. That's why writing is so important for me right now.

Moon light. *Clair de lune*, in French. Moon clarity. I imagine. It is night and Sahira is dancing. Her face glows wet with sweat, her dark hair gleaming and skin like brown silk. Her body is softness and strength, tension and release. She is ablaze. Warmth radiates from her like grace from red-hot coals. She burns and no one is afraid. She burns and is not consumed. Holy ground. Take off your shoes; dance.

### **The play of metaphor**

I was intrigued by the metaphorical quality of Sahira's story—not just her use of the metaphors like hunger and moon, but by the way the story she told seemed to be a metaphorical representation of her life. Hunger is Sahira's metaphor for longing. It is a complex, even somewhat paradoxical image. She says she is longing for a spiritual peace that transcends the messiness and struggle of her daily life. That is why she meditates. Yet, hunger is bodily, a basic physical need. Hunger transcends itself, embraces both her spiritual longing and her bodily self with its needs, urges, and hungers. Hunger is embodied passion.

By coincidence, we also talked about metaphor in the girls' writing group.<sup>19</sup> I didn't plan for it; it just happened: "Earth is a ball of atoms turned to stone," someone wrote.

"Is that a metaphor?" one girl asked. Someone cited the dictionary definition, that a metaphor is a figure of speech using words that usually mean one thing to say something else, making a kind of comparison.

"Life is hard and the earth is hard like rock," someone said, "so that makes earth a metaphor for life." Someone else made a joke about the "gravity" of the situation. "And *hard* is itself a metaphor," I added. Then one of the other girls, a serious and logical young woman, said she still didn't get it. I don't either, I realize. Metaphors may be hard but they are also slippery.

The word *metaphor* is usually defined as the opposite of that which is factual and practical and ordinary. In the dictionary, somewhere between metamorphosis and metaphysics, I read that a metaphor "is the application of a name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable" (Barber, 2004, p. 974). Like its Greek cousins on the dictionary page, the word *metaphor* is transplanted from the bodily, temporal world into the realm of abstraction, idea, ideal, and of course, most lofty and impractical of all, poetry. Metaphor imitates the dualistic patterns of the Western philosophical tradition—mind versus body, objective versus

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<sup>19</sup> This section is drawn from my field notes from Group 2 (Experiences of social exclusion and bullying with girls age 14-16). However, as this conversation was not audio recorded, I have not used the participants' pseudonyms.

subjective, concrete versus abstract, reality versus art. Metaphor is seen as a purely linguistic device, a literary embellishment that is entirely dispensable.

Philosophers Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) bring the concept of metaphor back to earth, literally back into the body, when they say that the mind is inherently embodied and that abstract concepts are based on conceptual metaphors drawn from sensory experience. Ordinary speech, of the kind we usually think of as literal and factual, is infused with metaphors grounded in experiences of our bodies moving in time and space. Lakoff and Johnson describe metaphors as conceptual constructions that are central to the development of abstract thought. Metaphors that arise from daily, bodily experience enable us to create highly abstract concepts. The simple example of *hard* equating with *difficulty* is a metaphorical association based on sensory experience of touching unbreakable objects.

Johnson (1987) elaborates the idea that fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more metaphors that rely on our sensorimotor and emotional experience. Such metaphors are usually taken for granted, he says, and often considered to be literal. For example, if I say that the dollar is *down* this week, I am using a spatial metaphor derived from my bodily experience of gravity, which gives me a notion of up (away from the centre of the earth) and down (toward the earth's core). If objects are placed in a pile, the more there are, the higher the pile. Thus, the sensory experiences of *up* become extended to apply to an abstract concept such as value. *Up* becomes a metaphorical representation for *more* (an increase in value). Our culture has a great storehouse of these commonplace metaphors. We use them so automatically we do not usually consider them to be metaphors. For example, the idea of being *in* a bad mood employs the experience of



being *in or inside*. A body or object that can be contained *in* a physical space is extended to suggest emotion as a place *within* which a person can be located.

Crisp (1997) challenges the idea that metaphor is fundamentally an opposite of literal speech. Poetic metaphor is *both* literal and beyond literal, he says, claiming that a poem can be and sometimes must be read for exactly what it says. The literal and non-literal coexist, mutually informing and embodying each other. I think of a favourite passage.

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves. (M. Oliver, 1986, p. 14)

I can interpret the lines non-metaphorically—thinking of what it might be like to walk on my knees for a hundred miles through burning sand. And my body is just as Mary Oliver says—soft, the body of an animal. Yet the image arches beyond itself in my imagination. And something beckons like the rich smell of fallen leaves turning to soil; the dry hot desert becoming forest, furred, female. I think of animals small and brown—the muskrat swimming across the bay each morning, a mole I glimpse sometime beside the ferns. The more-than-literal plays in and between Oliver's lines—pointing to fragility and the gentle, the goodness of things.

Drawing on the insights of the 18th century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, Danesi (2004) proposes that metaphor is neither an abstraction nor a rhetorical device, but human beings' default mode of thinking. Like miniature poems, all metaphors stimulate our imaginations, he says, helping us to gain understanding from the interaction of their two parts. Metaphors help to make the world comprehensible by connecting one realm of

experience that may be foreign or strange to one that is more familiar. We are all born poets, he says, using our senses to link things together into larger ideas.

Metaphors make connections—one image to another, one idea to another, one experience to another, one person to another. Metaphors stitch together our fragmentary experiences of the world. According to Danesi, the study of metaphor is ultimately a study in how thought, language, and culture are intertwined in a seamless amalgam of meaning-making—an amalgam that we come to use from childhood onwards to understand reality and our place in it. As in Mary Oliver's (1986) poem "Wild Geese," poetic metaphor creates wholeness amidst the fragmentations and ruptures of life—not just common meaning, shared experience, but a binding up of the cracks in things and the brokenness in souls. Individualism posits lone individuals, each responsible for her- or himself. Poetic metaphor weaves a web of common humanity, life together on this planet home. I want to say that metaphor heals. Perhaps.

Ozick (1989) describes metaphor as a universalizing force that makes it possible to envision a stranger's heart. She understands metaphor as a kind of ethical or moral instrument, as a compassionate act of the imagination in which one can engage with another human being. Ozick says, "If A and B are strangers, it really is no good for A to envision B's heart if B will make no attempt to envision A's heart. For metaphor to work as an ethical instrument it must be reciprocal" (Bolick, 1997).

### **Listening With a Parabolic Spirit: Metaphor**

I believe that the reciprocity of storytelling in the women's and girls' groups deepened compassionate understanding among group members. There was a way in which hearing Sahira's story as metaphor enabled us to hear into her heart. There are

metaphors in which participation precedes information, says Crossan (1973), so that the purpose of the metaphor is to induct the listener into participation in the metaphor's referent. A true metaphor is one whose power creates the participation whereby its truth is experienced. Sahira's story tells the truth of her life, and in some sense, of all our lives as women.

This is not singular, this truth, nor is it static. As with any metaphor, there are multiple interpretations, many unresolved questions. The parable as metaphor is not easily reduced to simple explanations. It points to something that cannot be said any other way. We must enter into the consciousness of the storyteller before we will understand. If we are willing, the story will lead us there. If we risk self-disclosure, we may learn to envision a stranger's heart.

There is reciprocity in the hearing and telling of stories. To listen to stories with a parabolic spirit is to accept an invitation into the world of the storyteller, which is itself an ethical move. Sahira's story is just that, I think, a story that is a parable that is a metaphor—a fusion that invites our imaginative engagement. Imagination invites empathy, which is to say, compassion. Compassion depends on a spirited and willing imagination.

Hearing the girls' stories as poetic metaphor is to acknowledge that each is far more than the recounting of a single event. The stories become not just explanations for something else, not just a way for a girl to tell about who she was or how she had been shaped by experiences but bearers of the image of the girl herself. The stories are not just *about* girls' selves—they *are becoming* girls' selves.

*I sit on the floor with my back to the woodstove, watching the snow falling in large flakes against the windowpane. I have seen snow so many times I have to force myself to notice its particularity.*

*Keep writing, I tell myself. Only one more hour. Keep writing into the details. To write, plunge oneself headfirst into a snowdrift and remain there for a long time. Refuse to come to the surface. Soon you will begin to inhale snowflakes. At first they are painful, choking, burning. But stay submerged and then you will write, and the words will pour out of you, and you will forget about your aching lungs—which by now are getting their oxygen from somewhere else.*

*What does it mean? Girls and women write and sometimes the pieces of life come back together. The stories, if they are open, take them to places they have not yet been—places of strength and clarity.*

*I think of Sahira's desire to write. It is there in all of us, the longing to narrate ourselves differently, to complete the ragged sentences that hang in the air like prayer flags.*

*Sahira's deepest passion only a word like hunger can describe. It is the longing to compose herself back into something resembling a life. Its beating resonates with mine; it is the sound of a stranger's heart.*

## CHAPTER 7: FRACTAL

*Parables have that nested quality. Each one contains a world within a world. The smallest part reveals the shape of the whole. Jewish rabbis of the 1st to 5th centuries saw parables as a means by which the whole of scripture might be revealed (Scott, 2001). An account of a single experience can reveal not just the particular context in which that narrative is situated, but the larger social world, and can even reveal something more universal—something of the significance of life on this planet. To listen to a girl’s story as a parable is to discover, within a singular experience, the whole of her life and of the world that she inhabits.*

### Meeting Mikka

I interviewed Mikka—a participant in Group 4—in a busy coffee shop around the corner from her home. It’s convenient and it’s private, in a public sort of way. Like the coffee shop, Mikka’s life is crammed full—between caring for her two children and a writing contract she is working on, and her husband away on business, she has little time to spare. It is the school summer break, so both her children are home much of the time. Today, however, her 6-year-old son is at a science camp and she has arranged a babysitter for her 3-year-old daughter.

“It’s hard to pay attention to details when you’re in the middle of a cyclone,” she says, in reference to a conversation our group had about the importance of paying attention to the details in life and in narrative. As we sip our lattes, she talks about her children.

“If you ask me who I am, it’s that, first and foremost, I’m a mother,” she explains, “Yes, I’m a woman and I’m Caribbean black, that’s who I most identify with right now—other mothers who are choosing to stay home with their children.”

Mikka grew up in a low-income downtown neighbourhood, the only daughter of a single-parent mother who worked as a secretary for the provincial government. “Looking back,” she says, “I knew we didn’t have a lot of money but I didn’t think of myself as being deprived.

“We owned our house. It was small. And we could afford piano lessons; my mom made sure of that. They were \$1 a lesson through the school, and then it jumped to \$5 when my piano teacher took me on privately. I was really aware what a sacrifice that was, and took it seriously; I really practiced. We went to Dairy Queen once a year and that was also a big treat.”

Mikka and her mother shared their house with Mikka’s aunt and her aunt’s son, Daniel. “Most of my friends were being raised by single moms, so that wasn’t unusual. But two women raising their children together, that was a bit unusual,” she reflects.

Her mother had heart surgery when Mikka was 4 but had continuing heart problems. She became seriously ill when Mikka was 16. When Mikka was 21, still living at home and in her third year of university, her mother died of heart failure.

Her mother’s death removed what little security Mikka had. “My mom had no insurance because of her health problems. And two weeks [after she died] I had a mortgage payment to make,” she said. “My dad came to the funeral, but didn’t even ask if I had money to get bus fare for school the next day. And then he was gone. I never really saw him that much after that.”

I asked if her aunt had been supportive during that time. “The whole time my mother was alive, my aunt kept quitting her jobs even if she had no money. She had no real sense of responsibility. For six months after Mom died, my aunt didn’t realize that I

had mortgage payments to make. She couldn't take care of anyone. Perhaps she just isn't capable of it."

The absence of supportive adults in her life put huge pressure on Mikka to make it on her own. In order to complete her third year of university, Mikka worked full-time at night and studied by day. She was 21, she says, and she was completely alone.

"What about Daniel?" I wondered.

My aunt wasn't there for Daniel. When you talk about the intimacy of pain, she was the one person in the family who wasn't capable of intimacy. So, Daniel really came to me and my mom for that. I guess the dynamic in my house was always Mommy, Daniel and me. My aunt was always just out of the picture. And, my aunt, she worked, shifts, so that was often a convenient way for her to be out of the house when it was family time. Oh, Daniel, he was just desperate for connection.

After Mom died, things just kind of went downhill for him. She was a key support for him and he would have been, I think, yes, 17 when she died.

When my mom died, my aunt was really lost, and so that was another time where I was like holding him, and my aunt was off in her room by herself, dealing with the loss herself. So Daniel came to me.

Mikka went on to describe how Daniel became increasingly involved in drugs. Several of his older cousins were dealers, she later discovered.

After her third year of university, Mikka moved to a different city to study law. She had a scholarship so she didn't have to work full-time. The gruelling schedule of study, work, and isolation had taken its toll, however. She had been suffering from depression for some time and midway through her second year of law school she suffered a serious breakdown.

I guess I have a really good guardian angel. The [hospital staff] didn't give up on me. They kept me in for six months, then another month in a day program.

They didn't want to just turn me out because of my situation living alone with no support. So they helped me get back, well.

I was going back to law school and not wanting anyone to know what had happened, having lost a year. I ended up a year with people I hadn't started the program with and I was always afraid they would ask.

It's that male thing about law school and not wanting others to know. So there was sort of this public shame and private pride. I have a sense of accomplishment, pride in what I did, because I was working really hard. Being on heavy duty antidepressants, I couldn't make most of my morning classes so I had to study twice as hard because I missed those lectures.

I did OK, but I didn't do it alone. The sense of pride doesn't come from feeling like I did it all myself. Although it seemed like I didn't have any support, there were always people that just came in at the right times that may have said or done something here or there that just helped. So I definitely know that I've had a lot of good luck. I realize that it could have turned out very differently.

And when I look at Daniel and the people that he was surrounded with, I never, ever think anything other than, "There but the grace of God go I."

### **Hearing Stories: Broken Things**

The women's group gathers around the table—food is at the centre now. By this, our fourth session, snacks have become a kind of potluck supper. Sahira always arrives last—late, hungry, and in need of sustenance. Mikka is always early. She says she doesn't like to be late—her life may be chaotic but she has it well in hand. She makes the rest of us seem disorganized.

Mikka tells us that this wasn't the first story that came to mind. "But I couldn't tell that story," she explained. "It is still too big, too painful." Yet somehow her narrative disclosed the story she didn't want to tell. I think you will see what I mean.



## Broken Teeth, by Mikka

We'd been running around, Daniel, Lyn and I. He was chasing us, threatening to kiss us, I think. Just an excuse to make us run, squealing. Lyn and I ran in between the brick stairwell and the cement planter filled with struggling juniper. We made the sharp right turn around the planter and headed for the open playfield. Following close behind, Daniel jumped over the corner of the planter. The toe of his running shoe caught the under lip of the planter and his face hit the pavement before his hands could break his fall.

Surprisingly, he didn't cry right away. His first reaction was to put two fingers to his mouth. He felt the jagged points that remained of his three front teeth. Panic briefly crossed his face before it crumpled in tears. At home, all I could see was that his mouth was a bloody mess. Mommy ran to the bathroom. While the water thundered into the tub he held my neck, buried his face in my shoulder and wailed. I held him. I was aware that from somewhere behind me and to my left, Aunty was trying to reach between us to look at his face. She was asking, "What's happened? Let me see," and I know that from further behind Mommy said, "Just leave them. He's getting what he needs."

As he sobbed into my shoulder, a briny, slippery pool of blood, saliva, snot, tears and sweat collected in the hollow between my neck and collarbone. It began to run down my chest beneath my tank top. I took Daniel to the tub and helped him get in. I picked up the washcloth and squeezed cool water against his back. Gently, I wiped his face. Small, pink swirls appeared briefly in the tub as water dripped from his chin. His sobs gradually stopped. He looked at me and smiled weakly. I then saw, for the first time, the three fangs that remained where his beautiful, white teeth had been.

After getting out of the tub and drying off, he examined his face in the mirror. He parted his lips to check the damage to his teeth. Three of his upper front teeth were sheared off in perfect crescents, almost at the gum line. Each tooth arced downward, tapering to a sharp point. My stomach sank as I looked into his broken mouth. I felt sadly sick. He raised his eyebrows, curled his mouth into a mischievous smile, turned to me with hands raised claw-like beside his face and said, "I want to suck your blood." I shrieked, exactly the reaction he hoped for.

After he dressed, we headed out to look for the lost teeth. We crawled over the rough pavement, poked in among the browning juniper. I noticed how rough the underside of the planters were, made for grabbing hold of children's toes and not

letting go. “I’m going to give those planters a wide berth from now on,” I thought. Finding no sign of the lost teeth, we gave up the search. Later that evening, as we sat across from each other in the living room, he made his vampire face again. Each time he asked, “Am I freaking you out?”

“Yes,” I replied each time. He was satisfied. He would see the dentist in the morning, to be fixed up, but in the pit of my stomach was a sick, hollow space. As I looked at his damaged mouth, all I could think was that he had lost something that could never be replaced.

As we responded to Mikka’s story, there was a strong sense of connection. The other women reflected on the caregiver role that Mikka had assumed for Daniel. Deborah said, “I was struck by how compassionate you were, like a 13-year-old who didn’t express any revulsion about this mixture of blood and spit and snot. I was really finicky at that age and you were just conscious of his pain. At 13 that is awfully emotionally mature.”

Mikka replied,

It’s funny. As soon as Alyson gave us the assignment, I knew that’s what I wanted to write. I realized how many times that scene had repeated itself through our life. It then became very difficult to tease apart which *one* time that was, but it had happened that he was crying on my shoulder several times, at several different points over the years.

I didn’t think I was going to be reading this now, not right at this time, but last week, Thursday, was the thirteenth anniversary of his suicide. So it was like, “Ahhh! Not a good time to read this.” He had temporary crowns for a while. But, every single time I looked at his face, I saw these broken teeth, and it was just, and he was just so beautiful, you know? He just had these beautiful, big, white teeth, and then they were gone. Every school picture after that, you know, he never smiled with a big smile, and I always knew those teeth were in there and it bugged me. It’s funny because when Alyson told us [about the narrative task], and not to write about something we’re still working through or that’s hard [to talk about in the group] I said, “Oh yeah,” this is not something that brings anything back for

me, but the timing and, just, I feel kind of, I am counting how many times it happened like that. When he was crying and I was holding him. Love. You know?

But he never looked back. He never looked back. In fact, if you were to ask him about a defining moment when he was 9, he probably wouldn't have talked about this.

## **Cracks**

“There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in” (Cohen, 1992).

The story of the broken teeth powerfully encapsulates Mikka's early life, with its breaks, and losses: Her mother, her sense of security as a young adult, her mental health, Daniel. It is a microcosm of the whole of her story as a child and teenager. If we look deeply, we see the many facets of her life—the play of a child who grows up amid the brown struggling juniper of poverty but does not see herself as deprived; the child who was so suddenly tossed, alone, into the adult world; Mikka's love and care for Daniel; his losses; her grief. So many broken things.

The story acts as a container for other stories, story within story, connecting to the lives of other women and their losses. Nestled in her story is the story of every girl's longing and loss.

It has startling parallels with Sahira's loss of her mother, at a similar age, and her more recent loss, by suicide, of her sister. But it also touches many other facets of the lives of girls and women in my research group. Understand this story and you will start to comprehend Sahira's desperate plea for clarity. You will know why Ameilia wrote (on a blog she called “Oh no shipwreck”) that “there is a loneliness in the world so great you can see it in the slow movement of the hands on a clock.” And something will touch you deep within when you hear Mikka say simply, “Love. You know?” Because, yes, you do.

“Broken Teeth” breaks in another sense. It breaks in, the way light cracked open the day, at exactly 7:33 this morning. The story illuminates, as light through the cracks that appear in everything (Cohen, 1992). Without Mikka’s story, we would have missed layer upon layer of meaning. If she had told us that she had a cousin, Daniel, who had died by suicide 13 years ago, we would perhaps have been moved by her sadness but we would have had little sense of the complexity of the relationship and the significance of her loss. How could she have explained it to us? How, except as a story. As Crossan (1973) reminds us the parabolic story is indispensable.

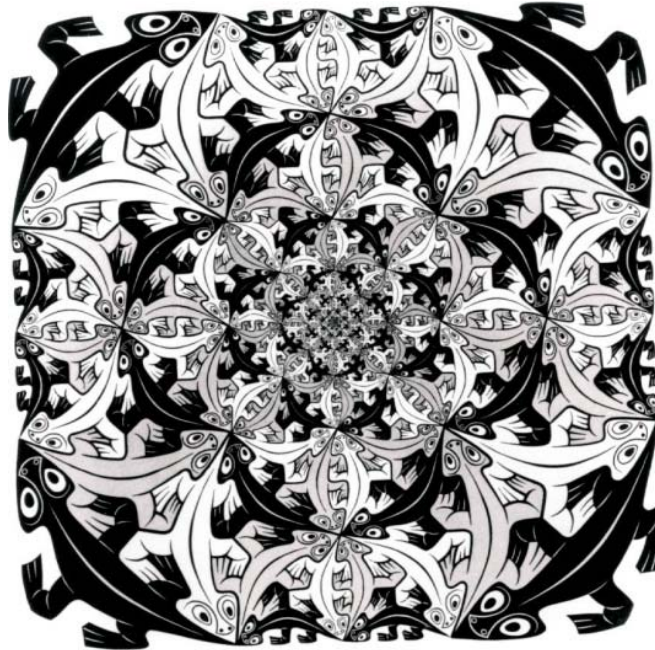
### **Fractures and Fractals**

In 1975, mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot coined the word *fractal* to describe a geometrical form that is similar in all detail except scale. He based the word on the Latin root *fractus*, which means *broken* (Steen, 2002). This is the same root as for the English word *fraction* and refers to the way in which fractals divide and subdivide like fractions. It also is the same root as for words like *fracture*. Fracture—to break, to crack. There is a crack in everything.

A fractal is a geometric shape that can be divided into parts, each of which is a smaller replica of the whole—a characteristic called *self-similarity*. It points to the idea of *roughness* that Mandelbrot (1967) observed in natural phenomena such as coastlines. Fractals are an alternative to Euclidean geometry. Their components are iterations and self-similarities rather than circles and straight lines (Steen, 2002). Many natural phenomena approximate fractals—the spider plant on the windowsill beside me with its self-replications, for example.

One of the most intriguing fractals I know is a print made by the Dutch artist Escher (1956) called “Smaller and Smaller.” A large circle of lizards is replicated; each iteration moves inward, each smaller than the one before.

*Figure 3: Smaller and smaller*



(Escher, 1956)

In her book *For the Time Being*, Dillard (1999) moves between the infinitesimally small and the universal: Why does one human life matter in the grander scale? What is a handful more or less human years in the span of eternity? Dillard poses questions of each small particularity. Why does it matter, one life more or less? A lost schoolgirl, a crippled moth, a terracotta army, sand, and dust. Her narratives are beautiful, each one a delicately painted miniature; if you move far back, you no longer see the details, but you know they are there.

I used some of Dillard's writing in my research with groups of girls and women, to help them experience the beauty in details. The meanings of girls' lives are found in the particularity, and yet, like fractals, the details of individual lives and stories replicate larger themes that resonate with the whole of their life narrative and with the stories of other girls and women.

Narrative is how people explain and cope with life events, says Bruner (1990). And they do not do it sentence by sentence, but in narrative wholes. Narrative "ascends to the particular" (Bruner, 1990, p. 64) in order to form larger patterns of meaning and coherence. Narrative demands the detail. It works out its patterns amid the intricate and intimate particulars—three broken teeth lost on a particular day by a boy who was someone's particular and irreplaceable love. Fractals move to the fine points of things, ascending to the complexity of life.

To create and think in a fractal mode is to move from larger to smaller, into the fine points, the details in which life can be seen in all its infinite complexity. A fractal breaks but it does not break apart. In fractals, the small pieces are always bound together in complex unities.

In her article "Fragments to Fractals," Luce-Kapler (2007) uses the image of fractals to talk about the process of writing a complex literary text—a process in which parts of the piece reflect the complexity of the whole. The separate pieces of text are not broken fragments but holistically integrated into a larger pattern.

As I work on the Geraldine project, I have developed a process of stepping back, identifying the patterns that are emerging, noting the complexity and the opportunities it provides and then writing again. At each stage there are moments to stand in the midst of the text and be immersed and then times to step back and

identify what has emerged from the interaction. Each iteration develops more complex characters with deeper entanglements and richer contexts.

. . . Moving from fragments to fractals as a metaphor also suggests that the exploration of identity through such writing is not one of broken pieces, but one where the intricate pattern of human experience and relations continues to unfold in all its complexity. (Luce-Kapler, 2007, p. 264)

In the narrative storytelling of girls and women, we ascend to the particular, where life is lived in all its complexity. With Luce-Kapler (2007), I think of the individual stories I have gathered not as separate entities but as parts of a complex whole. I am attempting to re-create the fractal shape of things. I am, with Escher, moving smaller and smaller into the heart of meaning.

### **Lullabies for little criminals**

With the women's group, I used the novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (O'Neill, 2006) as a focal point for reflection. O'Neill's protagonist, Baby, is a 13-year-old-girl in Montreal. She is being raised by her father, a heroin addict, who is little more than a child himself. Baby is childishly naïve and at the same time streetwise. O'Neill portrays the optimism, hungers, illusions, and insecurities of this girl who is utterly alone. Baby's voice is tender, beautiful, and desperate. As Baby's life spirals downward, she gets caught up by a dangerous local pimp, Alphonse, who offers her attention and affection. Alphonse introduces Baby to prostitution, which funds his heroin addiction. Toward the end of the novel, Alphonse offers Baby heroin.

"You've never done heroin, have you?" Alphonse asked me. The minute Alphonse said those words, my guardian angel started humming and circling around me happily. I could feel her there, getting excited. Some guardian angels did a terrible job. They were given work in the poor neighbourhoods where none

of the others wanted to go. Every delinquent kid had one of these miserable angels who made sure they got the worst of every situation. These angels loved it when people did the wrong thing or took risks. You can't have that many bad things happen to you without some sort of heavenly design. I had never felt my angel jump so quickly to work as when she heard the word "heroin." I guess she'd been waiting awhile for someone to say it. (O'Neill, 2006, p. 285)

In the women's group, the novel was also received with some ambivalence. Jordan had already read it. She said, "it's a fabulous novel, one of the best I have ever read."

Sahira started it but couldn't finish it. "It is way too close right now, too close to my sister's life and in a way it is too close to mine. I just couldn't read any more."

Deborah felt a strong connection between the book and the lives of her three adopted children. "I just loved that character, Baby. I just loved her. And it's like with my own children, well, all vulnerable children I guess, the one thing they are looking for is permanent love."

"Evil's very real in her young, unprotected life," says Sahira. "That's what strikes me. It's scary when young people have such a sense of abyss. You know what I mean?"

"I saw evil there too," Deborah agrees.

And it's like with the Children's Aid. I'm thinking about when my son Rob was taken out of his home. I think he was probably about the same age. I'm thinking of how he was lifted out of his home, which was not such a bad home. His dad was sick, but, you know, he was managing. The [child welfare] system did not protect that girl. That's evil, to me. That's absolute evil. I've run into social workers who were so wonderful and who've done so much good stuff, but in that instance they totally failed her.

"We use the word *unprotected* and that's to me what was so pervading," agrees

Mikka.



It's this kind of wandering in the wilderness. Alienation's not exactly the word, but just this solitariness, that she's the only person and there's all this stuff and you know it's just going to take one opportunist to just, you know, come in and . . .

Mikka felt strongly about O'Neill's (2006) character. Baby had become so real to her that she didn't like it when she felt O'Neill got her character wrong. "There are just certain things that were not fitting and were kind of jarring about it. It kept pulling me out of this story. It's almost like I've taken Baby out of the book and made a little story about her in my head and continued with the character. But I just don't want to read Heather O'Neill telling me about Baby because she's really annoying me." Mikka felt that O'Neill had "got Baby wrong."

To understand what Mikka was saying requires a sophisticated mind reading ability (Zunshine, 2006). When we read fiction we employ a theory of mind. We assume that human bodies are set in motion by minds, that behaviour is not random. Even if we are scarcely aware of doing it, we develop theories about the feelings, and intentions behind a person's actions.

Zunshine (2006) says that stories are pleasurable because they let us play with this cognitive ability, to test its limits and appreciate our skills. We can experiment with mental states that are not our own and try out what it might be like to face a particular life experience.

Mikka has accepted the novel's invitation, to step behind the scenes of Baby's consciousness. Mikka comments, "I loved the character and I feel like she deserved a better writer. That's such a weird thing to say, because, of course, Heather O'Neill created her." Mikka is aware that Baby is not entirely O'Neill's creation because she

exists in her own imagination as the reader, and yet not *only* there. The full text of the novel can only be found in the imaginative interplay between the text and reader.

When the women read the novel, they are not merely interpreting O’Neill’s text—they are also inserting themselves, with their own intentions, beliefs, and experiences—Sahira as a woman whose sister died of a drug overdose, Mikka growing up as poor and black, Deborah as a parent of adopted children, Jordan growing up in a city similar to the one described in O’Neill’s novel. Thus, as Sumara (1996) observes, to read fiction is always simultaneously to interpret both the text and ourselves. It is to discover meaning within the text and meaning beyond it.

### **Listening With a Parabolic Mind: Fractal**

*My Aunt Janet had a set of Russian nesting dolls in a dark wooden cabinet near her dining room table. As a child, I would play with the dolls when we visited. After I took each doll apart, I would fit its two wooden halves together and stand it up until I had a line of dolls arranged in decreasing size. I was always a little disappointed when I came to the final doll, the one that wouldn’t open. I liked to pretend that the littlest doll had a hundred smaller dolls hidden inside. Nothing is ever complete in itself. Everything is inside everything else. Fractal.*

As I said earlier, parables have a fractal shape, a nested quality. I encountered this quality in the stories that girls told. Their personal narratives were nestled inside another story—the larger story that they told of their own lives. This life story in turn resided inside other, much larger stories—the collective social discourse of girls and girlhood. Because, like the Russian dolls, each story was similar to all the others, the smallest story revealed marks of the largest one.

I noticed it first when Mikka introduced her personal narrative to the group but, once I heard it, I noticed this fractal quality in all of the stories. No story was ever just an isolated event, a one-off moment. As Mikka observed, what she remembered in singular clarity as though it only ever happened once, had happened many times in her life. When we recount a story of significance, we tell the story of our whole lives.

Listening with a parabolic mind, attuning to the fractal quality of stories, entails a double movement—a simultaneous tuning in to the fine points and details of a particular story and opening oneself to the larger meanings and patterns that are disclosed. To listen with a parabolic mind, one must be alert in the present moment. Writing about what he calls the “hermeneutical imagination,” Smith (1999) says that, although the future and the past are involved, they are summoned into the present moment. Hermeneutics, he says, means engaging with deep attentiveness to whatever comes to meet one as new. Therefore, he says the hermeneutic stance is necessarily poetic, imaginative, and suggestive rather than prescriptive, procedural, or rule-bound. Hermeneutics is concerned with life as it is lived.

A parabolic mind notices particularities, individuals, and differences. It is only in the details that one can open up one’s own horizons of understanding to fully engage with others. The interpreter is not objective and aloof but deeply inserted in experience, in the middle of the conversation, in the heart of the singular moment. To listen with a parabolic attentiveness is to ascend to the particularity of girls’ stories. Truth and meaning are found here, not as universal and enduring, but as partial, particular, and indefinite. The ground we tread here is not enduring as bedrock. It is earthy, soft, and pliant. Things grow here.

## CHAPTER 8: TRUTH

*As Crossan (1973, 1976) observes, the gospels were never intended to be read as factual historical accounts. Nor can they be read as literally true in every detail. Much more so for the parables, which are certainly not descriptions of actual events. Parables are true if they are true to life; that is, their truth value lies not in their literal factuality but in the larger meanings to which they point. Appreciating the parabolic nature of girls' stories entails letting go of notions of truth as literal, fixed, and permanent, in order to encounter the deeper truths of girls' stories and of their lives. To discern the truth in girls' stories one must listen with parabolic imagination for truth that makes sense of the whole and for truth that points to larger meaning and purpose. Truth is not in the details but in the projection of possibilities.*

### Meeting Zoe

I often offered the girls a ride home after our sessions; our route took us in a roughly east-west trajectory, first to Laila's neighbourhood, with its lush green lawns and quiet streets lined with full-grown oaks and maples. Audrey's house, the next stop, is closer to downtown. This is an area where dignified three- and four-storey Victorian brick homes, many serving for a time as rooming houses, have been re-gentrified. Rock gardens, fountains, or stone sculptures complement the stately architecture.

Leaving Audrey at her door, we skirt the downtown and literally cross the tracks to get to what Zoe calls her "project"—a government-subsidized complex of row houses and three-storey walk-up apartment buildings located between an industrial park and an eight-lane highway through the city. There are a few trees in concrete planters, too young to provide any shade. A small bed of petunias and marigolds splashes colour against the aging stucco.

This is where Zoe lives (Zoe was a participant in Group 3). Our first interview takes place in Zoe's living room where I am introduced to the cat; Zoe's younger brother,

Eddie; and their mother. Zoe looks young even for 13. She is short, thin framed, and her hair is neatly pulled back into a ponytail. She is wearing cut-off jeans and a plain white T-shirt. Zoe is taking a new MP3 player out of its box. I chat with her mother until she turns her attention to Zoe, “Give me that thing!” Zoe pouts and hands over the MP3 player. “I’m not allowed to have it yet—I got it for my birthday but my mom has taken it away as a punishment.” I nod, not sure if I should ask for more details, but Zoe chatters on.

I had MSN without my mom knowing and uh I would go on MSN and I would uh, how do I explain it? My friend, well, one of her guy friends added me on MSN and he would always ask me for a picture of myself, so eventually I gave him one. But he asked for a picture one time so that he could, what’s the appropriate word to say it, to um make himself like jerk off kind of thing, and I gave him one of my pictures. Then recently on my Facebook account, me and my friends took pictures of each other, but like we were showing our thongs and stuff and we put them on Facebook. Actually I didn’t put anything on. My friends just put it on Facebook. A lot of teenagers are taking pictures like that. It’s not to make it look like, you know, you’re a whore and you want to give something to them, it’s just a sexy picture. My mom took it as me acting like a total slut on Facebook and putting pornography pictures on.

Zoe’s participation in this research project is the only exception from her most recent grounding<sup>20</sup>—one imposed for coming home at 1 a.m. without phoning and with a dubious alibi.

I know a 9-year-old in my project that does crack. It’s very sad actually. His older cousins are like 18 and 19. Because they smoke all the time, so, and when they do smoke they give some to the kids and Jim, well his name is Jimmy, and he turned 9 a week ago. They give him like crack and he’s done needles, he’s done ecstasy. Just to see what happened probably. He doesn’t pay for any of it. His

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<sup>20</sup> Grounding—as a punishment—means that Zoe cannot leave the house except for school and other essential activities for a set period of time.

cousin gets it for him to smoke it and then Jimmy ends up usually getting some of it from his friends, and he used to be like all high and he used to walk around and he has a big crush on me so he'd always come to my door and say hi to me and he wanted me to give him a hug and I'd be like, "Are you high?" and he'd be like, "Yeah," and I'll be like, "Bye. Come see me when you're sober."

