An Intergenerational Retreat Revisited:
Adolescent Girls and Older Women
Share the Residual Impressions
of a Single-Gender Group Experience
on Female Development Four Years Later

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative research focused on the residual impressions of an intergenerational storytelling group retreat 4 years after the initial experience. During the retreat 5 women, ages 62 to 80, met with 7 adolescent girls, ages 13 to 15, during a weekend of storytelling that focused on female development. This was a single-gendered experience of non-related participants. The women shared personal experiences from their youth around the topics that included dating and peer influence, fashions, and puberty. The adolescents also discussed, described, and reflected their own experiences with the women. At the time of the follow-up interviews the adolescents ranged in age from 17 to 19 and the women 66 to 84. The retreat experience positively influenced both the adolescents and the older women four years later by building self-confidence, increasing the tendency to engage in new endeavors, and to be more open to others different from themselves. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]
The intergenerational storytelling retreat occurred in February 1999, with a lapse of four years occurring before follow-up interviews were conducted in February 2003. There had been no contact with the participants since the 3rd interview, which was conducted 6 weeks after the retreat in 1999. The purpose of the follow-up interview was an inquiry of lasting or residual impressions from the weekend experience. The intergenerational retreat, relevant literature, methods, the follow-up interview results, and implications will be discussed.

During professional experiences both as a teacher and then a school counselor, the daily stress, isolation, and challenges that youth encounter were obvious but the solutions were less clear. The struggles of adolescent girls were and are particularly frustrating. What do girls need to assist them in reaching their potential? What did girls need that they were not receiving?

It was during a clinical internship as a doctoral student that the idea for an intergenerational storytelling group developed. As an intern on an inpatient geriatric psychiatric unit in a large hospital, the majority of the patients I worked with were older women, many were depressed and alone. During the biweekly group sessions, the women’s personal stories began to be shared. Listening to their stories and life experiences, the idea emerged to link adolescent girls with the older women around the context of storytelling and personal sharing. When the women patients were asked if they shared their life stories and experiences with family members, they stated that the young people were too busy. The women were also reluctant to think anyone would be interested in hearing about their lives. Actually, these were exactly the types of stories that might benefit young people in their making positive choices and creating meaning in their lives.

Findings from the original research for the adolescents stated that the intergenerational storytelling retreat was beneficial in increasing their self-confidence, comfort with self, openness with others, and risk taking. The adolescents also stated that the experience led them to be less judging of others who were different from them. Data collected from the women indicate that they felt a sense of pride in female progress, an instillation of hope, an increase in personal risk taking, and a sense of rejuvenation. Four years later these are still the prevalent themes to emerge.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adolescent girls in our society are confronted daily with challenges that erode their self-esteem and create a variety of alarming problems. This may include increases in teen pregnancy, underachievement, drug and alcohol use, suicide ideation and attempts, self-mutilation, and eating disorders (Santrock, 1997). Current research points toward the influence of the American culture as a source of many of the problems that confront girls during puberty and adolescence (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Girls are often not content with themselves, but rather emulate the images that are portrayed in the media, leading to increased self-disatisfaction (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). These factors are often compounded by the increasing segmentation and isolation of generations and families through the breakdown of our communities (Pipher, 1999).

Women and girls often “silence themselves in relationships rather than risk open conflict or disagreement that might lead to isolation or to violence” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 3). This situation might lead many girls, and eventually women, to become disconnected, which could “derail them throughout” much of their life (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 3). In our culture that type of disconnection can manifest itself in depression, anxiety, or isolation (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Sometimes the voice returns when a woman reaches around age fifty (Belenky et al., 1997). The female voice should never be silenced; it is a waste of talent and dreams with decades spent in a prison of silence that is shifting and unstable.

