URBAN Girls
Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities

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From Mentor to Muse: Recasting the Role of Women in Relationship with Urban Adolescent Girls

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Although mentoring programs are frequently promoted as strategies to “reduce problem behavior and foster healthy development among adolescents” (Hamilton 1991, 7–8), there is reason to question whether the traditional role of mentor is appropriate or sufficient for women in relationship with adolescent girls. The role of mentor, as described in literature on “at risk” teens, is devoted to teaching, socializing, and acting as a role model for the adolescent. My research with urban adolescent girls considered to be at risk for dropout or school-age motherhood, however, suggests that important and health-sustaining relationships with women are overwhelmingly characterized by women’s ability to listen, understand, and validate the knowledge, experience, and feelings of the adolescent. Efforts at teaching without acknowledging and respecting girls’ perspectives may discount rather than enhance their experience and knowledge; attempts at socialization can be similarly destructive if they enforce social conventions that are harmful to girls and women.

The model upon which mentoring is based, originating in early Greek literature and myth, illustrates some of the limits that the prevailing mentoring model presents for girls. Advisor to Odysseus, Mentor was charged with the care and education of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, during his father’s long absence. Descriptions of mentoring retain the essential characteristics of the relationship between Mentor and Telemachus: the mentor’s role is one of teacher and father substitute, with the mentor relationship most commonly formed between a man and a boy. My research with girls points to another metaphor that shares its linguistic roots with mentor—that of muse. Muses were women in mythology who acted as sources of inspiration; their role was to recognize and to
help spark or draw out the genius or artistry of their charges. The metaphor of *muse* shifts the focus to the inner resources and potentials of girls—strengths that might well be missed in relationships that seek primarily to teach girls what they do not know. Thus instead of a *helping model* of mentoring, which often assumes deficiencies in the adolescent, research with urban girls supports a *relational model* that recognizes the diversity of needs and resources among girls of varied backgrounds, assumes that both adolescent and adult possess vulnerabilities and strengths, and values the contributions of both partners in the relationship.

Using the guiding metaphors of *mentor* and *muse*, this chapter outlines two models of relationships between adolescents and nonparental adults. Described first is the current framing of the mentor role and relationship—what it is, why and how it is considered helpful, and where it may fall short in meeting the developmental needs of girls. Following this is a preliminary formulation of relationships between women and girls that has arisen from my research with urban girls, centering on why and how the role of muse may benefit girls as well as the women with whom they are in relationship. Data for this discussion are drawn from the Understanding Adolescence Study—a study of the relational development of urban adolescent girls considered to be at risk. This project was carried out by members of the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development (Gilligan et al. 1992; Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1996). Although this chapter specifically addresses relationships between women and this particular group of girls, the types of relationships that these girls describe may be equally beneficial in other adolescent-adult relationships, including those with urban (as well as nonurban) girls who are not considered to be at risk, those between girls or boys and men, and those between boys and women. Future research may determine whether or not the role of muse applies as well to these other varieties of adolescent-adult relationships.

This chapter does not seek to dismiss the value of the mentoring role; rather, it offers possibilities for expanding or recasting existing formulations of the mentor relationship; it also suggests alternatives for creating meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with urban adolescent girls. Such recastings of roles for women in relationship with girls not only point to new directions for research on relationships between all adults and adolescents; they also offer practical models of relationship that may be of immediate value to women who work with girls in formal and informal educational settings and to any women who share part of their lives with adolescent girls.
The Mentor

Mentoring has received considerable attention in discussions of how adults can serve in the social, psychological, and educational development of adolescents (Darling 1991; Galbo 1983; Hamilton and Darling 1989; Hurrelmann 1991). Mentors are believed to be of particular value to adolescents who are at high risk for dropping out, school-age parenthood, delinquency, or emotional distress. This belief is supported by research on resilience in adolescence, which documents an association between positive relationships with adults and avoidance of these negative outcomes (Rutter 1980; Werner 1987). Summarizing this research, Stephen Hamilton describes how investigations of adolescents "who overcame the problems they faced and successfully negotiated the transition to adulthood have found that a key factor in their 'resilience' is the presence of a nonparental adult who gives guidance and encouragement, doing what a parent would be expected to do under better conditions or complementing parental influence" (1991, 1).

