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**TEACHING ADOLESCENT GIRLS "AT- RISK":
STORIES OF VOICE AND SILENCE**

by

Beth Veale

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto**

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Beth Veale, Doctor of Philosophy, 2001
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto**

A Traditional Abstract

Welcome to the woods. This thesis is built around the metaphor of exploring "The Forest of Voice and Silence." The development of voice is defined in this work as a life-journey toward wellness; voice is described as the ability to make choices that reflect one's needs, feelings and values. As women, many aspects of experience threaten to silence our voices, placing us "at-risk" of making choices that keep us unsafe, unhealthy or unwell. As you journey through this thesis forest, you will meet six adolescent girls and six teachers of adolescents (five females and one male) who will share their experiences of voice, silence and "at-riskness," reflecting ways in which we are all "at-risk."

This thesis takes the form of postmodern arts-based educational research. Expect the text to depart from traditional expository styles of writing and dive into a variety of creative forms to communicate experience. I write "in-role" as each of my co-researchers, channelling their voices through mine to reflect their experiences. Using metaphor and images, I inquire into voice, silence and "at-riskness." Implications for teaching and learning arise throughout this forest adventure, challenging us to see our "at-risk" girls and ourselves with new eyes.

Acknowledgements

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understanding of voice and silence. Thank you for engaging so deeply with this work. Thanks also to John Matthews, for lending your creative vision and your photography skills to make the wall idea a reality.

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voice. Your gentle strength inspires me and your kindness touches everyone who knows you. You are my candle on the water.

And to Alison Matthews, because you make me brave. Your voice is the soundtrack to my history and your courage keeps me dancing my dreams into life. I thank you for honouring my voice and keeping my secrets. When your music makes you famous the world will find out what I already know, that knowing you is a gift.

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dancing in the streams of sunlight, lighting fires in the rain and holding my hand through the darkest parts of the woods.

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Dedication

**I dedicate this thesis to my parents,
Marilyn and Alan Veale
You are in my heart and my voice
I love you forever**

My Arts-Based Abstract: A Wall of Words

I could be here or not be here it wouldn't really matter a "typical" adolescent at risk of school failure or dropping out is a member of a racial, ethnic, and/or language minority from a lower socioeconomic status family there is never enough food in my house 33% of children in metropolitan Toronto live in poverty they just expect you to do it like there is something wrong with you if you don't 73% of teenage girls cite sexual pressure as the reason why they have sex my brother is turning out the same as my dad 50% of young offenders have been exposed to family violence I wish I looked like Becky 90% of adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their bodies maybe I will get pregnant, maybe not. Who knows? 56% of Ontario teens are sexually active and there has been an 18% increase in teen pregnancies between 1987 and 1994 I want to quit but not right now 23% of girls in grade 10 smoke everyday my mom says if I just lose a little bit of weight I could be a knock out Canadian girls ages 11 to 15 are paying for peer pressure and stress with high-risk behaviours like smoking, drinking and dieting I'm stupid I'm a big fat whale I hate myself I wish I was dead Adolescent girls greatly outnumber boys for treatment of depression and attempted suicide because I don't know why it wouldn't go down 94% of people with eating disorders are female most of the time I can drink pretty good I'm really used to it 75% of eighth graders have tried alcohol and 25% admit to being current drinkers I tried to pull away from him but he was drunk and smoking weed and I didn't know what he would do to me if I said no students who engage in one risk behaviour are more likely to partake in others it's just that sometimes you have to get out of there you know? students who skip school are more likely to smoke or use drugs or alcohol all three of them were going to have sex with her that was the plan one third to one fourth of girls are sexually victimized by the time they finish high school I just lay there and let him do it to me two thirds of rape victims are under 17 if the guys in The Bullets ever found out that I told they would make me pay hell nobody can control the boys there are more than 100 youth gangs in the Greater Toronto Area I could be here or not be here it wouldn't really matter they know they are disposable

Why A Wall Of Words?

Dear Reader,

You are probably wondering what's going on with my arts-based abstract. Why did I follow the traditional abstract with an arts-based wall of words? Let me explain.

A wall is a construction made by people, a barrier that separates one domain from another. My thesis is a space that makes room for stories of barriers and separations, stories of being physically, emotionally and spiritually "at-risk." The purpose of my inquiry is to understand more about how adolescent girls and their teachers experience voice and silence, and how voice and silence are related to being "at-risk." Six adolescent girls and six teachers of adolescents (including myself) offer you our stories in this thesis. Of the teacher co-researchers, five are female and one is male. Each of us has experienced some element of "at-riskness."

My wall of words bombards you with some of the issues that threaten to keep girls and women "at-risk": sex, drugs, gangs,

violence, rape, addiction, poverty, systemic inequities, and media images that perpetuate body-shame.

I constructed my arts-based abstract by juxtaposing the traditional, cold and expository voice of statistics with the voices of the six adolescent girls who participated in my study. The words of the girls are direct quotes taken from our interview transcripts. Each of the girls' messages is represented in italics, and is followed by statistics, in bold font, that speak abstractly to their experiences. If you are interested in further deconstructing my wall of words, you are invited to refer to Appendix One. There you will find an elaborated version of the quotes and statistics that I used in my arts-based abstract.

I chose to begin with the girls' voices in my wall of words, because it is their personal "truths" that interest me most. I want to enter their world through their eyes and their stories, rather than through the anonymous and distant venue of statistics. I place the girls' words first to honour their experiences. Their voices alone are enough to help me understand the "truths" of their adolescence. The fact that my girls' stories are then reiterated by many of the statistics does not make the

girls' comments any more valid, reliable, or "true." I include the statistics, not to muffle their voices, but to show you that other researchers have also come to see what my girls already know about voice and silence. I use a large font to emphasize that their voices need to be heard.

In this thesis, I use the word "voice" to describe the ability to make choices in words and/or actions that reflect one's needs, feelings and values, and a healthy sense of self. However, at the onset of puberty, many girls disengage from their voices, silenced by internalized messages of their perceived lack of worth or agency in the world (Brown and Gilligan, 1993).

As is evidenced in the stories of the six teachers who also participated in my study, even many adult women continue to struggle with the process of reclaiming our voices. The voices of the six girls and six teachers in my project (myself included), echo a common struggle to invest our lives with a sense of self that integrates physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Understandably, many adolescent girls and adult women seek voice, comfort, refuge, escape or esteem in choices that are

ultimately self-destructive: smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, self-mutilation, gang alliances, violent behaviours, abusive relationships, and sexual promiscuity. Our broken bodies become the voices through which we speak our rage and fear. The silences that we choose by swallowing our voices into our bodies and translating our feelings into self-abuse place both our bodies and spirits "at-risk."

Traditionally, the term "at-risk" has been used to describe students who are "at-risk" of failing or dropping out of school. However, the wall of words stretches the edges of what it means to be "at-risk" far beyond academic dimensions. Many girls and women who appear to be effectively meeting the expectations of our school or work environments, may be "at-risk" in ways that are invisible to the world outside ourselves. Being disconnected from our voices can place girls and women "at-risk" of being unsafe, unhealthy, or unwell.

By this point you may be feeling a sense of futility or hopelessness. My prelude paints a bleak and disturbing picture of adolescent and female experience. How can adolescent girls survive this wall of words? With so many statistics stacked

against them, how can young women be safe, healthy, and well in relationships with themselves and others? As teachers of adolescent girls, what are we supposed to do about all these issues? And as women teachers who are ourselves "at-risk" in many unseen ways, how do we name and transcend the silences that have made us disappear?

Mirroring the wall of words, my thesis includes stories of addiction, abuse, abandonment, violence, violation, grief, loss, fear, and fury. The stories of the adolescents and teachers in my study reflect many devastating ways in which we are all "up against the wall."

But we are not just standing there waiting to be shot.

Holes In The Wall: Sites of Resilience and Hope

In many creative ways, the courageous participants in my study are actively resisting the "violences and silences" that compose the wall. We pick away at the bricks and mortar,

creating chinks and holes and spaces large enough to crawl through. We cling white-knuckled to the out-jutting corners or bricks, toes balanced precariously on ledges, boosting each other over the top. Some even press ourselves, ghost-like, into the wall, emerging mysteriously whole on the other side.

After Brown and Gilligan (1992) published their groundbreaking study about voice and girls' psychological development, the responses of many researchers focused on the losses that girls sustain through adolescence. Much has been written about "...the loss of voice, the narrowing of desires and expectations, the capitulation to conventional notions of femininity..." (Brown, 1998, p. vii) that girls encounter en route to becoming adult women. Indeed, the participants in my study have also experienced significant losses that have made it difficult for us to recognize, acknowledge, nurture, or honour our own voices and selves.

However, in a subsequent study, Brown (1998) emphasizes the brave and ingenious ways that some girls use to resist the loss of their voices as they move through adolescence. Like the participants in Brown's study, the six girls and six teachers in this

project are also navigating pathways through the silences, oppressions and "at-risk" spaces in our lives. My thesis includes inquiry into the creative processes of resurrecting and reclaiming our voices from the ruins and rubble of "at-risk" experiences. We are locating our voices and ourselves through a myriad of creative processes; we are making peace with ourselves and our experiences through singing, writing, dancing, teaching, running, meditation, and even volunteering at a sanctuary for abused elephants rescued from the circus.

Finding our voices is an ongoing process, and each of the twelve participants in my project is at a different point along this journey. Some are just beginning to become aware of the systems and circumstances that silence us. Others are confidently advocating on behalf of the silenced. Still others are coming to know the healing and restorative side of silence, a contemplative and meditative space of spiritual connection and peace that transcends words. All of us are learning about how issues of voice and silence affect our relationships with ourselves and others.

With voices sometimes screaming and sometimes barely a whisper, we speak our "truths" through the stories shared in this

project. We embrace a different and exhilarating way of being "at-risk": we bravely choose the difficult and vulnerable process of finding our voices through creative acts of courage. This thesis is a celebration of survival as six teenagers and six teachers search for ways to make peace with the wall and ourselves.

Chapter One: Beginnings

From The Wall To The Woods: An Invitation To Explore A Forest

Dear Reader,

The ongoing process of understanding more about how voice and silence affect teaching and learning relationships involves a long trip over rough terrain. Reflecting that journey, I have shaped my thesis around the metaphor of hiking through the Forest of Voice and Silence. Please join me as we move from the wall to the woods. We are moving from a metaphor of barriers and separations, to one of a natural, organic landscape of endless possibilities. Come along on a journey from the inner city, to wide-open spaces of forests and fields. Join me as we begin a dangerous and exciting adventure into The Forest of Voice and Silence.

In the forest we will visit two base camps, or inquiry sites, where we will meet and listen to the stories of six adolescent girls and six teachers of adolescents. One at a time, each co-

researcher will tell her/his stories of experiences with voice and silence. Through their stories, we will come to understand more about how voice and silence touch our lives and our teaching. We will reconsider what it means to be "at-risk," as our students teach us to see them and ourselves with new eyes. Some teacher co-researchers will reflect on how our own experiences of voice and silence are embedded in our teaching. Others will tell how we create spaces for voice in our own classrooms. Each story will lead us to question what it means to be "at-risk," and how voice and silence may be connected to "at-riskness." Voicing the silence may help rescue us from being "at-risk."

There's something else I wanted to clarify before we begin. In addressing you as my "dear reader," it is not my intent to be patronizing or condescending. I simply want to make sure you do not feel lost in this forest. Arts-based research invites a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty; it is an expedition into the unknown that evokes many questions. Spaces that are unfamiliar can sometimes create both excitement and confusion. My intent in addressing you directly, dear reader, is to let you know that I am still here by your side as we follow our questions into the woods.

Our journey into the Forest of Voice and Silence promises to be quite a trip. Are you up for the adventure? I'll meet you right here whenever you're ready to start.

Sincerely, Beth

(teacher, researcher, research participant, and fellow hiker)

P.S. On the following page, you will find our wall again, the same wall that you saw at the very beginning of this thesis. Previously it was imprinted with disheartening statistics about the challenges facing adolescent girls. You will notice that now the statistics are gone. In their place, you will find the shadows of trees, inviting us beyond the wall to the woods, beyond futility to hope.

*Forest Beckonings:
Tree Shadows On The Wall*




How I Arrived at the Forest of Voice and Silence

You might be wondering why I chose to write a thesis about voice and silence. To shed light on that question, I have recorded several personal vignettes. Each one illuminates an experience from my own life related to adolescence, voice, silence, or different ways of being "at-risk." Patterned after Alice Walker's (1988) "mental 'snaps' " (p. 100), each of these thirty-five written paragraphs captures a moment in my personal history. These are my arrival stories.

I have intentionally chosen thirty-five vignettes to match my age, thereby evoking a sense that finding my voice is my continuing life-work. I invite you to experience these scenarios as layered scraps of fabric, or remembered remnants, that are sewn piecemeal onto the patchwork of my experience (Diamond and Mullen, 1999). These vignettes offer a bricolage of images (Denzin and Lincoln, 1997) that combine to illuminate a frayed-edged work-in-progress, the ongoing process of finding my own voice in my teaching and learning relationships.


I have attempted to illuminate the complex nature of voice and silence through these scenarios; the vignettes represent a range of experiences that are connected to voice and silence in both obvious and subtle ways. I am blessed to have many relationships in my life that nurture, encourage and honour my voice. I have also experienced silences that have extended my notion of what it means to be "at-risk." Some of the silences reflected in the stories are imposed by my fear of losing someone else's approval or acceptance. Others are silences that arise out of uncertainty, embarrassment or shame. Some of the silences described are peaceful spaces of quietness that are restorative. Still others are patient silences that create space for voice: silences of love and acceptance, comfort and safety, tenderness and belonging. All of the written photographs, and the memories they evoke in me, lead to questions that have shaped my inquiry.

You will notice that each vignette begins with a symbol of a path and a tree that looks like this: . Like each of my participants, I have chosen an image to reflect some aspect of myself. The tree represents my spirit, drawing deeply from unseen springs and reaching toward light. Whenever you see the tree symbol, you will know that you are about to encounter


another written photograph, a different snapshot of one of my experiences with voice and silence.


I invite you, my reader and fellow-hiker, to piece together a sense of who I am from the stories I tell, stories that will be filtered through your own life experiences, assumptions and views of the world. Why have I chosen to write a thesis about voice and silence? As Kathleen Casey (1993) entitled her research, I answer with my life.

Written Photographs Or Postcards From My Own Edges

 I am eight years old and I am at Glen Haven Library with Priya Deepak and her mother. It is Saturday afternoon. There are two teenage boys leaning on the steps going in the main entrance. Priya and her mother have already gone inside. "What are you looking at?" one of them demands, grabbing me by the jacket and pushing me up against the wall. I say nothing. He knees me in the crotch and lets me go. It is hard to walk straight. I find Priya and her mom inside the library but I am too embarrassed to tell them what happened. I stand between the shelves and


pretend to look for a book, wiping my tears on the sleeve of my coat.


 It is February 9, 1976. I am in grade five, and it is my first day at my new school. My mom and I are in the office at North Forest Junior Public School filling out the registration form. The form requires my full name, so my mother writes Elizabeth Anne Veale. The secretary introduces me to my new teacher, Mrs. Nelaney as "Elizabeth." Mrs. Nelaney turns to address my new class. "This is Elizabeth," she tells them. I do not mention that my name is Beth, that everybody calls me Beth, that nobody calls me Elizabeth. Instead, I say my new name over and over in my head, fascinated with how formal it sounds. How sophisticated and important and completely unfamiliar. I do not correct them when they call me Elizabeth, momentarily drawn into the novelty of my shifted identity. I say nothing. Nine years pass as Elizabeth. Friends shorten it to Liz, even Libby. No one at school calls me by my real name.

 I am ten years old and I am crying into my pillow. My mom hears me through the wall. I listen for the familiar comfort of her footsteps padding along the hall carpet into my room. She sits on the edge of my bed in her soft flannel pyjamas. Her hand


feels cool as she slips her fingers between mine. "Everyone at my new school has a best friend except me," I sob.


"I'll be your best friend," my mom offers.


 I am sitting on the grass in the backyard with my cousin, Peter. We are both in grade five at different schools. We are updating each other about what we have learned so far in health class. I am winning this time, with my elaborate descriptions of how chickens and cats make babies. By the time I get to humans, we are both so giddy with the power of these dangerous words that Peter becomes reckless. "It's no fair," he announces at the dinner table, "Beth gets to learn all the sex stuff in health. We just get to learn about washing our hands." I am horrified at his indiscretion, and I do not look up. I know I will be in trouble later. I have said too much.


 It is the summer before grade seven and I have just bought my first Shoppers Drug Mart Youth Pack. I am feeling very grown up as I spread the contents out on my bed: Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific shampoo, Bonne Belle kissing potion lip gloss, Clearasil pimple cream, Ten-O-Six cleansing lotion, peppermint Freshen Up gum and three pink Bic razors. I am especially proud of the razors. I have never shaved my legs before and I am not

exactly sure what to do. I wonder how all the other girls found out how to do it. With one sudden stroke I shave a bare, dry strip through the downy fair hairs on my calf. I carefully pull the hairs out of the blades and repeat my long strokes, ignoring the sting and the rash that follows the razor's path. By the time I am finished, my legs are burning and covered in tiny red bumps. I wonder if it will hurt like this every time. My sister passes my bedroom door. "You shaved your legs DRY?" She asks with her eyes wide. She soaks some towels in cold water and wraps them around my red shins. "You should have asked me how to do it," she sighs. "I would have told you."


 Mr. Brook requests a hymn and we stand. I know the words off by heart. My dad's clear tenor voice finds the opening note and the congregation follows his steady lead. Once the congregation is managing the melody, my father lifts his voice to the descant, and I can hear my sister twinning his harmonies. My mom lightly taps out the tempo on the back of the pew in front of us, a metronome of fingers. I glance sideways and see that my father's eyes are closed. His face is reverent and prayerful and I know that behind his closed eyelids he is seeing Calvary. I feel safe in the sound of my father's singing.


 Adam Reynolds has his tongue in my mouth. I am thirteen and I am up against the wall behind the church. I do not know exactly what I am supposed to do with this warm, wet visitor as he pushes his tongue deeper into me, so I *pretend* that I know. I copy what he does with his tongue, breathing into his mouth and pulling his Levis closer with my fingers hooked in his belt loops.


 I am in grade 8 and I haven't had my first period yet. All my friends already got theirs. I tell Darlene that my cramps are really bad today, you know how that is, and we laugh knowingly, rolling our eyes about what a drag it is to be a woman. I take extra long in the bathroom and try to make paper sounds with the brown bag on the back of the toilet.

 Tracy is the coolest girl in grade 8. She has dark feathered hair and tight MAC jeans that she lies down on the floor to zip up. She hangs around with Paula McDonald and the boys from high school. She tells interesting stories about things you can do with vaseline, which I pretend I already know. Tracy phones my house one evening and asks me what I'm doing. "Oh nothing," I try to sound nonchalant as I gear up for the oncoming


lie. "Just sitting here talking to Lisa. Remember I told you about my friend who thinks she might be pregnant? Well, we're just sitting here talking about what she's going to do." I want Tracy to think that I am so cool that now I'm actually offering advice to *other* cool girls, albeit fictional, who would be lost without the smarts of someone as wordly and hip as myself. "She's there right now?" Tracy asks, skeptically. "Let me talk to her." I am trapped. I cover the receiver and make sounds like footsteps and muffled conversation before I change my voice and say hello. Tracy is not fooled. "It's still you. You're just changing your voice. I'm not stupid."


 I am thirteen. Jason Addersly is unzipping my beige cords. "My parents would kill me," I whisper into his mouth as I zip them up again.


 I am choosing my optional subjects for grade nine. "You don't want drama," my uncle assures me. "All they do is play frozen tag."

 I am fourteen and sitting in church with a white mantilla veil on my head, secured with a single bobby pin just to the right of my part. Sometimes when I wear a black one I


privately pretend I am a widow. Today I pretend I am a bride instead, letting the lacy edges frame my face and rest on my shoulders. I am in the same pew where we always sit, one row back from the window. I know this place by heart, the hymns and scriptures as familiar as the backs of the heads in front of me. I feel the lace of the mantilla brush lightly against my cheek and whisper wedding vows to myself.

 I am fifteen, and I am sitting in the hall between classes, leaning up against the lockers beside Elaine. We have code names for different girls as they pass by. "There goes Pound-A-Day," I whisper. "How much does that girl eat?" We laugh with amusement and disgust.

 It is the first day of grade twelve. I have gained thirty pounds since school ended in June. I am wearing a camp football shirt with sweatpants and I need a hair-cut. I want to be invisible. My gym teacher has to look twice before she recognizes me. She tells me I had better get running.

 Jeff and I are going to see a movie. I am sixteen. I walk to his house, which is around the corner from mine. Jeff is not ready yet, so his older brother says he'll take me for a drive in

his Jag. I am trying to remember if this is the same brother who was in prison. I do not want to go, but what am I going to do, say no? I get in and there is no seatbelt. He drives 140 km/h up Dawson Road, fishtailing as he screeches to turn on to my street. I am terrified. I want words, but my jaw is tightened shut. I duck lower in my seat as we fly past my house and swerve to miss a parked car. "Maybe we should go a little bit slower. Sometimes kids play around here," I manage feebly, trying not to sound ungrateful. "Don't worry!" He laughs, screaming on to Morgan Avenue against the light, "My dad would kill me if I ever did anything to this car." I say nothing. We finally make it back to their driveway. "Wow, your car is amazing. That was great," I lie politely. "Thanks for the ride."


 I am graduating from high school. I am sitting on the stage because I am the valedictorian. I win the leadership trophy, the citizenship award, an honours certificate, and a letter of recognition from the community association. I am disappointed. As much as I like Christy Anderson, I wish I were good enough to win the highest award, the one that she took home. Best Girl.

The perfect girl is always someone else.

(Debold, Wilson and Malave, 1993, p. 53)

 It is my first year as an undergrad, September 1984.


This is Orientation Week and I am a Frosh. Louise and I, who have been friends since childhood, are standing side by side in a long row of other first-year girls. We have been reluctantly enlisted in the Frosh Body Contest. The second year boys are moving up and down the lines surveying each girl's body. "Come and look at this one!" they yell to each other, "No way, check out this one over here!" We stand still and face forward, waiting for the final verdict from the sophomore boys. They are laughing and arguing loudly about which first year girl has the Best Butt.

 It is the summer of 1985 and I am working as a program director at the camp where I have spent my summers since I was nine. I am nineteen years old. It is my first summer as part of the program staff, and I am responsible for twenty-four thirteen-year old girls. I sleep alone in a one-room cabin in the forest at the edge of the camp property.


The sudden smack of a rock hitting the wooden wall of my cabin jolts me awake. It is three-twenty a.m. My heart is pounding. He's back. I do not know who he is or why he chose me. He is a stranger, but the pattern of his sounds has become as familiar as my fear. He walks slow circles around my cabin. He


takes a step, he throws a stone at the side of my cabin. He takes a step, he throws a stone. He scratches the screen and taps the outside wall. He lines rocks along the windowsill one by one and brushes them off again. He circles the cabin again and again, snapping twigs and tossing pebbles. His footsteps stop at the side window. He says my name. He moves around to the front of the cabin. He turns the door handle back and forth, back and forth.

I am crouched on the bed in the corner, my bottom lip quivering like the breathing of a wounded bird. My pulse is pounding in my throat. I imagine him suddenly kicking the door open. I wonder if he will kill me the same way he throws the stones, with a slow and methodical ritual. I envision him carving his name into the flesh of my breasts, pinning me down on the creaky floorboards of the tiny cabin. I wonder who will find my body first. I picture the horror on their faces as one by one they find out that I was telling the truth.


 I am snapping open another bag of Doritos. My lips are orange and stinging. I pry open a carton of ice-cream with the handle of a spoon and dig out the chunks of chocolate. I am remembering there is still some pasta left over from last night as


I toss a frozen bagel into the microwave. There is not enough food in the world for the way that I feel tonight.


 I am sitting in the dean's office, waiting for her to return with my file. My head is lowered and my clammy hands are folded in my lap. It is my second year of undergrad and I am failing my courses. I have skipped most of my classes. I circled C on the multiple choice exams. Now I am waiting to hear what the dean's committee has decided to do with me. I am guessing they will probably kick me out of the program. "I used to be an honours student," I want to tell the dean as she takes the seat across from me. "In high school I was the valedictorian of my graduating class, you can check my records." I want to beg her, "Please let me stay, give me another chance, I'll get it back together, I promise." But I am silent. I do not have words for what happened to me last summer. I do not have words for all the ways I lost myself since then.

 I am watching the lake with Doug. It is almost midnight in early April, and the wind off the water is cold against my face. I am nestled in the crook of his arm, snuggled partway inside his jacket. I can feel the warmth of his breath in my hair. For a


moment I let myself forget that I am not supposed to be here. It is someone else's reasons that make me leave.


 I am twenty-three, and I have just returned from spending the summer on a mission team in Eastern Europe. I am sitting in church. I want to stand up like the men do, and tell what I learned about prayer while I was lost in Bulgaria. My words are piled up inside of me. I stay silent. I am not allowed to speak here because I am a woman.

 I am sitting cross-legged on Annie's blue couch, my hands wrapped around a cup of steaming tea. Annie, who has been my dear friend since we were seven, tucks herself into the corner of the couch and faces me. We are twenty-nine in this picture, and we have witnessed each other's lives with an ongoing commentary of laughter and tears. Everything about this moment feels familiar and safe: the warmth of the cup on my palms, her baby sleeping upstairs, the easy rhythm of our conversations, her kind eyes waiting. "Tell me everything," she urges, "Start anywhere and don't leave out a word."


 I am teaching grade six in a portable. It is almost spring, and the afternoon sun is melting the snow off the portable


roof. The sun sparkles through the streams of water like falling diamonds. "Welcome to the rainforest," Chad whispers, and the class watches the window without speaking. The silence connects us. I feel a sense of quiet wonder, as gentle and peaceful as snow melting into water.

 I am at the chalkboard demonstrating how to reduce a fraction to lowest terms. "So what will my numerator be?" I ask, noticing that Mackenzie is paying close attention. Mackenzie hates math. I think she is afraid of it, worried that the numbers will somehow rise up off her page and reveal her uncertainty to her peers. But she seems to be following so closely today that I take a chance. "Mackenzie?" I ask hopefully. Before she can open her mouth, John and Andy have already called out "Three."


 Cassidy is angry today. I can tell by the way her body is slumped over her desk and her lips are pressed together. Neil, one of the other grade seven students in my class, has just noticed that Cassidy has new glasses. His simple comment, though seemingly benign, is delivered as a mean-spirited taunt intended to provoke: "You have glasses." Cassidy suddenly lurches to her feet and turns to face her surprised classmate. "YES, NEIL! THAT'S RIGHT! I DO HAVE GLASSES!" She yells above the


voices of the other students' chatter. The class falls silent to witness the unexpected outburst. "I have glasses. So what? Here they are right now on my face! Take a good look. I wear them because sometimes I have trouble SEEING! Are you satisfied?" She drops back into her seat and covers her face with both hands, mumbling furiously into her palms. The class is waiting for my response, for Cassidy's inevitable consequence. They know we do not yell at each other in room 103. But I am so proud of Cassidy for finally saying what she means out loud, that I just want to throw a party. I say nothing. "You're going to let her yell at me like that? She's allowed to yell at me like that?" Neil is lamenting from the back of the room, arms wide at his sides in disbelief.

 It is my fifth year of teaching. I am eating lunch at a table in the staffroom with my colleague, Bob. He complains that the Jamaican kids can't even speak English properly, let alone read it or write it for God's sake. I feel enraged but I say nothing.


 Santino and I are driving home after our night class. It is January, and the cold air snaps against the bare skin of our unmittened fingers. We blow into our hands while we wait for the


car heater to warm us up. Our breath hangs in the air like ghosts, each word a misty visitor disappearing into the dark. He is telling me about his daughter's writing, which reminds me of something one of my students said, which reminds us both of a favourite poem, and a journal entry Santino wrote four years ago about his daughter. Our history as learning partners and friends layers our memories one on another, a collage of stories that weave us in and out of each other's knowings. As we drive on through the darkness, one story falling into another, the streetlights scatter pinprick diamonds across the shiny blackness of the wet roads.


 I am walking through the hall on my way to teach my next class. I pass Eldon, a grade eight boy who is standing in front of a large photo of the girls' volleyball team. He points to each girl, one at a time. "Dog, dog, slut, ugly, bitch...."


 I am thirty years old and on vacation in British Columbia. Emma and I are hiking up a trail on Grouse Mountain. My shoes are caked with mud and the sweat is sticking my T-shirt to the small of my back. My hair is loosely pulled away from my face with a strip of orange trail tape I untied from a tree. The muscles in my thighs are quivering as I balance momentarily on a root jutting out of a rock. I feel a rare moment of love for my

body, for the air coming in and out of my lungs, for the strength of my legs and my heart. I am exhilarated and inspired by the newness of loving myself. It makes me brave and grateful and not afraid of anything.

 I am sitting alone in the hospital chapel, a quiet space with low lights and muted pastel walls. I am waiting to find out about my mother's surgery and the cancer cells that have silently multiplied inside her. I hear her voice in the stillness of my heart, repeating the words she told me this morning. "God did not hold me in the palm of His hand for sixty years to let go of me now. Whatever happens, He will still be holding me in the palm of His hand." Her faith comforts me like a promise. I feel strangely peaceful, like water following a river path already carved out between rocks.

 I am lying on a cot beside my mom's hospital bed. The room is dark except for the sliver of yellow light beneath the door. The stream of highway headlights outside makes shadow patterns across the walls and ceiling. Her IV machine hums a soothing rhythm that sounds like someone sighing. I am listening to my mother breathe.

 "I can't tell these stories, Patrick." He sits across from me in his office on the tenth floor. As my thesis advisor, Patrick has heard my fear before. He listens patiently, his gentle presence inviting me to continue. I am afraid of what people will think of me when they read my work. I feel vulnerable and exposed. I am afraid of my own writing, afraid of what I know, afraid of my own voice. In some demented way, this is making me feel fat. As I sit here, I feel huge, inflated, big enough to fill the whole room. I am ashamed of how much space I take up. I am too much and not enough at the same time.

 It is September and almost midnight. Louise and I are walking back roads in the country, talking for miles. The navy sky is wide and full of stars, stretching above the farms and fields like a canopy. Louise and I have been friends for twenty-six years, and we know a thousand versions of each other's life. Our histories overlap. But tonight I tell her a story she has never heard before, a secret I have kept for fifteen years. Fear has kept me silent. Fear and two simple questions that were waiting for yes. If you knew the truth about me, the shadows in the crevices of my past, would you still love me? Can I be the truth of me without losing you?

Dear Reader,

Hello again. I trust that my written photographs have given you a glimpse into my history, and some of the experiences that have brought me to the Forest of Voice and Silence. In the next section, I will introduce the questions that will guide us through this thesis as we embark on our forest adventure.

Questions To Guide Us

As an Intermediate teacher and guidance counsellor, I am especially interested in what the forest can help me understand about teaching adolescent girls who are considered "at-risk."

I am wondering what it means to be "at-risk," and what it means to have a voice, and how these two things might be related. As we enter the Forest of Voice and Silence together, the following questions will light our way like stars in the night sky:

***In what ways do adolescent girls and teachers of adolescents experience issues related to voice and silence?**

***What significance do stories of voice and silence play in extending teachers' understanding of teaching adolescents?**

***In what ways are teachers' experiences of their own adolescence carried into their adult teaching selves?**

***What does it mean to be "at-risk?"**

***In what ways can both voice and silence bring connection, hope and healing into teaching, learning and living relationships?**

As we explore the forest trails, you will likely uncover some questions of your own. Feel free to follow your own path and see where it leads you. This forest does not belong to me. I just come here to watch and wonder and be amazed.

Coming To Terms: Unpacking The Questions

As we bring our questions into the forest, there are four words that are important landmarks to watch for along the way: "at-risk," "enoughness," voice, and silence. Think of these words as trail tape, the bright orange plastic strips that are tied around branches along the route so we do not lose our way. They are the words that will help us stay close to our purpose of understanding more about what it means to teach adolescent girls who are considered "at-risk."

The term "at-risk" is usually used to describe students who experience difficulty in the regular academic program and are at-risk of failing or dropping out of school. However, I extend the notion of what it means to be "at-risk" to include other more subtle but life-threatening or diminishing ways in which adolescent girls and their teachers may be "at-risk." For example, a young woman may appear to be coping or even excelling academically, but meanwhile be involved in a relationship in which her own needs are not acknowledged or valued. The "absence" of her voice in that relationship may impact negatively on her physical health or spiritual well-being. Although appearing to cope in the classroom, she may be quietly and invisibly "at-risk" of being unsafe, unhealthy or unwell if she continues to make choices that ignore her own needs, desires or values. For the purpose of this particular venture into the forest, "at-riskness" refers broadly to the state of being disconnected from physical, emotional and/or spiritual wellness.

Another term that is important to my work is "enoughness." I use creative license to extend the form of the word "enough" to represent a state of feeling accepted. At one level, "enough" describes a quest, common among young women, to be perceived

by others as being worthy of approval and belonging. We long to be seen as nice enough, attractive enough, smart enough and generally good enough to meet with the approval of others. However, it is my hope that as women we can begin to value our own inherent "enoughness," rather than relying on others to define our worth.

Other terms that appear frequently along the trail are "voice" and "silence." When I refer to voice in this work, I am talking about the ability to make choices in words and actions that reflect our needs, feelings and values. Researcher Carol Gilligan (1982) defines voice as "...the core of the self" (p. xvi). As women, our sense of who we are evolves within a multiplicity of spiritual, personal, familial, societal and global contexts, some of which may contribute voices that challenge our worth. Our life work is to transcend the interrupting voices that clamour to tell us who we should be. We need to learn to listen instead for the still small voice of the soul, gently whispering what we need and who we are. In this study, to "honour one's voice" means that our words and actions are aligned with a connected and loving sense of self; our responses are representative and protective of our intuitive clarity, authentic spirit and inherent worth.

In the Forest of Voice of Silence, we will find women who are learning to reclaim our own voices, growing into more peaceful, healthy and joyful relationships with ourselves and others. However, there are many factors that make it challenging to find and honour our own voices, as is evidenced by the "wall of words" that comprises the arts-based abstract of this thesis. Various influences (images in the media, internalized expectations of others, experiences of physical and/or emotional crisis) can suppress, threaten, marginalize, or jeopardize a sense of self-value and clarity of voice. The influences that make it difficult for women to acknowledge and communicate our feelings can be thought of as "silencers" for the purposes of this particular project.

An interpretation of the word "silence" in this work includes a sense that one's acceptance or value is dependent on achieving, choosing or maintaining certain relationships or images as legislated by others. "Silence" also embodies the idea of refraining from making certain choices or voicing particular feelings in order to avoid conflict, sustain an image, or ensure belonging. Sometimes when the demands or wishes of others are internalized, a young woman becomes self-silencing. As we camp in

the forest, we will come to know many young women who are struggling to rescue their voices from a sea of silence.

However, it is important that silence is not totalized as the enemy in this research project. Although there are many potentially dangerous influences that figuratively silence women's voices, there are also beautiful and necessary silences that heal the soul. Silence can create a space for spiritual renewal. Such soulful silences actually invite voice, by providing a place of stillness in which we can listen to the still small voice of God within us. Our silent spaces of contemplative practice can awaken us into awareness, release us from our striving, and lead us to connect with all life in compassionate attention and mindful presence.

For example, I enjoy walking each day along a forest path near my home, a contemplative practice of breath meditation that is precious to me. The peacefulness cultivated in moments of silence accompanies me back into the busy activities of each day, gentling my spirit in gratitude and grace. Connection to my spirit nudges me to a loving acceptance of myself and others, less compelled by a need to be "enough" to someone else. Fear and

shame dissolve like steam from the kettle when I open my heart to the sacred silences of prayer.

It is this healing kind of silence, the silence of physical and spiritual quietness, that leads us to love. A love that is large enough to heal our secrets and connect us to each other. A love that is brave enough to speak.

As you can see, there are many ways that silence and voice are intertwined. As we explore the woods, our "trail tape words" will keep us connected to these key words and our questions. The terms "at-risk," "enoughness," voice and silence will emerge again and again along the path, leading us deeper into a forest of questions and stories.

Welcome To The Woods

So here we are, standing at the edge of the forest, about to begin our hiking adventure. Let's make sure we've got everything we need: the compass, the maps, the matches, the food, the tent, the whistle. After all, this is the Forest of Voice and Silence. Anything could happen.

We will be surrounded by beauty and mystery, the strength of trees and the tracks of animals. We will be immersed in the lush greenery of experience, exploring the world of adolescence in awe and wonder.

Our time will be spent watching for signs of life in the forest. We will be listening for the voices of the woodland wildlife: the friendly chatter of squirrels and birds, the squeaking of mice and moles, the howling of wolf packs. Like the adolescent girls and teachers who will tell us their stories of voice and silence, some of the forest animals may be bold and chatty, while others are wide-eyed and terrified.

Some creatures will run for cover when they hear us approaching. We will only have the bent stems, mud tracks and twig-crackings to prove that they were there at all. If we wait patiently, we may see some silent signs of life: the whisker-twitches of rabbits, the flashing white tails of fawns. If they are brave enough to let us approach them, we will be gentle in their presence and tender with their fear. There have been many hunters in these parts. They don't know who to trust.

I should warn you that we will be travelling through some rough terrain, over slippery rocks where it is hard to keep your footing. It can be dangerous in the thickest part of the bush, because it is easy to get lost. We will have to tread carefully and help each other.

And every night, we will sit in a circle around the campfire and tell our stories. We will have a lot to tell. For this is the Forest of Voice and Silence. Anything could happen.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Maps From Earlier Hikers: A Cartography of Voice and Silence

It's quite a walk before we get to the first campsite, where we will meet the six girls who participated in my research. The long hike ahead will give us a chance to talk. I wanted to tell you about some of the other researchers who have inspired me to explore this forest.

Prior to Carol Gilligan's work entitled *In A Different Voice* (1982), much of what was understood about psychological development and conceptions of self and morality was based on research involving only male participants (Belenky et al., 1986, Gilligan et al., 1990). Gilligan (1982) brought women's voices and stories to the questions of how a self is developed, namely "...how we know, how we hear, how we see, how we speak" (p. xiii).

Later, Brown and Gilligan's longitudinal study (1992) traced the experiences, thoughts and feelings of a group of American school girls as they moved from childhood into adolescence. Their

landmark research revealed that girls experience significant psychological shifts and profound losses as they move through puberty. They inquired into what a young woman gives up in her struggle to feel "connected" to others, highlighting the loss of girls' voices as a crisis in adolescent development. These researchers discovered that exuberant, assertive and confident nine-year-olds take their voices "underground" as they enter adolescence. Their childhood self-assuredness, esteem, confidence and communicative clarity dissipate. Girls entering puberty become less willing to take academic risks, voice their questions aloud in class, or participate actively in their learning. Some girls believe "...they could speak, but...few cared or listened to what they had to say. Having a 'big mouth' often got them into trouble, but silence, the slow slipping into a kind of invisible isolation, was also devastating" (McLean Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995,p. 3).

Many adolescent girls and adult women predict the responses or perceived expectations of significant others and then decide whether it is worth the risk to speak what they really think or feel. Brown and Gilligan (1992) assert that "...her desire to say what she feels and knows conflicts with her desire

to have relationships, not to disrupt relationships, not to hurt anyone" (p. 198). In trying to maintain approval and intimacy, many girls tend to silence their feelings and voices so as not to "look stupid," disappoint, provoke anger, embarrass themselves or others, or create distance in relationships. "...Their strong feelings come up against a relational impasse that shuts out their experience or shuts down their loud voices, a wall of shoulds in which approval is associated with their silence..." (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 97).

The premises of Brown and Gilligan's landmark study are reiterated in two major publications by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), entitled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (1991) and *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1995). They provide a comprehensive exploration of what often happens to girls between kindergarten and graduation; their loss of esteem and lack of confidence in areas such as mathematics and science are traced to a myriad of systemic inequities and biases. The AAUW reports name and challenge policies and practices that privilege male students and perpetuate female subordination.

Disturbed by the 1991 AAUW report, Orenstein (1994) decided to further explore the issue of adolescent girls' self-esteem. She researched eighth-grade girls at two schools in California, one located in the inner-city, and one in the suburbs. Endeavouring to understand more about the issues that affect girls' esteem and silence their voices, Orenstein immersed herself in the school cultures of her participants, observing both the students and teachers "in action." Orenstein concludes, "in order to raise healthier girls, we must look carefully at what we tell them, often unconsciously, often subtly, about their worth..." (p. xxviii). As a teacher of adolescent girls, what am I telling my students about their worth?

Orenstein (1994) notes the findings of the AAUW report indicating that black girls seem to sustain a stronger sense of self-esteem and entitlement to voice through adolescence than white middle-class American girls. She links the AAUW results with the findings of Burgher, who analyzed autobiographical writings by African American women:

...Burgher found that, from the start, the model of European femininity – grounded as it is in delicacy, innocence, and an idealized helplessness – has largely been unavailable to black women. Instead, they have measured their worth

through strength of character and a tenacious sense of self (p. 159).

However, Orenstein reminds us that the apparent personal esteem of black girls often does not necessarily manifest itself in *academic self-confidence*.

Feminist author bell hooks (1996) responds to the suggestion that black girls seem to have better self-esteem than white girls, a suggestion that is based on their apparent confidence in asserting their voices. She reminds us that "...an outspoken (black) girl might still feel that she was worthless because her skin was not light enough or her hair the right texture" (xiii). hooks cautions us that black girls' vocal assertiveness may not necessarily indicate a positive sense of self-esteem. Attributing girls' vocal confidence to healthy esteem is a way of interpreting experience that reflects white, middle-class values and may not apply to understanding the experiences of women of colour.

Indeed, race, class and gender are significant factors in understanding experiences of voice, silence and "at-riskness." McLean Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan(1995) attribute "at-riskness"

to "...material inequities rooted in...unequal opportunity and unequal outcome in educational and economic spheres, inequities that are largely structured by race, class and ethnicity" (p. 20). Restricted access to opportunities and environments that promote physical and emotional health, safety and wellness place our low-income youth "at-risk," not only of dropping out of school, but of experiencing what Marshall (1996) terms "a violent outcome." School drop-out rates are higher among low-income youth, and students who don't finish high school generally end up in low paying jobs, perpetuating a cycle of poverty (McLean Taylor et al., 1995). Poverty can lead to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, which often translate into addiction, depression and/or aggression. Dealing drugs and other illegal activities become tempting short-cuts for making fast money. Gang alliances, vandalism, and violent crimes are the currency used to establish status and power among peers through "fearship," or relationships that are based on fear and threatening behaviours (Marshall, 1996, p. 198).

The notion of "fearship" is one factor that may place youth "at-risk" of a violent outcome, according to Marshall's (1996) account of his work with black inner-city youth in Los Angeles.

Marshall highlights nine potentially destructive influences that may place youth "at-risk" of eventually become victims and/or perpetrators of violence (p. 197-198). They are paraphrased here:

- 1) the use of destructive language**
- 2) alcohol**
- 3) drugs**
- 4) guns**
- 5) fearship (alliances based on fear, such as gangs)**
- 6) a negative view of women**
- 7) an attitude of apathy or disengagement**
- 8) material values (the belief that your personal worth is determined or enhanced by your possessions)**
- 9) an environment (family/neighbourhood) where many of these influences are present**

As Marshall explains, the presence of these risk factors does not automatically result in a violent outcome. He compares youth "at-risk" to a person who has a hereditary predisposition to heart disease. Although the patient may carry a genetic potential for heart problems, s/he can make choices to reduce that risk. By addressing alcohol intake, cholesterol level, weight, stress and

nicotine use, a person can significantly alter the possibility that s/he will experience heart failure.

Similarly, some of our youth are born into circumstances of poverty or neighbourhoods of violence that predispose them to "at-risk" futures. However, that does not necessarily mean that all of these students will drop out of school or become victims of violence or perpetrators of crime. Some of their risk factors can be eliminated through choice-making, a notion which points to significant implications for our roles as teachers. We need to encourage our potentially at-risk students to consider which of the nine factors they may be able to control or affect through choice-making. Marshall emphasizes the need for youth to make choices to stay safe, healthy and well, a notion of survival that runs counter to the lifestyles of risk and danger that are most visible in the violent environments in which many of these youth grow up.

It is important to remember that an environment can be unsafe in ways that extend beyond physical risk. As young women, we seek to develop our voices in contexts that continue to silence us; we experience feelings that lead us to choices that threaten

our wellness. However, some of us manage to “survive our contexts,” using the energy of our anger to creatively resist the systems that oppress us.

In her research about girls’ anger and resilience, Brown (1998) invites the voices of adolescent white girls from two different communities. Although the communities differ in economic and social class, both feature elements that threaten to silence the girls’ voices. Brown focuses on their anger and resilience as they resist forces that silence their thoughts, needs, feelings and desires. She reports that the girls creatively challenge and transcend perceived expectations to conform to a particular image of what it means to become a woman in their circles of society. Listening to girls from working class and middle-upper class communities, Brown discovered that the girls’ anger protects them from submitting to a feminine ideal or identity that is not aligned with what they know, who they are and who they want to be.

At this point, you might be wondering, “What about the boys? Aren’t they at-risk, too?” Pollack (1998, 2000), a researcher who studies ways in which boys voices are silenced,

would likely answer "Absolutely." As long as our society promotes images and expectations of "macho" masculinity, our boys will grow up in a context in which the expression of many of their feelings (particularly sadness and fear) is unacceptable. Boys who give a voice to their sadness and fear risk facing disapproval from adults and losing status among peers. When homophobic insults and other put-downs are used to stigmatize boys who show gentleness, tenderness, fear or affection, they learn to hide or silence those parts of themselves. Power is acquired through appearing fearless and invulnerable; violence is mistaken for strength. Young boys learn early that they must silence socially unacceptable feelings like fear and sadness. Their frustration, anxiety, confusion, embarrassment, and anger too often translate into destructive language and violent choices. Tragically, girls are often at the receiving end of boys' efforts to appear the opposite of tender. Boys' anger feeds a cycle that keeps girls "at-risk."

There are researchers who question the notion that girls are "at-risk," arguing instead that the "girl crisis" is a manifestation of "misguided feminism" (Sommers, 2000). Sommers claims that "the description of America's teenage girls as silenced, tortured [and] voiceless" is unsubstantiated by the

field of "conventional psychiatry" (p. 18). This could be predicted. Primarily based on quantitative norms of adult male experiences interpreted by white, middle-aged, middle-class men, the field of "conventional psychiatry" has not committed itself to understanding and honouring the validity of adolescent girls' individual experiences.