Many children experience the stress of constantly rushing from one place to another, parents “feel isolated and overwhelmed,” and then we have elders in our society who “go days without talking to anyone” (Pipher, 1999, p. 306). The frequent personal connections and relationships within our community of neighbors and family members often no longer exist, or at the minimum, have deteriorated. Some researchers and theorists stress the central role that relationships play in the growth and development of girls and women (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1991; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1986; Taylor et al., 1995). They state that being in connection with others is vital for healthy development. A key component of this research addresses the concepts of relationship building, developing connection, empathy, and the capacity for additional relational networks outside the family.
The telling of stories, myths, and folktales, as well as the sharing of personal stories, appears regularly in both articles and books as a powerful force for healing and empowerment for older adults (Banks-Wallace, 1998; Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots, & Svensson, 1996; Crimmens, 1998; Estes, 1995; Gersie, 1997; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Kotre, 1996; Ludema, 1996; Parry, 1997; Peake, 1998; Rybarczyk & Bellg, 1997; Thang, 1997). Many older adults first came to the storytelling experience at the knee of a beloved relative, which may have occurred at the garden stool or while potatoes were peeled for supper (Gersie, 1997). In the Western world many children in recent times are still introduced to storytelling in the home; often the channel for the stories is no longer grandparents, but rather television (Gersie, 1997).

If we examined stories, we would find in both the oral history of families and in books that we often hear or read tales concerning the struggle to survive some hardship; the notion of surviving through fears and various excitements elicit very strong emotions (Parry, 1997). Strong emotions connect us to organized memories that warn us or remind us of how previous trials or challenges were handled (Parry, 1997). The narratives that people told of their lives illustrated the ways that people made sense of life events and the actions of themselves and others (Birren et al., 1996).

Many older Americans are isolated from family members. Due to this situation some therapists have formed groups that center on storytelling, so that older clients have an opportunity to share and talk about their past and current concerns (Crimmens, 1998). The experience has proven successful and beneficial in the group format to reduce boredom and increase interest, to maintain and extend the physical and mental abilities of older adults, and to increase self-esteem and enjoyment (Crimmens, 1998). Storytelling or oral traditions have been vehicles for self-understanding and healing since the early beginnings of civilization, and pre-dates written communication by thousands of years (Divinyi, 1995).

The literature demonstrated that the sharing of personal information, for older women in the group setting, was in fact a healing encounter in itself (Banks-Wallace, 1998). The question was whether a healing or nurturing connection could be established through relationships at the retreat that would benefit both the adolescent girls and the older adult women. The sharing of personal life events, their causes, and the resulting effects on a person’s journey through life may make evident qualities that enabled them to survive, develop, and overcome barriers (Martin, 1995). Successful aging through the life span not only requires physical and mental stimulation, but also must address the psychologi-
cal and spiritual needs of a person or they will shrivel and die (Thomas, 1997). The telling of a story can begin a conversation that is difficult to initiate. Gersie (1998) used a story, which paralleled the situation she was in with a group of teenage girls, to provide a point of exploration. By talking about the story, the girls were able to talk about how they personally felt about the situation and address issues that they would have normally not discussed. “Tales are potent stuff,” because they remind us of our capacity to be moved by the sorrow of others toward altruism, and ultimately to see pieces of self in others (Gersie, 1998).

THE INTERGENERATIONAL RETREAT

Imagine a group of adolescent girls and older women gathered in a large room with wooden floors and a stone fireplace on a cold February afternoon. None of the individuals were related to each other and most were meeting for the first time. The lodge was built during the 1930s and was nestled in the woods on a mountaintop, which created a sense of isolation from the outer world. The furnishings were sparse but adequate. At the beginning of the retreat the women and girls sat among their common age group, but eventually that division began to blur over the weekend. The women and the girls shared stories and experiences from their respective lives. They talked about puberty and dating, and the girls also discussed the various pressures at school. As the hours slipped by, the girls’ individual voices emerged, at first with hesitation, but then with rising intensity, their thoughts, feelings, and opinions surfaced.