They moved out last week. They got evicted because their mom is a druggie and she would start fights with her neighbour. One day they got in a huge fistfight and they got evicted and they had like four days to move out.

My mom says that she's protective because when she was a kid it wasn't as bad as it is today. Like there weren't guys like smoking drugs on the corner of the street, not being afraid of the cops driving by, and there wasn't 9-year-olds smoking pot and stuff.

And whenever I tell her or she hears about stories of things like my friend Susie—she's 13 turning 14 and she's pregnant, six months pregnant. Her parents are letting her keep the kid; her parents are drug addicts so they really don't care about it, so she's having the kid. Well, if my mom hears things like that, she gets even more worried. She's like, "Oh my God, this girl's 13. It doesn't matter if her parents are on drugs they should still care," and, "Oh my God, what if Zoe is doing this and I just don't know about it." So she gets kind of carried away and grounds me for hardly anything.

I'm never at home. I swear to God, when I'm not grounded, which is not often, but when I'm not grounded I'm always at my friends and I'm never at home.

Just like a week and a half ago we were all hanging out and my friend, she does drugs and she's trying to quit, but a friend of ours, he's 20 something and he's like a friend of the neighbourhood, he's always around so we know him, and he was high and he asked her to come and smoke a blunt with him in the car—a blunt, it's a joint, like weed. So she went in the car and he said for everyone else to leave, and we were like okay, you know, it's kind of awkward that he wants to be with a 14-year-old girl by himself in a car, and eventually we waited for about a half hour and we went back and the car wasn't there anymore so we called her cell phone. They were on the highway and he was driving and he wouldn't let her out of the car. He had locked the door, so we told her, we're like, "Well, where's the next stop light?" and they were just going on the bridge and they stopped at the lights in front of Lee's service station, and I'm like "Okay, Just reach over and open the lock from the front." So that's what she did and then she took the bus

back to the project. And then he came back to the project after, he was like driving around, he saw her and she started freaking out.

But then again, we have like a father figure in my project that's like my family. He's like an uncle, he's a Hungarian. We call him Cazzpapa, but actually literally Frank almost killed someone once when this man and his twin brother came and started to pick on me and my friends and started yelling out "whore" and stuff and Frank literally went up and grabbed one of them by the neck and said, "If you ever want to talk like that, you come and tell me that," and he almost choked him.

### **Hearing Stories: The Pink Cadillac**

Zoe had shared her personal narrative with us at the girls' sleepover weekend. We had been doing watercolour painting earlier in the morning and some of the girls were still working. I gathered the group in our usual storytelling circle, and the girls arranged themselves on cushions and couches. Zoe sat cross-legged on the floor. She read quickly and her voice was softer than usual. I moved the digital recorder a little closer and we leaned in to listen.

### **Me and My Life with Steven, by Zoe**

Steven's my stepfather. Well, we're doing it again; it was a long painful and hurtful journey. Steven had a problem with me and it had nothing to do with me at all. He disliked my mother and all he wanted to do was hurt her, and he didn't care what it took, not even if meant hurting his own daughter. Steven knew exactly how to get under my mother's skin and he did everything in his power to get right inside where it would hurt the most. And to do that meant hurting me and then destroying my self esteem and my confidence and then destroying my life and messing up my head. And it had no impact at all on him, and that's how he wanted it—painless for him and painful for others. See the problem with Steven is the only thing he cared about is my brother Arthur, and there's only one reason why. The reason was that Arthur is blood related to Steven and I'm not. I'm my mother's daughter and my mother's blood, and that's what got under his skin.

Every day it was the same thing, “Zoe, you’re stupid. Zoe, you’re going to be a junkie like your mother. Zoe, you’re ugly and fat. Zoe, a guy is never going to date you because you’re nothing, Zoe, this; Zoe, that. That’s all I ever heard from the time I got up in the morning to go to school, to when he picked me up and I went to bed. It never stopped, and even though it destroyed me it destroyed my mother even more, and the worst part is she couldn’t do anything about it. And even when she tried; no one believed her because Steven had them all convinced that he was perfect and my mom was the bad guy. But they had it all wrong.

A couple of years ago my friend’s sister wanted to come out for dinner and Steven said “Yeah.” So we were just waiting on the curb; she was standing on the back of our bumper, waiting for him to open the door, and then at the last minute he said no because he didn’t have enough [money] to bring everyone. So we told her to leave. But she’s AHD and something else so she didn’t really understand the meaning of *no*, and she didn’t take her pill that day either so she was kind of being, “Oh no, he said ‘go’ so I should be allowed to go.” And he said, “You know what, if you don’t get off my bumper I’m going to take you with it.” And she didn’t get off and eventually she got caught on it and we were almost four blocks down the street, until my friend’s mother went in front of the car and told him to stop. I went and called 911 and we had to bring her to the hospital.

All her back is messed up now because of all the scars from it. Her mom never sued because she didn’t want to start problems with him ‘cause he has vending machines at her work. No one knew him as well as me and my mom did and that was the problem.

Zoe had reached the end of the written text but the girls peppered her with questions—who was Steven and how was he related to her? Why did she have to live with him?

Steven is my brother’s dad but not mine. Steven was that dad that I never had in my life because my dad left me for alcohol and drugs, because my mom gave him a choice, because all he did was go out and party with his guy friends, so my mom told him that he had to chose me or his booze, and my dad walked out, so.

I used to live in the buildings down there and my stepfather paid these girls to beat the crap out of each other and give each other black eyes and then go into the police and say my mom did it. And like the whole time we’d be in like Montreal or



we would be in like Belleville, and like they believed the girls because, you know, they had black eyes and everything on them. And my mom would get charged with assault and this stuff and then she'd lose custody of us for awhile. It would suck. So I couldn't really leave (Steven). It's pretty funny how I left him actually. It was right before my camp and my mom's like "Okay this weekend you should go to the house and put everything you can put in your bag and bring it home." So I did. I wanted to bring my laptop and all that because he got me like a \$400 stereo, a laptop, like he got me cell phones and stuff, but I had to leave that stuff at his house.

He took my bike, and you know those places where they squish the cars and all that, he brought my laptop and all of that there and he like got it all squished and crumbled. Yeah, and like he got me this really nice Cadillac, it was pink, he got it painted pink. He actually got me a really nice Cadillac, but he went and got it painted pink because I didn't like the red colour. It was an old-fashioned Cadillac but he got it painted.

"He got you a car, but you can't even drive?" Laila asks. She isn't sceptical, just puzzled.

"No, because he bought me it before so that we'd have it when like we got older so he doesn't have to worry about the whole Sweet 16, bringing me to those shops and like paying for like expensive cars," Zoe explains. I wonder, not for the first time, if Zoe is telling the truth.

"I wish someone would buy me a car when I turn 16," says Beth.

"He gave me his old Cadillac, and we went and got it painted pink so that when I turn 16, I can drive it," Zoe continues, warming to her story. "Christ, what he did with the car; he like crushed it, the pink car. And all my really nice clothes, because the week before that I went to St. Paul's and we went shopping like mad. I bought like bags and bags of clothes; I just stuffed what I could in my backpack, so I kept only some of them.

He still tries to bribe me nowadays, like he'll go, 'You whore, blah, blah, blah,' but like, before I left, he bought me a puppy."

"Did he kill the puppy?" asks Audrey.

"No he kept the puppy; he has two dogs now and the puppy's one of them."

The conversation continues. Zoe tells the group much of what she told me in the interview, and more. There are lots of stories to tell about life with Steven.

### **The truth of the pink Cadillac**

The next time I pull into Zoe's laneway to drop her off, I see a cluster of teenagers are gathered around a parked car. The passenger door is open and hip hop music spills onto the dusty sidewalk. Zoe hops out of the back seat and turns to wave goodbye.

Now only Beth remains. We drive off, leaving behind the smell of cigarettes and hot asphalt. "Zoe really lives in a rough neighbourhood," she observes. Beth also lives in a lower income part of the city—the park at the end of her street is a common hangout for dealers and there is a large subsidized housing unit a block from her home. But living *close to* a project is not the same as living in one. Beth's home life is also more stable and more sheltered than Zoe's.

"I think Zoe's had a really hard life. She could have had a pink Cadillac. I think that's sad."

"Do you think she really had a Cadillac?"

"I don't know," Beth replies. "I think so. Probably." There is a pause before Beth continues. "I mean, I don't think everything she says is true, but she's not really lying."

I want to make sure I understand what Beth means. Does she mean Zoe is lying about some other things but not about the Cadillac?

“No, it’s like her life really *is* like that,” Beth says, “Just not all the details.” She pauses again. “I think.”

Philosophical hermeneutics has overturned notions of objectivity and verifiability. In this so called postmodern age, truth is a wanderer across the landscape of human experience, restless in search of a story. Instead of objective facts and single interpretations, words like *understanding*, *verisimilitude*, and *meaning* play in the intersubjective, conversational, and richly narrative spaces of human life (Crusius, 1991; Smith, 1999).

Hermeneutics demands that inquirers give themselves over to the conversation and immerse themselves in the play of the story, believing in it even when it turns out to be false, believing even when it is impossibly true. Hermeneutics is not concerned with only one way of seeing things nor with a story meaning only one thing. Interpretation is not focused on bringing truth under control through the rigours of science, but on creativity—the telling of stories.

My narrative (this text) contains evidence of my trajectory through a research process—sedimentary layers of accumulated experience, story layered upon story. The story is not pure fiction any more than hermeneutics is pure subjectivity. There are hinges to shared experiences—pointers to events, details, times, and places to which others also attest. But there is also a fluidity that unsettles certainty and attests to openness of my interpretation, to my anticipation of being transformed by stories. Some days I long to discern an essential truth, a solidity that can withstand my own scrutiny. But certainty is not found here, only play.

This text is more like a gospel writer’s creation than a verbatim account of what happened in my research. It could not in any case pretend to be verbatim, even though I

had at my disposal a variety of relatively reliable records—my field notes, digital recordings, notes on flipchart paper, the girls’ own notebooks and written stories, a camera to photograph artwork. My account of what the girls and women said is no more literally true than the parables—because my data, partial at best, is moulded and reformed in the act of interpretation. Were I to look at the best possible record imaginable, a hundred video tapes of the same event, from a hundred different angles, I would still miss more than I perceived. Humans are only conscious of perhaps a millionth of the perceptual possibilities in any given moment (Edelman, 2004). Yet what I perceive is not random. I weave sensory experience into a narrative whole that I experience as seamless and continuous, and that I now retell in some constructed fashion as this dissertation.

Such a narrative is an imaginative construction. It is conditioned by past experiences, culturally shaped meanings, other stories. As such, it is not fixed and static but fluid and emergent.

The criterion of rightness applies to this narrative as it does to any other event, but the very recounting of a story is necessarily interpretive and selective. It is never an exact replica of the original event. This shape-shifter, pattern-maker we call conscious awareness does not replicate reality as a rigid template or a perfect mirror. Its gift is not in its precision or accuracy but in its diversity and multiplicity (Edelman, 2004).

Our minds awaken to the world we inhabit. We don’t make or invent the world around us, yet we are not separate from it. I, any researcher, am neither a disembodied observer separate from the world nor a “dis-worlded” mind. Neither pure objectivity nor pure subjectivism is an adequate explanation for human cognition (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993).

Consciousness is a rich combination of perception and imagination that creates new patterns out of situational givens. Art, like consciousness, does not replicate what is. It creates something new. Art does not and could not merely copy “reality” anymore than my moment-by-moment awareness is an exact representation of what is. Even at its most representational, art must always and already select, discern, and interpret. Thus the art of narrative is always imaginative. It always transforms what *is* into what *might be*—those “rich imaginative possibilities” that Edelman (2004) describes—through which something new is created.

But even if I was able to completely replicate what I heard and experienced, some of the stories the girls told were not true, not *literally* true at any rate. I know this because sometimes they would say things like, “I’m not sure that’s exactly the way it happened” or “I don’t know—I might have imagined that.” They recalled the gist of events, transposing conversations into their own words. Sometimes they exaggerated well beyond the point of credibility. They acknowledged that many of their stories were composites—a story about a particular event with details drawn from other, similar experiences. Often they drew on their imaginations to add the richness of detail and emotion.

No life narrative can ever be literally and exactly true anymore than a painter or photographer can capture a scene perfectly. There is always the omission or addition of detail (depending on the scale), a choice of which elements to include and which to exclude, a decision about what to emphasize and what to ignore. No life story perfectly replicates life.

The Cadillac continues to niggle away at my sense of reality. Later, I ask someone I think might know about it. They think maybe there was a car, or at least there could have been. The stepdad had a lot of money, it seems, but perhaps the Cadillac wasn’t pink

and maybe it wasn't crushed in a junkyard. Or maybe it was. It doesn't seem likely that Steven took all Zoe's possessions to the junkyard, but maybe Steven said that is what he did. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Zoe talked with me openly about many aspects of her life story in the presence of her mother, who concurred with the essential details—that her mother and her mother's partner are both recovering addicts, that Zoe and her brother had been removed from her mother's care and placed with the stepfather, Steven; that Steven was violent and abusive toward Zoe and her mother; that as soon as Zoe was old enough to decide for herself where she was going to live, she left Steven's with nothing more than the possessions she could stuff into her backpack. Zoe's groundings for various and frequent misdemeanours are also attested.

The story of the pink Cadillac was not independently verified, but the more time I spent with Zoe, the more I believed this story is the truest one of all. The truth of self-narrative, as Kerby (1991) observes, lies not in its literality but in its coherence. A self-narrative is true if it coheres with the meaning of life as it is understood, experienced, and embodied by the storyteller. Does it hold together? Does it make sense within the meaning-making schema of richly textured lived experience? To discern the truth in girls' stories, one must listen with parabolic imagination, not for factual accuracy but for truth as coherence—truth that makes sense of the whole, and truth that points to larger meaning and purpose.

The truth is that a pink Cadillac (or something like it) was taken and crushed, along with everything else this young girl held dear, including her sense of self and security. Violence and dislocation and abuse were real. When that happens, it is hard to

get the pieces back together. No wonder Zoe's story sometimes seems inconsistent. Trust has been shattered.

Kerby (1991) says that life is inherently of a narrative structure. We make that structure overt when we reflect upon our past and imagine possible futures. We come to know ourselves through the stories we tell; it is as a character in our own or other people's narratives that we achieve an identity. A life led is inseparable from a life as told. In other words, life is not how it was but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold (Bruner, 2004).

Girls' selves are not hidden somewhere, waiting to be fully revealed. Selves are narrative constructions; they emerge in story and through shared language (Bruner, 1986; Kerby, 1991). The self is not an artifact that exists a priori. Language has a constitutive role in self-formation and self-understanding. People only know themselves after (and through) the act of self-expression. Self-narration is an interpretive activity; hence, hermeneutical. Tricky.

The truth of self-narrative is found, not in absolutes, but in the sense of fit. Like Darwin's notion of evolutionary fitness, it is true if it works, if it is useful and adaptive. The criteria for adequate self-narrative, according to Kerby, are related to fitness. Does it make sense of what we otherwise know? Is it edifying, as opposed to narcissistic or egotistic? Does it help a person to survive? Zoe's story of the Cadillac helps her hold together the fragmented pieces of her self—provides a tangible symbol of devastating loss.

Culture makes available narrative models for creating a life story. Culturally formed cognitive and linguistic schema structure our perceptions, guide us in selecting salient experiences, organize our memory, and shape the way we tell our life narratives.

Our individual life stories must concur and cohere with the deeper narrative structure of our culture. No story stands alone outside these cultural deep stories (Oatley, 1999). The pink Cadillac is essentially Zoe's story, but it's the Hollywood version (based on a true story). The evil stepfather, the abused stepdaughter, the contrasts of wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness—these elements are all there, but in the movie the contrasts are starker, the colours more dramatic. So maybe in real life Steven just put her stuff out with the garbage or gave it away. But on the big silver screen the camera slowly pans across the junkyard; a huge metal claw seizes the pink Cadillac, tossing it onto the conveyer belt, where it moves slowly, inexorably toward the great steel rollers of the crushing machine. In the final scene, a slender 13-year-old, her hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail, walks out the door of her stepfather's apartment with a backpack slung across her shoulders. There is a certain lightness in her step.

### **Fiction as truth**

*How did we even get into this conversation, I think. I am uncomfortable, in a "get me out of here" sort of way. I am talking with a couple of experienced, perhaps slightly jaded high school teachers at a conference where we have all recently been presenting papers. They teach high school kids with learning and behavioural issues—youth at risk. They asked about my research and I talked about the way in which girls shape their identity in narrative. They heard narrative as fiction, equating the telling of stories with the telling of lies.*

*"Yeah, exactly," said one of them. "[Girls at risk] do this all the time. They're always making up something to justify their behaviour."*

*"Isn't that what we all do, in a way?" I am defensive.*

*Self-invention is a fabrication, yes, but I was talking about creativity; they were talking about deception.*



In everyday language, the word *fiction*, because it is seen as something that is made up, often implies *falsehood*. However, fiction is of interest to psychologists because the same cognitive processes underlie both fictional and non-fictional interpretation: both rely on the construction of schematic representations (Oatley, 1999). Thus, it's not only stories that are made up but also people's understandings of them.

Modern science is primarily concerned with one kind of truth—empirical truth—truth that can be verified by observation and experiment, truth that corresponds with the data. Our society is more focused on truth in a scientific sense than it is on how to make meaning of experience. But it is meaning that is the realm and the power of story (Bruner, 1986; Oatley, 1999).

Oatley observes that, while empirical truth may be useful, it is insufficient. He points out that there are other ways of understanding truth—truth as consistency within complex structures and truth as personal relevance or meaning. Oatley (1999) concurs with Bruner (1986) that narrative is not merely a way of telling; it is a way of thinking. Inquiry about the meaning of things draws us away from empirical science, with its goals of explanation, reductionism, and prediction (Bruner, 1990). As two modes of cognition, a well-framed argument and a good story function differently, Bruner (1986) says. Both can be quite convincing—stories of their lifelikeness and arguments of their validity. Each is a different mode of truth. Narratives such as Zoe's attend to the essential meaning of her life; this is a story about her suffering, intentions, hopes, and accomplishments. The story of the pink Cadillac represents Zoe's greatest achievement—she escaped. She left everything she owned, but she got out alive.

“Stories are about the vicissitudes of human intention,” says Bruner (2004, p. 697). He means that people use narrative to make sense of life events. Narrative is what happens when humans, with their purposes and plans, encounter interruption, change, or difficulty. Human beings naturally tend to organize experiences in the form of narrative.

Narrative creates bonds between the ordinary and the exceptional; it helps to establish meaning and understanding in the face of extraordinary or incomprehensible experiences. It addresses dissonances between culturally normative worlds and the more idiosyncratic worlds of human belief, desire, and emotion. People use narrative to make sense of life’s incomprehensible breaks (Bruner, 1986). Narrative is what happens when human purposes and plans encounter interruption, change, or difficulty. Narratives stir individuals to recall devastating emotional circumstances and come to terms with them. For Zoe, the incomprehensible injustice of being taken away from her mother and placed with an abusive stepfather is graphically depicted. Her longings are writ large in the story of the pink Cadillac: she couldn’t survive with Steven, not without being crushed; she wouldn’t stay, not even if he offered her all that money could buy.

### **Listening With Parabolic Imagination: Truth**

Appreciating the parabolic nature of girls’ stories entails letting go of notions of truth as literal, fixed, and permanent in order to encounter the deeper truths of girls’ stories and of their lives. To discern the truth in girls’ stories one must listen for truth as coherence, truth that makes sense of the whole, and truth that points to larger meaning and purpose.

As I discovered from Zoe’s stories, listening for truth as meaning not fact requires imagination not just on the part of the storyteller but also on my part. I must move from

hearing the text as a single, unified sequence, to hearing possible meanings. I got snared by the seeming impossibility of the pink Cadillac. Once I let go of a need for it all to make sense, I was able to let the image play in my imagination until it became vivid and true to life—her life.

Listening with such imagination also makes it possible to hear within Zoe's story, not just the truth of her present experience, but the possibilities she is creating through her storytelling. Her story of the pink Cadillac depicts a self that is strong, capable, and canny—the girl who gets away to a place that is safer and healthier for her. To listen with imagination is to begin to hear the girl that she is becoming.

### **Projection of possibilities**

Zoe and I are sitting on the floor in the basement of her townhouse. There is no furniture in the room except for a full-sized billiard table with a tattered cloth, which is why we are sitting on the floor. In the cool, semi-darkness, Zoe is talking, the recorder is recording, and I am listening.

This is our last interview. Zoe is leaving tomorrow for three weeks at camp. She has spent the last two days going to second-hand and discount stores to get clothing and supplies.

At first I was embarrassed to go to Value Village, like my mom won't go to shop there. But my best friend went there and she bought like all these cute clothes and I thought, "Okay I'm going." Because at my school people have brand new Lululemon clothing and I'm like, I'm standing there and I have on [clothes from] Giant Tiger and Zellers. They have \$50 pants and I have \$15 pants, so it kind of makes you feel poorer.

Yeah, and the problem is that my mom doesn't want me to get a job. If I get a job our rent goes up, which means I'll have to start paying rent. So it's kind of

hard because my mom doesn't want our rent to get higher, but I want to get a job so I have money to do my own things. But Mom is holding me back of course. She won't let me do anything.

"The camp is for poor kids from the city," Zoe explains. "Kids who couldn't go to camp otherwise." Zoe says camp is "the most important thing I have to look forward to every year. It's the one good thing I have."

At camp they see, they don't see my bad side; they see my mature side. It's my last year of out tripping, and then next year I go on to be a leader in training, and then in a couple of years I can be a counsellor. And I kind of just go away to get away from my mom. It's like a second home to me. It's a lot funner than sometimes being here because I'm always yelled at when I'm at home, or I'm always in trouble And at camp, you know, they trust me, so I have all this like responsibility and this freedom.

Zoe also participates in various camp-sponsored activities throughout the year—leadership training, free swimming lessons (she has already earned her Bronze Medallion), and get-togethers with other campers through the Spark Program.

It's a way for the counsellors to keep like a connection because there's some counsellors at camp we're really close to where we tell them everything, like even if we're doing, um, like my friend when she went to camp she was doing really bad drugs after camp because like her mom was beating her and stuff and she didn't know what to do, and camp was her home. So she started going to the Spark Program and she ran to one of her like one of her close counsellors and she told her counsellor, and her counsellor's like helping her and stuff. So it's a way to keep us, well, like a way so we can talk to someone we trust because a lot of the times we can't talk to our parents. So that's why I'm really planning to be a counsellor one day.

I continue to listen to her camp stories—events from past years, stories of canoe tripping, campfires, swimming, skits, the excitement last year when she was "finally old

enough to help serve the food” to the younger campers, anticipation of this summer’s adventures, anticipation of the day when she will be old enough to be a counsellor herself.

Kerby notes that authentic self-narratives are not just a recounting of the past but also “the projection of one’s possibilities” (1991, p. 97). In this final interview, I am conscious that Zoe speaks herself into a future filled with possibilities and hope. This is what she means, I think, when she talks about “just wanting to get out of all this stuff and be less like into peer pressure and more being myself.” This anticipated future self stands as a reminder that truth is not just facts that can be verified.

Truth is an unfolding possibility; truth is an event that has not yet occurred.

## CHAPTER 9: EMERGENCE

*The parables of the Jesus tradition were first an event, an interaction within a group. Then, they circulated in oral form within a widespread community for 30 years or more before they were written down. The parable was told differently in different contexts, never quite the same twice. Many of the stories the girls and women told in the groups had been told several times in different forms. To attend to this parabolic quality is to recognize that the self that reveals itself in story is always in process, fluid, and emergent.*

### Meeting Maria

Maria was a participant in my study of girls' digital literacy practices (Group 1). I say that Maria was a *participant* in that study, but that is probably not the right word. She spoke very little in the group and, because she did not like anything remotely resembling school work, she did not participate much in group reading or writing activities. She did, however, form insightful and acerbic observations about others in the group, which she was happy to share with me in our interviews. She also talked animatedly with me of her struggles at school and at home.

She loved being interviewed—she was witty, candid, and possessed of that delightful adolescent capacity to be astute, self-aware, and sophisticated one moment and self-centred and immature the next. I found her utterly charming. I still do.

### Hearing Stories: I Have No Idea Who I Actually Am

Maria lives in a well-used and well-cared-for little house. It is in the Italian district, bordered by Chinatown to the south, and the low-income working class district to the north. Within a two-block radius there are expensive Italian restaurants, chic coffee

houses and playhouses, an inner city school, and a drop-in for street women. The interior is rustic, with worn pine floorboards, East Coast art, and an antique cane rocker in the kitchen. There are piles of books, newspapers, magazines everywhere. We meet for interviews in the bright living room at the back of the house. Maria sits on the couch, with Charlie, her adoring spaniel, at her side.

## **The Spanish Hijab by Maria**

My life probably started in Concepción, South America. Then, I moved in with my new adoptive parents and then we went to Canada. I've been to a lot of places—South America, the United States. But Canada is the place I identify with most. I just feel like this is my home. I've lived in this house since, like, forever. I sometimes pretend to be blind and I can get around my house without getting hurt—that's how well I know it. But I don't see myself as a Canadian. Because I'm adopted, I'm all over the place. I have no idea who I actually am. I'm proud to be Canadian sometimes and sometimes not. Because of that seal hunt thing and Iraq. When I first came to Canada I was an immigrant. Then later my parents told me I had Canadian citizenship. But I liked the other better; I think it was more who I am—an immigrant.

To my friends, I am the “Spanish Hijab.” I'm still Spanish, even though I don't know Spanish well. You can't take that away from me. I have a lot of multicultural friends. I like to surround myself with them, and learn their cultures. At Superfood, people are always blown away when I tell them I'm Spanish, because I wear the hijab. I guess they don't think there are South American Muslims, but there are. Not a lot, but several. Everyone thinks I'm Lebanese, but I have no idea. That's what I hate! I want to say, “Oh yeah, my grandpa was from Lebanon, and my grandma was Mapuche.” That's the only thing I wish for, that my parents could go back in time and ask for a family tree. Then I wouldn't feel like this. In school you have to do those stupid family trees. I'd put an arrow to my birth mom and dad and little arrows and question marks all over. It sucks.

I often fantasize about what happened; I have an image in my head. But I don't know if it's right. It was after that war happened. They said I might have seen somebody burned to death. And somebody might have put a gun in my mouth. I

don't know why anyone would do that. I have cigarette burns on me, burned by people with cigarettes, one under my armpit, ah, but then, these are chicken pox, I think.

They said my birth mom was kinda like a hooker. I'm thankful that she didn't abort me, but, she didn't take care of me. She had me and gave me to her sister, my aunt, who didn't take good care of me, and we were really, really poor. Our doors were blankets, and I slept on the floor. I still like to do that. My face is actually, like, shaped for lying down on the floor, kinda squishy. They don't know if I was raped or anything. They say probably, but I doubt it. See, that's the thing I don't like about being adopted is that you don't know. That's why I really want to go to South America and find out who my ancestors were, and where they came from. I'd like to meet a grandparent, that's all I want. I'd look for a grandparent. You know, old people are nice.

It would be nice to finally, just know who you are. Like Patchwork Girl<sup>21</sup> (Jackson, 1995), she knew. Well she had issues. I guess she didn't feel like a normal person because she was a bunch of different body parts all put together, but she knew where they came from. So, she had that going for her.

School is...I'm allowed to swear? School is shitty. I struggle in school, my marks are very bad. I've never liked English. Like, I like the language, but um, and I like to read sometimes, it's just that class is kind of pointless. I know how to correct my grammar and everything. These days, if I write anything, it's mostly to-do lists. I used to do the really extravagant ones, like get up, 9 o'clock, have shower, 9:15 to 9:30, or whatever, but mine never worked. Now I just write things like "I owe my parents an Easter present." I don't celebrate Easter but they do, so I should buy them something. I'm broke right now. I have to pay my mom—she's on my debt list.

I have a 51 in Math, a 54 in English, a 64 in Media Studies, and 74 in Spanish, which is kinda disgraceful because I'm Spanish, but I hate my teacher. I try to not go to school. Like, I try to prevent it as much as I can. I have a friend who's sick. I drank her water bottle yesterday because I wanted to get sick so I didn't have to go

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<sup>21</sup> Patchwork Girl, a character in Jackson's 1995 novel of the same name, is a female version of Frankenstein's monster, stitched together from various body parts that her creator gathered from a graveyard.



to school, but I'm not sick. And, I only like passed two classes last year I think. I skip sometimes. I go to the cafeteria to play cards. We just play, ah, Asshole, so that's all we play, or Cheat or Spit. I'm not good enough a player to gamble.

Like, math, I understand how to measure and stuff but it gets a lot more complicated than that and I wish it didn't. I have this game that I used to play a lot, SimCity. I just bought it to build the houses, and decorate them. I didn't even play with the families; I'd just kill them in the pool. I'd like to be an architect if there was a way you could do it on the computer, and then give it to the construction people to make.

I hated my media studies course. Her tests were incredibly difficult and the class didn't have any chemistry. I didn't like anybody except for three people. I got a really good mark on my summative—43 out of 45—but it didn't bring up the rest of my mark. Everybody else did essays, but I did a 30-second PSA against animal cruelty, and a brochure, and magnets. I had my logo, which was STOP—S for suffering, T for torture, O for oppression, and P for pain. This is my main picture. I love this picture. It's this monkey and holding on to a dog. They look like they're scared and, you know, gonna take on the world together. Because the world is hard for them, I guess.

*Figure 4: Maria's logo.*



I am someone who likes money. That's why I work, for money. I'm saving up for driving lessons and insurance and a car, so I need lots of money. My mom wants me to buy her a Mini. She thinks when I get rich and famous, which I doubt will happen, but, rich probably, I will buy her a Mini.

She's been asking for it since I started modeling. "So, what are you going to do with your money?" she said, kind of joking. "I don't know, buy clothes?" And

she's like, "No, you're buying me a Mini." And I was like, "Okay." But of course now I don't model. No one wants somebody that wears a hijab. Unless, I go to like, a hijab modeling agency, which I've never heard of, so no. I suppose I could model different hijabs but that's not quite the point, to be like a fashion model.

I don't think about the future much because I don't want to be disappointed. Like, I'll strive for something. Obviously I'm striving right now to graduate, or not graduate. And in the summer, it'll be to get the money, work, yeah, just take it as it comes.

In the second interview I had with Maria, she told me about her work and the difficulties she had in one particular store which she described as follows:

### **Robbery I, by Maria**

I'm a cashier. I was at Food Discount, and then I quit because I was tired of getting robbed. So, I went to the Superfood because the security is a lot better there.

This little girl came in, probably a pregnant teen. The girl at the cash beside me dated her big brother so she went to her and asked if she could hook her up with diapers. The other cashier said, "No, but my friend can, and she was referring to me. I'm like, "What!" She's like, "Can you just do it?" and I was like "Fine." So I was gonna give her one free one, but my manager was there. So I said, "I don't know if I can do it, and then she's like, "Please, please," and I'm like, "Ugh, whatever, just hurry up." And, I expected them to pay for everything except for the diapers. So what happened is...can I be arrested? She bought like a bunch of crap—chips, dippers, sodas, I don't know, some other stuff, chocolate—and her friend was packing, and then I was just putting the stuff through. Her total came up and she starts to walk away, and I said, "Aren't you going to pay for anything?" She said, "Do I have to?" and I'm like, "Ah, yeah!" She's like, "Okay. How much do I owe you?" I pointed at the terminal. "That's how much you owe me." And, she's like, "Oh, okay." And, then I didn't notice that her friend had, like pretty much left with all the food, and she threw three fives at me, and she left. The girl beside me, turned around and I said, "Your friends just ran away" and she said "Really?" I was like, "Yes" and she gave me \$20 from her till.

I was \$15 short, so I had to talk to my manager the next day. They noticed that my differences were wrong. I told her what happened but I left out the diaper part. I thought it was a lot of money, so I was nervous, but I said I'd pay. She said, "No, that's okay."

The second time, this quick-change artist came in. They train you to look for it, but I didn't think it would happen. I thought she was on drugs, so I just wanted to get her away from me. They said she came to me because I looked the most defenceless or the most nice. New, nice, kinda like out of it, I don't know. She bought a little bit of meat and she gave me a bunch of bills and she asked me to do change for her. We're not supposed to do change for anything 10 or higher but, I wanted her to leave. I gave it to her, and she was like, "Oh, wait, no, can you do this?" and then this, and this, and I was like, "What?" and I got confused. And then the guy beside me noticed what was happening. Instead of just calling my manager right away, he started yelling at me, "Maria, Maria, what are you doing?" and I'm like, "I don't know, call somebody." So, then she's like, "Alright, alright. Okay, give me this, this." and I was like, "No, I already gave you the right amount of change. No, no, no, no. Leave me alone," and I put the money back in the till. The lady left cause she knew she was gonna get caught. I had to count my till and I was off 50 bucks. So this girl who was my boss, sometimes said that I'd probably be suspended. I was just like, whatever, I don't want to be suspended, I'll just quit. So I wrote in my letter of resignation. I made it long too: "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here. Blah, blah." Because I wanted to get good references. Other people just leave, or they write like, "I'm quitting, thanks, bye," but I wrote a long page because I liked my manager. I don't like Harry, though. Harry called me a son of a bitch. Then he said he didn't, but I heard him.

I looked for a couple months for a job. I don't like the clientele at Superfood. I liked Food Discount, because they're all immigrants and much nicer old people. The only nice people here are the old people, some of them. Some of the university students are nice too. They ask me "Long day? How's school?" because it wasn't that far behind for them.

## **When you're adopted your life is like a puzzle**

Maria and I stayed in touch after the first study and I decided to interview her again the following summer. We met on an unusually hot afternoon in late June. We sat

outside, sipping soft drinks and enjoying the shade of a large green patio umbrella. Maria seemed happier and more confident. Although she still hated school, she had changed high schools and had successfully completed Grade 12. She was working at a local health food restaurant for the summer and planning to attend a local university in the fall.

I immediately noticed that Maria looked different. Glossy, black curls now framed her face. In response to my questions, she had lots to say about what the hijab had meant to her and her feelings about being Muslim.

I tell everyone this, like when people ask like, “Why did you convert?” I’d say just, “Because when you’re adopted your life is like a puzzle and I felt like I was missing a really big piece.” But I didn’t feel like I wanted to be Catholic. It didn’t click. And [Protestant] Christianity didn’t really either, and then I looked at the other religions, like Hinduism, and I thought that was really cool because I really liked cows but it was too much. My mom really likes Buddhism, she’s not Buddhist but like she has Buddha in the house holding up a window, which is probably really bad. It’s very peaceful and it’s a very nice religion but it was not for me. Then I looked into Islam and my friends gave me books and then I met my boyfriend and then he gave me books too and he just like talked to me about it and that helped me too.