Contrary to Sommer's views, the stories of the women in my project reflect contexts of crisis and landscapes of lived experience that show ways in which we are indeed "at-risk," and how males play a role in our "at-riskness." I am convinced that in many visible and invisible ways, males and females are *both* "at-risk." In this dissertation I have chosen to focus on young women and their stories.

In what ways are we, as women, "at-risk?" How are we silenced? The following "silences" are part of a web of systems and circumstances that suppress women's voices, and threaten to keep us unsafe, unhealthy and unwell.

Silence and Media Images: Buying and Selling Our Bodies

De Beauvoir (in Pipher, 1994) claims that girls in adolescence "stop being and start seeming" (p. 22). This loss of connection with the self is compounded further for young women by immersion in North American culture, which objectifies the female body and bombards us with unattainable images that are called "beauty" and are equated with male desire. The multi-million dollar beauty business seeks to perpetuate and capitalize on our feelings of inadequacy. Indeed, "...a woman who does not feel damaged cannot be relied on to spend money for her 'repair' " (Wolf, 1990, p. 96).

The media mirrors and sustains societal power inequities by perpetuating a single image of beauty and equating it with being wanted. The absence of diverse and realistic images of beauty in the media means that most women are under-represented and therefore silenced by invisibility. The process of devaluing all women is expertly executed in the omnipresence of one woman. She is the woman we are apparently supposed to become: tall and

thin, young and wealthy, clear-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, able-bodied, and of course, white. Sexualized and objectified, her body is an invitation; she spreads her long white legs across the pages of VOGUE and shows us how to look and be looked at this season. An endless parade of skin creams, shampoos, perfumes, and scientifically designed cellulite-removers promise to make us into her (Douglas, 1995). Her presence disconnects us from a loving acceptance of our own bodies and each other. She has been manufactured to be our dream, our goal, and our dollar. And then, just to remind us that our power in society will still be limited no matter how much we look like her, she is hunted down and murdered in the movie of the week.

We have become largely immune to the images of violence against women in the media. Sadly accustomed to her rape, we are complacently oblivious as she hits the wall and slides to the floor. We sigh and change the channel or we linger and watch him finish her off. We are inundated with victims. How do young women navigate their way through these daily violences? Where are the words for their fears and feelings of powerlessness? Growing up alongside these constant images of violence and oppression, our adolescent girls become silenced women.

It is no wonder that many adolescent females are considered "at-risk." Ashamed of our bodies and obsessed with our apparent inadequacies, we invest our time, money and energy in the quest for physical "enoughness." We are "at-risk" of measuring our own worth and value against a physical image artfully constructed to perpetuate consumerism (Wolf, 1991). We are "at-risk" of deciding that we are not good enough, and choosing from a host of available addictions to fill the canyon spaces separating who we are and who we wish we were.

Silence and Secret Struggles: The "Perfect" Girl At-Risk

Even some students who appear to be excelling in our school system may also be "at-risk." Perhaps they are not "at-risk" of leaving school, but of losing themselves in the process of staying. As young women disconnect themselves from their authentic voices in an effort to maintain connection and approval with others, they make choices that may jeopardize their safety, health or spiritual well-being. In *Mother daughter revolution: From good girls to great women*, Debold, Wilson and Malave

(1993) explain that many North American middle-class girls succumb to the image of a perfect girl:

...the Perfect Girl is created in response to disapproval and to the admonishments of women, usually mothers and teachers, to be nice, kind, quiet, and neat, and to get along with everyone else (p. 51/52).

The quest for perceived "enoughness" is sustained at a high cost for many young women, as their bodies become the battleground upon which the struggle for perfection is played out. Some girls feel compelled to match high academic expectations, unrealistic standards of beauty, and the approval of parents, teachers and peers in order to feel, if only temporarily, "good enough." Meanwhile, they silence any of the feelings or thoughts which they deem unacceptable to significant others (fear, uncertainty, anger, grief, passion, desire). This self-silencing is often accomplished through their relationship with food and their bodies, as one co-researcher explains:

Bulimia became my voice. I discovered that stress, anger, grief, longing and shame could be neatly, quietly, consumed. Swallowed up. I could make my own feelings disappear, pushed down and silenced with a bag of Doritos and a carton of ice-cream. And then I could watch these feelings leave my body, making them as visible but not as dangerous as words. Bulimia is a very convenient disorder

for women who have been raised not to rock the boat. It provides a space for pain to be expressed silently, myself the only victim of my violence (A co-researcher who wishes to remain anonymous, 1998).

Silence and Separation: A Crisis of Connection

A prevailing sense of physical inadequacy is only one of the ways in which all women, and young women in particular, are at-risk. Brown and Gilligan (1993) describe further difficulties confronting young women:

the desire for authentic connection, the experience of disconnection, the difficulties in speaking, the feeling of not being listened to or heard or responded to empathically, the feeling of not being able to convey or even believe in one's own experience...[are part of a] crisis of connection which we have observed in girls' lives at the time of their adolescence (p. 5).

In trying to stay connected with others, young women often silence their own voices, disconnecting themselves from their own needs, desires and values. The consequences of settling for silence often involve dangerous and self-defeating outcomes for adolescent girls. Her body becomes her voice. Maybe she gives

sex in relationships because it makes her feel wanted. Or perhaps she becomes the victim of her own violence, using drugs, alcohol, food or starvation to express or numb her feelings.

Compounding the crisis, a young woman's disconnection from herself occurs within a wider context of alienation. Miller (1994) describes our North American society as "hurried and task-oriented" (p. 1). The prevalent North American lifestyle is one based on competition, "rugged individualism," and the acquisition of status and goods. We are disconnected from ourselves and each other, and we have silenced our soul-voices through the frantic pace of our living. We move too quickly for compassionate attention and mindful presence. We miss the quiet clarity that comes with peaceful silence and natural places. We have spun each other further away from authentic connections; we have become strangers to grace. In so far as we are walking in our sleep, we are all, to some extent, "at-risk."

In our fragmented state of disconnection from one another, it is easy to view "at-risk" students as separate from ourselves as teachers. *We* are not the problem. There is something wrong with *them*. We pathologize their issues, label them with one disorder

or another, ship them off to the office or the detention room or a special program, and eulogize them as troubled products of their screwed-up families. It is easier to "dispose" of "at-risk" girls than to ask myself, to what parts of her "at-riskness" do I contribute? In what ways am I like her? It is easier to dismiss her than to invest part of myself in seeing, hearing or knowing her. Miller (1993) asserts that "...one of the most prevalent forms of the fragmentation of life is our division of people into 'us' and 'them.' At this level we ignore our basic connectedness as human beings" (p. 2).

Collectively we seem to have lost a sense of soul; we lack a compassionate awareness that every student is precious and belongs to all of us. An "at-risk" student may be viewed in the school system as a frustrating problem to be dealt with, rather than as a valued life that is as precious as my own. Miller (1994) reminds us that "...compassion arises from understanding at the deepest level that all is connected and that separation from others is an illusion" (p. 89). Unfortunately, a barrage of influences feeds the illusion of separation, threatening to distance us from our own knowing voices and each other.

We leave this chapter with further questions that lead us deeper into the woods:

***What are the influences that feed the illusion of separation between teachers and students "at-risk?"**

***How does the illusion of separation silence us?**

***What does it mean to stay connected to our "at-risk" students?**

***What does it mean to stay connected to the "at-risk" places in ourselves?**

The reference to the illusion of separation reminds me of the wall metaphor again. On the following page you will find that this chapter ends with yet another wall image, this time in the form of a shape poem. You will notice that a central wall of ignorance separates the voice of a teacher on the left from the voice of a student on the right. The poem asks us to consider the idea that we are disconnected from each other because it is easier to say, "I don't know her" than to recognize that she is me.

She should
smarten up and
get her act
together
because she's
going nowhere
fast and that
crowd she hangs
around with
doesn't help
which is a shame
really because
she has a lot of
potential but
what can you do
she has a mind
of her own and
there's no telling
her anything you
know how they
are at this age
they think they
know it all well
she's got a lot to
learn I can tell
you that much
and it looks like
she's going to
learn it the hard
way so what can
you do it's like
banging your
head against a
brick wall and
you get to the
point where you
say forget it I
don't get paid
enough to put up
with this crap

I don't know her
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I hate this stupid
school I can't
wait to get out of
here it's a waste
of time and it has
nothing to do
with real life the
teachers talk like
you could just
change your
whole life no
problem just
don't smoke
don't drink don't
do drugs don't
have sex if you
do wear a
condom they act
like you have
choices about
everything like
nothing just
happens to you
they don't know
my life but if you
try to tell them
that they think
you're being
mouthy and
when they ask
you a question
they don't want
to hear anything
except the
answer that is
already in their
heads and it's
not the same as
the answer that
is in mine

Chapter Three: Methodology

Let's Take A Photo Break

We've had a long day of hiking through some tough questions and difficult issues. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to take a break. How about we sit on this log over here and have something to drink? I brought some photographs to share with you. I thought you might like to see pictures of the girls and teachers whom we are going to meet when we finally get to the base camps.

In a moment, you will be reading descriptions of actual photographs that I took of each of the girls in my project. I invited each student co-researcher to choose any location that had particular significance to her, or seemed indicative of some aspect of herself. Each girl selected the place and the poses for her "photo shoot." Then each participant chose one of the photographs that she felt particularly reflected some important part of herself.

Each of the girls' chosen images was enlarged and incorporated into a binder. Their photo collection became a much-treasured legacy in our classroom. The binder partners the selected photos with written comments by the girls, and in some cases, excerpts from their poetry. We patterned our binder after the book *Seen and heard: Teenagers talk about their lives* (Kalergis, 1998).

In the section below, I describe the photographs of each of the adolescent girls in my study, as they appear in our own version of *Seen and Heard*. To protect their anonymity, I can not show you the actual photographs. Their images, like their voices, are suppressed. You are left to conjure visions of these young women from the "essence" evoked by my descriptions. With these images I offer you the simulacra, or shadowy likenesses, of young women whom I have come to know and about whom I care deeply. This research is a further legacy of our relationship.

Images of my Student Co-Researchers

This first photo is Gwendolyn. This was taken on the dock at the city beach. She's leaning out over the edge of the guard-rail

as if she is just about to let herself fall into the water. Her eyes are closed and the wind coming across the lake is blowing her hair back, away from her face. She looks like she's not afraid of anything.

This one is **Becky**. She is leaning against a large, glass door at the mall. Her fingers rest lightly on the handle as if she hasn't decided yet whether or not to open the door. She is turned slightly, looking into the camera with a shy smile. Her long black hair is reflected in the glass behind her back, giving the illusion that there are two of her, facing in opposite directions.

Here's **Sydney**, looking directly at the camera with a knowing smile. Her eyes are seductive and brave, as if she is daring the camera to come closer. She is leaning up against the long metal railings of the playground fence behind the apartment building where she grew up. The fingers of each hand are curled around the railings as if she is trying to keep from falling backward through the spaces.

Now this one is **Mackenzie**, but the shot was taken from a distance, so you can't see her face very well. She is balanced

precariously on the dried-up roots of a dead tree. Her body is centred between two branchless trunks, her arms stretched out on either side to steady herself. Mackenzie's face is partly shadowed by the trees, but if you look closely, you can see that she is staring intently at the camera.

This picture is Cassidy, her body cradled in the strong branches of a maple tree at the park behind the school. She is nestled against the wide trunk, her feet dangling easily from the thick branch on which she sits. She is wearing her favourite Nike fleece sweatshirt, its soft texture contrasting the hardness of her expression. She is not smiling, and her dark eyes penetrate the camera lens with a look of caution.

I love this shot of Felicity. She is wearing a long black gown, the kind you might wear if you were a graduate, or a priest, or a judge. She is leaning against the thick white stones of the courthouse entrance, appearing both warmly approachable and clearly authoritative at the same time. Her head is cocked slightly to one side, and her glasses rest lightly in her hands, giving her a look of disarming perception. Her dark eyes peer

knowingly into the camera. She looks like she knows a thousand secrets.

That's it for the photos of the girls, but I'll show you some shots of the teachers we are going to meet at our second campsite. Their descriptions represent imagined images, rather than actual photographs. Each is an image that I have envisioned as I have come to know aspects of my teacher co-researchers.

Images of my Teacher Co-researchers

The theme of the following photo exhibition is resilience. Through these written descriptions I want to honour spaces of creativity and courage that I have witnessed in my relationship with each teacher/co-researcher over time. It is my hope that the following descriptions may evoke an "essence," or image, that might lead you to "see" some resilient aspect of my teacher-participants' selves. Though only reflecting a shard or sliver of their whole person, these written photographs may offer a glimpse that gives you a place to begin to come to know them.

This first one is Faith. Here she is singing a solo for a Christmas performance in a large church. The hymn is a majestic piece that showcases her rich soprano voice. You can see that she is totally immersed in the music. Her eyes are closing dreamily as her voice rises to fill the room with sound. Her smooth skin is glowing warmly in the soft white light that encircles her as she sings. She looks both serene and vibrantly alive at the same time.

This next one is Jessica, sitting across from a friend in a little café downtown. She could be an advertisement in a magazine, her long lean figure highlighted smoothly by her stylish fashion sense. She does not know that I am taking this picture, and she is absorbed intently in conversation with her companion. Her fingers are wrapped gently around the mug in front of her, and she leans forward slightly as she engages intensely in their talk. She is fully focused on her friend, her deep blue-green eyes never shifting from his face. She is hearing his voice and spirit simultaneously as their words flow back and forth between them like water.

This is Emma, jogging along the boardwalk at the beach. The smooth lines of her muscles can be easily traced as her long legs

swallow the miles along the water's edge. Her skin is sun-tanned, and the breeze off the water draws her long blonde hair away from her face. Despite the sweat that beads her upper lip, her lipstick remains perfectly pink. Some people say she looks like Malibu Barbie. But more striking than her appearance is the vibrant spirit she radiates. You can almost feel her energy and spontaneity when you look at this photo. It is easy to imagine her suddenly turning to run straight into the water, laughing and splashing in the waves and calling out for you to jump in with her.

Here's a picture of Petunia, when she was volunteering at the Elephant Sanctuary during Spring Break. She has spent the morning ankle deep in mud and straw, shovelling elephant feed into troughs. She is wearing old grey overalls and a faded T-shirt, her brown hair pulled back from her face in a ponytail that bobs cheerfully behind her head. She is smiling broadly at the camera, as she leans playfully on her muddy shovel. Her brown eyes sparkle warmly in the shafts of sunlight that seep through the wooden planks of the barn door.

This is David, playing the guitar and singing an old Buddy Holly tune with his class of grade six students. The students are

sitting comfortably around the room, some on desks, some on the window ledges, some cross-legged on the floor in front of his stool. Look at their faces looking at him as they sing. His kind eyes are meeting theirs with an openness that invites them into the experience and a warmth that makes it safe to be there. His mouth is turned upwards in a smile as he sings, and the kids sitting closest to him can see the space between his two front teeth. You can see that this photo is older than the others. It was taken twenty-five years ago, when I was in grade six and David was my teacher.

And this last one is me. It was taken last summer, when I was camping in Vermont with friends. I had hiked into the woods on my own, following the tree shadows that the sun was patterning on the forest floor. I found this little clearing by the brook, where the cool water was splashing gently over smooth coloured rocks. In this photo I am alone in the forest and I am dancing to the sound of the water and my own breath. This image actually captures me in mid-air, my arms reaching skyward, to the space of sunlight between the trees.

Describing these "photos" makes me feel excited to get to our first campsite, so you can meet my co-researchers yourself. As we follow the trail that leads to their base camp, let me explain what my co-researchers and I have done together so far.

An Arts-Based Adventure Begins

My thesis is an adventure in arts-based educational research. Arts-based inquiry is non-traditional research that uses images and creative literary forms to explore and represent lived experience. In this thesis I use metaphors, "written photographs" (Walker, 1994), poetry, images, and "in-role" accounts to help you envision the virtual worlds of "at-risk" adolescent girls and their teachers.

As an arts-based researcher, I position myself in a postmodern context, meaning that I believe there are many ways of coming to know or understand a particular issue or phenomenon such as "at-riskness." Unlike the positivistic paradigms of traditional social science research, postmodern inquiry rejects knowledge claims of universality, certainty and truth. Instead, as

an arts-based researcher I believe that knowledge evolves out of personal experience, and is fluid, ambiguous, ever-changing, elusive, uncertain and complex (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). There are many "truths," many sides to any story, and many possible perspectives from which to explore and represent life experiences of voice, silence and "at-riskness."

Curricula of Life Experience

The word curriculum is rooted in the Latin word "currere", one meaning of which is "the running of a course" (Jackson, 1992; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). This reminds me that curriculum is a process similar to a long-distance journey; learning happens over time through experiences. Dewey (1938) claims that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). Dewey's "principle of continuity of experience" (p. 35) is reflected in my choice of arts-based educational inquiry. By inviting and representing my participants' voices through arts-based activities, I am exploring stories, illuminating insights, and gleaning the personal, practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) that is embedded in what

we have experienced. In inquiring into some of the experiences of our life-curricula, we uncover clues that inform our questions about voice, silence and what it means to be "at-risk."

Hansel's Crumbs: A Trail of Clues

In the classic fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, two children are sent deep into the woods by their evil step-mother. As they make their way into the forest, Hansel leaves a trail of bread crumbs for them to follow on their way back home.

Like Hansel and Gretel, we are also making our way through the woods as we explore the Forest of Voice and Silence. As a reader of this thesis, please join me in piecing together the bread-crumbs clues that we find along the way. These clues, gleaned from the stories my participants and I tell, uncover glimpses of experiences of voice, silence, and "at-riskness." As Wolcott (1994) suggests, my thesis is presented somewhat "...like mystery stories, with a problem to be solved, clues dropped along the way, and a mounting file of evidence to be weighed and considered, including facts that do not fit..." (p. 58).

Remember that this is a postmodern forest. It is mixed, unpredictable, and full of surprises. The stories of my co-researchers give us clues to understanding more about voice, silence, and "at-riskness." However, those clues do not mark the path to one final, inescapable conclusion about the nature of their experiences. Don't expect to end up with one definitive answer or any once-and-for-all-time solution to teaching adolescent girls "at-risk." There are endless paths and possibilities and ways of understanding voice, silence and experiences of "at-riskness." My co-researchers' stories are designed to let you wander and wonder. You can never know everything about voice, silence and "at-riskness." The knowledge constructed through the research journey is inevitably incomplete, always allowing for the possibility that there could be other ways of understanding the issue at hand (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). Don't be surprised if you follow the clues to a certain point and then discover, like Hansel and Gretel did, that the rest of your bread crumbs have been eaten by birds. Suddenly your path is no longer marked. Don't be afraid. You are not alone. There is no right answer. There is only dawning awareness and new ways of seeing our students and ourselves.

The stories of six adolescent girls and six teachers fill our forest walk with clues that relate back to our questions about voice, silence and what it means to be "at-risk." In the following section I will help you understand how my clue-dropping co-researchers and I first found each other.

Finding My Co-Researchers

Initially, I talked about my proposed study informally with a number of teachers whom I knew from various urban schools in Toronto. Each of my five teacher co-researchers expressed interest in participating. They are my friends and colleagues. We have known each other in various contexts over time, and there is a basic relationship of trust between us that facilitates our openness.

Each of the teacher participants in my study either teaches or has taught in the range of grades from five to eight in urban settings. I especially wanted to work with teachers who teach students in early adolescence, as girls of that age are the central focus of my research. The teachers range in age from the late twenties to mid-fifties. Our cultural backgrounds are also

diverse, including participants of West Indian, East Indian and European descent.

The six adolescent girls in my project were all students in the Intermediate special education core class in which I previously team-taught. Their cultural backgrounds are varied, but four of the six share West Indian roots. The other two girls are part of families who originally came to Ontario from Eastern Canada.

The voices of my co-researchers represent a variety of races and cultural backgrounds. Their diverse voices, largely marginalized in mainstream North American society, take their place firmly in the centre of this study.

The girls were members of a co-ed class of approximately twenty-five students who required varying degrees of extra academic support. Some of the class members had been identified with learning exceptionalities. Many demonstrated behaviours that seemed to reflect intense feelings about their marginalized position in school and society. Each could be considered academically, socially and/or emotionally "at-risk."

I chose to work with students in the classroom where I taught, because they already knew me and seemed comfortable with my presence and my interest in their ideas. As one of their teachers, I knew my student co-researchers in the context of their ordinary, daily realities. I am, in fact, still part of that context, echoing Neilsen's (1998) notion of ethical research:

...I believe it is important that our inquiry be situated in places we know, and in which we participate. ...Flying into data plantations, in the colonialist version of "objective" research, has always allowed for the kind of symbolic violence that...might be considered intrusive, assumptive, arrogant, and exploitative (pp. 198/199).

I did not want any of the twelve girls in our core class to feel left out of my project, so I invited all of them to participate pending parental permission. Each of the girls in the class contributed to my understanding of how issues of voice and silence affect adolescent girls. My interview conversations with six of them who had parental permission to participate have been formally incorporated into this dissertation.

Relational Research: To Know and Be Known

I refer to my twelve participants as "co-researchers," because we are partners in exploring this research process together. I honour the interconnectedness of the knower and the known (Palmer, 1983), collapsing a paradigmatic wall, a dualist, objectivist view of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In other words, my co-researchers and I are intertwined in a process that is relational, dynamic, and naturally subjective. We are implicated in a circle of relational interaction (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl & Minarik, 1993), a connection that weaves us together as teachers and learners in a process of coming to know ourselves and each other. As a researcher, I do not exist in a sanitized laboratory, robotically recording data from a position of apparent immunity. I am a living, breathing, human being, affecting, and being affected by the mystery of the evolving research relationship. Reflexivity, or reflection on my own processes, is the mark of postmodernism.

Summoning Our Stories

Prior to our interview/conversations, I gave my co-researchers an outline offering suggestions for possible "story starters" to consider as a guideline in preparing for our get-togethers. I offered a myriad of choices (listed on the following pages) so that each co-researcher might find his/her own way to begin our interview/conversation. Each "story starter" has the potential to lead us deeper into understanding experiences of voice, silence and/or "at-riskness." Each co-researcher arrived at our "interviews" having chosen a different topic, or "story starter," with which to begin our conversation.

Story Starters For Student Co-Researchers

- *Tell about a teacher who has had a significant impact (positive and negative) on your life and in what ways
- *Tell about the person you are, the person you hope to be or the person you fear to become
- *Tell about a metaphor that represents yourself as a student

- *Tell about a girl you know who is not afraid to say what she thinks or feels**
- *Tell about something that you know now that you wish you knew earlier in your life**
- *Tell about a situation in which saying how you really feel was dangerous or problematic for you**
- *Tell what you think makes a student fail a grade or a class**
- *Tell about a teacher who made you feel important**
- *Tell about a teacher who made it harder for you to learn**
- *Tell about a time when you felt good enough at school**
- *Tell about a time when you did not feel good enough at school**
- *Tell about a time when a student was not treated fairly by a peer or someone else at school**
- *Tell about a time when you spoke in class**
- *Tell about a woman who is an important part of your life outside of school**
- *Tell about the similarities and/or differences you see between the girls and the boys in your class**
- *Tell about two girls in your grade who seem very different from each other**

***Tell about a situation in which you felt like nobody was listening to you or cared about your opinion or idea**

***Tell about a situation in which you felt like somebody was listening to you or cared about your opinion or idea**

***Tell about a time when you got in trouble at school**

***Tell about something you did at school that made you proud**

***Tell about a time when someone made fun of you at school**

***Tell about a female peer who is like you and in what ways**

***Tell about a female peer who is different than you and in what ways**

***Tell about the bravest girl you know**

***Tell about something you have done that did not feel like the right choice**

***Tell about someone whose opinion or approval matters to you**

***Tell about your bravest moment**

***Tell about a difficult choice you had to make in a friendship**

Story Starters For Teacher Co-Researchers

- *Tell your teaching "arrival story": how/why did you become a teacher?**
- *Tell about why you teach adolescents rather than a different age-group**
- *Tell about a teacher who has had a significant impact (positive and negative) on your life and in what ways**
- *Tell about the teacher you are, the teacher you hope to be or the teacher you fear to become**
- *Tell about a metaphor that represents yourself as a teacher and/or learner**
- *Tell about an event(s) which has/have been a significant part of your learning journey**
- *Tell about a person(s) who has/have been a significant part of your learning journey**
- *Tell about a female student whom you feel is "at-risk" and in what ways**
- *Tell about something that you know now that you wish you knew earlier in your life/during your adolescence**

- *Tell about a situation in which you silenced a student's voice**
- *Tell about a situation in which you honoured a student's voice**
- *Tell something you have learned from a student/teacher about voice/silence**
- *Tell about a situation in which honouring voice was dangerous or problematic for yourself or a student**
- *Tell what you think makes a student "at-risk"**
- *Tell what you think "at-risk" students need**
- *Tell what you think teachers of "at-risk" students need to know**
- *Tell about whether or not male and female students seem equally "at risk" in Intermediate grades, in your experience**
- *Tell about a time when you felt good enough as a teacher**
- *Tell about a time when you felt inadequate as a teacher**
- *Tell about ways in which your teaching is connected to your own adolescence**
- *Tell about a female student who seems to have a confident and clear sense of self and/or voice**
- *Tell about a classroom incident in which a female student seemed to be silenced by another student**

- *Tell about a classroom activity through which female students' voices have been encouraged**
- *Tell about a female student who seems to have a strong female advocate in her life and in what ways that relationship is evident at school**
- *Tell about the similarities and/or differences you see between female students who are/are not considered academically "at-risk"**
- *Tell about a female student whom you think is "at-risk" in some way other than academically**
- *Tell a story about yourself as an adolescent**
- *Tell about a situation in which you felt silenced as an adolescent**
- *Tell about a situation in which you honoured your voice (in words and/or choice) as an adolescent**
- *Tell about a time when you were "at-risk" as an adolescent**
- *Tell about someone to whom you felt connected during your own adolescence**
- *Tell about a risk you took during your own adolescence**
- *Tell about a female student who is like you and in what ways**
- *Tell about a female student to whom you feel/felt connected**

- *Tell about a female student with whom you find/found it difficult to connect**
- *Tell about a situation in which you felt silenced as an adult**
- *Tell about a situation in which you honoured your voice (in words and/or choice) as an adult**
- *Tell about a time when you felt connected to your own body**
- *Tell about a time when you felt disconnected from your own body**
- *Tell about an advertisement that disturbs you and why**
- *Tell about ways in which your body is connected to your voice, spirit, and/or teaching**
- *Tell how race, class and/or gender affect a student's connection to voice, in your experience**
- *Tell how race, class and/or gender affect your connection to your own voice**

*Beyond Words:
Other Ways to Tell a Story*

I believe that "perspectives can be transformed...when teacher researchers use arts-based textual strategies to reflect

on experience..." (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 18). In addition to telling our stories in words, I invited my co-researchers to use images and non-expository ways of writing to explore their stories more personally. Research models that are firmly rooted in the tradition of explanatory text are limited in the kinds of experiences they can represent. But, as Polanyi (1983) claims, we always "know more than we can say" (p.4).

Alternative forms of representation (Eisner, 1993, 1997) are needed in order to access the deeply personal meanings that reside in experiences that transcend the spoken or written word. This is particularly relevant for my work with adolescent girls, who sometimes struggle to voice the personal truths of their experience (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). By entering a version of their world through their arts-based responses, I am able to attend to subtle details of their experience that they might not be ready or able to verbally articulate in a rigidly prescribed interview/conversation.

"...Acknowledg(ing) the variety of ways through which our experience is coded" (Eisner, 1997, p. 7), I gave each of my co-researchers a list of "Possibilities for Arts-Based Responses"

before we met for our interview conversations. As our research relationship deepened, I invited my co-researchers to experiment artfully with a variety of images and literary styles to explore and represent their experiences. I encouraged them to "...exploit the power of form to inform" (Eisner, 1981, p.7), trusting their creativity to lead them deeper into their stories of voice, silence, and "at-riskness."

On the following pages you will find the arts-based invitations I extended to my co-researchers. Each participant was invited to engage with any of the following suggestions to assist him/her in accessing personal stories through artful images and creative forms of writing. Many of my co-researchers later reported that the suggestions were like a warm-up, providing reassurance as well as choice.

Possibilities for Arts-Based Responses

*Choose a significant story from personal experience and try writing it as a fairy tale, mystery, adventure, tragedy, children's picture book (Diamond & Mullen, 1999)

*Write in role as a significant teacher, student or other from your experience, exploring yourself as someone else may see you

***Revisit songs that are/were part of your adolescence and write about connections you recognize between the music and your lived experience**

***Interview yourself about an experience of being at-risk**

***Revisit personal journal excerpts or former academic assignments using split text, alternating your past voice with your present voice or other voices (Diamond & Mullen, 1999)**

***Represent part of your learning journey through photographs: yourself in relationship to your students, or significant others, or your body, or the media (Diamond, 1991; Eisner, 1991)**

***Create a storyboard recounting a significant scene or series of events from your own adolescence**

***Write a script for a movie scene or a one-act play relaying a significant conversation from your learning journey**

***Compose a riddle, proverb or fable which comments on some aspect of your teaching or learning experience**

***Outline a chronology of significant events in the form of a map or guide through the territory of your adolescence or other important period in your life**

***Collect or create meaningful objects, symbols or metaphors representing your teaching/learning journey using:
a memory box of significant items clay, plasticene or plaster sculpture or structure
cut-and-paste collage (Diamond & Mullen, 1999)**

***Write yourself into your favourite childhood fairytale or story (Diamond & Mullen, 1999)**

***Experiment with palimpsest (meaning "twice written upon") to layer past and present voices using photographs, letters, journal entries or magazine pictures (Diamond & Mullen, 1999)**

***Create a scrapbook page of "clues to you", with fragments of written "documents" reflecting significant turning points in your experience (perhaps a wedding invitation, academic transcript, ticket stub, love letter, note from a student or teacher)**

***Write an album of "written photographs" or paragraphs detailing significant images from your experience (Walker, 1988)**

***Imagining that your life or part of your life has been written as a novel, list the chapter titles (in the style of a "table of contents")**

***Write the dialogue that might occur between you and someone/something that is/has been significant to you: a relative or pet now deceased, a famous philosopher or historical figure, your future child, your favourite childhood place, someone whose work has moved you, your own body (Progoff, 1991)**

***Record and paint images from your dreams (Progoff, 1991)**

***Review a significant section of your experience by combining lines from poems, songs, plays or novels written by others ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" could be a place to start)**

***Write the conversation that might occur between two significant people from your life as they meet each other for the first time and discover that they both know you**

***Use paint, pencil crayons or crayons to create an element (earth, air, water, fire) or animal to which you feel connected and then write a dialogue between you about the ways in which you are alike**

Chicken, Coffee and Kleenex: Our Conversations Begin

My co-researchers' responses to the Story Starters and/or Arts-based Invitations became a starting point for each interview conversation. I formally met with each co-researcher between two and six times. We met in a variety of locations ranging from Tim Horton's over coffee, to Swiss Chalet over chicken, to a quiet library seminar room over a box of Kleenex. We met for an average of about two hours each time, and I tape recorded these conversations with permission from my co-researchers.

After each interview, I carefully transcribed our taped conversations. The transcripts were returned to my co-

researchers, who were invited to revise, delete or add to the text in whatever way they desired. The element of choice is crucial to empowering co-researchers as full partners in the research process. The writing is ours, not mine. We corroborated in person or by phone to reconstruct the transcripts, clarifying passages and recovering meanings in the text.

Adventures In Artful Reconstruction

After the transcripts were approved by each co-researcher, I wrote "in-role" as each of my participants. Similar to Kiesinger's (in Banks & Banks, 1998) use of evocative narratives, I composed first-person accounts of their experiences, telling their stories from their perspective. I combined insights and stories from the interview transcripts, the arts-based responses, and my own relational experiences with each co-researcher, artfully shaping them into an "in-role" rendition of her/his experiences. Each is an artfully rendered (auto)biographical sketch.

I posted my guiding questions on the shelf by my desk, so that I could easily refer to them in deciding which stories to

include in each "in-role" account. As I considered the stories in the transcripts of our interview conversations, I asked myself, "To what extent does this story inform my questions?" I selected stories that contribute to a deeper understanding of voice, silence and what it means to be "at-risk," as well as a sense of each individual's personal history. I constructed each account around the experiences that my co-researchers identified as significant in their life-curricula of voice, silence and "at-riskness."

As I wrote the "in-role" accounts, I taped a photo of each co-researcher to my computer monitor to keep her/his image at the forefront of my mind. I also spent time listening to the interview tapes again and again in an attempt to integrate the tone, expression and rhythm of each participant's speech into my writing. I imagined them speaking as I wrote, inviting their spirits to infuse my text. As I wrote, I felt deeply connected to each co-researcher through empathy, and humbled by the trust invested in our relationship. They bravely and generously gave me their stories to shape into a form that invites you, my reader, to understand more about voice, silence and what it means to be "at-risk."

In essence, my mission as researcher is to reconstruct and represent my co-researchers' experiences in a way that "...will help others to perceive the work more deeply... [My] task is to function as a midwife to perception" (Eisner in Pinar et al., 1995, p. 583). I became a channel for the voices of my co-researchers, transforming our transcripts, artwork and relationships into "vivid, detailed accounts of lived experience" (Kiesinger in Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 129).

It is important to note that my representations of my co-researchers offer only a glimpse into their stories, a quicksilver kaleidoscope of their lived experience. Although I have attempted to create "vivid and detailed accounts" (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 129) of my co-researchers' stories, I recognize that the power of many experiences transcends the limits of conventional language. How can tacit, felt, aesthetic experiences be harnessed in words? How can the "essence" of an artful engagement be captured and communicated? How can I describe the intangible process of immersing yourself in memory? Words are an efficient currency for transferring propositional insights, but are inadequate to express the fullness of aesthetic experience

(Diamond & Mullen, 1999). How can I represent a co-researcher's experience, unfolding on a landscape beyond language?

Virtual Realities: Constructing Compelling Contexts

Recognizing that I am unable to capture all the intricacies of my co-researchers' lived experiences, I offer you my (incomplete) version of their stories. My intent in writing "in-role" as each of my co-researchers is to provide enough descriptive details (Geertz, 1973) that you can envision some aspects of their lives. I want to reconstruct experience in a way that helps you imagine what it might be like to be them. The stories of my co-researchers may exist in a realm that is different from your immediate circle of experience. My intent is that you are able to enter this text and feel drawn into another reality, a "virtual world" (Iser in Barone, 1995) that is separate from your own, but that seems authentic and resonates with some element of your lived experience. I have used vernacular, expressive, "everyday" language in my "in-role" accounts to create a sense of authenticity. It is my hope that you experience these stories as

compelling and familiar.

Barone (1995) explains that you can measure the value of my research based on the extent to which I present a virtual world that evokes a sense of verisimilitude in you, my reader.

Verisimilitude is described by Bruner (in Barone, 1995) as a sense that the virtual world constructed is plausible and "authentic," believable enough to lead you to accept that world and the meanings it evokes as credible (Barone and Eisner, 1997).

Reconstructing A Sense of Self

After constructing a virtual world for each of my co-researchers by re-telling their stories through the mediation of my voice, I revisited each participant. We corroborated by phone and in person to revise, reconstruct, and recover the meanings as they were represented in the "in-role" accounts. I invited my co-researchers to change, delete or add to any part of the writing until it more closely resembled a sense of themselves. Some co-researchers made many changes to the draft texts I had written based on our conversations. Others changed only a word or two. Some elaborated on their original stories and added new text.

Their participation was crucial in order for me to understand and represent their story in a way that aligns with the memory of their experience. As we collaborated to shape the "in-role" accounts, we engaged in a process of co-creation (Hunt, 1992), layering our voices to tell their stories through my writing.

The Ethics of Co-creation

There are many ethical safeguards in place in my work to protect each co-researcher's anonymity. They have each chosen a pseudonymous first name, and any identifying characteristics are removed from my writing. They are free to leave the study at any time, no questions asked. They are given transcripts of each of our conversations and we discuss them together to clarify possible meanings and interpretations. They are invited to revise the transcripts in whatever way they choose, and they have signed an agreement stating that anything related to them that will appear in my final thesis has to be approved by them first.

Despite these well-intentioned efforts, my presence as researcher in their life is inevitably an intrusion. I am asking my participants to expose their innermost thoughts and feelings. I

invite their stories, which means I am also inviting them to welcome me into their most private places and to voice their hushed vulnerabilities.

I have tried to alleviate some of the pressure for my co-researchers by providing three pages of possible "story-starters," topics that they can choose to begin with during our conversations. By providing choice, I am introducing many routes toward my topics of voice and silence, assuming that at least one of these choices will feel "safe" enough to speak about. However benign some of these statements may seem to me, they may recall a lifetime of issues or long-buried heartaches for my co-researchers, about which I know nothing. When my co-researchers are at home, thinking through our dialogues and reviewing our transcripts, how do I know that their hearts are not skipping a beat at the memory of what lies beneath the spoken surface? The point is, *I do not know* precisely what it is like to be one of my co-researchers. Though well-intentioned, I am *Other*. As Anglin notes (in Heshusius & Ballard, 1996),

...research involving persons is a significant form of intervention into their lives...and...an apparently simple and straightforward question can be deeply intrusive and may

elicit powerful and disturbing reactions (immediate and longer term) from the respondents (p. 25).

I lean heavily on the relationship of trust that already exists between us to help alleviate the potential trauma of exposure and vulnerability. Regardless of my efforts to protect them, their act of participation is one that involves risk. This consequence was particularly revealed to me by one of my co-researchers, who communicated her concern about issues relating to anonymity. I was humbled to realize that my co-researchers did not necessarily feel as safe, protected, and anonymous as I had intended. Let me explain.

If I Could Start Over...

Let me take you back to the beginning of this research process, before I had secured the participation of my co-researchers. I held an information evening to tell my colleagues about my research and to invite them to consider participating. At the time that I held the meeting, none of the teachers had officially committed to participate in my project. Only four

colleagues actually attended the evening presentation, and all showed interest in being part of the study.

Technically, none of my teacher participants know *for certain* who else has officially agreed to be part of the project. However, if any of the four teachers who attended the information evening actually committed to the project, their anonymity may not be completely protected. Although their names and significant identifying features have been carefully changed in my thesis, it is possible that they could "figure each other out" by comparing what they read in my thesis with what they know about each other in real life. Although they cannot know for certain "who is who," they could certainly guess at the identities of the other teacher-participants.

This important ethical dilemma was raised by one of my teacher co-researchers. She voiced her concerns, which I have paraphrased here: "By reading this thesis, other teacher participants are made privy to personal information that until now, may not have been made public. It is likely that we will see each other again in some professional or personal context. I am not comfortable knowing that they can figure out that these

stories are mine. It is "safer" for complete strangers to read our stories. But for someone whom I know to piece together my secrets, that is too close to home."

I spoke to each of my teacher-participants about this concern, and reiterated their option to withdraw any part of their story or leave the project entirely. All bravely agreed to stay and to leave their stories intact. Secret stories do not yield easily to the light. I regret that my co-researchers may feel vulnerable having left the safety of silence and secrets. I wish that I could offer them a witness relocation program.

My ethical dilemma reminds me that it is an awesome privilege, adventure, and responsibility to be the one who translates and shapes someone else's experiences into an artful text. I am representing someone else's life in my writing. What I write, and even what I leave out, are acts that threaten to place me potentially in a position of "power over" my co-researchers (Brunner, 1994, p. 205).

I cannot deny that my position as researcher is one that affords me power, as I make some choices about what is kept or

deleted and how it is presented in the final thesis. I am the channel and medium through which my co-researchers interior understandings become public. As I write "in-role" as each of my co-researchers, telling their stories from what I imagine to be a credible view told from their perspective, you come to know them through me. This reality places me in a position of power.

However, any power that is inherent in my role as researcher, I wish to translate into shared empowerment, recognizing that "...the root of the word power has nothing to do with domination: power means 'to be able' " (Debold, et al., 1993, p. 40).

Enabling Each Other By Inviting Our Stories

There are at least two ways in which sharing my power as researcher enables my co-researchers. One way is by co-creating a space in which stories can be told that might not otherwise be heard. Many of the girls in my study reside on the edges of mainstream experience. They have been marginalized and silenced by many systems in society, which may explain why they see themselves as "disposable" (Azam, 2000, p. C2). Narrative is a

political enterprise; the claiming of voice through the telling of stories enables the exposure of power inequities and challenges the status quo related to teaching and learning in schools. Arts-based inquiry, in its commitment to peripheral epistemologies, is invested in "...telling the stories of the weak and inarticulate" (in Pinar et al, 1995, p. 575). Arts-based educational research seeks voices from the margins of the mainstream and creates a space for those voices to be heard so that others may learn from them. This thesis process empowered my adolescent co-researchers by inviting them to leave the edges and walls they lean against, leading them to centre-stage and handing them a microphone.

Enabling Each Other

By Creating Collaborative Spaces

Another way that my co-researchers share my power is through collaboratively revising the text and debriefing the process. By corroborating as to changes to the writing, and making explicit our ongoing experiences in the research relationship, an effort is made to demystify the research process and decentralize the power of my position. My co-researchers are

invited and enabled to exercise agency in affecting and shaping the research process and the written text. Together we tell their story.

One implication of collaborative revision is the possibility that some co-researchers might not feel comfortable suggesting changes to the text. They may feel that they don't want to hurt my feelings by making revisions, another ironic illustration of the perceived connection between silence and sustaining someone else's approval. Most of my co-researchers did indeed suggest some changes, but who knows what they chose to keep silent? Who knows how much they didn't say? All I can do is offer the circle of trust as an opportunity for them to bring their voices of revision to my "in-role" rendition of their stories. The extent to which they spoke their true thoughts and feelings about my version of their lives is part of the mystery of researching on a landscape of relationship. Can you ever really know another person? Can you ever really hear her voice, or the words unspoken in her silence? At the very least, I hope we each learned to listen to ourselves.

Like my co-researchers, dear reader, you are also invited to share in the power of creating this arts-based educational research. You bring your own life experiences to your reading of this thesis, reconstructing meaning through engagement with these stories. As my co-researchers' stories enable you to see and hear voice, silence and "at-riskness" with new eyes and ears, you are empowered to reconsider your own views, values and teaching/learning practices. How you make meaning of voice, silence and "at-riskness" is an artful act of reconstruction between you, your life experiences and this text. You are an active agent in the process of making your own meaning from these stories, and hearing the echo of your own voice in this forest. We are together in the woods.

Transforming Our Vision

Just as my co-researchers and myself are altered by our participation in this study, you may find that reading this thesis affects you in some unexpected way. Eisner (1991) maintains that arts-based experiences develop "epistemic seeing...the kind of knowledge secured through sight" (p. 68). As you immerse

yourself in the virtual worlds of my co-researchers, you are opening yourself up to consider voice, silence and "at-riskness" from someone else's perspective. As you become aware of how others have experienced these issues, you may find that some of your previous perceptions and beliefs are challenged. This is the work of transformation.

Transforming Our Values

Iser (in Barone, 1995) uses the term "values negation" to describe the process when a reader's values are challenged or negated by exposure to new values, thoughts or ideas as presented in research. As a reader develops greater awareness, or new "epistemic sight" (Eisner, 1991, p. 68) about some aspect of experience, the potential exists for s/he to make different choices in the future. Barone (1995) further asserts that

...aesthetic experience can be sufficiently resonant to cause us to call into question the fundamental value premises and ideological bases upon which educational decisions are made (p. 174).

Values negation is of paramount importance in terms of the practical, developmental applications of arts-based inquiry to educational practice. Our practice is derived from our personal philosophies, thoughts, feelings and experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). To negate, challenge, or alter a teacher's values will inevitably alter our practice. In this way, "...perspectives can be transformed, and teacher education and human learning can be renewed..." (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 18).

As we extend our vision by considering other people's experiences and perspectives, we begin to revisit our own views and values about teaching and learning. As you enter each co-researcher's world in chapters four and five, you may find yourself imagining, envisioning, or vicariously experiencing what it is like to be this "at-risk" girl or her ("at-risk") teacher.

Chapter Four: Students' Stories

Coming Into A Clearing: Our First Campsite

Dear Reader,

Are you still with me? That was quite a hike through chapter three. All that argument about virtual worlds and verisimilitude and values negation made for some rough terrain. At one point I felt like we were stuck in that swamp of v-words forever. Knowledge about is no substitute for experience of. But we made it through, and here we are at my favourite part of the journey. We have arrived at the first campsite, or inquiry site, and it is time to meet the girls. My student co-researchers have invited us to join their circle around the campfire and listen to their stories.

Before each of the six girls tells her story, I will lend you a memory of my own entitled "A Heart-beat Before S/he Speaks." My remembered moments will invite you to see these girls from

the outside, one heart-beat before their stories take you deep inside each one of their lives.

You will also notice that each "in-role" account ends with a response from that co-researcher. They tell us why they chose their name, their font, and their symbol. Finally, each co-researcher comments on how it felt to be part of this research process. They voice their participation.

So come and sit down by the fire. Make yourself comfortable. But let me warn you. You may find yourself in these stories. You may experience a shift in perspective as empathy opens your heart to transformation. The "in-role" representations may lead you to see aspects of yourself and your practice with new eyes.

Are you ready? We are waiting for you over here by the fire. I begin with a poem, "Fire Stories", to celebrate our campfire circle, the courage of my co-researchers, and the stories you are about to hear.

Fire Stories

our fire stories rise
marking seasons
writing passage
tracing ourselves back

we are mirrored like the moon in still water
we are lifted into the night sky
we are whispers disappearing in the dark

A Heart-Beat Before Gwendolyn Tells Her Story

Gwendolyn has a fat lip. It is a Monday morning in October and I am out on yard duty when she arrives at school. I watch her walk up the path toward me from the sidewalk behind Gatewood. She is thirteen, but she looks older. "I got hit in the mouth," she says, pulling out her bottom lip so I can see the swollen, bloody cut. One front tooth is pushed back farther than the other. I ask her what happened. She tells me that she messed up her face falling off Lenny's bike.

GWENDOLYN:

"MY SCREAM WOULD LAST FOR EIGHT DAYS"

THAT'S ACTUALLY NOT WHAT HAPPENED. I DIDN'T FALL OFF LENNY'S BIKE. I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF LENNY HAS A BIKE. IT'S JUST THAT SOMETIMES THE TRUTH TAKES A LONG TIME TO TELL.