Mentoring can be described as primarily an instrumental relationship. Mentors are characterized as teachers and guides (Daloz 1983; Levinson et al. 1979); they provide information and advice to their students or protégés, guiding them in decision making, teaching them particular skills, and identifying areas in which they might improve their behavior or competency (Hamilton and Darling 1989). Stephen Hamilton and Linda Darling describe the prototypical mentor relationship as "a special bond between an inexperienced or naive student and someone more skilled than himself or herself who is willing to act as a guide in a new or unfamiliar situation" (1989, 121). Thus, the relationship tends to be primarily unidirectional, reflecting a helping model in which the focus is on the behaviors of the mentor that are directed toward the student. It is also likely to be a transitional relationship, aimed at bringing the student or protégé to a level of development at which the mentor role is no longer needed. The mentor role is therefore one that is future oriented, focusing on what or who the protégé can become or is becoming.

There is some evidence that relationships that fit the description of mentoring are relatively uncommon among young women. Hamilton and Darling (1989) found that female college students were less likely than were male students to have an unrelated adult mentor (defined as an adult who acted as a "teacher," "challenger," and "role model"). Slightly more than one-third of these college women (those perhaps most likely to have mentors) had mentors; among those students who named a significant adult, 43% of female students identified this adult as a mentor, whereas 72% of male students said the same. Hamilton observes that
“distinctions flowing from gender and class call attention to the likelihood that mentors are . . . harder to find for young women, working class youth, and members of minority groups who seek to find a place among the dominant white males.” Hamilton therefore recommends efforts to make mentors more available to these adolescents, for whom mentors are also “more critical because such pioneers need more help to take advantage of opportunities that are easier for the dominant group to acquire” (1991, 8).

From the perspectives of cognitive, educational, and career development, urban girls may indeed benefit from greater access to the kinds of instrumental support provided by the mentor relationship. Other research concurs that greater access to opportunity and to more information and guidance on educational plans and career development may be a need shared by all girls (American Association of University Women [AAUW] 1992; De León, chap. 21 of this volume; Sadker and Sadker 1994; Sullivan, with Snee and Weinger 1994). However, the social and emotional health and development of girls (and perhaps boys as well) may not be equally well served by a primarily instrumental mentor relationship. It may be that girls are less likely to report having mentor relationships not only because of the social inequities of gender, race, and class that may make mentors less accessible to them, but also because this type of relationship with adults is one that girls themselves are less likely to seek out.

More research is needed on the role of nonparental adults in all adolescents’ lives, including the specific role of women in the lives of urban girls. While some progress is evident in the years since Dale Blyth, John Hill, and Karen Smith Thiel stated that “relations with adults other than parents have, for the most part, been ignored in empirical studies” (1982, 426), there is still much to be learned about what constitutes positive and health-sustaining relationships between adolescents and adults. Research has identified relationships with adults as key factors in adolescents’ resilience, but it has yet to specify the kinds and qualities of relationships that are most beneficial. Social network studies have explored a range of adolescents’ relationships with others, including adults; however, they have not investigated the psychological dimensions of these relationships (Salzinger, Hammer, and Antrobus 1988). Few studies offer a developmental perspective on these relationships, and little is known about the relationships of adolescents who are not white and of the middle class. (Some notable exceptions include Garbarino et al. 1978; Rhodes and Davis, chap. 12 of this volume; Rhodes, Ebert, and Fischer 1992.) At present, discussions of why relationships with mentors might be important for adolescents rarely reflect a recognition of the needs and wants
that might be specific to urban girls in adolescence. As Galbo concluded in a comprehensive review of research on relationships between adolescents and adults, “much has been assumed about who really are the significant adults in adolescents’ lives” (1984, 958).

The Muse

My analysis of interviews from the Understanding Adolescence Study begins to address some of the gaps in knowledge about the significant women in girls’ lives. The purpose of this qualitative, longitudinal study was to contribute to an understanding of the relational development of a racially and ethnically diverse group of urban adolescent girls who were at risk for high school dropout or adolescent motherhood, or both. Although not asked explicitly about connections with women other than their mothers, 85% (N = 22) of girls in this sample cited at least one such relationship. Aunts, adult sisters, sisters-in-law, older friends, and neighbors were among the women who figured prominently in these girls’ lives.

The Study

Eighth grade girls from three elementary schools in racially and ethnically diverse working-class and low-income sections of a large urban area were asked to participate in this study. Students who were included were designated “at risk” for school dropout or teen pregnancy by their teachers and also met our criteria of “risk” (see Taylor, chap. 7 of this volume, for description of these criteria). Although the label of risk is problematic because it is commonly used to imply deficit or deviance, I use it here for the purpose of identifying the particular girls in this study because not all urban adolescent girls are at equal risk for the outcomes of school dropout or pregnancy. The shorthand label “at risk” is kept in quotation marks, however, to reflect the caution with which the term should be interpreted.