When I converted to Islam two years ago, I decided to wear the hijab. The point of the hijab is to like hide your beauty and make people see you for your personality and stuff like that, not for what you look like. Also, it helped me connect more to the Muslim community but it also kind of separated me from everyone else. Also, because of the whole September 11 thing, people looked scared of me and that wasn’t fun to deal with. Like I’d go on the bus and then people would look really uneasy like just thinking I’m going to blow up the bus or just being scared of me because they’re not used to that.

I liked it; I liked the respect. I felt safer and I felt more respected by boys because I’m very pretty. So boys used to like treat me not very nicely because they thought I was like an object and they’re like “Hey pretty,” but with the hijab they’re like “Hello.” They were respectful, and if they weren’t like I’d cuss them out, but I’d do that either way, but less of them gave me a hard time, so that was nice.

But then I decided *not* to wear it, and that was about me not feeling like myself. I'm Hispanic and I didn't feel Hispanic in the hijab. You have to feel like your roots, you know. I still love what [the hijab] represents and I like it for girls who want to do that, but it just wasn't for me so I took it off.

But now I feel good. I feel like I look Spanish and I can be Muslim and not wear a hijab, and it's just the way you carry yourself. If you're drinking and clubbing, well, I have a friend who is Muslim—she was born Muslim—she just drinks and parties and has sex and stuff like that and she doesn't pray, but I don't judge her on the praying part because I know it's really hard to do.

I think I do pretty good in acting like a Muslim. I'm respectful to elders. I do swear, I swear quite a bit, but it's so in my system I can't get it out, like when I'm driving I'm not aggressive, but in my car I'll be like swearing and stuff, I'm a nice driver, but I do it to make my mom laugh. I'll be in the car and I'll just be swearing and she'll be laughing.

## **Becoming a research collaborator**

Six months after this interview, I invited Maria to work with me as a research collaborator with the final group of girls (Group 3).

Baker's (2005) process of "Girlfriend Theology" uses a research collaborator working with the primary researcher. The research collaborator is a young adult who is close to the age of the teenage girls with whom Baker worked, but old enough to bring a self-reflective perspective. In working with girls who had faced significant life challenges, I felt that it would be important to have a young woman who brought a critical perspective and who had herself faced significant struggles. Maria was 19 and was in her first year at university; I believed she would be an important asset.

Maria responded enthusiastically to my invitation. We agreed to meet at her house; in our conversation, Maria updated me on her life:

Maria collapses onto the couch with a dramatic moan, pressing an icepack to one of her swollen cheeks. She is wearing a shapeless blue dressing gown and unmatched beige knee socks. Not her usual elegance. She had her wisdom teeth removed the day before. She munches on stewed peaches and frozen black currents. “It is hard to eat,” she says, because “the dentist has somehow managed to stitch my cheek to my gums.” I assure her she will survive and she smiles weakly. She is in pain but as always, our conversation is comfortable. She jokingly refers to me as “my therapy woman,” saying that she really likes being able to talk. She tells me that she had been helped by the first group not so much because of the group itself but because being able to talk about herself and her life had been important in working through things.

Maria is interested in helping a new group come together with greater trust and cohesion. “We didn’t bond [in the first research group],” she explains, “but I think it’s important for girls to have a place they can feel comfortable, so I want them to feel they can trust each other.”

I was an emotional little dumbass. I was such a dramatic girl when I was in Grade 9. You know, when you’re a kid just everything seems like the world is ending if you don’t get to go to a certain movie, or something. I was so messed up. I was dating, like, a different guy every week. I was on the pill from when I was 14. It’s just like that experience of, you know, “I’m the pretty girl, and I’m cool and the boys like me.”

I remember one girl in an older grade, like, was my friend’s older sister and she came up to me, or she was talking shit behind my back and said something like, “This girl dates a new guy every week,” and she pretty much called me, like, a slut.

Now I am, like more self-assured, for example with what I wear. I remember in high school, it’s like such a popularity contest that what you wear is very important. It still is today but now I’m more outgoing in what I wear.

So, yeah, when you get older you sort of, figure out who you are. So if the girls [in the upcoming research group] are in Grade 10 or something they're not close yet. No. I think they'll probably be closer when they're in Grade 12 and first year university. That's sort of when you're figuring out who you are, what you want to do in your life and what you want to be. I'm *still* trying to figure shit out. I'm closer than I was though.

We meet several times at Maria's favourite Italian coffee house. I find she has good advice and many helpful suggestions. Maria still has lots to say about the other participants but her former critical judgments have been replaced by concern, tenderness, and genuine compassion. After hearing one of Zoe's stories she said,

They were talking about that kid in her neighbourhood that's, like, 9 and has done ecstasy and stuff. That really surprised me. She said that the brothers were drug dealers, or something, and that they're giving their little brother [drugs]. That's not good. Those kids have no morals. I was like, "Wow." I'd call social services like that (she snaps her fingers) or I'd take the kid. I'd be like, "Come live with us until this is sorted out." That is bad.

Maria participated fully and actively in all the group sessions, including sharing a personal story—although she didn't write it out ahead of time. There were occasions in the group when Maria naturally moved into a role as a leader, offering a more mature perspective. When the girls talked about the stress they were under, and their fears about school—not getting everything done, not doing as well as they wanted to, she had this to say.

Don't freak out about it because like, say you want to take the year off or something. There's so many different choices now. You can go to adult high school; you can go to university or go to community colleges and stuff like. Also, Grade 9 and 10 are like not a big deal; 11 and 12 yeah, they are. But don't worry so much.

The girls had a long conversation about pressures to dress and look a certain way. Maria offered this response.

They make you feel like that's the way to get guys but actually guys are like, they see you like more than that. I saw this girl waiting for a bus. She had like these low rise pants and like her black thong sticking out, and like the guys were looking at her, obviously, but when they see her they have this different, this different image of her; I think if girls cover up more, guys think they are more, well, intelligent.

Maria offered the other girls advice from her own experience, perhaps even from her own mistakes. She wanted them to be more themselves, to not have to participate in the high school popularity contests, to not have to be so afraid, and certainly to not have to bare their bodies for boys. I think back to Maria's choice to wear the hijab, and her refusal to be seen as just another sex object. After having had terrible experiences in Grade 9, she had protected herself and her self-respect and she wanted the other girls to do the same.

Maria formed a particularly close relationship with Zoe. She knew that Zoe looked up to her, and she felt drawn to Zoe as someone who she felt was going through struggles in some ways similar to her own: "I feel like she was me in Grade 9." She was concerned that Zoe was going to get involved in drug use, or that she would make poor or dangerous decisions. "I am worried about her. It's very hard. Her situation is shitty." I watched the two of them in the group; Zoe often chose to sit close to Maria. On our sleepover weekend, they sat together in the evening discussion time. Zoe was on the floor at Maria's feet, her back resting against Maria's legs. Maria was gently brushing Zoe's hair.

It seemed that Maria had a positive impact on others in the group. Laila commented in one interview that



We vibed, so that's a good thing. I remember, after the first meeting, when Maria drove me home, we had a really interesting conversation which I can't remember all of the things that went on, but it was really neat because she's a university student but she was actually listening to what I had to say, which was kind of cool.

## **Self-portraits**

I have cleared away the last of the snacks and taken a few moments to breathe and observe as the girls continue to work on their self-portraits. I provided them with a variety of different art materials and encouraged them to use whatever medium they liked to create a self-portrait. They have moved apart for this activity. Maria is on the couch, drawing in her notebook with a black, fine-tipped pen. Vanessa works on a collage, using pictures cut from magazines. Zoe, Laila, and Gabrielle are seated at the large pine table, the oil pastels, drawing pens, and markers spread out in front of them. Laila is complaining that she can't draw, but she is drawing anyway—experimenting with oil pastels using a blending technique I showed them at our last session. Gabrielle is intensely focused on what she is doing, being still for once, and quiet. Audrey, at the other end of the table, has chosen to work with watercolours. Seeing the ease with which she paints, I can tell this is not the first time she has picked up a brush.

When I asked the girls to talk about the self-portraits they had made, Maria said this.

I'm trying to find a balance between my Spanish side and keeping my Spanish culture and learning more about it just because I was adopted so I kind of lost all of it. And then that [other half of the picture], that's my Muslim side. I'm not a god or anything but I was just going to do an arm thing, like that god Krishna, the

one with arms, and they have different arms like with the native side, but I didn't know what could represent the native side.

*Figure 5: Maria's self-portrait*



On several occasions, Maria retold significant events. She revised and recast her own personal narrative about who she was, where she had come from, and who she was becoming. Everyone does this, of course—we narrate our experiences differently, bringing to light some aspects while forgetting or obscuring others. In Maria's case, I have the same experience recorded as she told it on different occasions, two years apart. I compared the two versions and considered the meaning of each. Like the parables of an oral tradition, the story is the same but the meaning is shaped by the audience and by the context.

Maria tells the story of the robbery to the group of girls for our weekend sleepover. During the weekend, there had been conversations about teen pregnancy (including an

anecdote Zoe told, for the third time, about a teenage neighbour who was pregnant), and Maria picks up this theme in her own storytelling.

## **Robbery II, by Maria**

I was a cashier. And I was working with my best friend and I was there for, I don't even know, two months? Three months? Not very long. There was this Jamaican kid I worked with and an Asian girl who liked this Jamaican kid. And then his little sister came in with her best friend. And they asked the Asian girl to hook her up with some diapers because she had a teenage pregnancy and she couldn't afford diapers. (It was his little sister that had a baby, but she was with her best friend.) And they wanted chips and other stuff too, so they asked this Asian girl and she didn't want to deal with it, so she's like, "Ask this girl." And I didn't really know what was going on and I was like "Whatever, yeah. Fine, I understand teenage pregnancy so, you know, you don't have to pay for one but you can pay for the other stuff." So I'm ringing it all through and it didn't come to that much. They got pop and stuff—unhealthy foods if you have a baby, you know. They only got the diapers. I didn't see any like, baby food or any vegetables; I saw pudding and chips. And I was like, that's not the greatest. And toilet paper, which is good. So, I put it all through and I was like "Ok, it comes to like \$44." And what happens at that store is that we put the stuff through and there's a little belt and then their food goes down that way so that they can bag it.

So they bagged it. All of a sudden I looked out of the corner of my eye and I saw her friend duck out. She left, she was gone. And then this one chucked three fives at me and ran. I didn't really know what to do. I wasn't mad, but I was more embarrassed because I didn't want to get in trouble. And then I was also kind of embarrassed for him because his little sister did that where he works. I told the Asian girl that told me to deal with it, "I was like, what do I do?" And then she's like, "I don't know." I can't remember what we did; we might have just taken some money from her cash and put it in mine to make up for the \$15. No we didn't do that because then she would be low. I can't remember what we did. I think we just told my supervisor, "Yeah, those kids stole."

She had a kid. I knew she had a kid. I don't know where it was. Yeah, therefore I was happy she was actually buying diapers. Like, it's hard being a teenage mother.

Scholars such as Scott (2001) use the differences between the various gospel renditions of a parable as clues to the meaning-making intentions of the parable's gospel editors and of its oral form. Through a careful process of comparison, the different parabolic meanings come into sharp relief. By comparing the different versions, one can hypothesize as to what the gospel redactors might have added to the story, how they might have influenced its possible interpretation and meaning. I used a similar process to compare Maria's versions of the story of the robbery. The biggest difference in the second version of Maria's story, Robbery II, is the emphasis on the teen pregnancy. In Robbery II, Maria is clear that this is about a teenager who *has* a baby—in the first version she said “probably a pregnant teen.” Robbery II glosses over details of what happened later while Robbery I gives a lengthy description of the aftermath. Robbery II is a story about a teenager who is not behaving in what Maria thinks is a responsible way. It focuses less on herself as a young, vulnerable teenager being robbed and as someone with a sense of responsibility and ethical sensibilities. No longer is she the little girl who tries to avoid school; she is a young woman who takes an ethical yet compassionate stance. Robbery II is also a cautionary tale for girls in the group, for whom she is concerned because, she says, “I understand teen pregnancy.”

Self-narrative is not merely a passive recounting of past events but a generative activity. Self-narrative articulates what is important to us and it acts as a moralizing force (Kerby, 1991). Maria's narration not only reflects her values and beliefs about what is good; it also helps to shape and form herself as an ethical person. Maria is now capable of simultaneously holding divergent, even contradictory perspectives—her sympathy for the

young teenage mother, her embarrassment for her co-worker, her judgments about what the teenager is buying, and her anger at being robbed.

This ambiguity is consistent with Raggatt's (2006) finding that people never have one singular and all-encompassing life narrative. He challenges the psychological tenet that successful self-identity results in complete integration, arguing instead that, while a certain degree of consistency and coherence is important in self-representation, the "assumption of a core self underlying all this might be misleading" (p. 16). Raggatt builds on Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) claim that the mind is not a single conscious centre but the result of dialogical relations. Our understanding of self needs a theoretical framework that takes account of multiplicity, conflict, and even contradiction, he says. Our subjectivity is the result of shifting voices that are in conversation or even conflict. Inner debate is a normal and healthy part of our subjectivity.

Maria's story embraces multiplicity. She does not take a singular or narrow position by telling the girls what they should do in certain situations—teenagers should never get pregnant or abortion is always bad. She says simultaneously that she knows "it's hard being a teenage mother" and that she is angered by certain kinds of behaviour. But by telling a story rather than stating an ethical rule or prescription, she invites others to participate with her in reflecting, rather than judging or dismissing other opinions. Her willingness to embrace multiplicity is a compassionate move in that it takes account of difference—different experiences, needs, values, choices—and makes space even for those with whose choices she disagrees.

## **Listening With a Parabolic Ear: Emergence**

A parable takes form and shape differently in different contexts. Each time it is told, the storyteller uses his or her own words to reinterpret it for a new audience. Thus, oral tradition preserves the structure, details, and overall sense of the story but not the exact words. Details get added to the parables as they are retold, edited, and compiled into new forms. And with each telling, the meaning is made and remade differently. As Scott (2001) notes, the tradition usually gets more complex rather than simpler over time.

Maria's story of the robbery—an account of the same event—takes different forms in a different context. The story holds true to its original plot and structure and yet the meaning shifts dramatically. The story emerges and grows as it takes on more nuanced and more complex significance. The self that Maria narrates through her storytelling is also emergent, in flux, and more complex, with each iteration.

This quality of emergence is important because it is here, in the spaces of indeterminacy, that girls articulate their possible selves. Like the hijab that Maria tries on and takes off, like the selves she sketches as multifaceted possibilities, like variations on a theme, Maria tells and retells her self-narrative, which is to say, herself in narrative. Listening with a parabolic ear requires attending to the variations and the subtle differences—the places where meanings and selves are transformed.

## CHAPTER 10: PERFORMANCE

*Parables are first and foremost an oral tradition. That is, they are performance art. The parable requires active involvement—an imaginative engagement on the part of both the listener and the storyteller to bring the story into being as lived event. I discovered that girls' stories are also a performance; girlhood itself is a performance in which identity as girl is an accomplishment, not an entity. Identity, understood as storied performance, is fragile, transient, and capricious. It is always an accomplishment and never fully determined.*

*Just as the meaning of the parable is found only through mutual engagement of listener and storyteller, so too the self requires the participation of others. Hearing girls' parabolic performance of self is to engage with the meanings and selves they are creating.*

### Meeting Laila

Laila was a participant in two of the research groups—Group 2 (Experiences of social exclusion and bullying with girls age 14-16) and Group 3 (Storytelling, selfhood, and narrative with girls in challenging circumstances). Laila comes across as an articulate and confident Grade 8 student. When I first interviewed her I asked about her background. “It’s kind of confusing so I don’t know how we would put it,” she said. “Maybe just say ‘mixed’ and then if you want a bit more detail you can say my mother’s side of the family is from Europe and father’s side is from Africa, or something. But I also have ancestors who might have come from India.”

Laila has travelled widely. She and her family spent three years in India.

It’s a culture shock when you get there but also when you come back. When I came back my class had changed so much that I didn’t fit in anymore. At one point in Grade 4, I had actually started crying about it at school in front of everyone when we were talking about bullying, but that showed the weakness and then no one really cared.

I wasn’t really good at the whole social thing, so it was kind of hard for me so I, like I used to say a lot of stuff that people would take as being snotty even when it wasn’t, and snobby sort of. You might come to school wearing something that

everyone hates and then you're like, "Oh no! Now I have to go shopping and try and find something that everyone else likes." But you try and say the right things and sometimes they come out the wrong way and people look at you and you go "Oh dear, why did I say that?" So I think that most people do try to fit in and like later on they might look back and laugh at themselves and go, "Oh my gosh! Why did I try and do that? I don't even like those people," but at the time it seems like the thing to do, otherwise you're sitting there reading your book under your desk and feeling lost.

Laila's experiences in school, after she returned from travelling, made her profoundly unhappy. Even though girls told Laila, in their words and actions, that "everyone hates you," she didn't want to change schools for fear that she would be even more of an outsider.

I didn't think it would be as emotional to tell it again but it kind of was. I wrote [about] it last night and I just kept writing and writing and writing and then once I read it, it was actually making me sad even though it's been awhile, so. And I don't, I try not to think about it that much, but when I do it's sort of depressing and I don't really have a problem with depression most times, but it does get you down from time to time.

In Grade 4 it wasn't as bad but once you turn into a teacher's pet everyone is like, "Oh, the teacher likes her so much but I hate her guts." In Grade 5, I was a *complete* social outcast. I had nothing to do after school in Grade 5 so I just kind of sat and read books all the time. I didn't completely withdraw, I just didn't talk nearly as much as I had and I tried to fit in with them, which was impossible because they were just different and they didn't really like me that much, so. The teacher picked me for everything, and for awhile I did like being picked for some things, but I dreaded it because then everyone was like, "Oh, there she goes again picking her one favourite student." At one point one girl was crying because she had wanted a part so badly and everyone was around her, and then she came up and I asked her what was wrong and she said, "I really wanted that and then you got it and she always picks you and that's why everyone hates you." She actually said it to my face. In Grade 6 things got a tiny bit better but I was still having trouble with no friends. I was the last one to be picked for any group work and I



never got invited over. I guess they were seeing the part of me that was trying to fit in but I wasn't doing a very good job and they took it as being, as me thinking that I was better than them or thinking that I was full of myself, which I'm not really.

I think it's mostly girls [who are mean to each other] because of how if one person says something and they don't exactly mean it, the other person will take it to other people and spread the rumour or the gossip or the lie and then just to get a whole bunch of people hating that one person, just so that they have an excuse to hate them sometimes.

I guess it might change; I hope it does. It might get better in [high school]. I hope that it is a more accepting place than my class was and that there's not as much gossip and rumours and cliques and that kind of stuff because there are bound to be a few, but I just hope there aren't as many and that they don't hate me.

### **Meanings and mean girls**

Laila's story of social exclusion was told and retold in the two years that she was a part of my research groups. It did not have a singular meaning. The story came to make sense in several different ways—as a story about Laila as a social misfit who lacks social skills, as a story about girl-on-girl social aggression, and as a story about gender performativity (Butler, 1993).

Laila repeatedly talked about her ineptitude—saying the wrong thing, wearing the wrong style, being misinterpreted as snobbish. She constantly reassessed her words and actions in an attempt both to understand what had happened and to get it right next time.

While lack of social skills was a plausible explanation, this interpretation always seemed incomplete. Laila read the social cues of other participants accurately. She intuited meanings, feelings, and intentions and responded in ways that seemed sensitive and socially appropriate. If she seemed somewhat lacking in self-confidence, there was enough in her experiences of being ostracised to account for that. Laila also recognized

that when one is being shunned for reasons that are never explained, there is not a whole lot that one can do.

At one point, Laila considered an interpretation offered by Serena, another girl in the group—that it was not a lack of skill but a lack of strength that undermines her. Serena’s suggestion was that the two of them are victims of girl-on-girl social aggression: Bully is to target as predator is to prey. Laila heard this, and she tested her experience against one of the predominant social discourses of girlhood: Mean Girls.

There is no doubt that girls are sometimes mean to other girls and that such behaviour can inflict lasting harm—Laila’s experience attests to that. However, the discourse of Mean Girls is both problematic and dangerous. Stories that portray girls as spiteful, self-serving, and vindictive have appeal because they draw on familiar stereotypes; at the same time, they belittle girls and their concerns. Although the media depict girls as more aggressive and dangerous than ever before, girls’ physical aggression has actually decreased in recent years (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005). It is important not to deny or trivialize girls’ social aggression; it is equally important to understand it within the context of girls’ struggles for voice, power, security, and legitimacy within a patriarchal society that continues to diminish them.

In a sexist climate, it is simply easier and safer and ultimately more profitable for girls to take out their fears and anxieties and anger on other girls rather than on boys in a culture that denigrates anything remotely associated with femininity. (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 77)

Very early in life, girls receive a message that it is a boy’s world and their role, if they are to be considered “good” girls, is to be nice, compliant, and passive. Contemporary girls and women are still presented with polar opposites: good girl versus

bad girl (Charlton, 2007). Girls learn to be covert; they manage relationships through gossip or other forms of social control, because they are not allowed to express their power overtly. Conflicts and anger are submerged, to resurface in girl-on-girl relational aggression. The social power girls are afforded comes through controlling their networks of relationships (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005). Girls are told that girls and women cannot be counted on for support and that other females will readily betray them. (Think Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty.) Popular depictions of girls' relational conflicts show girls either as innocent victims or ruthless predators (Simons, 2002). Such depictions, and the self-help strategies that accompany them, do nothing to address the larger issues of power. For example, Wiseman (2002) focuses on teaching girls to understand power dynamics in girls' cliques, to empathize, to confront one another, and to apologize. Her strategy largely ignores girls' social context; she does not consider the possibility that the anger underlying girls' conflicts may have something to do with the oppressive conditions in which they find themselves (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005).

Laila and her contemporaries are all too familiar with the discourse of Mean Girls, so it is hardly surprising it is featured in their interpretations of their stories. However, there are inconsistencies in this interpretation. Laila says she is bullied because she is weak, and yet she holds out through many years of shunning, endures harsh attacks on her character and intentions, and continues to attend school and to achieve at a high level. All of this requires great strength.

Walton's (2006) research demonstrates that research and anti-bullying programs typically define bullying in individualistic terms, without taking account of issues of social difference or larger social power relations. Bullying is seen as an individualized set

of behaviours, and efforts to combat it focus on individual relations of power. He says that differences based on gender variance are rarely noted in policy or considered by those who do research in this area. Walton argues that research on bullying should take account of issues of difference and address bullying as a practice of social control.

Educational policy, like research on bullying, mostly does not take social difference into account. Regulation of behaviour does not address the ways in which bullying reinforces social norms and hierarchies of privilege. Such hierarchies are constituted by an interwoven grid of social categories, such as race, gender performance, and class, among others. (Walton, 2006, p. ii)

### **Hearing Stories: Performing Oneself**

Ultimately, Laila concludes that the discourse of Mean Girls is not fully adequate as an interpretive lens. There is a third way in which Laila makes meaning within her story of exclusion and that is as a story about censures of her performance of gender. She does not say so in so many words, of course, but this possibility sits alongside the others; it unsettles and contradicts, but it also confirms and elaborates the other interpretations.

Laila told another story to the group of girls in my final year of research (Group 3). This was a year after her participation in the group on social exclusion. She was more confident and happier in school. However, she was very anxious about telling a story to the group. She talked to me or emailed several times to confirm the instructions. She hesitated, saying she couldn't decide what to write about. The other girls were reassuring, telling her just to write about anything, that it would be fine. She began nervously, and then found her voice.

## All the World's a Stage, by Laila

I'm in a small, cramped room backstage at the NAC, staring at my reflection in a gigantic mirror surrounded by lights. The room is filled with mirrors identical to mine, so that it feels like Christmas in April. My hair is plastered to my head with a thousand bobby pins and elastics, and secured in place with a cloth cap that never stays on properly. My face is covered in orange pancake makeup and I'm wearing some kind of lipstick.

"I am Fernando, an Italian shepherd boy," I say to myself. It is hard to believe, given what's inside the worn-out cloth shirt and patched vest that I'm wearing and what's not inside the baggy pants, but I try anyway. I feel like a pumpkin from the neck up! One more practice of the "guy walk" and I'm ready.

We leave the quiet dressing room, our little haven, a home away from home during the long weeks of rehearsals and performances. We walk single file down the long hallway that leads to the actual backstage area. From there, we have a clear view of what is going on onstage and off. The props have been laid out neatly on the table, waiting to be needed. Hiding right beside the curtain, dressed completely in black, is a woman with a music stand. Perched on the stand is the complete copy of the score. We have to watch her closely; otherwise we'll miss our cue. In a few seconds, I'll be on stage with the other members of my children's choir, singing in my first opera at 14!

Onstage, the atmosphere is electrifying. The dramatic music fills the room, every musician focusing on the conductor, who stands erect like a lighthouse by the ocean. The chorus of adults and children let their strong voices blend beautifully, careful not to overpower the soloists, who command the audience's attention. They stand so tall and sing so well, and the audience watches their every move, hypnotized by the majestic sound of their voices and the beautiful Italian language. The expressions on their faces say it all: this is their moment and they're going to shine! Their voices defy gravity like acrobats in a circus. All of this combined with the bright stage lights, the makeup, and the simple yet effective scenery can be summed up in a few words: intense, magical, surreal.

Getting off the stage is like stepping into a parallel universe and we're sad to leave the old one behind. All good things must come to an end at some point, and this is no different. As we step into the dressing room again, we shed our fake personas and pseudonyms along with our costumes and props, leaving only our memories intact. We've become ourselves again, happy, tired, and vulnerable. We

leave one stage for a greater one: the world. The world is our stage as much as it is our home. It will be our stage again tomorrow, but for now, all we need to do is sleep. No cues needed there!

In her story, Laila is self-consciously performing gender. At first glance it may seem as though Laila takes an entirely essentialist view of gendered identity—she is only pretending to be Fernando-the-shepherd-boy and her performance is “hard to believe” because of the physicality of her own body: her body marks her as female by what it has and by what it lacks. At some level, she seems to understand that her identity, and even her gender, is a performance. When Laila steps out of the surreal world of the operatic theatre, she does not, as one might expect, step off the stage and into the real world; she enters another stage of another performance. Only in sleep does she not need “cues” to guide her performance of self; only in sleep is she no longer on the public stage.

## **Identifications**

In his *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, Gee (1999) says that identity is always enacted; it is about recognizing and being recognized, a process he calls “recognition work” (p. 29). Recognition is about being able to recognize oneself within social discourse as, for example, girl or white, and being recognized by discourses. Recognition work, according to Gee, creates a Discourse (with a capital D) which he defines as the “words, actions, beliefs, emotions, values, interactions, people, objects, tools, and technologies that come to constitute ‘being and doing’ such and such an identity” (p. 29). Identities are always provisional and approximate, and they must be constantly kept in place; that is, they must be enacted with words, people, places, tools, objects, deeds, values, and beliefs.

Hall (1996) says that, in a postmodern world, we can no longer think of the social subject as simple, singular, and unmediated, nor can we restore a coherent theory of a knowing subject that acts as the author of social practices. What we have instead is a theory of discursive practice. The discursive approach speaks of *identification*, not *identity*; the verbal form underlining that identification is a process, always in process, never fully completed. This concept of identity is strategic and positional rather than essentialist. It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modernity, increasingly fragmented and fractured. Gone is the idea of a stable core self, remaining unchanged through all the vicissitudes of life. There is “no true self hiding inside the other more superficial or artificially imposed selves that people or cultures hold in common” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Identities are always multiple, assembled within differing, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory discursive practices and locations. Because identities are formed within discourse, they are subject to particular historically grounded discursive practices.

Identities come into being within the play of difference; identities exist only if there are things that can be demarcated as *outside* or *other*. Identities are defined as much by what they exclude—their capacity to render some things as outside their boundaries—as they are by what they embrace. Identities need difference—that which they are not—in order to be what they are.

Hall (1996) defines identity as a meeting point—what he describes as “the point of *suture*” (p. 6)—between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices that speak to us or attempt to call us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and, on the other hand, the processes that construct us as subjects. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions that discursive practices make possible for us. Suturing is not a one-sided process, nor is it automatic. Discourses serve as positions

to which a subject is called or impelled but the subject also invests in or allies with particular discourses.

Butler's (1993) influential work, *Bodies That Matter*, shows how discursive practices create the possibility for us to be subjects that can be named (spoken). Sex functions not only as a norm but as part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. Sex is an ideal construct which is materialized through time. This is true of any other identity—black, white, gay, straight. There is no *real* objective Identity that stands outside the discursive practices that produce it. Identifications belong to the realm of the imaginary—they only approximate an idealized discursive position. Thus, identifications are always fluid—they can only be temporary points of attachment because they are never fully and finally achieved.

This idea of identification as a process of suturing was illustrated in conversation with Mikka, one of the women in my adult research group. Mikka spoke of thinking of her identity more in terms of her class position than as a black woman.

My family in Jamaica would have been considered upper class black, just below the white folks. The fact that a lot of my family is very light-skinned has a lot to do with it. And they were all well educated you know, and despite the fact that my grandmother was very poor and she was light skinned.

When I hang around with black people they expect me to be black, you know, like that's sort of central to my identity. What does it mean to be black? Black means when anybody else looks at you and thinks that you're black then you are black. And, you know, black people will see blackness in people that other people won't necessarily see. I don't buy into a lot of the self-identification. You can identify yourself in any way that you want to but I think at the end of the day, it's how the rest of the world sees you that defines the way you are treated and you don't *have* to accept it.

There's such a difference between American blacks, indigenous Canadian blacks, people from the Caribbean, and people from Africa that I don't think



there's enough commonality among us to see our group as homogenous in any sort of cultural sense. I would more likely define myself as Caribbean or West Indian. I talk about being brought up in a West Indian home, as opposed to being black. Because for me I don't feel a connection to black people but I do feel a connection to West Indians, especially those who are first generation, raised by parents who came here.

Mikka reveals how the discourse of blackness impels her into position as black, an identity that is never singular and that differs depending on historical, geographic, and social location. Mikka articulates the tension between the ways that the discourse calls her into position and her willingness to ally herself with any particular identification. On the one hand, she says that it's how the world sees you that is fundamentally important, but, at the same time, she says one does not necessarily have to take up that identity for oneself. Her reflections illustrate the fluidity of identification as a process in response to a discursively produced ideal.

### **The performativity of girlhood**

Feminist post-structuralists hold that norms of femininity, and hence of girlhood, are constantly being revised. There is no single way to be a girl and any talk of girlhood is constantly evolving (Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006; Jones, 1993). Furthermore, girls are not uniformly socialized into gender roles. Girls develop untidy and unruly selves, narrating themselves into existence by using the available discourses of their culture, while simultaneously moving outside of neat social categories (Gonick, 2003). They become girls by participating within the available social meanings and practices that define girlhood (Jones, 1993).

Davies (2006) argues that it is necessary to move away from seeing the self as a noun (an object stable and fixed prior to discourse) to seeing selfhood as a verb. Selves are always in process, taking shape through discursive possibilities. When presented with dominant scripts, “the task becomes one of negotiating and navigating this terrain, its various cul-de-sacs and spaces of safety, and its hyphenated third spaces” (Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006, p. xiii). Developing a subjective identity is always an ambivalent project because one must submit to the imperatives of a particular discourse in order to gain mastery (Davies et al., 2001).

Gender is a “lived process” (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 3) and not the inevitable outcome of a sexed body. Gender is a set of relations developed by and within technologies, physical bodies and spaces, discourses, and material processes. Echoing Butler’s (1993, 2006) notion of gender’s undetermined determinedness, Nayak and Kehily say that gender is neither a random occurrence nor a *fait accompli*, but “the shaky happenstance of identification, embodiment, and the rigidly routine rituals of gender demarcation” (2008, p. 5).

Gender is a negotiation, not a voluntary choice. The appearance of a complete and coherent gender hides the considerable effort that goes into making gender appear to be natural and inevitable. It also hides the severe social sanctions and censure that are levelled against those who do not perform gender in conformity with social norms. Although they do not fully determine it, performances of gender are constrained by taboo, tradition, or threats such as ostracism and even death (Butler, 1993). Mikka experienced social censure for not performing black as others thought she should. And there are hints within Laila’s account that suggest she understands that her enactment of identity as an adolescent girl is being sanctioned. Laila referred on several occasions to a girl whom she

calls “the style police” because she judges and criticizes Laila’s physical appearance. “She likes helping out a lot with others, with what other people are wearing because she kind of thinks she knows everything about it. Yeah, sometimes she just comes over and basically gives me a once over and says you need to go buy new clothes or you need to do this and that kind of annoys me. And I really, really don’t like shopping although I know I’m supposed to.” Laila reflected the pressure to look and act a particular way.

They say that we’re equal and in some places women and men *aren’t*, but we already kind of know that. There are different expectations on men and women. If we were really equal we should have the same expectations. I think it’s because we kind of put the pressure on ourselves. Because our appearances are important and the people around us are important. Whereas guys don’t care about that stuff as much. But, we do for some reason, and that’s what makes us have more stereotypes, I think.

Like we can’t be too smart. And that’s really different, too for guys, because they can be more natural. Whereas we have to, well, we don’t *have* to, but the media and other people are kind of putting pressure on us to like wear makeup and shave our legs, and do this and do that because that makes you pretty or whatever. Appearance is key. Sometimes I think we get measured against robots because robots could have the ability to be perfect. You can make them whatever you want them to be. Whereas, you can’t really with us because we’re stuck with what we have, unless you go through a whole bunch of plastic surgery or try and act differently.

Sometimes I hold to my own boundaries and stick to them. Other times I don’t, which is bad. It’s just that sometimes I try to fit in, and sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes I end up looking like an idiot.

There are suggestions that Laila knows she is not performing gender according to the expectations of her peers. She described returning from a place where makeup and fashionable clothing are not heavily emphasized into a Canadian school where “that is all girls seem to think about.” She struggles with not wanting to behave in traditionally

feminine ways just to fit in. She longs to behave *as if* “it didn’t matter if you did something really bad, or made a *faux pas*, or wore something. Or weren’t fashionable or didn’t like this or didn’t like that, and they were like, ‘Oh. Okay. Well, I’ll accept you anyway. You’re my friend.’”

The subjunctified notion of being able to “wear what you want” (*as if* it didn’t matter) is used as a metaphor for being who one wants to be, assuming a claim on a certain kind of agency and self-authorship. For example, upon first meeting Laila, Maria said

I feel like she doesn’t really fit in; well, she doesn’t *think* she fits in. I keep wanting to tell her that it gets better: “Be, like, yourself, you know. High school is just a popularity contest. In university you can be who you want to be and wear what you want.” I know Laila’s already looking ahead. I was like that too. If you hate what you’re in right now you look ahead and see what’s going to happen next, and you reach for that.

## **The drawer boy**

Healey’s (2005; 2009) play, *The Drawer Boy*, opens with Miles, a young actor, arriving at the farm of two old bachelors, to gather material for a play. Angus, who is brain injured, is cared for by Morgan. (Angus is called the “Drawer Boy” because he used to sketch houses.)