The retreat began on a Friday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., and parents came for the girls on Sunday between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. The structure of the retreat provided opportunities for interactions between the girls and the women in a variety of contexts: storytelling groups, meals, activities, and free time. Storytelling involved the sharing of personal stories by the women about their youth and the girls their current challenges. Throughout the schedule of the retreat, group interactions were designated. During these allocated times, topics were introduced for discussion. Both the women and the adolescents spoke freely on the topics. The topics were chosen with the direct intent of providing opportunities for the discussion of issues related to female development.

Unstructured time was provided for private reflection, assimilation of new information, and journal writing. Much of the unstructured time was spent playing music, dancing, singing, sharing old pictures, eating,
and talking together. A piano was located in the great room and one of the adolescents brought her violin. The lodge had no telephone, computer or cable, and the television was only used for our 2 films. Physical activities and artistic expression were encouraged at the retreat. Activities included morning walks, yoga, dance, music, and a spinning demonstration. Incorporated into the retreat were the personal skills and knowledge of those women who wished to share with the group. One woman shared her skills in painting and quilting and another woman demonstrated and led the group in making clay doll heads, which were baked in the oven. During the activities the girls and women practiced and learned new skills. This involved elements of risk taking; in the beginning some girls and women were reluctant to participate, but as time went on they experienced some success and were more willing to try new things.

Other discussions during the weekend occurred after watching two films on Friday and Saturday evenings: Fried Green Tomatoes and How to Make an American Quilt. Both of these films were chosen because they involved relationships and bonds that developed among women across generations. The two films modeled in a small way the connections and sharing that the retreat was attempting to create. After the film, a break, and refreshments on Friday and Saturday evenings, there were short presentations and discussions on women in history. The women, Hildegarde and Hypatia, were chosen because of the status they held in their communities, their intellectual and scholarly accomplishments, and the fact that though their stories were not well known, their contributions were significant.

**METHODS**

The qualitative analysis, employing grounded theory and heuristic inquiry, was based on the design that emerged from the data. Without the grounding of theory in the data the ideas would be speculative. Social phenomena are complex and thereby require that theory be conceptually dense and account for the variations within the research projects (Strauss, 1996). Grounded theory refers the data as the reference for what design develops or emerges. The data determined the reported meaning that the storytelling experience had for the women and girls through emergent design. Emergent design also allowed for a certain degree of maneuverability during interviewing as important concepts developed. Through the collection of documents–information sheets for
each participant, consent, releases and confidentiality forms; journals, which were given to each participant at the beginning of the retreat, collected a week after the retreat, coded, and returned to the participants; through informal conversational interviews that occurred before and after the retreat, and another interview six weeks after the retreat; observations and field notes; and 18 hours of videotaping—the data revealed the reported meaning of the intergenerational storytelling experience for the women and adolescents.

Heuristic inquiry was utilized as the process of systematic observation of and dialogues with self and others (Patton, 1990). Heuristic inquiry was the most suitable format of investigation for this study. Heuristics can lead to depictions of essential meanings and may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that is a synthesis of intuition and tacit understanding, but involves the passionate quest for meaning by the researcher who is involved in and in connection with the participants (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristics research is guided by a six-phase design: “the initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27).

Participants

Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit and select information-rich participants for this study for both the girls and the women. Patton (1990) stated that purposive sampling illuminates the questions under study. This type of sampling maximizes the “investigator’s ability to devise grounded theory that takes adequate account of local conditions, local mutual shapings, and local values (for possible transferability)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). Seven girls between the ages of 13 and 15 volunteered to participate in this study, their grade levels ranged from the seventh to the tenth. Five older adult women between the ages of 62 and 80 were recruited and selected for the retreat. Eighteen girls were interviewed before selecting the 7 participants, and 20 women were interviewed before selecting the women who participated. Parental permission, individual consent, and releases were obtained for this study from participants. Insurance was purchased from the retreat center to cover the entire weekend of activities.

