

We All Wanted to Fit In:
Faith Community as “Welcoming Space”
for Adolescent Girls on the Margins

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In the Beginning

In the beginning, God (Gen.1:1). In the beginning, Word (John 1:1). In the beginning, creation: an interweaving of God and word; the creative at work in the making of words. Words create worlds.

In the beginning is the story, the making of words into worlds.

I think one thing that's the same in all our stories is that at the beginning we all wanted to fit in. 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 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, feeling lost.

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, 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 [that 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 or whatever, 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.

[Natasha¹, age 14]

High school is a lot better but even it has its weirdness, things I don't understand. Yeah, for no reason every day, uh, there's a boy who calls me fag for no reason every day, and another one just insults me all the time, you know, and there are girls who just like non-stop insulting.

I guess its all instinct. They just go for the weakest person they can see. I've always like related elementary school to wolves personally. It's like you have, it's like a pack, right. Normally you have the pack leader who picks on smaller pack members so they can show their superiority. I actually researched wolves because I got so interested in that and I found like a whole bunch of relations and I wrote it down in a notepad and I want to write a book on it some day.

[Serena, age 15]

Natasha and Serena were participants in a study I conducted in July 2007 to talk with adolescent girls from diverse backgrounds about their experiences of exclusion and inclusion. Like other girls their age, they are struggling fit in, to make their way in the world, and to develop an

¹ All names and identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

authentic and resilient identity. That is not easy in a world that gives adolescent girls conflicting messages about what they can and should be—be powerful, autonomous and independent, but be careful to maintain relationships; be strong, but be sexy; be yourself, but above all, be nice. It is not easy in a world that pits girls against one another and against the idealized, unrealizable images of girls and women that they see in the media. It is not easy in a society that, as Henri Giroux says, is increasingly hostile to young people: “At worst, [cultural representations] construct youth in terms that largely serve to demonize, sexualize, or commodify them, to reduce their sense of agency to the consumerist requirements of supply and demand” (p. 58).

Carol Lakey Hess (1997) asserts that communities of faith can make a difference in the outcome of the development of girls and women. She situates her analysis within the context of the crisis that many adolescent girls face (e.g., Gilligan & Brown, 1992; Pipher, 1994). She says that young women must find a community that can support them as they cross the “perilous divide” (p.126) between pre-adolescence and adolescence and says that faith communities can be “safe houses” (p. 97) where girls’ voices can be heard.

In this paper, I report on my conversations with a group of adolescent girls from different racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds about their experiences of social exclusion and of belonging. I discuss the welcome they have found within their faith community, as well as barriers to inclusion, and discuss implications for other faith communities seeking to support girls on the margins.

The Discursive World of Girlhood

Narrative Selves

Maxine Greene (1995) speaks of life as an unfolding narrative, in which, to understand the meaning and purpose of our life, we must see our life as story. Jerome Bruner (1990) concurs that a life led is inseparable from a life told. It is in this sense that I think of narrative and identity as a process of storytelling oneself into being—coming to know oneself in relation to others and to all Being. Because self narratives depend upon cultural stories, symbols, and language, they necessarily reflect historical and prevailing discourse about the possible lives that are part of one’s culture (e.g., Bruner, 2004).

Texts of Terror

The god talk that has emerged within the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions has not on the whole been friendly to girls. Yet, girls must draw on these traditions as they develop their identities through self narrative.

I draw on Phyllis Trible's (1984) concept of "texts of terror"—biblical texts in which women experience abusive male power. Trible says that developing a theology of blessing for women entails coming face to face with the horror in the Bible. I believe that creating safe space for girls within contemporary faith communities also entails knowing the texts of terror for girls, facing the reality that the Bible actually says this about what girls can be or become.

There are some biblical texts in which the bodies and selves of adolescent girls are violated—girls such as the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19) and the daughter the Levite's host offered up to be violated; or Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11), a girl burnt as a sacrifice to God for granting victory in battle. God, who intervened to save the boy Isaac from being sacrificed (Gen. 22:12), does nothing to protect these unnamed girls.

And there is Eve—a kind of archetypal adolescent living in the blissful pre-sin world of childhood before she gains knowledge and is expelled into an adult world. The story of Eve is particularly important because of the way it has been used throughout history to justify women's oppression. Eve's story is culturally imbedded. This is the story with power to name a world in which woman is second best; made from man, not from earth; source of evil; subservient to men.