Miles overhears the story that Morgan regularly tells the brain-injured Angus to soothe him. With the unsuspecting Angus and Morgan in the audience, Miles appropriates and retells their story as part of his play. Miles awakens lost memories for Angus and the precarious balance of memory and fiction between the two old farmers is disrupted. Miles thus becomes the Drawer Boy—the one who elicits and plays out alternative possible

stories, possible lives. *The Drawer Boy* is ultimately about the power of storytelling to create, interpret, and transform life.

*My writing today has been more focused than usual and it is therefore a shock to quit my quiet study for the crowded lobby of Ottawa's Irving Greenberg Theatre. I feel dazed, blinking in the sudden dazzle of chrome and glass as I gather with my friends. Later, as we pass bowls of fragrant Thai curry across the dinner table, we discuss the play, recalling the tenderness with which Angus fed Morgan a sip of water from a spoon and the anguish on Morgan's face as his story is revealed to be a lie. My thoughts are simultaneously here at the supper table and elsewhere.*

*I wonder if the stories the girls perform for me and one another imitate (or not) their real life (or not). Am I the Drawer Girl in any of this? Does my request for a story elicit multiple layers of fictions and truths? And how each performance on the stage of our small group unsettles some identities and constructs others?*

*I recall Angus's indictment of the actor, Miles: "You are the one who did this to me" (Healy, 2009). Miles did not create Angus yet somehow Miles called him into being by enacting a fictional Angus that more fully reflected who Angus is. The paradox is that Miles' performance creates an Angus who is capable of authoring his own self-narrative.*

Cultural discourses call selves into being; however, they never fully complete them. The girl on the stage cannot, as Laila knows, be a robotic replication of the discourses that call her into existence as "girl." In her texts, Laila's performing and possible selves are produced within the constraints of the scripts while at the same time challenging and enlarging them. There exists a creative tension between the self that is called into being by dominant discourses and the subject that is, however ambiguously, the author of her own intentions.

## **Listening With Parabolic Engagement: Performance**

I ponder Crossan's (1973, 1976) depiction of parables as an enactment of possibilities for self and world and his suggestion that rather than thinking of parables as pointing to reality one should think of reality itself as parabolic. To listen to girls' stories as parables is to become aware of the way in which their self-narrative, rather than merely depicting or acting out their sense of self, *is* their self. The "real" self is not hidden inside the story; rather, it is the unstable, iterated, performance.

Sumara (2002) claims that, paradoxically, maintaining a coherent sense of self means paying attention not so much to oneself as to the relationships upon which one's sense of self depends. The self is maintained and developed not through its interior cohesion but in a dance of complex relations. Selves do not develop in isolation. Just as a play is completed only in the intermediary, negotiated spaces among audience, author, and actors, so selves become selves in and through public performance. Just as the meaning of the parable is found only through mutual engagement of listener and storyteller, so too the self requires the participation of others. Hearing girls' parabolic performance of self is to engage with the meanings and selves they are creating.

## CHAPTER 11: POSSIBILITY

*Crossan (1976) observes the power of parables to shape consciousness, that is, their capacity to invite the audience into a changed worldview. It is evident from cognitive studies that human consciousness—and the very basic sense of who we are—are attributes formed through the telling of stories. Narrative experiences have an important role to play in enlarging and expanding possibilities for the self (Iser, 1974, 1978; Luce-Kapler, 1999; Sumara, 2002). The act of storytelling, in the parabolic sense, is an avenue into enlarged consciousness and awareness. But with possibility there is also ambiguity—the power of the subjunctive spaces between knowing and not knowing.*

### Meeting Serena

Serena was a participant in Group 2, the same study in which Laila first participated. Serena said that she thought of herself as average in most ways, that she doesn't particularly stand out.

If you walked into my class, you'd have no idea I existed. I was the girl in the back corner with her 4 inch thick book hidden under the desk, as she read it to try and make up for the fact that she had no life. Most people are born with a kind of social sense. I wasn't.

Serena, like others in the group, attributed her marginalization to “a lack of social sense.” In the group, I found Serena to be honest, even blunt at times, but she was not lacking social skills. Mostly she seemed to be the pleasant, ordinary person she thinks she is. Yet, she suffered many years of almost complete ostracism. In Grade 8, things got worse.

There was a girl. I made another enemy, because she was always, always picking on me. And then one day I got so mad at her because she was like, basically making fun of me in front of the whole class and the teacher wouldn't do anything and I was so pissed off I just screamed *shut up* at her, which no one ever did because she was such a, like, god in the eyes of everyone else, and so then the, like um the whole class, you could almost like hear them go “Oh!” like that, and

she was just glaring daggers into me, and the teacher though, the teacher hated her too so she didn't like get especially mad at me.

Then later on that day she came to the office with another girl that didn't like me and they turned in a knife they said they found in my locker.

The whole day as far, when I look back on it the whole day was just a blur, a lot of tears. It was just, it was the shock that made me so upset. I, for the two days, I was suspended because of that. I just spent the whole time crying.

The principal believed me but it's not like I could personally talk to the School Board so it's still on my permanent record and there were questions getting into high school. That hurt more than anything else, the fact that anyone would think I would do that. The teacher, the principal, they couldn't do anything because as far as the School Board goes—just impartial people sitting in a room somewhere—I was some kid with a knife in my locker. The knife was turned in to the police but they never did anything.

Serena explained that her principal and teachers clearly supported her so the police did not investigate further. Serena was never charged, which meant there was never any follow up and thus, her name was never cleared. The school board followed its policy—because the incident was reported, it would remain on her permanent record. She still rails at this injustice.

I'm just a student. I'm not important, you know, why should they care? Yeah, but what I'm really freaked out about is, it was hard enough getting into high school with that. I'm freaked out about how I'm going to get into college.

My parents transferred me [to a different school]. And I tried, when that happened, I tried to fit in again, but it was just like that was when the whole values thing started to kick in because like I saw all the stuff, like, um, like because for once I had a fresh start.

But eventually it got out and then people started making fun of me and like asking me if I had a knife on me right then. Mostly it was the guys that did that. Once again the girls are more the whisper behind your hands types.

High school's a lot better than elementary but even it has its weirdness, things I don't understand, like a boy at school just calls me a fag for no reason. Yeah, for no reason every day he calls me a fag, and then there's another boy who just



insults me all the time. And there are girls who are just non-stop insulting, and I don't really understand that. Personally, even though it seems like I've had enough experience of it I'll never understand them. I'll never understand them unless I become like them and I don't want to become them. I guess it's all instinct. They just go for the weakest person they can see.

In an interview, Serena told me that she cried for weeks after the incident with the knife. Twice, she tried to kill herself. She is still shaky, still unwilling to trust any friendships, still depressed. "The only person I'll ever really trust is my sister." She lifts her head now and her light blue eyes look directly into mine. "It was very hard to read my story aloud. My voice shakes and sometimes the words come out harder than I intend." Serena had been the last participant to read her narrative to the group. She had prepared it carefully, typed on the computer, with a copy for me. She was nervous but once she began, she spoke firmly and with animation.

## **Hearing Stories: A Particular Kind of Watchfulness**

### **Science Class, by Serena**

I shifted my feet uncomfortably. This was my most dreaded moment. I knew I would be ok but still I couldn't help thinking of all those years that the same thing had repeatedly happened to me. My mind wandered to just last year in Grade 8 when I had been sitting in my seat, dreading the teachers next words "ok class, now pair up!" Most people are born with a kind of social sense. I wasn't, if you walked into my class, you would have no idea I existed. I was the girl in the back corner with her 4 inch thick book hidden under the desk, as she read it to try and make up for the fact that she had no life.

But how could I possibly EVER have a social life after those first few elementary years. I tried so hard to fit in, I was so nice to everyone. But I was always . . . well . . . Different. I could never put my finger on it. I looked perfectly normal, I had blonde hair, blue eyes, I was skinny. But I think other girls just

sensed it, the fact that I was weak, they knew they could walk all over me and I'd beg them to like me. By the time I hit fourth grade, I was locked in my own world. Because that was the only place no one could hurt me. The only place I wouldn't be called geek, loser, or whatever else they were saying behind their hands as they stared at me. The world of books, the only place I could feel emotion was inside them. Because when you reach that point of total misery, it hurts so much less if you're numb. But there was one time in every day of school, when I couldn't be numb, no matter how hard I tried. Science class.

The teacher would say the same thing every day. I would pray to god today would be ok. But it never was. I always wondered in my mind, why they hated me for wanting to know things, to learn. I would see every girl and boy in the class room; do that classical eye contact thing, where two best friends would go. "Oh yeah, let's SO be partners" without having to say a word. I would look sadly from side to side. But everyone avoided my gaze. I wanted to jump on the desk and scream to everyone, the students, the teacher, god, "What did I do?! Why do you hate me?!" But would they notice?

Then in a matter of seconds they would all have partners. Lots of them were trios. And then there was that horrible moment of pity from the teacher that made me hate myself. He'd look at me and go "Oh Serena, do you not have a partner?" Thanks for pointing out the obvious! So the teacher would go up to one of the trios and say "one of you girls needs to pair up with Serena, she doesn't have a partner." Why did they always have to do that, I worked good when I was on my own! No one wanted to be paired up with the geek, it would ruin your "reputation." Then there was that awkward moment, when they'd all look at each other with that disgusted look on their faces. Their friends would mouth sorry to them but even I knew it meant, "Better you than me."

So here I was again sitting in science class, first year, first day of high school. I had so many jitters but I knew it would be ok. I had practiced all summer on my charisma skills, my social skills, and my outgoingness. So I walked into the class room, picked a seat, turned to the girl next to me, and said the fool proof line I had practiced all summer. "Oh I love your outfit!" I wasn't even looking at her outfit. I half expected her to say "get lost loser." But to my INCREDIBLE shock, she didn't. She said "Oh thanks! I got it at Detox, where'd you get yours?"

Twenty minutes later the teacher said. "Ok class, now pair up!" I looked confidently to the side at my new friend, Bree. We made eye contact. It felt SO good. I had a friend.

When the teacher told us to go to the back of the class room, I felt great, like I was walking on clouds or something. So I wasn't a freak after all, I just left the book at home and brought my confidence with me instead, I no longer needed a security blanket. I was pushing my way through the crowd saying hi to people, when something caught my eye that made my spirits fall.

It was a girl standing in the corner. She had short curly brown hair, freckles, a very "skinny as a twig" look, and soft blue eyes. She reminded me of a scared little mouse. She looked around from side to side, people averted their gaze. It made me SO mad. What kind of right did they have to treat her like that! I saw her open her mouth a few times and raise her finger, like she was going to tap someone on the shoulder. But eventually she sat down on her seat and pushed it backwards into the very back corner. God, it was like watching a recording of my life from just last year. And then she pulled out the book. I felt tears sting my eyes, not tears of pity, tears of anger. This wasn't right! We were in high school; I wasn't supposed to have to deal with this anymore! Things were supposed to be better here! But some jerks just don't change; they just keep on tearing at the weak.

"Serena!" I heard Bree call from behind me. I turned around and craned my neck over people's heads to see her in the back waving me over to a free table with equipment on it. I looked back over my shoulder to see the teacher making his way over to the mousey girl, ready to say "Oh do you not have a partner?" Like hell I was going to let THAT happen. I mouthed one second to Bree, holding up my finger and turned around quickly making my way to the girl's corner, I tapped her on the shoulder and she looked up from her book with a surprised expression. She probably didn't have the wonderful sister that I had, who had painstakingly spent the whole summer telling me how pretty and kind and funny I was. But she had me. And I did the one thing I always wanted to do, the one thing that no one had ever done for me.

"Hey, I'm Serena. Do you want to be in me and my friend's group?"

There was a moment of stunned silence that hung in the air. "Thank you." She said. The gratitude in her eyes was overwhelming.

I confess that when I first heard Serena's story, it seemed contrived. Her narrative seemed constrained by the truth she imposed, a truth she insisted that we must know if we

are to understand her. These were my first thoughts, judgments. It is always more complicated.

The real parable lay in waiting for me, holding its breath.

I had read Serena's intertextual references to Mean Girls discourses as though she had written herself into an ongoing script as the heroine. It felt fictionalized. It also seemed unrealistic: surely if she befriends another "outcast" she will end up excluded herself. Her gesture might work in a movie but not in a real Grade 9 classroom. I had been hearing Serena's "Science Class" as a simplistic response to the discourse of Mean Girls: Girl is bullied, girl fights back, girl eventually triumphs, peace and harmony and happy ever after.

### **Narrative analysis**

Silverman (2003) believes it is important to avoid treating qualitative data as indices of some external reality. It is a way of "accessing various stories or narratives through which people describe their worlds" (p. 343) but it is not "the reality." As I began to explore the narrative that Serena had composed, I had to shift away from looking for truth and reliability toward hearing meanings and intentions—I had to enter more deeply into the narrative itself.

According to Clandinin and her associates (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), narrative is both a phenomenon to be studied and a way of studying. Kimberly Oliver (1998) says that narrative analysis can be a particularly powerful research methodology for understanding the fullness and uniqueness of human experience because it provides a way to maintain the unity of experience, feelings, and actions. Narrative analysis is both an analysis *of* narratives and the use of narrative as a

device to interpret, and ultimately, to present, one's data. The researcher's narrative is not merely a linear description of events. It is an interpretation; it requires the researcher to situate and find relationships between events and actions. As Kimberly Oliver writes, "Narrative analysis is a configuration of the data into a narrative or narratives that renders some explanation, gives meaning to some experience, or offers insight into the motivation or purpose behind some chain of events" (1998, p. 251).

Many times, in my work on this dissertation, I had to return to the texts that comprised my data. I read aloud, I listened to the voices of the girls on the recordings while I was reading. Sometimes, I made myself read as slowly as possible, savouring the textures, nuances, and subtle flavours that the girls provided, trying always to listen for their particular and unique voices.

I did a close reading of the transcripts, reading with particular attention to the literary structures, forms, and details (Luce-Kapler, 2004). I drew on Prose (2006) for strategies, attempting to model her attentiveness to the text itself, to the ways in which her honouring of the textual details illumines and lifts up meaning. Through her finely tuned analysis of words, sentences, and paragraphs in classic literary texts, Prose shows how larger themes and meanings are depicted. I also looked for what was *not* said, the gaps in the text, spaces for the interpreter's own engagement with meaning-making.

From *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), I learned that moving into the intimate details, paying attention to the minutia, the very small, what the authors call "life in its daily ordinariness, not in its laboured cleverness" (p. 142) moves to a place of knowing where feeling informs thinking.

Narrative inquiry is a challenge to pay close attention, a process that "requires a particular kind of watchfulness" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 21). Close reading

served to slow me down, helping me “notice what is there to be noticed” (Greene, 1995, p. 125). Such perceiving demands an energy and commitment—a receiving, but also a going out to meet the work, rather than passively waiting to receive (Greene, 1995).

Meanings in texts emerge out of a complicated negotiation, an ongoing conversation, between the reader and the text (Luce-Kapler, 1999, 2004; Sumara, 2002). There is no single one truth within a given text and no two readings can ever be quite the same. Every time I read Serena’s text, I bring different experiences, memories, and a different mindset.

### **Getting the joke**

The relationship between a reader and a text is never static; the experience is in the reading process itself and the meaning does not reside in the text but in the relationship between reader and text (Sumara, 1996). As I returned for a close reading of Serena’s story, increasing my level of involvement, I noticed more. In “Science Class” Serena combines a narration of her inner consciousness with direct speech. She uses far more direct speech than the other stories girls told. The other stories use next to no dialogue, relying instead on the inner voice of the narrator to tell the story. Serena describes the non-verbal speech acts of others—a word mouthed, a raised finger, eye contact. Her use of literary devices creates a profound sense of ongoing conversation between the many different voices in the text.

I found three things about her use of dialogue that seem important. First, while Serena uses direct speech for other actors, the bullies are entirely silent: They make gestures but do not speak aloud. Second, everyone but the teacher is also silent until halfway through the text. Only in the middle of the narrative do we hear the voices of

girls themselves. The first voice is Serena's. She takes the stage as an actor who has rehearsed her lines. And from that point forward, the only voices in the narrative are those of Serena, her friend, and the girl she invites to work with them. Even the teacher is silenced, reverting to indirect speech, cut off by Serena before he can say aloud that the other girl does not have a partner. And third, when Serena takes up her role as actor, she does not address nor is she addressed by the bullies. The conversation is not with them, it is not by them, it is not about them.

I had to read Serena's text outside of the movie-script version of *Mean Girls*, where bullies and bad girls are variations on a theme: The victim is tormented until finally there is a showdown, usually in the school cafeteria; the bullies are shown for what they are; some bullies repent and some are punished; former "losers" become winners. In Serena's narrative, however, none of this happens. She shifts the lens of the camera away from those who are presumed to have power—the teacher and the bullies—and focuses on the back of the room where another drama is taking place. Here, where she is the actor, she shows a small act of generosity.

I realized that Serena is not trying to be a hero. All she is doing is trying *not* to understand bullies. "If I act like them, then I'll think like them. If I think like them, I'll understand them. That's what I don't, I never want to do."

Her goal of not understanding intrigued me. Usually people want the opposite. Dewey (1959, c1934) believed art arises from organism/environment disequilibria, which generate responses and representations by means of which we render problems coherent. In other words, the aim of art is to understand our world, yet Serena aims at incoherence, a deliberate misunderstanding, a kind of primal innocence. She creates a story in which

she deliberately refuses to understand why bullies do what they do, so that she can do and be something else.

Serena is not trying to impart information in her story, nor is she trying to make a moral claim—do this to be good. She is moving to a kind of parabolising that is more than just teaching a moral lesson. She is trying to enact an identity; she is creating a “me” by configuring a “not me.” She is using her own power in a more dispersed sense. She is enlarging the spaces of possibility for herself by creating a new script with herself as an ordinary girl who acts with moral agency. She acts “as if” she is outgoing, confident, kind, and generous.

Her narrative sounded contrived and somewhat over rehearsed because it was. She acknowledges that she spent all summer practicing it with her older sister. Perhaps, in writing and practicing a new script, she is creating a newly configured self.

Varela (1992) proposes that human beings are constantly involved in situations that require us to possess a “readiness-for-action” (p. 9). It is this readiness-for-action that allows us to negotiate through our daily activities with little deliberation about how to select the best way in which to handle each event. Varela names this readiness-for-action our *microidentity* and the corresponding lived situations *microworlds*. Varela writes that most of our actions occur within everyday situations that involve immediate coping strategies. The stability of these situations in the record of our personal histories and the immediacy of our actions often make it difficult to critically examine many of these everyday activities. He asserts that this type of knowledge, the knowledge of how to do something, does not involve reflection or conscious appreciation. Varela (1992) notes that our microworld tends to break down when we are faced with an unfamiliar or unpleasant situation. During these moments, we must use all of our existent knowledge and resources



to select an appropriate course of action. The decision to select a specific course of action is neither simple nor reflexive: it occurs as a “common-sensical emergence of an appropriate stance from the entire history of the agent’s life” (p. 11). These moments form the hinges that give shape to our microworlds and serve as the basis for our self-governed cognition. During breakdowns, we tend to analyze our worlds like beginners, so that we might once again feel like experts—comfortable with our surroundings. These breakdown moments between unknown and known, unconscious and conscious, provide a rich context for us to construct a narrative of our shared conscious experience (Varela, 1992).

Serena is faced with this sort of breakdown as she navigates past her experiences of social exclusion. She has to think like a beginner, construct a script and a role for herself, rehearse, practice, and finally enact her new identity. Her narrative feels contrived, I think, because it is still being created. Indeed, the narrative process is part of the ongoing construction of her new sense of self. In construction of a self she is bypassing the dyad of powerful (mean girl/bully) and powerless (bullied/victim) and moving toward a self that can respond both with power and with kindness. She is rehearsing this self, so that eventually, as with Varela’s (1992) ethical know how, it will become unconscious, everyday readiness-for-action.

Consistent with this notion of a self under construction, Sumara (2002) argues that personal identities are not discovered, they are made. He says that readers of novels can experience strong identification with characters, providing unique opportunities to generate meaning in readers’ lives. Encounters with the stories of “other” play an important role in the development of consciousness and self-identity (Luce-Kapler, 1999; Sumara, 1996). Through imaginative encounter with other narratives, including fictional

ones, worlds of possibility open up for the individual. Engagement with literary narrative enables us to experiment with different identities and enlarge our sense of what is possible. Such experiences may lead to an active reconfiguration of the individual's sense of self.

Iser (1974, 1978) says that we are always creating and recreating meaning, and ourselves, in the act of reading. In the experience of reading, we are changing (our) selves. Language and literacy practices have become what Foucault calls “technologies of the self” (as cited in Sumara, 2002, p. 62). That is, they are cultural devices that shape human consciousness. Sumara goes on to suggest that writing autobiographical narrative can be a deliberate “changing the subject” (p. 64). The capacity to use narrative to change oneself can be important for girls such as Serena, who might be in danger of remaining stuck in an overly rigid or unhealthy sense of self—as a social misfit, someone who lacks social skills, or as Serena says, “outcasted for life.” The literary act can help new and perhaps more efficacious selves to evolve and flourish.

Interpretive acts remind participants that human identities are not found; they are not predestined; they are not discovered. Whether one is involved in creating gossip, or narrating past experiences, or identifying with literary characters, one is always in the process of inventing a new relationship with what is remembered, what is currently experienced, and what is imagined. (Sumara, 2002, p. 70)

### **So much to tell you**

John Marsden's (1987) novel, *So Much to Tell You*, is narrated by an Australian teenage girl who is not named and who does not speak. We learn of her experience only through her journal—we must follow her own gradually dawning awareness and her slow

recovery from trauma. As Beth noted, “I was imagining through the whole book because it wouldn’t give me the answers, so I was like, okay well this could have happened.”

The girls talked for over an hour about the novel, discussing not just who had said and done what, but the underlying motivations and intentions. They were mindreading—mining Marsden’s (1987) text for clues about why people had acted in a certain way.

Because they were committed to the characters (they had all read the novel or, in the case of Gabrielle, listened to it) it was as though they were talking about a significant event in their friendship group—they needed to sort it all out. Although they had differing levels of tolerance for the gaps in the novel, they were aware that they needed to co-construct the text.

“She didn’t tell us anything about what happened,” said Laila.

“I liked that because, like I made up my own story as I went along,” said Beth, “and then like the more pieces I got the more I added to it, and tried to solve things and like who did that to her and so I’m thinking, her dad, like she’s already forgiven her dad, she doesn’t hate him or anything. I guess she doesn’t forgive him completely, but sort of, I think she just wanted someone to understand and I think like she goes back to school and starts talking bit by bit.”

And so the conversation continued, spiralling around their questions—should she forgive him, can she let go of this and move on, how does this story end—until supper time.

### **The subjunctive is not dead**

The subjunctive is used to assert not that something is but that it might be, that something is supposed, doubted, feared, or desired (Bruner, 1986). The subjunctive is “a

verbal mood obsolescent in English” says my well-worn copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, Fifth Edition, and now obsolete (Fowler & Fowler, 1964, p. 1285). It is a common assumption that the subjunctive tense is used only by highly literate people in formal situations and rarely in everyday speech. However, Nicholls (1987) found that the subjunctive is alive and well in the United States, even for students who had been categorized as “verbally impoverished” (p. 141). For example, she observed that students readily completed clauses such as “She kept asking that he \_\_\_\_\_ back home” with verbs in the subjunctive tense. The subjunctive remains prominent in popular culture, as for example, in the hit single, “If I were a boy” (Beyoncé, 2008) or everyday phrases such as “If I were you...”

Nineteen seventy—that was the year I became a teenager, the year of the Kent State massacre and the My Lai massacre court martial, the year my sister and I turned our high school’s library newspaper into a mouthpiece for our antiwar, antiapartheid, and anti-pollution sentiments. We carried very little school news—one exception being our high school’s only protest march, which resulted in the right for girls to wear pants to school instead of the regulation 1 inch-below-the-knee skirts. The subjunctives of 1970s politics and protest enlarged my inner world. It would be almost a decade before I held *Lesbian/Woman* (Martin, 1972) in my hands, but I did read one novel about a boy who fell in love with another boy. I discovered the book in the public library and read it cover to cover before carefully replacing it in the stacks. The novel’s hero committed suicide, but not before he had shined a sliver of light into my own closeted self. That is the subjunctive—a door opening onto worlds of possibility.

If I had a hammer  
I’d hammer in the morning

I'd hammer in the evening  
All over this land . . . (Seeger & Hays, 1962)

I believe that the subjunctive lives. The subjunctive is vital because it is the *if*, not the *is*, of life. Narrative, says Bruner (1986), is a way of thinking in the subjunctive, playing with the *ifs* of life's possibilities. He says that all stories subjunctify (that is, they use subjunctifiers) and that a story ends up even more subjunctified when it is re-told. The telling and re-telling of stories is in itself a subjunctive move. Good stories succeed in stepping outside the taken-for-granted world of everyday experience, making the obvious strange. "The artist creates possible worlds through the transformation of the ordinary" (Bruner, 1986, p. 53). To find meaning in human experience is to discover alternative possibilities, what Bruner calls "possible worlds."

According to Luce-Kapler (1999), narrative creates subjunctive spaces within which selves (and hence worlds) can be revised. Building on Bruner's ideas, she says readers and writers can participate in the fictional worlds, experiencing alternate consciousnesses and different subjectivities as though they were their own.

When we write literary texts such as fiction, poetry, autobiography, or memoir, we initiate performances of meaning that subjunctivize reality. Because the subjunctive traffics in human possibilities rather than settled certainties (Bruner, 1986), writing becomes a site of possibility, an "as if" that works in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text. What such contingency does is broaden the possibilities for experiencing, acting, understanding, and creating. If there is no "solid" sense of self, but rather an ever evolving story of identity that is always in revision, then our stories about ourselves are fraught with possibility—the subjunctive possibility of writing. (Luce-Kapler, 1999, p. 267)

When the girls tell their lives in story they do not merely reiterate past events; they attest that something new is already being created (Dobson & Luce-Kapler, 2005).

## Listening for the Parabolic Joke: Possibility

Crossan (1973) speaks of the power of a parable to transport the reader or listener into a different mode of understanding, that is, to transform consciousness. Serena's story has the same kind of parabolic shifting of ground—for me and for her. Her assertion of self is not a triumph over the bullies. Probably because her one experience of standing up for herself was so disastrous, she is not aiming for that. She is not even aiming to understand her predicament. Her intention is the creation of a *non*-understanding self, a self that refuses to comprehend. Paradoxically, her refusal gives her greater power. Transformation comes from living with a certain kind of ambiguity; it is power drawn from not knowing, from the conditional and contingent, the subjunctive spaces between knowing and not knowing.

Developing a relationship with a text requires willingness to play with and into the text in order to discover something meaningful. Sumara (1996) calls this discovery process “locating the joke” (p. 69). The joke in humour is always that which surprises, the twist on the ordinary. Getting the joke is encountering the unexpected. Thus, reading is always an encounter with the unknown and the act of reading must always be a willingness to be opened up, to be surprised. The same is true of parables—getting the joke, which is always one of many possible interpretations or meanings within parables—entails a willingness to be caught off guard, to be surprised, to be taken somewhere else. Sumara (1996) says that literary fiction asks the reader to become more nomadic than usual. This is what I must do with Serena's text—become more nomadic than usual. To get the “joke” I must be open to that which I do not anticipate.

Listening for the parabolic joke means being *willing* to be surprised. I must let down my guard, keep the options open. The assumption that I understood Serena's story foreclosed other meanings. I needed, with Serena, to *not* understand. As I became open to not knowing, I was able to encounter *parabolic* meanings in Serena's story. I became open to the twist, the parabolic "joke." When I think I have finally caught the gist, meaning snaps back at me like a fish hook pulled free of the weeds. Hook, line, sinker.

### **Away laughing on a fast camel**

*Away Laughing on a Fast Camel* is one of a series of novels marketed to teens, featuring the character of 14-year-old Georgia Nicholson (Rennison, 2006). It was Serena who first put me on to Georgia, although it turned out that my own teenage daughter and all her friends have read the Nicholson series. "Georgia is hilarious," Serena told me. "You've gotta read her." She tells me that Georgia is a bit like most average teens.

I agree with Serena that Georgia is indeed hilarious. She is also candid, tender, melodramatic, and completely self-absorbed. She is mean to her parents, who embarrass her, and also kind. Occasionally she has moments of insight. Rennison (2006) has captured something of teenage life from the horror of pimples to trying to "get" boys—get as in understand, and also get as in snog (kiss)—to her desperation over clothes, cats, friends, and false eyelashes. When her boyfriend moves away, Georgia is bereft. In her bedroom, she creates a small shrine to pray for his return. She has a picture of her boyfriend, a figure of baby Jesus, and a plastic Buddha.

Georgia seems completely alive, with all the complexity of her feelings, sexuality, and relationships. She tries on different selves like various outfits of clothing; she is obsessed with her looks and will do almost anything to fit in with her peers. I asked the

women's group (Group 4) to listen to excerpts from Georgia; with the exception of Sahira, they did not like her.

"I just didn't buy her as authentic," said Jordan.

"She just seems really shallow," said Deborah.

"I can relate to almost everything she's saying," said Sahira.

"This is an adult giving a stylized version of what they think it's like . . ." Mikka began.

"God, this is exactly what adolescence is like," Sahira interjected, "I teach teenagers every day. I didn't feel that it was stylized. To me that was totally what teenagers . . ."

"Maybe because I don't have that many teenagers in my life," Deborah continued. "I'm so far away from teenagers now that it's hard for me to imagine . . ."

"I don't think I was like that as a teenager," said Mikka. "I wasn't part of the cool crowd so I didn't really have those expectations on me that this is the way you're supposed to be. I never even wore makeup."

And so it went. In the end, Georgia was voted off the island.

When I told the girls group how the adults had reacted to Georgia, they laughed.

"Of course she's shallow," said Beth. "She's a teenager. What did they expect?"

The girls said that what they really liked about Georgia is that she lets them laugh at parts of themselves, things they don't really like—her obsessions about appearance, being embarrassed by her parents, her fickle obsessions with her boyfriends. "Like, she's in love one day, really, really in love and the next day she's looking at that other hot guy, you know. And she's mean to that girl. The one she calls fat slime green or something?"

"Yeah, like you're not supposed to even think that kind of thing . . ."



“But sometimes we do.”

The girls could see themselves in Georgia; she provided a kind of mirror for them. Maybe the women are too far away from it to remember, or maybe it wasn't like that for them. Or maybe they aren't ready for the joke. As for me, I was never so daring as Georgia and never part of the *in* crowd. But I wanted to be. If I could, I think I would have been just as shallow as Georgia.

## CHAPTER 12: POWER

*The parables of the Jesus tradition were and are still powerfully transformative not just of awareness and understanding but also of social forces and institutions (Crossan, 1973). The narratives of Jesus also speak of a man who challenged social authority and disturbed unjust social practices. The stories of girls in this research were also disturbing and disruptive, also all about power. Parables, and girls' stories, trouble the waters. Listening to girls' stories with parabolic passion, I think, is letting oneself experience the discomfiting, contested spaces of power, subjugation, and empowerment.*

### June 12 notes

*We met in Jordan's back yard. On a patio table Jordan had spread a feast—pita bread, tzatziki, oranges, sun-warmed tomatoes, sliced red peppers, and iced tea. The sun filtered through the leaves into the little courtyard with its paths of red brick. The shade was a welcome relief from the hot afternoon sun. With the rich scent of mock orange and lilac and robins calling from the tree tops, we might have been in a country garden. And yet the conversation that unfolded in this most tranquil of settings left me restless and disturbed.*

*"I was never a feminist. Feminists have only succeeded in making things worse for women," was what I heard. "They pretended to give women choice but all they really offered was an expectation that women must do it all. So now women can't be homemakers even if they want to. And look how much stress this puts women under!" I'll have to listen to the recording of course, to see what was really said.*

*I responded with a passionate defence of feminism. But I don't feel good about my rant. I was angry and hurt, stepping out of the researcher/listener mode. And I cut Deborah off, who might have said something more helpful.*

*Mikka criticized feminists for making things worse for women. Surely it's neo-liberalism that is making things worse—white male capitalists whose incomes continue to increase at the expense of women and the poor.*

*And what of another group member's complaint that no one told her the truth of the mating game—that it's all over by the time you're 30, that she scared men away by being too smart and too strong to bow to their egos. How unbelievably sad that feminists get blamed and no one calls the men and boys to account!*

*Then another woman talked about a girl on her street. "I could not tell at first if she was a boy or a girl. She was a real loner—everyone thought she was so weird. But I saw her the other day with a friend and I was so relieved for her. They were at the tennis courts, lying on their backs in the sun, just talking and being like typical girls, laughing, probably talking about boys."*

*"Maybe she's lesbian," I suggested.*

*"No, don't think so at all. The other girl was very feminine looking. Long blond hair and very girly looking."*

*I recall myself in high school, hair almost to my waist. But not a normal girl either. Not a real girl. I could have been either one of those two by the tennis courts. The one everyone thought was weird or the one with long hair.*

*I wish you well, if you two are who I think you might be. I wish you quick passage through the awful days to come. (My eyes are blurred with tears. I keep typing furiously). I wish you well as you walk the gauntlet of neighbours' stares. I wish you passion, if that is what you find with each other; safety and listening ears, if that is what you need.*

*Fear creeps in, a fear for that loner girl lying there on the grass beside the tennis courts. What if she says too much, opens up too much, and her friend turns out to be straight, or scared? Or, what if she says nothing at all about her feelings, because, after all, it is just her alone in this? Maybe when you're 30. Tears again, welling up more strongly with my anger at onlookers who see you as different. Anger at all those who might have seen well enough to make the path for you just a little smoother and less painful. I lean my head back against the back of my chair, look to the maple tree that*

*arches above my window, the tears are flowing freely now. I look to something larger and more powerful than me. The strength of trees.*

*Is all research so gut wrenching?*

There is another way I could tell the story of June 12, based on a detailed review of the recording, the transcripts, and notes I took during the session, the way I have told other accounts in this dissertation. Both accounts are true, in different ways. This, then, is my “twice-told” tale.

### **June 12 reprise**

After hearing Sahira’s school dance story, “Hunger,” we all shared experiences of school dances. All of us had felt like misfits, one way or another, in our high school days. Mikka talked of the racialized dimensions of popularity. “I definitely identified as black girl. I just didn’t fit into the categories of attractive—you know, blue eyes and blond hair kind of thing. I somehow just accepted that there was just no room for me in that category. I couldn’t really call myself a minority in my high school because there were so many different races and cultures represented in that neighbourhood. But none of us would have fallen into the category of popular girls or there was just no room in there for us.”

Jordan said, “I’m lucky. I was dating someone in Grade 8 so all I had to do was stand and kind of spin in a circle and talk with him.” Everyone laughed—we could all picture their two limp bodies, clinging to one another in that slow, shuffling circle called “the slow dance.”

“I knew him and that was okay, so there was nobody watching my every move.”