The twenty-six girls in the final sample—eight African American girls, four Latina girls (whose families were from Central America), eight Portuguese girls, and six white girls (of varied ethnicities)—were interviewed annually over the course of three years, from 1988 to 1990. When possible, girls and interviewers were matched by race (no Latina or Portuguese women were available to conduct interviews). The interview guide used in this study was developed by members of the Harvard Project to elicit narratives of relationships in and out of school, decision-making strategies in conflicts and dilemmas, and future plans. Students
were administered the pencil-and-paper Washington University Sentence Completion task (Loevinger and Wessler 1970) in the eighth and tenth grades to provide supplementary data to the interviews. Two methods were used to carry out the interview analysis: (1) content coded, conceptually clustered matrices (Miles and Huberman 1984), and (2) a narrative listening guide (Brown et al. 1988). Analyses of these interviews were conducted with attention not only to evidence of psychological distress and health but also to evidence of risk and resilience. Reliability of coding and validity of interpretations were assessed through ongoing discussions with the research team and in periodic review with colleagues whose personal and professional experience afforded them insight into a variety of social and cultural contexts.

The first method entailed creating matrices to code and organize major aspects of the girls’ descriptions of their relationships with women and to chart the progress of themes in these descriptions over time. Categories included relational roles (for example, aunt or neighbor), types of shared experiences (such as being the oldest sibling or running away from home), duration of relationships, uniqueness of relationship, types of interactions (such as listening or talking), and content of communication (school problems, dating, or future plans).

In contrast and complement to the first method’s focus on breaking down and organizing narratives into summary descriptions of themes in relationships across girls, the second method—the narrative listening guide—retains the coherence and integrity of individual narratives by moving through four different levels of analysis of the same text (see Taylor, chap. 7 of this volume, for description). For this analysis each of the four readings were undertaken with portions of text describing girls’ relationships with women. The third and fourth readings, for psychological health and distress, traced evidence of when relationships with women either seemed to support girls’ psychological health and development or to increase girls’ distress and level of psychological risk (guidelines for psychological distress and health were drawn from Rogers, Brown, and Tappan 1993). Examples of psychological health include feeling free to voice a range of thoughts and feelings (especially those not shared in other relationships) and being able to resist debilitating racial, ethnic, class, or gender stereotypes. Increases in these capacities over time in the context of these relationships would be noted as evidence of psychological development. Only a few girls spoke explicitly about relationships with women that caused them distress; most evidence of distress was found in women’s failure to connect with girls or in their diminished presence in girls’ narratives over time.

Many narratives about important relationships with women other than
mothers occurred in response to the question that followed inquiries about relationships with mothers, namely, *Can you tell me about someone else who is important to you?* Narratives about relationships with women also arose in response to questions about girls’ experiences of feeling good or bad about themselves and in response to questions about who helped them think about their futures. Based on previous research—my own and that of my colleagues at the Harvard Project—I have organized the discussion of findings around three possible implications of this relationship: health, healing, and transformation.

*Health*

Maria, a Portuguese American girl in the tenth grade, completes a sentence that begins with the phrase “a girl has a right to——” by writing “talk and express her feelings.” Eighth grade Donna, who is Italian American, expresses a similar sentiment when she asserts a girl’s right to “speak for herself and tell what she means.” Yet the girls’ sentence completions also describe a dilemma: alongside a recognition of their right to voice their feelings is the knowledge that speaking up can lead to trouble. Maria completes the sentence that begins “what gets me into trouble is——” with the words “my big mouth.” More than half of the girls who did the sentence completion task complete this sentence stem describing the same idea; in fact, they also use the same words, “my mouth” or “my big mouth,” to define the source of their trouble.

Research with girls conducted by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues has highlighted the key role that *voice* and *relationship* play in psychological health and resilience (for example, Gilligan [1982] 1993; Brown and Gilligan 1992; Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor 1988; Rogers 1993). Connections with others and with one’s own feelings and knowledge are forged and fostered by expressing feelings and speaking for one’s self. At adolescence, however, girls’ relationships with themselves and others may be placed at risk, and as Maria and Donna describe, girls may find that voicing their thoughts and feelings lands them in trouble.

Lyn Mikel Brown, Carol Gilligan, and Annie Rogers have described how prior to adolescence, many young girls demonstrate a strong sense of self, an ability to know and voice their feelings and to trust in the authority of their own experience (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Gilligan [1982] 1993, 1990; Rogers 1993). Relationships with others are often characterized by a full range of experiences and expressions, including love, anger, closeness, jealousy, joy and sadness, trust and betrayal. At adolescence, however, girls’ voices may be silenced or suppressed, and authentic relationships put at risk, by increased cultural pressure to con-
form to dominant images of femininity or by culturally mandated ideals of separation. Ideals of femininity and the "perfect girl" encourage girls to suppress feelings such as anger and to control or deny physical needs such as hunger or sexual desire. Conventional ideals that equate development with increasing levels of separation from others can also discourage girls from bringing the full range of their thoughts and feelings into relationship with others. These new demands may create an impasse for many girls, who face "psychological dilemmas in which they [feel] that if they said what they were feeling and thinking no one would want to be with them, and if they didn't say what they were thinking and feeling they would be all alone, no one would know what was happening to them" (Gilligan [1982] 1993, xx).

