

# NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGY: INTRODUCTION TO THE STORIES OF GENDER PROJECT

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## INTRODUCTION

If I had to pinpoint an exact moment, I would say I got interested in women and religion in the seventh grade on the day I found out that the priest at my grandparents' church would not allow my sister and me to be the altar servers for my grandparents' fiftieth anniversary mass. The particular iteration of this topic that currently commands my attention was born my inaugural year of teaching middle school religion, the year I saw *The Merchants of Cool* (2001) Frontline documentary for the first time and had to figure out how to teach sexual education effectively to my students when I became aware that there was a particular group of young women in the seventh grade class who were known as the ones to go to for oral sex.<sup>1</sup> In a mass mediated society where women frequently are portrayed as sexual objects without their own agency, what resources are available to support young women in the “search for self in every dimension of being” that marks adolescence (Hersch, 1998, p. 17)? How do young women negotiate gender identity in a cultural environment in which they are subjected to the contradictory messages that they can do anything they want but that to be properly feminine, they must be silent, submissive, and attractive to the male gaze?

Wanting to know more about how young women construct female identity, what resources and discourses they draw on for this construction, and what role religious identity plays in this process, in summer and fall 2005 I undertook *Stories of Gender—What It Means To Be a Girl*, an empirical research project utilizing story-sharing groups, narrative analysis, and

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<sup>1</sup> In this Frontline documentary, journalist Douglas Rushkoff hypothesizes that in the world of media and advertising the portrayals of young women and men largely have been collapsed into a prevalent stereotype for each gender. Young women are portrayed as “midriffs”—perfect bodies whose sole value is derived from being a sexual object.

semi-structured interviews. Recognizing that religious communities have often been responsible for keeping women from living into their full humanity, I also believe that religious communities can create safe spaces for young women to engage in constructing female identities that challenge normative constructions of femininity and that integrate religious identity as part of one's narrative identity. Thus one main purpose of this project was to provide a safe space for young women to narrate, share, and reflect on their experiences of being young women in our society. The subject of female selfhood is addressed substantially in the emerging field of girls' studies, where analyzing the changing meanings and discourses of girlhood and femininity is a central project. However, in the girls' studies literature, consideration of the place of religious identity and practice in the formation of female identity is almost completely absent. In the few places where religion is discussed, it is assumed that religion only propagates negative and restrictive messages about female identity. There is fruitful conversation to be had between girls' studies and those in religious education who work with and care about young women; hopefully this project can help initiate this dialogue.

In addition to learning about how young women construct female identity, *Stories of Gender* also enabled me to practice story-sharing as a method for religious education. This is a method that is linked to liberative education (see hooks, 1994) and that has been lauded by religious educators (Wimberly, 1994; Baker, 2005). Utilizing story-sharing groups as the methodological focus of this research project allowed me to analyze how young women experienced and were affected by participating in such a group.

I begin this paper with a literature review of key works in philosophy, girls' studies, and education that inform the *Stories of Gender* project. Then, after providing a methodological introduction to *Stories of Gender*, I present Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren, the Grace Methodist

Church discussion group, and their stories of what it means to be a girl.<sup>2</sup> In narrating their stories, our group discussions, and their exit interviews, I focus on these three central questions: (1) Upon what discourses do these young women draw in constructing narratives of female identity? (2) Do they use any religious discourse in constructing their female identity? (3) How do they speak about their experience and how they are affected by participating in story-sharing groups focused on the topic of female identity in the context of their Christian community? In conclusion, I offer a preliminary sketch of how theological anthropology and these young women's understandings of female identity can be placed in critical correlation so that each illuminates the other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing on research in philosophy, girls' studies, and education, the following literature review helps to situate the Stories of Gender project and to conceptualize the key terms in my three research questions listed above. Based on these research questions, the literature review is divided into four sections: narrative and identity; female identity; religious identity; and transformative education, narrative pedagogy, and story-sharing methodology.

### *Narrative and Identity*

According to Erik Erikson (1968), identity is of prime importance for adolescents, who strive to find congruence between how others see them and how they see themselves. In contrast to Erikson, who argues that young people should have a stable and coherent sense of identity by the end of adolescence, Kenneth Gergen (1991) notes that a unified self may no longer be tenable or adaptive in an increasingly pluralistic and connected culture. As modern technology enables us to be immersed fully in communications and relations, the self has become socially

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<sup>2</sup> The names of the young women and their church are pseudonyms. Other identifying information has been changed so that neither the young women nor the church are readily recognizable.

saturated, meaning the self is infused with and shaped by the voices of others. The notion of a saturated self severely challenges an understanding of identity as solely constructed by the individual.

In this context, "... 'narrative' may prove a helpful metaphor for understanding the nature of identities" since a narrative self allows for continuity and integration at the same time as plurality and malleability (Ammerman, 2003, p. 213). According to Stephen Crites (1971), a narrative understanding of identity coheres with the inherently narrative quality of our life experiences. Similarly, philosopher Richard Kearney (2002) notes how narratives give meaning to life experiences and are a form of discourse that allow us to communicate with others about who we are. Against individualistic conceptions of identity, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) asserts that people are not just who they choose to be; at best, we are co-narrators of our lives along with the cultural, social, political, racial, ethnic, and religious groups of which we are a part. In this research project, I understand identity in a narrative fashion, as the story one tells about oneself by drawing on the discourses of the groups of which one is a part.

Using interviews with women to assess the connection between women's ways of knowing and their self-concepts, Belenky et al. (1986) find that many women have difficulty naming themselves. Part of what influences this lack of self-knowledge is a cultural message that women should be seen and not heard. Those women who make it to the most mature way of knowing are able to "...develop a narrative sense of the self—past and future" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 136). The research of Belenky et al. supports the claim that narrative identity work is important for adolescent women in order to develop self-knowledge and mature ways of knowing.

### *Female Identity*

In constructing female narrative identity, the language that is available is the language of our culture, which as philosopher Judith Butler (1993) emphasizes, is a language sustained by those in power that supports the oppression of those who are not. Further, while speaking some truth about the self, each identity category, such as female, necessarily excludes other aspects of the self since no one category can capture one's entire identity.

Indebted to Butler's analysis of identity categories, the emerging field of girls' studies attends to female identity construction. In contrast to commonsense notions that view girlhood as a universal experience tied to biological female identity, those in girls' studies understand girlhood as constantly changing and constructed by discourses of girlhood that necessarily illumine some aspects of identity while hiding others. Jessica Taft (2004) defines discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e., a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (p. 69). According to Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005), three particularly salient discourses about girlhood in Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century are girl power (i.e. girls can do whatever they put their minds to), girls in crisis (e.g. *Reviving Ophelia*), and neo-liberal individualist notion of selfhood (i.e., I am what I make of myself). Following this understanding of girlhood as constructed through social discourse, this research project allows me to examine the discourses young women use in narrating female identity.