“Oh everybody’s watching you do the couples dance you know, like people are watching where people’s hands are,” laughed Sahira. “The school dance is a mating ritual. But these mating rituals were very mysterious to a lot of people including me. Actually, I think there was something kind of duplicitous about the whole project of what we were doing in university as these ‘80s feminists. I think I had this idea, and I think this was part of the feminist thing, that you could either have a career and be your own person or have a husband and a family. I was unconsciously operating like that for a long time. I mean a lot of women were having to make that choice earlier on, but when I look at the women of my generation many of them actually got both. My mother ended up choosing the motherhood/wife thing and couldn’t do both, and maybe I thought that I had to choose, and looking at my mother’s life, I chose the career. I wrote off the partner part so I didn’t even consider it as a possibility. I wanted more power than that.”

“That’s the key word, *power*, right,” Deborah observed.

“Yeah,” Sahira continued. “I think that us misfit girls didn’t feel empowered. But other girls knew their power, like when the guys were asking them to dance they knew how to use their body for god’s sake. I didn’t know how to use my body. When I was a teenager, because of the way I was raised, like, in an Indian household, I thought of the girls with boyfriends as kind of slightly slutty girls who are going to go nowhere but when I look at the girls with boyfriends at the school where I teach, I think those are the really smart girls, they’re smart girls and they’re multi-tasking, they’ve got the guy and the academic awards.”

“I vowed that I was not going to be like my mom who stayed at home and took care of the kids,” said Jordan. “I said to myself, ‘That’s awful. I’ve got to be *something*.’ And my mother, she actually had a nervous breakdown when she was younger. She just

couldn't handle being at home with kids and teaching at the same time—it was too much. I was determined that I was going to work and not do that, like my mom. I didn't think you had to choose a career or family. It was just that the path that my mom chose was not sufficient, not for me.”

“I still have this sort of anger about feminists kind of making women think they could have it all, but taking away the ability to have it all,” said Mikka.

And so we moved from talking about school dances to feminism. Mikka's voice became impassioned, “Like if you were going to have it all, you had the career and the husband and the kids and, but I look at that as having nothing because you only sort of scratch the surface of everything. In some ways you didn't have any more choice than your mothers did in the '50s because if you chose to have a career and then dispense with it for some time to raise children, well you are seen as somehow setting the feminist movement back. So, there really wasn't a choice. I really have a lot of resentment toward that first wave<sup>22</sup> of feminism that made us feel like we had a choice when really we didn't.”

“But there was another aspect to that,” Deborah countered.

Completely abandoning my role as facilitator, I jumped in to support Deborah, “I think there's a huge other aspect to it too.”

Deborah was speaking animatedly now, “There's another huge thing that, and by the way did you all see the interview with Germaine Greer on the CBC? It was just wonderful. One of my first experiences was going and listening to her at McGill and I just

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<sup>22</sup> Although Mikka uses the term “first wave” she is referring to feminism of the 1960s to early 1980s, commonly called “second wave feminism.”

thought, ‘Wow.’ That wave of feminism, to my mind, opened up so much in the workplace, equality, and this kind of stuff.”

“Including places in law schools,” I said. There were several people talking at once, but the recorder picked up Deborah and me most clearly. We were talking the loudest.

“And this sort of thing that, that you know what this is, this has two aspects to it,” Deborah started, but never got to finish the thought because I had already chimed in.

“This is where I feel really passionate because I don’t think feminists like Germaine Greer dumped on women for staying home and having children. I think that was a perception that the media escalated, but I never heard it from those feminists. What I heard was women have a right to a place in law school, to become a doctor . . .” I am not sure how accurate this was. It is a long time since I have read Greer and I didn’t hear the recent interview. But I was beyond that now.

“Exactly that’s how I heard it too in the ‘60s,” said Deborah.

“But when I look at my professors in law school, there was this whole school of thought that we only need men for a few minutes and then we can dispense with them once we have their goods,” Mikka replied. “I guess we have the legal and institutional equality that everybody fought for, but what we keep coming back to is the social issues about what choices do girls really feel like they have?”

“This makes me really angry because I think of that as distortion. It becomes what feminism gets described as. What I was hearing in the ‘70s was completely different,” I retorted.

“I think we, sometimes we overestimate how far we’ve come,” said Sahira. “I was driving to work yesterday and I saw, two women, maybe in their 40s or 50s. They were

well-dressed middle-class women, and I looked at the way they were walking, I thought to myself, these are not happy women. These are women empowered, moving into the day and the life they've chosen, but look at them! I look at the women I work with, strong, powerful, successful, many with families. I see the 20-something and early 30-something women, smart, funny, sensitive, having trouble meeting guys, getting cheated on by guys . . . And women's health is a huge issue," Sahira continued. "The women I see are dropping like flies with breast cancer, heart disease, chronic fatigue syndrome. These are the so-called *successful* women, you know. It's a very complex picture of what choices you have today or what prices we're paying for the choices. And in this day and age it may seem politically incorrect to be saying these things, but I teach them and I'll tell you that boys and girls are different. There's a lot of research on this and girls are doing quite well in maths and sciences and outnumbering boys in universities. What's happened is that the boys have been sort of neglected and the girls are outperforming the boys in many of these areas, and the big thing in the school system is boys and literacy."

"Like my power came out in verbal, like I would debate anybody on anything all the time," Mikka agreed. "Everybody said you've got to be a lawyer right because I'd pick arguments with everybody on everything and I'd show off my mental prowess."

"I didn't have physical prowess," Sahira said, "but my strength got channelled into mental prowess because I came from a family of talkers and teachers. I was a very aggressive debater."

"But that's not very feminine either," I asked. It was almost a question.

"It's not feminine," Sahira said, "What I was doing was debating with boys in high school instead of giving them the come on look. In my own eyes, I would have lost status to play those games, you know, because I thought of myself as a strong person. So the



way I interacted with boys was to be strong verbally and mentally, but that scared the shit out of them. But I didn't care, because my sense of power was in my verbal and mental strength."

"Somebody should have been teaching the guys to handle you," I said.

Sahira replied. "My mom was the beauty queen on the campus and she was trying to teach me to play those games, and I'd go, 'Mom, I'm not playing those dumb games.' I really did want a guy but I wanted a guy who could handle me in all my strength."

"But shouldn't somebody be teaching the boys to relate as equals instead of having to have you do the come on?" I was impossibly implicated in this conversation.

Somehow, we wandered our way through the next hour, still wondering what was feminine and what wasn't, what was sanctioned and what wasn't. Then one of the women told an anecdote.

There's a girl in my neighbourhood and the first time I saw her I wasn't actually sure she was a girl. She'd march around in boys' athletic shorts, and she was tall and willowy sort of and she's always got a basketball tucked under her arm and a soccer ball and a gym bag and she's extremely skilled as an athlete, but she'll walk by and people will say, "Man she's an odd duck or she's, you know, she's a strange one."

I think she's about 11. She carries herself in a very masculine way and she was a loner for years. I've noticed, I think, this year she seems to have a girlfriend that she hangs around with, but I've heard people say, you know, they'll say in one breath "Man she's weird, but holy smokes she's got a hook shot," you know. They don't know her, they don't know if she's weird or not, but she doesn't look like a girl, you know, she doesn't look like the typical girl that we would have expected to see. But she's extremely skilled. She could probably put any boy in the neighbourhood to shame on the basketball court, and she's always, she's playing basketball, she's playing tennis. Yesterday I saw her at the tennis court, she's running, she's extremely active, and very good. But I was relieved when I saw her with this other girl because I thought then maybe she's not always going to be

such a loner. I saw them lying on their backs down by the tennis courts talking and laughing and being just like normal girls or whatever and I thought, “they’re laughing because they’re probably talking about boys.”

“Or maybe, you know, about *girls*?” I suggested.

“No, I don’t think, no not that. I don’t think they’re a couple. The other girl is really feminine looking, like she has really long hair and stuff.”

By now we had gone an hour past our agreed-upon time to finish. Deborah, who was having radiation for cancer, was looking drained. I suggested we end the session.

Then I went home and wrote my rant.

### **Meeting Jordan**

Jordan is quieter than other women in the group. Her voice shows up less often in the transcripts, but when she does speak, she seems perceptive, intelligent, and thoughtful. At work she holds a junior executive position, but she is moving up fast. Her work is very important to her. She works long hours, she says, with that, she has a strong sense of wanting to make a difference in the world, but she does not strike me as a hard-nosed or competitive corporate player. She is soft spoken in the group and very attentive to the other women. She looks young, even for her 23 years.

She comes from what she describes as an “ordinary middle class background”—both parents are teachers; she has one younger sister. At times, it seems that her voice is in danger of being eclipsed by the larger and louder dynamics of the group, but then she surprises me.

## Hearing Stories: It's All About Power

### Lunch Hour, by Jordan

The bell has rung at the end of fourth period and I have dashed to my locker to pick up my unappealing lunch. I have also swung by the cafeteria to use the money my mother has given me for milk to buy a chocolate brownie with icing. I am on my way to Mr. Herman's classroom to spend the lunch hour.

Nearly every day for three years in high school, I hung out in Mr. Herman's classroom, the first at the end of a long hallway on the third floor and then in a wing on the second. There was a series of large desks at the front of the classroom covered in piles and piles of books, written assignments and hundreds of horse figurines. Mr. Herman told us he was given one horse as a present and then students assumed he was collecting them.

My friends, both boys and girls, would sit on top of the desks in concentric circles around Mr. Herman when he was present. There was a hierarchy and definite favourites. When they came into the room those less important students would get out of their places to make way. Mr. Herman listened to you when you spoke, and students would try to sound witty and intelligent to get a smile or best, a wise crack at their expense. When I would tire of the show offs or when Mr. Herman wasn't around, I would sit with friends in clumps at new tables purchased to promote group work. They were perfect for sharing lunches and talking about classes, the weekend, and TV shows.

Mr. Herman was an English teacher who directed Shakespeare plays every year. He had a British accent and used dramatic and effeminate gestures and expressions when he spoke. Coupled with the way he draped his sweater over his shoulders, we just assumed he was gay. When I found out there was a Mrs. Herman I was baffled as he no longer easily fit into my labelling scheme.

My friends were in plays, some only in the Shakespeare productions, but others like myself, were also in the yearly musicals. In contrast to Mr. Herman, these were led by Mrs. Blonde, a bold brassy and confident woman whose hair was dyed almost too white to suit her name. In her drama classes she had a mantra, all stories need a beginning, a middle, and a clear ending that makes sense. Some kids sat outside her classroom during the lunch hour, but my life didn't seem to have a clear ending that makes sense that would live up to her expectations.

Mr. Herman knew that vocabulary lessons don't entice teenagers so he spoke lasciviously about learning to fondle our words, which was to know them intimately inside and out and then use them. I was in five of Mr. Herman's plays. First, in Grade 7 there was Hamlet where I and a few other kids my own age hero worshiped the Grade 11 leads who seemed to understand what the Shakespeare lines really meant.

Partly due to my limited acting abilities Mr. Herman asked me to play the piano in my Grade 10 production of Othello. The staging was in a nightclub and Mr. Herman's request exposed me to the jazz standards, Willow Weep for Me and My Funny Valentine, which were certainly not in the Royal Conservatory books.

In Grade 11, my last year of high school, I was chosen to be part of the inner sanctum as a student producer of Richard III. I was like his personal assistant. I kept track of him and the many students involved, as Mr. Herman could never remember names.

He also wasn't particularly on top of school work. Our assignments would sit on his desk for months unmarked. Then one day right before the end of the term you would receive your assignments with only a check mark or a number scrawled across the top. I was pretty convinced that he never read them but gave you marks based only on how well he knew you and how you behaved in class. Luckily I was a favourite.

On one of the performance nights I spent too much time with my boyfriend and pretended to be sick to cover up the fact that I was late. I was worried that Mr. Herman would see through my lie but was disappointed when he didn't. On closing night Mr. Herman kissed me to celebrate the end of our hard work. While there was nothing furtive or uncomfortable about the kiss, I was worried he would get in trouble.

To solve his difficulty in putting names to faces, Mr. Herman invented nicknames. He was a fabulous judge of character and sometimes he would predict our futures. He told my friend Kate that she would grow up to be a corporate vixen, she wouldn't care what others thought of her and would make piles of money and drive a fabulous car.

Mr. Herman turned to me and said, "Now you," as he couldn't think of my name, "I see you as a soccer mom. You won't be too worried about your career. You're going to find a nice guy, get married, and drive your kids to piano lessons in the family minivan."

I was so terribly crushed that I had to leave the room to make sure he didn't see my tears. I was determined to prove him wrong.

### **Still talking about feminism**

Jordan told her personal narrative on June 19 (a week after the June 12 discussion) at the beginning of the longest session we had in the women's group. By this time, the group had taken on a life of its own. We had abandoned the more formal process of earlier sessions and our conversations carried us long past our scheduled ending time. I told myself I was being flexible, letting my research methodology evolve as we moved deeper into the process (Patton, 2002). The truth is, I was now more of a participant in the group than its facilitator.

As we discussed Jordan's story, we were still talking about feminism but we were more conscious of the ambiguities and contradictions. We moved more cautiously, feeling our way.

"It really shows the power of words," said Sahira. "The power of those words to crush someone, to sum somebody up in three lines."

"And also the power of teachers," Jordan added. "They have so much influence on students, and the power of adults who treat kids with respect and maybe not with respect."

Jordan's story reflects a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, she was deeply hurt, as she explained, "At that time I absolutely did not want to become my mother who is a soccer mom, who taught piano in the home, you know. I always thought oh my mom is so weak all she can do is stay at home and take care of kids. I had vowed that I wasn't going to do that, so when he said that, all I was hearing was, 'You are your mother.'"

Yet Jordan also admired her drama teacher. “I could tell that he had faults as a person, even like as a teenager, I knew. I’d get fed up eventually. His room was big enough that you didn’t have to sit there and, adoring him kind of thing. And I knew that he probably didn’t mark the work but he was my buddy so I didn’t really care, you know. He certainly didn’t try *not* to play favourites. So he is conferring the power on the students in terms of their place within the hierarchy. And because he assigned the roles in all the plays, if you were like a good friend of his it’s partially because you could act. If you could act that kind of raised you in the hierarchy.”

“And what did you get points for?” asks Sahira.

“Being witty and intelligent, playing his game.”

“Well, that’s the Mr. Herman club,” Sahira observes dryly. “He makes the rules and gives out the prizes and gets to own the space.” Sahira is a teacher; she has seen this before.

“Yeah, it’s very power imbalanced,” says Deborah.

“But in exchange he treats you with a certain amount of respect, like a human being,” says Jordan.

We raise more questions: Is he a good teacher or not? He is in reality somewhere in between. He is conferring power and playing games with it, playing into that dangerous territory. Was this more imbalanced than any other student-teacher relationship, for being that overt? Were students any more vulnerable with Mr. Herman, for all the transparency of the hierarchy, or were they more secure for knowing where they stood? Was he abusive?

Jordan didn’t think so and yet she, like the rest of us, recognized the power imbalances.

As Sahira said, “The teacher-student relationship is very delicate and very potentially abusive and sometimes your relationship to the student can feed some unfulfilled part of your ego that is not appropriate, and that doesn’t even have to be sexual to be an abuse of power. You have more power than the student and so you can manoeuvre the relationship in ways that allow it to feed certain emotional needs even if they’re very subtle. Most students aren’t any match for an expert teacher. In any relationship, like doctor and patient it’s the same thing.”

Jordan says that now, as an adult, she wonders why Mr. Herman wasn’t hanging out with the other teachers at the lunch hour, and yet, she concludes, “He’s not just a villain obviously, he’s really, he really was quite exceptional in certain ways.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” agrees Sahira. “I said all that stuff about the imbalance of power but this is not your average teacher. Maybe it is this teacher, artist, eccentric, whatever he is that is valuable to us, especially in an increasingly bureaucratized schooling system. That kind of person who would approach students in the way he did and allow them to be with him and with the ideas and experiences with each other in a much broader way than is usually allowed. Maybe he is hugely important, even more today than ever. The ambiguity of power.”

I go back to what Deborah had observed, that “the key word is *power*.” Jordan’s story, “Lunch Hour,” and the two June 12 accounts are about power—who has it and who doesn’t, who feels empowered and who doesn’t, what power is, how to get it, and what it costs.

The ambiguity of power—how little we understood, or agreed, about what that meant.

## Power in relation

In the first June 12 story, I gave myself permission to write a narrative that was not constrained by my role as researcher. I allowed myself to cross the boundaries—in fact, they had already been transgressed—and to express my own emotional responses. The second narrative reflects my responsibility to my research participants to be careful and, as much as is possible, to also be truthful. But both the stories reflect my ambivalence about power.

The women cut very close to the bone, my bones, when they shared their resentment of feminism and talked about the girl who might or might not be weird, female, queer. At the time, I couldn't articulate a response. Me, in my identifications with that girl; me, in my encounter with feminism of the late '70s—the two are bound together. Feminism, for me, was discovering a different language of power and a different name for myself as a sexual being. Feminism enabled me to “speak back” to the powers that defined me, mostly that negated me, as female/gay/queer.

It is not that I want to defend the feminist project of the 1960s and 70s. It was deeply flawed by homophobia, racism, class relations, and ironically, by its essentialist understandings of female identity. In its very attempts to undo sexism, feminism of the second wave ended up in a kind of circularity of identity politics that queer theorists have deconstructed (Butler, 1993). In fact, as Nobel (2006) says, second wave feminism ended up defining *woman* as that which is powerless, abused, and victimized.

But there are some enduring contributions of second wave feminism. One of the most important, in my view, was the understanding of power as situated within, not outside, relationships. My engagement with feminism has been primarily within a



community of feminist theologians. Therefore, I find it easiest to speak of this aspect of power—relational power—in theological terms. Power as it came to be understood within certain strands of feminism, was not understood over-and-against power of patriarchy. Power was created and experienced within mutual relationships. Feminist theology developed a participatory and conversational process that attempted to reflect convictions about mutual empowerment. Power was a vital issue in religious feminism; feminist theology emphasizes mutual and communal relationships.

The basis of the feminist understanding of mutuality is that human beings, god, and creation are interdependent (Heyward, 1982; Russell, 1974). Reclaiming mutual and relational understandings of god—wisdom, liberator, spirit, co-creator, companion, nurturer, friend—helped feminists re-conceptualize power in human relationships. The image of an all-powerful god with dominion *over* all creation was critically reformulated to an understanding of god in compassionate and mutual relation *with* creation. Because Jewish and Christian traditions see humans as created in God’s image, the result is a new understanding of human relations with the world and with one another (Legge, 2002). Rather than seeing human beings as having dominion over nature and subservient others they have what Legge calls “co-creator status” (p. 69) with god and the world. Legge understands power as *empowerment* —a creative engagement of self with others in community. It is the capacity to act *with* god to restore creation and create community. Legge says, “To be created in God’s image means that my creative power is my power to renew the world for someone or for a community” (p. 70).

Second wave feminism exposed the language of power and the (mis)naming of women as subordinate within social structures, including the family. It exposed the injustices of women’s economic relations. It named power and it identified powerlessness

and subjugation. It did not construct a utopian alternative; I do not think it even promised one (although many misheard it as *claiming* to do so or judged it for not being *able* to do so). But in naming what *was*, feminism created space to imagine what *might* be, subjunctive space. Feminism gave me a language of power and the power of language in its deconstructions of misogyny and heterosexism. And it gave me back myself.

### **Listening With Parabolic Passion: Power**

Issues of power came to the fore in the women's group conversations, but all of the girls' stories in this dissertation are in some way about power: power over the girl, power denied the girl, power of the resistant girl, power in mutual relation with other girls. For a girl who is marginalized, it is necessary to confront the strictures, taboos, and censures within the discursive spaces afforded girls, where to tell one's own self in narrative is an act of confrontation and resistance. But because no girl ever fully achieves the discursive ideal girl, and because *girl* is defined against normative masculinity, to be girl is always to find oneself up against power.

Listening to girls' stories with parabolic passion, I think, is letting oneself experience the discomfiting, contested spaces of power, subjugation, and empowerment.

Jesus is described in the gospels as a controversial figure who opposed the rulers of his society. He argued with authority figures (e.g., Lk 11:42-49), caused a riot in the Temple (Mk 11:15-18), violated religious law (e.g., Mk 7:1-8), and made many people angry. The parables understood in this context, must be heard as stories that shook the status quo. Parables are not tame or pious. As Scott (2001) observes, "Jesus' parables often employ poetic metaphors that shock or give offense" (p. 19). Parables, and girls' stories, trouble the waters. The parables of the Jesus tradition were and are still

powerfully transformative not just of awareness and understanding but also of social forces and institutions (Crossan, 1973).

Listening with parabolic passion is disquieting, disturbing, and emotionally fraught. Parables and people argue back; the status quo gets called into question. Hearing what enables girls to construct an efficacious narrative in the face of difficulty is somehow entangled with my understandings of power and empowerment, but there are always more questions than answers.

## CHAPTER 13: WISDOM

### Meeting Deborah

The light from the bay window floods Deborah's small kitchen. Outside, although it is only April, her garden is full of colour. A stone path lined with small shrubs meanders around a tiny pond. I am amazed by the intricacy—the gradations of height and form and colour. There are wispy grasses, a grape arbour just beginning to leaf, clumps of crocuses, snowdrops, wood violets, and flowers I do not recognize. Deborah's backyard is such a paradise that I could easily forget we are in the centre of the city. Gentrification hasn't yet arrived in this part of downtown, with its three-storey walk-up apartment blocks, corner garages, a print shop on the corner, a video store called Extra XX, and streets like Deborah's with small, frame houses.

Deborah and her garden, both somehow are blooming unexpectedly, oblivious to all that is hard, painful, and complicated. "We're living a very contented life at the moment," Deborah says. The "we" includes her husband of 15 years. "We're just very happy." She is very much at peace with her life—a life that has had more than its share of difficulty.

My first interview with Deborah takes place a week before the women's group meets for the first time. In our conversation, I discover that less than a week earlier she had had abdominal surgery for cancer. She is still in a bit of pain, she admits. I ask her whether she feels up to being part of the group. "Oh, it's nothing serious," she says. "I'm a little bit sore but it's nothing that's going to bother me for long." Throughout our group sessions, she is having radiation treatments. I have to keep reminding myself of her illness

because she always seems so energetic, cheerful—so completely healthy in body, mind, and spirit.

The kettle is whistling and I move to get it. “Oh no, you sit,” she says, “You look tired. Besides, it’s good for me to move around.” Deborah says she just putters, but her life is very full. She is on several regional church committees and does other active volunteer work. Deborah is one of those women who, at 68, has the energy of a woman several decades younger.

I watch as she pours the tea into two flowered tea cups. When asked to describe herself she says, “Fundamentally, at the core, I’m Asian.” She was born and spent her childhood in southern Asia where her parents, second-generation Asians, owned a mixed farm.

The family raised beef cattle, pigs, vegetables, and dairy cattle. I helped my parents a lot. We sold milk and cream. In the few last years that we were there, from the time I was 13; I relieved my mother from running the dairy. They let me do that. I was sort of a responsible girl who did what she could to help. I have a friend who always remembers me as having a big bunch of keys. She says I was the one that looked after everything.

Deborah’s mother was an alcoholic. As the oldest daughter, Deborah took over when her mother became incapable of working. When her parents immigrated to Canada, Deborah, then 16, went to England to train as a secretary.

She returned to Canada in her 20s, and married for the first time. When Deborah found she could not get pregnant, they adopted three children. “That is the only other regret of my life, not being able to give birth, that and leaving Asia. I should have stayed in Asia,” she says. “[I was] too young to stay on my own, but I should have. It’s too late to go back now.”

Her husband died suddenly, leaving her to raise three teenagers on her small secretarial salary. Her two oldest children were troubled and grief stricken. “[They were] only 13 and 14. That’s a terrible age to lose a father.” They were “a bit of a handful” during adolescence, Deborah says. Nonetheless, she upgraded her skills to become a dental assistant, later putting herself through university. When the children left home she studied to become a hospital chaplain, and married again.

### **Hearing Stories: Under Tropical Stars**

Deborah and Mikka were waiting by the door when I arrived at the Sunshine Room. I was pleased we had been assigned this room for our session. I liked the space—afternoon light streamed in through the open windows. It was a beautiful day, the spring sunshine still fringed with the coolness. This room worked well for our small group—cheerful couches, a newish rug, a low round table where I set out French bread, whole grain bread, hummus, carrot sticks, a spinach-cheese dip, and red grapes.

As expected, Jordan arrived exactly on time in a black, well-cut suit. Its formal pinstripes do not suit her thin face and pale skin but she says they must wear things like that in her work world. Sahira didn’t show up right away so we began without her.

This was our second session together and it was Deborah’s turn to read her narrative. She read with much animation in her voice, although she kept her eyes down.

Her narrative, she tells us, is a tale from her childhood—a story from Asia.

### **Denton’s Hill, by Deborah**

We were approaching the bottom of Denton’s hill when he pulled over. The night sky was inky black, not a cloud, and millions, trillions of stars winking at us.

We were surrounded by the sounds of night—frogs, crickets and owls letting us know they were watching us. In the distance, there was the sound of singing, accompanied by drumming. Tropical night sounds.

And I looked up at the house on the hill, lights in every window. “Oh my God, what if John Denton sees us. And he would know Ned’s car, it’s the only one like it.” I was sure my heart could be heard as it pounded inside me, I was hot and sticky between my legs, and I raged inside my head: “Yes, yes, yes. O God, no. Not here. But, Oh, yes.

And circling above me was a voice, which I could hear so clearly, “Now remember dear, don’t anticipate marriage.” My mother’s voice. These were the only words she said to me about my first ever date. It was at the hotel where she said that, the evening that Ned had approached my mother and asked her permission to take me to see a film.

He arrived at exactly the time he said he would—after all, his parents had been the owners of our farm prior to our coming, so he knew how long it would take—20 miles for him to get to town, then 18 miles to our farm.

He wasn’t driving his parents’ old car—the one with no doors on the sides, the one which got into a skid and his mother fell out and was pinned between the car and the high bank, leaving her a paraplegic. Beautiful Mrs. Furlough stuck in that wheelchair forever and ever. No, Ned had his own car.

We were waiting on the veranda—my mother and I—in silence except for that one sentence. I was aware of my sisters peering out of their bedroom window. I didn’t know whether to run out to him, or wait for him to stop and come to me. The car stopped and he came across the lawn to us. “Good evening, Mrs. Brown.” Not a word to me, but his eyes were looking at me. Some small talk and he took my hand; he went round to the passenger side and opened the door for me. Later I remember my mother saying, “Well at least he opened the door for you.”

We sat in the back row at the cinema, and I remember the movie was called “The Fly.” I remember the horror of the movie, and not looking at the screen, all the while feeling his arm around me, feeling his kiss on my cheek, and all along absolutely not knowing what to do. Do I turn and kiss back? Do I push his exploring hands away, even though they sent exquisite ripples through me? I was warm and flustered, happy beyond words and scared stiff.

And here we are at the bottom of Denton’s hill. I have never been so happy in all my life, and yet so afraid. Happy to be with Ned, whom I had loved for so long, albeit from afar and never spoken of to anyone. Afraid that I would never see him

again, if I didn't go along with what he wanted. Afraid of my parents. And yet never so alive with happiness seeping out of every pore.

### **The dialogical self**

When the others express their deep appreciation for her story, Deborah smiles, looking pleased. We follow the reflection process closely in this session. The process didn't fit at all last time we met, but this time it is just what we need. We move through the questions, each layer adding new depth, particular nuances. The conversation is rich and lively. I use my notes to guide the questions. "This works," I think to myself, "this works." The questions lead smoothly from affirmations to connections to deeper themes, as each layer of reflection peels back a new layer of the story. It feels very comfortable. I do not have to push.

The summer sun shines on us into the early evening. We lean in around the table, listening and talking, closer together. Sharing food and a certain kind of intimacy.

As the group reflects on Deborah's story, we are struck by the multiplicity of viewpoints. "It feels like everyone is watching," says Jordan. "The Dentons, your mother, even the stars seem to be watching." Even within Deborah, there are different competing voices. A yes/no that reflects ambivalence and fears and her mother's voice in the back of her head.

As Apusigah, Luce-Kapler, and Smith (2002) observe, "The notion of heteroglossia reveals the plurality and multiplicity of social interactions that underpin language and communication...The spaces we inhabit at any given time and circumstance are not predetermined but are negotiable and uncertain" (p. 110). Life stories always express the multiplicity of the self—a self that is more like a polyphonic and multivocal



novel than a single strand of “I” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). Self-narratives are always a dialogue among voices. People create various narrative identities that juxtapose different images of the self with another. Raggatt (2006) agrees that a single all-encompassing life narrative is impossible, saying that the self is never a monologue. He refutes the idea of many psychologists that the primary function of self-narrative is one of integration, claiming that healthy selves are not fully integrated. While a certain degree of coherence is important, a theoretical framework for understanding the self needs to include notions of multiplicity, diversion, conflict, and even contradiction. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1981; 1986), he says that the mind is not a contained centre but a product of dialogical relations.

Taking conversation as his metaphor for the self, Raggatt (2006) says that narrative identity is more like an argument among different historians than it is a nucleus with a single voice. It is often assumed that those who are mentally healthy can give an orderly and a coherent narrative account of their lives. However, the complexity and multiplicity that emerges when narratives are explored in depth might be lost if there is overemphasis on integration. Identity develops initially in a process of dialogue between self and culture. Over time this dialogue becomes increasingly internal and reflexive. Each narrative voice has its own constellation of attachments to the outside culture. Over time, these voices change and emerge as new stories, with new voices, contribute to the ongoing conversation that is the self.

Hermans (2001) adds that the *I* of the self fluctuates among different and even conflicting points of view and has the capacity imaginatively to endow each position with a voice, so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices are like characters in a story, experiencing the events of the narrative from different points of

view, and each with its own particular descriptions and feelings about what happened and why.

Deborah's narrative reflects this multiplicity of viewpoints and voices, this feeling that, as the women said, "Everyone is watching."

### **Notes to self**

Running through all of the girlhood narratives are threads of a kind of knowing that reflects multiple viewpoints. Often girls are completely immersed in their own experience and yet also able to step back, listen, and hear other voices. The girls are not completely taken in by their media-saturated world. They know that beauty is more than skin deep, that it is not created by creams and potions, that it is not always narrow-lipped and thin-hipped, blond and smooth and hairless. They know this. Sometimes they pluck themselves hairless and carve their curved bodies into thin lines, but they are not completely taken in by their culture's command that they be beautiful in the eye of the boy. They know that having a boyfriend does not complete them and yet their inner core demands completion. They admire another girl's strength and are awed by her freefall from the trapeze, but they cannot climb that high or, if they do, they cannot let go.

This persistent ambiguity is everywhere in the girls' narratives, but it particularly came to the fore in a writing exercise in which I invited the girls to write a letter from their imaginary future 35-year-old self to their current teenage self.

Zoe's letter is tender, funny, self-aware, light-filled.

Dear me,

Zoe, hey hon, how is Grade 9 going? Hope those boys aren't giving you a hard time; just ignore them if they are. They're just jealous because they want you but

they know they'll never get you. They know you're beautiful. And don't settle for anything less than you. Go for higher, more, richer, and wiser.

As for peer pressure, don't fall into it. Be yourself, that's all you should have to be and if your friends don't like you, or a guy doesn't like you the way you are, then they're not worth your time.

When it comes to drugs: don't do them. They destroy your life and give you no positive future; all they do is give you a buzz for the moment and then it goes away. One moment of fun is not worth ruining your whole life, so be smart.

And please listen to your mother or you'll wind up being grounded your whole entire life which, coming from experience, sucks.

Oh well. Well that's all for now. But live your own life, and if anybody tries to tell you you're not good enough or anything, tell them to shut up because, if you put your mind to it, anything is possible.

Love you lots and all the best as well to you.

Zoe at age 35.

xoxo

The author of the letter is an imaginary self that Zoe constructs, a projection of herself into the future. This possible self is not yet fully realized. However, it is congruent with what I experienced in Zoe. There is no doubt that she is profoundly troubled and has some distance to go before the ground is solid and secure under her feet. She acts out, seeks attention, and at times she gives a strange accounting of her life. Yet she is also astute. She is canny enough to get what she needs and wise enough to get through the present dangers. She has safe places to go and reliable adults to turn to; she looks to the future; she has hopes and plans. She can imagine herself at age 35—compassionate, wise, experienced—writing a gently reassuring and protective (self-protective) letter to a struggling 13-year-old.

Deborah's story also depicts a self that is multivocal. For example, the background "voice" of her mother contrasts with her adolescent voice. Her story was multi-positional

in another sense—it bridges the metaphysical divide between body and spirit, secular and sacred.

## **Passion and awe**

The women's group responded to Deborah's narrative with awe at the passion and sensuality of her story. Even as I look back over the transcripts, listen again to what was said, it is hard to capture the feeling on paper. Deborah presented a world that was sensate—bodily, sexual, passionate, hot and sticky—and also somehow transcendent. We were delighted. I can still sense the panorama of stars; we encountered in this story a bodily and intensely personal experience that was also transcendent. Otherness.

“How complicated physical love is, how complicated it is,” Sahira sighs.

It keeps bringing me back to this hot stickiness between her legs, right? My parents just pretended we weren't sexual beings at all, so there's lots of actual shame around all that physicality, like saying “hot and sticky.” I actually find it hard to say it even among a group of women that I'm very relatively comfortable with. You're not supposed to be hot and sticky and the whole thing is quite shameful, really. How physical and how, well, how awesome at the same time.

Another woman interjected:

You're excited to be such an object of such absolutely irresistible lust. So the first time for me, you know, I decided I was just going to lean back and let myself be desired that much and then I woke up and I was pregnant, and then later I go, “Oh my God I'm being punished” and “God, it was the very first time I ever had sex and I got pregnant.” But if you'd asked me to describe what I was feeling through all of that, the thing that sticks out was this phrase Deborah used, “hot and sticky between my legs.”

Mikka reflected:

I was raised by a mom and aunt who just said, “Make sure you have clean underwear so if you have to go to the hospital,” like that kind of thing, about just keeping your body clean and intact all the time. No one ever said anything directly about sex, but indirectly we got that message because our body’s supposed to be very clean and dry and intact.

“It’s just that like this thing is very powerful and teenagers don’t have any idea how to handle it. It’s like the tide—it’s the tsunami and the earthquake knocking you over daily—minute by minute,” added Sahira.

At the end of the evening, the women linger, reluctant to leave; the conversation continues long after the recorder is turned off. I am stunned by the intensity and the depth of sharing that Deborah’s story evoked. How did we get from there to here? To talking so candidly about ourselves, our bodies, growing up, about our first awareness of sexuality, feelings and experiences that most of us had never discussed in a group.

The gift of Deborah’s narrative is the binding together of the awesome with the sensate experience of living bodies. Under the vast canopy of stars, we hear the proximate throb of two small hearts. Her story bridges the worlds of body and mind, everyday and transcendent; it transgresses the borders between sexuality and the sacredness; it points to a way of experiencing and knowing self and world that is at once earthbound and cosmic.

### **Texts of terror**

Women’s bodies are sites of knowledge not just about the transcendent and awesome but also about terror and violation. Tribble (1984) uses the phrase “texts of terror” to describe biblical texts in which women experience abusive male power. I introduced three of these texts as stories for discussion in the girls’ and women’s groups as part of our exploration of narratives about girls and girlhood. In each of these texts a

young woman, probably under age 15, is treated brutally by the man whose “property” she is.