Resisting these losses by speaking or acting out against relationships that feel false, or against conventions that would require self-sacrifice, silence, or disavowal of one's own experience, may have costly social or personal consequences. Thus, girls' resistance to disconnection from self and others constitutes both a strength and a risk. Gilligan and her colleagues suggest that women can hinder girls' healthy development by supporting and enforcing cultural conventions that are harmful to girls. Alternatively, women can foster healthy development by validating girls' feelings and experiences even when they are at odds with convention and by assisting girls' efforts to recognize and resist idealized social norms (Gilligan 1990).

Writer Brenda Ueland tells a parallel story of psychological resilience and risk in her vivid account of the vibrancy and spontaneity of young girls—and of how this creative energy can be stifled:

You know how all children have this creative power. You have all seen things like this: the little girls in our family used to give play after play. They wrote the plays themselves (they were very good plays too, interesting, exciting and funny). They acted in them . . . made the costumes themselves, beautiful, effective . . . contriving them in the most ingenious way out of attic junk and their mothers' best dresses. They constructed the stage and theater . . . They drummed up the audience, throwing out a drag-net for all the hired girls, dogs, babies, mothers, neighbors within a radius of a mile or so . . .

They were working for nothing but fun, for that glorious inner excitement. . . . It was hard, hard work but there was no pleasure or excitement like it . . .

But this joyful, imaginative, impassioned energy dies out of us very young. Why? Because we do not see that it is great and important. . . . Because we don't respect it in ourselves and keep it alive by using it. And because we don't keep it alive in others by listening to them. ([1938] 1987, 5–6)

Ueland invokes the image of the muse when she adds, "The only way to love a person is . . . by listening to them and seeing and believing in the
god, in the poet, in them. For by doing this, you keep the god and the poet alive and make it flourish.” Ueland writes about keeping the creative impulse alive both in writing and in life; as the girls in this study describe, women who listen to and believe in them—who do not focus on what they lack but value who they are—help girls resist disconnection from this “joyful, imaginative, impassioned energy” ([1938] 1987, 6, 5). Other research suggests that girls can have a similar, and equally powerful, effect on women (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Dorney 1991).

Listening to the diverse group of “at risk” girls involved in the current study suggests that relational risk and resilience may play out differently for girls of differing culture, background, and experience. Variations in cultural conventions, patterns of socialization, school standing, and relational resources seem to contribute to different psychological strengths and vulnerabilities among these girls. Understanding the risks faced by these girls and the resources and strategies they use to manage these risks requires an understanding of the cultural contexts in which they live, as well as knowledge of the multiple and often contradictory conventions that they learn.

Both the black girls and the white girls in this study, for example, tended to maintain their ability to speak their minds and express disagreement or anger. This is not surprising, as African American girls are likely to be socialized to resist the internal and external manifestations of racism (Ward, chap. 5 of this volume), to adopt conventions of womanhood that include being strong and self-sufficient, and to expect to work outside the home (Reid and Comas-Diaz 1990). Although research is sparse on the development of white low-income and working-class urban girls, Jewelle Taylor Gibbs (1985) has suggested that they may have more in common with black girls of the same class than they do with white girls in middle-income groups. Among many of the more outspoken girls, however, maintaining strong voices throughout this period of adolescence carried with it distinct risks. For many, by the time they reached tenth grade, “being strong” or “self-confident” (their words) also meant covering over a need for relationships and curtailing the willingness or ability to voice their fears or concerns. For girls in the frightening position of being close to dropping out of school, the need to “stand alone” or keep their feelings to themselves seemed only to bring them closer to the edge of leaving school, and it certainly put them in danger of increased isolation and psychological distress.

Among the Latina and Portuguese girls traditional conventions of femininity and being a “good woman,” rooted in cultural values emphasizing goodness and virtue (Falicov 1982; Moitoza 1982), revolved around maintaining loyalty to families and adhering to restrictions in speaking
about or engaging in sexual activity. Although these conventions may have protected them from becoming teen mothers or dropping out of school—only one Latina girl eventually dropped out to have a baby—they also may place the girls at risk for the covering over or loss of voice and desire documented in earlier work among girls in more privileged educational or social settings (Brown and Gilligan 1992).

