

GIRL TALK

A WAY OF HEARING THE LIVES OF
ADOLESCENT GIRLS

ELAINE, SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD when she attended the Youth Theological Initiative and participated in its interview research, bounded into the library conference room where the interview was to take place.

“Is this going to take long?” she wanted to know. “We’re going out for a Coke in a little while.”

An hour and a half later, the time and the outing forgotten, Elaine was immersed in talking with me about her religious beliefs, her family, and what it is like to be a girl in this day and age. Initially unsure that she was “worth interviewing,” since she didn’t really “know that much,” Elaine discovered in the course of the interview that she had a lot to say about all these topics.

She talked about her family situation, complicated by the fact that her parents were getting a divorce, “like right now.” She also described the crucial role of her youth minister in helping her cope with the transitions in her family life: “God is always with me and gives me the people I need to get through. So I can trust that everything will be all right in the long run.”

At the end of the YTI program, she spoke about her interview experience this way: “At first I thought, ‘Oh, research—I don’t want to do that.’ But then I decided it might be interesting to do the interview, and I just started talking, and before long I was saying things about my life I haven’t had time to think about. It was really good. I found out about my life by telling *you* about it.”

Finding out by telling—that is a good way to describe what often happens in interviews with adolescent girls. Formal interviews as well as informal conversations with a researcher who listens to them can become opportunities for girls to sort out, and even to construct anew, what they know, think, and feel. In this chapter, while describing the process of listening to girl talk in interviews, I will briefly introduce a few of the girls along with some of the insights and issues concerning their religious lives that inform this book. Sharing these girls' voices helps to situate the book's underlying research, in which fifty girls talked about their religious lives, their families, and being female in interviews lasting about two hours.¹

Finding Out by Telling

Human beings are “storied” people. That is, we both express and shape our personhood through the stories we tell about ourselves and our world. Contemporary thinkers, following the sociologist Peter Berger, sometimes refer to this as the “social construction of reality.” Others, in the tradition of the late French philosopher Michel Foucault, refer to the “productive power of discourse,” a phrase that describes the deep connections between the lives we narrate and the events and relationships that take place in our lives. Recent developments in the emerging therapeutic method known as narrative therapy put forth the notion that often disabling problems encountered by people or groups have at their source a “problem” story shaping the limits of who those people can be and how they can act. This kind of therapy consists in helping people deconstruct such harmful narratives and replace them with “preferred narratives,” that is, life-enhancing stories. The idea behind this perspective on healing is that how we speak about something has the power to shape our experiences.

When a girl speaks in an interview such as the ones conducted for this project, she engages in the act of constructing a story that comprises a particular version of reality. In telling her story at this particular time and in this place, she shapes new meanings and may find herself offering new interpretations of a story she has told many times to others. Storytelling is most centrally an imaginative act of making meaning, a process of making sense of one's world and experiences, of giving significance to certain relationships and experiences while making little of others. An interview is a moment of self-narration in which a girl creates anew the way she wishes to be known. As she stresses a certain situation, feeling, thought, or relationship, the points of her experience worthy of such

“accent marks” begin to comprise a new story, a new way of narrating her life. This new story is not made up, in the sense of being a lie, and yet it is newly made up for this particular hearing. The interview comprises a focused opportunity for a girl to “restory” her life.

Researchers have to make choices about how to engage and honor the particular identities and contexts of research participants, knowing that these are always partial renderings at best. For this book, I did not employ the kind of case study methodology chosen by some contemporary ethnographers as my primary framework for representing in writing my research with girls. It is true that this kind of methodology allows a researcher to flesh out interview subjects’ particular backgrounds and contexts in greater detail, but case studies also bind descriptions to a few people, who are then treated as representative.

In contrast to that approach, my research process was grounded in an understanding of interviewing as a relational practice in which encounter elicits insights. Rather than treating these interviews as “eternal,” freezing girls in a particular moment in time as if that is who they were and are and always will be, I engaged in what Sarah Lightfoot-Lawrence and Jessica Hoffmann Davis have called “portraiture”: taking “snapshots” within a specific time frame and context, from which insights and generative themes can be drawn to provide a way of learning—in this case, learning more about the religious lives of girls.² Portraiture offers a partial glimpse of someone situated in time, not a vision of the whole person across all time. Therefore, what we may learn from it is also partial and should not be confused with the whole of a person’s life. For that reason, in this book I have adopted the sometimes awkward-sounding practice of using the past tense when sharing what girls said in their interviews, so as not to contribute to the myth that I am presenting the girls themselves, or the myth that what they said at one moment in time equates with who they are now and with what they will be saying forever. And in this research, the technique of portraiture was less focused on any single individual than on a whole group of girls.