*Daughters and concubines (Judg 19).* A man from the tribe of Levi, who is returning home with his runaway concubine, finds himself with nowhere to spend the night. A townsman welcomes the Levite and his concubine into his home. That evening, men of the city surround the house and demand that the Levite be sent out so that they can have sexual intercourse with him. The host offers his own virgin daughter and the concubine instead. The concubine is given to the men, who rape and abuse her until dawn, when they release her. When the host opens the door in the morning, she is lying at the threshold. It is unclear whether she is dead or alive, but later the Levite cuts her body into 12 pieces. This story is invoked by the prophets as God’s judgment on the Israelites for failure to offer hospitality to strangers (Trible, 1984). Nowhere in the Bible is there condemnation of the men who were willing to hand young women over to sexual violence.

*Jephthah’s daughter (Judg 11).* Jephthah, a prominent judge and warrior, vows to God that in exchange for victory he will offer as a burnt offering whoever comes to greet him upon his return from battle. (It was the custom for women of a community to greet men returning from battle.) Unfortunately, Jephthah is welcomed by his only daughter. The girl is given a two-month reprieve because she is still a virgin. Then, Jephthah does with her “according to the vow that he had made” (Judg 11:39). An earlier biblical text tells of God intervening to save a male child offered for sacrifice (Gen 22:12), but there is no such intervention here.

*Hagar (Gen 16).* Hagar is an Egyptian slave girl belonging to Sarah. Sarah is childless so she gives Hagar to her husband, Abraham, so he can have intercourse with

her. When Hagar conceives, Sarah treats Hagar harshly and Hagar runs away into the wilderness. There, God promises Hagar that her children will form a great nation; but then God orders her to return to her mistress and submit to her cruelty (Gen 16:7-8).

The girls in Group 2 responded with outrage at the events the stories depict and were puzzled that such stories could have found their way into the Bible. They noted that God seemed to help some people in the Bible, but didn't help these women. Certainly, God didn't intervene to end their suffering. Laila observed that "God led Moses and those guys out of slavery" but sent Hagar back. Serena connected the suffering of these women to her own experiences and her sense that there had been no divine intervention for her either.

I just think that if god does exist, then I don't really think he's worth worshipping if he lets all of these horrible things happen. And if he's just a friend that offers support, that's great, but I think I need more than that. Even parents, I mean, like, if you fall down then they'll let you get up and you'll know not to fall down the next time, but at the same time they won't let you get seriously injured. They'll tell you, "No, don't touch that knife. You'll cut yourself."

Serena demands more from god than illusive presence and vague words of comfort. She wants a god worth worshipping, a god equal to the challenge posed by the adolescents in this group and by the pain of the world. Serena speaks of the Holocaust, of Darfur. She looks me directly in the eye; her blue eyes are wide. It is as though she dares me, dares god, to answer her.

When we talked about the stories in Group 3, the girls thought these stories "are maybe a warning to people about what happens [to girls]." Maria suggested maybe they were to teach people what God really wants. Beth wondered if they "just got in [the Bible] by accident."

In the women's group (Group 4), the discussion quickly moved to the "patriarchal worldview of the texts," to use Deborah's phrase, and the way in which the biblical narrative picked up "attitudes toward women as property" that may have predominated in that culture. Sahira immediately connected the stories to "misogyny, cross-culturally and through biblical, pre-biblical times, and biblical times right up to the present." She linked the stories to her sister's death: "There's this deeply implicit valuing we have of who should get the attention. We don't pay as much attention to women with mental illness and women and homelessness."

Common to all the conversations was an awareness of vulnerability in a world that is dangerous to living bodies. Beth said, "Everyone can be really, really friendly, but also the world can be really really dangerous. But I don't *feel* like I'm in danger." Many of the girls and women had experienced violence, including sexual violence. While Beth could say she did not feel in danger, this was not true for most of the others. For example, Zoe told many stories about threatened or actual violations of women's bodies; and Audrey's story, "Titanic," conveyed her feeling of being "usually afraid."

### **Wisdom personified**

I dressed emo<sup>23</sup> last weekend. More accurately, my 16-year-old daughter dressed me. I wore black: my own hooded sweatshirt, her black jeans, her too-large Converse running shoes, and a blood red T-shirt. She trimmed my black, dollar-store wig, combing the bangs low across my forehead, and painted dark lines around my eyes. She fashioned

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<sup>23</sup> Emo is a style of rock music, with an accompanying mode of dress, that deals with strongly emotional subjects (Barber, 2004).



my silver nose ring from an old earring. She was both horrified and amused, not wanting to be caught dead with me in public, but at the same time enjoying herself.

I was playing in a backup band for a rock musical and we had been asked to dress like the performers. The younger musicians slipped on emo like a second skin. I kept looking in the mirror; the other musicians kept looking at me. I grinned too much to pull it off.

Although I can't write emo fluently, as an "insider" might, I recognize some of its vocabulary (I know how to read emo a little, but not as well as French). I first came across the term in the second year of my research. Emo is short for emotional, I learned. "Emos can be cutters [girls who deliberately cut the insides of their forearms]," Laila told me, "or they might be really depressed and seeing a shrink and stuff. But it may also be just the way they dress or how much they hate school." The girls went on to describe the emo look—"not as horror-movie-ish as Goth, but mostly black and a bit punk."

Now I see emo everywhere. Not as a musical offshoot of hardcore punk, where it originated (DeRogatis, 1999), but on many teenage bodies. I am currently leading a high school girls' narrative writing group. One of the regulars looks out on the world through a ragged fringe of jet-black hair. She has words and images impressed on her arms in black and red ink. Her blue eyes are ringed with heavy black eyeliner.

Emo makes mood a fashion accessory, shaping the body into an iconic representation of one's relationship to the world. Each generation's culture provides a vocabulary of styles that can be used to play with bodily significations. When I was in high school, my body talked about difficulty—loneliness, depression, questions about sexuality and sexual orientation, conflicts with my parents and siblings. Through my

body, I defined myself against the smart, pretty, and popular girls—the winners and high-achievers. Were I a teenager today, I might have chosen emo.

Ameilia has chosen a creative and colourful punk/emo combination—with spiked hair and an assortment of clothing, most of it adapted from second-hand or homemade items—costumes that sometimes look as though they came out of someone’s dress-up box. Her hair colour is constantly changing—electric pink, azure blue, black—quite often black. Some girls followed discursive imperatives to be pretty or sexy while others rebelled against them.

Selves are body metaphors. They are encapsulated representations of identity. They are a kind of knowing that needs the body for its expression. This is the wisdom of body selves, wisdom personified, the female figure on the street corner calling out what she knows.

### **Listening With Parabolic Understanding: Wisdom**

To hear the wisdom in girls’ stories, one must listen for embodied knowing: truths that are found in ordinary sensory experience; knowledge that is encountered and expressed in women’s bodies; knowing that integrates body and mind, world and spirit; knowing that is ordinary transcendence. Girls speak wisdom through their bodies.

The stories of girls and women in this research reveal the complexity of what they know as embodied selves—their sexuality, their passions, and also the everyday knowledge of how to get by, how to protect themselves, how to create their future selves. Girls’ wisdom, like the wisdom of the parables, is grounded in the here-and-now reality of their lives. It is not abstracted from their living as sexual and sensual beings but revealed within it. Girls’ bodies reveal their knowledge that the world is at once

dangerous and beautiful. Their stories reveal the complexity of Wisdom herself—wisdom that is closely allied with beauty.

## CHAPTER 14: BEAUTY

*Jesus' parables, as artmaking (making special) take experiences of daily life and transform them into poetic metaphors that reach into the heart of life. To consider parables a kind of poetic metaphor, as Crossan (1973) does, is to appreciate the way in which they engage not just the mind, but the imagination and heart and soul. There is a beauty in the girls' stories—the beauty of language and of living. Many times, the stories of girls in my research moved deeply into the texture and beauty and detail of a particular moment in a particular life and in so doing moved into the realm of what might be thought of as sacred or spiritual. To listen to girls' stories with a parabolic wonder is to risk being touched, awed, and awakened, by the beauty of the holy, the Other.*

*Although the ice is still thick enough to walk on, the sudden March sun has melted the surface of the lake turning it into an expanse of silvery light, splashed here and there by reds and pinks of evening.*

*All day while I was writing, two red-breasted crossbills sung fiercely to one another from the maple tree. Below, chickadees busied themselves in damp brown earth of the vegetable garden. The crows gathered last winter's grass and the willows turned from grey to gold.*

*I love this place. I need this beauty to survive, the breath it gives and takes away, the words it forms. I need this place to write. I need this restrained solitude within the abandon spring.*

### Meeting Beth

Beth was a participant in Group 3 (Storytelling, selfhood, and narrative with girls in challenging circumstances). She is a dancer and a gymnast. “These two things are the most important things in my life,” she says, “And my sister. Well, she’s my stepsister really, but we think of ourselves as sisters. We were friends first, and then we became sisters when our parents got married.”

When I ask her to describe herself, she says, “I’m usually really happy in my life at the moment. Like, life is uncomplicated right now. I like to listen, like when people

have problems—I really like just to listen to them and try to help out. I like to work, like when I find something that I really like, I like to work really hard at it. I want to be good at things I love and things I love doing.”

“Gymnastics and dance?” I ask, but that’s not what she’s thinking about.

“I want to be good at helping people. It’s really worrisome and like. I find like that and the fact that some people don’t have like proper housing or they don’t have proper food and like I wonder what it would be like if I didn’t.”

Beth says she thinks a lot about life, about spiritual things, about different religions, “Like, what life means for some people, what it would mean for me, and I worry that the sun is going to get too hot.”

Mostly though, she feels peaceful, even in a crowd, “Like sometimes, when, like actually when there’s a lot of people and everyone is crowded around, like running around somewhere, and everything’s just like a hum and sometimes I find that can be really like, like I can just get really peaceful in that, like, if I’m not the one running around.” But dance is best for feeling peaceful. “Dance is more like that, because when you’re doing gymnastics you really have to focus on not killing yourself, so it’s kind of too hard to be peaceful. But like it can be really, anywhere. I guess it can be really peaceful like, just like in open fields and beauty.”

We sit in her living room for our final interview, looking through her notebook from the sessions. We recall the various conversations and writing exercises and look at some of her writing. Beth really enjoyed the process, and the group. “It was a lot of fun. We were all really, really different but we kind of meshed, so that was good.”

We come to the page on which the girls wrote affirmations for one another, an activity we did in our final session together. I read aloud some of the comments:

“I love the way you can tell what kind of person someone is.”

“You’re an all around good person with awesome intuition.”

“I think you’re a fabulous writer, I was astounded.”

I asked Beth, “Do you think that’s true, what people say about you?”

“I think so, yes.”

“How else do you want people to describe you?”

“That she is the kind of person who doesn’t have to live up to everyone’s expectations or anything. That she stands up for what she believes in.”

Maria described Beth this way:

Beth’s very cool. You can tell that she’s outgoing, but she’s not afraid to be totally herself. That’s good. I think she’s probably the most balanced [of the group members], like, like problem-wise. I think she knows how to deal with her problems. She’s not one of those girls that, like, talks behind your back and stuff like that. She’s very forward and upfront. That’s a good way to be.

### **Hearing Stories: It’s Very Spiritual**

Beth sits on the window ledge in the early morning sun. She sips orange juice as she scribbles in her notebook. She is copying out a good copy of her narrative, transcribing it from several creased pieces of lined notepaper. She is almost ready, she says, as the other girls gather at the breakfast table. She will present her story at this morning’s session. Laila, who had been agonizing for weeks about her narrative, asks if she is nervous. “Not really,” Beth declares. No, I think: It would take a lot more than this to unsettle Beth.

After breakfast, we gather in a circle. Beth is ready to present her narrative. “Okay this is when I was in Placentia—it’s in Costa Rica and I went with my family and my

sister, so, it was really awesome and it's like, oh, it was so hot. Okay, and it's a beach, so here we go."

### **Swimming the Wave, by Beth**

We got out of a small cottage and ran barefoot across the road, kicking up sand behind us as we sprinted, trying not to burn the bottoms of our feet on the sizzling dunes on which we raced. We ran with nothing in our hands but a towel and \$5 bill. Warm air pushed back on us entwined through our hair, filling our cells and extremities.

We slowed as we got closer to the boardwalk, our hearts fluttering in our chests like dancing butterflies, and walked to the Barefoot Beach, a beachside bar that sold the best smoothies in all of Costa Rica. As we reached the bar we ordered our favourites and wandered over to some lounge chairs at the water's edge. We sipped our smoothies in silence, savouring the sweet tangy taste of the fresh mango and raspberries blended together.

We sat and we watched. We watched as each wave came up, curled over, and smashed down on the water below—and pulled back drawing the sand with it. I got up leaving my sister and her sun-kissed face, eyes closed, in a lounge chair. I glided slowly to the beckoning ocean making sure, with every step, to dig my feet deep into the sand so that the cooler darker sand devoured them, saving them from the heat above. I got to the place where the foam gathered and slid my foot under. It was cold but soothing and I moved in deeper, the water covering first my feet, then my ankles, until it covered all of my shoulders. I could feel the currents underneath pulling at my legs trying—struggling to bring me down.

Wave after wave came, but before every one I would take a deep breath of salty air and dive under, coming up only when I felt the pull of the wave leave. I could still easily touch the bottom of the ocean floor with my feet and have the tips of my shoulders above the water. I remembered what my mother had told me about not going in too far or the current would carry me away, but with each pull of the tide I felt compelled to take a step forward. In no time at all I was on my toes, my neck stretched, and my face turned upward to the sun. Eyes closed, I breathed in the salty air, felt the sun on my face, and forgot my surroundings.

I forgot about the waves and my breathing patterns, so when the wave came I was unprepared. It whipped up over my face and in my surprise I opened my eyes

as the salty water washed over them. My feet left the bottom and were swept out from underneath me. I was under water. I hadn't closed my eyes so I could see the water around me moving, flowing, dancing, the colours changing, the way the sun hit the surface. I felt the pull of the wave and tried to raise my head above the water, placing my feet firmly back on the ground beneath me.

I straightened myself out and realized that the pull of the wave had brought me closer to the beach where Sophie still lay in her lounge chair, eyes closed, her glass still only half drained of smoothie. I was now only up to my waist in the water, and when the waves came down crashing, they only hit me in the middle of the back. I walked back to the beach still breathing heavily, my nose burning from too much saltwater inhaled. I got back to the beach and dried myself off with my towel, accidentally spraying Sophie as little droplets splashed away from my body. She woke up, surprised to see that I was wet. "I'm going to go cool off," she said as she looked me over.

She got up and walked into the ocean. I stared after her, a sense of fear growing in the pit of my stomach for her. I knew that I was the stronger swimmer, knew that the water was not her element. But she never went in past her waist, her comfort zone, halfway between water and air. I knew she would not make my mistake of going out too far, of getting distracted, too level headed, air child.

The other girls in the group appreciate the details in Beth's narrative. "It was very beautiful and descriptive, I have to emphasize the description," says Vanessa. "Like, I was picturing everything as you were saying it, including the smoothies and what it would smell like."

"Yeah, I was picturing it too," Laila agrees.

"It's very spiritual," adds Maria. "I don't even really know how to talk about this because like usually when people are spiritual they notice everything, like, you know, they notice the little hummingbird or they notice the grasshopper or just small things like that because they're so in tune with [it]."



“Well it’s spirituality,” Zoe continues the thought, “I feel like when she’s in the water she wasn’t scared because I feel like she’s got like a really close bond to the earth. I don’t think you feel threatened either because I think you knew that the water wasn’t going to harm you.”

Audrey joins the conversation now. “I think it goes in with artsyness.”

“Yeah, artsyness,” Zoe concurs, and the others nod. They mean that it fits in with a sense they have of Beth being artistic, graceful, a dancer, and spiritual. In their minds, beauty and spirituality are closely linked.

“It’s very peaceful,” adds Laila.

Interestingly, Audrey found the narrative not at all peaceful but anxiety provoking. “I don’t know, well not like the smoothies and stuff, but the water. I am terrified of being, well drowning and stuff like that.”

“Yeah, you’re like Sophie, you’re also extremely *air*. Like extremely,” says Beth.

“Yeah, I can’t stand it; I can’t stand the idea of going under water completely. It scares me. So when I heard she was like, ‘I’m going into the water,’ I was like, ‘Oh no.’ Yeah, so that whole time I was a bit stressed out, but like as soon as you got out it was like fine.”

Audrey is surprised that Beth didn’t panic. “Even the part where you got like doused you didn’t seem like you were too panicked you kind of really felt like . . . “

“I was panicked afterward, not at the time,” Beth admits.

The girls ask Beth about Sophie. “I’ve known her like actually all my life. We were best friends before we were sisters. It took awhile but we actually did plan it. We would sit up at night and plan it, plan how our parents would get together.”

“You were panicked when you saw your sister go in the water because you were afraid?” Zoe asks.

“She was very worried about her stepsister; she was worried. Once she got out she kind of noticed ‘Oh my god, like I could have drowned out there.’ Like Sophie wouldn’t even know, she was sleeping and she would have blamed herself, and now she worried that maybe Sophie would go out too far too,” suggests Audrey.

“Yeah,” Beth agrees.

Because I actually realized what happened and I’m like, “Oh, okay I could have drowned.” But at the time, no.

I didn’t describe the actual movement—the water came like right up on top of me so I actually arched over and then I saw the colours changing because when the sun hits the water then it turns green. I was looking up, but then when I arched back, [Beth demonstrates how the wave pulled her backwards in a great circle] I kept my eyes open. I could like see the water changing like really fast, right, because I saw like at first the yellow and then the green and then the blue and then the dark, dark blue, and then I came back up and again and I was on the surface.

## **In the zone**

The girls talk about how Beth feels so at home in the water. Even when the wave catches her and pulls her under, she keeps her eyes open, noticing the beauty of this underwater world.

“*In the zone*,” someone calls it. It means that you are just totally there, completely at home in the present moment; nothing else is real, nothing else *is*. They agree that Beth has been in the zone and that it is a good thing. That’s what makes it spiritual, they say—the all-encompassing experience that “sweeps you up and carries you inside itself.” They are talking about the wave as a kind of spiritual ecstasy—intense, terrifying, beautiful, and mystical.

I am interested in how the girls extend the story, connecting with their own feelings and experiences, speculating about how this experience felt for Beth, imagining how Sophie might have felt if something had happened to her sister, considering their own feelings about water and air, marvelling at the open-eyed wonder with which Beth let the wave carry her.

Later in the conversation, Beth speculates on how each of them reflects the elements earth, air, fire, and water. Air people (Audrey), she imagines, are not at home in water. But, like Sophie, they are level headed and cautious; they think before they plunge in. Earth people (me, Laila) are kind, and also grounded, strong, not easily shaken. Fire people (Zoe, Gabrielle, Vanessa) are impulsive, wild, and passionate. Water people (herself, Maria) are open and go with the flow. “Water people let go and follow the wave,” she says. She is speaking metaphorically.

“Which kind are the spiritual people?” Vanessa asks.

“I think all of them,” Beth replies. “I mean, they’re all kind of spiritual in a way.”

Vanessa seems satisfied with this answer, and the other girls nod their agreement.

Beth stretches and sighs, arching her back. I picture her caught by the wave, tumbling backward, dancing.

Their ideas about spirituality are not easily translated into speech; they have reached an understanding and, with that, a level of connection. Spirituality is something that deepens within them in response to the elemental calls of danger, fear, wonder, and the natural world—the beauty found in the dance of air and fire, water and earth. Beth’s wave is a metaphor for the way in which the spiritual experience is a total immersion. It is letting the wave carry you where it will, and yet it is not completely passive. Letting go and holding on at the same time.

Later that morning, the girls show one another the self-portraits they have created. Following Greene (2001), I first invite them to take some time to silently notice what there is to be noticed. Then, before the creators comment on their work, I ask the girls to share their observations and impressions. Finally, I invite each girl to talk about her self-portrait.

Beth extends her hand, cupping the clay dancer she has made. It is not quite finished, she says. The other girls comment on the dancer's beauty and grace. They notice the vine entwined around her leg and speculate that is a sign of Beth's connection to the natural world. They notice the dancer's leotard, her balanced pose.

Then Beth talks about her figure and how it reflects her love of dance.

It's like some people have it with running, like where you can just like run away, like running into running. And like in dancing, you have to put all your attention to focus into it or else you can really hurt yourself, so it's a really great escape. At first [the vine] was supposed to be a ribbon, like in artistic gymnastics—I don't do artistic, but I think it's really pretty. I like the way it's more expressive almost than just normal gymnastics, where you just tumble. And then it just turned into a vine because I find I'm really connected to the earth. I like to garden and like to be outside.

And then I started thinking about the elements like, you know, earth, wind, water, and fire, so I drew the flames. This, the circle is like, like some people add it into the element of spirit. And I'm having difficulty right now trying to figure out which religious path like I want to go through, like whether I even want to go for Christianity or something else. And so I decided to draw that sort of circle.

And it's also like [Maria] said, I've always felt spiritual when I dance. I like the structure of ballet. It's something you really have to focus on, but I like the way in modern dance, you kind of just get to move right away. It just kind of happens. You move, you let go, you get lost, and there you are.

*Figure 6: Beth's self-portrait*



## **Aesthetic practice**

In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum (1995) defends literary imagination against the utilitarianism of the world. Utilitarianism casts the world in broad strokes: numbers, statistics, and generalities. Economic utilitarianism reduces fine points to blunt edges, and details to quantities. It effaces separateness. “Lives are drops in an undemarcated ocean and the question of how the group is doing is a question whose economic resolution requires effacing the unbridgeable separateness between one person’s misery and another’s satisfaction” (p. 21). Details are lost; the complexities of life are reduced to simple solutions. Human beings are merely counters in an economic game.

The economic mind is blind: blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world, blind to the separateness of its people, to their inner depths, their hopes and loves and fears; blind to what it is like to live a human life and to try to endow it with a human meaning. (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 27)

The literary imagination, in contrast, paints with a fine-tipped brush. According to Nussbaum (1995), literary imagination “opposes to the dull instruments of the names used by economics its own very different language, and is carried away by playfulness” (p. 41). Not everything in life can be reduced to numbers; not everything in life has a use. Some of it just is. Beauty.

The literary artist, whose expansive imagination sees eternity in the details, presents a world that is richly textured. Literature draws attention to finiteness; it signifies each singular life; it moves into the complexity of things, acknowledging inner worlds of consciousness and feeling and perception. Good literature, Nussbaum (1986) says, is disturbing. It summons passion, puzzlement, and possibilities. Cultivating the literary imagination develops human capacity for empathy and compassion. It enables people to envision real, particular, and individual human beings within the generalities of laws, institutions, wars, catastrophe, GDPs. In a society “full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. xviii), acts of imagination, individual stories, and narrative detail are an essential to social justice.

I found Scarry’s (1999) book *On Beauty and Being Just* helpful in this regard. “Beauty is allied with truth,” she says. “Beauty ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error” (p. 52). I know that beauty is an important dimension of this research because of the power of beauty to ignite creativity and incite deliberation. “Beauty is lifesaving,” Scarry says. It is also life-creating and “life-altering, as in Rilke’s imperative, ‘You must change your life’” (p. 32).

Early on in my research, I decided to use Scarry’s (1999) understanding of beauty. I chose texts, learning activities, and physical surroundings that had the power to be life-

giving and life-altering for me. I supposed that those things that stirred my own creativity and incited my own thoughtful deliberation might have the same effect on the participants in my research. I paid particular attention to the aesthetics of our physical surroundings when we met as groups—considering light, air, and the physical appearance of the rooms in which we gathered. The women’s group often met in a little stone chapel that now serves as a community meeting space. Its arched ceiling is spanned by thick, unvarnished wooden beams. Sunlight filters in through the leaded glass windows. The floor has smooth, worn flagstones. The place has an unassuming beauty. We met around a low, circular oak table with a lighted white pillar candle in the centre.

In the second and third years of my research, I used a greater variety of artmaking and aesthetic activities with my groups. For example, I read aloud selections of poetry or narrative. With the women’s group, I used literary narrative to begin most sessions. I found Dillard (1987, 1999) particularly helpful with the adult women because she helped us to attend to the particularity; the beauty is in the details. With the girls, I often used children’s picture books, ones that reflected the diversity of human experience in images and words and that were beautiful in their language and illustrations. We began our conversations by sharing what we had noticed in the reading or images, often rereading or taking a second or third look to notice what we might have missed.

For both the women’s and girls’ groups, I used a picture exercise. I asked participants to choose a picture from a collection of diverse and interesting photographs, prints, or artwork that I had spread out on a table. I used an instruction such as, “Choose a picture that reflects how your week has been,” or “Select a picture that shows how you are feeling today.” After everyone had selected a picture, I asked them to examine it closely, looking at the fine details. Often they discovered things that they had not noticed

at first glance. I encouraged them to consider what these small details said about their own feelings or experience, or perhaps about why the image had appealed to them. When individuals shared their chosen pictures with the group, I invited other participants to also notice subtle nuances and to consider what these images might point to. When we used these pictures later, as prompts for personal writing, I found that the participants' writing was rich and finely textured—attending to details made their writing come alive.

And I used periods of silence or free writing, drawing or work with watercolours immediately after we had listened to narrative. These pauses helped the participants to pay attention to what they had felt or noticed when they heard the story, before the conversation began.

Beth is seated cross-legged by the woodstove. She is examining a lump of animator's clay that she has been warming in her hands and moulding over a frame of twisted wire. Beth's lithe, dancer's body is still, head tilted a fraction to the side, back arched, neck tall, and her hair sculpted into a smooth coil at the base of her neck. Her body is so perfectly posed that she looks as though she has been frozen in mid-movement.

Animator's clay, which, as its name suggests, permits a greater fluidity than traditional clay. Figures retain their plasticity and can be repositioned to create a sense of movement. I learned this technique in 2006 at a workshop in New York sponsored by the Lincoln Centre for the Arts in Education. Educators and artists gathered for a week-long event at which we experienced applications of Maxine Greene's philosophy of aesthetic practice and education. We used a variety of artistic practices including sculpture, charcoal drawing, performance arts, and music. We visited art galleries and watched live opera. Although I was already familiar with Greene's writing, the workshop brought it alive in new ways. Greene (1988; 1995) says that aesthetic experiences release the



imagination to wonder, to question, and to leave behind our immersion in the everyday. In Greene's view, learning is going beyond—going beyond our selves to discover enlarged personal possibilities but also going beyond the world as it is in order “to think about things as if they were otherwise” (Greene, 2001, p. 65). Aesthetic engagement empowers people to transform themselves and their world.

At the Lincoln Centre workshop, I learned the importance of taking time in aesthetic practice—time to deeply consider a work of art; time to prepare oneself for it; time to consider and reflect; time, as Greene (2001) says, to notice what there is to be noticed. So often we are rushed or distracted in our experiences of art—moving through a gallery as though it is a shopping centre, listening to music while doing three other things. It was a delight to simply attend, soak in, pay attention, and become immersed in an experience of beauty. I applied my learning from this workshop to introduce artistic practices in the groups—encouraging silence and attentiveness, taking time to notice. I tried to slow down, to slow us all down and to help participants to attend to the particular details of things. Beauty in the details.

### **Beauty as imperative**

The idea of beauty came up many times in my research. Participants often admired the beauty within the stories—a nice turn of phrase, a pleasing image, an experience that resonated with their own, the warm and pleasurable sensation of being drawn into the detail of another person's consciousness. In the women's group, we talked about truth and beauty, the link we sometimes sensed must exist between beauty and spirituality, the way that beauty draws us into an experience, transporting us outside our thinking, rational selves, moving us more deeply into ourselves. In one notable conversation, we talked

about the pressures for women to conform to external standards of beauty—the ways in which media and culture shape expectations of sexuality and sexual attractiveness for women. The girls, too, were keenly aware of media messages to be thin, hairless, sexy, adorned for men. Such messages are hard to resist, they agreed, hard to counter.

We're not only on show for men; there's many other reasons to reveal your body, adorn your body, to beautify your own physicality for your own pleasure or just like growing flowers, to just give beauty in the world. I sometimes think like, you know, as an Indian, one thing I like about my culture is that it considers that beauty is a moral imperative. I think that too. I think we should give as much beauty to the world as possible, including in our physical appearance. Now how you define beauty, there are many kinds of beauty or many ways of being beautiful, and I don't think we should all be the same kind of beauty, whatever it is, but I think we have an ethical imperative to be beautiful. (Sahira, interview)

I consider what Sahira says about beauty in light of Dissanayake's (2003) claim that art is a biological imperative. Dissanayake says that even though words like *beauty* and *art* may be overused or lack clear definition, they are still vital. Beauty, mystery, meaning, and value are as much fundamental human requirements as food, warmth, and shelter.

The fact remains that even when we are told that “beauty” and “meaning” are socially constructed and relative terms insofar as they have been used by elites to exclude or belittle others, most of us still yearn for them . . . human beings were evolved to require these things. (Dissanayake, 2003, p. xix)

The “desire to make some things special is a basic and biologically endowed need,” Dissanayake says (1995, p. 60). The impetus to mark as extraordinary such things as speech, artifacts, movements, and bodies, is deep-seated and universal. Human beings need art, she says, not because the strong emotional responses we have to art are

pleasurable, which they frequently are, but because these strong emotional responses mark something out as significant.

Artistic behaviour arises from a human being's inclination to distinguish the ordinary from the extraordinary. Making special is the act of transforming everyday things—a cave wall, an article of clothing, a piece of skin, a sound or a human movement—and setting them apart as important. Making special is a designation of care, concern, value, and significance.

The girls' narratives are an act of making special, in the sense Dissanayake intends. The girls take an ordinary experience and mark it as significant through the use of carefully chosen words and phrases. The result is pleasurable for us as listeners—we enjoy the beauty, balance, and form of language—and for the girls themselves because it gratifies their own desire to make special. Their artmaking, through its emotional marking, focuses our attention on meaning and significance. “This is important,” says their art. “Handle this with care, as I have done.”

Dissanayake says that the arts have always been an integral part of the human experience: Long before humans ventured beyond the African savannah, we decorated and danced and sang. So, too, with ideas of transcendence, Otherness, and beauty, which, she claims, are closely allied with art. She suggests that marking important things out as special, the impetus for artistic behaviour, accounts for the close association between art and religion. The girls and women were intuitively aware of the connection between artmaking, or making special, and transcendence. As they reflected on Beth's narrative, “Swimming the Wave,” they remarked on the connections between what they called “artsyness” and paying close attention to details in experience and spirituality. The response of awe and wonder at Deborah's narrative was another such occasion.

## **Listening With Parabolic Wonder: Beauty**

In spite of a contemporary tendency to see oral cultures as primitive and our own as complex and sophisticated, the parables are neither simple nor simplistic. Scott (2001) contends that the parables of Jesus “which rank among the supreme literary creations of western literature, testify to a consummate religious genius who had a unique vision of God” (p. 1).

Jesus’ parables, as artmaking (making special), take experiences of daily life and transform them into poetic metaphors that reach into the heart of life. The parable does not remove listeners from this world but transports them more deeply into it. Rather than separating the religious realm from the secular, the holy is found within the “now” of lived experience. The early Christian church understood Jesus as pointing to the kingdom of heaven, not as some future state or otherworldly realm but as a paradise that could be experienced in this life; paradise was made present through acts of care, beauty, justice, and compassion (Brock & Parker, 2008).

Many times, the stories of girls in my research moved deeply into the texture and beauty and detail of a particular moment in a particular life and in so doing moved into the realm of what might be thought of as sacred or spiritual. To listen to girls’ stories with a parabolic wonder is to risk being touched, awed, and awakened, by the beauty of the holy, the Other.

The girls’ narratives have the power of parables, the power of the wave, the power of beauty. They knock the listener off her feet, shaking her deeply, somersaulting her into the world of the storyteller—the world of imagination, spirit, and self.

*I have been writing and another day has come and gone as the willows by the shore turned a deeper shade of gold. Water is stirring; lake is shaking off her sleep. All around, spring is. I still do not know where this is going, but it has something to do with power.*

*Power, not of might and machines but of beauty and of spring.*

### **PART 3: CONVERSING**

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(Yeats, 1972, p. 826)

Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness.

(Eliot, 1972, p. 897)

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden  
beauty of the world,  
and makes familiar objects be  
as if they were not familiar.

(Shelley, 2009/1845)

## Reprise

I have shown how the stories of girlhood in my research are like the parables of the Jesus tradition. They are portals into girls' worlds, inviting *participation* and engagement. Such stories build bridges between selves, enabling others to encounter a girl's life in its essential *difficulty*, its brokenness and pain. Sometimes the encounter is sudden, deep, and surprising. Stories build trust and intimacy.

Girls' stories are *metaphors*—bodily, incarnate metaphors—that point beyond themselves to something larger and deeper. As with poetic metaphors, the meaning of girls' stories is not something that can stand alone, abstracted from the word. Meaning requires the story. Such stories are *fractal*, broken apart and broken open, each is a world within a world, infinitely complex. Within each singular experience lies the whole of life.

Girls' stories do not merely replicate their lives; they interpret them. Stories are always pointing to *truth* not as fact but as meaning—that which makes sense of the whole. Such truth is not static or final. Life narratives are always in a process of *emergence*. Like selves, they are neither singular nor sedentary.

Both stories and selves are a *performance*. The performance of self requires active involvement of audience and actor, of world and self. Girls play with their own stories and the stories of others as they shape consciousness and enlarge the *possibilities* for their own selves and worlds. This iterated performance of story and self has transformative *power* within and beyond the lives of the girls. Power in this sense is not merely rebuttal or rebellion. It has the potential to change girls and worlds. The world, reimagined in parables, carries the storyteller and her audience into *wisdom* deeper than she has known—knowing incarnated in and through women's bodies. The artistry in girls' self-

narratives—the *beauty* of language and the power of embodied knowing—engages the mind, imagination, and heart.

In this research, I set out to explore what empowers girls to construct resilient identities that move beyond the constraints of contemporary discourses and the challenges of their own life circumstances. Was I searching for a cure for difficulty? Perhaps. Did I want to find something that might help to move them from trouble to beauty, from a broken and self-destructing self to wholeness and health? I have been reminded throughout my research that this is a trap, in that searching for a *something* is like trying to extract meaning from a parable. The meaning cannot stand outside the parable because it needs the parable, not merely to explain itself but to exist (Crossan, 1973, 1976). Likewise, I have come to think that empowerment and power, if they are to be found, dwell not *apart* from stories but *within* them. Girls' resilient selves are not merely the outcome of storytelling—they *are* storytelling.

I have come to think of artistic practice as a metaphor for girls' selves: Girls' selves *are* the performance of story. In the next three chapters, I reconceptualise selfhood as artistic practice. In Chapter 15, I explain what it might mean to think of girls' selves as an artistic endeavour, an act of “making special.” In Chapter 16, I extrapolate to imagine this self-making artistry as power—power understood as a narrative process. In Chapter 17, I reflect on how one might nurture the aesthetic practices of girls' selves—a process that I have called “nurturing the parabolic imagination.”