The girls in this study speak clearly about both their needs in relationships and how adult women can join with them in healthy and potentially health-sustaining relationships. Their narratives also hint at what distinguishes women who are able to be present with them, to listen and "really talk" without giving "a lecture." For example, Lilian, a Latina girl, frames many of her relational needs with other women in terms of what she is unable to discuss with her mother. She does not talk to her mother about boys "because she's strict about that"—a restriction cited repeatedly, often with unconcealed frustration, by a number of the Latina and Portuguese girls. Lilian's neighbor Joan, however, gives her an opportunity in eighth grade to discuss what is forbidden to her at home: "Yah, I talk to her. It's more easy to talk to her [than to my mother . . . because] my mother's strict and Joan really likes to hear what we think, kids our age and our time, because she said she used to be that way when she was young, just like me. It's good to talk to her." Connection with a woman who listens to her, who is interested in her, and whose experience resonates with her own is a source of pleasure and support for Lilian. Like many of the women described by these girls, Joan matches Ueland's profile of "the only good teachers for you": they are "those friends who love you, who think you are interesting, or very important, or wonderfully funny; whose attitude is: 'Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you. Let more come out' " ([1938] 1987, 8).

Connection with Joan is particularly important for Lilian in light of the many difficulties she describes at home with her mother and brothers and the lack of opportunity she has elsewhere to share her thoughts and feelings. Joan also helps Lilian to think about her future and how she might respond to her family by asking questions and sharing her own experience and learnings:

She always asks me, what do I want to be when I grow up. And how am I going to live my life, am I going to make mistakes like with my family—like her family, they don't like what she did. She ran away from home when she was 16, if I was going to do that. She ran away from home and she asked me if I was going to do the same thing and I said no, I'd just work it out. . . . She says, "Don't make the same mistakes I did." . . . She just came to realize that running
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away, she wasn’t as close to her father as she used to be. . . . She was sad
because she always wanted to get along with her father, and her father never
wanted to come down and visit her.

For Lilian, as for many of the girls in this study, the transition from
eighth grade to high school brought with it heightened concerns about
the trustworthiness of peers, as rumors and gossip became a daily threat
at school. Emerging issues of and interest in sexuality also became a point
tension and contention in many girls’ relationships with their mothers
and with peers. In this context, knowing an adult with whom they could
speak openly and in whom they could trust implicitly became a valuable
and much needed resource.

In tenth grade Lilian speaks of how she feels good about a close
relationship with her older cousin, a woman in her early twenties. Again,
the trust and identification that Lilian feels with her cousin create a
relationship in which she can speak freely; they “really can talk.” Lilian
draws a distinction between giving advice and delivering lectures:

We’re able to talk about anything. I can tell her anything I want. You know,
with mothers . . . some daughters are close to their mothers, others are not.
. . . My cousin seems to understand more . . . she’s been through it. . . . She
understands more and she can give me more advice while my mother’s just
more like, “Oh, you shouldn’t do that.” . . . Yet you try to tell her, “But Mom
that’s what I’m asking you, for advice,” and then they don’t understand. With
[my cousin] I can tell her anything and she’ll understand. She gives me advice, I
give her advice, you know. So this, we really can talk. [With my mother] it’s
not advice, it’s more like, um, a lecture with my mother, you know.

Ana, who is Latina like Lilian, also prefaces the discussion of an
important relationship with an adult woman by describing the subjects
that cannot be understood by, or broached with, her mother: boys and
sex are again off-limits for discussion. Ana says that the differences
between her and her mother are not only those of generation and culture.
A limited understanding of English also precludes her mother’s under-
standing of the “pressures” and “temptations” Ana faces:

My mother doesn’t know about school things, she’s, she doesn’t hardly even
know English, okay. It’s different from her country. . . . It’s different now, you
know, she doesn’t know what pressures we’re having in school, what tem-
ptations, a lot of problems, you know. So let’s say um, we can’t really talk . . .
about it, you know. Because [she doesn’t] understand it. Like my mother doesn’t
know English. It’s hard to tell her. And if I tell her in Spanish, it won’t come
out so good, you know, how it really is in English.
Ana says that her aunt has been in this country for a longer period of time than her mother; thus the differences of experience, culture, and language seem to be attenuated:

She’s so different. She’ll listen to you. She knows how it is because um, see, she knows more, even though she’s from a foreign country too, she knows more English, she understands more of the words I’m trying to say. She married an Italian guy, so . . . she knows things, right. . . . She came [here] when she was around 17 or something and . . . she’s like more used to here, she knows what things go on in school.