Place and friendship are two other categories that are crucial for understanding narrative female identity. Instead of focusing on the identity question of who am I, Bettis and Adams (2005) suggest asking how young women's identities shift according to changing places. Further, an important place where girls do the work of constructing femininity is in same-sex peer groups

(Gonick, 2003; Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery, 2005). This study examines how the place of religious communities and how participating in an all-female story-sharing group affects the construction of narrative female identity. Finally, Gonick's (2005) discovery that imaginative group work can expand the possibilities of female identity shapes my analysis of how young women are affected by participating in story-sharing groups.

### *Religious Identity*

Nancy Ammerman (2003) provides a functional definition of religious identity: "An interaction takes on a religious character when it directly or indirectly invokes the co-participating of transcendence or Sacred Others, invoking a narrative in which they play a role" (p. 216). Following Ammerman, I define religious discourse as speech in which the participant mentions a Sacred Other from her faith tradition as part of her identity narrative.

One of the most cited accounts of adolescent religious identity is Christian Smith's *Soul Searching* (2005), which is based on a massive interview and questionnaire study designed to portray comprehensively the religious lives of American teenagers. While this study provides a useful macro-view, it does not offer fine-grained detail about how young people construct religious identity or how this religious identity might be related to gender identity. In contrast to Smith's work, religious educators S. Steve Kang (2001) and Sissel Østberg (2000) utilize participant observation and interviews to get a clearer picture of how young people construct identity. Kang studies the way second generation Korean American Christians internalize the voices of their Korean heritage and American culture. Østberg explores how Pakistani Muslim youth living in Norway move between religious homes and faith communities and the larger secular, pluralist society. As the narrators and interpreters of their own lives, these Pakistani children develop integrated plural identities marked by a diversity that does not threaten their

integrity. Following Kang and Østberg, this project is based in participant observation and focus group discussions to learn about how young women construct female and religious identity.

*Transformative Education, Narrative Pedagogy, and Story-Sharing Methodology*

Based on his work with Brazilian farmers and peasants, educator Paulo Freire (2003) argues that the first step toward transformation is conscientization, that is, coming to critical consciousness about the causes of oppression. Similarly, bell hooks (1994) describes conscientization as critical thinking, and she argues that critical thinking is stimulated when we realize that the way things are is not the way things have to be, a process that can be initiated either through experience or through recognizing the voice of another. Drawing on the work of Freire and hooks, educator Maxine Greene emphasizes that being exposed to the life stories of others is an effective means for stimulating conscientization because stories invite us to empathize with those who are different than us and cultivate multiple ways of seeing the world. As Gonick (2003) discovers in her work, stories also evoke imagination; Greene names imagination as crucial for reinterpreting past experiences, projecting new future possibilities, and connecting empathetically with others. If one of our goals as religious educators is to help young women come to an intersectional understanding of the way in which sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism (among others) influence their construction of identity and to resist oppression, we are attempting to do transformative education. As these educators indicate, the sharing of personal stories can be an important way to stimulate transformation.

Educator Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) argues that transformation happens through a process of confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. This helps me to understand why narrative pedagogy is potentially transformative. In a community of learners based on narrative pedagogy (see Palmer, 1993), learners have their stories confirmed through empathetic listening,

their stories contradicted through the stories of others, and the room to work on continuity through the telling of new stories that incorporate others' stories into their own.

Carol Lakey Hess (1997) advocates that faith communities create “safe houses” for girls in which girls can speak their truths and tell their stories without fear of breaking relationships and in which they are exposed to many versions of “femininity.” Similarly, Anne Streaty Wimberly (1994) introduces story-linking as an important method for religious education, particularly with African Americans. In *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, Dori Grinenko Baker (2005) reports on running three “girlfriend theology” groups, her “shorthand for eliciting girls’ autobiographical stories and reflecting upon them theologically” (p. 322). By making story-sharing groups the methodological focus of this research, I hoped to create the safe houses for which Hess advocates, and in doing so, I closely followed Baker’s methodology, although I adapt it to deal specifically with questions of female and religious identity.

Ideally, this research builds on the theories of narrative identity and female identity by offering a detailed analysis of the discourses young women draw upon in constructing their female identity. It also serves to supplement the girls’ studies literature by considering how religious identity informs female identity. Finally, it offers information grounded in the experiences of the participants about whether story-sharing is indeed a transformative pedagogical practice.

#### METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STORIES OF GENDER PROJECT

Inspired by Dori Baker’s girlfriend theology and supported by research into narrative identity and pedagogy, in summer and fall 2005 I undertook the qualitative research project *Stories of Gender—What It Means to Be a Girl*. As stated in the introduction, I aimed to address the following research questions: (1) Upon what discourses do young women draw in

constructing narratives of female identity? (2) Do they use any religious discourses in constructing their female identity? (3) How do young women experience and how are they affected by participating in story-sharing groups focused on the topic of female identity in the context of Christian communities?

The methodological focus of this project was three story-sharing groups—one with college students and two with adolescent women. Each story-sharing group met once a week over the course of 5–8 weeks. In summer 2005, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren, three rising high school sophomores, all European American, met with me at their church, Grace Methodist, which is located in an exurb of Atlanta, Georgia. Also in summer 2005, Idana, Iesha, Shantell, Aasha, and Alexa, ranging in age from 14–19, all of whom were African American, met with me at their church, New Life Baptist, which is located in Atlanta. The Jackson College group consisted of five college students, ages 18–22, and two graduate students who assisted me in facilitating the group, and we met throughout fall 2005 in the women’s center on their campus. Of the group, seven of us are European American and one young woman is Haitian American; a variety of religious perspectives were represented in this group.

At the first session, participants completed a questionnaire designed by me to get information about their families and neighborhoods; their participation in school, work, and church activities; and their use of a variety of media. At the first and last session, the participants took the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE) and the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Locus of Control scale (ANSIE).<sup>3</sup> At a later date, I will compare the pre- and post-group scores to ascertain if there is any support for my hypothesis that participating in a story-sharing group

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<sup>3</sup> Locus of control is a way of measuring how people understand the connection between their action and its consequences. A low score on the survey indicates an internal locus of control, which correlates to a belief that a person’s actions have an effect on the world and that the person is not at the mercy of outside forces. A high score on the survey indicates an external locus of control, which correlates with a belief that a person’s actions have little effect on the world and that a person is at the mercy of outside forces.

positively affects self-esteem and locus of control. Clearly, any positive findings are not generalizable to a larger population since my sample size is quite small and not randomly selected. However, this in-depth analysis of a small sample may provide exploratory data worth pursuing in future research. At the time of completing the surveys, the participants did not know the nature of the surveys, but the purpose of the surveys, along with their scores, was revealed to the young women through a letter after the completion of the research.