IT ALL STARTED BACK AT CIRCLE TRAIL, WHICH IS THE APARTMENT COMPLEX WHERE I LIVED FOR MY WHOLE LIFE UP UNTIL I WAS TWELVE. IT WAS PRETTY TOUGH THERE, LOTS OF DRUGS AND KNIFE-FIGHTS, MOSTLY BECAUSE OF THIS GANG CALLED THE BULLETS.

THE BULLETS BASICALLY OWNED MOST OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE WHOLE VALLEY, THE TENNIS COURTS,

THE PARK, BONWAY SCHOOL, THE APARTMENT BUILDING I LIVED IN. IT WAS THEIR TURF. THEY WOULD SIT AROUND, SMOKE WEED, PARTY, CAUSE TROUBLE TO PEOPLE. YOU KNOW THE STUFF THEY DO.

ONCE THE SUPER OF MY BUILDING TRIED TO TELL SOME OF THE GUYS FROM THE BULLETS THAT THEY WEREN'T ALLOWED TO HANG OUT IN FRONT OF OUR BUILDING ANYMORE. SO THEY SHOT THEIR GUNS AT HIS WINDOWS AND THEN THEY CUT HIS NECK WITH A KNIFE. HE DIDN'T DIE THOUGH. BUT EVERYBODY THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO, BECAUSE OF ALL THE BLOOD ON THE CURB.

WHEN I WAS ABOUT EIGHT, I STARTED TO GO DOWN AND HANG OUT AT THE RAVINE WITH MY FRIENDS. THERE WOULD ALWAYS BE GUYS DOWN THERE FROM THE BULLETS. THEY WOULD GIVE YOU TWENTY BUCKS IF YOU WOULD DO THINGS WITH THEM, KISSING OR WHATEVER. THEY DID PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING TO ME. WENT INSIDE MY CLOTHES, TOUCHED MY BREASTS, MY CROTCH, WHATEVER THEY WANTED. ONE TIME THEY TOOK ME AND MY FRIEND INSIDE AND MADE US WATCH THIS PORN MOVIE. LIKE, I WAS NINE YEARS OLD AT THE TIME.

THE GUYS IN THE GANG WOULD FOLLOW US AROUND OUTSIDE AND SAY, "COME ON, YOU CAN BE MY GIRLFRIEND. WE'LL PROTECT YOU. NO ONE ELSE WILL TOUCH YOU. COME HERE." IT'S BETTER JUST TO SAY "OKAY" AND GO WITH THEM. BECAUSE THEY DON'T REALLY TAKE "NO" TOO GOOD.

SOMETIMES THEY WOULD SLAP US AROUND OR WHATEVER, BUT THEY WOULDN'T MESS US UP TOO BAD. JUST ENOUGH SO NEXT TIME YOU DO WHAT THEY SAY.

I KEPT GOING DOWN TO THE CREEK WITH MY FRIENDS, EVEN THOUGH I KNEW WHAT THE GUYS FROM THE BULLETS WOULD DO TO ME. I DON'T KNOW WHY I KEPT GOING THERE. HALF THE TIME THEY TREATED ME LIKE I'M NOT WORTH ANYTHING. BUT IT MADE ME FEEL TOUGH WHEN I WAS WITH THEM. THAT'S HOW COME I'M TOUGH NOW. I'M BASICALLY NOT AFRAID OF ANYTHING.

THINGS GOT REALLY BAD IN OUR BUILDING. PEOPLE KEPT GETTING KNIFED AND SHOT AND EVERYTHING. THEN SOME OF THE GUYS IN THE BULLETS TRIED TO HAVE SEX WITH MY FRIEND IN THE STAIRWELL. I TOLD MY DAD. HE WAS REALLY MAD. LIKE RAGING, YOU KNOW? AND HE WENT STORMING RIGHT DOWN TO THEIR APARTMENT. THEY WOULDN'T OPEN THE DOOR SO MY DAD KICKED IT IN. AND HE WENT SCREAMING RIGHT INTO THEIR APARTMENT, THE HIGHEST GUYS IN THE GANG. AND HE DRAGGED ICE, THAT'S THEIR TOP LEADER, OUT ON TO THE BALCONY AND HE WAS HOLDING HIM THERE AND POINTING DOWN AT ME AND MY FRIEND WHO THEY TRIED TO HAVE SEX WITH. AND SINCE MY DAD HAD THEIR LEADER UP AGAINST THE RAILING, NONE OF THEM WOULD TOUCH MY DAD. HE TOLD THEM THAT IF THEY EVER LAID A FINGER ON ME OR MY FRIEND HE WOULD KILL THEM AND THEY WOULD PAY HELL.

ANYWAY, THAT'S WHEN MY DAD SAID WE WERE MOVING. WE LEFT CIRCLE TRAIL AND CAME TO GATEWOOD COURT, WHERE I LIVE NOW. A COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER WE MOVED, I WAS AT HOME BY MYSELF. IT WAS SUMMER, AND I WAS SLEEPING UPSTAIRS IN THE AFTERNOON AND I HEARD THIS BIG BANG AT THE BACK DOOR, LIKE A KNOCK OR A KICK OR SOMETHING. SO I WENT DOWNSTAIRS BECAUSE I THOUGHT IT WAS ONE OF MY FRIENDS. AND THERE WERE FIVE GUYS FROM THE BULLETS SITTING IN MY BACKYARD. JUST SITTING THERE LOOKING RIGHT AT ME. FIVE OF THEM. THEY DIDN'T SAY NOTHING, BUT I COULD TELL THEY WERE MAD. IT'S BECAUSE I TOLD MY DAD ABOUT SOME OF THE STUFF THEY DID, THAT WAS THE PROBLEM. THEY DON'T LIKE IT WHEN YOU TELL. THEY DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO ME THAT DAY. THEY JUST SAT THERE ON THE GRASS BEHIND MY TOWNHOUSE STARING AT ME. I THINK THEY JUST WANTED TO SHOW ME THAT YOU CAN'T REALLY GET AWAY FROM THEM.

MY DAD SAYS, "NO ONE IS GOING TO TOUCH YOU, GWENDOLYN." BUT HE CAN'T BE WITH ME EVERY MINUTE. EVERYBODY SAYS, "IF SOMEONE TRIES TO GRAB YOU, JUST KICK THEM WHERE IT HURTS." BUT THE GUYS IN THE BULLETS ARE BIG, AND THEY'RE STRONGER THAN ME, AND WHAT IF THERE'S MORE THAN ONE ON YOU? SOMETIMES YOU CAN'T EVEN MAKE ONE SINGLE SOUND COME OUT OF YOUR MOUTH. OR MAYBE YOU SCREAM YOUR HEAD OFF BUT NO ONE DOES ANYTHING TO HELP YOU.

IF SOMEONE IS STALKING YOU, LIKE WATCHING WHERE YOU GO ALL THE TIME, THEY KNOW THE EXACT RIGHT TIME TO GET YOU. THEY COULD SHOOT YOU FROM THEIR CAR, OR SNEAK UP BEHIND YOU. THEY WAIT FOR THE PERFECT MOMENT WHEN YOU ARE ALONE AND YOUR DAD ISN'T THERE.

AND THAT'S HOW I GOT MY LIP. LAST FRIDAY NIGHT ME AND TRACEY WENT TO MINI-MART LATE, LIKE IT WAS DARK ALREADY. AND I SAW ICE AND ZORRA IN THE PARKING LOT. THEY WERE SITTING IN THIS WHITE CAR, AND THEY CALLED ME TO GO OVER AND TALK TO THEM BUT I WOULDN'T GO. SO THAT GOT THEM MAD, AND WHEN WE WERE WALKING HOME THEY DROVE SLOW BESIDE US AND THEN ZORRO GOT OUT OF THE CAR. HE WAS ALL MAD BECAUSE I DIDN'T DO WHAT HE SAID SO WE GOT IN THIS BIG FIGHT, YELLING AND EVERYTHING, AND HE PUNCHED ME IN THE MOUTH. HE ONLY HIT ME ONCE, BUT IT WAS PRETTY HARD. AND THEN THEY TOOK OFF. I JUST STOOD THERE BLEEDING ALL OVER MY HANDS. EVERYBODY FREAKED OUT ABOUT MY LIP WHEN I GOT HOME, BUT I JUST TOLD THEM THAT I WAS GOOFING AROUND ON LENNY'S BIKE AND I MESSED UP MY FACE ON THE HANDLE BARS.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT SOMETIMES, EVEN WHEN YOU ARE TOTALLY TELLING THE EXACT TRUTH, PEOPLE DON'T BELIEVE YOU ANYWAYS. IF YOU'RE LOUD AND YOU GET IN TROUBLE A LOT, THEY JUST AUTOMATICALLY THINK THAT YOU'RE LYING. WHATEVER YOU SAY, YOU'RE MAKING IT UP. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED TO ME IN GRADE THREE.

I WAS DOING GRADE THREE AGAIN BECAUSE I FAILED IT THE FIRST TIME. IT WAS PICTURE DAY, AND I HAD THIS LITTLE SKIRT ON, NICE BLOUSE AND STUFF. AT RECESS WE WENT OUTSIDE AND WE WERE PLAYING IN THE SAND, AND THESE TWO GUYS CAME UP TO ME AND MY FRIENDS. THEY WERE TEENAGERS FROM OFF SCHOOL PROPERTY. WE HAD THIS HIGH SCHOOL NEAR US AND THEY WOULD ALWAYS CUT THROUGH OUR SCHOOL YARD. AND THESE TWO GUYS ASKED ME AND MY FRIEND, TAMMY, TO COME AND HELP THEM DO SOMETHING. LIKE, I WAS STUPID, YOU KNOW. I WAS NINE OR TEN. SO I SAID, "WHAT DO YOU NEED HELP WITH?" WE STARTED TO WALK A LITTLE BIT WITH THEM. THERE WERE OTHER KIDS OUTSIDE AT THE TIME, LIKE MILLIONS OF KIDS EVERYWHERE BECAUSE IT WAS RECESS.

BUT WHEN WE GOT BACK BY THE FENCE WHERE THE TREES ARE, THE GUY GRABBED MY MOUTH AND PULLED ME DOWN. I TRIED TO FIGHT HIM OFF ME, BUT HE WAS WAY BIGGER AND HE WAS ON TOP OF ME. I WAS SCREAMING SO MUCH. THERE WERE STILL KIDS OUTSIDE AND THEY SAW US, BUT THEY THOUGHT WE WERE JUST GOOFING AROUND. TAMMY GOT PULLED DOWN BY THE OTHER GUY, AND SHE WAS TRYING TO FIGHT HIM OFF, SAME AS ME, SPITTING AND BITING. THEY WERE TRYING TO TOUCH US AND STUFF, GO UP OUR SKIRTS, GET OUR SHIRTS OFF. EVERY TIME I TRIED TO GET UP AND THEY PULLED ME BACK DOWN. THEY WERE GRABBING US EVERYWHERE AND MY SHIRT WAS ALL RIPPED. I WAS

SCREAMING SO MUCH, AND MY GOOD CLOTHES WERE ALL DIRTY.

THEN THIS KID WHO WAS MY FRIEND, HE WAS A REALLY TOUGH KID, CAME RUNNING UP AND KICKED THE GUY IN THE KNEE. THE KID WAS YELLING, "GET OFF HER. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? ARE YOU SICK? ARE YOU GROSS? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" OTHER KIDS STARTED COMING TO SEE WHAT WAS GOING ON, SO THE GUYS TOOK OFF.

WE RAN INSIDE AND I WAS BAWLING AND THESE OTHER KIDS WERE LIKE, "ARE YOU OKAY?" BUT I JUST STARTED SCREAMING AT THEM: "SHUT UP. I DON'T WANT TO HEAR YOU. YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE HELPING ME. I WAS SCREAMING AND I KNOW YOU HEARD ME FOR SURE BECAUSE I SCREAM PRETTY LOUD, BUT WHERE WERE YOU?" AND I RAN INSIDE THE SCHOOL.

SO I FOUND MY TEACHER AND I TOLD HIM WHAT HAPPENED, HOW THOSE GUYS JUMPED ON US AND TOOK US DOWN. I WAS ALL DIRTY AND MESSED UP, AND I COULDN'T STOP CRYING. BUT MY TEACHER WAS JUST LAUGHING AND MAKING JOKES ABOUT IT. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THEY JUMPED ON YOU? THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE. YOU'RE NOT A TRAMPOLINE." AND HE WAS JUMPING UP AND DOWN AND PRETENDING THAT HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND ME. SO I KEPT SCREAMING AT HIM, "LISTEN TO ME!" BUT HE WASN'T TAKING IT SERIOUSLY. MY BLOUSE WAS TOTALLY RIPPED AND I WAS BAWLING AND

SCREAMING ALL OVER THE SCHOOL, BUT MY TEACHER STILL DIDN'T BELIEVE ME. HE WAS JUST MAKING A BIG JOKE ABOUT IT.

SO I WENT AND TOLD THE PRINCIPAL, AND HE DIDN'T BELIEVE ME EITHER. AS IF I WOULD TOTALLY WRECK MY OWN PICTURE DAY SHIRT. WHAT AM I, STUPID? SO I TOLD THE OFFICE TO CALL MY PARENTS RIGHT NOW. I WAS SCREAMING AND YELLING AT EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THE MAIN OFFICE. THEY TOLD ME I HAD TO CALM DOWN AND GO AND WAIT IN THE HEALTH ROOM. BUT THEY LEFT ME BY MYSELF IN THERE FOREVER AND I KEPT ASKING THEM, "WHY AM I WAITING THIS LONG?" THEY WOULDN'T EVEN ANSWER ME. THEY JUST SAID, "WE'RE TOO BUSY. WE HAVE NO TIME FOR THIS." THEY DIDN'T EVEN CALL MY PARENTS. SO I JUST LEFT THE SCHOOL AND WALKED HOME BY MYSELF. BUT WHEN I GOT HOME I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO TELL IT TO MY PARENTS. IT TOOK, LIKE, THREE DAYS BEFORE I TOLD.

MY DAD TOTALLY FREAKED OUT WHEN I FINALLY TOLD HIM WHAT HAPPENED. HE WAS SO MAD. AND HE CAME TO THE SCHOOL WITH ME IN THE MORNING, AND HE WENT RIGHT INTO THE OFFICE AND ASKED THE PRINCIPAL ALL THESE QUESTIONS. "WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING ABOUT THIS? EVEN IF YOU WEREN'T THERE AT THE TIME, YOU SHOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING. AT LEAST GOT SOME INFORMATION, CALLED THE HIGH SCHOOL TO SEE IF ANY GUYS LEFT THERE WHO LOOK LIKE THIS DESCRIPTION, BECAUSE THIS IS A

SERIOUS THING.” BUT THE OFFICE JUST SAID, “WELL, WE CAN’T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT NOW.” AND MY DAD WAS JUST SO MAD. HE SAID, “IF I CATCH THESE GUYS, I’M GOING TO KILL THEM.”

MY DAD CAME TO MY SCHOOL THAT WHOLE WEEK. HE CUT WORK. HE WOULD SIT THERE AGAINST THE FENCE, YOU KNOW WHERE THEY PLAY BASEBALL? HE’D WAIT THERE AND WATCH ME PLAY AT RECESS. HE’D JUST SIT THERE AND MAKE SURE NOTHING HAPPENED TO ME. HE DID THAT EVERY DAY FOR A WHOLE WEEK.

SO BASICALLY, SCHOOL HAS NEVER REALLY WORKED OUT ALL THAT GREAT FOR ME. I WAS IN SPECIAL ED. FOREVER, AND I HAD THESE TWO TEACHERS WHO WERE TOTALLY EVIL. I NEVER WANTED TO GO WITH THEM WHEN THEY WOULD SHOW UP IN MY CLASS TO GET ME. I JUST WANTED TO STAY IN THE REGULAR CLASS. THEY WOULD SAY THINGS LIKE, “YOU HAVE TO COME AND GET EXTRA HELP, OR YOU’RE GOING TO BE LIKE THIS FOREVER” AND I WOULD SAY, “LIKE WHAT? I’M NOT STUPID” AND THEY WOULD SAY, “YOU’RE SURE ACTING LIKE IT.”

AFTER I FAILED GRADE THREE, PEOPLE MADE FUN OF ME ALL THE TIME. THEY WOULD CALL ME STUPID AND SAY ALL THE LUCKY STUFF THEY GET TO DO IN THE GRADE ABOVE ME, LIKE GO TO WINTER CAMP. SO I GOT IN A LOT OF FIGHTS. I WAS NOT

AFRAID OF ANYTHING. I WOULD BEAT UP ANYBODY WHO GOT IN MY WAY, SO THEY KNEW NOT TO GET STARTED WITH ME.

I HUNG OUT WITH GUYS, PURE GUYS, NO GIRLS. THE GIRLS ALWAYS WANTED TO DO STUPID THINGS LIKE STAND AROUND AND TRADE STICKERS. MY DAD WOULD SAY, "GWENDOLYN, YOU'RE A GIRL. START ACTING LIKE ONE." BUT WHO WANTS TO STAND AROUND AND TALK ABOUT STICKERS?

AT RECESS WE PLAYED NATION OF DOMINATION. IT'S THIS GAME WHERE YOU PICK ONE KID AND YOU BEAT THEM UP. WE WOULD RUN UP REALLY LOUD AND MAKE A CIRCLE AROUND A KID AND WE WOULD START PUNCHING, KICKING, HITTING, PUSHING HIM AROUND, WHATEVER. I WOULD SCREAM "NATION OF DOMINATION!" A MILLION TIMES SO LOUD. BUT THEN THIS ONE KID WHO WAS A TOTAL WHINER TOLD ON US AND WE GOT SUSPENDED. BUT BY THEN I DIDN'T CARE IF THEY SUSPENDED ME. I WAS ALWAYS IN TROUBLE FOR SOMETHING ANYWAYS SO WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE?

THIS ONE TIME MY SISTER'S FRIENDS BROKE INTO THE SCHOOL AND STOLE SOME STUFF, LIKE ART SUPPLIES AND WHATEVER. I WAS THERE WITH THEM BUT I DIDN'T TAKE NOTHING. AND WE GOT CAUGHT BECAUSE SOME LADY REPORTED THAT SHE SAW US GO IN THROUGH THE WINDOW. SO WE ALL GOT SUSPENDED INCLUDING ME, EVEN THOUGH I NEVER TOOK NOTHING.

MY DAD USED TO ALWAYS SAY THAT, IF I EVER GOT SUSPENDED, I WOULD GET IT FROM HIM WHEN I GOT HOME. BUT MY DAD HAS REALLY STRONG HITS, SO MY MOM TOLD HIM JUST TO GROUND US INSTEAD. MY SISTER TRIED TO TELL HER THAT WE DIDN'T STEAL ANY OF THE STUFF, BUT SHE SAID, "I DON'T CARE. YOU GUYS WERE STILL THERE AT THE TIME THAT IT HAPPENED AND THAT'S BAD ENOUGH."

MY PARENTS ALWAYS HAD ALL THESE RULES FOR US, LIKE WHAT TIME WE HAVE TO BE IN, AND WHERE WE CAN GO AND WHO WE CAN HANG AROUND WITH. IN SOME WAYS IT'S GOOD, BECAUSE THERE IS A LOT OF STUFF OUT THERE THAT COULD HURT YOU, LIKE DRUGS AND GANGS. BUT IN OTHER WAYS I JUST WANT MY FREEDOM. SOMETIMES AT NIGHT I SNEAK OUT BACK AND MEET MY FRIENDS. OR I JUST SIT OUT THERE AND SMOKE. MY DAD SAID IF HE EVER CATCHES ME SMOKING HE'S GOING TO SEND ME TO GO LIVE IN A GROUP HOME AND SEE HOW I LIKE IT.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME. I KNOW HOW I WANT TO BE BUT I NEVER ACT THAT WAY. I'M LIKE A DOUBLE PERSON. I HAVE A REALLY DARK SIDE TO MYSELF. I THINK THAT'S WHAT GOT ME INTO GOTH. LAST YEAR I STARTED WEARING BLACK, PURE BLACK WITH LOTS OF BLACK MAKE-UP. I WOULD WALK UP AND DOWN THE STREET AND I WOULDN'T WEAR SHOES, JUST BARE FEET. MY PARENTS NEVER KNEW BECAUSE THEY WERE AT WORK. MY FRIENDS AND I WOULD LIGHT ALL THESE CANDLES IN MY ROOM AND TRY TO BRING

BACK DEAD PEOPLE. BUT YOU HAVE TO TOTALLY BELIEVE IN IT OR IT DOESN'T WORK.

WE WOULD ALWAYS WALK DOWN TO THE CREEK IN THE DARK AND SAY ALL THESE PRAYERS TO THE SPIRITS. I LEARNED HOW TO DO THIS CEREMONY TO OPEN THE GATES OF HELL ON SOMEBODY YOU HATE. I DID IT ABOUT THIS GIRL THAT I DIDN'T LIKE, AND RIGHT AFTER THAT SHE GOT TOTALLY BEATEN UP. SO I KNOW THAT GOTH IS REAL.

BUT IF YOU DO GOTH THE WRONG WAY, IT CAN TURN ON YOU. YOU GET STUCK IN THE DARK PARTS, LIKE ABOUT DEATH AND HELL AND ALL THE EVIL THINGS THAT ARE IN THE WORLD. THAT'S HOW COME I TRIED TO KILL MYSELF. EVERYTHING WAS GOING BAD IN MY LIFE, LIKE MY UNCLE DIED WHO I LOVED. AND I COULDN'T TAKE IT, FEELING SO SAD ALL THE TIME. SO I TRIED TO STAB MYSELF. I JUST WANTED TO BE DEAD SO MUCH. I WAS PULLING MY HAIR AND KNOCKING MY HEAD OFF THE WALLS. BUT I COULDN'T REALLY CUT MYSELF ENOUGH TO DIE. IT WAS TOO HARD, YOU KNOW? SO THEN I TOOK PILLS INSTEAD, A WHOLE BUNCH OF ADVIL, BUT THEY JUST MADE ME SLEEP FOR A LONG TIME. SOMETIMES I STILL FEEL LIKE I WANT TO DIE, BUT SOMETHING ALWAYS CHANGES MY MIND AT THE LAST MINUTE.

I THINK I WOULD LIKE MYSELF BETTER IF I LOOKED DIFFERENT. I WANT TO LOOK LIKE BECKY. SHE'S GOT A PERFECT BODY, REALLY TALL AND SKINNY, EXACTLY LIKE A

MODEL. HER CLOTHES LOOK REALLY GOOD ON HER. EVEN IF I TOTALLY ATE NOTHING, I COULD NEVER EVEN GET HALF THAT SKINNY, BECAUSE I'M BIG BONED. AND I HAVE A HUGE BUTT. JOHN ALWAYS TELLS ME INSULTS IN THE HALL. HIS LOCKER IS BESIDE MINE, AND HE ALWAYS SMASHES THE LOCKER DOOR AGAINST MY HEAD AND I SAY, "STOP IT" AND HE JUST SAYS "SHUT UP, FAT ASS." YESTERDAY HE DID IT AGAIN AND I TOLD HIM, "I DON'T CARE. IT'S MY BODY. I DON'T NEED YOUR OPINION ON HOW I LOOK BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT ME." HE JUST SAID, "WHATEVER YOU SAY, FAT ASS" AND WALKED AWAY. I SAY I DON'T CARE BUT I REALLY DO. I DON'T WANT PEOPLE MAKING FUN OF ME. I DON'T WANT THEM LOOKING AT MY BUTT AND THEN MAKING A BIG ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT IT.

WHEN I WAS TEN, I USED TO GO TO THIS MODELLING CLASS, AND I WAS REALLY GOOD AT IT, BECAUSE I'M NOT AFRAID TO POSE AND SMILE AND EVERYTHING. THEY SAID I HAVE A REALLY PRETTY FACE, BUT I'M TOO BIG. IT'S BECAUSE I EAT TOO MUCH, THAT'S WHY. I'M A TOTAL PIG. MY MOM SAYS IF I JUST LOSE A LITTLE BIT OF WEIGHT I COULD BE A KNOCK-OUT. I KNOW THAT ANOREXIA IS A DISEASE AND IT CAN KILL YOU BUT I WISH I HAD IT.

EVERY MAGAZINE IS TOTALLY FILLED WITH SKINNY GIRLS. I KNOW WHY. IT'S BECAUSE ALL THE CLOTHES LOOK BETTER ON SKINNY GIRLS AND THEY ARE TRYING TO SELL THE CLOTHES. LIKE NO ONE IS GOING TO BUY AN OUTFIT IF SOME FAT COW IS WEARING IT. THEY PICK REALLY BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

WITH GOOD SKIN AND LONG HAIR AND THEIR WHOLE BODIES ARE EXACTLY PERFECT.

I KNOW I'M SUPPOSED TO SAY THAT IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT A PERSON LOOKS LIKE ON THE OUTSIDE. BUT GUYS ARE NOT EVEN GOING TO GIVE YOU THE TIME OF DAY IF YOU ARE FAT AND UGLY. THAT'S JUST A FACT OF LIFE, SO FACE IT.

EXCEPT MAYBE IF THEY WANT TO FOOL AROUND WITH YOU, THEN THE GUYS WILL TAKE WHOEVER THEY CAN GET. MOST GUYS JUST WANT TO SEE HOW FAR YOU'LL GO WITH THEM AND ONCE THEY FIND OUT, THEY GO ON TO THE NEXT GIRL. THEY AREN'T REALLY INTERESTED IN WHAT YOU ARE LIKE AS A PERSON. AS IF ANY GUY IS GOING TO SAY TO ME, "OH, YOU LIKE WRITING? WOW THAT IS SO INTERESTING. I WOULD LOVE TO READ YOUR POEMS." THEY TOTALLY DON'T CARE ABOUT THAT KIND OF STUFF.

YOU KNOW WHAT? I WISH SCHOOL COULD BE MORE LIKE THIS INTERVIEW, JUST TALKING ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE SO FAR. I WOULD DO REALLY GOOD IN SCHOOL IF IT WAS MORE ABOUT ME. I'M NOT STUPID. IT'S JUST THAT SCHOOL DOESN'T SUIT ME TOO MUCH. THE STUFF WE STUDY IS REALLY BORING MOST OF THE TIME.

EXCEPT MORNING CIRCLE IS OKAY, BECAUSE WE GET TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON IN REAL LIFE. AND I LIKE WRITING TIME, BECAUSE MY TEACHERS READ MY STUFF

AND WRITE ME BACK. BUT THOSE ARE THE ONLY GOOD THINGS WE DO. THE REST OF THE WORK IS JUST HARD AND BORING.

I HATE MATH THE MOST BECAUSE I FEEL SO STUPID IN IT. THE ONLY KIND OF MATH I CAN DO IS THE REALLY EASY STUFF, LIKE ADDING AND SUBTRACTING. I KNOW HOW TO MULTIPLY, BUT I ALWAYS FORGET SO I USE THE CHART. AND DIVISION IS IMPOSSIBLE. A NORMAL KID IN GRADE FOUR CAN DO MATH BETTER THAN ME, I BET YOU ANY MONEY. SO BASICALLY WHAT'S THE USE? I COULD WORK MY ASS OFF AND I'M STILL WAY BACK THERE DOING GRADE THREE WORK. I CAN'T REALLY CATCH UP UNLESS I GO TO SCHOOL UNTIL I'M FIFTY.

MOST OF MY TEACHERS THINK I HAVE AN ATTITUDE PROBLEM. THEY ALWAYS TELL ME THAT I'M DISRESPECTFUL, LIKE, TALKING WITH A TONE AND ALL THAT. BUT SOMETIMES I AM JUST SAYING MY OPINION. EXCEPT NOBODY REALLY WANTS TO HEAR IT TOO MUCH. TEACHERS BASICALLY WANT YOU TO SHUT UP AND DO YOUR WORK AND DON'T MAKE A BIG SCENE ABOUT IT.

I HATE IT WHEN TEACHERS ACT LIKE THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. THEY PRETEND THAT NOTHING FROM REAL LIFE EVER HAPPENS TO THEM. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF YOU WERE IN A HUGE FIGHT WITH SOMEONE, AND EVEN YOUR TWO FAMILIES WERE FIGHTING, AND THE PERSON WAS TOTALLY DISSING YOU TO EVERYONE? WOULD YOU JUST COME TO SCHOOL AND ACT NORMAL? BUT SOME TEACHERS

JUST EXPECT YOU TO SIT THERE AND ACT LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED AND GET YOUR WORK DONE. THEY DON'T CARE HOW YOU ARE FEELING INSIDE. THEY JUST WANT TO SEE YOUR HOMEWORK.

I WISH TEACHERS WOULD ACT NORMAL. BUT INSTEAD THEY FAKE THAT THEY ARE ALL PURE AND PERFECT. LIKE IF YOU SWEAR, MOST TEACHERS ACT ALL SHOCKED, LIKE THEY HAVE NEVER EVEN HEARD THE WORD BEFORE IN THEIR WHOLE LIVES. BUT MEANWHILE THEY PROBABLY SAY IT ALL THE TIME IN REAL LIFE. TEACHERS GET ALL FREAKED OUT AND SHOCKED ABOUT EVERY LITTLE THING.

IT'S THE SAME WITH MY MOM AND DAD. HALF THE TIME I DON'T TELL THEM THE REAL TRUTH BECAUSE I KNOW THEY CAN'T TAKE IT. I JUST TELL THEM THE PARTS THAT THEY CAN HANDLE. LIKE, I JUST SAY, "I SLEPT OVER AT TRACEY'S AND WE STAYED UP ALL NIGHT TALKING." I DON'T TELL THEM WE WERE DRINKING AND SMOKING IN THE PARK AND WALKING TO MINI-MART IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. BECAUSE THAT WOULD JUST FREAK THEM OUT. THEY PROBABLY WOULDN'T LET ME GO OUT ANYWHERE IF THEY KNEW ALL THE STUFF I DO. I WOULD JUST HAVE THIS SMALL BORING LIFE DOING MY NAILS IN MY BEDROOM. SO I ONLY TELL THEM THE PARTS OF THE STORY THAT THEY CAN DEAL WITH, AND THE REST, I KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT ABOUT IT.

IT'S BETTER IF YOUR PARENTS DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE, BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE POWER OVER YOU TO MAKE YOUR LIFE TERRIBLE. I WAS GROUNDED FOR ALMOST THE WHOLE SUMMER JUST BECAUSE IN JUNE, PRACTICALLY THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL, SOME TEACHER SAW ME SMOKING OUTSIDE KFC AND PHONED MY MOM. I WASN'T EVEN ON SCHOOL PROPERTY. WHO KNOWS WHAT THE HELL THEY WOULD DO TO ME IF THEY KNEW ABOUT SHANE.

SHANE IS THIS GUY THAT I KNOW FROM MY NEIGHBOURHOOD. THIS ONE TIME, IT WAS A SATURDAY NIGHT, I WAS AT ASIRA'S HOUSE UNTIL ABOUT ELEVEN. IT WAS RAINING WHEN I LEFT. I STARTED WALKING HOME, AND I SAW SHANE. HE WAS JUST STANDING THERE IN THE RAIN SMOKING. SO HE STARTED WALKING WITH ME, BECAUSE HE LIVES NEAR MY HOUSE.

WHILE WE WERE WALKING, SHANE KEPT ASKING ME ABOUT SEX, LIKE IF I EVER DID IT BEFORE. I TOLD HIM THAT I GOT PRETTY CLOSE ONCE, BUT I STOPPED BECAUSE I FELT SHY AND SCARED. SO SHANE GOES, "WELL THAT'S JUST BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T HAVE THE REAL THING" AND I SAID, "WHAT'S THE REAL THING?" AND HE GOES "I AM." SO I WAS LAUGHING AT HIM, BECAUSE, LIKE, HE THINKS HE'S SO GREAT.

THEN HE STOPPED WALKING WHEN WE GOT BEHIND THE BOWLING ALLEY, YOU KNOW, BY THE PLAZA. IT WAS REALLY DARK BACK THERE. SO HE STOPPED WALKING AND HE GOES,

“I’M SERIOUS ABOUT THIS. DO YOU WANT TO TRY THE REAL THING?” AND I SAID, “NO, IT’S OKAY.” SO HE SAID, “WELL, DO YOU AT LEAST KNOW HOW TO KISS?” AND I’M LIKE, “YEAH, OF COURSE,” SO WE STARTED KISSING.

THE KISSING PART WAS OKAY. BUT I’M NOT STUPID. I KNOW THAT IT KEEPS GOING UNTIL YOU HAVE SEX. SO I JUST WANTED TO GET OUT OF THERE AND GO HOME, BUT HE DIDN’T WANT TO LEAVE YET. HE SAID HE JUST WANTED TO TALK TO ME OR WHATEVER. SO WE WENT DOWN THE STAIRS BEHIND THE BOWLING ALLEY AND HE KEPT SAYING, “YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO DO IT.” I’M LIKE, YEAH RIGHT, WHATEVER.

THERE IS TOTALLY NO WAY THAT I CAN TELL MY PARENTS BECAUSE THEY WOULD DIE AND THEN THEY WOULD KILL ME. BUT I HAD TO TELL SOMEONE, SO I PUT A QUESTION IN THE TIN FOR MORNING CIRCLE SAYING, “WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT TEENAGERS FOOLING AROUND?” I WANTED TO FIND OUT WHAT YOU WOULD ANSWER, AND THEN I WOULD KNOW IF I STILL WANTED TO TELL YOU WHAT I DID WITH SHANE.

AFTER SHANE, I DID STUFF WITH JAMIE AND MARK IN TRACEY’S BASEMENT. BOTH OF THEM. I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY, REALLY. MAYBE I’M A PLAYER JUST LIKE THEM. IT’S EASIER THAN BEING SOMEONE’S GIRLFRIEND. I’D RATHER JUST FOOL AROUND AND WALK AWAY, BECAUSE THEN YOU DON’T HAVE TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM. YOU DON’T HAVE TO MAKE ANY PROMISES AND YOU DON’T HAVE TO PUT

UP WITH ANYTHING AFTERWARDS. AS LONG AS THEY DON'T TOUCH ME WITH ANY DISEASE, I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY DO TO ME.

IT'S GOOD THAT I'M IN THIS PROJECT BECAUSE I HAVE A LOT OF THINGS TO SAY. I KNOW THAT IF I DON'T GET IT OUT, ONE DAY I'M GOING TO START DOING THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN DONE TO ME. THAT'S PROBABLY WHY KIDS GROW UP TO BE MURDERERS, BECAUSE THEY'VE HAD SO MUCH DONE TO THEM IN THEIR LIFE. THEY JUST HAVE TO GET IT OUT.

I FEEL LIKE THAT ALL THE TIME, LIKE I HAVE ALL THESE BAD FEELINGS INSIDE ME. SOMETIMES I THINK I COULD JUST BLOW UP ONE DAY, JUST TOTALLY LET IT GO. ALL OF A SUDDEN I WILL BE SCREAMING. AND ALL THE BAD STUFF THAT ANYONE EVER DID TO ME, IT WILL ALL BURST OUT OF ME LIKE A BOMB. AND EVERYONE WILL HAVE TO COVER THEIR EARS OR GET OUT OF THE WAY, BECAUSE MY SCREAM WILL LAST FOR EIGHT DAYS.

GWENDOLYN'S RESPONSE

MY NAME:

I CHOSE THE NAME "GWENDOLYN" BECAUSE IT STANDS OUT, SAME AS ME. NO ONE REALLY HAS THAT NAME. IT'S DIFFERENT AND IT'S POWERFUL. IT SOUNDS GOTHIC, AND I USED TO BE GOTHIC IN GRADE SIX. I ONLY DRESSED IN BLACK AND I WORE ALL BLACK MAKE-UP AND I BELIEVED IN SPIRITS

AND ALL THE THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE. IF I WAS TO SAY THE NAME "GWENDOLYN" TO SOMEONE, THEY WOULD PICTURE THE DARK SIDE. NOT LIKE ONE OF THOSE HAPPY NAMES LIKE "TINA" OR "SUZIE." SO THAT'S WHY I PICKED IT.

MY FONT (COPPERPLATE GOTHIC BOLD):

I LIKE THIS FONT BECAUSE YOU CAN SEE IT. IT STANDS OUT. IT'S DARK AND THE LETTERS ARE ALL CAPITALS. IT'S EASY TO READ AND YOU CAN GET THE POINT FAST. IT LOOKS LIKE THE FONT IS TALKING REALLY LOUD, SO YOU HAVE TO LISTEN.



MY SYMBOL:

MY SYMBOL MEANS REMORSE. I PICKED IT BECAUSE I HAVE A LOT OF REGRETS, YOU KNOW? I NEED TO FORGIVE THOSE WHO HURT ME, AND ALSO I NEED TO FORGIVE MYSELF FOR HAVING TRUST IN TOO MANY PEOPLE. WHEN YOU TRUST PEOPLE, THEY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOU.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO BE PART OF THIS PROCESS?:

TO ME IT FEELS GOOD, BECAUSE YOU CAN ACTUALLY SPEAK TO SOMEONE AND LET THEM KNOW YOU HAVE BAD

THINGS IN YOUR LIFE. IT WAS COMFORTABLE. IT WAS GOOD TO SPEAK TO SOMEONE WHO WAS ACTUALLY LISTENING AND WHO UNDERSTANDS. I DON'T TRUST A LOT OF PEOPLE, BUT SOMETHING TOLD ME I COULD TRUST YOU.

WHEN I SAW MY WORDS WRITTEN DOWN, IT FELT LIKE MY WHOLE LIFE WAS BEING EXPLAINED ON A PIECE OF PAPER. I FELT LIKE "WHOA." I FELT LIKE I WAS LOOKING IN A MIRROR. IT WAS SHOCKING, BECAUSE I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THAT WAS MY LIFE, ALL THOSE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO ME. IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE I AM REALLY STRONG THAT I GOT THROUGH ALL THE STUFF THAT HAPPENED TO ME IN MY LIFE SO FAR.

YOU CAN'T FORGET THE STORIES WHEN THEY'RE WRITTEN DOWN LIKE THIS. NOW MY WORDS ARE HERE FOREVER. ONCE YOU WRITE SOMETHING DOWN ON PAPER, IT'S ALWAYS THERE. NOT LIKE WHEN YOU ARE JUST TALKING, AND THE WORDS ARE GONE AS SOON AS YOU SAY THEM.

A Heart-Beat Before Sydney Tells Her Story:

It is a Thursday in November. It is pouring rain when I meet Sydney at her new school for lunch. At the beginning of the school year, Sydney was in our grade seven/eight class at Gatewood Middle School. She left Gatewood quite suddenly in the middle of September and now attends Watterson, a school for students who need intensive academic support. Sydney's best friend, Carly, also attends Watterson. Both girls are fourteen.

Sydney has spent the morning in the suspension room for skipping classes. She lets out a squeal when she sees me, and comes bounding down the hall yelling "PEOPLE! THIS IS MY TEACHER FROM BEFORE!" As we walk through the parking lot puddles to my car, she tells me with genuine elation "Guess what...I have great news! Carly is pregnant again and I get to be the god-mother!"

**Sydney:
"Get me out of here!"**

I don't skip that much. It's just that sometimes I have to get out of there, you know? Mostly when I skip it's because I'm too mad to be in the class. They should be happy when I skip, because then they don't have to hear me be mad.

Like, last week right before hairdressing class, I wanted to kill this guy named Peter. He was driving my nerves crazy about Carly. He was telling all these people that he's going out with her and he's not. She doesn't even like him. And he was calling her a slut and a whore. Sorry for my language what I said there. Carly and me are best friends, and I don't have to put up with someone insulting her. So I said to him, "You shouldn't call those words to her because it's not true." But he just kept on doing it. Like, what is this, Gatewood Middle School all over again?

So I was already mad when I went to class. I should have just never even gone into class, because I didn't want to do nothing in the same room as Peter. So then the teacher was yelling at me, because I was just sitting there being mad, not doing none of my work.

Then Adam starts his same stupid things that he does. He does these things what are annoying. He is always bugging me about everything, saying things that are not true and making

these stupid noises. So I just yelled, "Shut up, Adam!" and he came over to my table like he wanted to start something, so fine. I got out of my chair and I stood in front of his face, because he doesn't scare me. Don't start it up with me if you can't take it. I could have punched him no problem but the teacher stopped me because she knows that I would really do it. So I said, "Forget this. I'm gone." I got my stuff and I walked out. I was suspended for that, just because I walked out of hairdressing.

I get suspended all the time. I got ten days for something I didn't even do. This girl accused me of stealing her hairbrush, but I never did. She wouldn't believe me, so I slapped her across the face and I got ten days.

I even got suspended the first day I came to this school. It's true. Because the teacher got me mad. All I did was ask the teacher if I can go to the washroom, and he was totally ignoring me. I had to yell it at him, and get it into his head. So I screamed it. "CAN I GO TO THE WASHROOM, SIR?" and then I

just walked out. He gave out the work to everybody else while I was at the washroom, and when I came back, he wouldn't give me no job to do. He was just pretending I wasn't even there. So I walked out, and that's how I got suspended on my very first day at Watterson.

I don't skip just for no reason. I skip when I'm mad, like when someone makes fun of one of my friends, or when someone is mean to me for no reason, or when the teacher doesn't listen properly, or when I'm bored. I walk out. But I never skip gym, because the classes always go outside to play soccer on the back field, so the gym teacher will see you pretty much for sure. Like, you're hanging out back, smoking on the wall, and here comes your whole gym class running right past your face.

I could go somewhere right off of the school property, I do that sometimes. But then you might miss so much classes, not just the one you wanted to miss. Like, you don't want to skip the whole day, or why bother even coming at all that day.

Why would I wake up and take the bus all the way to Watterson, and then skip every single class when I'm here? That's just stupid. I only skip one or maybe two classes a day.

Sometimes I get caught, and sometimes I don't. One time I got an in-school suspension for skipping, and then I skipped the suspension. I had to skip it because that day I would be the only one in the suspension room. I never want to be the only one there. It's so boring. It's better to be suspended with someone else. If you're in there with someone else, it's pretty fun. Once I was in there with Carly. We talked the whole time. The teacher kept going, "Shhh. Stop it. Be quiet." But Carly and me can't shut our mouths.

Except Carly doesn't come to school anymore. I know why. It's because she was raped. It was on the news, too, but they didn't say her name. It was ten o'clock in the morning and she skipped class and went out for a smoke. She was walking on Finland Road, and some guy came up behind her. He pulled her into the washroom in the Medical Building, you know, on

the corner by the Chinese food place. And he raped her. She didn't know the guy. Carly's had sex a lot of times, you know, but that time was not her choice. And she stopped coming to school after that.

If that happened to me, I probably would have dropped out too, same as Carly. Because sometimes, you have to get away from a place if it has bad memories.

That's why I left Gatewood. It was too hard for me there. I couldn't take it no more. Half the people never liked me. I wanted to get away from the people I knew there. They would talk behind my back. They said all this stuff about me, like, I wear the same clothes every day. I don't change them. I'm dirty. All these not-true things.

But mostly they spread rumours about what happened last summer. They kept calling me slut and 'ho, and I couldn't take it no more. So I just begged my mother, "Get me out of

here. Let me go to Watterson," because no one at Watterson knew me except Carly.

If I stayed at Gatewood Middle School, I probably would have been at the office mostly every single day. I would have got put there for being mouthy, and beating up everyone who was talking about me. Probably if I didn't get out of that school, I'd be in jail, maybe, I don't know. I was mad all the time and I can't always count on myself that I will just walk away when someone is saying so much rude things to me.

I have my mother's temper in me. My dad used to have a tattoo on his arm of his ex-girlfriend's name. Her name was Sheila. Well, one day my mom got so mad that she bit his arm really hard, and she bit off three letters of his tattoo. The S, the h, and the e. I could get mad like that. If I stayed at Gatewood, for sure I would have done something violent at someone.

So now I'm at Watterson. It's a pretty bad school, like there's a lot of fighting because of the gangs. But at least I don't have to put up with no rumours.

There are two main gangs at Watterson, the Bloods and the Crips. The Bloods wear red bandanas, and the Crips wear blue. You can get in with them by two ways. You could start going out with someone who is already in the gang. That's how Carly joined the Crips. Or you can get initiated. You meet them somewhere at night, and they fight you to see if you can take it.

I'm not in a gang. I don't want to join, because it's hard to get out if you change your mind. And I don't want so much violence in my life. There are fights at my school all the time. With knives, mostly, but sometimes guns. Once I was walking to the bus, and the two guys behind me were fighting with each other about something. Then one of them pulled out a gun and shot the grass. I think he just wanted to prove that he had a gun on him, so the other guy would shut up and listen.

I don't want to stay too long at Watterson. Because someone could just come up to me in the hall for no reason, point a gun to my head, and blow my life away.

And the guys here are just as rude as the ones at Gatewood. Like, this one boy named Jay in my class, he always talks about my breasts. He wants me to show them to him, you know? But I keep on telling him, "No, no, no." And he says, "Just let me squeeze them. They're big and plumpy." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no." Sometimes in class he even writes it to me in a note. He doesn't listen to the word "no," even when I add some swearing. He keeps asking to touch them. But I'm not going to tell on him, because he'll just get mad at me and that will make everything work out worse.

Probably Jay heard about what happened last summer so that's why he thinks I'm just going to let him touch me wherever he wants. One single day in July changed everybody's opinion to think that I am a slut and a 'ho.

I don't even remember half the stuff that happened that night. It's all like stars into the air. All I know is that I shouldn't have went to Ricky's party, but me and Carly got peer-pressured. Ricky is this guy in my neighbourhood who had a house party. It was just me and Carly and all these guys who were Ricky's friends. And some of them made this plan that they were going to have sex with Carly, but we didn't know that or we wouldn't have went there.

That night I got totally drunk. Most of the time I can drink pretty good. I like beer. I grew up with it. When I was little, like around seven, my sister's friends would have parties, and they would bring me along. I would just drink whatever they were drinking. Ever since those days I like to drink fine. I'm really used to it. But at Ricky's he had other drinks there, not just beer. And I got totally wasted.

This one guy, Mark, he told Carly what the other guys were going to do to her. All three of them were going to have sex with her. Three people. But Mark was not part of that plan.

He never wanted to do nothing to Carly. So he told her, "Be careful, stop drinking that stuff, get out of here." Because he knew what they were going to do after she drank a lot of it. That's why they invited her.

Carly wasn't really that drunk yet anyways. So after Mark told the plan to Carly, she was trying to get me to leave. But I was still outside in the backyard, drinking. I didn't pass out or anything. I was just really loud in the backyard. This guy who lives one door down from Ricky's, he ran to my house and told my mom I'm drinking. First she called the cops and then she came to Ricky's and kicked down the door. And when I saw her I started running.

Everyone was searching for me: Carly, her mom, her step-dad. I took off through the ravine behind Chapelton High School. Some guy followed me who I do not know. He had blue jeans that were rolled up and a white bandana tied around his leg so he was in some gang but I don't know which one. I was totally drunk, but I could tell that he was following me for sure.