However, all of scripture may be a text of terror for adolescent girls in its eclipsing of their stories; denigration of sexuality; taken-for-granted treatment of sexual violence and powerlessness; the rare mention of girls with agency and power. These stories reveal a harsh and patriarchal god, a god who is strangely and terribly silent as girls are raped and murdered. An uncritical reading of these biblical texts reveals few narrative options for girls: invisibility; good girls who are acquiescent, chaste, and feminine; silenced girls; victims of abuse; and bad girls.

The misogynist biblical texts continue to infuse secular Western culture in ways that diminish and oppress girls. Biblical discourses of girl as silent/invisible, good (asexual, passive), victimized, or evil translate into contemporary discourses of girls as silenced, good (conventionally feminine, subservient to men, and nice), or bad (evil, dangerous, source of girls' victimization).

Contemporary Discourses of Girlhood

Theorists in girl studies delineate four dominant contemporary discourses of girlhood: Girl Power, Reviving Ophelia, Mean Girls, and Bad Girls. These discourses idealize, constrain, and regulate girls' subjectivities. They work in concert to promise girls unlimited opportunity, while demanding feminine virtues of niceness, relationality, and sexual attractiveness (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Gonick, 2004).

Girl Power says girls can be or do anything they want. It is a catchword for girls' empowerment and a symbol of the equality supposedly now achieved for girls and women (Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2003). Its normative ideal girl is economically well-off, white, physically and mentally healthy, straight, able-bodied, and successful, (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005), thus excluding girls who are Other because of race, ethnicity, culture, body type, or sexual orientation. However, Girl Power catches all girls in a no-win situation. They must be all this but also nice. They must be powerful and autonomous, but they must maintain relationships (Gonick, 2004). Above all, they must be sexually attractive to men (Bettis & Adams, 2005).

Reviving Ophelia depicts girls as silenced victims of a hostile culture. Adolescent girls are in crisis: their problems include depression, eating disorders, school phobias, silence, withdrawal, and self-inflicted injuries (e.g., Gilligan & Brown, 1992; Pipher, 1994). This discourse reinforces the idea that girls and women are weak and powerless to help themselves.

The discourse of Mean Girls says girls are untrustworthy, competitive, cruel, and harmful to one another (e.g., Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). Bad Girls depicts girls as violent and dangerous (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Bettis & Adams, 2005). These two discourses shift attention away from social structures of oppression by blaming other girls for girls' problems. They fuel increasingly punitive responses to girls, especially those of color and poor girls (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Schissel, 2006).

These discourses position girls and women as they have been positioned since the time of biblical writings: sometimes powerful and active, but only within the limits of femininity (those who violate these norms are punished); victims (daughters/concubines); or bad (Eve). These discourses leave girls with very little space in which to develop strong and healthy identities.

Creating Community and Supporting Girls

Liminal Spaces

Bettis and Adams (2005) address the disadvantages with which some girls are faced—sexual orientation, social class, race, ethnicity, or ability. These researchers use the notion of *liminality* to theorize not just about the space between adulthood and childhood but also about spaces in-between—the places outside of the officially sanctioned spaces of the classroom, where girls construct resistant and resilient identities. They say that for girls who are marginalized or in challenging circumstances, the work of shaping a resilient identity does not take place primarily in the classroom or in officially sanctioned school activities. Such girls must seek other places where it is safe and possible for them to do their identity work. While Bettis and Adams do not consider the role faith communities may play but their work leaves open the possibility that inclusive faith communities could serve as liminal spaces for adolescent girls.

Safe Houses

Hess (1997) draws on Gilligan's and Brown's (1992) image of girls crossing a perilous divide between pre-adolescence and adolescence. She says that a strong sense of self, what she calls "a degree of autonomy and self-authoring," (p. 60) is essential for genuine relationality. Supporting girls' development entails a deep understanding of relationship that does not perpetuate the oppressive burdens put on women to give their selves away in the name of female goodness.