Ana’s cousins seem to find similar sanctuary in the company of their aunt:

All my girl cousins . . . that are 14, 15, they all go to her. . . . A lot of my cousins just find it so easy. . . . Because sometimes their mothers don’t understand it and they get a different wrong idea. . . . of what you’re trying to say. You know, they think you are saying one thing, they’ll say, “Oh, she must be telling me this, this and this.” They understand it wrong. . . . All my cousins go to her and they say. . . . their mothers would probably get mad. . . . And so . . . she won’t tell your mother. . . . She won’t say, “No, don’t do this,” she’s just, “You make the decision whether its right or wrong.”

Like Lilian’s neighbor, Ana’s aunt does not instruct or tell her nieces what to do; rather, by simply listening as they describe their experience, she helps them stay connected to their own knowledge in deciding what is right or wrong. Ana’s description also suggests that a woman to whom girls can turn is easily recognized by girls. With Lilian, Ana builds a portrait of such a woman: she is someone who “likes to hear what we think,” who may be “just like me,” who “understands” and has “been through it,” who “listens” and “knows what things go on.” Ana also notes, however, that relationships like this with an adult are a rarity when she says of her aunt, “she’s so different.”

Christina is a Portuguese girl who has also experienced sanctions at home about what she can and cannot say. Christina conveys a need to express herself but seems by tenth grade to have learned to keep her feelings to herself: “I usually keep my feelings bottled up. You know, I don’t usually say anything, but when something bad happens, like I get into a fight, it all comes out, knocks against me. If I don’t talk about it, it all stays inside, all my feelings stay inside and I don’t really say anything about them.” Adding that she needs to “get [her feelings] out” so that “one day I just won’t blow up you know,” Christina also indicates that this need has not been well met. She describes liking the interview, for example, because “you could talk to somebody, somebody listens to you for once.” Christina experienced the loss of her father in ninth grade, and
by the tenth grade she seems increasingly cut off from her friends and family and seems to be struggling with some level of depression. Speaking and listening, as Gilligan has observed, are “a form of psychic breathing” ([1982] 1993, xvi), and tenth grade Christina seems to be in particular need of this life-sustaining process.

Mary is an Italian American girl who dropped out of school in ninth grade and later returned. Her narrative tells a story of a failed opportunity for connection with a woman and suggests that the continued presence of someone who could listen to her might have helped forestall some of the losses she experienced. In eighth grade Mary described herself as surrounded by people to whom she could turn: “If I have a school problem, then I’d go to my father. If I have a boyfriend problem, then I go to my mother. . . . [And] I always have my best friends to go to.” Over the three years of this study, however, these connections lose their prominence in her narratives. Mary increasingly takes on conventions of autonomy that are flagged in her narrative with the phrase “you should.” In tenth grade, for example, she says she no longer discusses her problems with others: “I just like to deal with [things] myself. . . . I don’t want to feel like I have to depend on other people. . . . You should be able to deal with it yourself.” These conventions of autonomy and independence propel Mary increasingly out of relationship with others, and by tenth grade she says, “I really don’t tell anybody about anything.”

The reasons for Mary’s adoption of these conventions become evident when she speaks of how she has been “hurt in relationships . . . so many times” and how speaking her mind has led to “trouble and fights.” Mary’s solution is to resist revealing her feelings to others, and in the tenth grade she says, “I just can’t be honest or open anymore. I’m afraid that if I just open up to everybody, I’ll end up getting hurt again.” While she is wise to avoid “opening up to everybody”—for indeed such indiscriminate openness would leave her vulnerable to considerable hurt—her strategy of not opening up to anybody proves equally costly. If, as Robert Stevenson and Jeanne Ellsworth suggest, the “culture of individualism,” so prominent in white middle-class ideology, is an even “more powerful influence” in the white working class (1993, 270), such cultural forces may potentiate the effects of Mary’s personal experience and increase her risk of psychological isolation.

In the past Mary’s ability to connect with and voice her feelings had enabled her to express herself creatively through writing. After returning to school, however, Mary says that she “lost [the] ability to do some things”: “I used to be a great writer, write great stories. But now, I read my stories and . . . I don’t really know what happened. . . . They don’t feel the same. When I used to read my stories, no matter what . . . I was
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a messup, but I wrote some damn good stories, let me tell you.” Mary says she used to “automatically . . . have a story in my head,” but in her recent attempts to protect herself things have changed:

Now I think of nothing, and it takes me a long time to write down a story. . . . I don’t feel as comfortable as I did last year, writing about my stories . . . because if [people reading them] didn’t like ‘em, I think I’d die. You know what I mean. If I wrote down all my feelings on a piece of paper and somebody said “I don’t like this,” I really think I would die.