When I got to the valley, I hid behind a tree until I couldn't see him no more. Everything was dark by then because it was really late at night. My heart was pounding, like, so loud in my ears. But he never saw me where I was hid.

But then Carly's step-dad caught up to me behind Chapelton. The cops came to the school parking lot. I don't really know what happened then. Carly said I was screaming and calling the cops "Pigs." They wanted to take me to the psycho ward, or the drunk ward, whatever the place is that they put you, but I never wanted to go. Carly's step-dad told them to take me to the hospital where my mom went. She fell when she was running after me. She had a broken face, like, her cheekbone. But I did not even know that, because I was running and I was out of my mind.

I didn't know everything what happened until after that night was over. I just freaked when I found out everything from Carly after. I wanted to go right over to Ricky's house and break my arm on his head. But I only talked to Carly about that

night, nobody else. I never said one word to Ricky or any of them. I just kept my mouth shut. Except, by the end of August, everyone in my whole neighbourhood knew about the party and they were all saying lies about me.

When school started, every single person was talking rumours about that night. They were saying that me and Carly are sluts, and we had sex with all of Ricky's friends, and Carly is pregnant and I did drugs.

Carly is pregnant, that's true. But it didn't happen at Ricky's party. That was a total rumour. She had sex with her ex-boyfriend at a different party, that had nothing to do with Ricky's. This is her third time being pregnant. The first time was when she was thirteen, or maybe twelve, I don't know. Her mom took her to Valley View Hospital and she had an abortion. The second time was last year. She had a miscarriage. She got really sick, and she was in Valley View for almost a week. I went there everyday to see her. And this is the third time. So

far she's okay. I hope nothing else bad happens, because I get to be the baby's godmother if she actually has it this time.

Everyone is always making up rumours about us, me and Carly. After Ricky's party, everybody at Gatewood Middle School was calling me slut, skank, 'ho, all the words. But I never said nothing to defend myself. I couldn't. Because one day when I was walking to the bus, Ricky's friend came up to me, all mad. He told me that if I get any of them in trouble, I'm going to pay for it. I do not know what they would do to me. Maybe kill me, I guess. So I never said nothing to anyone, only to Carly. I can't help it if everyone else at Gatewood keeps on talking about it. I am not in charge of their mouths.

So that's why I switched schools. I had to get out of Gatewood and start new. And things are going good now. Well, I skip school sometimes. But one thing for sure I'm never doing, I'm not going to drop out of school. No way. Because I want to pass. I only want to do every grade one time. I want to do the learning, get my education and get a job. If I drop out

right now, grade nine, what job can I get? Maybe McDonalds, which would not even pay the rent or food. For most jobs you need at least the grade twelve diploma. I learned that from my sister, Lana. She's been telling me some stuff. She got kicked out of high school in grade eleven, I don't know how come, but now she can't find a job.

Lana told me don't get pregnant until I have the right man, and some money to get stuff the baby needs like food. Lana had a baby last year, when she was sixteen, so now I have a niece. We all live together, my sisters and their kids and my mom and me. But money is very hard. That's how come Lana told me, "whatever you do, don't get pregnant."

I might not get pregnant ever, because of the money. I would love my kid, who they are, and all that. That's for sure. But you can't grow up a kid being naked with no food, because you can get charged for neglect. So I'm not having a baby until I can buy it everything it needs. So first I have to get a job that pays enough. That's why I'm not dropping out of school yet. I

tried to put that through Carly's head, but you can't make someone else think the same way that you think.

The jobs I want are a teacher, an actress, a massager, or a police, because of the guns. I already know how to work guns because I'm in the army air cadets. I want to arrest the bad guys and get them in trouble. Plus cops get privileges. They're allowed to do more stuff than regular people. They can turn on their sirens and go right through a red light, no stopping. And they can arrest whoever they want. I would go find Ricky and his friends, and the guy who raped Carly, and my father, wherever he is. I would arrest them all, throw them in jail, put them behind bars, and make them pay big time. Maybe for their whole lives. All the people who do anything wrong. I know that I do things that are a bit illegal, like I drink and I smoke, but I'm talking about the really bad things.

Like what my dad did. To tell you the truth, I don't really care where my dad is because he's a jerk. He can go to hell. Sorry about my language. I was a newborn baby when my dad

left. I never knew him. He doesn't help pay for nothing. As soon as I hit eighteen, old enough to press charges on him, I'm going to take him to court and get my money.

My mom never says nothing about my dad. And I don't ask anymore, because she just gets mad at me if I talk about it. If I ask anything about him, she gets all worried, in case I'm going to find him.

If I ever find my dad, I'm going to look him straight in the eyes and call him a jerk. I just want to cuss him off. And I have some questions for him, too. Like, "Why did you leave? Why did you abandon me? Why did you deny me? Why don't you support me?" If he saw how my life is, he'd be sorry.

I think my life would have been more happier if my father had been around. Because right now my mom has all the stress by herself because he is gone. My mom is always worried because we don't have enough money for clothes and food and stuff. Sometimes I feel like I could eat and eat and eat and eat

and eat. But we don't got enough food to just eat it all myself and it's very expensive to get more at the store. When I grow up, if I ever be the president, I am putting the food prices down low. Costing hardly any money.

But the good thing about being poor is you know how to take care of yourself. Like, where I grew up, it was a rough neighbourhood, you know? Gang fights and drugs. When you grow up the street way, you learn how to protect yourself. I've been chased. I've been grabbed. If anybody comes up behind me and tries to jump me, I know how to fight them. I am not afraid to scream and make a lot of noise. I'm not afraid of hardly anything. I'll try anything. Except not drugs. Only weed, nothing else. I decided that for sure. Because I seen from my sister, Janeen, that drugs can wreck up your life.

Janeen doesn't live with us. She's got the same mom as me, but her dad is different (she's lucky for that part). I go to her place on the bus to babysit. She's an alcoholic and a druggie, but I don't really care. She can do whatever she wants.

She doesn't force me to do nothing. I smoke cigarettes and sometimes pot, but I don't do no needles, because I don't want the same life as what my sister got.

I tried to quit smoking, but it didn't work. I stopped for two days, but then I couldn't stand it anymore. I missed it so much. Smoking gets all the stress off my mind. Whenever I'm mad, I go outside, have a smoke, and go back to class, you know, and I'm alright. Smoking works good when I'm mad. I'm going to quit, but not right now. Maybe when I'm fifteen or sixteen. Not right now. My doctor said, "You should quit," but I think now is not the right time. Because sometimes I still get mad.

Responses from Sydney

My Name:

I got this name from the movie "Scream." Neve Campbell played this girl named Sydney and I'm just like her. She knows what to do in every situation and she's not scared of anything.

That's the same as me. I don't freak out about anything. Even if there was a killer in my house, I would still be calm.

My Font (Lucinda Sans Unicode):

I like this font because you can read it easy. It's just clear and straight up so you can understand what I say no problem.



My Symbol:

I picked the dove because it means peace and angel spirits. I believe that when someone dies who you love, their spirits watch over you and keep you safe.

How it felt to be part of this process:

I like talking my stories to you because it's like I'm letting out my words that are trapped up inside me. I set my stories free into the air so the spirits can hear them, all the people who died that I love. And then my Grandma and Grandpa and my half-brother know that I'm still alive.

A Heart-Beat Before Becky Tells Her Story:

It is morning circle and Becky is sharing her "Me Box". She has brought a small collection of things that are precious to her, favourite momentos that span the thirteen years of her life. Among the treasures there is a photo of her and her mom hugging, a stick that her cousins carved their initials into last summer, and a small white Bible. She takes the Bible tenderly between her hands. "Sometimes in the morning I pray about you one by one." The classmates seated around her are suddenly silent in the presence of her gentleness. No one moves or speaks. Becky continues, "I pray that God will keep you safe, and bless your life, and give you what you need."

Becky:

"Maybe I'll talk in grade eight"

I miss Sydney so much. When Sydney was at Gatewood, I hung out with her and Gwendolyn. All three of us together. Sydney was my glue that got me accepted by Gwendolyn. But now Sydney's gone and our desks got moved for talking and Gwendolyn doesn't even like me now.

Well, it's not like everybody is my enemy or anything. I get along equal with everybody. I just don't have my own person to talk to private.

I know that Gwendolyn's kind of bad, you know. She's a trouble girl. But I wasn't going to follow in her steps. I didn't do her example. I just liked talking to her. It's different than talking to other girls because Gwendolyn knows about everything. And she would talk about any topic you want. Like, all the puberty things, boys, even sex. She knows every single answer.

I can NOT ask those things to my mom, like about puberty and sex and everything. Well, maybe I could ask her a straight question that has a straight answer, as long as it is not about how a person feels. Like I could say, "Can you have sex when you have your period, like, is it possible?" and maybe she would say an answer. But if I asked her, like, "How did you feel when you did it the first time?" No way. No questions about how it feels. Because she would want to know why I want to know. She would be all terrified that I'm going to do it.

Once I asked my mom what virgin means. I heard it on *Family Matters*, the TV show. She freaked out at me, like, "Where did you learn that word at this age?" Then she told me, "Don't you dare do that until you are married or you will be out of this house."

All they teach you in health is about the parts, like, how they work. I know all that stuff already. I want to talk about the other things, like, does it hurt. And how you feel after you have sex. And before. And also while it's happening.

But me and Gwendolyn don't talk at all anymore. The only time Gwendolyn talks to me now is if she wants something from me. She always asks me to give her some of my snack. I always give it, because it's kind of hard to say no to her. She doesn't take the word "no" in a good way.

Gwendolyn bosses me every day. But I never tell on her because I'm a bit afraid of her, you know? I don't know what she will do to me if I make her mad. Also, I'm used to it. I've been bossed my whole life, mostly by my dad.

He lives in the States now and I never see him. I just live with my mom all the time. We get along pretty good, except sometimes she makes these rules that are not fair. Like, I can't go to the mall by myself with just my friends. I am thirteen years old. I know how to take a bus. Like, hello? But I'm not allowed because she thinks I'm going to get lost or attacked or something.

Most of the time I don't argue back to my mom. I don't want to be too hard to her, because she's a soft person. But sometimes when I want to do something and I'm not allowed, then I get mouthy and I yell. But I never mouth off to my grandma.

My grandma is really strict, so forget talking back to her. One time my grandma slapped me for answering my mom with the wrong personality. Like, I was saying my answer rude. If you say your words with an attitude voice, my grandma will hit you for sure.

My grandma should teach our Life Skills class, because our class is out of control in there. She would call the police if she was in there. Everybody is yelling back and forth, using put-downs to each other, and throwing erasers, everything. My grandma would come in there and suspend everyone. She would be yelling, "What is all this nastiness?" Ms Ulstead usually just says, "Stop it" in a quiet voice. She's our Life Skills teacher. She's a soft person so nobody does what she says. Not even the quiet people, like me and Mackenzie. Sometimes Ms Ulstead buzzes the office for help. Then the V.P. comes and takes out the main trouble people, like John and Gwendolyn and Sydney.

I'm not one of the main problem people. Mostly I do what I'm supposed to do. I listen, I do my work, I don't talk too much. Last year I didn't talk at all in class. I didn't say anything ever. I was good all the time, you know? Like, to my friends I would talk a bit, you know. But I would never put my hand up to tell the answer.

Most of the time I didn't even know the answer anyways. "Probably my answer is wrong," that's what I would think. So I just kept quiet to myself. It's easier. I don't want to look stupid in front of everyone. Because some of the boys, they are kind of tough, you know? They will tell you if they think that your idea is stupid, or wrong, or not the same as theirs. They will laugh right at you, or make a face about it, or breathe in a way to tell you that you said something so dumb. Even if they get in trouble for it, that doesn't happen until *after* they already did the thing to make you feel bad. So you still feel bad, you know? So I just waited until this year to talk out loud. Inside my head I just said to myself, "Maybe I'll talk in grade eight." Except now I'm in grade eight and I have no one to talk to. Finally I am brave enough, but I don't have any friends.

Maybe it's better. When Gwendolyn was talking to me, I was getting in trouble a bit. Like, for talking and not working. But now that I'm alone, I'm raising up my marks. I want to do good this year, you know, so every high school picks me. Because I want to be a nurse. That's my goal in my life.

When I was little I wanted to be an actress, because I like to act. I do little plays to myself in the mirror, like act out situations. But then one time my aunt said, "Oh, you want to be an actress? Then do something in front of us." They wanted me to put on a little show, you know? Like, sing or do a dance or be funny. They wanted me to just stand up right there in front of them and do it, like make it up on the spot. And I said, "Excuse me. No way," because I felt stupid. Like, I didn't have anything to show to them at that minute. And my aunt said, "You can't be an actress if you can't even do something in front of people." I felt bad, but anyway, it's true.

So I'm going to be a nurse, because I'm really good at taking care of my mom when she's sick. I rub Vicks VapoRub on her forehead and give her Tylenols. And I also take care of this old lady in our building. She's eighty-six and she lives all by herself. I go over there and help her, whatever she

needs, and I make her toast. I take out her garbage, go to the store, buy her some milk. I put the blanket around her legs, like tuck her in, and make her some tea in a pot. I always pretend in my head that I'm her nurse. Same when I'm with my grandpa. Sometimes I massage my grandpa's feet when they are sore to walk with, and he always says, "I love it when you do that to me."

So I'm going to go to high school and then college and then be a nurse. I want to go to Chapelton for high school, because Felicity goes there now in grade nine, and she's a good friend to me. She's older than me, like she has more experiences. And she's stylish in art, like, she can draw clothes that are for models. She knows what looks good. And she can sing so beautiful, you know? And she has a good attitude about herself. I want to be like that.

The best thing about Felicity is that she is not afraid of anything. She's sort of my bodyguard. Last year when she was in grade eight and I was just in grade seven, whenever somebody came near me, she would be right there fast beside me. One time Gwendolyn was arguing to me so loud and I had no words to say back to her, because I'm not really equal to Gwendolyn in talking. But Felicity is equal to everyone, even the boys.

And, if I was in a fight with someone, Felicity would sort it out fair. Even if I was being wrong, she would not leave me. Like, she would say, "Okay, first of all, Gwendolyn. Why are you saying lies? And second of all, Becky. Why are you standing here filling up your head with all these words that she is saying to you?"

But nobody gets mad at Felicity for interrupting into the situation, because she's pretty tough. She doesn't care what other people think about her, so she can just say whatever she wants. But it's okay with me when she does that, because I need her.

I'm really soft, that's why. I'm shy. I can't speak out to people, like about my feelings, you know? Because I don't know what the people will say back. So I need Felicity. She helps me know the words to say, and she makes me brave. By myself I'm not brave. Plus she is smarter than me. Not in school work, but in other stuff. Boys, sex, puberty, everything. And she says, like, "This is how the boy should treat you, and if he doesn't, he's not good enough for you."

Like, she won't put up with some guy who treats her wrong. Because her dad was the same as my dad. He was a

violent person to her mom. So she understands my life. My dad was mad a lot, you know? For my whole life that I remember. He would yell mostly at my mom. Except if me or my brother did something he didn't like, then he would yell at us, too. He's loud when someone makes him mad.

My father is a rough person, you know? Like, he is not soft about anything. You can't tell him something if that's not what he wanted you to say, or he will hit you. Or sometimes he would just pull you up, like grab your arm and pull you where he wants you to go. He has a heavy hand. He would slap my butt or my face mostly. My face would swell up sometimes. He would hit me with whatever he had around, spoons, belts, anything.

And he was always mad at me for not eating my food. I didn't eat that much when I was little, you know? I couldn't eat it. I don't know why. It wouldn't go down. That made him so mad at me. He would scream at me, and also at my mom, because he wanted her to make me eat.

When I was five I got my arm broken because I didn't eat my soup enough. My father picked me up and he carried me into the bedroom and he slammed me on the wall and my arm broke. I had a cast for twenty-six days. My mom

was at work that time, so she couldn't save me. That's how come I learned not to mess with my dad.

We left my dad on New Year's eve. My mom, my little brother and me. I was about eight years old. I didn't know anything about leaving until it happened. My mom didn't either. Like, she never made a plan to leave my dad on New Year's. Because we had all these people in our living room, friends of my dad. They came to our house for this big dinner. It was a whole feast that my mom made.

Except my dad was mad. Because just before that night, my mom quit her job. He was really mad about that because we didn't have too much money. So he was yelling at her so much, and pushing her around a lot those days. Sometimes he would send me and my brother to stay in our room, but we could still hear him screaming every word to her because he's really loud when he's mad. I would just sit in our room up against the door and listen for it to be over and then I would come out. Lots of times I wanted to call the cops and tell on him, that he keeps beating my mom. But if he found out that I phoned, I would be in lot of trouble, so I never did it.

So, it was New Year's eve and my dad was mad at my mom. And all the guests were at our apartment, all my father's friends that he knows. I was sitting on the couch eating and my mom was bringing the food in from the kitchen and she said, "I am OJ Simpson's wife." She said it out loud. And my dad said, "What is she talking about? She's crazy. Go get the rest of the food." But my mom just stood there in the living room and she said it again, that she is OJ Simpson's wife. My dad didn't like her saying that, because OJ Simpson treated his wife bad. Plus all his friends heard her say it.

So my dad pulled the phone out of the wall and slapped her face with it. In front of everyone. All the people in the living room saw. They were shocked at my dad. Because they never saw him be like that. He was like that all the time, but they didn't know. They were saying, "You shouldn't do that." And that was making my dad madder at my mom.

My mom was crying and holding her face, because it had a mark from the phone. She left and went to the next door neighbour who is our really good friend. But I was just sitting in the living room still. I was like, frozen. My dad was staring at me very madly. He had the look like he was going to yell, or maybe hit me. I don't really know why he was

mad at me, because I didn't do anything that time. I didn't even say one word. I never moved one of my muscles. I was just sitting on the couch because I didn't know what I should do. Because if you picked the wrong thing that my dad didn't want you to do, he will hurt you when he's so mad like that. So I just sat there and kept my mouth shut. But my brother started crying and ran out to go see my mom.

So my mom was gone next door and my brother was gone next door. Some people got up and got their coats. Like, there was still some dinner on their plates, but they were going. So I thought, "I'd better get out of here." So I went quiet out the door and I went to my neighbour's apartment where my mom was. Her face was all red where the phone hit. She was really hurt. I didn't know what to do. My mom was crying and crying so much, so I just sweet-talked to her, like, "It's going to be okay." I just said that but I didn't know if it was true or not. Then my neighbour called the police, because my dad is not really allowed to hit people with things, you know?

The police came in a few minutes and took my dad. He was still in our apartment, because he didn't know the cops were coming. He was mad when he found out. I could hear him through the wall. But he went with them. After he was

out of the apartment, we went back over and packed our bags to go live with my grandma.

I had to start a new school closer to my grandma's house, because Gatewood was too far. I hated it, because I didn't know anybody in the whole school except my cousins and they weren't in my class. I started there in January and everybody already knew each other since September. So I didn't talk because I felt brand new and every friend of mine was not there. I did not understand anything they were talking about, because I already missed the beginning of what they were doing. And I was mad that I had to leave Gatewood, because that's where all my friends were. Like, I just got jumped out of my life all of a sudden.

I was only at that school for about a month, because then my dad came over to my grandma's and he apologized to my mom. He took me and my brother back to our old apartment but my mom didn't come with us. My other grandma from New York came to take care of us instead. I missed my mom, but one good thing was that I got to go back to Gatewood School again.

My dad was hardly ever at home. But when he came home, he bossed everyone, even my New York grandma.

My dad is like a king. All his brothers, and even his mom and dad, they do whatever he says. They are all afraid of my dad. Nobody wants to make him mad.

One time I asked him why he hit my mom. He told me that she shouldn't have quit her job. But I said to him, "You could have talked with words instead of hitting her." But he didn't answer me, and he was mad at me for what I said.

One day my mom came back to live with us again, and my dad gave her roses on the day that she came back. But then they started arguing again all the time. My dad kept sending me and my brother to our room to not hear. But I sneaked open the door a little space so I could find out what he was doing to my mom. He was yelling at her so loud and my neighbour heard. She called the cops again, but my dad didn't go to jail or anything.

But that Friday my mom came to Gatewood School in the middle of the day and she told me that we had to go to my grandma's again because my dad was behaving bad. So I was sad because I had to say goodbye to Gatewood again. But we only stayed at my grandma's three days and then my dad apologized. So we went back to the apartment again. We were always going back and forth.

I slept in my mom and dad's room all the time with my mom, in their bed. My dad slept in my bedroom. But I couldn't really sleep good, because I didn't know what my dad would do in the middle of the night. Like, maybe he might sneak in and hurt my mom when she was sleeping. And I couldn't fight him off her if he tried to do something because he's bigger and he is really strong. Sometimes I sat up in the bed and I watched my mom sleep the whole night until the sky was light. I was protecting her.

Then one day my dad took all the money out of the bank and he took my little brother and he moved to New York. So then it was just me and my mom. And we had no money, just welfare. And my mom was so depressed. She would sleep all day, like for five hours in the daytime. I was beginning to really worry. She was getting all fat and tired and sloppy, like her clothes and everything. This was when I was in grade four.

Nothing was going good. I was so far behind in my work and I was failing all my assignments. I had no idea what was going on at school, like what they were talking about. Because I was away a lot, and I kept going back and forth to my grandma's. Even on the days when I was at

school, I didn't know anything. And I was worried about my brother because I didn't know if he would be safe in New York with my dad if I'm not there.

My dad wants to send my brother back now. He has had him for about four years, maybe five, and now my dad is sick of him. He just wants to be free. He doesn't want to take care of nobody. He just wants his freedom to do whatever he wants, you know. So I think my brother might come back and live with us. But I don't know how that will be because my mom can't really handle to have both of us. Like, my brother is kind of wild a bit, like out of control.

And we don't have extra money for another person, you know? We already can't afford anything. Like, there are things that I want, clothes and stuff. But the things that I like are too much money. One day these girls at school kept asking me, "Why do you wear the same pants every single day?" And I felt so stupid. So I just came home and told my mom, "I NEED SOME NEW CLOTHES!" But clothes cost a lot.

I wish my father lived back with us again, because we had more money when he was here. Also my mom and me don't have a car, and he does. We go out once a week to church, and sometimes we go to my grandma's house or we

get the groceries. But that's it. We don't go out places too much because we have to take the bus all the time.

Most of all I wish my dad was back because I want both parents' love. I only have one. My dad doesn't even call me. I'm kind of mad at him, you know. Like, doesn't he know how to work the phone? I know he treated us very bad, but I still want to have him back. But only if he changes his personality to us.

I know why my dad beat me. It's because he got treated like that when he was small. He used to get licks the same way. That's what they do in the country where he came from. He was used to that way of doing it, so he did it to me. But I'm not going to beat my kids. No way. This is the last end of it. I might not even get married because I don't want my life to turn out like my mom's. If anybody tries to treat me wrong, I will say, "Excuse me, don't do that to me or I will leave." I have been hurt enough times in my life to see it coming to my door.

But I'm not worried about how I will turn out. I'm not really an at-risk person, you know? There's not really too much risk for me to drop out of school. Because I want to finish and be a nurse. Plus it would not be okay with my

mom if I dropped out of school, and I don't want to make her upset.

I want to go to college and get a good job. Because then I will be free, and have some regular money. No more welfare. I am not being poor when I grow up. I want to get a job right now, as soon as I'm allowed, so I can save up some money. Because it costs a lot to go to college.

Everybody says I should get a model job, because I'm so skinny. Except the expensive models have to wear all those clothes that show your body naked. I don't think that's a good idea because it doesn't go with my religion. But maybe I will be a model for Sears, or something where you wear enough clothes.

Everybody says I have anorexia but I don't. I have been skinny like this all my life but I eat fine. Gwendolyn says she wishes she could have my body. But she wouldn't like it, because people call me "Toothpick" and they always tell me I have a disease. I wish I just had a medium body, not fat, not skinny. Because the boys always make fun of how thin I am, like they ask me if I am a dead skeleton, or what.

There are boys in my class who are turning out my dad's way. Like, Andy and John, they are getting mean, you know? They use put-downs to everyone, and they are always causing trouble in the class, kicking the lockers, swearing and fighting people outside. They are mad at every single person.

But when we talk during Morning Circle, then you hear the way that their life has gone so far. Like when John's dad took off, that was not okay with him, you know? I feel sorry for him about his life. But I don't want to act John's way, because it makes people afraid of you. It makes them go far away from you. I don't want people to hate me.

I know that some people, they have a hard house to live in, and then when they grow up they hurt other people. Like, fighting, yelling, doing crimes. But I'm not like that. I don't feel like abusing anybody in the world. I could not hurt another human person that is alive. Well, I killed a lot of spiders in the summer, but that's it. I just want a gentle future now, like, no more of the violent things.

I'm just going to forget about the past. I will shut up my mouth about my life. It is over. My dad is over. My mom

does not hurt me and no one is hurting her that I have to watch.

Sometimes I think about what my dad did to us and I feel mad again, or sad. I just cry quiet in my room. In a way, I have a really bad life. But when I feel like that, I just keep forgiving my father again. I can't forgive him out loud to his face, because he's in New York and I never see him and he never calls me. I just forgive him inside my heart. Like I say to myself, "It's okay. I'm still here."

I have faith for my dad, that God will change him around and make him soft. Everybody's not really perfect, you know? It's not my job to make my father pay for what he did. God has eyes about my life. He will deal with my dad His own way. I just go gentle.

Mostly everybody is a Christian in my family. I like my religion a lot, because I like being on the same side as God. I feel safer. Because I'm never alone. God is always with me. And when I die I am going to Heaven for positive sure. Like, it's double-checked.

I had this dream that I married Jesus. It was this big wedding and it was up in Heaven. We were all standing on

clouds. It was so beautiful. And I had a father in the dream, but it was not my real father. I think my real father is a devil. He's one of those bad angels.

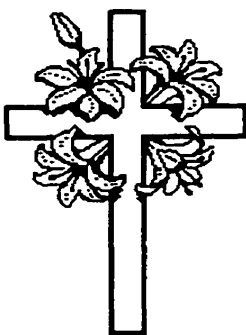
Becky's Response

My Name:

I chose Becky because I love that name. It makes me sound cute. I feel good about myself when I say that name.

My Font:

This font doesn't mean anything. It's just a font.



My Symbol:

I chose the cross with the vine because I am a Christian. The vine is me, growing in my faith.

How it felt to be part of this process:

I feel that I have a person to trust. I can tell her all my feelings and my past.

A Heart-Beat Before Mackenzie Tells Her Story:

Mackenzie's round glasses magnify her eyes so that she has the appearance of an alert bird, silently observing her surroundings. She is thirteen, and a student in grade eight. Today she is sitting motionless, the assigned task spread out on the desk in front of her. She is staring straight ahead, saying nothing. Moments pass, as she continues to sit in silence. Her classmates note Mackenzie's stillness without interest. Cassidy mouths to me, "She's mad" and shrugs, unsure of the reason for Mackenzie's anger. With one violent sweep of her arm, Mackenzie suddenly clears the papers off her desk, scattering them to the floor. "I can't take this anymore," she mumbles quietly, to no one in particular.

It reminds me of "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" or one of those nature documentaries that follows a pride of lions across the Savannah. She is like a crocodile that lies low in the shallow wetlands, its half-closed eyes just protruding above the surface of the murky water. It appears to be sleeping. Suddenly, the silent crock snaps its chops around an unsuspecting fish and drops beneath the muddy surface. The water barely ripples where the creature disappears.

Mackenzie:

"If you say nothing, you're free"

I don't usually throw things off my desk like that. Most of the time I'm fine. Just sometimes I feel that way, like I've had enough and I can't take it anymore. I get tired of people being mean to me, calling me ugly

and stupid. I get tired of the work that I don't understand how to do too much. I get tired of all the girl-fights back and forth, like, who won't be your friend anymore. And it is hard to keep my feelings quiet to myself, but it's worse if you let them out. Unless you are a person like how Felicity is.

If I could be like anyone, I would pick her. Felicity is brave with talking, but also she has a heart to other people. She doesn't use her smartness against you, to hurt your feelings. And if she has a question, she just puts up her hand and asks it out loud. She hardly ever "passes" during morning circle. She just tells her opinion, and sometimes she says it funny, too. Like, when we were talking about a long time ago, how the women wanted to vote but they weren't allowed yet. Felicity was saying, "The government is lucky that I wasn't alive yet, because I would not take no for an answer." And she was snapping her fingers.

People listen to Felicity. She just sticks herself out in front of the class anytime. And she stands up for people. Like, when Andy and Shane were making fun of how I played the flute, she told them, "Well, I don't think I ever heard you two play it any better." And then they shut up.

Most of the other brave girls are mean. They have guts to say whatever they want, but usually it hurts somebody's feelings. Whatever Felicity says, it's never about putting people down. It's always about keeping people on their feet. Sometimes I try not to be afraid like her, and

I say something out loud that I think. Except nobody listens to me the way they listen to her.

Usually I don't say what I'm thinking out loud. Because people could make fun of you, or think you are stupid. They might disagree with your idea that you said, and then maybe they will argue to you, and they won't like you anymore. So I just lie down low. I keep my opinions to myself because I don't want to start anything to make a big fuss. I just want to keep everything calm. Act normal and try to make everything go fine and don't say anything to make someone mad.

For a long time that I can remember, I have never answered people back when they make fun of me. They say my face is ugly, I have bad hair, my clothes are the cheap brands, my voice sounds funny when I talk, I don't get so high marks in my subjects. I don't answer them out loud, just in my head. I say, "What am I supposed to do? Tell me what you want me to do about it. This is how I am. I can't make myself satisfy you." But I don't remark those things out loud, because I don't want to start a big thing.

If you look different than the normal group, people at school make fun of you. Like, one day I did my hair different, in an up-style. These girls stopped me in the hall and said, "Why did you do that to your hair? It looks stupid." And then they said to other people in the hall, "Look at her hair today." If you try a style that doesn't work good to them, they will

say “Nice hair” to you in a mean way. They like normal, straight-down hair that looks pretty.

The clothes you wear, they make fun of them if they aren't the good brands. They say, “Your shirt isn't real.” Or they call you “Bi-Way,” because that's a store where everything is cheap. If you wear shoes that are trying to be the same style as Nike but they don't have the swoosh, then they will say, “Your shoes are so ghetto.” That means they are cheap, like poser shoes. There's always a little way they can tell if your clothes are real. Like, true Adidas pants have three stripes down the side, and the fake brands only have two. So everyone can tell. My coat, it's not famous, but it looks a bit like a real brand. Except there's no word printed on it. So everybody always remarks on it, like, “Your coat is fake.”

The clothes that are okay to wear are Nike, Fila, Fubu, Hilfiger, Gap, Adidas, Lugz, and other ones too, that I don't remember. But I don't have so much money to wear all those brands. They cost very expensive money to buy them. I can't really buy all those kinds like that. So I'm used to it when they say my clothes are fake. Pretty much anyone might make fun of each other for what you wear. Males and females, both. No one is safe from it if you look wrong.

There is a main group of girls who are the popular ones in grade nine. And the rest of us just find our own friends that aren't popular. The way the popular girls act is happy and outgoing. They are always laughing in the halls and screaming and hugging each other when they see each

other. And they have friends in older grades than them. And the boys know them, like they say, “Hey” in the hall to each other. And most of them dress the fashion way, like with good brands. They stick together close and they are not shy or scared or nervous of anything. The popular girls, they just do whatever they want and say whatever they want. That’s why everybody wants to be like them. If you get a boyfriend or a girlfriend who is part of the popular group, then you get to be popular too. That’s how you get raised up from the outside groups into the popular group.

I don’t have the right personality to be in the popular group. But it’s okay with me. I feel fine to be a quiet person. I don’t feel like being known. It would take a lot of extra work all the time to be really popular, because everybody is looking at you. You have to keep it up all the time. You have to do everything the right way to keep in the cool group. I don’t want to be the one who walks down the middle of the hall and everybody sees them. I don’t want to hug everyone ten times when I walk to my next class. I just want to mind my own business.

I have a few new friends that I made at Chapelton High. We have our own little group, but we don’t make fun of other people that aren’t in it. Sometimes I still walk to school with my other friends from my neighbourhood, but they hang around in a different group at school. Sometimes they let me be with them and sometimes they don’t. I’m just on the edge of them. The friends from my complex are tougher than my new friends that I met. My new friends are quiet, like me. And they don’t make fun of other people.

Like, this girl that I don't know too good, she wore these pants that no one liked. And other people were making fun of her pants that day. So I just said to her, "those pants are nice," even though I didn't really like them. I just said a little sentence to keep her going, like what Felicity would do. Because probably that girl was wishing those were not her pants.

I've been picked on before in my life, so I know how it feels. That's why I don't do it to other people. When someone makes fun of me, it stops with me. I don't keep it going back and forth with words. Because I know how it feels and I don't want to do that to someone else. So I don't repeat the mean things back to them, but they don't always take my example.

Also I don't answer too much because I don't want anyone to be mad at me. I don't want to be the cause of it. If someone says I'm stupid, I don't say, "Come here and say that to my face, and by the way, you're stupid too." Because then it keeps going back and forth forever, and ends up in a big fight where everyone gets mad and no one is friends. I don't have enough friends to be mean. When someone insults me, I just pretend that they didn't say anything to me, and that it didn't bother me. I say in my head, "I cannot hear you." I pretend my brain is deaf.

I usually ignore it when someone gives me an insult. I don't want nothing to happen, no one on my back. I don't want no trouble. Because there is trouble at my school. Some people get caught by the cops for

violence. I don't want enemies that follow me around. If someone insults me, I ignore it. If I have something to say that disagrees with the other person, I keep my opinion to myself. I try to guess ahead, like, "How will they like this thing that I'm going to say?" And if I guess no, then I don't say it. I just tell people the answer that they want to hear and I don't get in the way of them. In class I don't put my hand up to tell my answers like a goody-goody, because some people don't like that. And if I don't understand my work, I just figure it out or I ask my friend in private. Because if I keep my mouth shut, then I don't have nothing to be afraid of, like, no one has anything to be mad at me for.

Except sometimes it doesn't work enough if I just ignore the person, because they might want an answer out of me. Like, one day I was at my locker and Heather came up and she was mad at me because she thought I told Gwendolyn something that Heather said about her. But I never did. We all live in the same complex, but I hardly ever talk to Gwendolyn. She has other friends than me. But Heather didn't believe me and she said, "Then how did Gwendolyn find out?" and I said, "I don't know." And I don't. That's the truth.

But Heather wasn't just passing by me with an insult about my hair or something. She kept standing there and she wanted an answer, like, who told Gwendolyn. So I was afraid, because I didn't have any answer that was what Heather wanted me to say. I just kept telling her, "I don't know how Gwendolyn found out what you said, but not by me." And I was facing inside my locker and wondering what she was going to do to me.

There were lots of people in the hall, but probably it just looked like I was getting my books out of my locker and Heather was waiting for me like a nice friend of mine.

If I turned around and said, "Leave me alone, Heather. I already told you I don't know anything what you're talking about, so go away," she would have fought me. Probably she wouldn't punch me in the face herself. She would fight me with words and tell me to watch out for later.

I was really scared, because Heather is in the tough group. I didn't know what to do, so I just got my books and pretended that I was just going to my next class, all calm about myself. She followed me down the hall. But after a little time, she went back to her friends. I never told anyone that I'm scared of Heather. If I told the teacher and then Heather got in trouble, she would come back and deal with me after. But she would be even more mad than before. And she would always remember me, that I got her in trouble. I've seen it happen to other people.

When girls fight, it's usually about gossip and rumours, like, who said what. Because everybody has secrets, and they get really mad if they told you something private and then you told somebody else. That's what girls fight about, who did you tell.

Chapelton has all these rules about no violence. But no one can protect you when you're off of school property. Not unless you have a lot of friends and you stand yourself in the middle of them.

I don't talk about school too much to my mom and dad. Because I don't want to get them all worried about me. I just keep it to myself and go up to my room. Because I don't want to get my mom upset. And my dad, probably he would go over to Chapelton and get involved in whatever the situation is. So I just don't tell them because I don't want to make a big scene.

But sometimes, my mom can tell that something is wrong, even when I don't say anything. She reads my face. Then she comes up to my room and asks me if I'm okay. I always say I'm fine at first, because it takes me a long time to decide how much I want to tell her about. Sometimes she sits on my bed and tells me stories about when she was my age and she lived back east. She had this group of friends, and sometimes they would fight, and she would get left out. She says I shouldn't let my friends treat me bad. But I don't know how to make them stop it.

My mom says that as long as I think I'm fine, that's the most important thing. It shouldn't matter to me what other people think. My mom says that as long as I feel okay about myself, I can go on with my life, like, hold up my head. So I try to have my own opinion that I'm fine. But I don't always think so.

I don't need lots and lots of friends, anyways. I have my mom and my dad and my little sister. Some people in the world don't even have one person that loves them good. Maybe their family is dead or they don't have

anyone nice that they know. I'm lucky that I have a few friends that are sincere to me. Like Annie, who was in my class at Gatewood Middle School. She goes to a different school than me now, but not too far away.

In grade eight when I had my first seizure, Annie made me a giant card. Because I kept being away while I got used to having epilepsy. I've been over to Annie's house before, and in the summer she phoned me to invite me to Canada's Wonderland. But I couldn't go because I was at my trailer. When I got back home, she called me again to tell me too bad I couldn't go, maybe next year. I think why she likes me is because people have made fun of her in the past but I never did.

Another person who treats me just fine is Felicity. She comes up to me in the hall and pats me on the shoulder and jokes with me about our olden-times in grade eight at Gatewood. If she's passing by my way, she always stops at my locker and checks out how am I doing today, and what's new with me.

If I wanted her to, Felicity would stick up for me to other people, like Heather. But I don't want to run to someone else all the time. I don't need anybody to stand up for me. I can deal with it myself. I just ignore what they say that is mean. It's easier than bringing someone else into every little situation. If I got Felicity, they would say, "Oh you can't stick up for your own self? You can't fight your own battles? Why does someone else have to talk for you?" I don't want to make the trouble even bigger by calling someone to be on my side.

I don't want to get sent to the office for nothing. I don't want to be involved in all the suspension things, like, violence and drugs and wrecking the school up. Because I know that my mom won't want to go through that hassle. She wouldn't like the idea of me being suspended. I would disappoint her with that news. She would flip out and be shocked. She would ask me a million questions, like, "What happened? How come you did this?" I'd be like, "Hold on. Let me talk my side." She might listen, or she might say, "Just go up to your room. I don't want to have no more fights about this. And I don't want any more of your trouble brought into this house."

Sometimes my dad blames me for things that I never did. And I tell him I didn't do it, but he says I did. Like, at Chapelton, some kids are taking pills, like, snorting them or something. They have these bags with some kind of drugs in them that they snort up their nose. I had nothing to do with it. But everybody is talking about it. And this guy in my complex, he is a caretaker at Chapelton, and he's friends with my dad. So he tells my dad what is going on there. Some students got caught because there are video cameras at my school. So my dad said to me, "Your face better not be on that video." I told him, "Those people aren't my friends that I hang around with. I never even seen any pills."

I argue back to my dad sometimes. I don't just keep my mouth shut if I know that I'm right. I said, "You are not talking fair about me. Prove the evidence that I'm buying pills because I'm not." It's easier talking back

to my dad than to my friends. I don't argue back to them, because probably they would just walk away and not be my friends anymore. Most of my friends from my complex don't like it if you be different than their opinion. They would probably say, "Go away, you're not in our group anymore, we don't need to see your face, leave us alone." But my mom and dad aren't going to walk away and not be my parents. They will still love me and keep me in the house. So sometimes I say my own side of the story to my mom and dad, even if they don't believe me.

Like, when my dad couldn't find his five dollars that was on the table, the first thing he thinks is that I'm snorting up drugs with his money. I never took any money from my dad. I never bought any pills. But I'm suspicious because a lot of kids are involved and he thinks I'm hiding myself. My father told the caretaker to watch me close and tell him if he ever sees me doing any trouble at school. If I ever did something bad, I guess he would report about me to my dad like a spy.

I think my dad is nervous because he doesn't want me to fall in that path. He doesn't want me doing any of that stuff. He says if I ever do drugs, just go ahead and see what happens to myself. See how I feel later. See how I like the consequences of my life falling apart.

I'm not into those choices, like drugs, smoking, drinking, sex. Nobody peer-pressures me. Some of my friends in my complex do those things, but nobody makes me. If you do, you do. If you don't, you don't. So far it never happened that somebody told me to do those things.

My mom and dad smoke, so they can't really tell me not to do it. They would probably say, "Go ahead, but you have to buy your own smokes." Like, they won't help me pay. But I don't want to start. Because it's hard to quit once you start. Both of them want to quit now but they can't.

I don't know what I will be when I grow up. In our Mentoring class, I was supposed to predict myself in five years, but I just have blank answers. I don't know what my job will be. It's far away. I think maybe I could work at Swiss Chalet, like, be a waitress. I don't want a job that's too big for me. I don't want to have a fast job where everybody is waiting for me to tell them what to do. I just want a quiet job that I can do where nobody is on my back. I don't think I'd be good in business because I failed that subject. I don't know anything that I'm good enough to do for a career. I don't know how my life will turn out. I just live every day and see where it takes me. Right now I just want to get through safe to grade ten.

All my subjects are hard to me. I get one class of extra help and that's my favourite time. I don't even care that other people call me dumb. They say they are more smarter than me, they're better than me, they've got higher marks than me, I need kindergarten work. I don't know how they found out that I go to the extra-help class, but somehow they know. I don't answer them back. I just answer myself. I say to myself, "It's okay to get help. It's better than failing grade nine."

My grade nine special help class is a small group and they all treat me no problem. And my teacher is not in a hurry. You can talk to her about other things in your life, not just homework. Sometimes I sit in a quiet corner of the room and have a little conversation with her. It's like in grade eight, when I used to stay in at lunch and make dream-catchers with Ms V. It's easier to talk then because nobody else is listening. Another good thing about the extra-help class is that I don't get any new work there. The whole time I just get to do my homework from my other classes, and the teacher explains it to me slow.

Regular classes are very hard. That's why I skip so much. I just go outside and walk around by myself. Because in class, I don't know what's going on half the time. There are so many students, maybe thirty-five, but only one teacher. So the teacher just wants you to understand fast, because they can't help you much. My computer teacher, I didn't understand anything she said. I know how to use a computer by myself, but we had to do these assignments of certain things that I didn't have any clues. So I just failed that subject. The teacher got tired of explaining everything, like, she breathed loud to me when I ask for help. And she said, "Why don't you listen the first time I said how to do it?" I was listening, but I still didn't get what she was saying.

It was the same last year in grade eight. I did okay in Math and English because I was in the extra help class in the morning. It was at my level. But in the afternoon when we moved around to the regular classes,

that's when the work tricked me. And Shane and John and Andy were always mouthing off and fooling around so the teachers were not in a good mood to see our class coming to their door. I didn't ask for help too much. I just tried to figure it out myself, or else see how Annie was doing it. Because I didn't want to be a bother to the teacher, like be another interruption in the way. In the regular classes there are too many kids to help and the teacher is in a hurry to teach. They say, "Talk to me after school and I'll help you then. Not right now." So, some things I fail, some things I pass. But I don't cause trouble.

There was one time that I understood the work last year. It was a graph. I went up to the board because I knew how to do the question that she asked. But after I sat down, John called me "suck-up," like, I'm trying to be the teacher's pet. So I just kept my mouth shut most of the time last year.

Well, during Morning Circle I might say something. I liked that part the best of the day. Because the topic of the day goes around the circle to everyone, and you can respond something if you want, or you could pass. No one is allowed to interrupt or take away your turn. Usually I passed to the next person, but sometimes I would say a little sentence about my opinion. We don't do Morning Circle this year, like, high school doesn't do it that way. I miss Circle, because I liked when it was my turn. It's not like talking in real life, because no one can say anything against your words.

Most of the time I keep my feelings to myself. Because there are people like Tracy, Gwendolyn, John, Andy, Shane, lots of people, who think you're weird if your words don't go toward their words. If you try to say something that you think, and you accidentally say it wrong by accident, they don't give you a chance to remark yourself. They are already laughing at you, and correcting your opinion to be whatever they think.

My best way to be is silent. When I don't talk, it's sort of like being free. And other people just leave me alone, because I am not commenting any words against them. I am free. I'm out of the group and I can think my own way to myself. I am not starting any problems. Nobody can comment on what I say, if I don't say anything. There is nothing to measure up how smart I am, or if my answer is the right one that they wanted me to say. When I'm silent, then I'm safe. I'm free.

Mackenzie's Response

My Name:

I like it because it makes me picture somebody who is outgoing. I don't know anybody with this name. I didn't get it from TV. I just got it from the top of my head.

My Font (CG Times):

I picked this font because it's in-between. It's just simple and calm. It's not tough-looking or fancy. It's in-between, same as me.

**My Symbol:**

I picked a star because I shine on people. I give them light to lead them to light. If someone's down, I pick them up.

How it felt to be part of this process:

I felt okay telling my stories to you because I knew you for a long time and I trust you. It feels good to hear you read my stories out loud because I said those opinions, and now they're written down. Because most of the time, when you speak out loud, the words are just gone out to the air. Once the words are out of your mouth, you can't get them back. But when the words are written down on paper, then you still have them. And we get to read them, and talk about them, and make them fit the way I feel.

A Heart-Beat Before Cassidy Tells Her Story:

Cassidy has her head down on her desk. Her face is buried in the crook of her elbow. The soft yellow fleece of her shirt cradles her head like a nested egg. Her short black hair is pulled into a tight knot at the nape of her neck, and the ends stick out like they are trying to escape. Cassidy's slumped body covers what she has been writing. I wonder what is going on with her today, whether she is feeling sick, or frustrated with her work, or something else. I stand beside her desk and rest my hand on her shoulder. The fleece is soft on my palm. She shifts her body to one side and rolls her head around slowly to look at me, like a turtle blinking in the light. As she turns to face me, tears spill from her dark eyes and drop on to the papers she has been protecting. She sits back in her chair and pushes the four papers toward me. Each page features one line, repeated sixteen times. "I'm stupid." "I'm a big fat whale." "I hate myself." "I wish I was dead."

Cassidy:

"One at a time we will all get mad out loud"

That was last year, when I was in grade eight. I'm in high school now, and I've changed a lot since I wrote those pages. I don't really want to die. I just say that sometimes when I feel upset. But I still feel like my life is too long. I'm fourteen now, I'm in grade nine, and I could live so many more years before I die of a normal age. I'm tired already and I still have a long time left.