Hess (1997) says that communities of faith can provide "safe houses" for girls, places of genuine listening, where girls can name their experiences and develop a strong sense of self. This requires the kind of listening that embraces conflict and difference. She says that education involves handing over to younger generations "the forbidden fruit of curiosity, inquiry, critical thinking and voice" (p. 183). Rather than endorsing obedience and submission to the status quo, such education should be an invitation to what Hess calls "hard dialogue and deep connections" (p. 183) with one another, scripture and tradition, and with God.

Hard dialogue must include critical relationship with the patriarchal texts of scripture. Here Hess (1997) draws on feminist scholarship to say that encounter with scripture must correct misinterpretations, celebrate visions, name regressions, identify overarching theological criteria, and invite conversations between texts. She suggests oppressive texts should not be read as having

authority over women's lives; they should be read as a memory of suffering and a mirror of sin, thus naming the sin in the text and resisting oppression.

An important thread in Hess's (1997) work is the notion of community. She imagines a faith community that functions as a "common house," as a safe space within which girls' and women's selves can be nurtured and affirmed. She writes:

Rather than being a place that colludes with our sexist culture, [the faith community] can be a place that holds on to women in affirmation, appropriately challenges and lets go of women as they grow, and stays put as these supported women celebrate their distinctness and exercise their voice. (p. 74)

Mentoring Communities

Dori Baker (2005) picks up where Hess (1997) leaves off, proposing a way to create such communities for girls. Through her work with groups of adolescent girls, Baker developed a process that she calls "girlfriend theology" to help adolescent girls tell stories of their lives within a safe and supportive context. As Baker explains, girlfriend theology is not a systematized set of beliefs; it is a process of bringing voice to the god talk that emerges when older women and girls share and reflect on the stories of their lives.

As with Hess, Baker (2005) bases her work on the vision of Gilligan and Brown (1992) to bring adult women and girls together to pass on feminist tradition to younger women. Girlfriend theology has feminist adult mentors meet with girls to listen and respond to one another's stories. Baker (2005) uses the womanist concept of othermothers—relationships with adult women supporting adolescent girls into adulthood—as the basis for these relationships.

Key to Baker's process is what feminist scholars call a *usable past*. A usable past refers to the ever-growing body of texts, both contemporary and retrieved from the past, that provide an alternative to the predominant, androcentric worldview. A usable past is a body of evidence to support the belief in feminine strength and dignity. Baker contends that building and sharing our usable past is a necessary part of supporting adolescent girls in their faith formation and development.

In Baker's (2005) process, the daily experience of girls becomes a primary source of theology. This is a liberating activity, making it possible to reclaim and reinterpret scripture and faith tradition from the point of view of those who have been ignored or denigrated by it. This puts girlfriend theology in line with other liberation theologies, which begin with critical reflection on experiences of marginalization. Baker's process creates communities where girls are affirmed and

their experiences are heard. But there is also critical dialogue: mentoring provides a bridge between girls' experiences and women's "usable past" of critical traditions. By enacting a compassionate presence, her process speaks back to a patriarchal god who judges, silences, or ignores girls.

Liberating Theologies for Girls on the Margins

But I was always, well, Different. I could never put my finger on it. 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 what ever else they were saying behind their hands. 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.

[Serena, Age 15]

In my own research with adolescent girls, I have begun to explore the implications of Baker's (2005) and Hess's (1997) work. In June, 2007, I gathered a small group—three girls age 14 to 16 with different racial, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds—who had all been socially ostracized, isolated, or bullied in school. The girls had been involved in a particular congregation all their lives and were currently active participants in a newly formed youth group.

Following Baker's process, I invited each girl to write a story about a significant experience and to share that story with the group when we met. Each girl had an opportunity to read aloud the story she had prepared while the rest of us listened. Then, we shared affirmations, reactions, and points of connection. Building on ideas from Baker's process, we worked collectively to identify theological themes and connections with the girls' faith traditions and practices. Although I did not use an adult collaborator, I inserted insights and stories drawn from feminist liberation theologies.

Different

Natasha, age 14, is a bright and articulate Grade 8 student. "I guess you could say I come from a mixed background," Natasha says. "I am sort of African, and I also have ancestors that might have been from India, so I'm also sort of Indian." Her father is Hindu, her mother Christian; she and her sister were raised in both traditions.

Natasha has traveled widely—she knows a lot about diversity—and also a lot about not fitting in. Natasha's experiences left her profoundly unhappy. "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."