Girl participants. Most of the girls were recruited and then selected because they had limited female role models and little or no contact with grandmothers or an expanded generation of women (women older than their mothers). Recruitment and ultimate selection of the girls to partici-
pate in the study included the following criteria. The girls needed to be willing to participate in the retreat, be willing to share their thoughts and feelings in a journal, and have limited or few contacts with extended generations in their family. All of the adolescents that participated in the retreat had dealt with challenges in their life. Five of the seven adolescents had lived through divorce in their families. One girl suffered through the hardships of neglect as a result of alcoholic parents and was adopted at the age of 5; another girl was adopted at birth, but her parents divorced and she lived with her mother. One participant came from a very simple and modest home and lived with strained family relations. Of the 7 girls, 4 girls lived in single-parent families and only 1 girl lived with her biological mother and father. One girl had lived through divorce in her family and was the oldest of 6 children in a stepfamily, and the last and seventh girl lived with her father, who was about to remarry.

The adolescents were predominately Caucasian; one had Native American heritage and one girl had an Italian heritage, the others were not aware of their heritage. One girl had a Jewish surname, but did not identify with the religion or culture and one girl was from a Quaker background, but their family did not practice that religion either. Five of the 7 girls attended Christian churches regularly that ranged from Pentecostal to Catholic in denomination. The other two girls did not attend any institutional religious services. Within the group there was great diversity in the economic and educational status of the girls’ families. The girls were selected through contacts with 3 area churches, with 3 school counselors in 3 different school districts, and through personal contacts in the community.

Women participants. In regards to the women, inquiries were made and flyers posted at 2 area churches and a temple, an exclusive retirement community, and at a subsidized federal retirement housing neighborhood. Community contacts were also utilized. All of the women selected to participate were articulate and expressed openness related to the topics to be addressed: menarche and puberty, dating, fashions, work, fun, and sports. They all stated that they were comfortable with the idea that the girls might ask them questions related and unrelated to the discussion topics. All the women brought pictures of themselves during their youth to share with the girls.

The criteria for the women were a willingness to participate and document feelings and thoughts in a journal. The women also needed to be comfortable talking about their youth and experiences they had during their developing years. An important factor that emerged during interviews and was given careful consideration as to the scope of the re-
treat’s intent was traumatic incidents that may have occurred during adolescence, for example, sexual abuse. One woman was removed from consideration for the retreat because she had experienced sexual abuse throughout puberty by a family member. She wanted to participate but was confused about what to say and what not to say to the girls. The retreat would be discussing a time period that was painful to her; although she had gone through years of therapy addressing the abuse, potentially the retreat could be a harmful experience to the woman. The woman came to agree with me, but she was disappointed in not being included. The information regarding her abuse only emerged after the initial interview was conducted. It was not necessary that the women had experienced an ideal situation growing up, but protection of the retreat participants was a primary consideration. As stated, the abuse surfaced through the interview process, and this helped to clarify the criteria for the women, the girls and the research. When the person opens up during the interview, information may come forward through listening that assists the researcher in the selection process. In several other incidents, women were unable to focus on the topic and it became clear that their mental capabilities had deteriorated to a level that their contribution would have been limited.

The women were Caucasian and had grown up as children in the south or the midwest. There was great diversity and range in life experiences of the women. One woman grew up in with maids and other woman had to quit school in the 8th grade to help her father farm. The span was just as broad in education; one woman had a doctorate and another woman earned her Graduate Equivalent Diploma when she was 70. All were Protestant and Christians.