Finally, in Chapter 18, I consider possibilities for further inquiry—that is, for future storytelling.



## CHAPTER 15: GIRLS' SELVES AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

*Winter has come and gone and the lake laps high against the shore. The birches and maples have put on the outrageous green of early spring—so green it hurts. If this was a landscape painting, no one would believe the green; the artist would have to tone down. The greens of spring are always the hardest to paint. No one believes them.*

The self reimagined as artistic practice is not the product or outcome of artistic endeavour—it *is* the aesthetic practice. Self as a verb then. Self is not the story, but the storytelling; not the play, but the playing. Self is a meaning-making process—telling as creating as coming into being.

This understanding of selfhood as practice rather than as product is congruent with theories of self that see it as fluid, narrative, and emergent (Bruner, 2004; Donald, 2001; Kerby, 1991). It reaffirms the idea that meaning and form are inextricable. The self is realized in and through narrative process and cannot be abstracted from the narrative: The self is to story as meaning is to poetic metaphor. It is also consistent with theories of the dialogical self. The narrative self is formed in the multivocal relationship between self and others (Hermans, 2001).

However, to consider the self as artistic practice is to consider two additional dimensions. First, the creative act itself—the artmaking *practice*. And second, the intentions of self-making behaviour—the inclinations toward beauty, pleasure, significance—what Dissanayake (1995) calls making special. I consider each of these in turn.

## The Artmaking Practice

In my research groups, I used as a writing prompt the children's illustrated story book *Something from Nothing* (Gilman, 1992). In this book, a tailor makes a beautiful blanket for his grandson. The grandson treasures the gift but as he grows, the blanket becomes too small for him. The tailor reworks the cloth from the blanket into a jacket, then a vest, then a tie, then a handkerchief. Finally, there is only enough fabric left to make a button for the boy's suspenders. On the fateful day that the button is lost, the grandfather declares, "Even I cannot make something from nothing." The boy, however, discovers that there is indeed enough fabric to weave into a story! The story the boy tells is a creative act—generative in the sense that it is making something new—but it is not, of course, something from nothing. The "something" that remains from the original blanket is no longer a piece of cloth: It is the fabric of the boy's life experience. Just like the grandfather's earlier creations from the original fabric of the blanket, the story is a reorganization of the source material.

One of the effects of art is to reorganize experience so that it can be perceived freshly (Grumet, 1995). Making something from something is the creative act of storytelling, the generative action of selfhood. Any artistic practice is the reorganizing and reshaping and recombining of an original *something*—pigment on canvas, clay on the wheel, sounds or movements in space, words on the page. Nothing is ever entirely something from nothing. Always, we take up the stuff of culture, the givens of our inheritance, and reshape them in the hand or on the tongue. Girls as artmakers take up the substance of their life experience and reshape themselves in story.

Greene (2004) says that consciousness entails “remaining in contact with one’s own perceptions, one’s own experiences, and striving to constitute their meaning.” Thus, the learner, far from being a passive recipient of educational content, “re-creates or generates the materials of a curriculum in terms of his own consciousness” (p. 139). Learning is, in Greene’s view, a kind of reorienting or reconfiguring of experiences. This creative rearrangement is the means by which perceptions change and new meaning emerges. The learner moves beyond his or her present horizons and takes another perspective on the world.

Dissanayake (1995) understands artmaking as *behaviour* that modifies, embellishes, or shapes something that is natural or given into something distinguished as special. Artmaking serves to endow significance, meaning, or intention.

Self-making as a behaviour can be thought of as artmaking. It parallels the artmaking behaviour in that it is the taking up of the ordinary, daily experiences and reshaping them as story. Self-making takes particular experiences and makes them special. Thus, the self can be thought of as a continuous reshaping of the “raw material” of human experience into forms of meaning and significance.

### **Increasing the diversity**

I think of art as reconfiguring (reconstituting the materials one is given) as a way to increase the diversity. A handful of notes can be arranged into almost infinite combinations to produce melodies; likewise, words become poems, beads on a string become beautiful patterns, pigment rearranged on paper becomes a new picture, and significant life experience becomes a new, storied, self. In all of these examples, the original material, like the four proteins that make up the double helix of our genetic

matter, is rearranged and combined into infinite variations. Creativity is transformational ability; it is the capacity to rearrange what one is given and make of it something new. Creativity is movement toward multiplicity. I think of the art of the self as increasing the diversity.

Selves need diversity as surely as life forms need the diversity of their genetic code to survive, and as surely as an ecosystem needs diverse inhabitants if it is to flourish. A monoculture or genetically uniform species is vulnerable—one successful parasite or virus can wipe out an entire population. Genetic diversity ensures that some members of the population are less vulnerable to a given threat and hence able to survive. The diversity introduced into the genetic code through sexual reproduction makes it possible for a species to evolve and adapt to changes in its environment. Diversity is essential for life.

Art introduces diversity by increasing the range of possibilities for what can be imagined; the artistic recombination shuffles the code to produce a new pattern. The self as artistic practice is the self adapting and evolving in response to adversity; it is the rearranging of the givens of experience in order to create new possibilities for the self.

Making selves from selves is an evolution of personhood; it can be seen as increasing the diversity, as adaptation in response to life's adversity.

### **Playing before a live audience**

Selves are social. As with parables or other art forms, selves are realized only through a dynamic interaction between storyteller and listener, author and audience. The meaning of parable is realized only in the interaction between the storyteller and the

listeners. The meaning of the self, likewise, is realized only in the interplay of self and community.

Art exists in the interaction between artist and audience. There might be a tree in the forest falling (or even one noisy hand clapping), but there is never a play without audience, never a self without a social world. The self is utterly social; selves do not exist in isolation from culture (Donald, 2001). As with fiction, the story of self unfolds not in the words of the author but in the hybrid agreement between the author and the audience. The story of self is in the interpretive interaction between the girl and her social world; the text of the self can never be written out alone. It exists only in the participation, the play.

In the creation of selves there are always at least two sets of ears—those of the artist who tells and shades the nuances that become a self on the public stage, and those of the social audience for whom the self is told. The created self must feel authentic to its creator and it must seem plausible to its audience. In other words, to that external eye it must seem to be a possible self, something that *could* exist, something that in some way resonates with selves that are also thought to exist. And to the inner ear, it must feel as though it already exists. Experiencing selves as aesthetic practice, one participates in an approximation of persons as they might be imagined.

The artist painting the impossibly green tree must never try too hard, must never mimic the exact shade of colour that is observed. To do so, paradoxically, is to become less, rather than more, believable. The self must not seem to imitate, to be fabricated. Girls are quick to judge others who seem to be trying too hard, as “posers,” as inauthentic. Selves as artistic practice must seem effortless—already there. Self-making

must mask the extraordinary effort and attention that goes into making something special—a self—out of lived experience.

## **Intentions of Self-Making Behaviour**

### **Beauty in particular**

Beauty is central to thinking of self as artistic practice because so much of what the girls were creating through narrative seemed to be inclining toward beauty. Girls' self-making was intending beauty and goodness. Sahira made this view explicit when she talked about beauty as an ethical imperative. And I found this inclination toward beauty in many other places in girls' narratives—they admired the beauty and form of language in one another's stories, and tried to create beauty in their own narratives, aiming to create stories that were aesthetically pleasing and that others would admire as beautiful.

Although an inclination toward beauty in selfhood is sometimes confused with normative discourses that define beauty for the girl as a product—something girls must put on to be attractive to men—girls know the difference.

I watch my friends put their makeup on like, liquid layer, powder, liquid and then powder and then all this eye shadow stuff friggin' all over their face. They walk around like little Barbie dolls, their skirts swishing so you can see their frigging punani. It's so gross. (Zoe, age 14)

We're not only on show for men; there's many other reasons to reveal your body, adorn your body, to beautify your own physicality for your own pleasure or just like growing flowers, to just give beauty in the world. (Sahira, age 47)

Girls' selves are aiming for beauty that is both authentic and intrinsic; they desire to be perceived as beautiful, not only “for show” but as an intention in the world. Beth's

story, “Swimming the Wave,” captures this sense of orienting toward beauty—the way in which she is taken up by the awesome beauty of the underwater world, the way that the wave sweeps her up and carries her into beauty. The girls identify this moment as spiritual. I think it is, in the sense that spirituality can be understood as leaning toward beauty, goodness, truth.

Beauty is always particular. The artist attends to the details (Nussbaum, 1995). Art does not exist in the abstract, but always and only in *this* particular moment, this story, this landscape.

The *this-ness* of a girl, the particularity of herself, is found in and between the lines of her narratives. It is found in the fine textures, the meticulously lined details of colour and form and feeling. The girls and women in my study wrote narratives that were rich in descriptive detail, and in doing so, revealed the artistic practices of their selves.

### **Pleasure and beauty**

Beauty, as Scarry (1999) reminds us, is pleasurable. I have wanted this research to tap into that which can be experienced as pleasurable for its own sake, to test the power and contemplate the possibilities inherent in things that give pleasure, not by being acquired or consumed, but simply because they exist. In contemplating the world in which North American adolescents are expected to speak themselves into adulthood, and all the forces that seem to mitigate against them doing so, it seems to me that the pleasure that beauty gives is particularly important. We live in a society in which that which is pleasurable is desired and whatever is desired is consumed. How then can selves be desirable, beautiful, and good, without being devoured like Atwood’s edible woman (1969).

I wonder about the selves these girls are becoming and about the beauty of the truth they are expressing. This beauty has the power to tap into a deep desire for joy that is radically different from a desire for material possessions.

Dissanayake (1995; 2003) points to the strong emotions that art evokes. She says that artmaking as a behaviour is itself pleasurable. We need beauty, she says, and artmaking meets a basic need. She observes that nature has equipped us to find pleasure in those things that are also good for us (from a Darwinian perspective, she means those things that ensure the survival of our genetic material, such as eating, sex, and interaction with other humans). We need art, and artmaking is pleasurable, she claims, both for the creator and for the audience. Gallagher's (2000) work in drama education illustrates the pleasure that comes from an artistic product that is reshaped and rethought until it is satisfying.

Girls in my research experienced the satisfaction and pleasure of artmaking as they created and shared their personal narratives. They also experienced pleasure as they listened to one another. As evidenced by their comments that this was fun, their laughter, their high level of interest and their affective engagement, the act of storytelling was a source of great pleasure.

In attending to the stories of adolescent girls, I tried to listen with the discipline of artistic practice and with parabolic imagination—to notice form and texture, the elegance of language and the subtle play of details and images. I, too, experienced strong emotions, including great pleasure. I was enriched by the truth and beauty in their stories, for, as Scarry (1999) observes, these two are close allies. I was touched by the grace and beauty of their lives—the truthfulness with which they proclaim the worlds they inhabit, the grace of courage, sharp wit, a sudden laugh, a creative turn of phrase, or turn of life.



Many of the stories I heard in this research were moving, passionate, and true. True in the sense that life is like that, true as they cut through distortions and misperceptions of girlhood, true in the speaking to that which should be and must be.

Because beauty repeatedly brings us face-to-face with our own powers to create, we know where and how to locate these powers when a situation of injustice calls on us to create without itself guiding us, through pleasure, to our destination. (Scarry, 1999, p. 113)

I know this: Beauty is empowering. Beauty makes things possible. Beauty impels me to make things afresh, to re-create, and to write.

## CHAPTER 16: REIMAGINING GIRL POWER IN PARABLES

Issues of power and empowerment are crucial to adolescent girls. Contemporary discourses define Girl Power in an individualized and often unattainable way. Girls are faced with the no-win situation of having to be powerful and strong but also relational, also nice. Many of these no-wins are reflected in the conversations I had with the participants in my research. Having to be nice and sexy is set in opposition to being smart and powerful.

Against the no-wins of Girl Power, the selves of adolescent girls must assert themselves as powerful. But girls who are powerful learn, sometimes disastrously, that powerful females are considered dangerous. Powerful girls and women are censured, constrained, and punished.

I want to talk about empowerment but it always comes down to power—how Girl Power is *not* power and how girls in challenging circumstances might gain a sense of their own worth or efficacy. I think of Maria in the early years of high school, swept along by currents and confusions; I think of Ameilia, picking up the shards of her life after the accident, or Serena, powerless to confront the bullies who tormented her. Audrey, with more cultural (and other) capital than most, is trapped on a ship that may or may not hit an iceberg sometime soon. Even Beth, the dancer and most creative of them all, seems caught for a while in a powerful undertow.

I cannot address issues of power in full, not without following Foucault and the rest into another world of inquiry. I can, however, begin to re-imagine power through the lens of artistic practice. That is, I can imagine artmaking as a kind of empowerment of the self. And I can imagine that empowerment, for adolescent girls, has something to do with

their role as creators of their own self-narratives, that is, as artists with the power to create something from the givens of their life experience.

Gee (1999) talks about the seven building tasks of language—his suggestion is that language itself is an activity that builds or makes something.

As I consider what I have learned from listening to girls' stories and from the ways in which they build or create selves in artmaking that is narrative, I discover that their activity makes or builds a self through story. Their survival through difficulty is not merely survival. I have observed that some creative, generative activity is going on here. Something new is being created. This is power in the sense of "work"—power in the ergonomic sense of movement, play, and resistance to destructive forces.

I have observed in the girls' narrativizing process what I consider to be seven creative acts of self. These are seven ways of imagining the power of narrating selves, seven ways of reimagining artistic practice as girls' power. I have named these seven forms of power as follows:

1. Power to tell a story
2. Power to create participation
3. Power in mutual relation
4. Power as meaning-making
5. Power to enlarge spaces of possibility
6. Power as disidentification
7. Power as embodiment.

## **Power to tell a story**

Girls in my research process were taking their life experience and shaping it as story—this was their first creative movement. Telling a story is a generative act, not merely a passive recounting of life's adversities. To make (of) herself a story, a girl must infuse personal experience with significance and meaning: She must discern the significant events and the significance within events; she must choose the salient details; she must find the words, images, metaphors, to craft the narrative; she must arrange it all in the shape of a story; and she must perform that story before an audience. All of this is artmaking, all of this is creative power—the power, or perhaps better, the empowerment of the artist.

The girls and women were satisfied with their stories, taking pride the way a creator of any artwork does, when the art is presented and received. There was a sense of artistic accomplishment, pride in their work, which is to say, pride in themselves.

It is important not to underestimate how much work goes into creating self-narrative. As with much of our cognitive activity, the self gets sloughed off into the automated or semi-automated parts of the mind, hiding the extraordinary effort that it takes to create and recreate an ongoing unified narrative for the self. Just as gendered identity is always an accomplishment (Nayak & Kehily, 2008) so, too, conscious selves are an ongoing creative project. Adversity, life challenges, even adolescence itself create a breakdown of microworlds that requires a reconfiguration, a creative reordering of self (Varela, 1992)

Stories of girls reveal the difficulty of lives of adolescent girls, intense pain, struggle, and the storms that they have weathered. This is true of all the girls in my

research but some more than others. For Zoe, Gabrielle, Maria, Mikka, and Ameilia, the challenges of their lives seemed to produce a kind of rupture, a breaking of self. For these girls the telling of story seemed like patchwork or mosaic work, the ways in which the artist uses fragments to produce a whole image. The work of creating a story, the art of transforming fragmentary experience into a whole self, is a powerful act of self-making; it is the power girls summon when they tell themselves as story.

### **Power to create participation**

Girls' stories created participation. This is the second way of thinking about girls' power that I observed in my research—the power of self-narration to transport the listener into the world of the girl. In creating self-narratives, girls and women bring the reader into the world of their own consciousness —what Zunshine (2006) calls an invitation to the backstage of consciousness—using the same kinds of strategies that are used in literary fiction to invite the reader into the consciousness of the characters in a novel.

The devices girls used in their narratives—rich description, direct speech and inner dialogue, and metaphor, especially metaphor—open up a landscape thickly populated with meaning.

Stories invite participation in the world of the storyteller; they create a kind of engagement that is fusion of horizons in a hermeneutical sense, power to transform the listeners, which is to say, to bring them closer to the consciousness of another.

As anyone knows who has ever tried to speak through a door that an adolescent girl has closed, communication can be withheld. But I am not talking merely about stories opening up communication; I am not talking merely about self-disclosure. I think of the

power of Beth's wave, the way it takes her and turns her over and under, carrying her deep inside the underwater world. Girls' self-narrative is a power of that sort. Girls' stories do have the power of self-disclosure but they also have the power to create participation, a power to sweep the listener off her feet, creating a certain kind of commonality, which is to say, community. Thus, their storytelling can be profoundly relational—not power over and against but power within and with others.

### **Power in mutual relation**

Human beings have a learned capacity to create and sustain relationships with one another through language (Sumara, 2002). The power in girls' storytelling is also relational power. Researchers in the field of girl studies often speak of relational aggression—the ways in which girls use relationships to wield power against one another. I found another kind of relational power—the power exercised within healthy relationships, the power of storytelling to weave together relationships of care and compassion.

Heyward (1982, 1984) asserts that theological work must always be done through the particularities of our lives in relation. Drawing on the existential theology and social philosophy of Martin Buber, Heyward (1982) says that god is our “power in relation” and that justice is the actualization of love among us, the making of right and mutual relation. She sees human life itself as a relational matrix in which god is born. Thus, god is not abstracted from human experience; not an Other to whom humans relate. God is *in* the relation, and god *is* the relation. If the relation is imbued with love and justice, the power of god is realized.

Whether one uses god language or not, I experienced power within the groups of girls and women to care for one another. Over the weeks, groups seemed to deepen their capacity to be fully present to one another. Trust deepened, but we also enhanced our ability to notice the particularity and detail of the lives of others. The practice, the discipline, of being attentive and responsive gave us the power of presence, the power exercised in mutual relation.

As Sumara (2002) says, “Maintaining a coherent sense of self is, paradoxically, not so much a project of self-attention but, rather, one of attending to the many relations upon which a sense of self depends” (p. 25). The power in the artistry of the self is the power not just to mediate or maintain relationships—it is power enacted and efficacious within relationships.

### **Power as meaning-making**

For Heidegger, truth was not something that could be fixed or located after the fact; truth was the ongoing project of coming to an understanding of human existence in each present moment (Sumara, 1996). The girls in my research groups were engaged in an ongoing process of making sense of their own life experiences—these truths were not fixed or final but were emergent understandings that changed each time a story was told. This process shows up most visibly in Maria’s twice-told account of the robbery—where meaning and purpose shift as the context (and her own self) changes, but is also apparent in other storytelling moments as girls gained insight into their own experiences. They commonly used certain phrases that pointed to new meanings or ideas: Phrases such as

“I’ve never thought about it this way before,” or “I haven’t said this before,” suggested that some new insight or self-awareness was being presented.

The creative act of storytelling, like the parabolic “joke,” acts to shift awareness (prepare to be surprised) but also acts as a creative regeneration of meaning and possibility both for the girls and for their listeners. Storytelling is thus powerfully transformative not only of the external world but of selves and listeners in relation to the world.

### **Power to enlarge spaces of possibility**

Imagination releases paralysis, according to Greene (1995). She writes that imagination restores the sense that something can be done to change or transform the givens of the present moment (or present self), likening imagination to the opening of a window to disclose new perspectives, to shed light, and ultimately to release us from what she calls “non being” (p. 36). When people cannot identify alternatives or imagine that things could be better or different, they are likely to remain stuck. However, if imagination helps disclose other possibilities, action becomes possible. Thus, imagination is the catalyst of change. Creativity is a process of empowering selfhood.

Whether one is telling a story about a past experience, reflecting on another person’s story, or identifying with characters in a literary narrative, one is always in the process of inventing new relationship between what one remembers, what one is currently experiencing, and what one might imagine for the future (Sumara, 2002). This power to imagine is the power that artistic practices have to reimagine current configurations, and even past memories, as new possibilities.



The subjunctive spaces created by the play of imagination enlarge the spaces of possibility for girls to become and to act. Creative practice is an experiment in *what if* that allows girls to experiment with possible selves and possible responses to life situations. The possibilities are hinge moments (Varela, 1992). Breakdowns in the “readiness for action” require a bringing back into conscious awareness the ways that one has been or has responded to a particular life situation. Thus, storytelling as artmaking allows for one to change, adapt, or adjust oneself in order to act or respond differently. It becomes a kind of reflexive action mediated in art. It is probably safer because it is a virtual simulation, so perhaps it is easier to try out new selves in story than it is in so-called “real life.” It is also possibly fluid and expansive because there are fewer constraints—one is limited only by one’s imagination.

Stories are not literal accounts—like parables, they are metaphorical and open to multiple interpretations and meanings, like selves. The metaphorical quality of the story moves the listener and the storyteller into an enlarged space—an opening up and branching, like fractals. This enlarged space of play gives room for the self to experiment, learn, and simulate future action. The artistic movement of imagining a possible self in response to a possible situation is power—the power to enlarge spaces of possibility. Such spaces for imaginative play and experimentation with identity are all too rare in the “real world” or girls’ daily lives where, as Gallagher (2007) says, “the stakes are simply too high” (p. 86).

Later, the simulation might be translated into power to act in the world. For example, Serena’s story, “Science Class,” illustrates the rehearsal that precedes her readiness for action—the bridge or hinge moment in her story is tested first in her

imagination and later where she steps into the public arena as a student in a science class faced with the possibility of helping someone else who has been excluded.

Throughout my research, I observed girls' stories acting as sites for experimentation and imagination, spaces in which they used the power of their creative imagination to enlarge spaces of possibility for themselves.

### **Power as disidentification**

Muñoz (1999) describes three discursive movements in relation to dominant social discourses. People can identify with dominant discourses; they can *counteridentify* (reject or rebel against prevailing discourses, while still granting them discursive authority), or they can *disidentify*. This latter Muñoz describes as working both on and against the dominant ideologies, transforming them in the process. To disidentify is to take dominant signs, roles, codes, and use them in new ways that disrupt the dominant social meanings and practices. He writes

Instead of buckling under the pressure of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable power (counteridentification, utopianism) this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always labouring to enact permanent structural change. (p. 11)

As a process of self creation, disidentification is a survival strategy for people who are in marginal positions (those who fail to identify with dominant positions) to create cultural artifacts that activate their own sense of self. Disidentification has transformative potential, what Muñoz (1999) calls its “worldmaking power” (p. ix).

Disidentification is when a gay, black, Latino transvestite dresses white and plays female and dances a carnivalesque retort to the dominant discourses of heteronormativity,

misogyny, and white supremacy. Disidentification is more than “talking back” because it involves reshaping the very structures of discursive language

Disidentification is the joke, the trick, the prank, the carnival, the laughter at the master’s expense (and one’s own). Power in disidentification is what the Jesus parables are doing; the joke, the carnivalesque in parables, is a rewriting of the discourses, which is also a kind of reordering of reality. It is a different kind of power.

Within girls’ storytelling practices, there are threads of this kind of power—the joke, the humour, the turning upside down of the expectations or givens. I was constantly awed by the strength and resilience girls’ disidentifications demonstrated. Some of the carnivalesque images they used—the Pink Cadillac, Fernando the Shepherd Boy, and even Titanic—have this quality of disidentification. Their self-portraits are not traditional accounts of how girls *should* be; they take traditional story lines and reinvent them or mock them or both. I was also aware of how frank and funny the girls are when they talk about their sexuality and their body selves. In stories like Denton’s Hill and Hunger they are not nice girls—they are sexy and bold. In stories like Sleepover and Swimming the Wave they are active, noisy, and playful. They are girls with bodies, girls willing to flaunt their body selves.

### **Power as embodiment**

Cognition, knowing, is embodied—act and sensing are inseparable. Selves are bodily wisdom, the understanding of one’s identity. This is not a linear kind of knowing but a complex and organic one. It is not logical in a Cartesian sense—we do not think and then know as two separate acts. Our cognitive awareness, including self-consciousness, depends on the movement and action of our bodies through time and space. All that we

know is through our body selves. Power of selfhood can be thought of as embodied wisdom, as woman herself.

Our self co-emerges with the world the body inhabits. We cannot create our worlds; neither are we fully created by them. Like Wisdom, bodily and incarnate knowing is there at the beginning, co-creating worlds and selves.

In the literature of the Hebrew Bible, Wisdom is personified. This embodied, feminized form of knowing is depicted as a very powerful force—she is the co-creative power at the beginning of all Creation. Wisdom is not making something out of nothing (creation is not like that). She is like a woman making a patchwork quilt. She is stitching together fragments. She is making order out of disarray; she is shaping worlds out of the primordial chaos.

This is the power of girls' creative selfhood—embodied power, creative power, the power to reorder chaos and co-create worlds.

Christian feminists noted that the denigration of the body and sexuality in traditional Christian thought is connected to the subjugation of women. Both stem from a dualism in which femininity is associated with nature, the earth, and the sinful human condition; masculinity is associated with the divine and transcendent (e.g., Mollenkott, 1992; Ruether, 1983). Christian feminists urged a reunification of the material and the sensual with the divine, and a return to an immanent experience of spirituality grounded in bodily experience. They began to speak of women's bodies as sacred sites in which god is experienced and known (Miller-McLemore, 1992). Feminist theological epistemology thus recreated the site of knowledge—knowledge as embodied—and hence what can be known and what counts as knowledge. In biblical Hebrew and Greek, the verb *to know* has two possible meanings—to know in an intellectual sense and to have

sexual relations with. Thus, to *know* god is to embody the erotic power of god. Heyward (1989) sees the erotic as our most fully embodied experience of god's love. She writes:

The erotic is the divine Spirit's yearning, through our body selves, toward mutually empowered relation, which is our most fully embodied experience of God as love. Regardless of who may be lovers, the root of love is sacred movement between and among us. This love is God's love and, insofar as we embody and express it, it is ours. (p. 99)

Adolescent girls hear many conflicting messages from church and culture about bodies, sex, and sexuality—discourses that tell them they must be sexually attractive and sexy, but also nice, feminine; discourses that warn of the inherent evils or danger of sexuality: Girls must not be bad/slut/whore.

Although they acknowledged these discourses, the stories of girls and women in my research spoke of embodied, sexual knowing. Some stories referred explicitly to girls' bodies with images that were intimate, sexual, and erotic: Sahira's story of the school dance, "Hunger," and Deborah's story, "Denton's Hill," for example. Other stories such as "Swimming the Wave" and "All the World's a Stage" depicted girls' bodies as sites of knowing. These stories reclaimed girls' sexuality/sensuality as a creative, generative, and powerful force—as Wisdom. The narrative artistic practices that girls engaged with in this research became sites where girls could express and claim and come to a deeper understanding of what they know in their own bodies but "seldom find reflected in textbooks" (Gallagher, 2007, p. 171).

## CHAPTER 17: NURTURING THE PARABOLIC IMAGINATION

Art is not welcome in modern Western culture, and artists are more often neglected than nurtured. As Sumara (1996) says, we are all products of an age of reason. We live in a culture that wants things to mean one thing and one thing only; we do not want multiple possibilities. Art takes us into the messy middle of things by opening up the *what ifs* of the imagination. Those who are accustomed to singularity and literal meanings do not like the uncertainty.

Artistic practice entails a certain kind of loss of control (loss of self). Literality, things meaning only one thing, must be displaced to allow the possibility of transformation. When one is playing with the story of self, things cannot mean only what they appear to mean. Just as the too-bright green of spring cannot be taken literally on the canvass, selves cannot take themselves too seriously.

An important insight from my research is that in girls' stories there is always complex interweaving of metaphor, image, truth, and fiction. There is no singular, literal story at the core of a girl's self-narrative. There is only the play of meanings.

The creativity of artmaking and artistic practice requires a tolerance for this kind of ambiguity and a curiosity about what might be, as opposed to what is given. It needs a willingness to forgo the steady, sure claims of normative culture and embrace the unknowingness of life as it might be imagined. It entails choosing the challenging and complex over the effortless and uncomplicated. And it necessitates a certain level of risk.

Greene (1995) claims that aesthetic experiences cannot happen naturally, that they must be induced. I am not sure that aesthetic practice is *never* unmediated. However, in a culture such as our own that is poisonous to arts, I agree with Greene that educators need

to create environments where art and artmaking are supported. Greene (1995) elucidates a vision of education that brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community, the desire to know with the wish to understand, the desire to feel with the passion to see.

Supporting girls' parabolic selves, participating in this movement toward diversity, multiplicity, and emergence of possibility might be thought of as mentoring an artist in a community of artists.

## **The studio**

David has invited me to his evening art class. I am a few minutes late and uncertain of my directions as I turn off West Broadway and walk toward the Hudson River. All the buildings are in some state of demolition or renovation, their boarded sides plastered with posters and graffiti. I ring the buzzer and hear the click as the steel door unlatches. I take the staircase to the basement. A door from the dimly lit hallway opens into colour and light.

Here in David's studio, the air is thick with linseed and oil paint. Someone is peeling a tangerine and several others are sipping wine and talking earnestly. Beside them, a young woman standing at her easel is brushing a canvass with wide, dry strokes. Her brush reminds me of one my grandmother used to rouge her face. The effect on the painting is powdery—dry and soft as my grandmother's cheeks. The young woman continues to paint, or rather un-paint, the canvas. She pauses occasionally to dry her brush on a rag, steps back to look from another angle, then moves forward to brush more vigorously, oblivious to the sensory extravaganza around her. Another artist beside her is splashing red paint onto his canvass. Further into the studio, several artists with easels

cluster around a model who is lying on a couch. It takes me a few minutes to locate David; he is with a group at the far end of the room discussing a recently completed work.

I don't know quite what I was expecting—a seminar perhaps, with David leading the conversation, or a group of students standing at easels following the instructor's directions. However, this class is a loosely structured process. For the past 18 years, David's art class has brought together students at all stages of art experience and skill to work and learn at the studio of a recognized professional artist. The class is a complex process in which learning emerges through creative co-construction of meaning, including the meaning of what it is to be an artist.

The common activity—learning art—that occurred in David's studio was made possible because he showed up, in effect announcing it as an “art class.” Learning required his participation but his role was not one of instruction or even mentoring in the usual sense of that word, but of highly skilled observation. David's role was to notice what there is to be noticed—the form of the piece, the movement of brush strokes, the shape and the details. As I acclimatize to the experience and begin to notice more structure in the activity of the room, I see that the other artists also take on this role of experienced observer. This artistic practice of drawing close, honing in on the details, paying attention to what the artist has done, is how artists are mentored and supported.

Lave and Wenger (1991) note that the conventional understanding of education sees learning as largely cerebral and makes a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside. That is, a learner *internalizes* knowledge whether it is discovered, transmitted from outside, or learned through experience. This traditional view leaves the question of who/what the learner is and how he or she is related to the world completely unexplored. In contrast, Lave and Wenger describe “legitimate peripheral participation” as the



essentially relational character of knowledge and learning, the negotiated character of meaning, and the concerned/engaged/ dilemma-driven nature of learning. Learning is not just an add-on to social practice—it is an integral part of social practice. This theory sees learning as a collective event in that the whole system, not just the individual, is engaged in collective transformation and adaptation. Learning is not just a change in the consciousness of individual learners. It entails the emergence of a shared, socially constructed consciousness.

In David's art class, the beginner artists and the more experienced ones are both the subjects of the class and its mentors. These are the things that I notice in David's studio—community participation, experienced observation, complexity, care, interpretation, and artmaking. These six factors are also important in supporting girls in the process of becoming girls.

## **Supporting Artistic Practices of the Self**

### **Community participation**

David invites or asks questions about the artist's intentions or thoughts, but never comments on the merits of a piece or instructs. He shares what he perceives. He is often accompanied by others who are taking a break from their own work. This is a community of artistic practice in which everyone serves both as audience and artist, subject and object.

Community participation is vital to the development of new forms of knowing, including the reconfiguring and reimagining of oneself. As Sumara (2002) has shown,

learning and understanding are enhanced in situations where there is support for complex webs of relationships.

In my research, I formed small communities of practice to talk about girlhood, but more than that, to participate in the act of being and becoming girls/women. We were not just discussing girlhood; we were sharing our narratives—the creative process by which we are always becoming selves. This sharing of narratives was the core of our community throughout the research. We had this in common—all of us were narrating our lives to one another.

As we opened up the details of our own experience to one another, we also invited participation and engagement. The stories we shared with one another formed and created the community that we became. The stories, acting as bridges between our individual experiences of becoming selves, also created deep trust and appreciation. The stories shaped what the girls came to think of as safe space for their own disclosures and discoveries.

### **Experienced observation**

As I worked with groups of women and girls in my research, I more and more took on this role of experienced observer. Over time, I realized that this research activity, this paying attention, had an impact on the participants beyond what I had anticipated. This “being noticed,” is what selves need in order to form and transform. It is the “recognition” that identities require (Gee, 1999). By paying attention, I was participating in the artistic practice of girls’ selves.

The participants commented that being noticed—having someone really pay attention to them—was important. They liked the feeling of being noticed; they seemed to

thrive under the light of the attention it offered. Like David, I was noticing what was there but without commenting on the merit or rightness of what I saw. I was offering recognition but without judgment, and in that sense, I was giving affirmation.

My process also encouraged an aesthetic appreciation—a deliberate slowing down of thought in order to attend to the detail and particularity of each experience. I introduced this concept in a variety of ways—through verbal encouragement to listen and watch for the detail, in the kinds of discussion questions I used, through artistic practices that invited participants into the detail and particularity of artmaking, by modelling an attentiveness and close observation myself, and through certain activities that focused in on detailed observation. Each time a story was told, I encouraged participants to attend to the details in their own and other people’s experience. Thus, we were forming a community of experienced observers.

In nurturing artistic practice, whether of selves or of painting, it is important to focus on the details of things, for, as has been noted earlier, the beauty is found always in the particular; the parable is not a generalization but a particular moment. The “moment” is not the general case. The participants told me that this kind of aesthetic practice was somewhat foreign to them. While they did not resist doing it, they noted that it sometimes felt strange to pay such close attention to the details of experience. They also noticed that it required slowing down, reorienting, a refocusing of conscious awareness—it required a deliberate switching off of some of the automatized process that is our default mode of apprehension (Donald, 2001) in order to pay attention anew (as though one is a beginner with a beginner’s mind).

## Complexity

In David's art class, participants moved freely in the space. I noticed this movement because it was this aspect of the studio that made it seem so unlike a typical class. The studio was abuzz with movement that, at first glance, seemed random and uncoordinated. Everyone had some space within the studio where their latest project was, or was not, being worked on at any given time. People in the class moved between their own spaces and the other spaces of the studio, sometimes to stretch or go outside to smoke, but mostly to interact with others in the space. These uncoordinated, individual interactions formed a web of complexity out of which the overall activity of the class—the formation of artists through artistic practice—took place. In many ways, this was a complexity model of education, with artistic practice as the common denominator or enabling constraint and the multiple, redundant interactions creating conditions of complex emergence (Davis & Sumara, 2006).