But even with careful efforts to define and explain research practices, distortions and problems are inevitable in research conducted by and with human beings. Therefore, a final caveat: remember that this book represents my interpretations. I do this kind of research in the hope of contributing to a larger understanding of the religious lives of adolescent girls, in fresh ways that can also contribute to their well-being. Despite the potential problems and limitations of interviews, I still value ethnographic interview methods as a way of learning from and about interview subjects. In this case, my interviews became a way of hearing about the

faith lives of adolescent girls—not the only way, but surely a valuable and important one.

The Religious Lives of Adolescent Girls: Snapshots

When girls at YTI talked about their lives and their religious faiths, they often wove together stories of activities, ideas, and relationships—activities worth doing, ideas worth thinking about and believing in, and people worth knowing. Mixed in with mundane descriptions of having “too much homework,” or of there being “nothing to do around here,” girls shaped narratives about, for example, a parent’s illness causing them to work hard to answer questions about why a good and loving God allows human suffering. Among humorous tales of pranks played on teachers, girls also spun stories that showed them wrestling with models of adulthood, of female gender identity, and of living out the integrity of their core beliefs in their relationships. These narratives of girls’ everyday lives, and of their struggles to make sense of the “big questions” posed within everyday encounters, comprise girl talk on faith.

What are some of the ways these girls described themselves and their religious lives? Two snapshots of individual girls, chosen as interesting examples of the connections among religion, gender, and family relationships, will begin to introduce this group of girls and their perspectives. These two examples clearly show the importance these girls attached to defining religion in their own terms, apart from the received definitions that were common in their immediate worlds. They also convey the way everyday relationships with parents, pastors, and peers comprise the stuff of religious reflection and of girls’ efforts to make meaning. These snapshots illustrate the way girls’ lives of faith have to do simultaneously with what is most personal and individual and with their deep desire to participate in events and causes bigger than themselves alone. And, finally, these snapshots convey the importance girls attached to living lives of integrity—that is, living in such a way that their actions and outwardly visible selves were consonant with the viewpoints, values, and principles of their articulated convictions.

Kendra: “My Religion Is Who I Am”

Kendra, describing an average day in her life, spoke of days filled with activity: time spent “just hanging out” with friends before school, hours passed in classrooms that were “mostly boring, with a few brief exceptions,” and after-school basketball practices. Once home from school, she

had a routine of homework and chores, practicing the piano, and checking in with her parents as well as a lot of time spent listening to music or talking with friends on the telephone.

“What elements of such a day would you consider part of your religious life, or connected to your faith?” I asked her in an interview.

“All of it,” she replied. “It’s all part of my faith. I mean, my religion is who I am. It’s not like a piece of clothing I put on and take off. It’s me, so it’s in everything I do and say.”

Kendra’s sense of the entire fabric of her life as faith-connected contrasted significantly with what she believed other young people from her hometown meant when they spoke of being “religious.” Many of her peers at school, for instance, held that Christians had to engage in certain activities, such as specific forms of prayer or a discipline of daily Bible reading, to qualify as Christians under the terms defined by their social context. Unlike these peers, Kendra said, “I don’t have any rituals.”

I don’t. I mean, everybody always tells me if you just read your Bible every night, you’ll feel so much better. Read your Bible every night, read your Bible every morning, read your Bible once a day, get up early and read it, get up early and pray. And I know it’s important, and I do it for a while, and then I start feeling guilty. I’ll quit for a day, and then I’ll get off the bandwagon, and I’ll feel so guilty. And I don’t . . . so rituals have kind of done me more harm than good.

For Kendra, an important question at the time of her interview concerned whether observing a daily quiet time—or any other particular set practice, for that matter—defined a person as a Christian. What, for Kendra, defined faith? What did she believe that was like the beliefs of others around her? In what ways was her religious self-understanding different from that of her parents, her peer group, or her community?