Participants also were asked to write a narrative about their experience of gender before the second session. However, in practice, the young women ended up writing their stories the week before their appointed story-sharing session because I did not collect the narratives ahead of time. The advantages of not collecting the stories ahead of time were that the young women's stories tended to build on and interact with each other and that we discussed a different subtopic related to gender each week since the young women wanted to share a story about something we had not yet discussed. The major disadvantage was that I did not have time before the sessions to reflect on the stories in order to be more prepared to lead our group discussions.

The first session of each group was an informational meeting about the research, and at our second meeting, participants made collages from popular magazine clippings to answer our focus question, "What does it mean to be a girl?"<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this activity was to initiate thinking about our focus question in a way that did not feel as intimate as reflecting on personal stories. Each subsequent week one young woman shared a prepared story about her experience of gender, and then the group reflected on: how the story made them feel; their associations with the story; themes from faith communities and the larger culture that shed light on the story;

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<sup>4</sup> The phrasing of this question was something I struggled with in conceptualizing this research. I decided to stick with "girl" for the two adolescent groups, but with the college-aged women, we had a discussion about what term they wanted to use. With them, our focus question ended up being, "What does it mean to become/be a woman?"

places they saw God in the story; and insights they take from the story as they go forth.<sup>5</sup> After our final group meeting, I conducted individual exit interviews with each of the participants in order to gather their reflections on the experience of participating in the story-sharing group.<sup>6</sup> I conducted the exit interviews with the Grace Methodist participants at the church; with the New Life Baptist participants in their respective homes; and with the Jackson College participants at public spaces around campus.

#### NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION TO STORIES OF GENDER

In this section, I introduce the Stories of Gender project through a narrative reconstruction of the pilot story-sharing group I ran in summer 2005 at Grace Methodist Church. Following VanMaanen (1988), I want “...to evoke an open, participatory sense in the viewer” through my writing (p. 101). In other words, I invite the reader into the worlds and narratives of the young women with whom I worked, so that the reader is able to make judgments about my interpretive efforts. Based on the emerging work in girls’ studies, I recognize that girlhood is not monolithic or constant. It is fluid and culturally influenced, means different things to different young women, and is never fully embodied in one person. It is important to write in a way that signals this understanding of female identity and that indicates that I am not trying to paint a definitive picture of female identity. It is consistent with the aims of this research project to foreground the stories and discussions of the participants. However, this decision necessitates focusing on only one of the three focus groups in this present article.

In telling the story of the Grace Methodist group, I focus on how the young women construct female identity through their explicit identity statements about themselves (e.g. “I am...,” “I like to...,” “I value...”) and through their statements about girls as a group (“Girls

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix A contains the list of questions upon which I drew for our story-sharing discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix B contains the exit interview schedule.

are...,” “Girls are expected to...”). I also highlight places in the young women’s stories and our group conversations where there is a conflict between the category of female identity and the young women’s understanding of their own identity (e.g. “Girls are supposed to..., but I...,” “It’s stupid that girls have to...”). Also of particular interest are any explicit or implicit statements the young women make about religious identity in conjunction with female identity. Finally, I attend to how the young women report experiencing and being affected by their participation in the story-sharing group, as articulated through their exit interviews.

*What It Means To Be a Girl—A Narrative Analysis of the Grace Methodist Group*

When it came time to recruit congregations to partner with me in this research, the first one that came to mind was Grace Methodist Church. Since I had worked with some young women from Grace Methodist on two previous class research projects, the pastor, the young women, and their parents and grandparents had grown accustomed to having me around. I hoped this familiarity would serve me well, as we would be delving into a more sensitive topic for this project—the question of what it means to be a girl. Excited about the chance to work with these young women again, the day after my research approval came through, I began phoning the ones I had worked with in the past to see if they would be interested in being part of the Stories of Gender project. Numerous phone calls, messages, e-mails, and one information session later, I had my group: Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren. Although I knew the four of us would have great discussions, I was annoyed at myself for not having been able to gather the 4–7 participants I had anticipated forming our group. Knowing that Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren were anxious to take part in this project and unsure of what other churches I might easily be able to partner with, I decided our small group would have to be good enough.

Each Wednesday afternoon for six weeks that summer I met Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren in the deserted parking lot of Grace Methodist Church. Having cleared my research with the head pastor and the youth director, we were allowed to use the church building at any time since Emmy's grandmother was the church secretary, lived right around the corner, and could let us into the building. Usually the three rising high school sophomores would help me lug bags of snacks and drinks up to the youth room on the second floor of the fellowship hall, where we would rearrange the couches so that they made an intimate U surrounding the snacks, drinks, and my voice recorder on the floor. Lauren and I always got our own couches, facing each other, and Emmy and Bethany, best friends since the fifth grade, would sit together on the middle couch.

Our first meeting was devoted to understanding the research and completing the surveys. Even though I knew all three young women from previous research and all three knew each other well from attending the same church and high school, our second week we did not yet jump into story sharing. Instead, I brought a stack of popular magazines and asked the young women to each create a collage answering our central question, "What does it mean to be a girl?" using three images and three words from the magazines.<sup>7</sup> When the collages were complete, we talked about what we saw in each other's work, and the collage's creator shared what she had intended to convey.

A prominent theme arose in our discussion of the collages—one that would recur in the coming weeks when we discussed the young women's stories. The main theme represented in our collages is that being a girl is about how you look and what you have. The young women describe "the look" that is expected of girls as skinny, perfect skin, tan, and breasts that are not too small or too big. Additionally, the proper girl is expected to own fashionable shoes,

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<sup>7</sup> The collage activity was adapted from a learning activity I participated in as a student of Mary Hess, which she calls the trio of triads activity.

backpacks, and clothes, even if she cannot afford the latest trends. As Bethany puts it, “The skin, hair, lips, eyes, face, and fragrance is practically what most girls worry about the most.”<sup>8</sup> The young women struggle to distinguish being healthy from being skinny, knowing they want to be healthy and criticizing boys who only go after “pencil anorexic girls,” but simultaneously recognizing the social rewards of acceptance, popularity, and a boyfriend that go to young women who most closely approximate “the look.” One of Emmy’s comments reveals the somewhat disturbing equation of what it means to be a girl: “You have to have it all perfect. It all has to be perfect, and you have to have love.” In other words, being perfect, i.e. achieving socially appropriate beauty and style, is the way to guarantee love, which is closely associated with social popularity and a heterosexual romantic relationship.

After two preliminary weeks of meeting, Bethany is the brave volunteer who agrees to share her story first. Bethany sees herself as someone who likes to have fun and who is always there for her friends. While she is not involved in activities at school, she participates in Bible study, youth group, and the praise band at Grace Methodist, even though her grandparents, with whom she lives, do not attend church. While Bethany’s mother is around but not dependable, she has recently reconnected with her father and enjoys spending time with him.