Mary told these things to her writing teacher, but “she didn’t comment. She didn’t say what she thought.” Venturing for a moment out from “dealing with things” herself, Mary shared with her teacher the magnitude of her fears about having her feelings, her story, rejected—“I really think I would die”—only to have these feelings themselves met with silence. By Mary’s teacher’s apparent reluctance to share her thoughts, and by her seeming failure to respond to Mary’s concerns, she may have missed a critical opportunity to assist Mary in reconnecting with others, with her feelings, and with her creative abilities to write “some damn good stories.”

Despite her stated caution, Mary’s readiness to connect with someone she could trust was evident in her interview. Like Christina, who liked having “somebody listen to you for once,” Mary said that she liked the interview because she was able “to sit down and like talk to somebody and have them understand, without them turning around and laugh and say, ‘Oh, that was stupid,’ or stuff like that.” Describing the positive impact of such interactions, Mary added that the interview itself might help her in the future “to be more open and honest.” Her comments not only reveal the need to be listened to, but they also highlight the risks in speaking, where there is ever present the prospect of being hurt by someone who might “laugh and say . . . that was stupid.”

Mary dropped out again in eleventh grade. Although the continued presence of someone with whom Mary felt safe to voice her feelings may not have prevented this outcome, it may have provided her opportunities to stay connected to her writing and may have diminished some of the emotional distress and isolation she was experiencing. That she was capable of taking advantage of opportunities for such a relationship was evident in her interviews; as Mary commented at the end of her tenth grade interview, “It’s good to tell how you feel.” That such opportunities had become rare for Mary, however, was equally, and distressingly, apparent.

Ruby is an African American girl who became pregnant and dropped out of school, despite her reported intentions in tenth grade to do other-
wise. Like Mary, Ruby begins to move away from confiding relationships in ninth grade and begins to speak of the ability to “stand alone” as a sign of strength. Also like Mary, Ruby’s increasing psychological distance from others is accompanied by an increasing level of psychological distress. When asked about a time she felt good outside of school—a question she responded to with ease in the eighth grade—Ruby in tenth grade is unable to recall any examples: “I don’t know, I can’t remember any, but I know there must have been times when I felt really good.”

In eighth grade, when Ruby speaks of the burdens and privileges of being the oldest in a large family, she says she can go to her aunt for advice on a problem: “She’s the oldest, too, so she sort of understands me better. She says if I need to come over there on weekends to talk about things, that I can come over and tell her.” As it is for Lilian and Ana, a relationship with a woman who can understand and share her experience is important for Ruby. In the ninth grade, however, Ruby’s aunt receives only brief mention, and by the tenth, women drop out altogether from the stories that Ruby tells about her life. Ruby’s interviews over the three years sound progressively more guarded; she speaks more frequently of keeping to herself and about how it has become increasingly difficult to find people she can trust. By tenth grade Ruby says, “I really don’t talk to nobody.”

Although concerned about failing her classes in school, Ruby has kept this information from her teachers: “I’m worried about it. They don’t know that, though.” Like Mary, Ruby says she does not share her feelings with others, but she nevertheless is willing to speak in the interview about her concerns, and this in turn seems to help Ruby clarify her feelings. Ruby says that the interview “lets you know a lot about yourself and how you feel about things. I mean I leave out the door and I’m like, ‘Wow, I didn’t think I thought that,’ you know. . . . I didn’t know I really felt that way.” Speaking about her life “let me know how I felt” and, she adds, “I think that’s good.” Ruby’s need for relationships—both for her emotional well-being and to cope with her difficulties at school—is clear, and her loss of connection places her at greater psychological and academic risk.

What seems to be shared by the women with whom these girls felt free to speak—including the interviewers—is that they are relatively unencumbered by conventions that would dictate or constrain their roles in these relationships. Ana’s aunt, for example, has no children of her own; this may enable her to be free to listen to her adolescent nieces without feeling compelled to tell them what they should do or needing to report these conversations to their mothers. Without children—especially daughters—Ana’s aunt may not feel the pull to enforce rules of the
dominant culture or the family culture with her nieces. Lilian’s neighbor and cousin and Mary’s and Ruby’s interviewers may be in similarly advantageous positions. They are free to listen to these girls without the need to change them, and they can allow them to share their experiences and express their feelings in a climate of trust. These women, because they are “not their mothers, teachers, or therapists” may have “the advantage of standing outside of what are sometimes painfully complex and difficult relationships for girls at this time in their lives” (Rogers 1989).

Patricia Hill Collins remarks on this connection for women in the role of “othermothers” with girls in black communities:

Othermothers often help to defuse the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters. In recounting how she dealt with the intensity of her relationship with her mother, [one writer] describes the women teachers, neighbors, friends, and othermothers she turned to—women who, she observes, “did not have the onus of providing for me, and so had the luxury of talking to me.” (1990, 128)

For the girls in this study—especially those who are experiencing tension or restrictions in their relationships with their mothers, who become cautious with friends in a school climate of rumors, gossip, and distrust, and who find themselves caught up in trying to adopt the role of “good daughter” or “strong woman”—relationships with women they can trust in and talk with may play a vital role in sustaining and supporting their psychological health and resilience.