At one point, Natasha's peers were so overt in their negative behaviour toward her that her parents wanted to intervene; Natasha felt that would only make things worse. Her isolation from peers continued for four years, but she did not find any effective response. Even though girls told through their words and actions, "Everyone hates you," she did not want to change schools for fear that she would be even more of an outsider.

Anyone who's done a bit of traveling around the world would know that things are never exactly the same when you get back. It's a culture shock when you get there but also when you come back. When I came back from an 18-month time in India, my whole class had changed so much that I didn't fit in anymore. It didn't help that not very many people remembered me, so I was basically the new kid all over again. I was behind on my French and ahead in other things, but that didn't matter to the kids. I had been dubbed weird. In Grade 6 things got better, but I was still having trouble making friends. I was the last one to be picked for any group work and I never got invited over.

Keylie is a sixteen-year-old Grade 10 student in an arts high school, where she takes courses in an intensive dance program along with her regular academics. She is American-born, the only child of Chinese-American and Malaysian parents, but she has lived most of her life in Canada. Keylie sometimes finds herself in conflict with her parents' cultural values. Dating is a big issue.

Well, from what my mom says about the whole [thing], you don't meet your boyfriend and they don't meet your parents until you're getting married, which I find ridiculous. So I have to wait until like I'm like 28? I don't know, I think that's kind of, for me it's hard to understand because I was raised in like a North American setting, which I think my mom should understand how that works, but she doesn't because her family was like Chinese.

At odds with her family's culture, Keylie found herself even more out of place with her high school peers in the dance program. "Dancers all look the same, the same body type, the way they look, clothes, acts, their kind of like aura." The other dancers were all from much wealthier families than Keylie's.

I remember they'd be talking about shopping, and they'd be like, "Yeah, we went to this store and we bought this and this for this much money," and I'm like, "Whoa!" And they'd be like, "Why? That's not a lot," and I'm like, "That's a lot!" They're like "Thirty-four dollars for a t-shirt?" And I'm like, "Yeah, you can buy a t-shirt for five dollars."

I also look different, and being a gymnast I don't have the dancer body. I do have bigger muscles than they do, but um also like clothes and stuff. The times I felt most excluded was when they would talk about what they did on the weekend together, like going shopping. I never knew why, but I never seemed to fit into their group.

At the beginning I did try to fit in, I guess I always had a different way of seeing things and different opinions. I was almost never invited to their parties. I was always afraid of saying something stupid. Not being rich or having a lot of money for clothes and not being invited to any of the cool parties, I had fewer things in common with the dancers. Eating lunch would become one of my least favourite things in the day. Even math class was better. I would just sit there and listen to them talk about which guy talked to them on Facebook and what happened at the latest party. After a while I just started to zone out. I'd hear other kids laughing down the hall and the band practicing on the other side of the school; it was like I was watching myself in a movie.

Serena is a Grade 9 student, a Canadian of parents of European ancestry, she thinks of herself as an average student, average in most ways. "If you walked into my class, you would have no idea I existed. I was the girl in the back corner with her four-inch-thick book hidden under the desk, as she read it to try and make up for the fact that she had no life."

It's funny how I became an outcast. I was being nice to a girl and she offered me her pudding and I ate it, and this girl happened to be best friends with the most popular girl in school, who thought I was trying to steal her best friend and like socially outcasted me for life and got everyone to hate me, and that was kind of like how the damage was done and I could not repair it. Plus, most people are born with a kind of social sense. I wasn't.

Like Natasha, Serena suffered many years of ostracism and bullying in elementary school. Her problems intensified in Grade 8.

There was a girl, she was always, always picking on me, and then one day I got so mad at her because she was making me, 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 um 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. It was being like, feeling like you're outside your body, that's what it felt like when that happened.

The Principal believed me but it's not like I could personally talk to the School Board so they still suspended me and it's still on my permanent record and there were questions getting into high school and 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 who read it, I was some kid with a knife in my locker. The knife was turned in to the police and the police never did anything. 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.

Yeah my parents transferred me. And I tried after, 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.