Kendra’s family situation was difficult; her mother suffered from a long-term chronic and debilitating illness. In her interview, Kendra spoke of earlier times when she had blamed or resented her mother for being so sick. Then she had gone on to blame God. In the previous few years, however, she had gained a new perspective on the matter of God and her mother’s illness.

“I know it’s not her fault,” she said. “But I always used to ask why God would let this happen to her. Now I try to think about why God, who is good, can stand to have such awful things go on.”

For Kendra, reflections on the story of Jesus’ passion on the cross provided new ways of thinking about how God has empathy.

“God knows about watching someone you love suffer. I don’t understand it all, but at least it helps me think that God understands how I feel.”

Defining faith, sorting out what kinds of faith practices really matter, God’s relationship to pain and suffering in the world—these are some of the issues Kendra wrestled with during her time at YTI, and in her interview. For Kendra, everyday life provided the raw material for constructing a faith perspective. Not content to accept popular definitions of faith, or the unexamined assumptions about God offered by peers and the surrounding culture in which she lived, Kendra was deeply engaged in the hard work of making religious meaning. Clearly, anyone who wanted to know this adolescent girl at a level deeper than superficial generalities would need to know about her religious life.

Kelly: Imagining a World Governed by the Golden Rule

Kelly was a lively, outspoken girl who at the time of her interview was headed toward her senior year in an all-girls’ Catholic high school, although neither she nor any members of her family were Catholic.

“I go there for the good education,” she explained, “and also because it’s all girls, which is supposed to give you more opportunities if you are a girl, and I think it does. See,” she explained further, animated in gestures and tone, “I’ve always gone to a girls’ school. So to me, I’ve never really had the competition. I can’t even think about not being picked for a job or anything because I was a woman. I’ve always had woman teachers, and, you know, that’s just the way it’s always been. I love it. I’m sending my daughter to a girls’ school, I don’t care what she says! I love it.”

She resented the fact that in this environment of strong women, a male priest was required for leadership of the weekly Eucharist service at the school.

“I’m Unitarian Universalist,” she reminded me. “We try not to tell other people what to believe.”

When I asked Kelly to talk about her understanding of God, and about how she lived her religion in her everyday life, she tended to talk about people. She described in detail her close relationship with one of her teachers, an eighty-year-old nun, with whom she became especially close after sharing feelings about the death of her grandfather. Her family life had been complicated by her parents’ divorce and by some lingering sadness from childhood, but she spoke of having “decent” relationships with both parents at the time of her interview, even though her relationship with her father had been severely strained.

In addition to her mother, whom she described as “the most giving person on the planet,” Kelly easily identified several adults from her church and at school who were important in shaping her religious life. Among these important adults were this nun, who taught at her school and with whom she had become quite close, and her youth minister. She credited these relationships with helping her develop her particular understanding of Christianity, a perspective on faith as “more about what you do than what you think, and even more about how you treat other people.”

Kelly intended to live her faith in various efforts aimed at “making the world a better place, not just for people but for all God’s creatures.” Even before coming to YTI and participating in its programs of service learning, Kelly had engaged in several different types of volunteer work to help others. She had also participated in her church’s active protests against legislation pitting the interests of businesses against the environment, and in her church’s activities in support of access to health care and affordable housing for those who are poor. Kelly’s perspectives on faith put relationships and fair, caring treatment of others at the center of her thoughts and actions.

“I love my church. It was, like, really instrumental in the civil rights movement, so I’m really proud of it. . . . I love it because I love the people. Unitarianism’s definition is that its just a religion that you don’t have to hold to any creed to belong to as long as you respect other people’s spirituality and are kind and fair to the people around you, and you really live by the Golden Rule. That would be the number one thing I cherish.”