In response to the question “What does it mean to be a girl?” Bethany discusses her romantic relationships with boyfriends, the heartbreaks these relationships have caused, and the difficulty of dating when parents insist on giving their approval. She begins her story, “Growing up I have liked a lot of different kinds of boys, but when I finally started getting real boyfriends it seemed to me that I couldn’t find one that my parents approved of.” It is difficult for her to convince her family, especially her grandfather, to see beyond the surface to what she values in a particular boyfriend. Similarly, she mentions that it is scary to meet her boyfriends’ parents for

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<sup>8</sup> All direct quotations are taken from transcripts of our group discussions and the exit interviews.

the first time because she really wants them to like her. While having a boyfriend is fun, Bethany also says it can be “a pain because you have to worry about if he’s cheating on you and if he really means what he says,” particularly since she believes girls are more serious than boys in relationships. Bethany recognizes that “finding the right boyfriend is always hard to do, because you don’t know if you really like someone ’till you get to know them.” When she was in seventh grade, Bethany’s grandmother predicted she would have many boyfriends and lots of heartaches; Bethany now believes her grandmother. As she concludes her story, “My heart has been broken many times, and I’m still looking for Mr. Right!!!!”

Our discussion following Bethany’s story begins with questioning why parents are so protective of their daughters, particularly when it comes to dating. Lauren offers that it is because dads know what boys are like, and all three girls mention parents’ fears about them experimenting with drugs and sexual intercourse because of a boyfriend’s influence. Further, the girls are dismayed that their parents often judge their boyfriends based on external appearance. Emmy comments, “What you dress like does not say who you are. One thing that ticks me off about some parents is that when they look at the guy, all they see is personal appearance. They don’t see what is really in them.” Emmy’s comment indicates a desire to separate a true, inner self from outer appearances, which is similar to the way in which the young women in Gonick’s (2003) study negotiate the discrepancy between the persons they know themselves to be and the selves they are recognized to be by others by valuing who they are on the inside above how they are viewed by others.

Curious about the fact that Bethany answers the question, “what does it mean to be a girl?” by talking about boyfriends, later in our conversation I ask the young women to say more about their relationships with male friends and romantic partners. All three indicate that they do

not have too many female friends, largely because they identify most girls as drama queens and gossips who are not to be trusted. They think boys are more laid back and easier to trust. Lauren, who loves to skateboard with her male friends, faces judgment from her parents, who think “it looks dirty when you hang out with guys.” Her parents reinforce the cultural messages that girls cannot simply be friends with boys, that there is always an underlying romantic current to boy-girl interactions, and that this current can result in young women being labeled with negative sexual terms. As Liston and Rahimi-Moore (2005) find in their interviews with 12 young women who received negative sexual labels in high school, this sort of labeling can result in isolation and acting out sexually, although not out of one’s own sexual desire. While we may feel Lauren’s parents are overreacting to her friendship with boys, their concern represents the reality that adolescent women must negotiate—that while their interactions with boys are important for female identity, these interactions can also be mislabeled, garnering the young woman a potentially harmful reputation not based on her actual actions.

Discussing why boyfriends are such an important part of being a girl, the young women make explicit what had been implicit in our collage discussion—that being a popular, acceptable girl requires having a boyfriend and that having a boyfriend meets a need to feel loved. Knowing that someone cares about you makes you feel better about yourself, Lauren comments. She continues,

And girls really strive for acceptance. I think girls have a hard time with actually being accepted and, you know, really, some girls will do whatever they have to do to be accepted. And part of the whole girl thing is that, you know, you have to go through having a boyfriend and everybody has their stories of being hurt. You, you know, if you have a boyfriend, then you, you know that at least one person really accepts you.

While they would not use these terms, the young women are aware that the heteronormative discourse prevalent in high schools plays an important role in dictating female identity (see

Petrovic and Ballard, 2005). However, the emphasis they place on romantic relationships is about more than being boy crazy, desperate for popularity, or dependent on a man for one's identity. In different ways, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren all lack strong relationships with male adults in their lives. What I hear in the background of this conversation about the importance of boyfriends for female identity is a longing to find acceptance and love when "they may not have that in another situation... in a home or anywhere else," as Bethany puts it. Within a heteronormative culture and coming from homes where they have not always been cared for as they may have needed to be cared for, finding a boyfriend who cares for her may actually be an act of hope and agency for these young women. In fact, toward the end of our conversation, Lauren makes a connection between father-figures and boyfriends, saying,

But still if you don't have like your dad there or some kind of guy there, then it's just, it's like something's missing, you know. God didn't create guys and girls for nothing. He wanted them to mix and, you know, intercommunicate, to complement each other, and if you only have one part of that equation, then you're not – you're always gonna feel like something's missing. So you – if you don't have like your dad there for you, then you strive to find something else that's gonna fit that need.

While the young women are more than willing to discuss their romantic relationships in our story-sharing group, all three indicate that this is a subject best not talked about with their parents and grandparents. Even when parents and grandparents say it is the boy they are concerned about, the young women feel that their families do not trust them. Bethany used to confide in her grandmother about almost anything; however, when Bethany moved in with her grandparents, she decided to keep her grandparents "out of the loop" as much as possible. The young women's silence with their families about boyfriends is not surprising given all the concerns they know their guardians have about these relationships. Seeking out heterosexual romantic relationships but not sharing these relationships with their families may be one way

these young women attempt to gain acceptance from both peers and family, approval that is important for them and not necessarily easy to gain.

Toward the end of our discussion time, I ask the young women how they see God in Bethany's story. Even though she has some thoughts about whether God is there when she gets really upset and depressed, Lauren believes, "He's always there, even though He may sometimes seem distant," and in times of trouble, she opens the Bible to a random page and always seems to find something to which she can relate.<sup>9</sup> Bethany indicates that God is always there as a father-figure, and Emmy continues, "Yeah. And you at least know somebody loves you, if nobody else does. If nobody—not even your parents do, you know that He loves you." Besides trusting that God is always there to help, Bethany comments, "I'm glad He gave us friends," because friends can be there for you when you are crying and need support. In fact, both Bethany and Emmy say that they have called Lauren when they needed help, and Lauren has prayed with them about their problems. The young women also express a belief that God knows what will happen to them in their lives, that "He has a written plan for everybody when they are born," as Bethany puts it. While we did not have sufficient time to delve into this topic, I wonder, in the face of life challenges, what sort of comfort the idea of God's plan offers these young women.

While Bethany is shy and was nervous to share her story, her best friend Emmy, our story-sharer the following week, is outgoing and relishes the opportunity to be the center of attention. Like Bethany, she is not involved in school activities or paid employment but considers Grace Methodist a home away from home. Also like Bethany, Emmy lives with her grandparents, but she has even less contact with her parents than Bethany does. In fact, during

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<sup>9</sup> It was not until reading through the transcripts of our discussions that I realized the predominance of male God-language in the young women's speech. In the context of this study on female identity, and particularly in light of the young women's expressed need for the love and acceptance of men in their lives, I wonder what it means that these three young women express such reliance on and trust in a male God?

our work together this summer, Emmy gathered the courage to write a letter to her father, who is in prison, and she received a letter back from him. This was their first communication ever.