.The girls in the group felt that they had all been excluded by other girls because they were Different. Culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation were all possible factors, but the differences that they articulated most definitely had something to do with feminine performance. These girls were successful in other areas of their lives, in schoolwork, or at home, but they were not successfully performing “girl” amid the discourses that condition how that is to be. Keylie, a gymnast in a room full of dancers, said it was something about her body that was not quite right—in addition to the shape of her eyes, the colour of her skin, she had “too many muscles.” She said dancers all look alike: “They’re all blond, thin, the way they hold their necks.” In a way, she was saying that all girls look alike—that is, girls who perform feminine successfully. Natasha felt she did not really know how to be *nice* and also truthful, smart, shy, brown, and culturally different. Maybe she thought too unconventionally, she speculated.

Serena felt her lack of self-confidence was a part of it, and her longing to belong. But lack of confidence also came from early experiences of being bullied. Only in some vaguely indefinable way did she understand the difference that made her Other. All she could say was that she did not seem to fit in with what others expected girls to be like.

All the girls had internalized the shame that comes from being socially rebuffed, some of them for years, a shame that profoundly affected their sense of self.

We Are Welcome Here

The girls in the group all found welcome and acceptance in the church youth group—a group they call K3B. This group of 13- to 16-year-olds, both male and female, meets with three adult lay leaders for an hour on Sunday mornings and on other occasions for potluck suppers, activities, and retreats.

I really like K3B. I think it brings us closer together and it gives a different aspect of life, like when you have week after week of being with people you may not like and having an hour with people that you do like and having fun, it makes your life a lot easier. I think that since, it's been like a year that we've [been together as a group], yeah that we've become really close and like whenever like one of us has a problem, we kind of help each other. And what is also really interesting for me is having younger members and I think for like maybe for [the other older girls in the group] because we see them, it sounds really old, but we kind of see them growing. [Keylie]

It is a lot better than school and I do have fun when we do K3B activities and that kind of thing and I do feel accepted and included sometimes, well actually most times . . . And as I get more used to it the more time I spend there and stuff, so I do feel included and accepted, and it is hard but all in all it is good, so it's not like school is for me. [Natasha]

I think it was luck that K3B happened. I think also like the church realized that we do have a lot of adolescent people in our church. And I think they're also trying to like save the youth. [Keylie]

The girls all agreed that K3B is different from school. The leaders care deeply about the group members; the group itself is explicitly welcoming. Serena recalls a time when she was sitting apart from the group: “We did an experiment in K3B once, like, um Bill asked me to sit outside the circle one time. He wanted to see how long it would take people to notice or do something. I don't know if you guys remember?”

Keylie nodded, “To see how close we are, see how we reacted, like, to exclusion.”

“It worked. I was sitting there for like five seconds before someone said, ‘Serena, what are you doing over there? Get in the circle.’ ”

Keylie grinned. “I said, ‘Serena, why are you sitting out there?’ ”

“Yeah, yeah. You said that.”

For girls who have experienced social exclusion, as these three have, such experiences are important, to be savoured. K3B is also a place where they can be themselves, where they can try out authentic selves without having to be afraid. As Keylie explains,

Yeah, I think it's important to be yourself because then you find the people who are actually genuinely nice to you and not because you're being fake to them. And so when you're yourself you meet people like you and you don't have to always every day put on an act.

I Need More Than That

The group is a vitally important place for these girls, but sometimes even this safe space has been limited by what the girls felt they had to be and to believe to get in the door. At first, Serena did not feel authentic. For a long time, she says, she was “an atheist pretending to be a believer.”

I actually think most of us don't [believe in God]. I think, uh, I know Amy does. She's hardcore, like, “I believe in God!” But we were talking about that, I think it was at our last sleepover and a few of us were having . . . we were talking about, like, if we believe in God and stuff. I think some of us believe that there is, there might be, but we're more kind of like into the whole like spirit thing, but not the whole, one-person thing. [Keylie]

As the girls reflect on what they do or do not believe, it is clear that they struggle against images of a god who is in charge, a god who stands apart from their own life experience. Natasha wonders about the four years of social isolation she experienced at school. “Maybe God is trying to teach us something, you know, has plans for this stuff so we can be made stronger.”

Serena rejects this idea. And Natasha and Keylie both agree that four years is too long; one year would have been enough to teach them what they needed to be stronger.

Well, 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 [hurt yourself]. They'll tell you, “No don't touch that knife, you'll cut yourself,” you know. So it doesn't seem like he's really a parent if all he does is ignore us, and if he is there then he's not a good parent. [Serena]

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 their pain, the pain of the world. Serena speaks of the holocaust, of Darfur.