The issue of respect for the beliefs of others, she told me, was precisely what had led up to a major misunderstanding about her faith by some of the members of her church. Kelly described her congregation as being full of “regular people and also ex-hippies,” an activist kind of place, so that when issues of injustice arose, the church often would take to the streets in protest and advocacy. On one such occasion, members of the church created a banner, with the church’s name on it, bearing a slogan signaling support for a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy by having an abortion. Recalling that experience, Kelly spoke at length about her personal beliefs:

I had a really bad experience last year. You see, I’m pro-life because I was born when I was only six months in the womb. And I stayed in an incubator for a long time. I was in intensive care for a long time. But the point is, I lived, I’m here. But in my state you can have an abortion that late, and I’m like, “No, those are babies that are like me—I’m

sorry.” And so then the whole church made a big banner announcing COMMUNITY UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH: PRO-CHOICE. I was obviously upset. I really believed my beliefs should be respected in that way, because the only belief our church holds in common is to be respectful of other persons’ beliefs. And they went and marched around with it.

She arranged with her youth pastor to preach a sermon the following Sunday in which she called people back to this most central belief in respect for others.

Missing from this portrait of an adolescent girl’s religious life is any linear formula that easily lines up particular religious beliefs with a set political ideology. At the time of this interview, Kelly was, in her words, a “pro-life feminist,” a Unitarian who had come, through the caring ministry of a Roman Catholic sister, to imagine Jesus as “God in human form”; before that, she said, she hadn’t really believed much in God.

“What would the world be like if we all lived by the Golden Rule?” she asked rhetorically. “People would probably still have different ideas and beliefs. But they’d also have respect. They wouldn’t be forcing their ways on each other.”

In this brief snapshot of Kelly, we see a young woman’s quest to live her beliefs with authenticity, and in a way that calls those around her to do the same. Kelly’s exposure to some form of religious education displays itself in her easy use of explicitly Christian religious language, such as in her allusions to the Golden Rule, God in human form, and even her brief reference to all God’s creatures. This is a portrait of a young woman whose view of the world has been shaped in significant ways by her education and immersion in Christian religious perspectives, practices, and language.

At the same time, however, this snapshot does not portray a casual, unquestioning adoption of religious views handed down from one generation to the next. Rather, in Kelly’s narration we see a young woman who actively wrestles with the meanings and implications of her religious tradition, using the beliefs and language of that tradition to call others (particularly the adults in her faith community) to account for what she perceives as the gap between their actions and their professed beliefs. For example, she makes use of the time-honored Roman Catholic practice of separate education for girls and boys as an arena for discovering and affirming the power of young women to think, know, and act. As Kelly’s comments illustrate, the religious lives of adolescent girls—even girls participating in churches and faith communities—are not as passive and

compliant as some social science researchers would assert. Instead, Kelly provides an example of how a girl's spirituality can involve her in active wrestling with her faith tradition and in the connections between ideas and actions, a process of struggling to construct beliefs and a way of life that make sense, and that can make a difference beyond herself alone.

Listening as a Contemplative Spirituality of Parenting

One of the best ways to learn about the spiritual lives of adolescent girls is to ask them—and then to listen, carefully and attentively, to the variety of ways in which girls talk about their religious lives. Interviews such as those from which I drew the perspectives of Kendra and Kelly are formal listening opportunities in which there is benefit for both the speaker and the listener. In formal interviews, researchers like me gain insights into the topics and lives of the people we study. But interviewing is not a one-way street. Girls also actively use such interviews for their own purposes. Sometimes people do not know what they think or how they feel about something until they talk about it. Over and over in these interviews, I watched girls figure out what they thought by telling me. This suggests to me that adults, by listening carefully to girls, can participate in helping them sort out what their perspectives, feelings, and experiences mean to them.

Another important aspect of the YTI interviews is that they provided the girls a space in which an adult took time to attend to them. Girls frequently commented at the conclusion of their interviews that no one before had ever listened to them for so much time, or in such a focused way. After all, not even psychotherapy offers a two-hour uninterrupted opportunity for a girl to narrate her life story! Elsewhere, my colleague Dori Grinenko Baker and I have referred to this as an act of “holy listening.”³ When I listen to girls in the careful way that interviews require, I often want to take off my shoes, aware of being on holy ground, because frequently there is a sense that something powerful is taking place in the sharing.

But what does interviewing have to do with the desires of parents and other caring adults to support the religious lives of adolescent girls? Admittedly, this kind of interview offers a somewhat rarified opportunity for listening to an adolescent girl. Parents, naturally, like most other adults whose lives touch those of girls, will not be in situations where they can listen the way an interviewer can. But the process of interviewing does offer some clues about parenting practices that support the religious lives of daughters.