Returning to the main theme from our collage discussion, Emmy is clear that being a girl has much to do with appearances: “Well to me to be a girl you have to be a certain way!!” Looks are important for dating relationships, since “you have to dress a certain way or something to get a guy!”, and for friendships, since “You have to dress, look, act like someone to get in the right crowd!” In fact, Emmy states that girls tend to get emotional when they do not look how they feel they should. Beyond worrying about looks, Emmy says girls have a lot to worry about, including getting pregnant, a worry that does not plague young men. Emmy questions why it is that girls have to look a certain way and ends her story on the hopeful note of wanting to change this some day.

Our discussion of Emmy’s story begins with the importance of physical appearance for female identity. No matter how many times they have been told that they do not have to look like the models and actresses they see in the media, the young women still feel the pressure to live up to this ideal of thinness and they put part of the blame on the fact that they do not see “regular people” in the media. All three seem caught between the knowledge that being a “beanpole,” as Emmy describes it, is the acceptable look and the desire to live out Emmy’s philosophy that “you should be yourself, not be like what other people think you should be.” While the young women are critical of the fact that girls spend so much time worrying about “how their hair is, how their make-up is, did they break a nail, did they buy the right clothes at the store,” a litany Emmy reels off, a good portion of our discussion time over the six weeks we spent together was devoted to this topic. Even though they articulate a desire to follow their own standards of beauty, these young women cannot avoid being caught up in the demands of ideal girlhood. In the following

exchange, they refer to how this beauty ideal has become internalized, so that they become their own harshest critics:

- Lauren: See and looking in the mirror and stuff like that. Even if somebody doesn't tell you something, you're gonna...
- Emmy: You always find it yourself.
- Bethany: Yeah. You're really critical of yourself.
- Lauren: You know, it doesn't always have to be on the outside, it's also a voice on the inside.

In addition to being critical of themselves, the young women also participate in the policing of other girls who in some way violate their sense of what is appropriate. Some targets during our discussion of Emmy's story are girls who arch their backs so that their breasts and bottoms look bigger, girls who try to hide behind their make-up and wear so much eye shadow they look like "darn clowns," and girls who wear "booty shorts" and other clothing that is too tight.

Since Emmy ends her story by indicating that she would like to change the fact that to be a girl you have to look a certain way, I ask the young women what they would change so that life would be easier for their daughters someday. Emmy's immediate response is "Girls aren't thinking they have to look a certain way. They can look any way and still be pretty," and that putting normal-sized women on television would help this. Taking it a step further, Lauren desires an emphasis on internal beauty over external beauty and more respect for people who are smart and have good personalities, not just those with a pretty face. They all agree that it would help if men and boys valued women's personalities over looks and that this would not change until the women men see in videogames, magazines, and movies resemble "real" women more.

Culturally, television shows like "I Want a Famous Face" and "The Swan" reinforce the message that proper girls need to look a certain way and that it is acceptable to take drastic measures to achieve this look. In their critique of these shows, the young women use theology as a resource. Lauren believes God creates people as God wants them to look, continuing, "I can

understand making subtle changes and wanting to look better, but I don't see why you'd want to look like somebody else. God made you a certain way, and that's the way that he wanted you to be." The young then reference the discussion from the previous week about how God accepts people as they are and has a plan for people's lives, and Bethany paraphrases what it says in the Bible about treating your body as the temple of God. Thus, in a consumer-drive culture in which young women receive the message that they must do whatever it takes to look the part of an acceptable woman, these young women use theological beliefs as a site of resistance, drawing on a belief in a God who accepts them as they are to bolster their own self acceptance and valuing of their bodies.

In addition to media culture, the normative heterosexual culture of high school enforces the importance of having the right appearance, since boys date girls who approximate the beauty ideal portrayed in the media, and good girls date boys. The young women know that girls are supposed to act flirty, innocent, weak, dependent, ignorant about sports, and like "dumb blondes" around boys, but they think that this is ridiculous because they also want to be independent. Here they express the ambivalence toward female identity that Gonick (2003) claims is a logical aspect of female identity since they cannot fully live into the female ideal while still being themselves.

When talking about the potential of future romantic relationships that might lead to marriage, this ambivalence is evident. The young women are not quite sure how to envision a future in which they are independent women with careers and housewives with full responsibility for the children, both of which they desire as part of an adult female identity. They recognize that some level of dependence is part of a healthy relationship but are not sure where the line between healthy dependence and complete passivity is. As Lauren puts it, "And I mean, we are supposed

to grow up and be independent. Yet, if we get a husband, we're supposed to depend on him? That just doesn't sound right to me." The conclusion of Aapola et al. (2005) seems to name this dilemma well: "Girls and young women constantly have to balance the demands of individualist ideologies with those emphasizing the value of the close relationships of the family" (p. 107).

Lauren, the most introspective one of the group, is our final story-sharer. She explains herself as a tough girl into skateboarding, who also recognizes that she needs help sometimes from her friends. She adds that she loves to have fun but knows her limits. Lauren lives with her mother, father, and younger sister, who has severe learning disabilities and behavioral problems. They live in a neighborhood that Lauren describes as the ghetto of their exurb. Equally as involved at Grace Methodist as Bethany and Emmy, Lauren is also the student manager of the high school wrestling team, and she does odd jobs for her grandparents to make extra money. Finances have been difficult for her family since her father was laid off almost a year ago.

She begins by assuring us she could never capture her total experience of being a girl on paper, adding that being a girl can be either the best or the worst thing, "depending on the situation." For instance, "Girls have the opportunity to bring God's children into this world, but they just go through the pain physically and mentally to do it." Similar to Emmy, Lauren takes up the theme of stereotypical categories into which women are expected to fit, naming dressing up and playing with Barbies as a prevalent image of young girls, and identifying "predominant businesswomen, soccer moms, or stay-at-home-take-care-of-the-kids moms" as the options for adult women. Societal images of the "normal girl" are frustrating to Lauren, who wants to know "what happened to the happy medium" and asks "Can't a girl just be herself, who she wants without having to adapt to what people see her as or want her to be?" Complicating the messages sent by society, Lauren feels that "even good guys look past 'real girls' sometimes" in the search

for girlfriends. Parents confuse the process further by wanting their daughters to stay little girls forever. With all of these expectations, Lauren bemoans how hard it is “to find the real girl inside yourself.” Recognizing the importance of balance, Lauren writes, “I want to be a strong chick but with needs. I want to be independent but have people there to catch me if I fall.” Finally, Lauren believes that God made girls for a reason, that God “made us what we are and no matter what happens we should be what we are and not fall victim to the views of society or other people. And if there is no one else in the world who will accept you for who you are, God will.”

Our discussion of Lauren’s story begins with the young women talking about their relationships with their parents and grandparents. They agree that it is typical for dads to want their daughters to stay little girls forever and that the father figures in their lives have trouble accepting that their little girls are maturing. While junior high meant changed relationships with fathers and grandfathers, it was at this time that the young women developed closer relationships with their mothers and grandmothers. However, the young women name their mothers’ and grandmothers’ concern about them getting hurt and their contradictory messages about being their own people but also trying to fit into gender norms. As Lauren describes it, “But [moms] know what’s going on and they know that they don’t want you to really give in with everything and go with the flow, but then again they don’t want you to be totally different than all the girls.” This is something Lauren particularly struggles with, since she thinks her family tries to get her to be more “girly” than she wants to be. Here again we see the theme of ambivalence connected to female identity. These young women know that there are rewards for being a “proper” girl, but they also know that they can never fully be the ideal girl because she is not them (cf. Butler, 1993).

At this point, I probe Lauren's comment from her story that God made chicks so unique and complex that you have to be a girl to understand girls. Bethany chimes in that boys need a rule book to have any idea what is going on with girls, and Lauren reiterates, "there's no way you can really get what being a girl is unless you are one." Listing some of the differences between girls and boys, the young women say that girls use their brains more, that girls are more practical, and that girls tend to have more complex and in-depth relationships than boys do. The young women believe these differences make it hard for boys and girls to understand each other, although they think that girls have a better chance of understanding boys than vice versa.

The young women go on to name another difference between boys and girls—one that very well may be connected to the fact that mothers frequently express concerns about girls' safety. Lauren mentions that boys and girls think differently, so I ask her to say more about this. After joking that girls like chocolate more than boys, Lauren mentions that boys will tend to do things without worrying too much about what will happen, whereas girls have a constant string of "what ifs" running through their heads. Emmy describes it as guys living for the moment and going with the flow, whereas girls have to plan more. When I ask them where the voice in the back of girls' heads comes from, Lauren answers, "I think that part of it is how you've grown up and everything. And then another part, I think God just kind of put it there because, I don't want to say it's your conscience, even though sometimes it can be, but like your brain saying, whoa, hold up. You might to think about this a second." As evidence for their views, the young women mention that there are more boys than girls involved in extreme sports because it is easier for boys to ignore the potential dangerous consequences of such activity.

Having established how the young women understand the differences between girls and boys, I could not help but explore Lauren's use of the word "chick" to refer to girls in her story.

Admittedly, this comes from my own discomfort with the term since it carries diminutive undertones. Emmy claims that chick is a common way for female friends to refer to each other, and Bethany explains it as an example of how teenagers use nicknames for each other, something they will grow out of when they are adults and want to be more mature. Upon reflection, Lauren says that she used the term "...when I really wanted to make a strong point about girls. I really wanted to show them stronger." Lauren knew she wanted to use a term that carried more weight than "girl" to describe her experience as a young woman, but the word she chose is a word that actually describes a baby chicken, not exactly a symbol of strength. However, there is a history of oppressed cultural groups reclaiming previously derogatory terms in a way that changes the meaning of these names. By using chick affectionately with each other, these young women may be retrieving this term in a way that is positive and empowering.

Toward the end of our conversation we discuss the images of "typical women" Lauren presents in her story. All three talk about wanting to be like Barbie when they were little, of being attracted to all the sparkle and shine, but also of wanting to emulate their mothers by dressing up and wearing make-up. When I ask whether they would give their own daughters Barbie dolls to play with, the consensus is that they will let their daughters choose what toys she wants to play with, without influencing her too much. Emmy's idea is to let the daughter choose between a Barbie and a truck, and Lauren suggests walking through a toy store with her daughter to see what she likes. This leads us to discuss what kind of adult women Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren want to be. Echoing our discussion from the previous week, all three express a desire to be a mixture of a business and a family woman, and they detail specific plans about how they will make sure they have enough time for their families. Using the language of individualism, Emmy says, "I mean, there's a mixture and all that, but depending on what you want to be is

your choice.” At least on some level, these young women are heavily steeped in the individualization discourse and the belief that they can choose to be who they want to be without recognizing that there may be structural and cultural constraints to this sort of freedom (see Aapola et al., 2005).

At the very end of our conversation, I ask them to think about the way in which Lauren ends her story. The consensus seems to be that the young women should see themselves as God sees them, not how other people see them, which means accepting themselves for who they are. When I ask how they are able to resist the pressure to be someone they are not, Emmy is clear that staying true to what her family believes helps her stay true to herself. Lauren has had the opposite experience since her family has pushed her to be “...a lot more girly than I kind of want to be at times.” Lauren says she listens to her gut and that “I just think about what I’m going to want to be in the future and try and mix it with what I want to be now and take what I think the best parts of each of them are and fuse them together.” As was the case throughout our time together, the young women draw on theological beliefs to validate their trust in their true selves, apart from external appearances. All three are convinced that even when no one else does, God sees who you are deep inside and loves you. It is worth quoting their exchange in length:

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

Similar to the way that Richter et al. (1998) offer a theologically-grounded vocational identity as an alternative to cultural scripts about adolescent identity, these young women draw on their religious tradition to find acceptance for who they are. As they articulate, even if people around you do not know, accept, and love your true self, God knows, accepts, and loves the person you are deep down inside. For Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren, their religious identity appears to be a positive resource upon which they draw to construct a female identity that is not simply based on external appearances.

*What It Means To Be Part of a Story-Sharing Group: Narrative Analysis of the Grace Methodist Exit Interviews*

After our story-sharing sessions were complete, we met one final time at the church. Two of the three young women hung out in the youth room upstairs while I conducted the closing interview with the third one in the barren ground floor of the fellowship hall. After Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren each had their turn to talk with me about their experiences in the group, the four of us went out to dinner at a Japanese steak house (the girls' choice) to celebrate our work. And Emmy, who is friends with everyone, got us a table with a chef she knows who put on quite a show for our little group.

Discussing their experience in the story-sharing group, by far the most common words the young women use to describe it are interesting, exciting, and fun. For instance, Bethany says it was interesting "just getting to hear everybody's stories and what other people thought about it and how they thought about a girl would be and what we have to go through." Even though she was already friends with Emmy and Lauren, she enjoyed getting to know them better through their stories.