Davis and Sumara (2006) summarize the conditions necessary for complex emergence as internal redundancy, internal diversity, neighbour interactions, distributed control, randomness, and coherence (pp. 135-136). These are described as follows:

Internal redundancy—commonalities between the elements or actors in a complex system—in the studio, participants had a common goal of learning/ painting;

Internal diversity—differences between actors or elements in a situation; in the studio each artist is working on a different artistic project and brings to her or his work different needs, talents, ideas, etc.;

Neighbour interactions—communication, interaction and mutual influence between the elements or actors in the situation; in the studio each artist is able to communicate with and affect the learning and the work of other artists;

Distributed control—in a complex system there is no single “authority” or central control because actors in the system share authorship and authority; in the studio each individual has artistic input into his or her own work but also participates in defining the activity, norms, and function of the artistic collective);

Randomness and coherence—the “enabling constraints” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, pp. 147-148) or guidelines of the complex system establish a balance between randomness, which inserts a creative new possibility, and coherence, which keeps the actors in the system oriented around a common task or purpose. The art class is given coherence by a common goal of practicing painting, but the individuals in the system insert the randomness of the particularities of their own participation.

Complex systems, because they are adaptive, are inherently unpredictable. Thus learning is seen as transformation through participation rather than arrival at certainty or a fixed truth (Davis, 2004).

In my work with groups of girls and women, I realized that I was also creating conditions for complex emergence not just of ideas and data for my research but also for girls’ selves. The process of storytelling and my instructions to tell a story out of experience that is rich in detail and description acted as an enabling constraint, balancing the coherence of a common task with the randomness of the ways that the writing task was interpreted by each individual. Although I guided the conversation at times, each participant had a role in contributing to and shaping the conversation (decentralized control). The group members had different life experiences, challenges, and backgrounds

(internal diversity) but commonality as girls/women who had experienced challenges in adolescence (redundancy). The girls' self-narrativizing was a recursively elaborative process—in the sense that the stories themselves were nested, fractal representations of girlhood, but also in the replications of the process of sharing and reflecting on narratives together.

The multiple, overlapping, and fluid interactions between participants in the group (neighbour interactions) created space for something altogether new to emerge—new insights and learning for this dissertation, and also, I believe, new possibilities for girls' selves.

## **Care**

It was obvious from his interactions that David cared about his art students, not just about their artistic practice. He noticed and attended to them as people with needs, concerns, struggles—with lives lived in and beyond the studio. Conversations were as much about life as they were about art, though of course life is always reflected in art.

Grumet (1995) says that relationships are at the heart of education because, she says, our relationship to the world is rooted in our relationships to people who care for us. Teaching the basics in education is not about great books or the newest educational gimmickry; it is about providing space and time and relational presence. It is providing human connection, not merely as a motivator for other things to happen but as an end in itself. Likewise, Noddings (2003) grounds her understanding of what schools should be in what she calls “care theory,” which she defines as an ethical stance that sees moral life in itself as thoroughly relational. From this perspective, even the self is relational, she says, because the self is developed through encounter with others.

I am a researcher who cares about the subjects of the research, not in *general* but in *particular*—these particular individuals whom I came to know in this endeavour. The practice of an ethic of care in research is not just about adherence to codes of ethical practice; it is about attending to what matters, what comes to matter, which in this case, is girls' and women's selves. For me, this care entails an intentionality and deliberateness about being fully present to another person. This is not to say that I always was as present as I would like to have been, but it means that stories touched me, that I felt something beyond mere intellectual curiosity, and that I cared about what has happened and what will happen in the lives of these girls and women. It does not mean that I see *myself* as *caregiver*, solution, or solace in the lives of these women and girls. It does not mean I will try to find out what happens later. It simply means that I know caring is important.

The girls and women in the groups came to care about one another, I believe. I recall the many conversations I had with them one-on-one, in which they expressed care or concern for another group member, for what she faced. I watched their small attentions—Jordan bringing coffee for Sahira, Maria and Zoe leaning close to one another on the couch, Gabrielle making little gifts of paper and crayon for each of the other girls.

As Jardine (1998) underlines, education requires teachers who both care and question. Nurturing the selves of girls and women, I think, requires the same; it needs those who are attentive—an audience of those who care and notice and question.

## **Interpretation**

As David moved around the studio his questions and observations invited rich conversation—about what others noticed in a work, about what the artist was intending or pointing to, and about other possible meanings within the work. I was surprised by how

many new possibilities arose in a painting. Through the sharing of different interpretations, new ideas occurred to others in the group—ideas bounced off one another in an ongoing process of interpretation.

The artistry of the self also needs intentional acts of interpretation. It is not sufficient just to narrate or hear stories of selfhood. Meanings and possibilities need to be brought into conscious awareness; they need to be tested and shared and transformed through conversations with others. New ideas and interpretations enhance or challenge or increase the complexity, which is to say, increase the possibilities for new meaning. The story opens up the process of meaning-making but does not complete it. The parable is the beginning of an ongoing conversation; it is a dialogue between world views that opens up other worlds of understanding (Crossan, 1976).

Interpretive acts help girls to discover that their identities are not predestined or fixed or inflexible. Interpretation, the making of meaning in the stories of selfhood, is itself generative of further self-understanding and future selves.

## **Artmaking**

This may seem too obvious to mention—of course a studio is about artmaking. But it is important to distinguish between artistic practice—the making and shaping of materials into something new—and other kinds of aesthetic experience. The artists in David’s studio had paint and brushes and canvass, the raw materials out of which they shaped new possibilities. They moved and played with artmaking tools to produce pleasure, beauty, and, art.

The girls in my research also engaged in artmaking in a variety of formats. We did not just talk about girls’ selves—we shaped clay, painted, drew, performed, and, most of



all, told stories. We did so within an atmosphere that was deliberately attentive to detail, form, beauty, and texture, an atmosphere that created conditions for imaginative engagement and play.

### **Educational Implications of Reimagining Girls' Selves as Parables**

In this dissertation, I reimagined girls' selves as parabolic, using 11 aspects of parables: participation, difficulty, metaphor, fractals, truth, emergence, performance, possibility, power, wisdom, and beauty. Seen through this parabolic lens, I experienced girls' storytelling selves as *participatory, metaphorical, fractal, truthful, and emergent*; I observed girls' selves as artistic practices that are embodied *performances* of their *wisdom, power, and beauty*. And I discovered how such performances of the self create *possibility* for girls in the face of life's essential *difficulty*.

Another way to articulate this is to say, as I have done in Chapter 16, that storytelling selves *are* girls' power, realized as storytelling, participation, mutual relation, meaning-making, enlarging spaces of possibility, disidentification, and embodiment.

Now, in Chapter 17, I have summarized six elements that seemed to be important in nurturing girls' parabolic imagination. As stated above, these are community participation, experienced observation, complexity, care, interpretation, and artmaking. These elements provide a framework for thinking about nurturing girls' parabolic selves in response to adversity and ways that educators might support the development of girls' selves.

I do not see these elements as a method, a map, a template that can be replicated, or even a set of criteria by which an educational experience can be measured. Taken together, they are more like a parable—an opening onto a particular worldview, an

invitation to participation in the world of a girl. They are best understood by those who have already practiced them.

If this seems circular, perhaps it is because it is. As with parables, participation precedes understanding. Having been in classrooms, small groups, and other educational events as a teacher, volunteer, observer, and researcher, I have heard girls talk about their experiences of education in a variety of settings. From what girls say, it seems that there are some educators who understand the essential difficulty of girls' lives—those who seem to already “get it” and those who understand what might support and empower girls because they are already relationally engaged with girls in the artmaking process that is a girl's self. I see this kind of participatory and empowering practice in Gallagher's (2000, 2007) research in drama education. Yet many other educators are still outside girls' experience, still trying to rescue, fix, or change the girl-at-risk.

These six elements may be signs that point to places where something is already happening, where parables of the self are already being told. They become questions that make sense only to those who already understand: Is this community? Is anyone listening? Is it complex? Is this a place of compassion and care? Is meaning being shaped and questioned and reimagined here? Is there art? Is there play? These are questions that resist simple answers, but those who are answering them already know this.

## CHAPTER 18: A STORY FOR ANOTHER TIME

### (FOR FURTHER RESEARCH)

Clare picks up the large plastic box she uses to carry books and art supplies. She slings her tote bag over her shoulder. Balancing a half empty carton of juice and a roll of watercolour paper on top of the box, she weaves her way through the clusters of teenagers spilling out onto the steps. “Why does this always feel like I’m moving house,” she muses, “and why am I always so tired?” She stows the gear on the front seat—the only place left since her car doesn’t have a back seat and the small luggage compartment is already full of books. Clare glances up to see Sonja and Em heading for the bus stop. “Have a good week,” she calls after them.

They turn and wave. “Thanks, we will,” Sonja calls back. She sounds like she means it.

Maybe they will; maybe they have turned a corner. Clare hopes so. They are always turning corners, though. Always turning around one corner, and if they are lucky, not banging in to something hard when they do so—a wall, a slammed fist, a train wreck, another something that amounts to chaos and catastrophe in young lives. Sonja told her story this week. Hers was hardest so far, the hardest to hear.

But then something always happens in the group, some small gesture of compassion, some movement of understanding that isn’t pity or judgment, just moving closer, the way girls do, leaning in toward one another. A kind of bending of bodies that blends stories and selves into a group that is holding one another, holding on.

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“I liked your story,” Em says. She is leaning against the side of the bus shelter, peeling back a candy wrapper. She hands Sonja a stick of gum.

Sonja accepts the gift. “It was OK.” she says cautiously. Almost as an afterthought, she asks, “Did you *really* like my story?”

“It was good, it was beautiful. Everyone said that. And I liked the way you were like, ‘fuck off’ when that guy did that shit. I liked that.”

“That wasn’t really me. I kind of said it under my breath, but more thinking it than actually saying it,” Sonja admits. “My sister would’ve come right out and said it though.”

“Yeah, your sister’s cool. But you meant it, so that’s it, right?”

“Yeah, I meant it alright. That’s something, I guess.”

“I liked that stuff we did with painting.” Sonja wipes a smear of blue paint off her thumbnail. “Are you gonna come next week?”

“Probably.”

“Probably as in *definitely* or probably as in *maybe*?”

“Probably as in *definitely*. I have to tell my story.”

“Right. So what’s your story going to be?”

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Morgan looks up and smiles as Clare enters the kitchen, “I just made tea. Want a cup?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“How’d it go with the girls?”

“Good. I think. Sometimes it’s hard to tell. They keep coming back. They really liked what we did with the watercolours. And the stories they tell, I don’t know—tough, touching, powerful, all of the above. These girls lead complicated lives, that’s for sure.”

“Did you hear from the evaluation?”

“Oh, yes, and guess what, Crichton phoned at lunch to tell me the evaluation was really positive and we’ve got 5-year funding. Not just for next year, not just for a pilot, for a full arts-based literacy and storytelling program for adolescents who are struggling.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“I know. I’m still in shock!”

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The researcher writes something in her notebook and glances at the voice recorder. The girl is seated beside with her hands folded carefully in her lap. She reminds her of someone she once knew.

“So you’ve been part of this program for four years now?” she asks the girl.

“Yeah, well, this is the beginning of my fifth year. I was part of a group when I was 12 and now, us older girls, we’re like, kind of like assistant leaders. We help out and sort of encourage the younger girls because we know the process and stuff. Plus, we have been through the same stuff they’re going through, so that helps. And we still do art and storytelling and stuff.”

“What do you like about the program?”

“It’s fun, that’s an important part of it, and learning how to do art, how to be creative, how to write, how to tell your own stories. Stuff like that.”

The researcher nods encouragingly, “Uh huh, anything else?”

“Well, writing, really it’s how to express myself. I’m thinking even I might be a writer some day. Like the group has really helped me think I could actually do something like that.”

“Can you tell me more about the group, what it was like for you?”

“It’s kind of like my family, you know, just a place where I can be myself and be who I really am and stuff like that. Be accepted, I guess. And also, knowing that someone cares about me. So in a way, it’s a lifesaver, you know, like the group almost literally saved my life I think. The group, and the art, almost literally. I was pretty messed up, you know, doing some pretty crazy shit. I don’t know where I’d be if I wasn’t for the group and stuff. Dead probably, or something like that. Not myself anyway; not who I am today. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so,” Sonja says, “I was part of a group like that when I was a teenager.”

“And now you do this kind of stuff, like researching about it?” the girl asks.

“Some research, like this project—trying to get a sense of what difference art-based storytelling makes for girls, also trying to figure out how educators might do this kind of work and what might support them. And I still do a lot of storytelling and artmaking with groups. I like that part the best.”

“Yeah,” the girl agrees, “me too.”

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## **APPENDIX A: GROUP PROCESSES USED**

### **Group Reflection Process**

The following outline describes the steps in the process and the general flow of the conversation and reflection. The wording of discussion questions was adapted from Baker (2005) to be appropriate to the age level and level of comprehension of participants and to suit my own research intentions.

#### **Step One: Hearing the Story**

Create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for storytelling and listening. Light a candle.

Listen as the storyteller reads her story.

Pass out copies of the story.

Allow a few minutes for silent reflection.

#### **Step Two: Experience Near**

Share appreciations.

Share feelings, memories, and associations.

Share points of identification.

Note key images, questions, and themes.

#### **Step Three: Experience Distant**

Discuss: What is the meaning of this story?

Tease out themes; theological reflections, connections with the practices or beliefs of the faith community; contextual issues in the lives of adolescent girls.

Discuss: What title would you give this story?

#### **Step Four: Going Forth**

Discuss: What does this story say about what it means to be a girl (within a faith community) (in our society today)? Where does this story lead? If you were going to act on anything you learned from this story, what would you do/say?

Reinforce any “ah ha” moments.

Remain open to different meanings and other possible interpretations.

#### **Hearing and reflecting on sacred narratives (Sessions 5-7)**

##### **Step One: Hearing the Story**

Create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for storytelling and listening. Light a candle.

Listen as the storyteller reads a biblical story about an adolescent girl.

Pass out copies of the story.

Allow a few minutes for silent reflection.

##### **Step Two: Experience Near**

Share appreciations.

Share feelings, memories, and associations.

Share points of identification.

Note key images, questions, and themes.

### **Step Three: Experience Distant**

Discuss: What is the meaning of this story?

Tease out theological reflections, connections with the practices or beliefs of the faith community; contextual issues in the lives of adolescent girls.

Discuss: What title would you give this story?

### **Step Four: Going Forth**

Discuss: What does this story say about what it means to be a girl within a faith community? Where does this story lead? If you were going to act on anything you learned from this story, what would you do/say?

Reinforce any “ah ha” moments.

Remain open to different meanings and other possible interpretations.

## **Writing Prompts**

1. Pictures: Choose a picture that reflects (some prompt is given such as, how you are feeling right now; what it was (or is) like to be a girl; some aspect of your life today). Spend some time looking at the picture (notice what is there). Share the picture in the group and explain why you chose it. Group members—what do you notice in this picture? Write a story about your picture.
2. Pictures. select a picture that speaks to you in some way. Where are you in this picture? Write about what it is like to be there (in the scene).

3. Buttons<sup>24</sup>. Choose a button. Wonder about what clothing this button might have come from; develop a character to go with that piece of clothing; write a short story (2-3 paragraphs) about that character.
4. Carrots. Choose a carrot (randomly). Get to know your carrot—pay close attention to its form and structure and shape. Put all the carrots back into the bowl. Find yours again. Write about three ways in which this carrot is like you.
5. Free writing. Write non-stop (without hesitating, without editing, without pausing to think) for three minutes.
6. Letter to self. Write a letter to yourself from imaginary future self at age 35 (*for teenage girls*); write a letter to your teenage self (*for adult women*).
7. Listening to narratives. Listen to a fictional narrative. Respond in first person to the author. Or, write a response (writing for 5-10 minutes).

### **Artistic Practices**

1. Watercolours. Create a wash (technique demonstrated). Add drops of another colour while the wash is still wet so that the second colour flows out into the wash. Repeat with a third or fourth colour.
2. Animator's clay. Shape a human figure using soft wire (arms, legs, head, body). Wrap clay over the wire frame. Pose and position the figure. Add details—facial features, etc.

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<sup>24</sup> Adapted from a writing exercise used by Rebecca Luce-Kapler.



3. Free play with watercolours—use colours to create an abstract image that depicts a mood; use watercolours –create images, shapes, patterns, use colours, to respond to another person’s story or to reflect on how it felt to tell one’s own story (create for a few minutes without using words, then share in the group).
4. Collage. Select one or two pictures cut out from magazines (to depict what you think it is like to be a girl; or “what is a girl”); juxtapose different images. Share collages and discuss what images you selected and why.
5. Collage 2. Use tissue paper, images cut from magazines, ribbon, glue, string etc. to create a “self-portrait.”

### **Aesthetic Practices**

1. Centering Exercise. Invite participants to relax, breathe. Sit in silence for 1-2 minutes, with eyes closed, paying attention to the rhythm of own breathing; if attention wanders, refocus on breathing. Practice bringing one’s attention back. Then, invitation to pay attention to the story that is read or told (either personal narrative or a piece of literary writing). Invite participants to listen and notice rather than analyzing or thinking; if they find that their attention wanders, invite them to bring their focus back to listening and noticing. Notice the details.
2. Pictures. Choose a visual image from selection provided (one that appeals to you). Look at it for a few minutes. Describe to the group what you notice. Look again; notice details that you did not notice the first time; consider how this picture might connect with your life right now.

## APPENDIX B: NOTES FOR STORYTELLERS<sup>25</sup>

I am inviting you to write a story (one page, single spaced) about a significant experience you have had that you would not mind sharing with others. It can be any experience from a long time ago or recently, anywhere, any time.

I would like you to write as concretely as you can about what happened, how you felt. Use rich description to help us get into the experience and feel what it was like for you. Give us flavours, smells, textures, sights, sounds. Don't tell us what the experience meant or how you interpret it—leave that for later. Just tell us **what happened and what it was like for you.**

Your story does need to be in writing and can be e-mailed to me by [date] so that I can make copies for others in the group.

It should not be a story that you have told repeatedly in a small group or therapy setting. It should not be a story about a difficult or painful life crisis that you are in the middle of right now. That story is still ongoing and should not be shared in this setting.

Here are some possible examples of things you could write about... (see over)

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<sup>25</sup> Adapted from *Doing Girlfriend Theology* (Baker, 2005, p. 188)

## Sample Stories

### Undersea

Billy Livingston took us to an island so small it had no palm trees, just bushes and white coral sand. The island was so small you could walk across it in a dozen steps, so small that no one had come before us to gather the fingernail-pink shells and white-bleached remains of sea eggs.

We kept our shirts on over our bathing suits because, even though we were brown as bears in those years, we could still get sunburned on that little spit of sand.

Billy gave us each a hardboiled egg for lunch. I remember peeling and eating the egg. It was salty and slightly warm. There was bread, too, with butter. And there were oranges, sweet and small and very juicy. As we peeled them, drops of orange juice fell in dark blots onto the sand and red ants scurried forward.

After our lunch, we spat inside our snorkel masks and rubbed the spit all around to stop the masks fogging. We held our breaths as we kicked ourselves into a silent, green-blue world. We ran our fingertips over the filigree purple sea fans and tickled the giant sea anemones back into their ugly rubber bodies with the tips of our flippers, until, when we could hold our breath no longer, we surfaced to fill our bursting lungs.

We saw brain coral, which is not the same as staghorn coral; and milk conks, which were easy to find, but none of the rarer and deeper-dwelling queen conks. There were fish everywhere.

We saw huge black sea eggs with spines three times longer than their bodies. Evil and beautiful. Impale even one of their barbed spines in your foot and it would throb painfully for days, yet their graceful symmetry astounded us. When they died, the sea

eggs' bare and spineless tests washed up on beaches where they lay bleached-white and delicate as egg shells.

We avoided all jellyfish, even the small innocent ones. Size is no judge for jellyfish—small smoky-whites hurt as much as the huge bottle-glass blue ones. We had never learned the names of jellyfish; we never trusted any of them. Yes, it is true that if you pee on a jellyfish sting it helps take the pain away, but only boys were daring enough to do that.

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Introductory Interviews**

- Tell me something about yourself.
- How might your closest friends describe you?
- Where were you born?
- Who is in your family? (invite conversation about family composition and relationships)
- (for adult women) What was life like for you growing up? When you were an adolescent?
- (for teenage girls) What is school like for you? What is it like to be a girl, for you?
- Invite conversation about work, home, faith community (if applicable), and family life.

### **Midpoint and Final Interviews**

- What was it like for you to tell your story in the group?
- How did you feel after you told it?
- What (if any) new ideas occurred to you about your experience as the group talked about it? Or, did you think differently about your experience after our group conversation? If so, how?
- What was the experience in the group like for you, when your story was discussed?

- How did you feel about the time we spend in the group overall?
- Which of the other stories you heard in the group connected most with your own experience? What was the connection?
- Which story seemed furthest from your own experience?
- If you were invited to tell another story about inclusion or exclusion, what story do you think you might tell?
  
- Interview prompts:
- When you talked about [*something from the story she shared*], I wondered....
- Could you tell me more about [*something from the story she shared*]...
- I'm curious about .....[*something from the story she shared*]
- Tell me more about what happened when...
- What do you think about what [*participant name*] said ...
- How did you feel when we talked in the group about...

## **APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR PARTICIPANTS**

The recruitment of participants will consist of the following steps:

The researcher will have an individual conversation, by phone or in person, with the parents or guardians of each potential participant to request permission to approach her to invite her to be part of this study. The letter of information (attached) will be provided to the parent or guardian at this time.

Draft Script for Conversation with Parent/Guardian:

*Hi [name of contact]. [Words of introduction.] I am currently working on a Ph. D. in Education at Queen's University, under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler. I will be conducting a study to gather data for my research. I would like to meet with [name of potential participant] to talk with her about the study and to ask her if she might be interested in being a part of this research. [Details of the study and purpose are provided as per Letter of Information, attached.] Do I have your permission to talk with [name of potential participant] about this?*

The researcher will have a conversation with each potential participant to ask if she would be willing to meet to discuss the possibility of becoming a participant in a research study.

Draft Script for Conversation with Potential Participant:

*Hi [name of potential participant]. [Words of introduction.] I am currently working on a Ph. D. in Education at Queen's University. I will be conducting a study to gather*

*data for my research. I have talked with your [mother/father/name of parent or guardian] and she has given me permission to ask you if you would like to be a part of this study. I would like to talk with you more about this, if you are interested.*

If a potential participant agrees to further conversation about this, the researcher will meet and provide more information about the study, using the information in the letter of information (attached). Participants will be given a copy of the letter of information. Any questions or concerns the participant has about the study will be answered thoroughly.

Each participant will be contacted soon after the meeting to see if she is interested in being a participant in the study. Parents and participants will be asked to sign letters of consent (attached) and any further questions or concerns will be addressed as necessary. Information on group meeting times and interview schedules will also be discussed.



## RECRUITMENT PROCESS FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATORS

The recruitment of participants will consist of the following steps:

The researcher will have an individual conversation, by phone or in person, with the potential research collaborator to ask if she would be willing to meet to discuss the possibility of becoming a participant in a research study.

Draft Script for Conversation with Potential Participant:

*Hi [name of potential participant]. [Words of introduction.] I am currently working on a Ph. D. in Education at Queen's University. I will be conducting a study to gather data for my research. I would like to talk with you more about this, to see if you are interested in being a part of this study.*

If a potential participant agrees to further conversation about this, the researcher will meet and provide more information about the study, using the information in the letter of information (attached). Participants will be given a copy of the letter of information. Any questions or concerns the participant has about the study will be answered thoroughly.

Each participant will be contacted soon after the meeting to see if she is interested in being a participant in the study. Parents and participants will be asked to sign letters of

consent (attached) and any further questions or concerns will be addressed as necessary.

Information on group meeting times and interview schedules will also be discussed.

[LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR TEENAGE GIRLS]

[date]

Dear Participants:

Thank you for considering participating in this research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood*, conducted by Alyson Huntly (the researcher), under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler of the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. This research project has been reviewed and cleared by the Queen's University General Ethics Review Board.

This is a study to learn more about how girls who have had particular challenges in their lives read and interpret stories and how they use stories to create their own sense of identity as girls. This study will include story writing, group sessions, and individual interviews. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

Story writing. Each participant will be asked to prepare a short written story that describes a significant experience in your life (time to prepare will be about 1 hour).

Eight group sessions. You will participate in a group with three or four other teenage girls, a young woman who is helping with the project (a research collaborator), and the researcher. Each person will have a time in one of the sessions to read aloud the

story they wrote. The group will talk about the story each person shares and identify themes and issues that seem significant as we consider what it means to be “a girl.” The group will also read and discuss other short stories and narratives together. There will be eight sessions of up to 2 hours in length for a total of 16 hours. Sessions will take place weekly.

Three individual interviews. The researcher will interview you three times for approximately one hour each. Interviews will take place before the group meets, after the third or fourth session, and at the end of the study. Interviews will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you. In the interviews, you will talk with the researcher (Alyson) about the ideas that were raised in your written story or in the group discussion. . Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

It is important to protect the privacy of the people who participate in research. Here is how we will do that:

Audio recordings will be made of the group sessions and the interviews. These recordings will be transcribed into text and the recordings will then be erased. No real names will be used in the transcriptions. No real names or identifying information will appear in anything that is written, published, or presented about this research.

All the information will be kept locked in the researcher’s office.

Only the researcher and the researcher’s supervisor and committee will have access to the information.

The information will only be used for research purposes.

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no known risks associated with participation in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to (for example, questions that make you feel uncomfortable). If you decide to withdraw from the study, you can still continue to meet in the group sessions if you wish. If you choose to withdraw, the data previously collected about you will be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.

The results of this study might be published in academic and professional journals, as well as in book form; if you are interested in reading what gets written about the study, I will forward it to you upon request.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the accompanying consent form. Your signature on this form tells us that you understand what is involved and that you agree to participate. Please keep this letter for your information. A parent will also be asked to complete a consent form on your behalf.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Alyson Huntly at 613.841.2354

(e-mail: [ahuntly@magma.ca](mailto:ahuntly@magma.ca)) or Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler in the Faculty of Education at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (e-mail: [rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca](mailto:rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca)).

If you have any concerns or question about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board (email: [EREB@queensu.ca](mailto:EREB@queensu.ca)) or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: [greb.chair@queensu.ca](mailto:greb.chair@queensu.ca).

Sincerely,

Alyson Huntly

[CONSENT FORM FOR TEENAGE GIRLS]

I agree to participate in the research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood*.

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation will include eight group discussion and storytelling sessions of up to 2 hours each (total 16 hours) where I will read and discuss a story about my experience, talk with others about their stories, and read some other stories together. I will also be interviewed individually three times for up to 1 hour (total of 3 hours). Interviews and group discussions will be audio-recorded. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

I understand that there are no known risks associated with participation in the research study; however, outside support services will be made available to me in the event that personal issues arise for me during the course of the study. I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to or that make me uncomfortable.

I understand that confidentiality will be protected to the greatest extent possible, by appropriate storage and access of data and by the removal of my name from the data.

If I withdraw from the study, any data collected about me will be removed from the study and destroyed.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. I will be able to continue in the group discussions if I wish to, even if I withdraw from the study. If I withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be removed from the study and disposed of confidentially.

I am aware that I can contact (a) Alyson Huntly, the principal researcher, at 613.841.2354 (ahuntly@magma.ca) (b) Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Alyson's supervisor, at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (email: rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca) (c) Educational Research Ethics Board (email: EREB@queensu.ca) or (d) the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Queen's University, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: greb.chair@queensu.ca with any question, concern, or complaint.

Please sign one copy of this consent form and return it to Alyson Huntly. Retain the second copy for your records.

Participants Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE  
TO ALLOW MY DAUGHTER TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Signature of parent/guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

[LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR ADULT WOMEN]

[date]

Dear Participants:

Thank you for considering participating in this research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood*, conducted by Alyson Huntly (the researcher), under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler of the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. This research project has been reviewed and cleared by the Queen's University General Ethics Review Board.

This is a study to learn more about how girls who have had particular challenges in their lives read and interpret stories and how they use stories to create their own sense of identity as girls. This study will include story writing, group sessions, and individual interviews. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

Story writing. Each participant will be asked to prepare a short written story that describes a significant experience in your life from your own experience as an adolescent or from your experiences as a parent or caregiver of an adolescent girl (time to prepare will be about 1 hour).

Eight group sessions. You will participate in a group with three or four other women and the researcher. Each person will have a time in one of the sessions to read aloud the story they wrote. The group will talk about the story each person shares and identify themes and issues that seem significant as we consider what it means or what it meant for you to be “a girl.” The group will also read and discuss other short stories and narratives together. There will be eight sessions of up to 2 hours in length for a total of 16 hours. Sessions will take place weekly.

Three individual interviews. The researcher will interview you three times for approximately one hour each. Interviews will take place before the group meets, after the third or fourth session, and at the end of the study. Interviews will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you. In the interviews, you will talk with the researcher (Alyson) about the ideas that were raised in your written story or in the group discussion. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

It is important to protect the privacy of the people who participate in research. Here is how we will do that:

Audio recordings will be made of the group sessions and the interviews. These recordings will be transcribed into text and the recordings will then be erased. No real names will be used in the transcriptions. No real names or identifying information will appear in anything that is written, published, or presented about this research.

All the information will be kept locked in the researcher’s office.

Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor and committee will have access to the information.

The information will only be used for research purposes.

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no known risks associated with participation in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to (for example, questions that make you feel uncomfortable). If you decide to withdraw from the study, you can still continue to meet in the group sessions if you wish. If you choose to withdraw, the data previously collected about you will be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.

The results of this study might be published in academic and professional journals, as well as in book form; if you are interested in reading what gets written about the study, I will forward it to you upon request.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the accompanying consent form. Your signature on this form tells us that you understand what is involved and that you agree to participate. Please keep this letter for your information.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Alyson Huntly at 613.841.2354

(e-mail: [ahuntly@magma.ca](mailto:ahuntly@magma.ca)) or Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler in the Faculty of Education at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (e-mail: [rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca](mailto:rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca)).

If you have any concerns or question about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board (email: [EREB@queensu.ca](mailto:EREB@queensu.ca)) or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: [greb.chair@queensu.ca](mailto:greb.chair@queensu.ca).

Sincerely,

Alyson Huntly

[CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT WOMEN]

I agree to participate in the research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood*.

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation will include eight group discussion and storytelling sessions of up to 2 hours each (total 16 hours) where I will read and discuss a story about my experience, talk with others about their stories, and read some other stories together. I will also be interviewed individually three times for up to 1 hour (total of 3 hours). Interviews and group discussions will be audio-recorded. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

I understand that there are no known risks associated with participation in the research study; however, outside support services will be made available to me in the event that personal issues arise for me during the course of the study. I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to or that make me uncomfortable.

I understand that confidentiality will be protected to the greatest extent possible, by appropriate storage and access of data and by the removal of my name from the data. If I withdraw from the study, any data collected about me will be removed from the study and destroyed.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. I will be able to continue in the group discussions if I

wish to, even if I withdraw from the study. If I withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be removed from the study and disposed of confidentially.

I am aware that I can contact (a) Alyson Huntly, the principal researcher, at 613.841.2354 (ahuntly@magma.ca) (b) Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Alyson's supervisor, at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (email: rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca) (c) Educational Research Ethics Board (email: EREB@queensu.ca) or (d) the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Queen's University, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: greb.chair@queensu.ca with any question, concern, or complaint.

Please sign one copy of this consent form and return it to Alyson Huntly. Retain the second copy for your records.

Participants Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

[LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATORS]

[date]

Dear Participants:

Thank you for considering participating in this research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood*, conducted by Alyson Huntly (the researcher), under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler of the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. This research project has been reviewed and cleared by the Queen's University General Ethics Review Board.

This is a study to learn more about how girls who have had particular challenges in their lives read and interpret stories and how they use stories to create their own sense of identity as girls. This study will include story writing, group sessions, and individual interviews. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

Eight group sessions. You will participate in a group with three or four teenage girls and the researcher. There will be 8 sessions for up to two hours each (total of 16 hours). Your role in the group, as a research collaborator, will be to participate in group activities and to share your insights and observations during group discussions. Each person will have a time in one of the sessions to read aloud the story they wrote. The group will talk about the story each person shares and identify themes and issues that



seem significant as we consider what it means to be “a girl.” The group will also read and discuss other short stories and narratives together.

Story writing. Each participant will be asked to prepare a short written story that describes a significant experience in your life (time to prepare will be about 1 hour). As a research collaborator, you will also be asked to share a story from your own life experience.

Two individual interviews. The researcher will interview you twice for approximately one hour each. Interviews will take place before the group meets and at the end of the study. Interviews will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you. In the interviews, you will talk with the researcher (Alyson) about the ideas that were raised in your written story or in the group discussion.

It is important to protect the privacy of the people who participate in research. Here is how we will do that:

Audio recordings will be made of the group sessions and the interviews. These recordings will be transcribed into text and the recordings will then be erased. No real names will be used in the transcriptions. No real names or identifying information will appear in anything that is written, published, or presented about this research.

All the information will be kept locked in the researcher’s office.

You will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, in which you agree to keep confidential all the information you encounter from other participants in this study.

Only the researcher will have access to the information.

The information will only be used for research purposes.

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no known risks associated with participation in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to (for example, questions that make you feel uncomfortable). If you decide to withdraw from the study, you can still continue to meet in the group sessions if you wish. The data previously collected will be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.

The results of this study might be published in academic and professional journals, as well as in book form; if you are interested in reading what gets written about the study, I will forward it to you upon request.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the accompanying consent form. Your signature on this form tells us that you understand what is involved and that you agree to participate. Please keep this letter for your information.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Alyson Huntly at 613.841.2354

(e-mail: [ahuntly@magma.ca](mailto:ahuntly@magma.ca)) or Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler in the Faculty of Education at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (e-mail: [rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca](mailto:rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca)).

If you have any concerns or question about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board (EREB@queensu.ca) or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: greb.chair@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Alyson Huntly

[CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATORS]

I agree to participate in the research project entitled *Narrative, Identity, and Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood* as a research collaborator.

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation will include eight group discussion and storytelling sessions of up to two hours each (total of 16 hours) where I will talk with others about their stories, sharing my insights and observations, and read and discuss some other stories together. I will also share a story from my own life experience in one of the sessions. I will also be interviewed individually twice for up to 1 hour per interview (total of 2 hours). Interviews and group discussions will be audio-recorded. Sessions and interviews will take place in a public facility where there is sufficient privacy to ensure confidentiality but with other adults in the building at all times.

I understand that there are no known risks associated with participation in the research study; however, outside support services will be made available to me in the event that personal issues arise for me during the course of the study. I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to or that make me uncomfortable.

I understand that confidentiality will be protected to the greatest extent possible, by appropriate storage and access of data and by the removal of my name from the data.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. I will be able to continue in the group discussions if I wish to, even if I withdraw from the study. If I withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be removed from the study and disposed of confidentially.

I am aware that I can contact (a) Alyson Huntly, the principal researcher, at 613.841.2354 (ahuntly@magma.ca) (b) Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Alyson's supervisor, at Queens University, 613.533.6000, extension 77267 (email: rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca) (c) Education Research Ethics Board (EREB@queensu.ca) or (d) the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Queen's University, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6000, Ext. 77035, email: greb.chair@queensu.ca with any question, concern, or complaint.

Please sign one copy of this consent form and return it to Alyson Huntly. Retain the second copy for your records.

Participants Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address:

Email: