

Girl Talk/God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—and Their Parents. By Joyce Ann Mercer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008. 192 pages. \$22.95.

With twenty years of experience in pastoral and social work, and now a practical theologian at Virginia Theological Seminary, Joyce Ann Mercer offers an excellent qualitative research study based on life-narrative interviews in which fifty adolescent girls share “how they think about, experience, and express spiritual and religious meanings in their lives” (xix). In her introduction to *Girl Talk/God Talk*, Mercer identifies the lack of literature that looks positively at the religious life of teenage girls. In order to address this lack, she focuses her analysis of these interviews on the four areas in relation to her spiritual life: faith, gender, the girl’s relationship to her mother, and her relationship to her father. The four key findings of this study are that girls want adult conversation partners on the topic of their faith life; girls need help discerning gender justice issues; parents play a huge role in their daughters’ spiritual lives; and finally, girls actively make meaning in relation to faith and want their faith to make a difference in the world.

Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist’s recent book, *Soul Searching*, a nationwide study on the faith lives of American teens, found that many teens considered themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” Mercer’s research addresses what teenage girls mean by this statement. Her interviews show that the term “religious” connotes certain stereotypes for many of the girls, who might affiliate the term with the religious right or a denomination to which they do not necessarily adhere. Many girls use “spiritual,” however, because it has a looser definition that they are then able to define for themselves.

One theme throughout the book is that the adolescent girls interviewed by Mercer are concerned with authenticity and integrity within their own faith lives. When they describe their faith lives, they use relational images and tend to judge the faith of others based on whether their practices seem “real” or if they are just “going through the motions” (29). These girls also have an idyllic sense that God is calling them to a vocation where they could “make a difference in the

world.”

Mercer was both surprised and disappointed to find that most girls have trouble defining what it means to be female, feminine, or a woman. The girls use physical, culturally, or socially determined definitions that often reflect the stereotypes portrayed in magazines and on television. Positively, Mercer found that African-American girls tend to be less affected by negative gender stereotypes, possibly because of the resistance they have learned from their own mothers with regard to racism. The relation of faith and gender tended to two extremes, one that empowers girls to transform old ideas of what it means to be female while embracing equality and sexual responsibility. The other extreme consists of the church encouraging women to be subordinate to the men in their lives, and sometimes resorts in placing the blame for sexual promiscuity on girls and discouraging them from leadership roles within the church. The interviews in this section highlight the fact that the church has participated in both the harming and the healing of the gender identity of teenage girls.

Mercer actively engages and challenges the literature currently written on the relationships between teenage girls and their parents. Through interviews, Mercer shows that the vacillating stormy and calm relationships between mothers and teenage daughters does not necessarily reflect a process of discerning appropriate distance, as Mary Piper says in her popular book, *Reviving Ophelia*. Instead, Mercer suggests that as girls begin to self-critique reflectively and to discern who they are and who they are becoming, mothers play an important role by renegotiating their relationships with their daughters as their daughters grow into women.

Similarly, Mercer says that daughters begin to see their fathers as imperfect, growing into a new period of fatherhood as the girls move away from home or become more independent. Girls often shared religious views with their mothers, while this sharing was less prevalent with fathers. Even so, girls empathize with their fathers' religious choices despite the fact that they were often not content with them. The most significant role of fathers, according to Mercer, was to bless the faith practices of their daughters through the practices of listening to them, respecting their choices, and seeking to understand them. Hostility toward their daughters' faith often resulted in a relational barrier between them.

Mercer concludes by saying that, “to speak of the religious lives of girls is not simply to catalogue certain religious activities that they perform” (125). She says that their spirituality instead consists in two experiences: making meaning out of every day life and experiencing transcendence. Mercer posits that adolescent girls are at a prime developmental stage for having both the capacity for integration and the imagination to make meaning out of God's activity in their daily lives. She admonishes parents to step up by nurturing their own faith lives, worshipping with their daughters, and incorporating their daughters' spiritual practices into their home. She also encourages parents, reminding them that their daughters are not looking for perfect parents, but rather for parents who engage in practices of healing, forgiveness, listening, and integrating the stories of faith into their family story.

This book is an excellent example of a well-written and analysed qualitative research study, using life-narrative interviews and phenomenological analysis. To help her readers think about their own life-narratives Mercer provides in an appendix a “Life Review Activity.” This book could be helpful to parents as they raise their daughters as well as to seminary students or ministers looking for ways to encourage adolescent girls in matters of faith. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is that it accomplishes what it sets out to do, filling the void of literature on the religious lives of girls by giving voice to the faith lives of fifty faithful adolescent girls. Mercer accomplishes this by pointing out common themes while respecting and acknowledging the exceptions, including views not represented within her study. One significant point this book highlights is that adolescent girls desire more adult relationships where faith can be explored. Perhaps more than anything else, this book will convince its readers to ask the adolescent girls in their lives about their faith, engaging them in “God talk.”

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