Beyond enjoying the group, all three young women indicate that sharing their stories and reflecting on what it means to be a girl was a new experience for them. While they do talk about

their relationships with boys and their parents informally with their female friends, what is novel is having a formal space to reflect on their personal experiences, to reflect on gender as a common experience, and to think about how God is present in their life stories. As Lauren puts it, “Well, nobody really asked the question, what does it mean to be a girl. I mean, you’re just a girl. That’s what it means. You don’t really go into it, you just kind of are it.” Lauren’s comment demonstrates how the young women experience gender as a category in which they are embedded and also hints that participating in the story-sharing group gave the young women a chance to reflect on this identity category in a new way. We get this sense further when Lauren compares discussions she has with her friends, which focus on specific girls’ experiences, with our discussions in the group, which began with specific girls’ experiences but then moved to a meta-level of analysis in which we talked more about gender as an organizing category of experience. When I ask whether the young women have been able to talk with their mothers and grandmothers about some of the issues we addressed, the young women regret that they have not felt comfortable having these sorts of discussions with their mothers and grandmothers. Having for the first time a space in which to reflect on female experience may indicate that these young women are beginning to experience conscientization—that is, critical thinking about their experience as females in this society (see Freire, 2003).

While the experience of story sharing was largely positive, the young women also express difficulty getting started writing their stories and nervousness about sharing their stories. Bethany informs me that all three young women waited until the night before their appointed week to write her story, and Bethany, our first story sharer, said she was really nervous before she started reading her story to the group. Knowing that she was talking to people she trusted enabled her to push through her nerves. Both Emmy and Lauren had trouble deciding what to

write about, and Lauren reiterates the beginning of her story—her difficulty trying to put her whole experience of being a girl on paper and discovering that there was no way to tell us everything.<sup>10</sup> While Emmy says it was not hard to share her story, Lauren leads me through what she was thinking during and immediately following reading her story; while she does not use the term “anxious,” we can feel it in her words:

I remember when I first started to share it I was kind of thinking, I got this all on paper and I really want to share it with everybody, but I don't know what everybody's going to think about it. I don't know. Maybe I'm totally off on this and maybe it's just me. Or, I don't know. So then I read it and like nobody would really say anything. So I was just kind of okay, well maybe I'm not right. But then somebody – I don't remember if it was Emmy or Bethany was like, “Well, she hit the nail on the head.” I was just like, “Yes. I did it right.”

Lauren's explanation suggests the way in which same-sex peer groups function in regulating female identity (Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery, 2005); affirmation of her story is important for her to know that she has told a “proper” story of female identity. Further, the young women's experience of nervousness reinforces the importance of making sure story-sharing groups are “safe houses” for young women to engage in narrative identity work (Hess, 1997).

Trusting each other and the leader was an important element for creating a safe space for story sharing. For instance, Bethany says she would not have been willing to share her story if she had not known the other group members. Similarly, Emmy would have been afraid of what others would have thought about what she wrote had she not known the other group members so well. Trust also came up in relation to thinking about possible leaders for a story-sharing group like this. Two months before I began this research, Grace Methodist had lost a beloved youth director, someone the girls identified as fun and caring, as someone who took the time to get to know them and who was there for them when they needed her. While they would have been

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Lauren, who was not present the week we made the collages, suggests that making collages instead of writing stories might make it easier for participants to more fully express their experience of what it means to be a girl because collages do not have to fit together in the same, linear way that stories need to.

excited to do something like story-sharing with the previous youth director, the girls had not yet warmed up to the new youth director and indicated that they would not have been comfortable doing a story-sharing group with her as a leader. In reflecting on her previous experience working with me, Lauren notes that what enabled her to trust me is that I listened and responded to what the young women were sharing in our group discussion, which demonstrated that I cared about what adolescent women think.

In addition to hearing how the young women describe their experience in the group, I was curious whether they were changed by this experience, whether their understanding of themselves, God, gender, or their relationships had been challenged, altered, expanded, or confirmed. Before this group, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren were already friends; yet this experience created a deeper level of closeness among them, even though they know they will still have their arguments. Their friendship changed because they were invited to talk about experiences that had not come up before, and through these discussions, they got to know each other in a new way. Bethany recognizes that Lauren and Emmy opened up more through their stories, and she notices that this enabled them to get “to know each other a lot better... I think it brought us closer as friends.” Emmy echoes this sentiment, even though she has also learned about their differences: “I think I’ve learned that Lauren and Bethany have different beliefs than me, too, and we all just combine our beliefs... And we all agree on at least one, so I think that we all got closer together by this discussion, too, than we would have been in the future anyways.” Emmy’s comment suggests that story-sharing evokes what Kegan names as the first two steps in transformative education—confirmation and contradiction (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Emmy’s comment also suggests that the young women were doing group meaning-making about their gendered experience through our discussions, combining their beliefs and experiences to expand

how they understand their gendered identity. Lauren also speaks to this process of group meaning-making, saying that she appreciates the added information and different viewpoints she gained from having our group discuss her story. In fact, when asked what she would do differently in another story-sharing group, Lauren says,

Probably see more people and kind of different people. I wouldn't want to say this and it sound bad, but we're all white, all the same age, in the same grade, girls. Maybe if we had some people with, like really different people, but that we kind of knew still without them kind of feeling weird around them... it would just help you to get different viewpoints so you're not always thinking the same thing.

Lauren's comment indicates the potential story-sharing groups have for exposing participants to a variety of viewpoints and gently challenging them to expand their own visions.

While story-sharing groups can provide experiences of contradiction, what seems even more important for these young women is the confirmation they received from each other. When I ask her whether it would be useful for other young women to participate in story-sharing groups, Lauren answers that these groups would help young women "know that people feel the same as you do and that they can relate to it." This is a central theme for Lauren, one she returns to many times in her exit interview. When I ask what she gained from the experience, she is quick to answer,

I think just a sense of understanding sort of from other girls. I mean, it's not just you going through this and you're not the only one who's ever gone through the same thing. There are other girls as well, and you can come together and talk about it without just having people look down upon you. You have an open mind, and everybody else has an open mind as well. So, I think that's a really nice thing about it.

Lauren appears to find comfort and support in learning that other girls' have had similar experiences *as girls*. While she does not put it this way, I get the sense that she found camaraderie and community in this group that made her feel less alone in her work of constructing and understanding female identity. Perhaps this is one of the greatest gifts story-

sharing groups can offer young women—the knowledge that they are not alone in their experience as young women.

In addition to confirming their experiences as young women and challenging their ideas about gendered identity, the story-sharing sessions created a safe space for intentional, critical reflection on past life experiences. In particular, Lauren and Bethany appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the past. For Lauren, this gave her a chance to say things to Bethany that she could not say at the time. She comments, “I know [Bethany’s] been hurt by a lot of guys... I didn’t really want to say that he was such a bad guy then. It’s different when experiences happen and you talk about them right then, than if you look down the road... But I think it’s different to talk about reflecting talk about it than the experience.” Bethany mentions it was fun “just bringing up memories and even though they might be bad memories of our experiences, we can laugh about them now.” She envisions that God might be laughing with her over some of the poor choices she has made in the past. Bethany’s language of being able to laugh at the past and Lauren’s opportunity to say what she previously could not say to her friend hint at a healing element of this process that religious educators may wish to explore further.