The process of attentive listening suggests that listening itself is so vital, so important to how these girls shape their spiritual lives, that we must find and create multiple opportunities in everyday life to listen to girls if we want to support their spiritual lives. In the kind of interview I am describing here, an adult sits down with a girl, stops every other activity, and attends to her without critique or judgment, for the sole purpose of hearing her. In everyday parent-teen interactions, no one gets two hours of sit-down time. But often people do get ten minutes in the car on the way to a game, or a few moments in the kitchen while preparing a snack, or a quick conversation on the way out the door, the kind of interaction that usually gets filled up with the logistics of where a daughter is going and who else will be there. Taking such moments as chances to practice holy listening offers parents many small opportunities to hear the lives of adolescent daughters and may open the way for somewhat longer times, when parents can hear more than just quick reflections from girls.

The practice of holy listening that I am talking about here is actually rooted in ancient practices of contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition, practices in which people strive to empty themselves of agendas, worries, and even words. The reason for bracketing off one's own agendas and noisiness in the act of contemplative prayer is simple: doing so creates an opening, a space where God might be encountered. And contemplative listening, or holy listening, is a way of attending to another person on the basis of the same dynamics as those found in contemplative prayer. In contemplative forms of prayer, the focus is less on *talking to* God and more on *listening for* God. Similarly, in contemplative, or holy, listening, we bracket off our inner noisiness and even our actual speaking in order to make space for another—our teenage daughter—to give voice to her life, her thoughts, her feelings. Ours is an intentional act of being as fully present to and for another as is humanly possible.

When my children were younger, opportunities for contemplative listening often came around bedtime as we went through the nightly rituals of reading stories, saying prayers, singing lullabies, and settling into bed. At those times, younger children often become reflective about the day when they sense that adults are listening. I thought of such moments as little windows of openness into the soul, when my children felt connected to me and openly shared what had been of greatest importance and urgency during the day, and when I could be with them in a special way.

With teens, we are no longer doing this kind of parenting work, putting them to bed with lullabies and stories. Far too often, they are still awake, on the phone or listening to music, long after exhaustion and sleep have overtaken us. And other factors may complicate opportunities for close

sharing at other times as young women emotionally push for more space in relationships with family members or actively renegotiate the forms of engagement they desire with their parents as they move toward young adulthood. But the basic need to be acknowledged and blessed by parents nevertheless remains during adolescence, even though it may require different forms of expression than during the childhood years.

One friend, the parent of a fifteen-year-old girl, told of converting the story time of earlier years with her daughter to a nightly check-in ritual.

“I don’t go into her room to say bedtime prayers anymore, obviously,” she laughed. “What we do now came into being gradually. As she got older, I started checking in at bedtime, stopping by her room and asking if she’s okay and ready to tuck in for the night. Sometime in there I started saying, ‘Is there anything keeping you from putting the day to rest?’ She’d tell me if there was something bothering her, or if she was too excited about something to go to sleep, and so we’d talk for a little. I got a chance to listen to her apart from the busy-ness of the day. Now it’s more of a shorthand. I say, ‘Putting the day to rest?’ And she’ll talk a little. If I’m headed to bed first, she’ll say it to me. It’s a little ritual we do just to touch base. And we can do it even when we’re mad at each other!”

Windows for contemplative listening with girls may open up around elation or disappointment over academic or athletic performance, if adults can set aside their own reactions, commentaries, and feelings about the poor grade, or the record performance at the swim meet, long enough to really hear how a girl talks about her experience. Setting adult needs aside, or at least temporarily suspending them (the need, for example, to clarify what our house rules are regarding visitors when parents are not home), can invite a listening space in which a girl can express what is most important to her about her friends, or how she prefers to spend time with them, or perhaps even some of the hurt and disappointment she has gone through in friendships.

The process of listening to girls in interviews suggests yet another clue about how parents can support the faith lives of their daughters. These interviews also reveal the importance of other adult listeners who stand alongside listening parents to care for the spiritual lives of girls. Parents have an important and unique role with their own children, but sometimes, as girls rework their relationships with their mothers and fathers, there are points when it is difficult for them to tell their “heart stories” to their parents. At such times, many girls welcome the chance for a friend’s parent to listen attentively to them. Caring for the spiritual lives of their own daughters calls parents into practices of care and concern for other people’s adolescent daughters as well.