And sometimes I still feel sad inside. Like, I could cry at every single thing. The sadness is very close to me. But I don't usually let it out, except when I'm with my closest friends that I know. I try to hold it in and act normal, because I don't want everyone to see that side of me. They'll think I'm a suck.

My best friends, Asira and Carly, they are used to me by now. They always hug me when I cry and tell me it's okay. They know how I am. Like, if someone else is crying, I cry for sure. I'm a very sensitive person. When I see something that is sad, or very wrong, I have tears for that person who is hurt. Like, when we were reading that thing in the newspaper about the women in Bangladesh. It was so awful. That woman who didn't do what her boyfriend wanted so he threw acid in her face. The picture was terrible and it kept on instant replaying in my mind. But I wasn't crying at first until what John did. He laughed at the picture. He thought their faces looked funny, like melted wax, and he was making fun of them. That's the part when I couldn't take it any more.

I wish I would have said something to John because I was so mad. I would have told him how did he get born without a heart. But you can't really talk back to John because he never listens. He just laughs at whatever you say. If Felicity heard him make fun of the Bangladesh women, she would have told him off for five hours. I

don't know the words she would say. But at the end he would have got the point.

Words never come out my mouth like that, like flying so perfect in public. Usually I just keep my mouth shut and say my words inside myself. Or I tell them to Asira and Carly after. Like, last year, in grade eight, it happened all the time about my work. John and Andy and Shane were pretty mean, you know? Tracy too, sometimes. They would always say things about other people, like, "You can't even do that easy math? What grade are you in?" Or they said, "Oh that was a really smart answer" but they meant it the opposite, like a sarcastic way. Sometimes they even wrote it in a note, like, they'd drop it on your desk when they walk by.

Once John sent me a little piece of paper all folded up small that just said, "You are so stupid." Or in Circle, they would sit with a sideways face to show that your idea is dumb. To all the girls they did it. And they made fun of some boys, even. The quiet ones, like David. That's why he never said nothing in class. They always used put-downs, like, constantly. They still think everything is a joke. They hurt my feelings every single day but they didn't care. They would cuss you out, call you "dumb bitch" and everything, but then they'd act all good in front of the teachers.

No offense, but teachers don't see anything that happens. It's like you are all blind. Like, one time you were in the cupboard getting something, a pencil or something, I don't know. And I was begging you in my mind to turn around and look at Andy. Because he was standing right in front of my desk bugging me. He saw my math test, so he was going, "How stupid are you?" and "You should be in grade one." And I didn't say anything back, but inside my head I was screaming at you. Like, "Please get over here and notice this now!" But when you turned back around, Andy was already back at his seat. It happens all the time. Outside and in the hall, for sure nobody can control the boys. They say whatever they want. But in class, too, they do exactly the same things only they do them quiet. They are still just as rude. They are just sneaky.

The worst part is that no one sees. Well, all of us see, but no teachers. Teachers don't see anything true. It's like when you gave Shane the "Student of the Month" award at the assembly, and you said all those nice things about him. All of us were just sitting there going, "Hello? Are you asleep?" And you know what really drove me crazy in grade eight? The blessings at Morning Circle. Because you would say all these beautiful, peaceful things about a person, but in real life they are totally mean and rude. Except it's not your fault, really, because they hide it good. Like, obviously John and Andy are not going to insult me in front of your face because they know they

will get in trouble. If you're looking, they don't do it. You need to see what happens when you're not looking.

I wish the clock in the classroom was a secret camera. Or a hidden eyeball. So you could see everything that happens behind your back. Like, John was always dissing Mackenzie. He would say stuff to her, like, "How come you never say nothing? What's your problem? You're a loser." And all three teachers were in the room when he said it, but you were all doing something else, not close to Mackenzie's desk. And she never said anything back to him, because you know about how his temper happens. And even if she told him to get lost, probably she would get in trouble for saying that. That happens all the time, like, the teacher turns around halfway through your words and you get caught, but meanwhile nothing happens to John and he's the one who started it. He just says his put-downs and then he disappears away.

It's better not to answer the boys when they act like that, because you get in too much trouble. You can't just blow up your temper in the middle of class. And the boys don't listen anyways. They just laugh if you get mad at them. That's what they do. And then I feel like screaming and I start to cry.

Like, last year Andy always called me fat and ugly. The boys say stuff like that to me all the time. I've had enough of it in my life.

That's why I never changed into my gym clothes for all of grade eight. Mr. Bailey gave me a detention pretty much every single gym class because I wouldn't participate, and I didn't even care. No way I'm jumping and running around in front of John and Andy and Shane. No way. Go ahead and fail me.

Trust me, I have a bad temper. You should have known me in grade four and five. I used to mouth off to anyone who dissed me or my friends. I was brave before I got to grade seven. Outside at recess I didn't take nothing from no one. I got in a lot of trouble for my mouth. Like, this group used to call me "stupid retard" because of getting extra help, and they always made fun of how I look, that I'm too big. I would just go right up to them and say, "Who do you think you are? Are you in charge of the world? Are you God? Mind your own business and shut up."

But then in grade seven, I came to Gatewood and I settled down myself. I didn't want a reputation, you know? Like, I didn't want the teachers to know how mad I can get, because they probably wouldn't like me too much. If I mouthed back in class to everyone who bugged me, I would get in trouble for sure. And the teachers might get the wrong idea about me, that I'm a problem girl. So in front of everyone I usually just say nothing back to the boys. Because, if I let my mouth be open when I'm mad, you should hear the words that would come out of it. I would be suspended for a month.

One time Andy and Shane were laughing at my dress, my sundress that I was wearing that day. Because it is short, like, that is the style of it. And they were fake screaming like, "Ew, gross! Put some clothes on!" and "Nice legs. NOT." But I didn't say nothing back because I just felt stupid and embarrassed. And if I said what I really wanted to say, I would be expelled. And I couldn't tell the teacher what they said, because then they would just get me back later for telling. I just had to sit there and take it.

So I started crying. That always happens to me when I keep my madness inside myself. The tears just fall down my face and I can't talk normal to no one because I can't even breathe enough. When Shane and Andy saw me crying, then they called me, "Suck."

One of these days, the girls will fight back. The boys think they have power over girls, that they can say whatever they want to us and we will just take it from them. But someday it is going to turn around and we will have the power over them. I think every single girl will just get to a point where she says, "Forget it. I am finished listening to you." And the ones who are married will say, "I am finished doing your dishes." One at a time we will all get mad out loud. Not just the girls, but every person who has had their feelings hurt for a long time. I know this is true, because I'm getting close to that point. In grade eight I had this plan that all of sudden one day I

would stand up in front of the whole class and yell at either John or Andy. One or the other. I wanted to end every word they ever said to me. It would be way worse than when I yelled at Neil about my glasses. That was just a small introduction of how mad I can get.

I know that screaming at people doesn't fix nothing and all that. But it will feel good to me. Because my words will be out in public. Right now all the mad words are inside me like a little bean and it is getting bigger and bigger until one day I am going to explode. That's why I keep my mouth shut. If I said what I really think, it would be like a tornado.

I'm tired of other people being in charge of me. Like, the whole thing that happened with Tracy. I got in so much trouble for that. The worst trouble of my life. It's my fault. I let her be in charge of me. I should have walked away. But Tracy is tougher than me. If someone makes fun of her, she never cries. She just tells them to f--- off. So I was scared of her. I was scared of the words she said, about the mafia.

It was a Monday afternoon. No one was in the classroom except me and her. At first I was alone in the room writing my science test that I missed, but then Tracy got kicked out of gym so she was there, too. But she wasn't supposed to be in there, just me. I think she was still mad at me for getting her caught for smoking.

So she wanted a way to get back at me. I know that's why. So when it was just me and her in the classroom, she went in to the cupboard and took out Mrs. Nunford's purse. She took out her wallet and she was searching all through it. She found her MasterCard and she said to me, "Come here." So I came over to the cupboard, and she handed me the wallet, and she told me to take the credit card out of it. She could have just taken the card out of the wallet all by herself. But I think she wanted someone else to be in trouble, too. Not just her.

She kept saying, "Come on, Cassidy" and I kept saying, "No." She started pushing me around, but I kept telling her, "No." Except then she told me that she would get a gang after me, like the mafia. I don't even know who that is, but I know they're tough. Tracy knows a lot of people. I could maybe fight one person, but not a group on me all at once. So when she said that, that's when I just froze my answers. And I took the credit card out of Mrs. Nunford's wallet and I threw it at her. She took the card and put it in her locker.

After school, Tracy went to the mall with Asira and two girls from another class. They charged so much stuff: jewellery, make-up, CD's and boots that cost \$125.00. They faked Mrs. Nunford's name. They did the signature really good and nobody caught them.

The next day, I was sitting in class and I couldn't take it. Because Mrs. Nunford always treats me good, you know. She has known me for a long time. And she didn't deserve what happened to her card. I felt so guilty, you know? I was totally ashamed. I felt like, "What kind of person am I?" But I was afraid to tell what I did. Like, terrified. Tracy told me and Asira that, if we say anything, her mom would phone the school and charge us for stealing the card. I knew Tracy would find out if I opened up my big mouth about it. And what if she really did get the mafia, or whoever, to punish me? I couldn't concentrate on one bit of work that day. I just kept going back and forth in my mind.

On Wednesday I couldn't last for any longer. The guilt came up to my chest and I couldn't even breathe hardly. So I said to Tracy, "I'm going to tell. I can't do this anymore." And she said, "Do you know how much trouble you are going to get into?" But I didn't care because nothing would be as worse as how I already felt. Well, I thought Tracy was going to kill me if I told, but she didn't do anything. She just said, "You're pretty strong to tell." I don't know why she said that to me. I expected her to freak out and try to stop me. But she didn't. So I went right down to the guidance office and I told Ms Derry that I had an emergency to tell her.

I wanted to find out what the trouble would be first, before I said the whole truth. So I just said, "Two of my friends took a

teacher's credit card and I want to know some advice for them." And Ms Derry asked me, "Are you one of the two friends that took the card?" I don't know how she knew so fast. But I was tired of pretending, so I told her, "Yes." And then I told her everything what happened and she said she would help me tell Mrs. Nunford.

So Ms Derry called down Mrs. Nunford and I just started bawling. Mrs. Nunford put her arm around me and she had tears in her eyes that I saw. She said it's good that I got brave enough to tell. I knew there would be big consequences from the office, but I didn't care because I deserved it. They suspended me for five days, but that's okay with me. Because Mrs. Nunford believed me, that I was sorry. She forgave me. She said it out loud to me.

The office called the cops and they came to my house while I was suspended. But I never got charged for anything. The cop said it was my reward for telling the truth. Except next time if I do that, I will get a record for sure. But I am never doing that again, ever. Tracy got suspended too, and the cops charged her for theft and fraud and something else. Because the video cameras at the mall saw everything they did.

Tracy never called the mafia or anything. I think she was in enough trouble already, that's why. I don't know why I believed her so much before. Like, if someone else told me they were going to get

the mafia after me, I would go, "Yeah right." But Tracy is tough, and there was just me and her there, no one to back me up. So I had to do what she said. But next time I am not believing anything out of her. I will just turn around and walk right out the door and tell the principal. I don't care about ratting on my friends. They're not my real friends if they make me do things like what I did.

I wish I never had anything to do with that story. So many bad things happened, just because of that choice that I did. I made Mrs. Nunford cry, and the cops have my name now, and my mom doesn't trust me anymore. When the police came to our house, she was yelling at me like, "How could you do that to Mrs. N. after all the stuff she did for you? What kind of nasty way is that? What were you thinking in your head?" That kind of thing. She told me how I have to say "no" to people and not just follow them like I have no brain. Like, if Tracy told me to jump off a cliff, I should use my own opinion because Tracy's not in charge of me.

After the cops left, my mom said, "I'm not going to ground you. I'm just going to ignore you." And she did. She did not say one word to me for two weeks. She gave me the silent treatment, to make me pay for what I did. She just pretended I wasn't even there. If I asked for something, she would only answer to my brother. "Randy, what does your sister want?" It felt terrible, like I didn't even exist. I would rather be grounded.

My mom just wants me to turn out okay, like not be in prison in the future, you know? She's afraid I'm going to mess up my life. She always tells me the way to be. She says, "Cassidy, you got choices to make in this life. Use your head." I can talk to her about some things. Like, if someone fights me at school, or makes fun of me, or if I fail a test, I go home and tell her. But only if it's something that won't make her mad at me. When someone picks on me, or I do bad on an assignment even though I tried to do it good, those things I can tell my mom. She can take it fine if it's not something that is my fault.

But, if I'm in trouble for something that is my own fault, then I don't just volunteer to tell my mom about it. I don't usually tell her what I did bad, because she gets disappointed in how I am. So I wait to see if the school phones her and then I confess it. Because she doesn't need to know every single little small crime that I do, like if I don't bring my gym clothes or if I skip English when we have a supply. But she doesn't disown me or anything. She just talks to me all about it, and sometimes I get grounded. But sometimes she lays off me a bit if she knows I already learned my lesson enough. Like, she went a bit easy on me about stealing Mrs. Nunford's card, because I was already the most sorry of my life.

Except sometimes my mom's not around because she has to work until really late. She gets home at about 11:00 p.m. because it

takes long to get the bus. I'm supposed to be in bed, but sometimes I stay awake if I need to ask her something. I don't usually cause too much trouble to my mom at home. I take care of my little brother and I'm a responsible person about it. I do what my mom says because she works really hard and she's tired from it. She says, "Cassidy, don't start with me." Like, I love my mom very much, but she doesn't have too much extra time to sit around. I miss my dad every day.

He was my best listener. He would always say, "Tell me what you're thinking," and he wouldn't let anyone interrupt me. He would say to other people, "Just wait, because I'm listening to Cassidy right now." I could tell him anything and he would totally listen to all of it. And he wouldn't freak out at me, even if I was in trouble at school or something. He would just wait to hear my side of the story, because everybody has their own side of what happened. I could ask him any question and he would just answer it like normal. I always told him about the boys at school, the ones I liked and the ones that were mean to me. I only saw my dad on the weekends so I saved up all my talk and then I just talked non-stop from Friday until Sunday. He was my best friend.

My father died when I was nine. I used to live with him and my mom, and then they got divorced and I just lived with him on every weekend. But then he got cataracts and he had to have an operation to take them off of his eyes. Except something happened wrong with

the operation, and he got blind by mistake. So he went back to our country, where we came from, because my grandma is still over there. He went back there to live with my grandma, and she took care of him because he couldn't see anything. So I never hardly saw him anymore and then he died.

My grandma phoned to tell us. All my Canada relatives were shocked when they found out the news. No one in Canada could believe it. My mom cried forever, because even though they were divorced, they still got along good. I could not stop crying. There are not enough tears in the whole ocean to be equal to how much I cried.

I kept listening to all the phone calls back and forth, but I never got any information out of anyone. No one would tell me what happened, like how my dad died. I still don't know. I have no idea. My aunt just said he's dead and that's enough to know. All the time I wonder about the true details.

I think about my dad every day. Sometimes I dream about him except he is still alive in my dream. And he can see me good, like, he's not blind anymore.

After my dad died, that's when I started writing poetry. I don't know why. It's just something I do when I miss him. That's why all my poems are sad. I write the feelings I want to tell him. I've been

writing poems for maybe five years. It's the only thing I'm good at in school. Like, I need extra help for every subject, except in writing I am smart alone. I think people who write poems, and also singers, something bad probably happened to them in their life. Because poems and songs have very deep emotions.

I don't read my poems to too many people. I just keep them to be my own private business. That's because I don't want people telling me my poems are stupid, like, not good enough to be real poems. Because to me they matter. I think my poems are just fine, but I keep them protected from other people's opinions who are rude.

When I am by myself writing, it's so peaceful and quiet. It's not a crying kind of quiet. It's calm. Like, I don't feel stupid when I write. I am good enough how I already am.

I am braver when I'm writing than when I'm talking out loud. Like my English teacher this year, I don't trust him. He's creepy. He always winks at me and raises up his eyebrows. I don't like it. I think he's a pervert. One time I was wearing my leotard under my overalls and it fits me close. Well, I went up to ask him a question but he wasn't even looking at my face. He was looking at my chest. He's a sicko. A psycho and a sicko. Both. So there is no way I am going to respect him because he doesn't respect me. Don't look at me like that if you want me to do what you say. So I told him to stop it in my

journal. He told us to write what we really think so I did. I wrote to him that I don't like the way he looks at me and winks and raises his eyebrows and looks at my chest in my overalls. I told him that I think he is creepy. And then I handed in my journal for him to read. He didn't write me back yet.

But after I wrote all that stuff to him, I felt like I might as well say stuff to him out loud. Like, if I can write it, I can say it. So this one day, he sent these two guys from my class to the detention room. After they were gone he called them fools to the rest of us. So I said, "You shouldn't call them fools. That's rude." I said it right out loud. And he told me that it doesn't concern me and it's not my business. So I told him that it does so concern me, because I heard him say it. I told him that "fool" is a dis, and those guys were not here to defend themselves. He told me to be quiet and do my work and if I don't then he'll send me to the detention room along with them. So I was quiet, but I think he was wrong.

I am not doing that great in English. Most of the time I skip. When I do go to class, I don't behave that good because I don't like the teacher. He's a creepy pervert and how am I supposed to learn anything from him? Forget it. I don't think I'm going to fail English, because I do the work enough. But the teacher doesn't know how good I can write. He doesn't have one clue and I'm not telling him. Because he doesn't deserve to read my poems.

My social studies teacher is another one that I don't trust. He calls me and Asira, "Dumb and Dumber." We told him not to call us that anymore, but he said he's just joking around.

The best subject that I love is drama. That's because our teacher is so nice. She says I'm such a good help, because I don't fool around like most of the people in my class. They think drama is an easy credit, you know? Like, they just goof around and don't take nothing seriously. But I like acting out the scripts and I have good expression. I say my lines with a lot of emotion and I can make myself cry. And it's not real life, so you can say whatever you want. The teacher told me right on the first day that I have ability in it and she's glad I'm in her class. So ever since that first day I don't cause her any trouble, because she doesn't deserve any. Drama's my highest mark. My teacher said that if I keep this up maybe when I finish all the drama credits when I'm in grade twelve I can get an extra credit by helping in her classes. So that's my goal for my future.

I can't really predict how my life will go. That is too far away to make a plan, because lots of things could change. I don't even know the plan of what I'm doing after I eat my dinner tonight. I just want to pass grade nine. But probably in the future I will stay in school for a few more grades, so I can get a good enough job. I don't know what

job yet. I want to make enough money to live in a nice neighbourhood, like, no violence, no drugs, and some trees.

But who knows? Anything can happen that you don't expect. Like, I never expected for my dad to get blind and die. Sometimes you just get shocked.

No one can predict the future. Like, I don't have a boyfriend right now, but if I do get one, then maybe I will get pregnant from him. Maybe not. Who knows? It would be okay with me if I have a baby. My mom had me when she was sixteen, so she won't be mad at me. She knows what it's like. My mom would probably help me take care of the baby, and maybe I would keep going to school or get a job somewhere. I don't know yet. Whatever happens, happens. You can't just make your life come true the way you want.

Cassidy's Response

My Name:

I got this name from a girl on the TV show "Breaker High." On the show, Cassidy is a very strong person, and she says whatever she thinks out loud. To me, "Cassidy" is a name that means that I'm strong and I stick up for myself.

My Font (Book Antiqua):

This font is fine, but it doesn't mean anything to me. I don't care how the words look. It's what my words are saying that is important. You might think my part looks boring because the font is regular, but if you read it you'll like it. And if you don't, tough.



My Symbol:

I chose a heart because it represents who I am on the inside, not on the outside. Your heart is the part that keeps the rest of you alive.

How it felt to be part of this process:

When we did the first interview, I felt nervous, because I was afraid that I might say the wrong thing. But then I got used to saying whatever I wanted to say. I got to express myself. Seeing my stories written out in words brought back memories. Some of them are sad memories, like about my dad. I cried when we got to that part. Some of the memories make me feel like I wish I could go back in time and make different choices. It's good to have these memories written down, so you remember what to change in your future life. But it's good to let go of them too, because you can't go back and change what happened so why torture yourself about it.

A Heart-Beat Before Felicity Tells Her Story:

Our grade seven/eight class is putting together a book, featuring a personal essay and photograph representing each student. Each student chooses a location in which to be photographed, a place that reflects some aspect of themselves. I take Annie's picture at the Seniors Home where she volunteers. Mark rides his skateboard down Yonge Street. Sydney returns to the neighbourhood where she grew up. "I know where I want to go for my photo," Felicity announces excitedly one morning. "I want you to take my picture in front of a courthouse, wearing a long black gown and boxing gloves."

Felicity:

"I am already enough."

I chose that photo because I want to be a judge when I grow up. Or a lawyer. I want to defend or decide. One or the other. I already get a lot of practice. People always come to me with their problems, and I tell them what I think.

I'm not afraid to say my opinion. I don't care if other people make fun of me, or if my idea is different

than them. I don't have to be the same as them. I'm not a repeat of somebody else's personality. I have to represent myself. Like, in Morning Circle, I hardly ever pass. Because usually I have something important to say about the topic.

Some topics, I could talk all day about them. Like in history class when we were learning about the Valiant Five, I just wanted to be one of those women. Women weren't allowed to be on the Canadian Senate, like the high government that makes decisions. And the reason was very ridiculous and ignorant. Because the constitution said "he" and "him" all the time, so the government thought that it meant that only men can count as people. Like, hello? So these women took it to the Supreme Court. I say, "You go, girls."

But the Supreme Court fought about it for five weeks and then they just said, "It's true, only men are real persons that can get appointed up to the Senate." What was the matter with them inside their heads? Well, the Valiant Women did not accept that news, and

neither would I, if I was there. They said, “What? God help us, this is craziness! We’re going to the highest government over in England, if that’s the way you’re going to be.” And they did. They complained to the Privy Council and they got what they wanted. And now women can be in the Senate, because those five women would not put up with it.

I just love that story. I love how they didn’t give up and they just kept going. They didn’t fight with guns and fists. They used their brains and their words. It’s the best way, same as Martin Luther King Jr. said. He wanted freedom for the blacks, enough of this racism. But he wanted to get there by peace, not by killing all the white people.

And Harriet Tubman, she didn’t just sit there and say, “Slavery is terrible, oh no, what will we do?” She got herself up and snuck her way to Canada and came back nineteen times to get other slaves out. That is the black history of my people. That is my heritage of being

brave. I'm proud to talk about it. I came from those stories because I'm black and I'm a woman.

My country is Haiti. Well, I have never been there, but I've seen pictures. I was born in Canada, but my mom was born in Haiti and I still have relatives over there. So my mom grew me up to speak French and English and Creole.

Creole is a language like a quilt. You make your own design with the words, you speak it your own way, and then you pass it down to the next generation. At home, me and my mom talk whatever language comes out of our mouths first. I like when we speak French, because then it is just private between us, like a secret that other people don't have.

I started out going to French immersion school. Everything was in French. I liked it fine, but then I had to move and I went to English school and I had no idea what they were talking about. I moved in grade two. When I got to the English school, I was behind the other

kids. Like I couldn't read and write in English, because I learned in French before. So they made me do grade two again. That was the start of my problems at school, like failing my subjects and fighting.

I have my father's temper inside of me. I absorbed up his anger and his energy to be violent. But I do not use it anymore to hurt other people. My father gave me the dark side, but I am living in the light side now.

My father did not get along with my mother. We used to all live together when I was little, but that was a disaster time, you know? They were always yelling and arguing. I would cry every night because I could always hear them fighting.

My father was rough. If I made him mad, he would hit me with his exercise belt. I had so many bruises and sore places. I still have scars on my back that he did to me. I will always have the marks of the past on me from my dad. But inside myself I have the marks of my future because I am strong and I am brave.

I was afraid of my dad. He is way bigger than me, and stronger. When he was really mad and he was looking for me, I used to hide underneath the bed and pray. Sometimes God didn't let him find me. I would make myself flat and lie still under there until he went to another room yelling. I am the only kid in our family, so there was nobody else to hide with.

But once my dad catches you, you better not try to get away then. Because that just makes him madder, and he hits you harder. When he got hold of me and he had the belt, I would just keep still until he was done hitting me. If you scream and cry and make a big scene, he will give it to you worse.

My mom has always treated me fine. My whole life I was attached to her like glue. She would try to stop my dad when his temper was blowing up, but his anger made him be stronger than one normal person. One time he grabbed my mother's arm and he made her punch her hand into the wall. Her hand was hurt bad from that. I

don't know what she said that made him mad that time. He was always mad about something.

So one day when I was in grade two and I was still in French immersion, my mom came to pick me up from school. I said, "Why are you here? Where are we going?" And she said, "We are going to the mall." But we went to a shelter instead. When we got there I said, "This is not the mall, mom." That's the moment when I knew my whole life was going to change.

At the shelter, I shared a room with my mom, and we had bunkbeds like sisters. I hardly had any of my own stuff, like, my toys and my clothes. They were still at the apartment, but we couldn't go back there.

My dad did not know where we were, so there was no yelling or fighting. They kept moving us around from place to place, to keep us safe from my dad. It was kind of like the Underground Railroad, I guess. I went to lots of different schools, but only for a few days, not long enough to make friends.

My mom went to this support group about how to be strong. I heard a lot of things at that group, other people's stories of how they got away. It was for grown-ups, but they let me stay with my mom. I was about seven, I guess. I didn't want to be anywhere by myself, and my mom didn't want to leave me. Because she was afraid that my dad would find me. Even when I just went to the bathroom, I would tell my mom first, "Don't worry. I am just going to pee and then I'll be right back here in five minutes. I promise."

My mom got us an apartment, and I started English school. That's when I did grade two again. I had a lot of things to get used to, like speaking English, and my new school, my new friends, my new teacher, my new apartment and living without my father.

I missed my dad sometimes at first. Because when he wasn't mad, he treated me okay. There's a good side of him sometimes. He taught me some things that I still keep in my head. He always says you have to work hard

to get what you want in this life. Nothing's going to be handed to you for free. There's a price you have to pay. That's one good thing he taught me to help my future.

I remember every year we would go to Ontario Place for Celebrate Canada day. And I would sit on top of my dad's shoulders and watch the fireworks. So some memories are okay. Also, we had enough money when we were all together. But I do not miss his temper screaming in my direction.

My dad tried to steal me back once when I was seven. I was at my uncle's house playing with my cousin. I remember I was wearing a blue dress. And my dad showed up at the door, but he wasn't screaming or hitting. He just took me back with him to his house. Except I was supposed to be with my mom and she didn't know where I was. So then my uncle came and got me, and gave me back to my mom.

In those days, I was a fighter like my father. I had his fire in me. And I would not put up with anything from

anyone at school. Those years when I was in grades three, four, five, six, I had a reputation. I was vicious then. They called me “the dog,” because I bit this girl’s arm. She had a broken bone inside, and they had to cut her arm open to fix it. She got sixteen stitches, and everyone knew it was because of me.

When people see that you have a temper, they know that they can start you going. They made fun of me all the time. They laughed at how my hair was set up to be. And they didn’t like my clothes that I wore. And how I spoke, like, French and Creole and English, they didn’t know what to do with that. And I’m big. Every part of me is big. My teeth, my face, my hands, my feet. I am not a scrawny chicken. They said I was a fat, ugly bee-otch. That’s another word for bitch. So I got in a lot of fights.

I used to punch, kick, bite, hit, scream, swear, whatever I had to do to get my point across. The worst damage I did was when they made fun of my mom. They said “Your mama is an ugly cow.” I would finish off any

kid who dissed my mother. You don't diss somebody's mom. Everyone knows that.

I still have the feelings that I want to fight sometimes now, but I don't do it. Well, I did get mad last week at school. I punched my hand through the glass on the door in the hall. I didn't know I was strong enough to break it. I let my temper follow my father that time. I am not proud of what I did. But I guess it's better that I punched the glass and not the teacher who made me mad.

Most of the time now I solve my problems with words. I am finished fighting. It doesn't fix anything. It doesn't get you anywhere, except the office. If someone wants to start something with me, I'll just take the punch. Because then I still have my pride, that I did the right thing. I don't want to hurt anyone anymore. That part of my life is over.

Sometimes I'm still involved in situations, but I don't start the conflict and I don't do physical violence.

But there are times when one of my friends needs help, like they need a strong person beside them. Like, these grade eights were going to beat up Tina, and I just went up to them and put Tina behind me. And I told them, “Look. If you want to fight her, you’re going to have to get past me first. So go ahead, but I’m not moving.” They just walked away then, because they know not to mess with me.

Those girls that fight each other, I know how they are. They hang around in groups and it makes them feel brave. But they are not too brave alone. That’s the difference between them and me. I am brave by myself. Because the courage comes from inside of me, not from being in a gang of people.

I am strong in my body and my heart. I am a strong, black woman. But I don’t use my strength against people anymore. I use it to help them. Like, when the boys were teasing Mackenzie, I just told them, “Someday somebody’s going to make fun of you, and then you’ll find out how bad it feels.” And they stopped

bugging her. I think they only like to bug one person alone. If someone else goes beside that person who is their victim, then they back off. So I go around everywhere, just interrupting myself into the problem places. Because there are too many people hurting each other. Someone has to get in there and say, "Enough of this."

I don't use put-downs, because then I would be just the same as them. Your tongue can be a weapon, same as a knife or a gun. So I don't threaten anybody, because I already learned the other side of being violent. I've got scars on my body from other people's anger. And I scarred up other people with my anger. Now I pick the peaceful way, with my words.

When John and Andy were making fun of Cassidy, something about her body, I told them straight up that they were being rude. They said they weren't talking to me, but I said, "You were talking to my sister, and that's the same as talking to me." Cassidy is not my real

sister, but she's like, my sister in God's way. She's in my soul, she's a girlfriend, and we stand by each other. The boys left Cassidy alone after that, because they didn't want to deal with both of us. Words are very powerful.

I'm like, the bodyguard of all the quiet people. I always tell Becky and Mackenzie, "Don't let the bullies make you small." They're afraid to talk in class in case someone makes fun of them. So I protect them with my opinion. Like, if they say something, even one sentence, I say, "Yeah, that's a good point you made there."

But I back myself out and shut up if there's a conflict going on that doesn't involve me. If it's just two people who I don't know and they want to fight each other, I don't try to stop them. Because you could get killed that way. Chapelton High School is pretty violent. If some big thing is going on, a fight with a whole bunch of people, I get right out of there and go straight home. I don't get into it. I'm on nobody's side. I only get involved when someone I know needs some protection.

Some people think I talk too much, because I always take my turn at Morning Circle. But it's my turn. That's what it's for. And when it's their turn, I listen to them. One time Tracy told me, "You talk too much and you always sound like a preacher." I just told her, "Well, God gave me a mouth and I'm going to use it."

Tracy doesn't believe in God. She told me to shut up about it. She's sick and tired of hearing me talk about Him all the time. But her life doesn't have any peace in it. That's why she thinks God isn't true. She says God is not even there. When she talks like that, I just want to smack her upside the head with my Bible. But don't worry. I won't really do it.

I didn't always live a God-life, like I do now. I used to be Goth. I wore everything dark with black lipstick. I watched all those witchcraft movies with my friends. And we used to do the Ouiji board, but I'm never doing that again because one time it spelled out Lucifer and it scared me to death. It was in the front lounge at Gatewood Public School. It was last year, when we

were in grade 8. You let me and Cassidy and Annie go there to read on the soft chairs. But we took the Ouiji Board with us and we were playing it. And when it spelled out Lucifer, that was the end of it for me. I told them, "Move that thing away from me. It's full of the devil. In the name of the Lord, I rebuke whoever is inside that board!" Cassidy and Annie were laughing at me, but they moved the board away, because they knew I meant what I said. Mostly people listen when I talk.

Sometimes I let my friends use me when they are too afraid to say something. Like, at the dances, I match people up. Say Cassidy wants to dance with Michael, but she's too scared to ask him. I go up to Michael, and say, "Hey, my sister over here wants to get to know you a little bit. Would you like to dance the next slow song with her?" And then I take his answer back to Cassidy. If he says no, then Cassidy hears it from me instead of him. She doesn't get embarrassed to his face.

I get lots of people connected up. But if I want to dance with someone, I just ask them myself. I don't need a middle person. If they say no, they say no. Sometimes I just like dancing by myself, anyway.

At one school dance, I wore this beautiful African fabric wrapped around my head so high, the exact same as Eriqah Badu. When I wear those African styles, I feel the history of my blood. I felt so great that day, so proud that I'm a black singer like her. And I just danced all alone. People made fun of my head, but I didn't care. Because they don't understand who I am.

Music really saved me from being violent. I was such a fighter before. But I joined the choir in grade three because I like singing, and I found out I'm good at it. And when I found that out, it changed my life a bit. Because I started singing at places, church services and school concerts. People were shocked that I could make something beautiful come out of my mouth, because usually I was cussing and fighting. I started singing solos and duets, like in harmony with my mom.

The sound is so clear and our voices blend good. We sort of have the same vocal chords because I was made out of her body. I never knew that I could sing. Now I sing every where I go. It raised up my self-esteem, you know? Because now there is something about me that other people think is beautiful.

Singing was the way I got my voice to be myself. Because when you are doing whatever is your deepest place, then you are having a voice to say what is the real you. But you don't have to say it in words out loud. You could have a voice by writing down about who you are. Your voice could be your words on the paper. Even your eyes are also your voice a bit, because they say something in a way about how you feel. Anything could be your voice if it shows the truth that you think. You can be a mute and still have a voice.

But some people, their voice is far away. Like how I was before. I would talk all the time, but it was mostly violent words to hurt people. I was really loud, but I

wasn't showing all the words I was feeling inside of myself. I never used to let anybody see the sad part.

It took a long time for me to stop fighting. I used to have strong ice around me. I think most of the people in our class are inside ice. Like, they are cold and hard on the outside, you know? They got frozen up by the things in their life.

If you get yelled at every single day, or you get hit all the time, ice is going to be thick all around you. Or if someone dies that you love, or you grow up in some violent place, it gives you ice. It makes you hard like a rock. Then people think you are tough, and no one can see the soft side of you. Nobody can hurt you too much because you are as strong as ice.

My ice broke because of my mom. She kept talking to me and talking to me. Every single day of my life. She talked to me about everything, what I think and how I feel and why I fight.

My mom listens to what I say and she watches me close. She is not easy, like, to get away with things. If she ever caught me smoking, drinking, doing drugs, having sex or anything in that way, she'd kill me. Because she wants me to respect myself better than that.

When I was fighting all the time, she used to talk to me about it forever. She told me that whatever choices I make, they show who I am inside. When I hurt someone else, I'm just showing who I am inside myself. She says I am beautiful inside, and fighting doesn't go with that.

My mom loves me so much. When I think about the hard things that we came through, she makes me brave. She got us out so we could start new. We didn't have anything at the beginning, no money, no where to live. Now we have our own place that is safe. She changed our life for us. She is strong, but she doesn't fight, she doesn't hurt other people. I want to be like that.

My mom always says to me, “Felicity, I love you. Inside of you is beautiful.” It’s true. You can be butt-ugly on the outside, but inside of you there is still some hope. That’s how my mom broke my ice. She made me notice the hope. She said I have strength and love in me that comes from God. I don’t need to prove nothing to anyone. I am already enough just the way I am.

Felicity’s Response

My Name:

I chose Felicity because of the TV show. I like that character because she’s going out on her own in a strange city. She’s far away and she is trying to find out where she stands in the world (but I liked her hair better long). But to tell you the truth, I would have said exactly the same things to you whether I got to use a fake name or not. I don’t care if people know that it’s me. If someone wants to fight what I think, let’s go to court. I have a right to express my own opinion.

My Font (Arial Black):

I like how bold it is. I want people to know where I stand. I want to be noticed. You are looking right at me on this page. You may not see me in body form, but I'm right here in words.

**My Symbol:**

I always make this eye that has the world instead of the eye part. It means, "What do you see?"

How it felt to be part of this process:

You're like my sister. I can talk to you no matter what. At first it was weird because I was thinking of you as a teacher, but now I think of you as a friend.

When you read my voice back to me, I felt like I'm seeing myself. I'm actually seeing myself. Not a mirror. Not an image. I'm actually seeing inside how I felt. The hard part to hear is when you wrote about my parents fighting. It's hard to look at it again because then I get flashbacks in my memory.

Chapter Five: Teachers' Stories

*What would happen if one woman
told the truth about her life?*

The world would split open.

Rukeyser in Exley, 1996

Dear Reader,

Are you ready to hear some more stories that could "split your world open?" Your mind is probably still swimming with images from the girls' stories. Let's pretend we've enjoyed a long hike between chapters four and five, and now we have arrived at our second campsite. Don't worry about leaving the girls behind. They're safe together. You'll get a chance to hear from them again in chapter six. And now we are coming upon a second campfire circle, and it is time to meet the teachers. You have already read some of my personal experiences related to voice and silence, through the thirty-five vignettes in chapter one. Now we will listen to the stories of five teachers of adolescents, four females and one male. Can they also be "at-risk?" In a circle of trust they tell their stories.

FAITH:

Up Against The Wall

I'm pregnant. It's our first baby, so of course my whole family is ecstatic. My parents are moving back from the States to be closer to their new little grandchild. They want to come and live with me and Karl. My mom just assumed that I would love that idea, having them around to help with the baby. I don't know how to tell her that I don't want them living with us. I love them and I want them to be part of our child's life, but I don't want them raising my kids. I want my baby to grow up in a different home than I did.

Not that my childhood was terrible. It wasn't. But my father is an alcoholic, so that creates a lot of problems. You learn that promises are not going to be kept. He wasn't physically abusive, but he was very verbally abusive to my mother. Sometimes there was a lot of yelling going on at my house. It was hard to listen to. You learn to shut it out, to think of other things, or sing something to yourself so you can't hear.

But he never yelled at me. I'm not sure why I was protected from that. But I know that I was his little angel. I still am now, even though I'm an adult now. He created this image

of who I am, this perfect little girl. He holds me in such high esteem. To him, I can do no wrong. I try not to say or do anything that might upset him, because I've got this angel image to uphold.

Thinking about disappointing my parents just freezes me up, even now. Most of the time, I end up making whatever choices they want, just so I can still maintain their approval. I don't know why it matters so much to me that my father approves of my choices. Because frankly, I don't really approve of his. But for as long as I can remember, the worst thing I could imagine was disappointing them.

When I was a teenager, my friends and I went to this fashion warehouse and they were showing me how to shoplift. I picked out all the clothes that I wanted to steal, and took them into the changeroom. I had purposely worn this long flair skirt, so I could hide all the stuff underneath it. I had all these pieces of clothing tied around my legs. But when I was just about to leave the changeroom, all I could think of was my mom and dad. I knew they would be so disappointed in me if they found out. My father's pride, I couldn't face it. He didn't work so hard his whole life to raise a kid who takes the easy way out. That's what he would say. And I couldn't go through with it. I untied myself and left with nothing. When we were outside the store, all my friends were proudly displaying the "spoils of their

victory," but I didn't care that I was empty-handed. Because I knew I could go home and face my father. My father's pride kept me out of a lot of trouble growing up.

But I have a real problem with how he treats my mom. Even now, I can't believe she puts up with his abuse. Logically, it does not make sense that my mother would stay for forty years in a relationship that makes her miserable. He hasn't been faithful to her. He's always had his women on the side. But she keeps waiting on him hand and foot and he keeps drinking their money.

I think she should leave him. I tell her that, when we talk about it on the phone. "Mom, you're given one life, and the choices you make determine the quality of your own life. You need to start making choices that are beneficial for you." It's like something I would say to one of the kids in my class. I don't know what happens to me when we start talking about my father. I go into "solution mode." She should terminate the relationship and move on with her life. That would be the logical thing to do.

I think part of me has just become numb to my mother's stories about my dad. I have had the same conversation with her a hundred times and nothing ever changes. I don't really listen to her anymore. I think that if I really let myself listen, if

I let myself hear the losses that she lives with every day, it would be heartbreaking for both of us. I would probably start to empathize with her. I would feel how hard it is for her to leave and how hard it is for her to stay at the same time. There's so much pain in that relationship. So I basically detach myself from my own feelings. I answer her from my head, as if we are talking about someone else's family. I say, "What's the logical, rational, sensible solution? Then that's what you should do."

I feel guilty saying this out loud, but sometimes I worry about what will happen if she ever takes my advice and leaves him. What's she going to do then, come and live with me? I don't want that. I don't want to be in the middle of their problems anymore. And I don't want my child to be there either. I feel ashamed to admit that because it sounds so selfish, but it's true.

It's really hard to think about disappointing my mom. I feel indebted to her at some deep, deep level that I can't even explain. I think it's because she has sacrificed so much for me, right from when I was a baby.

I was born in the West Indies. By the time I was eighteen months old, my mom was gone. She came to Canada and got a job as a nanny. She was trying to get everything in order, all

the paperwork, for our family to move here. Both my parents knew that the political and economic situation was changing in our country, and that if they wanted a future for their children beyond what was possible back home, they needed to get us out of there.

But my dad didn't want to leave. He was well-respected in the community because he was making a lot of money at the time. He started out poor, one of seventeen brothers and sisters. But when he was a teenager, he left his family and went to the city. He learned a trade and established his own business. He was a real entrepreneur. So he had no desire to leave our country. He had his work, he had his money, he had his women, he had his alcohol. He was happy there. So my mom went to Canada alone.

My dad didn't know what to do with my two brothers and me after my mom was gone. So my grandma took one of my brothers to live with her. She wanted him because he looks like my dad's side of the family. Me and my other brother look like my mom. So my grandma told my father, "I'll take him. You keep the other two."

My dad had this mentality that he couldn't raise a girl, that he didn't know how. He couldn't comb my hair, because you have to do the little braids, and all that. He says it's not

that he didn't WANT to raise a girl. He didn't think he was CAPABLE of raising a girl properly. Hair is a very big issue. You can't run around with your hair not combed. I guess my dad figured, "Well, if you can't do the hair, you can't raise the kid." So he sent me and my brother to live with our neighbour.

But I wanted to live with my dad. I remember feeling like I didn't fully belong with the neighbours. I knew they were not my real family. And they were very strict with us. We'd get it with the belt or a whip if we were out of line. Probably now it would be called physical abuse, but it wasn't any different than how everybody else disciplined their kids. I was really exuberant back then, so I got my fair share of discipline. I had a lot of energy and I loved to run around.

At my wedding, one of my relatives told this story about how I was so chatty when I was little. This was back home in the West Indies. It was his daughter's birthday, but all the little guests were too shy to sing "Happy Birthday." No one would do it. So I jumped up in my spirited little way, and sang "Happy Birthday" all by myself. And then I followed it up with a little speech about her. I was a real talker before we moved to Canada.

I lived with my neighbours until my mom came back when I was six. She came back because my dad didn't want to leave

our country. She had all the immigration papers ready for us to go to Canada, but my dad wouldn't do it.

I remember waiting at the gate of my father's house, watching my mother come up the path. I didn't really remember her from when I was a baby, so it was such a strange feeling that this woman was mine, that I belonged with her. I felt shy toward her at first, but I loved the idea of being a family.

My brother and I moved back to my father's house and we all lived together again. That was such a happy time. No more living with the neighbours. My mom was back and life became perfect in my mind. You know how you have Mary, Joseph and Jesus? Well, I thought that we were the next chosen family, because everything was so perfect. We were chosen, that's what I thought. I don't know how old I was when I realized we weren't.

Maybe it was when we moved to Canada. The political situation kept escalating in our country. My father finally decided that we'd better get out before things got violent. So we left, and came to Canada when I was seven. It's a huge transition, leaving everything you know. All the familiar people and places that have been home for your whole life. They're just not there anymore. Everything was so different: the food,

the weather, the way people spoke English. For the first time I began to hear the sound of my own voice. I hadn't noticed it before. Suddenly I became very aware that my voice was different than the voices of the other children around me.

My mother's friend says she remembers me from when I first arrived. She says I was such a shy little thing and I never made a sound. When I saw her coming down the hallway in our building, I would walk sideways with my back against the wall. I would put my back right up against the wall and walk down the hall like that. I was really timid, she says.

It was the same in school. I kept my mouth shut. I learned that one fast. Because the few times that I said anything out loud in class, the other kids made fun of the way I spoke English, the way I pronounced certain words. Like, I would say "tree" instead of "three," and they found that hilarious. When everything you say is received with a sense of ridicule, then the desire to speak diminishes. In that sense, I left my voice back home in the West Indies.

The way I survived in school was by listening really carefully. I figured out exactly how they said things, and I memorized the way the words felt in my mouth. I really worked at getting rid of my accent so that I could blend in with them. I copied their voices as closely as possible; I manufactured my

sound to match theirs. Observe, figure out the culture, conform. I didn't let my words fly free like you do when you belong somewhere. Only at home I spoke freely. Anywhere else, I censored everything I said before I said it. You have to. Otherwise your words will isolate you.

As a teacher, I really feel for kids who immigrate. That's why Margaret and I started writing our book. We wanted to reflect their experience. So we are writing a children's book about Lola, this little girl who comes to Canada from the West Indies. And you know what? Margaret and I were working on this thing for a year before I realized it is my story. It is my life we are writing.

I still straddle those two parallels, the little girl with her back up against the wall and the birthday singer who proudly steps up to the forefront. It's a system of checks and balances. There is part of me that longs to speak freely, openly, proudly about what I'm thinking or feeling, but I'm always measuring how I come across to other people.

I want to take more risks, especially with my singing. I just want to get out there and follow my passion. But the risk lies in being vulnerable with something that's so precious to me. My fear is manifested in singing. Internally, there is so much processing and polishing and perfecting that goes on. By

the time my voice actually leaves the internal environment and goes to the external environment, if my voice doesn't come out the way I would like it to, I feel devastated.

In my mind, there is a purity and clarity that I want for my voice, both in speaking my opinions and in singing. But nervousness robs me of that pure and clear experience. There is a physiological response to my vulnerability, which is just sheer terror. Then I feel devastated and depressed. All the questions start to come: Why can't I just relax, throw my head back and belt out the sound? Why do I have to wait until I think my voice is going to come out perfectly? The discrepancy between how I want my voice to sound and what it actually becomes, that discrepancy alone is where the devastation lies. Cognitively, I realize that this is an extremely inhibiting way of approaching singing. Because singing has to be free. It's organic and it's free and it's not about control. It's about relinquishing control. I need to be more of a free spirit, not only in my music, but in my life.

I'd love to be one of those people who could sit on the back of a motorcycle without a helmet, wearing denim shorts and no shoes. And I would just kind of throw my legs up, throw my hands up, and let out a yelp of enjoyment or excitement. But instead, I would be the one thinking, "Wait. Do I have all the proper leather gear? Is my helmet fastened properly? This

is dangerous. Lord only knows what could happen to me!" Well, I would never be on the back of a motorcycle anyhow. But I like to think that I could do it.