I don't know, I mean like it's, what I, I was trying to explain what I believe, that it's kind of just in my head, it's hard to explain. The only word I can come close to it is balance, but no 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.

A person kind of God, it's as simple as people can picture. No one can picture a thing that just is pure love and not really this and not really that, so everyone just assumes it's a conscious being because that's as close as we could come. It's like trying to imagine a fourth dimension, a place beyond the universe.

Serena is not, of course, the only one to have asked such questions, posed such challenges, or dared to wonder what kind of a God would be “worth worshipping.” But her questions raise important issues. Serena has experienced a deep loss of trust in herself and in the world. Even as she is beginning to gain confidence in her ability to manage social situations, she is still not sure she can trust anyone to really be her friend, “No, I'd always be looking behind me, waiting to be stabbed in the back.” Her self has been shaken to the core as has her faith in any larger presence or love.

For these three girls, images of God that they held got in the way of their experiences of feeling authentic, and fully included even within a group that welcomed them openly.

The girls' narratives confirm what Hess (1997) and Baker (2005) have noted: For communities of faith to be safe space requires more than just a warm welcome. It entails

transforming deeply seated theologies which judge or constrain what being a girl can mean. This includes transforming images of God and finding spiritual connections beyond the God-in-charge, the judgment, or the silence these girls have experienced from patriarchal scripts. For girls who have experienced marginalization, a genuinely girl-friendly theology becomes especially important. A liberating theology for girls must speak back to the Bible, with its images of an uncaring patriarchal god and its diminishing of girlhood, if girls are to become unfettered from what Carol Hess (1997) calls “the dehumanizing of girls in theology” (p. 246).

What strikes me, as I think of these girls, is how pervasive are the image of a patriarchal god who directs and controls human affairs.

In 1983, Mollenkott said that exclusively male imagery for God underpins patriarchy: “Because God is husband-like, husbands are godlike. Because God is father-like, fathers are godlike. The stage is set for the exploitation of girls and women” (p. 5) and for relationships founded on models of domination and submission rather than mutuality.

In 1982, Sally McFague spoke of the literalistic mentality that underlies Christendom’s traditional insistence on an exclusively male god. “The Bible becomes an idol: the fallible, human words of Scripture are understood as referring correctly and literally to God . . . If the Bible says that God is ‘father’ then God is literally, really, ‘father’” (pp. 4-5).

Sheila Collins (1974) also critiqued Christianity’s over reliance on the metaphor of god the father. She said that patriarchalism has become a root-metaphor—a world view, a whole way of ordering reality based on hierarchy and a splitting of subject-object. This superior-superordinate paradigm translates into other relationships including tyrannical ones—husband/wife, boss/employee, white/ black, affluent/poor. And boy/girl, adult/youth.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s feminist theologians explored and identified feminine images of God beyond the male father figure—metaphors such as a nursing mother, female pelican, midwife, baker woman, mother hen, mother bear, and *Sophia*, the feminine embodiment of divine wisdom (e.g., Tribble, 1978; Mollenkott, 1983).

Delores Williams (2006) underlines an important aspect of womanist theology, what she calls “survival struggle” (p. 173). She says that a womanist theological stance implies a

commitment to the survival of a whole people—the African American community. Womanist theology is integrally involved in understanding how God is in relation with women who are struggling for survival in the everyday life of African American experience. Williams says that a close reading of Hagar's story in the Bible reveals that her predicament involves slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, single parenting, and radical encounters with God. Because of its similarities with their own experience, Hagar's story has been appropriated by African American women since the days of slavery. For Williams, the liberatory acts of God must be viewed alongside the times when God does not act to liberate. In Hagar she sees God acting within the limits and constraints of Hagar's predicament to help her survive, and, eventually, to make her way out.

This image of God affirms the experience of those who must live with resistance in conditions of hardship, from which there is not immediate release, experiences such as those of the girls in my group who faced social isolation and taunting day after day. God does not remove Hagar from her suffering; instead, God helps her find the survival possibilities within it.