There were a number of such adults in my own adolescence: parents of friends, music teachers, a pastor; people who listened with intentionality and focus. When I could not imagine my own mother holding my beliefs in high esteem—after all, how profound could my thoughts be, when I couldn't even seem to remember to feed the dog every day?—I found that the mother of one of my friends listened to me as if I were incredibly interesting, as if what I had to say really was important. And I believe now, as I did when I was fourteen, that she actually did give importance to what I had to say. Such communally situated practices of listening continue to be crucial to the lives of girls today.

Thus a primary way we can support the spiritual well-being of our own girls is through a kind of shared parenting in which we have a stake in the lives of other girls as well. This is a call to recover the rich meanings of *godparenting*, which went far beyond the symbolic act of standing beside a godchild's parents at the baptismal font. Godparenting at an earlier time in Christian tradition entailed a relationship in which the godparents pledged their presence, care, and resources to support someone else's child. In this day and age, all our children, but especially adolescent daughters, need other adults who can godparent them along the journey of adolescence. As one father I know put it, "Kayla doesn't necessarily talk to me about her inner world. I don't always know directly from her what matters most to her. But I try to talk with her friends, to be another adult they can relate to. And every once in a while Kayla joins in, and I can listen to her, too."

Not all interactions with a daughter can or should be moments of contemplative listening: parents still need to find out when her soccer practice will happen, and how she will get home from Julie's house after school; the garbage still has to go out, and the huge cell phone bill that just came really has to be discussed. I am not naively suggesting that every parental conversation with an adolescent girl can miraculously turn into a deep encounter. Instead, I am saying that, as these interviews with girls suggest, the act of being listened to is so important to girls that parents who want to support their daughters' spiritual lives must retool themselves to listen contemplatively at least some of the time.

Reflections

In concluding this chapter, I am aware of a sense of gratitude for the listeners in my own life, those people who formally and informally have crafted spaces of holy listening and deep attentiveness across the years. Ultimately, the act of listening to another is a spiritual practice. It embodies

a contemplative moment in which the listener momentarily brackets off his or her own noisiness to open a space for encounter with another. Christians believe that in such spaces of encounter we may also encounter God (see Matthew 18:20; Luke 24:13–35).

You may also find it helpful, as a way of relating to the situations of adolescent girls, to recall people in your life whose listening presence upheld, challenged, or honored you in some way. In the next chapter, we turn to listen in on more girl talk, this time exploring, in a more focused thematic form, the variety of ways in which these girls narrated the meanings of religion and faith in their lives.

I asked the girls I spoke with to prepare for their interviews by engaging in some reflection on their lives ahead of time that would help them get ready to tell their stories. So, prior to their interviews, each of the girls completed a life-review exercise, designed by James W. Fowler, called “A Tapestry of My Life.”⁴ This life-review process helped the girls prepare to share their narratives aloud in a one-to-one interview.

As a researcher, and now as a writer, I too have found it useful to engage in some reflective preparation; thinking about my own adolescent years and reflecting on my life in the present help me to be clearer about the similarities and differences between my own life and the lives of the girls who talked with me. Reviewing my own story of adolescence helps me empathically remember how deeply young women often feel their experiences, how important it can be for them to take action in the world, and how much more thoughtful many youth are than adults credit them with being. Sharing a bit of my own story of being a teenager, as I did in the introduction to this book, reminded me of the special vulnerability experienced by some young women when they narrate their lives. This kind of reflective preparation assists me in my efforts to be open to the stories shared by girls. It helps me to recognize the incredible gift given to me when a girl tells me how she knows God, or why she hurts so much, or what her passionate commitments lead her to do at this time in her life. Each story is indeed a gift.

With that in mind, some readers may also find it valuable to do a little preparation for hearing the stories of the girls in this book. The life-review exercise in the Appendix is one way to do that. You may wish first to complete that exercise as an overall life review and then focus your attention on your teen years, recalling the marker events, people, world events, and images of God that gave that time of life its particular contours. Some people like to remember in the quiet of their own reflections; others find it helpful to share the stories of their teen years. Whichever approach you choose, I hope your reflections will enrich your encounter with the girls in this book, and with the girls in your life.