I want to be brave about taking risks. In that way, I find the school where I teach very challenging. I am so different from most of the teachers on staff. These women operate like a well-oiled machine. They are "t-crossers" and "i-dotters." In June, we organize all the units for the following school year. We sit there and decide which Ministry expectations to teach in Social Studies next February. They want it all down on paper ahead of time. I guess the structure helps them feel safe, like they know what they're doing.

But I'm not like that. I like to go with the flow in the classroom. I like to spend time getting to know my students: who they are and what they are interested in, and what they need, and what happened to them on the weekend. Then our curriculum grows out of those relationships with each other. Because as you get to know them, you see how much they know, and what is meaningful to them, and how to access their interest and their motivation. My real planning starts when I get to know my kids. And let's face it, at the end of June, I don't really care what units I'm teaching next February!

But as teachers, we are so afraid that if the students are partners in planning their learning, everything will be out of control, total anarchy. We are afraid to let them have a voice. It's easier on our nerves just to set a plan that works for us, and make them follow it. And then discipline the kids who don't conform. I think that "at-risk" behaviours would not be such an issue if the students had more ownership over what goes on at school. If they felt like they had a voice, or power to affect some aspect of their learning, maybe they wouldn't act out so much.

A perfect example at my school is Spring Play Day. The staff just love file folders of last year's activities. Every committee starts out by looking at last year's folder and filling in different names for this year. So Play Day is exactly the same every year. Some of our kids have run the same relays every year from kindergarten to grade six. So of course, they are bored, and some of them fool around and get in trouble. Others just allow themselves to be herded from activity to activity in a docile stupor. Well, personally, I think we should get the kids involved in the planning, have committees of students decide the events. But when I suggested the idea to my staff, they could not fathom it. They could not imagine the kids being able to organize a school-wide event effectively. It seems like the most important thing is planning a play day

that operates efficiently from the teacher's point of view, rather than how the kids feel.

The teachers I work with like things to stay the same, the way they know. There's very little diversity on staff in terms of gender, or race or personality, even. Well, there's me. I'm the diversity. I used to feel so inadequate, that my way of doing things was wrong because it was not the same as theirs. I spent my first year at this school trying to act like the other teachers on my staff. Most of them send homework sheets home every night. So of course, next thing you know, I'm running off sheets to send home. Spelling, grammar, math, fill-in-the-blanks, whatever. I didn't really think about whether it was a valuable exercise for the students. I just wanted to look like what they value as a "good teacher."

Some of them spend half the summer getting their classrooms ready and doing all their photocopying for September. Not me. I went camping with Karl, and it was wonderful. I love the peacefulness of being outside, falling asleep listening to the lake. But at the end of August, I was just getting started to set up my classroom and lots of them were finished. They had all the bulletin boards up and their activities laid out for the first week. Nobody said anything, but I felt like I looked like I'm not as dedicated, or I don't work as hard as

they do. I don't know if that feeling of inadequacy comes from them or from inside me.

I totally dread every Monday at 11:20 a.m., because my class has reading buddies. And the teacher of the other class is always telling me how far ahead she is on everything. "Well, I finished up my report cards last night. I did all my evaluations a bit ahead of schedule." And I'm thinking, "I haven't even started my report cards yet." Or she points out that I spelled something wrong on the board in my room. And I just smile and make some comment that sounds like I'm actively listening, but actually, I'm actively BLOCKING OUT. She just sounds like Charlie Brown's teacher to me, you know? "Mwa, mwa mwa, mwa mwa." Because no matter what words she is actually saying, the words that I hear are, "You are not enough." And then I feel like I am that little girl with her back up against the wall again.

I wanted to leave this school almost as soon as I came. I just wanted to transfer somewhere else. Last June I had the chance to go back to Gatewood Middle School again, and I came really close to accepting the job. Because it was easier there to be myself. But then I heard some of my grade fives talking about how much they are looking forward to being in my class again in September, because I was teaching grade five/six. And that was the moment when something changed in

me. I realized that it really matters to the kids that I am here with them. To them I am enough. And that makes me want to stay. They need my voice.

My class has an active, creative kind of energy going on. And I like to tap into that with my kids. I like to have fun with them, and joke around. But our classroom is not a “free-for-all.” We have some very clear expectations of each other. It has to be a safe space, both physically and emotionally. We spend a lot of time at the beginning of the year just establishing how to be together as a group. How to listen to each other, how to communicate without using put-downs, how to make the space inclusive. It’s like priming the canvas. It’s a lot of work, but in the end, there is space for something beautiful to happen.

Always in September, I don’t feel like me yet. I feel like the teacher with a capital “T.” I’m always up there giving the instructions, and correcting their behaviours. Addressing the smallest things, so they don’t become a big problem by January. If you let something go, like a student telling another student to “shut up,” then they push those boundaries of what you will accept in the space. So I spend September saying, “Let’s revisit our expectations for how we communicate in this classroom.” And eventually they start to own those expectations and enforce them themselves.

It makes a difference to the kids when you make the space safe. They remember it. There's this one student, Marnie, who keeps coming back to our school to visit. I taught her French last year when she was in grade six. She had a rough year, some family situations and so on, and she would hang around and tell me about it sometimes after class. She's at a different school for grade seven now, but I don't think it's working out so well. She keeps coming back to visit, dropping in to say hello and updating me on life in grade seven.

She presents a tough exterior, a lot of defensive reactions. You look at her and you see, "Don't touch me. BACK OFF." If you don't know her and you just see the behaviours, you would think, "I hope I never get her in my class." But underneath, she is really vulnerable. Well, I haven't seen too much of her vulnerability, but I believe it is there.

But in terms of her behaviour at school, she takes no prisoners. She does the fingers under the chin a lot ("F--- you" hand signal) when she's relaying stories about her teachers. She told me that she yelled out, "This class sucks!" during science. She doesn't understand why she was thrown out of class for that, because she was "just saying her opinion." It happened on the day that she had a multiple choice test in science class. One of the statements was, "Men make better scientists than women," circle true or false. Now, as a teacher,

I can see what her teacher was trying to do. He just wanted the kids to think critically about traditional stereotypes. But Marnie jumped up and said, "I'm not doing this! This is a stupid question. Why is this on the test? This shouldn't be on this test!" Her teacher said that he just wanted to find out her opinion about the issue. And she said, "You know what my opinion is? My opinion is that science sucks." So of course, all she got was "OUT!"

So now she's skipping school any day she has science. She says it doesn't matter if you skip, the school doesn't mind. You just have to sign out before you leave. I think she reads the attendance accountability policy as freedom, that no one actually cares whether she is there or not, as long as she signs out properly.

And so everyday after school she's in our schoolyard riding around on her bike. Then slowly she's coming into the school, and then up the stairs and the next thing you know, she's sitting in my classroom telling me what happened today.

Marnie says the teachers at her new school are all out to get her. I'm sure they're not all out to get her, but they don't GET her. And you can see where the teachers are coming from. The classes are large, there is a lot of work to cover, you can't

sit around and be a social worker all day. Kids like Marnie usually just get sent to the office.

I don't know how long she'll keep coming back, or where she'll end up. She needs a reason to stay in school, a reason to behave differently. And I don't think she sees enough reasons right now. Well, maybe French class will keep her in school for a bit longer. She says her French teacher likes her. So she doesn't mouth off during French, and she is doing fairly well in that subject. So for her, it's all about her relationship with the teacher. If she doesn't like you or she thinks you don't like her, she writes off your class.

Some days the kids are my only life-line. I get a real energy from interacting with them. But I don't let myself get too attached. I mean, I care about my students, and I pay attention to what they say and what they need. But I don't let myself love them too much. Because I know they move on at the end of grade six. They leave. So I stop myself from my natural instincts with them. I respond with more distance than I feel.

For example, this one girl in my room, she's only about 4'2", and she has the tiniest hands. And sometimes, when I sit beside her to talk about her work, she will put one of those tiny hands on top of mine. And my instinct is to respond like a

loving parent. I want to put my arm around her and draw her closer, but I hold back the warmth and connection that I feel. I just discreetly move my hand and talk about the work. Because if I let myself really respond with my heart, it would hurt to let them go at the end of the year. It hurts to love someone and lose them.

Maybe that's why I protect myself. I don't want to be hurt. Growing up with an alcoholic parent teaches you to guard your heart. I could not have survived if I let myself feel all the fear and anger that lived in our house.

The one time that I totally let myself feel everything was the first time I fell in love. I was about nineteen when I met Steve, and I was just immersed in loving him. What I did not know was that he had a girlfriend before he met me. He continued to see her secretly for two years while we were together. After I found out about her, of course I didn't trust him anymore. I just became cold inside. But I stayed with him for four years anyway, because I didn't know then that love didn't have to be like that.

There is still part of me that is closed off. I watch my own life happen from a distance. There are some emotions that I hardly ever feel. Joy, for example. That's a rare one. Well, sometimes when I'm singing, I catch a glimpse of it. And then I

have these fantasies that I leave teaching and just sing for the rest of my life.

Technically, I'm still functioning by all external accounts. I do my job, I meet my deadlines, I show up wherever I am supposed to be. Maybe I have inherited some of my mother's resilience. She just keeps carrying on, day after day.

But inside of me, there is some kind of road block. It's a wall that keeps me from connecting fully to other people and even to myself. I think the wall is my fear. The fear of being vulnerable, the fear of being hurt, the fear of not being good enough to other people. It keeps me from taking risks. If I could get rid of this wall of fear, I would be doing my music, and following my own teaching instincts instead of everybody else's, and telling the truth to my family.

I feel the wall with my family especially. I just have this sense of futility, like nothing will ever change. And it makes me feel apathetic and tired. There are so many things in my family that are not okay with me, destructive patterns of how we interact, how my father's choices affect the rest of us. Being pregnant creates a sense of urgency in me about healing the connections with my family, even though that seems impossible. At some point, I need to have a voice with my family. I need to say, "I can't keep pretending that everything

is fine." But that's a hard conversation to imagine. Even now, I don't want to lose my identity as my father's perfect angel. So there you go. I guess in some ways I am "at-risk" too, just like the girls in this project. I am "at-risk" of living without taking risks. I am "at-risk" of living without joy.

Faith's Response

My Name:

I chose Faith because that is the one area that I want to reign in my life. The absence of faith is fear. I would rather live in the realm of faith than the realm of fear.

My Font (Lucinda Sans):

The font I really wanted had been selected already. This one is okay with me, because it is tied with a sense of fluidity. I see myself connecting in a fluid way with the print.



My Symbol:

My symbol is an open flame. It is not a single flame, like a candle. It is bigger than that, more like a campfire. I see it as a symbol of the light of my spirit, and God's love shining in me.

How it felt to be part of this process:

It's a different level of validity when the words are on paper. It's shocking. I feel surprised. Did I really say that? But it's true. It's just so shocking to see my life on paper.

I appreciate how closely you stuck to my voice. It was as beneficial for me as for you. It was a journey of understanding and affirmation. I've come a long way. I can see where I want to go. I can see the whole picture, and I begin to understand why I respond the way I do to my life.

Jessica:
Savouring Forbidden Words

The best part of summer when I was growing up, was getting away from my father. School would let out and that's it, we would be gone. My mother and my aunt Carrie just packed us up and drove us straight out to the seashore. We stayed in the same town every summer, and we wouldn't come back to the city for weeks. It was always the four of us, my mom, my aunt Carrie, my cousin Ellie and I.

The thing that I remember most about those summers is the feeling of relief. It was as if finally, I could breathe. For those six weeks, I was free. I was free from the way I felt at home. And I was calm inside, like the round pools of sea water, left behind in the sand after the tide went out. It was like one long sigh, those summers. And all the memories run together somehow, so that it all becomes like one single summer, even though it was many. I would spend hours just crouched at the edge of the water, studying the pebbles beneath the water's surface. The colours are so vivid when the rocks are wet. Greens and blues and deep reds. But if you take them out of the water and let them dry off, they lose their vibrant colours. They don't even look like the same rocks, actually.

That is how I passed the days, walking up and down the beach, watching the sky and water change, talking to my aunt Carrie. I loved being with her, mostly because she listened to every word I said. It made me feel important, because I knew that my words were not going out into empty space. She was waiting to receive them. And my words could just flow freely. Whatever I was thinking was okay to say. Walking arm and arm with her, I was even allowed to swear, savouring the forbidden words and laughing together. I will never forget those times.

Carrie is still my favourite aunt. In some ways, I was closer to her than I was to my own mother. It was harder for me to be close to my mother. Our relationship was always clouded over by her relationship with my father.

My mother first fell in love with my father's blue eyes, and she blames them for what she considers her mistake. He married her because she was pregnant with me. My father was tall and handsome, and when my mother was pregnant, she used to pray I would turn out like him. Later she regretted that prayer. My father turned out to be a different man in private than he was in public. His friends and acquaintances found him very charming and witty, but he had a darkness in him that they did not see.

I grew up in the shadow of my father's darkness. He did not need a reason to be violent. Anything could set him off. I became accustomed to reading his body language, to sensing how his mood might shift, the way the sky changes before a storm. When I felt his rage coming, I knew to stay very quiet and get out of his way. There is a saying in my country, that "children and fish have no voice." Children should be seen and not heard, that is the same idea. I would keep my mouth shut, because I did not want to invite his rage. I believed that as long as I didn't say anything, I would be safe.

I begged my mother to be quiet when I knew my father was going to be violent. But she could not keep herself from speaking out against him. She would not hide herself to keep the peace. And so I witnessed the price of my mother's voice.

I have been reading through the journals that I kept as a child. I kept waiting to read the truth I remember. I was expecting to find the fear that I felt. I was always afraid of what my father would do next. I was afraid of their relationship. Do you know that in all those pages and pages of writing, I could not find any clues about my fear? Even my writing was silent. I wrote about nothing. Just meaningless words. Little things that happened at school, the boys I liked. So many words, but

none of them say what was really going on in my life. My terror was invisible.

There is only one sentence that refers to anything important about my growing up. I was sitting in the front room, and my parents were in the kitchen, talking very seriously. This time they were not screaming and fighting. They were quiet. They were deciding whether or not to separate. I remember feeling so afraid, and straining to hear every possible word. And I wrote in my journal only one line: "My parents are having a serious conversation right now, and I'm afraid." That's it. That's all I wrote about it.

But I wrote endless pages about the boys I admired, who I was in love with, whom I wanted to marry. The journals from my adolescence are full of poems about love. Maybe that is how I protected myself. I wrote about love. I equated that with hope, and a future, and something I didn't have. This love was going to rescue me, and save me from whatever life I knew. And not just any love. The love of a man. That's what I wished for all those years. I dreamed to be rescued by a man who loved me, someone who could sweep me away to a life of freedom.

But nobody can rescue you from fear. Forget it. It's just not going to happen. Fear is not something someone else can rescue you from. That is your own job.

So I rescued myself by choosing silence, in my voice and in my writing. I did not write about my fear, because then I would have had to acknowledge it, to give it even more space than it already consumed in my life. So I wrote about love, and I believed my own writing, I guess. Because I got married twice, and both times I hoped that this would be the love that would save my life.

It's like the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood. It was my favourite story when I was growing up. In fact, my aunt Carrie knit me a red cap because I loved the book so much. And my family called me Little Red Riding Hood whenever I wore it. In our version of this tale, Little Red Cap goes against her mother's wishes (this alone could be the prevailing theme in my life), and tells the wolf that she is on her way to Grandma's. Of course, when she arrives there, Grandma is looking rather wolfish. But Little Red pretends she doesn't notice. She does not turn and run away. She stays to see what will happen next, although she is suspicious and she senses danger. (This reminds me of when I walked down the aisle for the first time. Even while I was walking step-by-step toward my groom, I had that sinking feeling that maybe he was not

the one who could save me. But I kept walking.) And the next thing Little Red Cap knows, she has been swallowed. Who breaks down the door and rips open the belly of the wolf to set her free? Her saviour, the wood-cutter. The man who rescues her. From a very early age, I kept waiting for the right man to rescue me. I already had the hat.

And so my journals were full of my hopefulness for love. School was an escape for me, a place where I was physically safe and able to enjoy the company of my friends. I was comfortable among my peers, and I was known as an outgoing person with a good sense of humour. However, even at school, I was not free from the fear that characterized my early life. Our teachers were strict and unyielding. At the beginning of each class, three or four students would be randomly selected and drilled on any of the material covered that term. One wrong answer resulted in a grade of "F". Although I was an A student, I knew that one wrong move could jeopardize my standing. My stomach was always in knots as I waited for the moment when the teacher finally closed the register and went on with the new lesson. Many mornings I vomited before school, because I was full of terror that my name would be called that day.

When I was fifteen, my family left our country to move to Canada. In the ten days that it took to cross the ocean, I went

from being a top student and class president to being insignificant and alone. For the first six months after we arrived, we lived with relatives. I did not speak English and I could not communicate outside of my aunt's house. My world shrunk to very small dimensions.

I entered grade ten in a regular school program. I actually understood very little, but nobody seemed to notice. Except in mathematics , where I excelled and skipped a grade. In English I was reading Shakespeare, using my dictionary for every second or third word. I had to work hard, but I was used to learning that way. They didn't really have ESL support then, so it was just "sink or swim" in the regular stream with everybody else.

Socially, I was completely on my own, and my heart was broken with loneliness for my lost circle of friends. I had been popular among my peers back home, but here I was nobody. My new classmates never talked to me, or even looked at me. I was always on the outside of what was going on. It's not that they were cruel. If they made fun of me, it wasn't to my face. They just did not seem to know that I was there.

I did not speak out loud in public for almost two years after I first arrived. There was nothing to say and no one to say it to. I felt virtually invisible until a boy at school became

interested in me and pursued a relationship. Having a boyfriend changed my social status, and I suddenly became part of a group. I started to speak much more freely, and my circle of friends widened. So my dreams of being rescued materialized, in a way. Because here was this boy, making me feel like I belonged somewhere, which is something I had not felt since I left my country.

It is very hard to be uprooted from one country, one continent to another, crossing the ocean, and arriving to some totally unfamiliar landscape. And then to find your own place there, how you fit in... it is a very long road. Especially when you are an adolescent. It is nearly impossible. What you need, what you want or wish for, who you are, these things are invisible to everyone around you. And to release your voice into the air? That is too big a risk. That would be taking up too much space.

The first time I remember really taking up any space in my family, the first time I really asserted my own voice, was in university. I switched my major from science to French. My mother's dream was for me to be a doctor or a dentist. Actually this dream was for herself, but I am the one who ended up in the program! And if you think about my personality, you just know that I am not supposed to be a dentist. I love to communicate with people, to talk about ideas and opinions,

and to hear other people's stories. So I will have a job where my hands are inside their mouth the whole time, and they can't even answer me? Clearly, this was not the right career for me. But French was a big disappointment to my parents. They wanted me to have a reputable job, some position of status where I made good money. Instead I am a teacher. And when I was thinking of going for promotion, maybe becoming a principal, my mother asked me, "Well, do you want to be a teacher for the rest of your life? Or do you want to be a somebody?"

When I finished Teacher's College, my parents didn't come to my graduation. They had already seen me graduate once, and they were not interested in sitting through another ceremony. "What's so great about being a teacher? Anybody can do that. What's so special about a BA? In Canada, anybody can get a BA." My choices have never been enough for them. Everything I ever did was diminished. There was no voice saying, "Look at you. Look at how hard you have worked, how much you have done. We are so proud of you." For most of my life, I do not remember hearing that voice. The first time I heard it, and it shocked me, was when I got my Masters, but by then I didn't care about being acknowledged anymore.

That voice of recognition and acknowledgement is a voice that I want to give to my students, the voice of seeing them

and valuing who they are.. I want them to feel acknowledged and recognized, these two things. To tell you the truth, some kids are harder to know than others. Some of them fade into the group. They don't stand out, and you have to really look to see them. Especially the quiet ones.

In my experience, it is not only the ESL students that are usually very quiet at school. Certainly at the grade eight level, many of the girls are quiet in class, generally much quieter than the boys. There was a teacher on staff at the school where I taught before Gatewood. I noticed how he always spoke to the girls who were very, very quiet. I didn't even know them. And he said to me, "I really go out of my way to talk to kids like that. The kids who are loud and outgoing, everyone listens to them. But the quiet ones, they go unnoticed over and over again." And I thought to myself, "Why don't I see that, because I was one of those kids!"

Unless you make time for the kids who are quietly in the corner not saying anything, you will never know them. I was surprised at myself to realize how little effort I make to know the quiet ones. Ashamed, in fact. This other teacher was born here in Canada, he was not an immigrant himself. But he managed to figure it out, how to connect to these silent girls. Meanwhile, I WAS one of those kids myself, I know how they feel, but I do not invest myself enough into knowing them.

It is very, very hard to get to know the quiet ones, and usually they are girls. It is possible that they could just come in to class, and go out, without having their presence personally acknowledged. But even when you go to them, and ask them about something, “How was that thing?” or “What do you think?” their answers are so minute, that you still don’t get anything. They sometimes choose to stay after school to finish their project or something. And the boys aren’t there at that time. So when I get the chance, sometimes I’ll ask them about their holidays, something personal. Maybe about boys. I’ll say, “So, did anyone fall in love over the holidays?” Or something like this. We joke around. And sometimes they will say a little bit, but they really don’t say much, and I do find it hard to know who they are. In the absence of the boys, you get a bit more out of them. But generally it’s hard to draw out their voices.

To one of the boys, I forget who it was, I said, “That’s a great answer.” And then later on, I said to the girls, “Girls. You have to contribute more. Don’t give the guys the opportunity to be constantly shining. I know you have the answers, too.” And then one of the girls said, “You know when you said that Travis had such a brilliant idea? Actually it was Helen’s idea. She whispered it to him.”

I don't know why they don't just say their ideas out loud. I need to talk to them to find out. Maybe I should have a poetry club or something, so they could come and just have a girl time. Because you know what? At this age, I think you do have to do something intentionally and separately with the girls. It is not enough just to protect them from put-downs. You need to make the space where they can speak, so you get to know who these people you are teaching are. It has to be a conscious choice to seek them out. Because otherwise, there is no relationship, no connection between you.

At the same time, I think that these girls are coping just fine without me. They are so responsible, their homework is always done, they are never in trouble. And frankly, I am just thankful sometimes for the peace and quiet that I get with them. No hassles, no negotiations, no haggling over marks. They just accept whatever you tell them, and it is easier. And sometimes I wonder, what is the risk for these girls? Are they "at-risk" in some way, just because they're not volunteering to communicate with their teacher? They do talk to each other. So what risk are they at, just because they are not loud like the boys? Now, I can understand how a girl who is academically struggling, she needs to ask for help out loud. But if we're talking about girls who are A students, who have good work habits and a desire to do well, if they have all that potential, then what is their risk if they are quiet in class? Are

they “at-risk” just because they are not coming out and blabbering their stories? Just because they aren’t yammering like the boys, and taking up all the space, are they “at-risk?” They appear to be coping fine to me. Maybe I don’t know them as well, but they don’t seem to be suffering too much about it.

Now the boys, it seems like I know them better than the girls. It is usually the guys who get in trouble, or want to negotiate everything: rules, homework, assignments, due-dates. As a result of those conversations, they develop a relationship with me because I am dealing with them all the time. We are always talking about this incident or that situation, deciding who did what, and what will be the consequence. We are interacting more. So I am joking with them more, because I know them, and I know they can take it. There is a rapport that develops through that. And because the girls are not in trouble, and they never question my decisions, I don’t have the same connection with them.

It is the boys who have their hands up all the time about one thing or another. They are basically in your face, demanding your attention all the time. And you know what? They get it. They get it through my attention of sorting out all the things that they are constantly coming up to me to talk about.

Most of my interactions, about behaviour and otherwise, end up being with the popular people who demand my attention, who entertain me with their stories, who have a sense of humour. The kids who grab your attention, and they pull you into their stories and they take your time. And many of them are boys.

But my girls, they never seem to need anything. They don't need to go anywhere, they never have an issue for me to solve, they never have questions about how to do the work, because they are independent workers and they just do it. And actually, the few girls who misbehave probably feel closer to me than the quiet girls, because I have to deal with them on their behaviour. We are interacting more frequently, even though it is about unacceptable behaviours like yelling, using put-downs, mouthing off to teachers. Shawna, for instance, is still coming back from Chapelton High School to say hello to me. But that's because she was in my class for two years and I know her. But the ones who are good students, the independent students, they don't have a connection to me. In a way, it's like being good keeps them disconnected from me. And misbehaving creates some kind of connection. But they don't know that.

Actually, for some reason, I don't usually have a problem with the students who are known for being trouble-makers. I

don't know what it is, but they don't do those behaviours with me. It really makes you wonder about the term "at-risk." Do these kids only act "at-risk" in certain situations or with certain people? Because Lana was just awful last year, to be blunt. Screaming and violent and shouting and swearing and things you would not expect her to do. Telling other people to f--- off. But this year she really settled down. I don't know why. I think she connects with me better than her last year teacher. She didn't start grade 8 mouthing off. She started the year asking to be placed in my room. As far as I knew, she didn't even know me. But she wanted to be in my class. And she has never, ever given me any attitude. Never. I don't know what she likes about me. Other teachers keep coming up to me and saying, "Wow, Lana's so much better this year." And I'm thinking, "Well, it has nothing to do with me."

I never take any credit for kids. I think they just arrive at some point in their life where they are ready to be "better." Maybe it's because I don't give them that much attention when they act out. I don't talk to them about it for an hour. I just say, "No. We are not having any more of this." So acting out is not worth it for them, because that is not how they are going to get my attention. They get my attention when they do what they are supposed to do. Even then, my attention has to be divided between thirty-six people! So when I'm dealing with kids who don't do their homework, day after day, sometimes I

just say, “Never mind. Don’t do your homework. I’m not going to chase you. If you hand it in, great, if you don’t, you get zero. I don’t have the time or energy to play the game. I have thirty-six people, so you know what? You’re on your own.” And who knows why, but they respond to that. Maybe it’s because I’m just really honest with them.

I think the one thing that makes an “at-risk” student listen to you is the relationship you have with her. That’s it. But Gwendolyn, for example, was never in my class, so I don’t know her as well. So in the detention room, she lasts about five minutes in there. It’s not a place to be connected. There is no relationship that matters to her there, no reason for her to stay. So she breaks the “no talking” rule immediately, because she doesn’t want to be there. And then she walks out and slams the door. And the detentions add up every week.

When I think of the quiet kids, whether or not they are academically succeeding, I just feel like they don’t get enough of me. They don’t get enough of my attention during class, or in the hall, or anytime. And you know what they are missing? Acknowledgment and recognition. I am withholding that. Not consciously, of course. I don’t plan it, like, “Okay, today I am going to withhold my attention from these ESL and Special Ed. students. NO RECOGNITION, NO ACKNOWLEDGMENT for them!” But if they just quietly appear to be coping, they could

disappear from my view in the class. If they are not actively asking for my help, they rarely get it. There are just not enough minutes in the day to personally, individually sit beside every single student and say, “How are things going in your life? Do you need anything? Are you happy?” Especially not when there are thirty-six students in the room.

And the kids who are low academically, but they are quiet about it, those kids do not get the time that they need from me. For example, Mackenzie and Annie. They were integrated into my class for one of the math strands because that’s just how the timetables worked out. And frankly, when I realized that I was supposed to teach them measurement and conversion, it felt like an impossible job. They don’t get it, and they are so needy, that I was thinking, “Oh, I have to explain it AGAIN?” And on paper, I am apparently supposed to be adjusting and modifying the way I work with them to meet each individual student’s needs. But when am I supposed to do that, exactly? They need someone sitting there beside them step-by-step. It’s so frustrating, trying to meet so many needs at one time. I am just one person. And then I just feel like saying, “They don’t need to know how to do these bloody conversions, just forget it. They won’t get it anyway, so how much time do I want to spend on this?” All the energy and time that it takes, and they still don’t get it. Sometimes I just

don't want to be bothered. But I feel ashamed of that, because I'm not even giving them the hope they need.

One of the special ed. kids who is integrated into my room, Frannie, comes up to me every morning to say hello. So I told Miriam, her special ed. teacher, how pleased I am that she's integrated into my class and how she comes to me to say hello every morning. And Miriam said, "Yes, I tell them to do that. Because then, for that one moment, they are visible to the teacher in the regular classroom. They don't just disappear silently into the group. For at least that one moment, they are seen." And I thought, yes. Frannie has to come up to me every morning to get my attention, because otherwise, I wouldn't give it to her. How many times would I go out of my way to speak to her? Probably none. They pass me in the hall and say hello, but I don't say, "come over and talk to me for a minute." Sometimes they will come and hang around me, and I'm happy about it, but it's their initiative, and I think it should be my initiative. Like Mackenzie, when she just comes to my room for integration, I don't go out of my way to speak to her, and all that. I don't know who she is, I really don't. I'm busy thinking about teaching the lesson, and getting everything organized, and trying to keep up with all the things I have to do.

I would like to have time to talk with every single student in my class every day. Just to ask them how their day is going, and to know a little story about them. But I can't do it with all of them. There is simply not enough time. So usually you get to know the ones who are really willing to tell you, because they're talkative. If it takes effort to pull it out of them, I don't have time. You just end up interacting much more with the louder kids, the outgoing ones who volunteer their stories. Like I know the entire history of Bianca's life, because she wants to tell me. She talks! She passes by you, and she tells you every update while she's passing by.

It's just that realistically, there are thirty-six students in my room. And there is so much going on all the time, report cards, and meetings, and assemblies, and special days, and all the admin. stuff I am doing because of my chairperson role. I am totally swamped with paper. You should see my living room. Piles of assignments everywhere, waiting to be marked. And me, feeling the pressure to be up to date with everything. I should just tell the kids, "Just forget you ever did this assignment, okay? And one day, if you are lucky, all of a sudden, you will get it back, marked."

They enjoy that sense of humour and they really respond to it. Because I tell them the truth. They get the real me. I don't try to act like I am a frozen face who outranks them in

the hierarchy. I am not separate from them. I am human, just like them, and I don't pretend I'm not. I am never putting on airs. When I am mad, I'm mad. When I am happy with them, I am really happy. When I have a headache, I tell them, "No. I have a headache. So don't start with any of your little surprises." And they laugh, because they know how to take my humour. I even use sarcasm with them, but never to single out an individual, to embarrass that person or hurt their feelings. No. But I use it globally to make the whole class laugh. Like I say to them, "Excuse me, but I didn't realize that I am now teaching kindergarten." It makes them laugh, but they also get the message to grow up to the grade eight level. I'm honest with them about how I feel. I give them me the way I am.

Now, when you have one group of students all day, like in the Primary and Junior grades, that's a pleasure, really, because you know them inside out. But in grade seven and eight in our school, the timetable is very fragmented. They are with you for certain classes, sometimes only forty-five minutes, and then they are gone somewhere else. I'm feeling that I don't see my students enough, and then when I do see them, I'm always on them about assignments and so on, because I need the marks. So I don't get the chance to hear their feelings about every little thing. But one thing that reassures me is that I know nobody else is listening to them either, so it's not

like they think, “Well other teachers listen to us, but not Ms J.,” because I know I still listen to them more than some teachers. I know that, so it’s okay, but I just don’t feel the satisfaction that this is how I want to teach.

Teaching gives me a lot, but it’s been giving it to me for fifteen years, and I feel done. I don’t feel bored. I still love the classroom, and being with the kids. But I am tired all the time. I have no energy left for this crazy running around, doing a thousand things at once. And you are never finished. Since we started the new “rigorous” curriculum, I can’t catch up. I am totally swamped. And the times I used to spend with students, just interacting and discussing issues, have been reduced. This job is just too much these days.

There are still times when teaching fills me up, like when I really get into something meaningful with my class. We did this unit about rights, and the kids were so into it! We were having these incredible discussions, you know? And they got going on animal rights, and then they ended up doing all this great writing about it. I felt so energized just being with them. It just makes me want to do all these incredible units with them, with creative, artful projects that really make them explore many sides of a particular issue, you know? But I just don’t have the energy.

Sometimes I fantasize about leaving teaching and finding the perfect job that I love. Something that doesn't deplete me the way teaching does, because I am feeling empty half the time. And preferably something where I don't have to spend five years and ten thousand dollars to retrain! I dream about being a writer. I have written the great novel in my head a thousand times. I lie in my bed sorting out the plot. But thinking about writing and actually writing is not the same thing, that's what Natalie Goldberg says. And at the end of the day, I have nothing left for writing. Even when I have the time, I do not have the energy or the motivation. I just sit in front of the TV clicking channels. And I'm not even focusing on anything. I'm just dead.

That is when I feel like it is true, I am "at-risk" in some ways. I am "at-risk" of never following the passion of my heart, to be writing. Maybe not as a career, but in some way in my life, writing. I am "at-risk" of not being my true self, because the passion of my writing is not being lived out. I am "at-risk" of staying in a job that depletes me, because it is easier than leaving. I am "at-risk" of being stuck in a rut. And the rut leads to other risks, like depression. There is a risk of just following the path that you started at some point. Whatever that path is, a relationship, or a job, or something else. And at that point, it was the thing to do, or you had to do it for one reason or another. And what do you do, now that you're

halfway on it? You can't go back. The detour from your chosen road is not clear. It's not like you're coming to the crossroads, where you can easily merge yourself with your dream life. That doesn't happen. These are parallel roads, like train tracks. So to change from one to another, you'd have to jump over to another track and start again. And that's really hard. Because that jump often involves time, money, courage, confidence, energy, forget it. It's just too much.

RECOVERING VOICE THROUGH ARTS-BASED ACTIVITIES

Jessica was one of the co-researchers who chose to engage in some of the arts-based invitations as a way of coming to know more about her own relationship with voice, silence and "at-riskness."

Jessica immigrated to Canada from Europe when she was fifteen years old. As part of her participation in this thesis, Jessica revisited the journals she kept during her adolescence. She was surprised that in all the pages of her thoughts and feelings from that time, she could find only one reference to her fear, the predominant emotion that she remembers experiencing.

Her entries seemed to reflect "insignificant" stories of school and friends and the boys she liked.

Jessica chose to create a palimpsest, which involves layering writing and/or images one on top of the other (see Diamond, 1999, p. 428-438). She made a collage of quotes from the journals of her adolescence (her past voice) and overlay it with the typed text "words, many meaningless words" (her present voice reflecting on the journals of her past). Jessica's palimpsest is featured on the following page.

Consistent with Eisner's encouragement to "...exploit the power of form to inform" (in Finley et al., 1995, p. 2), Jessica uncovered an important insight through the process of creating the palimpsest. She realized that her adolescent journals reflect her hope that romantic love might one day rescue her from a home of silent fear and her father's violence. In the end, she recognized that the words that she had initially considered "meaningless" were actually part of her childhood resilience and survival. Through making the palimpsest, Jessica realized that if she had written about her fear, she would have been "...giving it power." Instead, she

...gave a lot of voice to love, in my writing and in my hopes and dreams. That was my big solution...this love was going to rescue me, save me...but nobody can rescue you from fear. That is your own job (interview transcript, Oct. 21, 1998).

Jessica's fear was silent in the writings of her adolescence. The palimpsest led Jessica to know again that to write about something is to give it a voice. Jessica's engagement with the arts-based invitations led her to ask herself some important questions about her adolescent journal entries.

Maybe there were many meaningless words and a lot of stuff was hidden and there was a silence, but what was I saying over and over again that was so important to me?

What was it that I needed that I wrote in so many different ways?...What did I say a hundred times over and over again [in the diaries] that I have no respect for now? (interview transcript, Oct. 28, 1998)

Jessica's palimpsest is an important cornerstone in our research relationship, as it leads us to honour our unspoken stories, and the words they hide behind. How might our teaching/learning relationships be transformed if we made space for "meaningless" words?

Jessica's Response

My Name:

What seemed much too soon after I came to Canada, I had to read "The Merchant of Venice" by William Shakespeare. It was a school assignment and at that point my knowledge of English was very limited. I had to stay up for many nights and labouriously translate most of the words to understand the storyline. It was there that I discovered the name Jessica and as I read on, I fell in love with it. I said it aloud to myself, savouring the sound and wishing it were my name: a name that nobody would find "weird" or cumbersome, a name that belonged. I vowed that if I ever had a daughter, she would be Jessica. When I was asked to choose a fictitious name to

represent me, I didn't have to think about it at all. Jessica was the obvious choice.

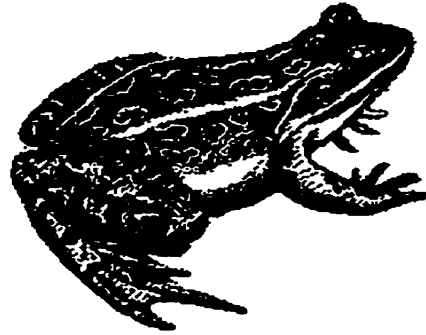
In the "Merchant of Venice," Jessica is the only daughter of a Jewish merchant Shylock, an outsider bordering on being comical, a villain who loses in the end. Jessica, who by nature is not a malevolent character, betrays her father by stealing his money and eloping with Lorenzo, a Christian. Today, delving into the psychology of these timeless characters, I see a deeper meaning in my choice. For the first time I see that there are parallels between Shylock and my father, between Jessica and me, and between our problematic relationships. There is more to Jessica than the sound of her beautiful name. Analyzing my life-long attachment to this word, gave me another way to look at my history and my complicated relationship with my father....

My Font (Bookman Old Style):

To me, choosing the font was not choosing the one I liked to look at, but the one that revealed part of my inner self. It was, after all, a visual representation of the experiences that I have very rarely, if ever, shared with others.

In the end, I have to accept the fact that no font will reflect the many facets of my personality and roles I play. Sometimes, I am free, unpredictable and maybe even unbalanced. Other

times, I am conservative and regimented. And this is where the computerized representation fails us.



My Symbol:

After much thought and searching, the symbol that I have chosen to represent me is a frog. In Dictionary of Symbols, Tom Chetwynd(1982) describes the frog as the symbol of creativity. For me, creativity has always been connected to the life force and personal writing has been an integral part of my life.

How It Felt To Have My Words Represented:

When I received the transcript, I was very surprised about the accuracy of Beth's representation of my voice. In the many pages of text, there was only one small factual error (my aunt's actions were attributed to my cousin's) and one expression that did not sound like something I would say. Any of the changes that I requested I considered very minor as they were grammatical in nature. What I think Beth accomplished surprisingly well in written form, was to give me an accent.

Although I've been in Canada for 28 years, a trace of it remains and I think that she really captured the particular way in which I express myself. Basically, when I was reading Beth's work, I felt that I could have written it, and my initial impression was that it was a polished transcript of what I actually said! Of course, that was not the case.

How It Felt To Be Part Of This Process:

When Beth asked me to be part of her project, I felt very honoured to be chosen. Since it was on issues of voice, I figured that she must have thought that I had something valuable to say – that in itself was an acknowledgement and a validation of MY personal voice.

Throughout the early stages of her research, we spent several evenings talking about certain aspects of her project and I felt thoroughly inspired by those conversations. Although I was just offering some unsolicited suggestions, she took my ideas seriously and made me feel that what I had to say was useful and important to her. I loved the opportunity to discuss the writing process, which is very close to my heart.

The part of the project that I enjoyed the most was experimenting with expressing myself through art. Although it's all part of the creative process which holds much meaning for me, I have been very inhibited about producing any piece of

visual art. When I was in elementary school, the emphasis was always on the product, and I couldn't draw. This seemed to have affected me for life, and once in Canada and given a choice, I have never taken any art course again. Beth's art suggestions were clearly focussed on the process and I was fascinated by several. Making the palimpsest took me back to my childhood pains and brought several personal realizations. An art session we had together, took me back to my childhood joys which have now taken a more prominent place in my memories. Some of the writing gave me a different viewpoint while re-visiting the past. Each trip back in time was worth taking and became a source of contemplation.

Private realizations which were the result of participating in this project were many, but talking about my life was at times difficult and tears were often just below the surface. Beth is an attentive and compassionate listener and it was easy to tell her some of the things that I had not told other people. Still, all along the way, I had to keep making the decision how much of the story I was prepared to disclose. What was inhibiting me was the knowledge that even though I was "Jessica" to any strangers reading about my life, the other women participating in the project would easily be able to figure out who I am. Only one of them is a personal friend, several others, unfortunately, are professional colleagues, both too close and too distant to know my intimate thoughts.

Although I was sometimes torn about telling parts of my personal history, I have made much of it public through this project. I have acknowledged and given voice to thoughts that have been locked away for a long time. Some of them I was no longer aware of. What I found, was that once I heard myself speak of the previously “unspeakable,” and allowed it to enter a public ear, I was then able to tell the same story to those who are close to me without the same anxiety. Becoming more comfortable with memories of discomfort and pain has been the most unexpected gain of participating in this project.

Emma:

“I want to make her matter to herself”

Carla wants to kill herself. That's what she told Helen, one of the other girls in my class. Helen's mom heard them talking about it and called the school.

I just feel so sad, thinking about Carla wanting to die. She's only eleven. I don't know if she would actually go through with it. But the fact that she was even talking about it, I think she's really hurting. It's like she's saying, “Pay attention. This is how bad I feel.”

I don't really know what's going on in her life. I mean, she's been in my class since September, but she's very quiet and shy. She doesn't talk about her feelings very much. I know she has a hard time making friends. I don't understand why every kid in the school doesn't just love her. She's very sweet and gentle as far as I can see. But for some reason, she's alone a lot. There is one girl named Stephanie, from the other grade five class. Carla hangs around with her

sometimes at recess. But it's not a good situation, because Stephanie is a very dominating person, and she treats Carla like dirt. You should hear the hurtful things that Stephanie says to her. I hear them talking sometimes in the hall, or outside when I'm on yard duty. And Carla is crying almost every day after recess. When I ask her what happened, she doesn't usually talk about it. She just cries. Or sometimes she tells me that she's not going to be friends with Stephanie anymore. But then she always changes her mind and goes back to Stephanie, probably because Carla doesn't really have any other friends.

I think she doesn't have the self-esteem to walk away from Stephanie. She doesn't believe that she deserves to be treated better than that. She's like I was, before I left Justin. She's just really down on herself. I worry about so many of the girls in my class, that they're going to end up in a relationship with the wrong type of person the way I did.

I see the kids in my class and I wonder about their futures, the decisions they'll make. I especially worry about the girls. One day the journal topic was, "Do you think you would ever want to get married?" Well, the girls wrote about how they want to have a beautiful white dress and look like a princess and be loved, and it makes me sad to think it might not be like that for them. And the reason the boys want to get married is they want someone to cook for them. Like, this is the nineties, and they're still saying things like that. At Hallowe'en, the boys are all bad guys or tough guys, and the girls are all princesses or cheerleaders. Very feminine, beautiful, cute things. There's such a difference between boys and girls and what's expected of them, and the expectations they already have for themselves.

And girls like Carla, who already feel bad about themselves, what kind of choices will they make based on those negative feelings? Like, Carla already thinks she's stupid, because she gets mostly C's and D's. I wish I didn't have to mark her with letter grades, because

it just gives her something to hate herself about. She's really low in math and language especially, but she tries so hard. I mean, any teacher would love to have a whole class full of kids like Carla. She's well-behaved, and she works hard. She just needs a lot of extra help.

I try to give Carla positive encouragement but you know, it's hard. There are more than thirty kids in the class, and so many of them are needy in one way or another. It's really hard to deal with everything they need, every single day. If I was able to spend a huge amount of time with her, like individual attention all the time, she'd get a lot more work finished, and academically she'd do better. But that's impossible, because there are so many kids who need extra help. And I have a group of about five boys who always fool around, so I have to totally keep track of them all the time, or else it's chaos in there.

But even if I spent all day telling Carla that I think she's wonderful, I don't think she would believe

it about herself. I don't know if positive recognition from me is enough to change her whole self-image. She needs to feel good about herself, and to believe that she can do it, but I don't know if somebody else can give that to you. I don't know how to make her matter to herself.

I see it with other kids in my class, too. If they're having a bad day, they'll say, "I don't have any friends and no one likes me." I remember feeling like that so much. One time I was talking to my brother about when we were in high school, and he said, "You were so popular! Everyone liked you!" But back in high school, I did not feel like that at all. To me, it looked like my brother was the one who had all the friends. You've never seen so many friends. But he was feeling those exact same insecurities that I felt. Wow, I wish we talked about it back then, because we both felt so alone.

I think that's how Carla feels, too. I wish I could just teach her to believe in herself, and to know that

she is such a wonderful person. To know that. I want her to be able to have her own opinion, and say it out loud, and feel good about it. And not to feel guilty to have an opinion. It's almost like she's afraid to say the wrong thing.

Even today, I gave them this journal question, "What's your favourite movie and why?" Carla just sat there staring off into space for the longest time. I was watching her for a few minutes, and finally I went over and I asked her, "Why aren't you doing your work?" And she said, "I don't know what the right answer is." So I told her, "There is no right answer. It's whatever you think you want to say. Your own opinion is what's important here." But she puts no value on her own opinion at all, although she's so respectful of other people's opinions all the time. She just doesn't think that her own opinion matters.

She's on the waiting list to be tested to see if there's some learning disability or some other reason why she's struggling so much. And the guidance

counsellor has spent a lot of time with her, especially since this whole conversation about suicide. But I don't know if she can just all of a sudden open up and talk about how she feels, why she feels so sad. I don't know if she even knows why.

Maybe there's stuff going on at home. But when I met Carla's mom at the parent interview, she seemed to be such a very loving person towards her. She said things like, "You know, Carla, I just love you so much. You are the light of my life and I wouldn't trade you in for anything. I couldn't ask for a kinder, nicer, more helpful daughter." If that was my mom saying those beautiful things about me, I would have been bawling. But there was something that Carla's mom said that bothered me. We were talking about how Carla was having difficulty in math, and finding long division really hard, all the steps. Her mother said, "Well, I always found math really easy. I don't understand why it's so hard for you, Carla. You don't have it, but I had it." I thought, "What a thing to say!" It really did come out as a put-down, even

though her mom seemed very loving in a lot of other ways. Just that one statement was the only questionable thing, but even one sentence can really hurt a person.

Who knows how a person really acts when other people aren't around? Maybe her mom is not the loving person that I thought she was. She seemed to be so supportive, but anybody can make themselves come across any way they want in an interview. A person could just project whatever image they want you to believe about them. I'm sure that if you looked at my family from the outside, you would think that we are totally happy.

Growing up, I felt totally unsure of myself on the inside, but I don't know if it always showed on the outside. I know a lot of that insecurity comes from my relationship with my mom, from feeling like I'm not good enough for her. I don't know if I will ever just feel good enough exactly the way I am. I don't know what it would take to make my mom proud of me. I

don't know. But that's not something I want to talk about here.