**DATA**

The initial data included 3 in-depth interviews, journals, 18 hours of video, case notes, closing activities and other documentation from the retreat. All the interviews and observations were transcribed. Additional notes were taken from the video recording and also transcribed. Careful documentation continued through the entire process detailing the procedure for conducting the research. All contacts and interactions with the girls and women were documented. The documentation was stored and organized in a fashion that provided an audit trail for reference during and after the study.
The follow-up interviews were conducted with 5 of the 7 adolescent participants. One person had moved out of state and contact information had not been obtained. The other adolescent was out of state going to college and I was unable to reach her. Interviews were also conducted with 4 of the 5 adult women. One of the women moved to another state and I was not able to contact her. The interviews were transcribed then open coding, axial coding and selective coding were utilized to analyze the data. Member checks were used to insure that I accurately captured the meaning or phrases used by the participants; this is one way to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning and the perspective (Maxwell, 1994).

Triangulation occurred through the various types of data collected. This process included member checks to determine the accuracy of the information with participants, and peer debriefing in reference to the data collection and transcriptions with the research team. Prolonged and persistent engagement was mixed. With an emergent design some flexibility was required to allow the study to develop on a creative and natural course.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS**

1. In February 1999, you were a participant in an intergenerational retreat; as you think about that experience what are some of the memories that come to mind?
2. Still thinking about that experience, what feelings do those memories evoke?
3. Did the intergenerational retreat experience in any way influence life choices that you have made? If yes, then please explain.
4. Did the intergenerational retreat in any way affect how you felt about yourself? If yes, then please explain.
5. How would an intergenerational retreat be of benefit to other participants?
6. Do you have any suggestions for improving the intergenerational retreat experience?
7. What three words come to mind when you think about the intergenerational retreat?
8. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share with me about the intergenerational retreat experience?
Results

Four years had passed since the retreat, many of those interviewed talked about general feelings related to the retreat rather than specific memories, although two memories were common for all participants. On Saturday evening of the retreat a fierce thunderstorm descended on the mountain lodge; it felt dramatic and seemed to draw the group together. The participants reported feeling much closer after the storm and more open to the experience and each other. All participants also remarked that the most memorable storytelling group was the session focused on puberty. The group members, women and adolescents, had never had an opportunity to talk openly about this event in their life. At the time of the retreat two adolescents had not reached menarche, but did within the months following the retreat. They both stated that the open environment, which allowed for discussion, sharing, and questions, was helpful. They said that having an opportunity to talk with girls slightly older than themselves and older women in a safe environment was an experience that all girls should have.

Most mentioned the relaxed meal times together and the importance of sharing in the storytelling groups. Participants remembered being in a large room sitting in a circle and talking. One of the adolescents stated that the retreat felt like a place that was equal. Both women and adolescents shared and listened to each other. No one group was above the other; she liked that because she said everyone was more likely to hear each other. At her school older adults would on occasion come for a lecture, but there was no real interaction between them.

One of the adolescents discussed remembering vividly the contrast of leaving the retreat on Sunday and going to school on the next day. She said it was like a slap in the face—the contrast was so sharp. Because of the contrast she began to look at her relationships differently and wanted more depth and meaning in her conversations and friendships. All of the adolescents interviewed stated that they felt better about themselves after the retreat. Words that they used to describe this were introspective, insightful, confident, goal setting, self-knowledge, willing to be open to others, and willing to take risks involving the unknown.

Comments also addressed the retreat environment as stress reducing and the freedom of time constraints. All participants still had their journals, which they were given at the retreat. One adolescent shared that journal writing at the retreat started her on a path of writing regularly about her thoughts and feelings. She is now a sophomore at a major university on a full scholarship in the honors program majoring in English.
She said that after the retreat she expected more from her relationships and herself. Many mentioned that they still had their nametag from the retreat on a bulletin board or mirror in their room. The comments made 6 weeks after the retreat still were prevalent in the responses to these questions 4 years later. The specifics were not as detailed, but the content areas were reinforced.

One of the adolescents stated, “I felt like I could say anything that I wanted to and it opened me up in the future. . . . Not to judge people, to listen to what they have to say and don’t be so worried about what people are going to say about you.” The adolescents were asked to state three words than come to mind regarding the intergenerational retreat experience.