Finally, being asked to talk about God in relation to their stories seems to have affected the young women. While Lauren wrote about God in her story, she also says, “It was a really nice feeling to know that other people could see God as well as I did.” Further, the discussions helped her find God in more places than she thought God would be. Even more so than for Lauren and Bethany, the idea that you can find God in your own life story and the theme that God loves you as you are seemed extremely important to Emmy, as she returns to these topics close to a dozen times in her exit interview. Emmy says she “didn’t know that you could really see God that much in what we all wrote about,” and indicates that she plans to “look for God

more in things now than what I used to.” Responding to whether her view of gender had changed, Emmy answers, “I think it’s expanded because now I see God more into girls. And I see how He is a big part of our lives... I’d say that we are all meant for a purpose and no matter what you are, girl or boy, He still loves you. No matter what you look like or anything.” The story-sharing group enabled Emmy to connect her experience as a girl with her experience of God in a new way. She expresses a belief that those who have a strong relationship with God will have an easier time ignoring the judgments of others and paying more attention to their own feelings and selves. Again at the end of the interview, when asked what advice she would give youth ministers, Emmy returns to this theme, recommending that youth ministers tell young women, “...it doesn’t matter how you look. That they’re always going to be beautiful to God.” Clearly for Emmy, and I believe for Lauren and Bethany as well, doing theological reflection on her life story was a meaningful experience and one that has helped her in the process of integrating a religious and gendered identity.

#### CONCLUSION

That Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren utilize theological beliefs in their identity work indicates that theological anthropology and these young women’s stories (and those of the other Stories of Gender participants) could be put in critical conversation so that each illuminates the other. Theological anthropology can offer these young women a more complex understanding of what it means to be created in God’s image to supplement their belief that God creates you to be a certain way and loves you as you are. Further, as they strive to negotiate relationships with parents, grandparents, romantic partners, and friends while staying true to themselves, these young women could benefit from a theology of relationships. Here I think particularly of Margaret Farley’s *Personal Commitments* (1986) as a resource. Finally, as the young women

confront the cultural pressure to be a proper girl and as they live in the space between being able to do whatever they put their minds to and facing systemic restraints on this ability, traditional theological categories such as sin, transcendence, and finitude may provide helpful language through which to describe their lived experience.

Importantly, this is not a one-way conversation. While theological anthropology has much to offer young women in their identity work, these young women's narratives have their piece to speak back to theologians. To offer just one example, Bethany, Emmy, and Lauren's emphasis on the importance of appearance for female identity as well as their resistance to this emphasis calls for a more fulsome theology of the body, one that honors and recognizes the importance of the body without claiming that the body is all that there is. By listening to these young women narrate their lived experiences, we can learn more about what it means to be human and made in God's image.

In naming how they were affected by the story-sharing experience, the young women's responses dovetail with the literature on how narrative pedagogy can promote transformation. The young women appreciated the time to reflect on their own life stories and felt confirmed when others agreed with what they had shared. They also experienced contradiction through the stories of others but in a way that deepened friendships and expanded their vision. Perhaps even more importantly, the young women simply seemed to enjoy the novel space created through story sharing. It was a safe, girls' only space where they could construct and play with understandings of female identity away from the judgments of parents, classmates, and the larger culture. Encouraging for religious educators is the fact that these young women appeal to God as a way of finding acceptance for their true selves. We would do well to think about how we can further use theology to better support young women in our religious communities who are

striving to articulate a narrative female identity and what we might learn from how the young women understand their God-given identities.

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## APPENDIX A

### STORY-SHARING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE: Stories of Gender—What It Means to Be a Girl<sup>11</sup>

Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator, Emory University

There will be an introductory session in which guidelines for the group will be discussed, including the importance of regular attendance and confidentiality. The group will have an initial discussion of how they would define gender. A schedule for story sharing will be established, and the parameters of story sharing will be explained. Each participant will be invited to share a story about her experiences of gender. These stories cannot be about intimate sexual behavior. Instead, the stories may be about first menstruation, crushes, relationships with friends, relationships with parents, being allowed or not being allowed to do something because of gender, or any other experience that relates to what it means to be female in our society. Stories should be one to two pages in length, and participants should not feel that they have to spend more than two hours of their own time writing their stories.

Each session will begin with one young woman sharing a personal story about her experience with gender, which she will have prepared beforehand. She will have the option to tell her story, to read aloud from a printer version, or to ask another member of the group to read a printed version of her story aloud.

We will begin by sharing the feelings and associations the story evokes for the participants. Related stories and memories may be told, and participants may ask questions of each other and the storyteller to clarify, challenge, and expand the discussion. Questions that may be asked by the PI to stimulate discussion include:

How did hearing this story make you feel?

What did hearing this story remind you of from your own life experiences?

Were there any central themes, symbols, or messages in this story?

Then we will focus more explicitly on themes, symbols, and messages from the story. During this time, participants will be invited to draw on resources from their faith and cultural traditions to help understand the story. Questions that may be asked by the PI to stimulate discussion include:

Does this story remind you of any stories from scripture or myth?

Does this story challenge what you have been taught by communities of faith about gender?

Does this story remind you of any stories that are part of popular culture—e.g. movies, songs, television shows, etc.?

Does this story challenge what you know about what it means to be a girl from popular culture?

Do you see God present or absent in this story?

We will end by reflecting on how this story and conversation might change future thought and action. The purpose is not to achieve a grand conclusion that is relevant for everyone in the group, but instead to help each participant appropriate the story and conversation for their own lives.

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<sup>11</sup> This group discussion guide is adapted from Dori Grinenko Baker's *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, 2005.

## APPENDIX B

### EXIT INTERVIEW: Stories of Gender—What It Means to Be a Girl Claire Bischoff, Principal Investigator

1. Do you remember how you felt about participating in the group before we began?
2. Do you remember any expectations you had for the group?
3. Are there places besides this group where you have been able to tell stories about your experiences of gender? What were these places?
4. What words would you use to describe your overall experience of participating in this group?
5. What was it like to prepare a story about your experience of gender to share with the group?
6. What was it like to share your story with the group?
7. What was it like to reflect on your story with other members of the group?
8. What was it like to hear the stories of other members of the group?
9. What was it like helping other members to reflect on their stories?
10. Has your understanding of gender or what it means to be female changed at all as part of your participation in the group? How has it changed?
11. What themes, symbols, or messages about young women's experiences of gender will you remember from our discussions?
12. What have you learned from being in this group? What will you take away from this experience?
13. Have you learned anything new about how religion might relate to experiences of gender?
14. Have you learned anything new about how experiences of gender relate to the larger culture?
15. If you had to give advice to people in the church who work with adolescents, what advice would you give?