I just remember that the worst I felt about myself was when I was the age of the kids I teach now. Because the whole puberty thing is just so hard. I got my first period way later than all my friends, like I was fourteen. And all those years, I thought that there was something wrong with me. Wow, like I think back to how I felt then. I was so shy. When I was in grade five, I would never have put my hand up, ever, to answer a question. I got good marks, but I was always worried that I was wrong. Even at the beginning of high school, I felt nervous when they took attendance, because you had to say "here," and raise your hand. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself.

Before I started grade nine, I had this impossible dream about being a cheerleader. I just thought, "Wow, that's the type of person I wish that I could be." I had this image in my mind of how it would feel to be that outgoing, and confident and popular. I knew

I could handle the physical part, because I was really into fitness and everything, but I didn't have any confidence. When they posted the announcement for the tryouts, I was totally terrified. I remember feeling shy and nervous and thinking, "There is no way I will make the team." But I wanted it so much, so I tried out even though I was afraid. I just kept saying inside my head, "Okay, pretend that you feel great about yourself."

And then, once I made it on to the team, my inside self did not match my outside self. Because I still felt nervous and self-conscious and small inside, but I was part of this team that was very visible and popular in the school. Being a cheerleader came with sort of an automatic image, so I just tried to pretend that it was perfectly normal to me. I caught on to the moves very easily, and other people started saying all these nice things about me.

It was always shocking when anyone complimented me in any way. I'd think "What's wrong

with them? Why do they like me? Don't they know that I'm just pretending?" But I started to make friends on the team, and they kept telling me, "You're so nice!" It made me think, "Wow. If other people think this of me, maybe it's true a little bit."

I've always done fairly well in school, but as my confidence grew, my grades improved even more. I did much better in high school than I did in public school. I even tried to hide how well I was doing, because the people that I wanted to be popular with didn't value academic achievement.

Cheerleading was really the gateway for me to start feeling more confident about myself. I think my physical abilities in cheerleading and athletics bought me some self-esteem. And that made it possible for me to succeed as a cheerleader, which helped me believe that I could do other things that used to scare me.

I have always been more confident to do physical things than to speak. I get nervous speaking in public. I used to have a job teaching aerobics, and I could jump around and give the instructions, no problem. But at the beginning of the class when I had to welcome everybody, I would be so nervous I would feel like throwing up. Once I got into the class, I felt no nervousness at all. I felt exhilarated. I loved helping other people feel good about themselves.

Teaching aerobics gave me confidence. It was a place where I felt really valued. I had one group of women who always came to my classes. One of them even took the time to write a letter saying how much she enjoyed my teaching, and how enthusiastic and nice I am. I got very positive feedback from the people I taught. One of my supervisors wrote in my evaluation that I would make an excellent school teacher, because I could take complicated moves and break them down into simple steps. I was so happy, because my dream was to become a teacher one day. I

felt like this woman was telling me that my dream could come true.

I have always had a lot of extra energy, and I like to be active. Even now, when I go out to a bar with my friends, sometimes they just want to stand around and talk, but I could dance from the second we get there until we leave. Physical activity is the way that I work through whatever is going on in my life. That's how I got into running. I felt so alone in my marriage and I was so miserable. So I started running, just to get out of the house. And I was so upset all the time, I was running miles. Whenever I was angry at Justin, I went out for a run. There was no use trying to talk about my feelings with him. He wouldn't listen to me. I just had to work it out inside myself.

Running is probably the reason that I feel better now about my own body than I ever have. I mean, there are still things I would change about myself if I could. Like, I would choose naturally blonde hair.

Ever since I was little, I have always thought that long, blonde hair is so pretty. So that's why I colour my hair blonde like this. But basically, I feel okay about my physical appearance right now. Not because I think I look great or anything. It's just that I feel really strong and fit and healthy. In my mind, I relate the beginning of my running to becoming a stronger person.

And when I finished my first marathon last October, I felt like I could do anything. The whole time I was running, I just kept thinking about how I am free now. To me, finishing the marathon meant that Justin does not control me anymore, and no one ever will control me again. It was the one last thing I needed to do, to prove that I deserve to believe in myself.

If you had asked me when I was married to him, would I ever have the courage to leave, I would have said, "No way." I didn't think I was brave enough. Justin totally silenced me all the time, and made me

feel terrible about myself. Being with him was a real downhill time in terms of my esteem. I met him my first year in university, and any confidence I had gained in high school, he totally took it away. And it happened so slowly, I never really noticed it happening. He put me down continuously in every way, in my personality, in my intelligence, in my looks, in my ability at anything I ever did. I think he put me down so that I would feel lucky to have him.

A couple of days after we got back from our honeymoon, I spent the whole day trying to make this big fancy meal. I'm not the most skilled cook on earth, so I was on the phone with my grandma all afternoon and she was giving me all these tips and telling me what to do. I made chicken with pineapples and it ended up being really good actually. Like, I loved it. But Justin tried one bite and he said, "This tastes like f---ing s---, Emma. Make me something else." I was so hurt and angry. I told him, "No, you make yourself something else." And he said "You can't cook at all. Some kind of wife you turned out to be." I

heard that comment so many times over those three years that we were married. "Some kind of wife you turned out to be." I really believed that. And in those three years, instead of thinking, "I'm not happy," I always thought, "Oh no. He's not happy. What am I doing wrong? How can I be better? What can I do to make him love me, to be the kind of wife I should have been?"

The problems between Justin and I were there right from the beginning of our relationship. One of his former girlfriends was still very much in love with him, and she really wanted to get back together. I felt threatened by that. Plus, this woman had very large breasts, the kind of body that men are attracted to. And I was worried that if I was not good enough for Justin, he would go back to her. I never even thought, "Is this the person that I want to be with? Does he treat me the way I deserve to be treated?" I just kept thinking, "How can I make him happy? What if he leaves me?"

So I just did whatever Justin told me to do, basically. My role in that marriage was to keep the peace, not rock the boat, not upset him, and not do anything to make him scream at me. I was so controlled by him in all these little ways that would probably sound like nothing to other people. Like, for example, he would have to be the one to drive if we were going anywhere. He wouldn't let me drive. I know it sounds stupid, but he just wouldn't let me. It would either be that he gets to drive, or we don't go.

Or we would go into the video store, and he had picked the last ten movies that we rented, and I would say "I'd really like to see this movie," and he would not let me get it. He would yell at me about how stupid my choice was, and I would just want to get out of there because I was so embarrassed. He would be screaming at me in the aisles at BlockBuster. We would leave without getting any movie at all rather than get the one that was my choice.

Even stupid things, like I wanted to go to the zoo. I love the zoo. I kept asking him every weekend for so long, and finally he said "Okay fine, I'll go to the zoo, but I'm NOT looking at the gorillas." He knows the gorillas are my favourite animals. They are the only reason I want to go to the zoo. But he had to have control over every single thing that we did. That's what it was about. 100% about control.

I decided after the first few months of marriage, whatever I do, I'm not getting pregnant. There was no way I wanted to have kids with him. Although I didn't feel good enough about myself to say, "he can't keep treating me like this," I thought, "I will never, ever let my kids be treated this way." Justin had a lot of little nieces, and he was beautiful with those kids. He was so nice to them, and I loved that about him when we were dating. I had seen him be so charming and wonderful with other people's kids for brief periods of time, but I knew he couldn't keep it up everyday with his own.

Most of the time, I did the grocery shopping, but occasionally near the beginning of the marriage he would sometimes go with me. I'm anaphylactic to peanuts, but he didn't seem to care too much about that. We would pass the peanut oil, and he would laugh and hold it up and say, "Death in a bottle," and joke about it. I told him so many times, "It's not funny. To me, it's not funny." But he thought it was hilarious. He always had peanut butter in the house, even though I didn't want it there, because he was really messy and there would always be peanut butter smeared on the outside of the jar. He just said, "Too bad," and he wouldn't get rid of it.

There was this one time we were in a huge fight over something. Probably money, because he had really strict rules for what I was allowed to spend. I don't even remember what it was about, but he was really mad at me. And he said, "I could put peanut butter in your food and kill you and no one would know how you died. No one would even know what

happened." It just shocked me. Like, my husband is imagining ways of killing me?

I felt so upset by what he said. And we were fighting. Well, he was yelling and I was crying. But there was no privacy because our place was so small, so I just went into the bedroom and shut the door. I was lying on the bed bawling my eyes out, but I kept it pretty quiet because I didn't want to make him more mad. I just felt like I wanted to die. I will never be as lonely as I was when I was married.

Justin came into the bedroom and lay down on the bed beside me. He did that sometimes after we had a fight. He would be all nice to me all of a sudden, and act like nothing happened. Then I would feel completely crazy, like, am I married to Jekyll and Hyde? So he was lying there beside me and he put his arms around me and he said, "I'm really sorry. Come on, let's make up." But then he pushed me over on to my back and held me down by my shoulders. He pressed his mouth to mine and breathed really hard

into my mouth. And he started laughing the wickedest laugh. Because he had eaten peanut butter on purpose before he kissed me.

Right away, my lips got all swollen from the peanut butter touching my mouth and I didn't know if my throat was just going to close up any minute. I just grabbed my stuff and ran out. I was too upset to drive, so I just sat in the underground with my doors locked. When I got myself together enough to drive, I went to my parents. I didn't want to tell them what happened. My dad would have driven straight over to talk to Justin, he would have been so angry. So I never told them the truth. I just said I was home alone, and I accidentally ate something with peanuts and I was really scared so I wanted to come over.

Including the years that we dated and the time we were married, it was eight years that Justin and I were together. My first two years of teaching were the last two years of my marriage. I just threw myself into my job. I would stay at work until eight or nine

o'clock at night so that I wouldn't have to go home to him yet. I started developing some really good friendships with female friends at work. I had such a wonderful time with them. We would be laughing and talking, and I would think, "I feel happy! I never ever feel like this with him. When was the last time I even laughed with him, or felt anything positive at all?" That was one really important thing, when I realized how much I enjoyed other people's company. I had really isolated myself from my other friends for the eight years that I was with Justin.

It felt good to talk about what was going on with my school friends, because I had kept it secret for so long. I didn't want people to know that my marriage wasn't working, because I felt ashamed. I felt like a total failure. I was so depressed, but I can hide it if I have to, so most people thought everything was fine.

But I just thought, no matter how bad this marriage is, there is no way I'm leaving. I felt determined to make the marriage work. I thought if

only I tried hard enough, I could make things better. I also thought that no matter what, I would never get divorced. Ever since I was in high school, thinking about getting married one day, it always upset me how many couples split up. I thought that people just didn't try hard enough, and I didn't want to be one of those people. It meant failure to me.

I was afraid to live by myself. I was afraid to be alone. I knew I couldn't go back and live with my parents again. I was terrified to leave Justin, and I was afraid to fail.

I don't think there was one last straw, one thing that finally made me walk away. Over time, it was something that happened really slowly. It was a long process to go from taking it, to not taking it, to leaving. After about a year, someone close to me gave me a book on emotionally abusive relationships. That was the first step. I read it and I thought, "This is us. He is emotionally abusive and I'm letting it happen."

Another huge, huge transition was that I finally got the courage to go for counselling. It was only because of friends really encouraging me to go that I finally went. I begged Justin to go with me for counselling, but he wouldn't go. So I made the first appointment to go alone, but then I cancelled it. Justin was going to be out of town at the time, and I felt too guilty to say negative things about him to a stranger, especially while he was away.

When I finally went to my first appointment, I spent the whole hour just bawling my eyes out. I was so depressed and so miserable by that time. Near the end of the session she asked me, "Why are you staying in this relationship?" and I didn't have an answer.

The counsellor suggested that I write down what's really important to me in the marriage, maybe three things, and tell him about it. So I wrote down really basic things, like, I wanted to be treated with respect. And I asked him to talk to me without yelling or swearing at me. I also wanted to spend some quality

time together. Things like that. But he thought the whole idea of me making a list was totally stupid, and he refused to do any of the things I asked for. I said, "Well, I'm going to leave then." And he said, "So go. There's the door."

He didn't think I would really do it. But I secretly started looking for somewhere else to live. I found an apartment, but it wasn't going to be available for two months. I had planned to go on living with him for those two months, and just keep my mouth shut about leaving. But then one day he phoned my parents' house for something, and my dad said, "I'm so disappointed that Emma has to move out." Well, of course Justin totally freaked out. He was furious. It was the first time he really believed I was going to go. He had to hear it from somebody else before he would believe it. And from a man especially, because he has no respect for women at all, period. Because when I told him I was leaving, he totally ignored me.

When I first got my apartment alone, I felt totally terrified and totally brave at the same time. My family told me that Justin was trying to find me, and I knew he was really mad. I kept expecting him to storm through the door at any minute, but he never did. And I felt free for the first time in eight years. I remember coming home from work one day and it felt so good coming in to a peaceful place. There was no one there to fight with me or say nasty things. I felt so happy, I ran into my bedroom and jumped up and down on the bed.

I think that leaving Justin was the most voice I've ever had in my whole life. I finally made a choice that was just for me, so that I could have a better life than what I had with him. Because usually I'm all worried about what other people will think about what I say or do.

The first two years of my teaching, I was still married to Justin. I just threw myself into my work, because I was so unhappy at home. Now I try to be

more balanced, and enjoy my personal life and my teaching. But as a teacher, there are still times when I feel like I am totally not enough. And I think I will never feel that I am enough. This job is endless, and there are so many kids, and so many needs and expectations to meet. And just when I feel good about one part of my teaching, there's something else that comes up, or ten other things.

When I first started teaching, I was so worried what everyone thought about my teaching. I felt like I was pretending. "What if someone finds out that I'm not a real teacher and I don't really know what I'm doing? Can the kids tell? Do their parents know?" I felt so unsure about almost every area of my program. And my class was special ed., so they don't always learn at the same rate as other kids. And I felt like it was my fault that they were all struggling so much. I just felt like I had no clue what I was doing.

Now that I have been teaching for five years, I feel more confident about my program. But I still feel

like I have so much to learn, and so many ways I want to be better for the kids. I want to model the qualities that make a good person: empathy, caring, kindness, patience. Because I want my kids to feel good about themselves. And kids like Carla are going to fall through the cracks unless someone catches them.

The days that I go home and think, "What a terrible day," it's usually because I don't feel good about the way I've related to the kids that day. I wasn't patient enough, or I snapped at a kid and I feel guilty and horrible. And a day that's wonderful, it's never about a lesson going well. It's about having a really amazing connection with at least one kid, and hopefully more of them.

Emma's Response

My Name:

Two years ago on Hallowe'en, I dressed up as Emma from the Spice Girls, because my class was really into that group at the time. It was so much fun,

seeing the kids' reactions. They liked the fact that I like the Spice Girls too. And even apart from the Spice Girls, Emma is a name I love. I want to name my first daughter Emma.

My Font:

I picked this because I like the way it flows. It is not plain or hard or formal. It looks fun and free and easy.



My Symbol:

I chose water as my symbol. Three friends and I went up to my family's cottage one weekend a few years ago, and we decided that we would each become the queen of something, some element that reflects something about us. And I am the queen of water, because I love to be near water. My favourite place is up at the cottage by the lake. I've gone there all my life, for as long as I can remember. It's the one

place where I feel peaceful and relaxed. The sound of water makes me feel calm.

How it felt to be part of this process:

It was pretty shocking and scary to see my stories in print. At first, I felt like, "I don't know if I want Beth to use any of this!!" When we're face to face I tell you how I think and feel, and it just flows because you're my friend. But then when it is in writing, I can't believe how much I said. At first I felt like I wanted to take back some of what I said. You did such an amazing job of putting yourself in my shoes, but it's imagining someone else reading it that made me want to change some things. When I first read it I felt really worried about someone else reading it, but when I read it again, I thought, "this is the true story of what happened." I didn't expect to feel so emotional when I was reading it. I guess it made me think about things from my past that I don't think about much anymore. And I realized I'm pretty "voiceful" now.

PETUNIA: ELEPHANTS, WISDOM AND MEMORY

When I was fifteen I was going out with this guy at school, and my parents had no clue about it because I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend. When boys would phone, my mom would drill me, "Who is this? What does he want? Why is he calling? Who gave him permission? Shall I call his family, because he shouldn't be calling you." So I used to write him letters.

One day I wrote him this letter: "I love you and I can't live without you," but when I was heading out to deliver it, my mom stopped me. "Where are you going, and what is this paper you have in your hand?" So I took off, running around the house, trying to hide this letter from my mother. Because I knew that the words I had written on that page were completely unacceptable. And my mother was following me around the house, crying and saying, "How can you do this to me? How can you not tell me?" And it hurt me that she was crying, but there was no way I could show her what I wrote. So I was running around, and screaming at them to leave me alone. My mom was crying. My dad was asking my mom, "Why can't you control your daughter?" And my sister was telling me, "Look. You're making your mother cry." I ended up ripping the letter into tiny pieces. My mother never got to read it.

There was a lot I had to hide by the time I was fifteen. It's just an intrinsic part of growing up in the Indian community. My friends and I could write a book about all the ways we worked the rules. We had to, because we were basically straddled between two very different cultures and two very different value systems. I could justify all of the deceit up to the age of, well, I can still do it.

As an adolescent, I could do anything at home, or with girlfriends. The only restriction was that I couldn't have boyfriends. When I started going out with Roger, I was seventeen. I would say that we were studying together, so that made it okay, because it involved school. Also, my parents knew his family. And eventually, when I married Roger, it was fine with them, because he was Indian, and because he was from a "decent" family.

A decent family is one that is conservative, and is not known for any rumors, history or baggage that would mar a family's reputation. Affairs in the family, or children who are "out of control," they're a reflection on the parents. An "out of control" child is one who doesn't go to school, or doesn't have a job, or is thought to be sexually active outside of marriage. If you are known to have had sex outside of marriage, you can never redeem yourself in the eyes of the community.

And everybody finds out who is doing what, because the community is tight-knit. We're talking twenty or thirty years that we grew up together.

It's common knowledge among my South East Asian friends: there's what you're really about, and then there's what your parents know. The same group of friends can associate very comfortably in setting A, with the drinking, the music, the fooling around. It's a subversive, quiet life that's very real, but not approved of by the parents. A covert setting where everybody knows one another, and everybody's socializing in the ways that we all know are not acceptable to the parents.

But you can take that same group of friends and move them to a birthday party with the parents all around, and there is an implicit understanding of what is allowed to be spoken about, and what is not allowed to be referred to. We protected each other. We could all stick to a story. We could move between the two worlds. We could just go back and forth so easily.

We even had our own theory that our parents really did know. They just didn't want to have to address it with us. There was no way for them to give us approval, or it would go against everything that they know and value, too. But they understood that we were living dual lives, at a crossroads between an Eastern and a Western world. They wanted us

to fit in. They bought us the clothes that we needed to fit in. They let us participate in the activities that our non-East Indian friends were participating in. For example, I always took swimming lessons, even though in India, people don't really swim for recreational purposes, because you have to expose so much of yourself. And I took ballet lessons, but there's no history of ballet in India. Our parents wanted us to participate. All the things that they might have had reservations about, they let us do anyway. So they knew that we were trying to fit in. They wanted us to have that peer approval and they wanted us to succeed here. And we wanted to have our parents' approval. So everyone sort of privately agreed on a code of silence, in a way. We understood that we had to keep certain choices covert, so our parents would not be forced to acknowledge them. It was as if our parents made an unspoken pact with us: "Don't put it in our faces, and then we won't have to address it. You just keep it quiet, and we'll just look the other way."

Roger and I went out for nine years before we got married. Did my parents really think that nothing ever happened sexually, for nine years? I never said anything about it one way or another. I couldn't tell them. I know they would still love me. But I would lose something in their eyes. They would no longer see me as wholesome or pure, the way they think of me right now. As it is right now, I enjoy our relationship and I wouldn't want it to change. They have respected my opinion on things

for a long time. I would lose some status with them, if they knew we were intimate before we were married. I've heard them speak about others, and I know what they respect. I haven't done anything outside the expectations that they've known about. Concealing it all has been paramount to keeping that good reputation going. I have learned what to keep silent.

I don't think that they could bring it into their brains, or it would mean that they would have to address it, and know that it happened. It's kind of self-protective. Because they also wanted me to be happy. By restricting me, they might have taken that happiness away from me. I knew they couldn't do that.

My parents were caught between the Eastern values that they wanted to instill in us, and our Western lifestyles. Because my parents' values applied to a different world. That's how we could justify lying, my friends and I. I can come right out and say that I lied to my parents and I'm okay with it. Because there was tacit approval. To bring everything out into the open meant that all of us would be in an uncomfortable place. So we just knew whatever we knew and kept our mouths shut.

I could play with my South Asian heritage very easily. When I could portray it in a positive light, where it would give me esteem, I did. For

example, when I was in grade eight, I had a classmate named Christie, who was Greek. She'd come over for lunch sometimes, and we would sit there talking about Greece and India, comparing how similar they are. That was a bond that established our friendship, so I didn't mind being "visible" with her.

But if anything about my heritage came up at school, I tried to keep it quiet. If there was something that could be negatively construed about the fact that I was Indian, I just covered it up. There was a girl who was Muslim, and she and I were good friends at the beginning of grade seven. But she decided that she was going to take on the hijab, the head covering. I don't know if her parents made her, or if it was an optional thing, but around that point, she and I stopped being friends. I knew that there was an Eastern connection between us, that could have been interpreted as us being the same. A couple of times people asked me, "Are you going to wear that thing, too? Is that your religion as well?" And I remember very vehemently saying, "No! We're very different, different religions. I'm not supposed to do that. I'm not expected to do that. No. No."

In the school where I teach now, there's a high immigrant population. I think our whole student council is non-white. We only have two white students in the whole Intermediate Division. There are

kids with accents sitting on the student council, talking on the intercom. It's such a different scenario from how I grew up, being a "visible minority" in a white school. The immigrant kids are not in the minority at the school where I am teaching. And I see them taking on all these leadership roles, in very vocal, visible positions in the school. Being in the majority means that you can more easily have a voice, because you're backed up by the knowledge and confidence that comes from a sense of belonging.

The grade eight boys that I teach seem to adopt that "belonging confidence" very naturally. They are so are outspoken. They just call things out in the middle of class. I have to remind them to put up their hands. And I also have to keep those outspoken boys quiet, so other people can say something. I have these three boys who take up a lot of verbal space in the classroom, and by doing that they take away space from other kids.

I don't know what it is, but grade eight boys take up a lot of space. They seem to feel very comfortable being loud, and saying whatever thought comes into their heads. In the halls, you hear comments like, "She's such a dog." "Woof woof." Males talking about females. When I hear females talking about males, they are usually talking about how "fine" he is, how good he looks, how appealing or attractive.

Before I came to Meadow Creek, I taught grade eight at Grace Road. The kids at Grace, their lives are really influenced by the street. What is out there for the kids I taught at Grace Road, is a street life that gives them power. The street is much more appealing than working hard in school. And the kids from families where there are fewer restrictions and less supervision, they're out on the street until late at night. Where there is a family influence keeping kids at home or tightly watched, that is obviously not cool to my Grace Road students. Because they want to be free.

Power on the street comes from knowing the right people. My kids would say, "I'm going to get my friend," and that friend's name intimidated other people, and brought them respect. And the school could do nothing, if the kid was respected through brothers, sisters, acquaintances or connections on the street. If a gang wants to take down a certain kid, rough them up a bit for whatever reason, the school is not much of a threat. Because off school property, after school hours, what can the school do about it?

Also, it is the element of violence that gives those kids power. Kids can overpower each other physically, because they have access to weapons from their friends and older siblings at Terrace Heights High School. Guns

and knives. I saw a lot of knives. They bring them to school. Most of the time, they just use them to intimidate. But for some of my Grace Road kids, the prospect of using the knife in a fight is not at all a negative idea for them. It's a way to be seen as even more powerful.

On the first day of school, we were talking about things that make us unique and special, our own person. And this student said, "Well, I have bullet scars" and that was considered cool. The kids went "Wow, that's so amazing! What happened? How did it happen?" So this boy showed the bullet wound on his arm. Apparently he was caught in the crossfire, but we didn't get into too much detail, because I wasn't comfortable with the conversation. The kids were so caught up in his story. They just loved it, loved the fact that the violence was so present in their lives, right there in front of them. And they loved seeing what a bullet scar looks like. And then this student proceeded to talk about how he couldn't wait to get them back, the guys who shot him. And he knew who they were, and he had friends who were going to help him retaliate. And that was all supported by these kids, all of it. So that's when I stopped him and said, "It's so awful that you've been through this experience. Maybe you should consider ending this conflict for good." But I think he believed that violence was the only way to survive his life outside. He didn't come to school much. He was actually a nice kid in the classroom when he showed up, but he was also prepared to do battle on the streets.

The kids I teach now at Meadow Creek, their lives are very different from my Grace Road kids. Meadow Creek has a high ESL population, with many new immigrants. Some of my kids came as refugees from war-torn countries. They know from their own experience how hard it has been, and how long it has taken to get to Canada. To have their parents come into the school for a negative report is just terrifying to them. They don't want to put their parents through that. In many cases, their parents are working two and three jobs. You would think that maybe the kids would take advantage of that. They don't. They work harder. They come in after school and ask how to get 100%. Their parents are expecting them to do well. Academic success is seen as the necessary prerequisite for a professional job in the future. Even for girls from very traditional families where they expect to get married early, school is still necessary as part of what makes them marriageable.

I do think my grade eights at Meadow Creek are "at-risk" in some ways, even though they are academically successful. They're not "at-risk" of dropping out of school, or joining a gang like my Grace Road students. I think they're "at risk" for being stressed-out and depressed, because they are constantly striving to achieve what their parents expect of them, or what they might expect of themselves. They're "at-risk" of feeling that there is an elusive standard out there that they have to reach.

It's "Do your best." They want to know what that means exactly. What will get them 100%? What will get them into university? What will get them successfully out of university and into a high-paying, well-respected job? These kids are already talking about that now, in grade eight.

At some point, you have to stop living your life to match up to somebody else's expectations, and just follow your own dream, whatever it is. That's how I feel about the elephant sanctuary. I'm totally exhilarated because volunteering there is exactly what I want to do. They offer a six-week internship program, and they usually only accept zoology and veterinary students, but I sent in my application anyway. I sent it in, and I told them, "I am IN LOVE with elephants. I feel it from deep inside me, I can't describe it, I don't know why, I have really no experience, but this is what I want to do, and please just give me a chance."

For the interview you have to spend a work-day with them and they watch you. And right now, I'm just so excited about going there even for a day, just for ONE DAY. You start work at 8:00 a.m. and you're supposed to dig things, and help the keepers prepare the food for the elephants. Their philosophy is that you don't really get close to the elephants. You have observation time, and people log hundreds of hours of straight observation. But these are abused elephants who have been rescued from circuses, so they don't feel safe with lots of different people

handling them. They prefer having one care-giver who they can recognize and get used to and trust. And that's okay with me. I don't want to impose myself on them. I just want to be there with them. They don't have to know who I am. And I am prepared to WORK. I've never really dug anything, you know what I mean? I've never really done the physical labour end of it, but I want to do that. I'm so excited. I got an email yesterday at 5:53 p.m. to say I can come for the interview, and I phoned her back at 6:02. She was like, "I just emailed you..." and I was like, "When can I come? Any time you say. How about next week?"

Just the thought of it, I'm so excited. I'm just fizzing inside. But I'm not talking about it in too many places, because I only want to tell people who can get excited about it with me. I haven't told my brother-in-law because his first response would probably be, "What? Why would you do that?" So he doesn't know. I only tell people who can be sincere and supportive. I haven't told my parents yet that I'm going, because when I first mentioned that I was looking into it, they kind of went, "Oh. Okay." I don't want anything to damper the way I feel right now. I don't want to hear anyone say "but...."

Why is it such a big deal if I want to take care of elephants for six weeks? It's my life and I want to have this experience, but I only tell it to people who can receive it properly, with respect. So basically, if a person

can't receive it, I don't want to hear from them. I know this feeling of exhilaration doesn't come along too often, and I want to savour it.

But I never had these feelings for doing my PhD, ever, EVER. Not a split second of this, whatever this is, this joyful hope. At first, doing a PhD just seemed like a natural progression after I finished my Masters. And there were no blocks that I could see. And it seemed like if it was a possibility, then I should do it. I should. But when I started doing my courses for my doctorate, I just saw a dark tunnel ahead, long, alone, isolated. I just pictured myself grasping to get out, to get to the other side, to be done.

I am always analyzing my life, asking myself the question, is this exactly what I want my life to be? Just to make sure that I'm still doing what I'm supposed to be doing, and that I haven't lost a connection with where I want to be. Where I want to be, is waking up and looking forward to living that day. Feeling happy in my work, and in my relationships, and with myself. And that's why I knew that I needed to leave my PhD program and go and spend time with the elephants.

I don't know why elephants matter to me so much. My last trip to India was in 1993. That was the first time I really remember feeling totally compelled by elephants. But I have had experiences with them all my life.

I grew up seeing images of elephants, as a deity, but also as an idol, and also in symbolic form, all around our house. And seeing elephants everywhere, because they roam freely on the streets in India. And elephants are considered precious in India. They represent wisdom and memory.

There's this whole story about how a young boy was asked to guard the room of his mother. But the devil came and decapitated the boy to get to the woman. She was informed, I don't remember how exactly, that the first living creature she could find, if she removed its head and put it on her son's body, then her son would be given life again. And so the first living creature she found was an elephant, and now this child with the elephant's head is the god we call Ganesh. And Ganesh is a symbol, that knowledge and light and life will overcome what's evil in the world.

I want that light in my life. I am so aware of natural light. I love it. I need the sun. That's why winter is really hard for me, when the days are so short. I get really depressed from October until December. After winter solstice, the days start getting longer again. But up until then, I am lost.

According to objective standards, I have everything I need. I'm getting three meals a day, I'm living in a first-world country, I'm married to someone that I love. My parents are healthy, I'm healthy, Roger is

healthy, I have a job. I have a lot to be thankful for. But I don't feel joy. And I feel guilty for not appreciating what I have.

Like, what's wrong with me, that I just feel like lying in bed all day? I sink to the same dark place every winter. I just lie around and I don't move. Even when I'm physically awake, I feel like I'm asleep.

When I'm depressed, I teach differently. I don't have the same spirit and enthusiasm in November that I have right now. I feel like I don't have creative ideas and I'm not interested in anything. And I don't attend to the kids the same way. I just want them to sit down and be quiet. I am less focused on them and more focused on trying to get myself through the day. I'm harsher and more irritable. I don't want to talk to people, I don't want to go to work, I don't want to see people, I don't want any superficial chit-chat. I just want to go back to bed.

By the middle of November, the thoughts just keep going through my head, "Is this all there is? Am I just going to keep waking up and going to school and talking to the same people day after day for the rest of my life? And then eventually someone's going to die, and then I'm going to die." It seems like I'm just going through the motions of my day, and nothing really matters. And that's what scares me. That one of these winters, I will get stuck in that place, and not come back to life

again. That I will just keep feeling that darkness day after day, month after month for the rest of my life. I am afraid that in my mind, I will give into the emptiness, to the feeling that there is nothing more. The feeling that I'm just putting in time until I die.

When it's mild like this, and the snow is melting, I just feel myself coming back to life again. Waking up. I feel open. Open. Open windows, open air. Hearing birds. Not hearing that insulated whir of indoor heat, where everything sounds muffled and everything is closed in. I want to breathe in fresh air.

I think the kids feel suffocated at school, too. Everything is so confining. The "at-risk" kids feel it the most. They just want to be free. Like this one girl that I am working with, Stacy. She's always skipping off. It's like she's trying to escape, you know?

Stacy's not in my class for any subjects, but I spend time with her after school each day. What happened is that she's been getting in all kinds of trouble at school. I've been dealing with some of her behaviours in my role as Intermediate Chairperson. She's always starting it up with someone. She does a lot of mouthing off in the halls, yelling, swearing, picking a fight. And she's been skipping. So I was wondering what's up

with her, and I told the principal that I wouldn't mind working with her one-on-one in some way.

Because I don't think a suspension would change anything for this kid. It would be like a holiday to her. I think she needs to establish some kind of relationship that connects her to being here.

So she has to make up the days she skipped by spending forty-five minutes with me after school every night. It started out that she had to come for one week, but then she skipped another day so her time with me has been increased.

And of course, I have to wonder, what good is it doing, that I am spending time with her? She's still skipping school, so it has basically not made any difference in that particular behaviour. Right now, she does not care about consequences. Her freedom is worth the price. She is still mouthing off in the yard. One time she walked out of my classroom and ten seconds later she was swearing in the stairwell at the top of her lungs.

But then, why doesn't she just skip those afternoon sessions in my classroom as well? What makes her show up faithfully to be "mentored," when she obviously skips other obligations and ignores other

expectations quite readily? Maybe the time I am spending with her will make a difference in some way that we can't see yet.

So Stacy comes to my classroom and we talk. We talk about her family, and what she does in her spare time, and where she likes to hang out. And this kid is "at-risk." She will most likely drop out of school. She says she can't wait until she is out of here. She has no interest in being here at all. She wants out.

She is very smart to talk to, a lot of street smarts, you know? But she seems to have no interest in school. I'm sure she struggles academically, because she has a learning disability, and it has probably made it really hard for her to feel good about herself as a student. It's easier just to pretend you don't care, than to keep trying and struggling and failing. So she acts out and she's bored. I'm just guessing that that's part of it.

Stacy is a negative leader. She gets a whole crew of people around her and then starts bad-mouthing anyone who walks by. "Look at what that person is wearing. He has no money. His mother doesn't dress him properly." This person could be a student, a teacher, anyone. She just cuts them up in front of everyone. Stacy's voice is really loud and the stuff she says is pretty offensive. She does a lot of yelling and swearing at people

in the halls. She's pretty quick with the comebacks, and that's what makes me think she's really intelligent. Even the grade eights are afraid of her.

She lives with her mother and an older sister, who is clinically depressed. Her father doesn't live with her. She has eight siblings, but she only lives with one of them. Her mother works, and she is also involved in a relationship, so she's not around a lot right now. She comes home late, so Stacy is on her own a lot at night. Her mom has rules about what Stacy is allowed to do, but she does not abide by them. She basically does whatever she wants. She hangs out at the mall, so her friends are people that she meets there. Most of them are older kids from the neighbouring high schools.

She's into a lot of stuff outside of school. She's twelve, but she's already into it all, you know? Smoking, drinking, sex. Her mom caught her in bed with one boy, and then another night with another boy. Guys she met at the mall. I found this out because her mom called the school. I asked Stacy about these guys that she's with. Does she think they like her for who she is, or for something else, like what they can get from her? She says they like her for who she is. Right now she probably believes that, too.

She's talked about cutting up people at the mall. She and her friends just sit around in the food court and make fun of the people who walk by. So we've talked a lot about how the people would feel. And I told her, "Don't you have anything better to do than that?" And then one day she came to my room and said, "Hey, guess what. I told my friends not to cut up people anymore, because we have better things to do with our time." So she's very proud of that.

But I think she has learned how to tell me what I want to hear, that's all. Why she shows up, I don't know. She's so nice to me, like super-sweet, sticky nice. I don't trust it. I don't feel like there's a genuine change in her. I just feel like she is putting in the time, just to get it over with. And I can teach her where certain choices might lead her, but I can't make her choices for her. So how do you get a kid to want a different life for herself than the life that she is choosing?

I think what she really needs is to have her mother there a little more. It sounds like her mother sets rules for her without following through with any kind of parental control. Her mom is not around a lot, and Stacy is basically unsupervised a lot of the time. She's used to doing her own thing, so when her mom tries to exert any control, Stacy just ignores her.

It wasn't an altruistic move, volunteering to work with Stacy. It was more like, "Let me see if I can work with this kid, to see any kind of change." Because the kids in my own class are so much on the right track. They don't require any of my energy in terms of discipline. None. My kids at the school where I used to teach, Grace Road, they were wild. And most of my time and energy was just taken up with issues around classroom management and behaviour. But it was probably a little more rewarding. It was definitely harder, but it was probably more rewarding.

At Grace Road the popular kids are the ones who are the "s--- disturbers." They are the ones who have the guns in their lockers and are telling other kids that they have them. Because that's how you get status on the street. You get other people to be afraid of you. "Ooh, aah, stay away from him."

So a lot of kids at Grace Road weren't really into school. There was definitely an awareness among the teachers, "Okay, the curriculum is boring. No wonder these kids are not interested." I still think that. It's so dry. So we spent a lot of time trying to find ways to make it more interesting so that they would become engaged and not be sitting at the back of the room gossiping. But it's so hard, because you put all this time and effort into creating some great activity, and then the kids go, "This sucks." So then as a teacher, you feel, "What's the use?"

Tara was this girl at Grace Road who had learning difficulties, same thing as Stacy. And it has been my experience that a lot of girls with learning difficulties are "at-risk" in other ways too, not just academically. I think that's because they are used to hiding their learning problem. And they are trying to make themselves feel better in other ways, by exerting some kind of power or control somewhere else in their lives. It takes so much courage to own up to a learning problem. And there's so little understanding among teachers and students, that a learning "difficulty" is just another way of learning. So these kids feel like they are "less than," and they try to compensate in any way they can. And in both schools, those are the kids who intimidate other students and try to physically take over. They are looking for power. They use violence to make people afraid of them because they think that fear and respect are the same thing.

But sometimes the "at-risk" kids will surprise you. My class used to go to a nursing home and visit with the seniors. When Tara was with the residents she was just the sweetest person in the world, more sensitive and aware of their needs than any other kid in my class. She would help them in ways that others would shy away from. She'd get in close to them, and she would help them get up out of their chairs, like physically hold them up and support their weight. Tara was a large girl, and I know that she had some issues about her physical appearance. In school she was like, "Stay away from me. Don't come near me. Don't look at me. Don't touch me.

Back off." But with the elderly residents especially, she was so gentle. And they loved her. It was such a mystery to me. Maybe the love preceded her opening up. They just wanted to talk to her and she wanted to listen.

And the other teachers, they wouldn't believe me when I told them. They would say, "Yeah, yeah. She's just doing it to get out of school." But she wasn't. There was something else going on there.

How teachers treat "at-risk" kids, that's part of keeping those kids "at-risk." I really think so. Definitely. It's a lot easier to dismiss those students, and to focus on those students who you feel, in the long run, are going to be more productive, and are not going to be so time-consuming. It takes more effort to deal with a kid who needs extra time for whatever reason, behaviour or academics.

At Grace Road, we had a detention room. It was the whole cafeteria! And we would have all these kids down there, and staff would have detention duty, and that's what usually happened to kids who couldn't handle the classroom. But usually the reason they couldn't handle the classroom, was because the work was too hard for them. But you can't ask for help, because then you just feel stupid. So you pretend you don't care, and you sit at the back, and you act like a goof, and you

get a detention. Or an in-school suspension, or an out-of-school suspension, depending on what you did.

Grace Road was exhausting. But I miss being needed like that. The kids I teach now have piano lessons on Monday, skating lessons on Tuesday. They have many influences, many opportunities, many people who are involved with their learning. I'm just one more teacher of the twenty teachers in their lives.

At Grace Road, you feel like you are making a bigger difference in their lives. The feeling that you are really doing something for a kid. You are going to change this kid's future. And I didn't feel that often, because it's hard to even know what your impact is going to be. I mean, I thought I was starting to get through to Tara when I worked with her in grade eight. But then I heard that she dropped out of school in grade ten, so I feel like I didn't do anything for her. I consider her lost, and it's a loss that I feel.

I suppose that the greater the need, the more dire the situation, the more you feel you have made an impact. Like, I remember calling the Children's Aid Society, to get a kid out of a home that was really unbelievable. This kid was wearing soiled clothes and eating dog food.

And I got her out. That's a direct, huge impact. Good or bad. I mean, who knows where she is now?

Petunia's Response

My Name:

I chose the name Petunia because it is different, and that is my presence in this world. I have always felt like the other. So this name, next to Sue and Jane and Kim, is different. And that's precisely why I want it. Because my life experience as a visible "minority" is completely framed as that context. While growing up, nobody could say my name right. Nobody could spell my name. They didn't know where it came from. What kind of name is that? They questioned my name all the time. So, if my chosen name, Petunia, evokes that same sense of surprise or confusion in your thesis, that's precisely the mindset that I intend. Because that has been the story of my life.

My Symbol:

I chose an elephant as my symbol because it represents wisdom and memory, two things that are precious to me. And it reminds me to have the courage to follow my heart and not worry about what anybody else thinks about me.



My Font:

I chose this font because it looks fun, the letters dip and drop. They're sort of bouncy letters, but they're not all over the page. I like it that the font is not harsh, like block style. It's kind of loose. It's clear but not bold.

How it felt to be part of this process:

I really enjoyed reading my words in print. I was laughing. It was fun to see myself from the outside. It is so rare to be outside your own voice, reading about your life. It was weird to feel like I was outside myself and inside myself at the same time. I mean, these are my stories, this is really what happened. I'm outside of myself and yet it's totally me.

Even at 28, it's still happening! Even after processing everything about sexual restrictions on Indian girls, recognizing that my identity should be independent of what my parents think, I still wanted certain phrases removed from the final copy, because they would make the truth too visible, too real. The words would violate that protective grey area that my parents and I quietly sustain. Like, if it's not spelled out, we don't have to face it and deal with it.

David:

Creating Safe Spaces

Hearing all these stories about the kids you teach, makes me miss being in the classroom. You know, when I retired, I knew I wouldn't miss all the stuff that's funnelled down the pipes: the policies and curriculum initiatives that perpetuate the patriarchy. But I do miss the kids. I guess after thirty-four years of teaching, that's pretty much to be expected.

Of course, Sara's still teaching, so that keeps me connected to it. And we are both involved in the political end of things, trying to promote changes to non-inclusive policies. Because political decisions have direct ramifications in the classroom, as to what is or isn't taught. We live in a male-dominated, sexist society. That's taken for granted. It's also racist, classist, homophobic and able-ist. So you have to address those issues head on. Name them and talk about them and take a proactive stance against them. And we need policies and curriculum that promote these crucial initiatives. Respect for self, respect for others. That is basic. But in reality, we end up teaching respect for self, and respect for others who are just like me.

Some people think that it is not intentional, the way our education system pays lip service to diversity while it continues to feed the patriarchy and perpetually marginalize specific groups of people. We keep certain people and issues silent and invisible in our teaching, because we ourselves do not see them. We need new eyes. Too many of us teach in the absence of awareness.

There is no way to separate the personal and the professional. You teach what you are. People have long suggested that it is okay to have this kind of value, and that kind of value, as long as you don't bring it into the classroom. Well, there's no way that you can't bring it into the classroom. Your values come into the classroom with the rest of yourself. Reflected in our teaching are all the things that matter to us, and absent from our teaching are all the things that don't. And our students get a clear sense of both.

I think if you are going to be an effective teacher you have to be a political person. That doesn't mean you have to become a member of the NDP or whatever. You just have to realize that policies and curriculum come from a certain agenda. Nothing is written in stone. As a teacher, you have choices to make about what goes on in your classroom, and you have to do what's right, and what you can justify.

To me, the curriculum guidelines I was given were simply suggestions. I could either follow them, or not follow them, or adapt them as I needed to. I've written policy, I've written documents, I know what they are. Teaching means so much to me that I can't let a blind adherence to the rules destroy what I'm hoping to do with kids.

Teaching, to me, is really very simple. You have to keep the kids safe. Physically safe. You have to make sure that they feel good about themselves and feel good about what they're doing. And if you can give them worthwhile, meaningful things to do, then I think you've done your job. So that has nothing to do with simply following Ministry guidelines.

What you're trying to do is develop a little cocoon in the classroom, where you're attempting to demonstrate in microcosm, what the world could be like. And to give the kids the kind of self-confidence and awareness that they can then carry with them outside the cocoon, and maybe build their own little cocoons as they go along.

But creating this cocoon depends on whether the teacher is at the point where they recognize the need for the cocoon. Creating a safe classroom is not only about something you do, it is about who you are. Teaching is not a set of actions

that can be followed like rules. Because everything is happening so fast all the time, and you respond and relate to the kids from the truth of who you are, not from some script. The teacher has to value the idea of creating a cocoon, or it's not going to happen. And that's the dilemma. Because how do you teach someone else, teacher or student, to value something? You can teach a person skills, or strategies, or reasons for doing something a certain way, but can you teach a person to value something?

Maybe the only way to make a teacher value this idea of creating a safe classroom space is for them to see it themselves over time. It has to be modelled, the same way teachers model the values they hold dear, through their attitudes, behaviours, language and so on. There has to be some kind of apprenticeship program so that first-year teachers are allied with the right kind of teachers when they start, and given that kind of opportunity to see what's possible and reflect on it. As far as I'm concerned, reflection is the soul of learning. It has to create internal, well, maybe not change, but internal awareness. I don't see any of that happening in the schools I've been at in the last fifteen years. The new teachers are on their own, and they just follow whatever they see. It's really hit and miss.

I started my teaching career that way myself. Most of us teach the way we were taught in school ourselves, and I had no good role models there, that's for sure. Or we teach the way our first colleagues taught, and I had some pretty harsh examples when I started. So I think I developed some bad tendencies, but unthinkingly.

What really helped me was when I taught grade two for six years, after teaching older kids for so long. Because then I had to go back and learn about Piaget, and learn about how kids learn. Then I could reconstruct my teaching, based on how kids actually learn. And that was illuminating for me. And that was how I got out of a lot of the prescriptive, teacher-centred ways that I had been teaching before. That was when I started really listening to kids, because I wasn't the one talking all the time.

The language you use and allow in the space is just crucial. I finally realized just a couple of years ago, that I was doing what so many people do, saying "boys and girls." "Boys and girls, look up here please." Why was I doing that? I wasn't saying, "Okay, Blacks, Asians and white people, look up here please," or, "All Christians and Hindus, look up here." So why was I saying, "boys and girls?" It was just reinforcing that dichotomy.

The language is so important. My students got very used to what I would accept or not accept. I always found it fun when kids that I didn't even teach would come up to me and use that same inclusive, "he or she" language that I use. Word got around to other classes: "That's that way you have to talk to him. That's what he insists upon." The language is just essential.

Because language has the power to break down the safe space you are trying to create in the classroom. So, if one of the students calls another student a "fag," I'm going to step in. I'm going to find out what caused it, where it's coming from. And then I'm going to teach to it. I'm going to bring in materials that I have, picture books that deal with homophobia, and I'm going to address the issue. It's not like there's any kind of panacea or quick solution. It's going to come up time and time again, maybe hundreds of times every year, year after year.