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<tr>
<th>Adolescent 1</th>
<th>Sincerity</th>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Hope</th>
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<td>Adolescent 2</td>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Real</td>
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<td>Adolescent 3</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Insightful</td>
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<td>Adolescent 4</td>
<td>Enlightening</td>
<td>Revealing</td>
<td>Open mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adolescent 5</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Learning</td>
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Figure 1 is a conceptual diagram of the meaning of the retreat for the girls. Figure 2 illustrates in a conceptual diagram the meaning of the retreat for the older women.

All the adolescents were asked how the retreat could have been improved. Most had no suggestions for improvements. Two said that the retreat should have been three days rather than two. One person suggested that everyone should be encouraged to bring personal items to share at the retreat to better learn about each other. The women had brought old photos of themselves to share with the girls during the retreat.

One woman had moved out of state and I was unable to reach her. Two of the women were ill during the interview, which limited our time and their responses. The women were also asked to state three words that come to mind when they think about the intergenerational retreat. They had more difficulty putting it into words; I sensed that they felt a bit uncomfortable or embarrassed to talk about their feelings. I also sensed that the experience deeply touched them. Rather than give me three words they expressed themselves in statements. One woman said, “I felt privileged and proud to be part of the retreat.” And another, “those girls were just exceptional that you had at the retreat, I feel very hopeful for the future.” Another comment was “I learned so much about myself and others while there,” although she had difficulty clearly stat-
Adolescent Girls' Reported Meaning

Meaning for girls

Freedom
- To talk honestly
- Freedom to talk openly with unrelated women & girls

Fun
- To be yourself
- No judging from the girls or the women
- Comfortable clothes & no make-up

Connections
- Leisure to spend time together
- Sharing stories
- Building relationships with girls & women

Risk taking
- Comfort with self
- New openness with others
- Increased confidence
- Less judging of others in all generations
- Questions about family member's life experience
- New friendships & memories

Reduced Stress
ing what she learned. Along the same line of thought a woman said, “I have a great lot of hope for the future with girls like that, and maybe it’s like the rotten apple, maybe one bad one colors the whole thing to you, maybe there just isn’t that much bad going on . . . I think there’s maybe more good than we know, I sure do. I think there is hope.” Another woman stated this about the retreat, “it gives you a lot of hope for tomorrow.”

Some of the changes that the women had made which included some risk taking on their part was moving to a new state where she had always wanted to live, two women had bought new cars, traveling to England, taking classes at the university, taking yoga classes (which was introduced at the retreat), and dating. One woman said that the retreat was “just a renewal of being with young girls, it was fun.”

One of the women stated that she regularly attends senior meetings to play cards and dominoes, but she said that being with the young girls at the retreat was like a reminder of who you really were, the young person on the inside. She wished she had opportunities to be around young people and talk to them, stating that it was good for her, but she felt it benefited the young people too. A concern she stated was that many of the life stories and experiences of older adults will be lost forever if not shared.

The setting for the intergenerational storytelling retreat was reported by all to be a unique experience, which was both enjoyable and an opportunity to learn about self and others. The women told their own stories about youth, dating, and how so many things were different when they grew up and some things seemed to remain the same. Full of vitality, intelligence, and occasional humor, the women recounted memories of menarche and growing to womanhood in a culture and society very different from today. They talked about important things, about life itself. They shared the ways that families managed and survived during the hardships and challenges of the depression and World War II. They shared simple stories, about a pretty piece of fabric bought for 25 cents to make a special dress long ago; but much more was learned from the sharing than the price of fabric. The girls had developed an expanded sense of what being female meant, and a growing sense of self-pride and comfort with themselves and with others. The girls had the opportunity to listen, to speak, and to be heard; the women and adolescents both found their individual voices.