Serena, from my research group, experienced many years of exclusion. Her story reminds me how important such a reading of the Bible is for adolescent girls. Liberation theology has tended to focus more on God's justice-making and liberation, and less how God supports resistance and survival in situations for which there may not be quick or easy solutions.

Bridging God Words and Girl Worlds

Some of this feminist work of reclaiming images of God is nearly thirty years old: yet a male father God, the patriarchal God of scripture, is alluded to again and again in the narratives of the girls in my research group. It is an image that girls such as Serena refuse but have not replaced. It continues to diminish girls' selves. It continues to leave them with a sense of a void. Because they do not believe in *that* kind of god, they are somehow outside, unbelievers pretending to be believers.

The pervasiveness of the patriarchal god astonishes me, at least, its pervasiveness in the god talk of Serena, Natasha, and Keylie. These three girls have all been life-long, active members of a church which publicly preaches and proclaims a very different image of God. All their lives, this congregation has been led by clergy and lay people who have an explicitly feminist stance. Feminist

powerfully present yet horribly unresponsive to girls in peril. This god hates sex and does not care much for girls. This patriarchal God is out there, snooping at the edges of teenage lives, lurking in their bedrooms, judging them and condemning their sexuality, rewarding them if they are good. Between the lines one reads the questions that Serena and other girls are asking: What *about* God's supposed care for all those suffering millions? What about the pain in the life of a teenage girl?

Second, even congregations that may think they have "moved beyond" male and hierarchical images of God need to continue to explicitly address the patriarchal god talk inside their own communities. I suspect that such theology, in its more subtle forms is still present within the most diverse and liberal of Canadian congregations. Even if God is not addressed as Father or King, images of divinity may still be infused with domination, control, and authority.

Third, this experience reiterates the need for the kinds of mentoring communities that Baker (2005) and Hess (1997) envision. It confirms that accompanying girls in a healing journey must be a long-term commitment. After a year in a supportive group, girls such as Serena have barely begun their healing journey. Much more time is needed. The work of "hard dialogue and deep connections" that Hess describes is a long term process. The feminist/womanist vision of liberating God from androcentric, racist, and patriarchal images has barely begun.

I was only with this group of girls for a short time, too short to develop the kind of mentoring community Baker (2005) describes or to address the questions I am left with: How might girlfriend theology speak back to profound loss of self? How might it speak back to the experiences that have left Serena and other girls feeling alone and abandoned by God? How can it be expanded and replicated in many more faith communities, in order to build a "usable past" for future girls?

But this much I am sure of: Such work is vital; girls' very lives depend on it.

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and other liberation theologies are part of this congregation's conversation in worship and Bible study, as well as in social action. The language of worship has, for many years, been consistently inclusive of a variety of images of God and humanity for as long as they have been alive.

These girls' home congregation is part of the Affirming congregation movement of The United Church of Canada and publicly states its welcome to all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, social, or economic circumstance. The congregation, in an inner-city location, is one of the most diverse I know—at least one third of the members are openly gay, lesbian, or transgender; the congregation is also diverse ethnically, economically, socially, culturally, and racially. The curriculum the girls have been exposed to in Sunday school is inclusive of gender and other social issues, with an explicit commitment to diverse images of God. In this congregation, the Bible is opened as text through which to explore God's revelation, not as literally God's words.

And yet, as these girls explore whether or not they "believe in God," they measure their believing against a model of god as male, authoritarian, all-powerful.

In their youth group, these girls are being mentored by caring, feminist adults who model faith in a God who is compassionately present. The commitment, the care, the modeling of deeply compassionate relations, is an important resource for girls who have been marginalized. I believe that this experience, over time, will help to heal their sense of self and their understanding of God. However, this is going to be a long-term process—these girls have only just begun to feel safe.

This raises important issues for congregations that wish to support girls on the margins.

First, it is a reminder of how pervasive the patriarchal images of god are in culture and in consciousness. For girls who have experienced exclusion and marginalization, it is a burden that must be shed before they can fully experience full welcome—welcome that embraces their aloneness, their questioning, their loss of trust. It is reminder that the girls carry this image of god deep within, even girls in congregations and families that espouse liberation theologies.

Communities of faith are not the only source of theology for girls. One has only to pick up a teen novel or watch a movie to be reminded that god talk is very much part of secular culture. But the images seen are caricatures and distortions. God is capricious, malicious, male, sometimes

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