And every time I hear language that makes our space unsafe, every time, I'm going to deal with it. Never, ever, ever just let it go. As soon as you hear "bitch," "slut," "whore," you've got to step in. If the girl says, for example, "We're just kidding around," I say, "Sorry, it's still not acceptable." It doesn't matter what the circumstances. Even if two girls are

affectionately calling each other "slut," you've got to step in and you've got to talk about the language, and the harm that this kind of language can do. Because otherwise, your silence condones it.

Language can be very empowering, too. Giving kids opportunities to talk in meaningful ways about relevant issues, that gives them practice in saying what they think and feel. They need lots of time to exercise their voices, especially in small groups. That's why I believe that co-operative learning strategies are absolutely necessary in the classroom. It sounds a little cold and non-emotional, but it's the one strategy, the one technique that's been proven to boost self-esteem, as well as learning language and co-operation with others. With young girls especially, if they're ever going to find their voice, then you have to give them vehicles in which they can struggle to find their voice. Co-operative learning strategies, pairs and small groups, are absolutely essential. Same as with drama, role-playing especially, and story-telling. You have to give them the rich heritage of stories that we have, so they can read through and pick and choose stories that suit their own particular lives and beliefs and hopes and dreams. From there they can go on to write and tell their own stories. And that's when they really start to learn something, when they see a link between what we do in the classroom, and their real life.

With the kind of environment I was creating in the classroom, I could always depend on a few of the girls becoming leaders, but it always felt unnatural for them. They were always fighting the tendency to give it over to one of the boys. Inevitably, the real leadership of the class would devolve to one of the boys, or a group of the boys. You had to proactively support the girls to accept their leadership abilities, instead of letting them pass it off to a boy: "No, I'm asking you to do this, not him... ."

The only time that ever changed in any significant way in my classroom was the two years that I taught a young woman named Sharma. She was a remarkable poet. She was Pakistani and a total feminist. Her mother edited a small feminist magazine. She arrived in September, and everything that I would want to do in the classroom, she did it for me. She was the leader and the girls grew so much, because one of their own had a voice.

Sharma took nothing from anybody, so the boys had to beware. Because she could speak the truth. She knew what the truth was and she could speak it, and they couldn't stand up to that. But they also developed enormous respect for her. So, all of a sudden, I had a community of writers, I had a community of listeners, I had a community of concerned peers.

I had people coming to me and saying that so and so really hurt her feelings by saying such and such. This could be about a teacher or a student. It was just wonderful. They would come to you with all kinds of problems and observations. "Maybe you could talk to Janie. She's having a bad time with her boyfriend." They told me about that, so that I'd know how to treat this girl, be a little more sympathetic, maybe help out in any way I could. Oh, it was gorgeous. It was a wonderful couple of years. I derived a great deal of satisfaction from living in that environment and learning from it. But that was the only time that I saw the girls as a group grow.

As a teacher, you're always dealing with the matter of trying to channel the voices of the boys, because they are going to be heard no matter what. So you dampen them a bit. You have to keep them from taking over. It's almost like conducting an orchestra, where you are trying to bring the other voices out. You don't want one section of the orchestra to dominate, or the sound will be compromised.

You can even see the male dominance in the body language. It's something that I really worked on. The boys always feel very safe about touching the girls, handling the girls, you know, grabbing them, pushing them down, jostling them, that was normal behaviour. When you establish a certain

environment in the classroom, they understand what you want and kids will give you what you want. They will hide and subdue all sorts of things. What's difficult is that as soon as they walk past that invisible line that separates your classroom from the hallway, then right away you see the change. Boys who wouldn't dream of grabbing one of the girls in my classroom, walk into the hallway and you see it right away. They just grab them by the arm and say, "Hey, come here, bitch."

It takes a long time, months, for the safe space you are creating in the classroom to be internalized by the students and transferred outside your room. At first, they follow the "rules" of inclusion and respect because they know it's the expectation of the cocoon. That's why, when programming, it's always essential to have the kids actually involved in decision-making and problem-solving in a very real way in the classroom. It's important to make sure, through your use of co-operative learning strategies, that the girls are involved. They have to realize that they have power. The boys have to realize "Yeah, I have power, but I also have responsibility. In this classroom, whatever happens is my responsibility and I have a voice in it." And maybe when they walk outside the classroom, they eventually begin to realize, "Okay, that fight going on over there, that's my problem too" or "the kind of language that's

being used over there, that's my problem," and maybe they'll care for each other a little more.

Actually, I would see this kind of caring all the time. It's such a joy when you have them for two years, or sometimes I've had kids for three years. And if you're blessed enough to be working alongside other teachers who have similar programs and similar values, then you feel as though you're going to make some headway with that kid. If students can move from grade to grade and continue experiencing the cocoon, they have a much better chance of internalizing those inclusive and respectful values. Even if you only get to teach a certain child for one year, you can make some degree of difference in the way that child feels about her or himself and others. But you can really make a significant difference if you get to teach the same kids for two or three years.

I experienced personal failures all over the place, girls whom I never knew enough about. I remember I had this one girl for two years, and she was silent. She was almost mute. She started to write in her journal but there was absolutely no reflection whatsoever. She had an older boyfriend, and I often suspected that there was some kind of abusive situation in her past, or maybe going on at the time. But I never got a handle on it, and I don't think I helped her one bit. She was in one

world and I was in another world and there was no passage between us. Maybe something sunk in that she will remember down the road, about how she deserves to be treated or the choices she can make to keep herself safe.

There would be these wonderful moments. One day I was on cafeteria duty and one of my girls suddenly stood up and barked at this guy, "Now look, there's absolutely no way that you should be saying that to her," and I just loved watching it. I was standing there thinking, "This is great!" because she had internalized our cocoon. But for every girl like that, where you felt like you were starting to get through to her, there would be another one that you really didn't reach. And some of those young women, I didn't have a clue how they were feeling inside.

Being academically "at-risk" is only one small part of the whole picture. Because many of my girls were coping just fine in terms of marks, but I know from their journals and their stories that they were dealing with all kinds of difficult issues. Destructive relationships, concerns about sex, depression, smoking, eating disorders, family expectations, trying to appear perfect (whatever that means). And I would say that probably all women are "at-risk" in one way or another. "At-risk" of being unsafe, for sure. Physically and emotionally unsafe.

My partner, Sara, is really involved in educating young women about self-defense. She runs this after-school course on female assertiveness and assault prevention. Sara teaches them to yell, and it's a revelation for them, a completely new experience. I would love to be there to hear it, the empty school corridors echoing with voices of young women yelling, "NO!"

Of course, brutality often happens in their own homes. As educators, we know a little about that, but we don't know as much as we should, and we're not hearing about enough of it. Quite often you're dealing with the wreck of these young women's lives, rather than being able to intervene while the critical experiences are going on. Physical and sexual abuse. There's so much more of that going on than anyone is willing to admit. I think a lot of young girls are beaten, or they are witnessing their mothers being victimized. But it's not the kind of thing they talk about it.

And then there are all the destructive messages that girls in grades seven and eight are internalizing. At that age, first and foremost, it's the beauty myth. And that is so damaging, because it's so pervasive. It's coming from the media, it's coming from the adults in their lives, it's coming from their teachers, and it's certainly coming from their peers. Anyone

who does not fit the image of the beauty myth, immediately realizes, "I'm imperfect." What they see in magazines: emaciated bodies, certain classical features, long hair, white skin, make-up, designer dress and so on, they're always aspiring to that. And the gap between how they see themselves and what they're seeing outside of themselves, is just an enormous gulf that immediately bolsters a sense of inferiority.

And all of these kids feel it. The star student, the star athlete, no one is immune. Each person feels in his or her heart of hearts that they really don't deserve whatever accolades they get. Someone's going to find out that they're really a phony. They all feel isolated and alone, and they don't realize that everybody feels that way.

So that's the first thing that I saw all the time, the beauty myth, and the way it makes girls feel inadequate. The other thing is, girls are always rewarded throughout their school lives, and especially in grades seven and eight, for being docile. Teachers praise them for being quiet, well-mannered, hard-working and studious (and easier to manage than the boys!) That's the only way that they're going to get any kind of reward from their teachers. Boys, on the other hand, are getting all sorts of awards and all sorts of attention, so there is definitely a double standard. If you're a girl and you want to be

well thought of, one, you have to be beautiful, and two, you have to follow this line of behaviour. I think those messages are pretty clear.

And I always saw a difference between girls' and boys' relationships with their own bodies. In a lot of ways. Look at me now, leaning back in my chair with my feet up on the coffee table. This is how you'll find a lot of boys in the classroom, sprawled, with their legs up and their legs out, chairs twisted around. You look at so many of the girls and they're at their desk, they're hunched over and their shoulders are lowered and narrowed. You see it time and time and time again. You also see girls huddling a lot, it's almost like herd behaviour, because they are trying to find some kind of security in the classroom environment, so they'll get very, very close to each other. It's just the added support of having two or three other girls with you, you'll see that. And of course, the girls are huddled around one corner of one of these desks, and the guys are just all over the place.

There should be an opposite beauty myth for boys, but there really isn't. If a boy is stocky and bulky, that's fine. If a girl is stocky and bulky, absolutely, anathema. You wonder where some of these boys get their arrogance. You see that they're not particularly bright, they're not particularly witty, they're not

athletes, they don't have particular manners and behaviours that would endear them to anyone. And yet, they act as though they own the world. And they certainly act so much more superior than any of the girls in the class would. It's got to be learned behaviour. It's not innate. I can't believe that it's innate. It's got to come from the family, the modelling that's occurring in the family, and society at large. And it certainly is reinforced in the peer environment. It's not like the rest of the boys are saying to him, "Where do you get off? Who do you think you are?" No. The boys find each other quite amusing. That's the way it is.

I've always been mystified by the fact that bullies persist, in light of policies like "zero tolerance." Sara and I just recently attended a conference about bullying, and we keep coming back to this issue of why bullying continues. It's starting to make sense to me. Bullies persist because they fulfill a role in society. Their job is to detect the "other," however defined, and put everybody in their place. They overtly act out what is covertly accepted by mainstream society; bullies keep the "other" from accessing the power of the centre. A bunch of guys cruise through the gay ghetto looking for a head to kick in, and the rest of us cluck our tongues and think, "that's terrible." But it doesn't horrify us enough to do something about it, because the victim is "other" to us. That's why bullies are usually

beligerent and confused when they are confronted about their behaviour. Because all their lives they have received mixed messages. Those who are "other" are pretty much irrelevant to those in the centre who hold the power. The lives of "others" can be considered inconsequential, unnecessary, even disposable. Bullies serve society by doing the dirty work for the rest of us. They identify the "other" and victimize them to ensure the continuance of their powerlessness. Bullies keep the "others" peripheral. And while we may "tsk tsk" about their aggressive means, we are not outraged enough to take action, because our own position of power has not been threatened. In fact, our centredness has actually been protected.

In the school system, our policies against bullying serve to curb the behaviours, not eliminate them. We rein the bullies in and set limits for their actions, but we still allow a lot of their behaviours to go by unchecked. The bully's behaviour has to be very extreme before it is negatively sanctioned. The rest of the time, we turn a blind eye. So boys will be boys, and girls will be their victims.

And I don't see teachers being proactive about a lot of things in the classroom. So maybe it's not that teachers are overtly giving messages that boys are allowed to take up more

space, but by their silence, they are allowing things to go on in that space that are not challenged. So the message is clear even though it is not necessarily spoken. The more the teacher is in trouble, the more unskilled the teacher, the more extreme the behaviours you'll see in the classroom. So you'll see it in the physical sense, but you'll also see it in the language that's used and other types of negative behaviours. Most of the teachers are unaware of what's going on in the classroom.

With the girls coming from all different cultures, you have all sorts of problems of voice that arise from those cultures. Because in some cultures, girls are not supposed to find a voice. They're taught to be subservient. They're taught to listen and obey. It's difficult to try and have them work against their culture. Because there are other expectations going on at home. I taught girls who were victims of female genital mutilation. It was awful. They would leave the school for three months, taken back to their home country for the procedure. And what that was like for them, how they were feeling about it, I can not even imagine. Talk about being "at-risk." They are supposedly functional members of their family, their culture, their society, our classroom. But meanwhile, what losses have they suffered?

You would notice divisions among the students along racial lines as well as gender. There's a wonderful writer, Jacqueline Woodson, who deals with bias, discrimination and prejudice in her writing. She feels that it all comes from common roots. So sexism, racism, homophobia, they're all linked. If you're a woman, you are down in the hierarchy. If you're a black woman, you're further down. If you are a black lesbian, you're way, way down. You see the same kind of thing with boys, but they're on a different sliding scale. They're always higher than the girls anyway, no matter what their condition.

Invariably, always you'd have in your classroom two or three girls, very talented, very bright, getting all sorts of marks in school, not a word coming out of their mouths. And when they did speak, little tiny voices. How often do you find a boy with a little tiny voice? But give the girls the concept of a journal, all of a sudden BOOM, they're just saying everything that they think. Just a wonderful launching pad. Girls are more apt to understand what a journal is all about, and begin to take risks in their writing. Boys are still looking for the "right answer," whereas the girls will make more of an emotional commitment, and that's how you learn some of these things about their lives. And girls seem to feel more comfortable transferring their voices into writing, as opposed to vocalizing. Giving them an opportunity

to write is really key in terms of giving voice to adolescent girls in the classroom.

I think girls commit to the journal writing because there are just so few avenues for them. There are so few. They would rather write it than say it, because it is not public. It's private, and the more they trust me, then the more they'll risk in their journal. They are certainly not going to risk in public. Regardless of how safe you try to make them feel in the environment, they know they are going to walk outside. Whatever they say, they have to pay for outside.

That's why your students need to know that your reach extends beyond the classroom, that you will help them take on the unsafe spaces outside your room. Last year, I had one girl, Jenna, come to me and ask, "It isn't fair for teachers to make fun of you, is it?" And I said, "No. Absolutely not." She wanted to know if there's anything that can be done about a teacher who makes fun of her. And I said, "A lot of things can be done. Do you want to sit down and tell me about it?"

She was a member of the school volleyball team, and the coach had nicknames for all of the girls on his team. He called her "the beak," because she had a prominent nose. It really hurt her feelings, but what almost destroyed me was, she didn't

want to make an issue of it because she wanted to be on the team. What she wanted was for him to stop doing that. But she did not want him to know that she had complained to me, because she wanted to stay on the team. I gave her a number of choices. What she finally decided to do was for the two of us to go and talk to that teacher. That was a big step.

So she confronted him about it and, of course, you know what he said. He said, "Oh, I am really, really sorry that you misunderstood. I would never hurt your feelings for the world. I have nicknames for all the girls, and I call you "The Greek" because of your heritage. I would never say anything about your nose. You just misheard me." And she accepted that, because it was face-saving for both of them. He could save face and get out of it, and she could still be on the team.

So I waited until she was gone, and then I told him, "You're lying. You're lying through your teeth. You shouldn't be making racial or cultural slurs anyway, but you are lying. I'm going to go tell the principal." He was getting away with these totally unacceptable behaviours, because the girls were not in a position to stop him. So I went and told the principal, and I told the principal what I said to him. I said, "This isn't my first complaint about this teacher, and it's going to keep coming."

Because there were all sorts of problems with that man, and the kids would come to me and complain about it.

But then it was a matter of negotiating how much the girls were willing to risk. They're not adults, and they don't have my security, or my experience, or anything else. They don't perceive themselves as having power. With me, it's, "damn the torpedoes and f--- the world, let's do it." With them, it's like, "How can we do this with the least possible disruption to my life?"

I don't think Jenna could have confronted him on her own yet, because there's such a power gap between them. And that's when you know that you're making a difference. You have to have a presence outside the classroom. You have to be in the halls, in the cafeteria, out in the yard. You have to find out how things are still actually operating, to realize that these problems haven't gone away.

Sometimes I get so discouraged, and frustrated when I see how far we still have to go to create and sustain humane schools. And then I look at the direction that education is headed, and the priorities and values of our government, and I feel hopeless. Because they are soul-less. It's been hard for me to accept that we find our own meaning in this profession, still,

one on one, in the classroom setting, doing what we can within, and often, in spite of the structure and external dictates of our employers.

I taught for thirty-four years. Year by year, we learned more and more about how people learn and why. I felt encouraged, watching this holistic vision of a nurturing, humanistic, enlightened profession begin to finally coalesce. And then, suddenly, that progress is swept aside as irrelevant within the parameters of the new political expediency in Ontario. It has been almost too much for me to bear. And I feel angry.

And it has taken me a long time to learn how to deal with my anger, about education, and my life in general. It's even harder to realize that recurring anger is often necessary. The core experiences, such as childhood (in my case), that we survive, are recursive for all our lives. They reappear at different times in different aspects and from different perspectives. I used to believe that we resolved conflict and moved on; then I found myself in my fifties, repressing the anger for my parents that I thought I had 'risen above' and dealt with, the pain erased. It seems that every time I grow or change, I have to go back and fight the same old battles and come to grips with the same old scars from my new understanding of myself. At my

age, I realize that there is no definitive, "growing beyond." Resolution can never erase – and shouldn't – otherwise we lose ourselves.

I thought we were supposed to forget the past; I had to learn to remember it, to rage against it time and again, to break its power over me. And where does that leave so many women, systematically and culturally deprived of the natural and spontaneous, and guilt-free emotional responses that lead to an understanding of and control over their own realities. How much anger can you eat before it becomes self-loathing?

We are all "at-risk" in some way. It reminds me of these sayings, "Most people live lives of quiet desperation," and "Between our birth and our death, we may touch understanding as a moth brushes its wings against a window-pane." In both cases, my own soul-mate, Sara, has made the difference for me, by dissolving the desperation I feel, and clarifying the understanding in my life. She helps me keep a perspective of hope. Because otherwise, I fear that education and our world in general is going to hell in a hand-basket.

And some teachers believe that their only responsibility is to teach the curriculum as mandated from the Ministry. That's their job. They're not psychologists, they're not social workers,

they can not fix all the problems of these families. Their job is to teach the curriculum that's mandated, and that's the thing they're there to do. Well, that's so ludicrous, it's difficult even to talk about. But it's true. I know that, especially in Intermediate and Senior grades, that's how the majority of the teachers feel. As far as they're concerned, they present the curriculum, and it's the students' responsibility to take it. And that's it.

I don't see it that way. To me, nothing ever changes from kindergarten through to secondary school. You always have to deal with the whole child. You have to deal with the whole child where they are at, at that specific moment. Whatever you were doing yesterday is not necessarily good enough for that child today, because there is something else going on in that child's life today. And that is absolutely paramount! You really have to try to get inside the children's minds, because the world they see is not the world you're looking at. You have to try and look through their eyes.

If a girl has had a fight with her best friend, there's no learning going to go on that entire day. You get whoever is involved in that conflict, and you get them off in a private space where they can talk it out. No learning is ever going to take place until that's solved. And it's the same if the kids are coming to school hungry, or if there's been name-calling, if

there's some kind of worry, if there's something happening at home, all of those things. You have to know about all of those things because unless you deal with those, you're not going to help the child learn. I don't care how good a teacher you are, you can't teach through those kinds of problems.

You just deal with the situations, one at a time as they come up. You've got a lot of time. You've got a whole year. There is no way that you can be everything to every child, and certainly not to every child at every moment. But you can set up priorities, and you can start dealing with those. You have to become aware of what is actually going on in those kids' lives, and as you become aware of things, you deal with them. And if you run the right kind of classroom, eventually kids will start helping each other. So it's a real snowball effect that way. And that's the only way that you're going to have any real satisfaction in this job. If you're going to make a difference in their lives, especially how they learn, then you have to deal with who they are and the problems that they are encountering. There is no other way.

I just wish that teachers were a little more courageous. I wish they'd worry less about whether they're covering the curriculum, which some bonehead wrote. You know they're going to change it all four years from now. Look at the

principles of learning, and then it doesn't matter what you're doing, those kids are going to be okay. The students have to lead you. Whatever is most important to them is the way you have to go as the teacher, both individually and collectively. I've always been a very organized person, and I've always set out what it is I'm going to cover, and what I'm doing for a particular lesson, and all the rest of it. But I have always been ready, on a moment's notice, to throw all that out the window, and get on with the real business of learning.

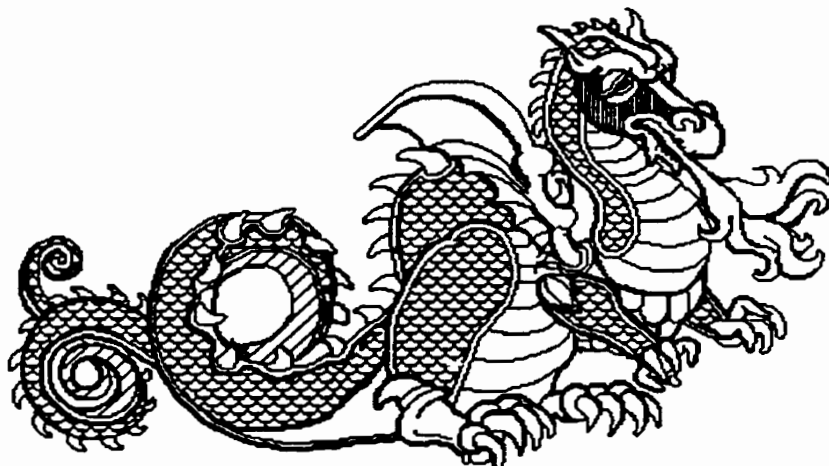
David's Response

My Name:

David was the name of my brother. He was a gay man who was the victim of a bashing. His brain was damaged extensively, and he suffered for two years before he died. I loved David very much. He was flamboyant and outrageous and he always spoke the truth. A lot of what I said has his spirit in it. Time doesn't heal all wounds. The wounds become part of who you are and you learn how to live with them. When I first read my voice reflected back through your voice, I couldn't understand why I found it to be such an emotional experience. I read it over again and again, and I had tears in my eyes every time. Now I know why. I see David reflected in my words. I feel him in the pages.

My Font (Century Gothic):

I like a font that is light and gentle, rather than heavy, bold and angular. I want the words to come through it, rather than the font overpowering the words.

**My Symbol:**

About ten years ago, when we were in France, I stopped in at a small artist's studio and purchased a dragon ring. It's quite huge on my finger, actually. It almost looks defiant. I am drawn to the image of the Oriental dragon. It is a symbol of both power and benevolence. It represents a nurturing strength. I grew up with images of the Anglo Dragon, St. George, but it is the Oriental Dragon that has meaning for me.

How it felt to be part of this process:

My own writing is impersonal. The books I write are practical and intellectual pieces for teachers. Not emotional. I have never had an outlet, other than with Sara, to publicly

allow my emotions about teaching and children to guide me. It is a revelation for me to reflect with you the way I feel about things. I found it liberating, because I usually keep my feelings under wraps in public. I felt incredible freedom throughout this process, and it brought out the truth as I know it.

Seeing my words in print was shocking. It didn't shock my partner, Sara. She recognized me immediately in the words. But it shocked me to recognize, to have it forced on me, how deeply I feel about teaching and children. It made me realize how much I've been hurt personally by what's happened over recent years in education in Ontario.

I think all of this came out only because I trust you, Beth. What a long, strange relationship we have had. Whoever could have predicted it? In all the years since I was your grade six teacher, I have never, ever thought of you as my student. You are a kindred spirit. It has been like finding a long lost friend, a welcome home. I am always embarrassed when we talk about me being your teacher, because I didn't know anything back then. That's how it feels. You never really know what you are doing or not doing for your students.

Chapter Six: Where Do We Go From Here?

Dear Reader,

Those campfire stories have given us a lot to think about and act on. Now it is time to pack up our stuff and follow a new trail. You can take my co-researchers' stories with you. Keep them in your knapsack to reflect on later. In the meantime, let's follow this path over here. It leads to the ranger's tower. The way is rocky and steep, but it's worth the climb. On a clear day like today, you can see for miles.

The rangers are the team of people who take care of the Forest of Voice and Silence. Webster's dictionary (1990) defines a ranger as "one who guards a tract of forest," a tract being "a space of land." One who guards a space. I like that idea. A forest space needs protection against fire, drought, disease, erosion, pollution and developers who want to clear-cut the land to use for other purposes. That makes me think about all the "at-risk" spaces in our lives that need guarding, and what we need guarding against.

My co-researchers stories have shown us many spaces in ourselves that are "at-risk" or endangered: our voices, our bodies, our esteem, our passion, our energy, our hope, our futures, our presence. Their experiences lead us to consider the ways in which we are endangered as teachers and learners. What parts of ourselves are "at-risk" of being unsafe, unhealthy or unwell? What are the choices that lead us to violent outcomes in our bodies and our spirits? Which of our choices feed an illusion of separateness (Miller, 1994) that leave us feeling disconnected from others and ourselves? What spaces in ourselves need protection? How can we as teachers create safe spaces in our classrooms and ourselves for courageous voices and restorative silences? What does it mean to guard a space?

So many questions! The stories of my co-researchers have given us these questions to lead us toward clues about what it means to be "at-risk", and how "at-riskness" is connected to voice and silence. Their stories tell us that as students and teachers, we need to listen to the still, small voice inside ourselves, the intuitive truths of our spirits. We need to make choices that protect our physical, emotional and spiritual wellness, choices that are voiced through our words and actions. By listening to and

acting on the voice of the soul, we become immune to the need for the approval of others; we can no longer align ourselves with choices that physically, emotionally or spiritually endanger us.

This does not mean that we stop caring about what other people think or feel, only that we stop allowing their opinions to direct our choices and silence our voices. Actually, we care more about others when we ourselves are well. We extend a loving compassion that welcomes others into our hearts, acknowledging their inherent preciousness, without swallowing their unwellness into ourselves. We detach ourselves from the spinning circles of id and ego, appearance and approval, to rest ourselves in the peaceful knowing of our soulful enoughness (Miller, 1994). When we are spiritually well, we bathe each other in compassion and tenderness; we encircle one another in a betrothal of trust (Palmer, 1993), transcending the silences that place us "at-risk" of being disconnected from each other and ourselves.

What does it mean to be connected to my students and myself? As we continue our trek to the tower, let's consider how it feels when we are deeply connected to something or someone, and we value their preciousness and treasure their worth. What

would happen if we chose to see our "at-risk" students with those same eyes of compassion and grace? How would our relationships with students change if we looked beyond their behaviour to the preciousness of their spirit? I am not asking you to condone their apparent apathy or resistance. I am asking you to believe that the value of their lives transcends the behaviours of disengagement or belligerence that you may be witnessing. I am asking you to believe that "at-risk" students are not disposable. I am asking you to open your eyes and your heart to the basic connectedness that exists between all living beings (Miller, 1993).

The idea of nurturing the connectedness in our student/teacher relationships reminds me again of the rangers who care for this forest. As teachers, we are like forest rangers who plant and guard living spaces so that wildlife can dwell safely, and thrive. As a teacher-ranger in the Forest of Voice and Silence, you are invited to create physical and relational spaces where voices can be heard, oppressive silences are questioned, and healing silences are preserved. You are betrothed to guard against anything that endangers the forest life.

I should warn you that becoming a teacher-ranger may lead you to value the landscape of adolescence in new ways. As you spend time listening to the sounds and stories of adolescent girls "at-risk," you may find yourself caring about what happens to them. You may begin to see yourself in their stories they tell. Your mind will open to all the ways we are connected as teachers and learners. Your mindful presence in this forest may lead to compassionate awareness of the shocking and transformative truth: "at-risk" adolescent girls and teachers need the same things. We need to release ourselves from silences that suffocate our soul-voices. We need to embrace meditative silences and life-affirming choices that create space for presence and wellness and joy.

As a teacher-ranger, you are probably wondering how you can possibly "embrace meditative silences and life-affirming choices" and teach the curriculum at the same time! Don't be afraid. Connection is not another lesson to prepare, present and evaluate. It is a way of being and seeing. Connection is a choice to be mindfully present, compassionately attentive, and deeply engaged with our students. Connected, restorative

teaching/learning relationships begin when we choose to see each other with our eyes and our hearts wide open.

Choosing To See

To see with our eyes and our hearts is to ask ourselves:

***In what ways do I contribute to the "at-risk" experiences of my students?**

***In what ways am I "at-risk" myself?**

***What is one choice I could make to begin to invite my own and others' voices in my teaching, learning and living relationships?**

***What is one choice I could make to begin to address systems of oppressive silence in my classroom or school?**

***What is one choice I could make to create space for healing, peaceful, contemplative silences in my life?**

These questions have given us a lot to think about. As we continue our upward climb to the tower, let's just listen to the sounds of the forest. If you are very quiet, you can hear the trees whispering nine questions that emerged in my student co-researchers stories. Let yourself listen. The girls are asking you to see them. How will you respond?

What do you see when you see me?

**Am I someone who gives sex because I want to feel loved
or am I a slut?**

**Am I someone who questions authority because I have learned
that authority is sometimes unjust
or am I defiant?**

**Am I someone who uses cigarettes, weed, alcohol, sex and food to
numb my pain and buy me a sense of belonging
or am I just digging my own grave?**

**Am I someone who feels angry when male classmates insult my
body, interrupt when I speak and make fun of my ideas
or am I a whiner and a suck?**

**Am I someone who has been grabbed at and fondled and pressed
up against the locker
or am I someone who asked for it?**

**Am I someone who can not find enough reasons to stay in school
or am I a drop-out and a write-off?**

**Am I someone who feels invisible in the classroom
or am I compliant and well-behaved?**

Am I someone?

What do you see when you see me?

Seeing and Being

The whispered questions of my student co-researchers challenge the way we see girls "at-risk." How we choose to see our "at-risk" students shapes who we are in relationship with them. Our awareness breathes life into our actions and guides our choice-making in our interactions with students, which profoundly alters students' beliefs about themselves and the choices they make that stem from those beliefs. I borrow Eisner's (1991) description of "epistemic seeing...the kind of knowledge secured through sight" (p. 68) to invite you to know your students more deeply and lovingly, by changing the way you choose to see them.

By seeing our students and ourselves as precious and connected, we exercise life-changing, radical compassion; we acknowledge the connectedness that exists between all living things. We surrender ourselves to Being, an experience of

...unmediated awareness...characterized by openness, a sense of relatedness, and by awe and wonder.... When we experience Being, duality drops away and as teachers we see part of ourselves in our students (Miller, 1994, p. 25).

We choose to spin a life-line that "implicates us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy" (Palmer, 1993, p. 9).

Being Seen

I want to tell you about an experience in which someone chose to see me and know me in a spirit of "compassion...awesome responsibility [and] transforming joy" (Palmer, 1993, p. 9). It was 1985 and I was away from home at university, in my second year of undergrad. The summer before my second year I was stalked by a stranger who was never apprehended. By the time I returned to school in September 1985, I was a student "at-risk." I lived in fear that the stranger would find me again. I slept through my morning classes, I skipped my afternoon classes and I failed almost everything. I was a stranger to myself. I knew I was unravelling, but I didn't know how to get myself back.

Here comes my favourite part of this story. Someone chose to see beyond my truancy and failing grades. Each student's marks were routinely reviewed by the dean each term. By third term, my dismal results should have simply confirmed that I was a

student who was not meeting the minimum requirements of the program and did not qualify to continue. However, my dean made a choice that turned my future around. She called me in to her office and asked me why. She believed that there was more to me than the choices I was making at the time. She made the time to meet with me and hear my story. She wanted to know what was going on in my life that was making it hard for me to be at school. She invited my voice.

After she found out the story behind my transcript, my dean convinced the review committee to consider my circumstances and allow me to repeat my courses on academic probation rather than dropping out of the program. She advocated for my academic future, and in so doing, she gave me hope that I could choose a different future for myself. Her choice to believe in me was the beginning of me wanting to be well. My dean helped me put together an academic plan, and she met with me regularly through the following year to see how I was doing. She chose to see *me*, not just my absences and missing assignments. She chose to see me, and to create space for my story. She was a ranger and guardian in the Forest of My Voice and My Silences.

Thinking about my dean's compassionate attention reminds me of how I have been affected by engaging in this thesis process. My life has been altered through my experiences of researching voice, silence and "at-riskness." Firstly, I have witnessed the transformative and healing power of listening. The radical act of being mindfully present with each co-researcher for a sustained period of time created space for stories that may otherwise have remained silent. I learned how difficult and rare and precious it is to listen and be listened to, without trying to solve, fix, rescue, predict or interrupt. I found that the more closely I listened to my co-researchers, the more deeply I cared about them, which made me want to listen to them even more attentively. I discovered that "at-risk" students will readily engage in a relationship in which they are heard. Sydney, who often skipped classes or came late to school, was always early for our interview conversations. She would sometimes be waiting for me in the hall outside our classroom at 7:45 in the morning. She couldn't wait to be listened to. It made her want to come to school.

My student co-researchers' stories made me more aware of what was going on in our classroom. I started to notice the many

ways that the boys silenced the girls with a look or a comment. I became more committed to creating a classroom space where every voice is invited through our Morning Circle and our Shared Writing. Learning to listen to each other does not happen naturally in a classroom; it requires proactive, intentional vigilance and practice to sustain. Through mindful presence and attentive listening I am learning to protect spaces for voice and healing silences in my teaching, learning and counseling relationships. David's description of his classroom cocoon has made me more attentive to what it means to create a safe learning space where voices are valued.

Listening to my student co-researchers during our interview conversations made me understand them more deeply in the classroom. Their stories taught me to see them as resilient and courageous and capable, which made me believe in their ability to succeed at school. For example, Mackenzie told me during an interview conversation that she felt free when she was silent because then nobody could get mad at her for anything she said. I told her that I found this idea very interesting and compelling, and that I wished she would share her insights during Morning Circle sometime. The very next day Mackenzie spoke out loud

during Circle, beginning by informing the class that she had "a very interesting idea to say." My relationship with Mackenzie, nurtured through our interview conversations, invited me to see her as an insightful young woman and gave her confidence to engage more fully and publicly in her own learning.

Becky's choice to forgive her father for his abuse moved me deeply. Her words "God has eyes about my life" have stayed with me and provided comfort through many shadowy moments. During the week that I wrote my comprehensive exams, my mom was in the hospital suffering with complications from radiation therapy. I remember highlighting journal articles while she slept after surgery, her face yellow-gray against the stark whiteness of her bed sheets. "God has eyes about my life" became a calming mantra during that stressful week, reminding me to trust my mother to His care.

Many of my co-researchers' experiences are imprinted on my memory, particularly their stories of surviving physical and emotional violence. Their spirit, creativity and resilience through devastating circumstances remind me to believe in the possibility of healing and transformation in the "at-risk" spaces in our lives.

The stories of my teacher co-researchers taught me that we are all "at-risk" in some way, and any sense of separateness between teachers and "at-risk" students is merely an illusion. Faith's image of herself walking with her back up against the wall, Jessica's childhood silences, Emma's courage in leaving her abusive husband, Petunia's position as an adolescent suspended between two cultures, and David's account of how he chose his name are stories that have pressed themselves into my heart and my memory.

I felt humbled and inspired by Felicity's self-esteem and confidence. She sees herself as strong and beautiful. During our interview conversations, I felt like I was in the presence of Maya Angelou. A poet, a feminist, a singer and an activist among her peers, Felicity is convinced of her own "enoughness." As an adult woman who does not always feel at peace with myself, I am intrigued by her wellness. I am also thankful to Felicity for describing "at-risk" students as being trapped in ice. It is an image to which I often return in my present work as a guidance counsellor. Felicity taught me that "at-risk" students may appear hard and cold, but have the potential to be warmed into wellness through the transformative power of caring relationships.

Felicity's healing relationship with her mother mirrors another aspect of my thesis journey. Completing this thesis has drawn me into a deeper and more honest relationship with my family and myself. In writing the vignettes featured in chapter one, I confronted many of my own stories of voice and silence. I wrote candidly about my emerging sexuality in adolescence and the experience of being stalked. I named the silence of my church. I unfolded secret stories and gave words to hidden spaces in my history. Writing those memories was very powerful for me, and connected me deeply to the silences experienced by my co-researchers. However, when it came time to finish this thesis and make it available as a public document, I was terrified. With my thesis suspended in a liminal space between private and public worlds, I felt most vulnerable about how my personal vignettes might be received by my family. Knowing that I would soon be giving my stories to strangers, I felt a compelling urgency to share my "truths" with those who have been most intertwined with my history. Completing this thesis led me to invest my voice more expansively in my relationship with my parents by sharing my vignettes with them. With tenderness, respect and compassion, they opened their hearts to my stories. Our dialogue continues to evolve as our relationship deepens even further.

Another way that this research has affected me is in terms of my own relationship to my body. I have spent many years using my body as my voice, numbing my feelings into silence with food. My body has become my unspoken stories. In connecting to my own "at-riskness" through the process of listening to my co-researchers' stories, I renewed my desire to be at peace with my body. Through art, dance and the contemplative practice of daily walking in the forest near my home, I am reclaiming my body as a space of creativity and health. I am choosing to be well.

Engaging with this research has profoundly altered my relationships to my students, my family and myself. I am wondering how this thesis is affecting you, dear reader. You have heard many stories in the Forest of Voice and Silence. Now we can see those stories from a new perspective, because we have finally made it to the top of the ranger's tower. Look. The Forest of Voice and Silence is stretched out in front of us like a downy soft comforter quilted in patches of green and brown. My co-researchers' painful stories are hidden as we look at adolescence from this distant viewpoint, but we know their stories are still there, and their voices are waiting for you to respond.

What you choose to do next is up to you. You may decide to stay up here on the tower for a while, surveying the Forest of Voice and Silence from a safe distance. Or you may want to head right back into the woods to learn more about voice and silence and what it means to be "at-risk." Maybe you will train other teacher-rangers to guard this space. Or perhaps you are ready to go home and enjoy a hot bath. Whatever you choose to do next, my co-researchers' stories will go with you. Who knows where those stories will lead you, or how they will change the way you think about teaching, learning and yourself?

On the following page, you will find a composite poem or chorus in the shape of a tree. The wall of words that started my thesis is now transformed into a whispering tree, reminding us of the themes that emerged through my co-researchers' stories. You will remember that my arts-based abstract (p. xi) ends by warning us that "at-risk" girls believe they are disposable. In this thesis, my co-researchers get to have the last word, maybe for the first time in their lives. Listen. They are telling us what they need. You can choose how you respond. They are watching and hoping.

I need to feel safe.

I need people who make time to listen.

I need to be in my body without shame or fear.

I need approval for something other than compliance.

I need to give a voice to my feelings instead of eating them.

I need a father who is not drunk or angry or violent or gone.

I need to let go of the addictions that answer my emptiness.

I need men who are brave enough to be tender and gentle.

I need to dance and sing and take up space in this world.

I need to stop equating my worth with male desire.

I need to be seen and heard.

I need to see my own beauty.

I need to feel like I belong.

I need the courage to leave.

I need the courage to say no.

I need to know I am not alone.

I need to stop accepting abuse.

I need peace and healing silences.

I need to believe that God loves me.

I need risks that take me to my edges.

I need to be recognized and acknowledged.

I need to know in my heart that I am not disposable.

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Appendix One

The Wall Revisited

This thesis starts with my arts-based abstract, a wall of words. The following is an elaboration of the statistics and girls' voices that compose that wall. As you revisit my arts-based abstract, consider the price our adolescent girls pay when we disconnect ourselves from them.

"I could be here or not be here, it wouldn't really matter."
Gwendolyn

A "typical" adolescent at risk of school failure or dropping out is a member of a racial, ethnic, and/or language minority from a lower socio-economic status family.

(Rumberger in Leithwood, Hargreaves and Gerin-Lajoie, 1993, p. 92)

"There is never enough food in my house." *Sydney*
36% of children in Toronto...live in poverty.

(United Way, Oct. 1999)

"School doesn't suit me too much. The work is hard and boring, and there are hardly any teachers who "get" me. I'm probably going to be in special ed. for the rest of my life." *Gwendolyn*

Canada's poorest children are three times as likely as the wealthiest children to be in remedial education classes.

(United Way, Oct. 1999)

"They just expect you to do it, like there is something wrong with you if you don't." Gwendolyn

73% of teenage girls... cite sexual pressure girls receive from their boyfriends as the reason why girls have sex.

(*"Boys Pressuring Girls,"* 1996)

"My brother's turning out the same as my dad." Becky

Over 50% of young offenders have been exposed to family violence.

(United Way, Oct. 1999)

"I wish I looked like Becky." Gwendolyn

Body dissatisfaction and desire to lose weight are still the norm for more than 70% of young women.

(*"Eating Disorders,"* 1995, p. J16)

"Maybe I will get pregnant, maybe not. Who knows? Whatever happens, happens. My mom had me when she was sixteen."

Cassidy

...55 per cent [of Canadian teens] ...are sexually active... .

(Bibby & Posterski, 1992, p. 47)

"I just let him do whatever he wants. Maybe I'm a player just like him."
Gwendolyn

[There has been an] 18% increase in teen pregnancies between 1987 and 1994.

(Hercz, 1999)

"Why don't they just say No? Girls are taught to avoid conflict and worry about other people's needs and desires more than their own – especially boys..."

(*"Boys Pressuring Girls,"* 1996)

"I want to quit but not right now." Sydney

Taking our Grade 10 sample, 23% of girls are daily smokers.

(Bahr, Sept. 1999, p. 10)

...the smoking rate among youth in grades 7, 9, 11 and 13 has risen to 28% this year (1999) from 22% in 1991.

(De Sousa, 1999, p. 7)

"My mom says if I just lose a little bit of weight I could be a knock out." Gwendolyn

Canadian girls aged 11 to 15 are... trying to deal with their stress with high-risk behaviours like smoking, drinking and dieting.

(Yelaja, 1996, p. K7)

"I'm stupid. I'm a big fat whale. I hate myself. I wish I was dead."

Cassidy

...Adolescent girls greatly outnumber boys for treatment of depression and attempted suicide.

(Yelaja, 1996, p. K7)

They are twice as likely to be depressed as boys.

(Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

"I couldn't eat it. I don't know why. It wouldn't go down." Becky

The incidence of diagnosed cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia has increased dramatically over the past ten years.

...In the past it was believed that anorexia nervosa was restricted to white, adolescent females from upper and middle class families. However, recent research indicates that the problem now cuts across all age, racial, intellectual and socioeconomic boundaries. Approximately 90% of afflicted individuals are female.

(Berg, 1984, p. 1)

...Am I alone, or are there other women who have felt imprisoned by culture, who have found no other way to speak except through the body?

(Foster, 1994, p. 8)

Teenage girls' bodies still become Other to themselves...

(de Beauvoir in Orenstein, 1994, p. xxiv)

"Most of the time I can drink pretty good. I'm really used to it." *Sydney*
Two-thirds of eighth graders say they have tried alcohol, and a quarter admit to being current drinkers.

(*"Years of Wonder,"* 1995, p. 113)

"I tried to pull away from him, but he was drunk and smoking weed and I didn't know what he would do if I said no." *Gwendolyn*

Girls are frequently the victims of violent crime.

(Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

Students who engage in one risk behaviour are more likely to partake in others. Of the Grade 10 daily smokers, 90 per cent had also used marijuana.

(Bahr, 1999, p. 11)

"Nobody can control the boys." *Cassidy*

Evidence indicates that a significant amount of victimization in schools is gender-based, that students have a perception that teachers could do more to intervene, and that more Ontario school boards require policies to address this victimization.

(Larkin in Robertson, 1996, p. 2)

...studies of 500 female students in Ontario indicated that sexual harassment was virtually an everyday reality. Larkin[1994] has linked sexual harassment and sexism in society, classifying it as, a part of the continuum of violence that restricts the lives of girls and women.

(Robertson, 1996, p. 3)

[Larkin and Rice] studied the verbal abuses of girls 12 and 13 years old – when their bodies are changing due to puberty – at the hands of male classmates. ...A boy calling a girl fat is a very common practice regardless of how much a girl may weigh.... "Body-based harassment" often creates distorted eating patterns in girls – many of whom are not overweight.

(Rynor, 2000. p. 7)

...if boys wield the power to ruin girls' reputations, speaking out against boys who offend becomes too risky...girls look to boys to confirm their desirability (which they've learned is central to their esteem)...

(Orenstein, 1994, p. 117)

"I have a vicious side to me. They used to call me the dog because one time this girl at school dissed my mom, so I bit her hand and broke a bone inside of it. They had to open up her hand to fix it, and she got fifteen stitches. I can be violent to people when I'm mad."

Felicity

[Girls] are now smoking, drinking and using drugs as often as boys their age. And though they're not nearly as violent as boys, girls are increasingly more likely to find their way into trouble with the law.

(Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

"...Adolescent girls are getting more of a sense of entitlement...but some may be acting this out in ways that are not so healthy."

(Phillips in Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

...the behaviour of many young girls...is being twisted by profound cultural pressures their parents barely understand. Pressures to be sexy, to be popular – to be powerful. And when conventional methods of achieving those goals fail, more and more girls are turning to violence.

(Chisholm, 1997, p. 13)

"They are taking the attitude that the way to reach power is by being like males...."

(Artz in Chisholm, 1997, p. 13)

"It's just that sometimes I have to get out of there, you know?" Sydney
 ...The more students skip school, the greater the likelihood their friends are smokers or alcohol and drug users and the greater the likelihood that they have smoked or used drugs or alcohol. Skippers were also more likely to be having difficulty getting along with their parents and at school. In other words, skipping appears to be an indicator of alienation and disengagement.

(Robertson, 1999, p. 11)

"All three of them were going to have sex with her. That was the plan." Sydney

...between one-third and one-fourth of girls are sexually victimized by the time they finish high school.

(Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

"I just lay there and let him do it to me." Gwendolyn

Nearly two-thirds of rape victims are under 17.

(Vobejda & Perlstein, 1998, pp. A1, A36)

"If the guys in The Bullets ever found out that I told, they would make me pay hell." Gwendolyn

"Someone could just come up to me in the hall for no reason, point a gun to my head, and blow my life away." Sydney

...There are more than 100 gangs in the Greater Toronto Area today.

(Shephard, 1999, p. A3)

In 1999, Toronto Police Service estimated that approximately 2000 youth are involved in gangs that operate in the Greater Toronto Area. Gang activity is affecting large numbers of young people who have no gang affiliation. Often innocent victims are being intimidated, robbed, assaulted, or even killed. Record numbers of females are attracted to gangs and they are often extremely violent.

("Youth Gangs," 1999)

"I could be here, or not be here. It wouldn't really matter." Gwendolyn
In *Discipline and Punish*, Michael Foucault explains that if people don't have a significant stake in society, they do not feel governed by its rules. Often poor kids believe their lives end at twenty-one. They grow up knowing they have few choices and almost no chance at having a stake in the system. They know they are disposable.

(Azam, 2000, p. C2)