The data from the adolescents demonstrated that the storytelling retreat was perceived to be beneficial in increasing their self-confidence, comfort with self, openness with others, and risk taking. The girls also
Adult Women Reported Meaning

Women
Girls

Sharing
Eating together
Laughing
Listening to each other
Dancing
Learning from each other
Playing music & singing
Women in history
Movies that move us

Meaning for women

Instillation of hope
Rejuvenation regarding self & direction in life
Increase in risk taking
Pride in how far females have come
stated that the experience led them to be less judging of others who were different from them. The women’s data indicate that they felt a sense of pride in female progress, an instillation of hope, an increase in personal risk taking, and a sense of rejuvenation.

Central Themes for Women and Girls

Single-gendered experience. Two central themes clearly emerged for both the women and girls during the retreat that was reinforced in the follow-up interviews. First was the uniqueness of the single-gender experience for almost everyone. The retreat was markedly different from other group interactions the women and girls had previously experienced, whether the gatherings had occurred at church camps or school events; the participants noticed a unique atmosphere at the retreat. Previous events had always included the presence of boys and/or men. In the environment created for the retreat, individuals stated that they felt free to express distinct opinions and thoughts, and to speak with their own distinctive voice. A special atmosphere was created through the single-gender experience related to the issue of “voice” and the expression of their “voice.”

Unrelated female gathering. The women and girls also commented that the open environment was further enhanced by the fact that group members were not family members; this was also reinforced in the follow-up interview. This allowed the women and girls to speak for themselves without reservation. The women and girls stated that if family members had been present at the retreat, they might have moderated comments due to family expectations or boundaries. The group came to view the common denominator as being female, not daughters or granddaughters or mothers or grandmothers. One of the girls said,

I thought it was really fun and I enjoyed talking to the older ladies. It’s not like they are your parents or anything, so you could say whatever you wanted to and you didn’t feel embarrassed or anything. So you could say whatever you wanted to and it was OK.

One of the women said,

But here I was with a group of new girls to me . . . and they would talk, but I felt no real responsibility towards them, like I do my grandchildren, I was happy to share with them, but I didn’t feel that responsibility to them. But as I said in my thing (journal), if
anybody had wanted an adopted grandmother, I would’ve been glad.

CONCLUSIONS

The intergenerational storytelling group provided an excellent vehicle for connecting the adolescent girls and the older adult women in a meaningful way. The girls stated that the storytelling retreat was beneficial in increasing their self-confidence, comfort with self, openness with others, and risk taking. The girls also stated that the experience led them to be less judging of others who were different from them. For the women the reported meaning included pride in female progress, instillation of hope, increase in risk taking, and a sense of rejuvenation.

The impact of American cultural climate and the absence of relationships that encourage female development in all capacities may be contributing to serious problems regarding how girls and then women view themselves. Interviews, journals, and videotape confirmed that girls feel pressured to conform and that they have a tendency to silence their own personal voice to please others. Several girls also discussed relationships between family members and friends in unsatisfying terms; this was related to the lack of time spent together as a family and also added that friends were very judging, both of each other and of themselves. The girls lacked opportunities in their lives to discuss openly their thoughts and feelings and to be listened to in a way that was non-judgmental. The adolescents stated that four years later they are more open to people different from themselves. They also discussed the fact that at the retreat our conversations were much deeper than the ones that they normally have with their friends. Several adolescents reported bringing this up to friends and now ask people’s opinion more frequently.

This research demonstrated that the storytelling retreat and the narratives shared provided a network of relationships that did meet the relational needs of the adolescents and that the lasting influence and impressions were positive. The single-gender experience in an isolated setting provided an opportunity “to explore the capacity for developing additional relationships based on broader, more diversified relational network” (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 38).

Implications for further research might include the role and extent of intergenerational connections and a relationship to adolescent choices for at-risk behavior. Intergenerational storytelling and sharing with boys and men presents exciting possibilities as well.
REFERENCES