Healing

The 1992 AAUW report on education and girls stated that “incest, rape, and other physical violence severely compromise the lives of girls and women all across the country. These realities are rarely, if ever, discussed in schools” (1992, 3). Psychiatrist Judith Herman describes research documenting the extent of “these realities”:

The results of these investigations confirmed the reality of women’s experiences that Freud had dismissed as fantasies a century before. Sexual assaults against women and children were shown to be pervasive and endemic in our culture. The most sophisticated epidemiological survey was conducted in the early 1980s by Diana Russell, a sociologist and human rights activist. Over 900 women, chosen by random sampling techniques, were interviewed in depth about their experiences of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. The results were horrifying. One woman in four had been raped. One woman in three had been sexually abused in childhood. (1992, 30)
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For many girls in adolescence, healing from trauma is a crucial aspect of their development. There is evidence, in fact, that girls who are identified as “at risk” may be even more likely than other girls to have been sexually abused. One investigation involving girls who had become pregnant as teenagers found that two-thirds of the girls had experienced at least one unwanted sexual experience: molestation, attempted rape, or rape (Boyer and Fine 1992). A girl who has experienced sexual abuse is likely to have a complicated relationship with her family and thus might be in particular need of a safe and supportive relationship with an adult woman. Herman describes research that identifies relationships as central to recovery: “Many of the women who had escaped without permanent harm remembered particular people who had helped them to integrate and overcome their sexual trauma. Most frequently cited were supportive friends and family members, who assured these women that they were not at fault” (Tsai, reported in Herman 1981, 33). A woman who can listen to and understand a girl’s experience may offer a safe and healing presence not easily found elsewhere.

Although the current study with girls “at risk” was not designed to assess whether or not girls had an abuse history, several spoke about experiences of some kind of abuse. Sandy, for example, is a white girl who described ongoing problems with her stepfather. The specifics of abuse were not articulated in her interview, but Sandy was unambiguous about her desire “to leave the house because he’s bothering me a lot”; she was reluctant, however, to leave her mother alone in a dangerous situation. For Sandy, important relationships are with women who can offer her some protection from her stepfather. In ninth grade, for example, she finds support and sanctuary with her neighbor: “My downstairs neighbor, she is like a mother to me, too. And when I have problems she helps me out and she doesn’t really like my [step]father that much, so she’s always on my side.” Sandy’s neighbor shares her experience: “She went through a lot of things like that, related to that. Her boyfriend . . . used to do this stuff to her.” Although Sandy does not provide details of what “this stuff” is, she provides a sense of the severity of the problem by describing how she routinely goes to her neighbor’s apartment to call for help from the police.

In tenth grade Sandy seems no longer to have anyone to whom she can turn. She speaks longingly of how her grandmother had once been a source of protection:

My grandmother [was important to me], but she passed away a year ago. I guess she was close to me, too. . . . She was just so nice and everything. I always wish
that she's still alive and I could talk to her and I know she wouldn't let my stepfather treat me the way he does. I know she wouldn't. It's just that she had ways. I think she had like powers or something to just take people over and just boss them around. . . . Yah, she could. My stepfather wouldn't ever try to get wise with her and talk back to her because he knows better, I know.

Sandy's wish in tenth grade is for a relationship with a woman who, like her grandmother, has "powers" to do something on her behalf, with whom she could talk and in whom she could trust. Her interviewer joined this lineage, for a short time at least, by listening to Sandy and helping her contact a counselor shortly after their interview. Since that last interview, Sandy has moved out of her parents' home and away from her stepfather. Sandy ultimately became pregnant and dropped out of school.

Evidence has also begun to accumulate suggesting that many symptoms of extreme psychological distress that become more prominent in adolescence—depression, eating disorders, suicide, self-mutilating behaviors—can in fact often be traced to experiences of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence (Herman 1992). At this crucial time for adolescent girls, adult women may indeed be in a unique position to mitigate or prevent these negative outcomes. The intention is not for women to be therapists, but rather to foster relationships that are therapeutic: to create a safe place to speak, to listen and share their own experience, to use their power when necessary to stop continuing abuse, and to make it possible for girls to speak the unspeakable and thus regain a sense of their own power.

Alongside evidence of the prevalence of abuse among girls and the essential place of relationships in recovery from this trauma, the absence of discussions about sexual abuse in the current literature on mentoring for adolescents "at risk" is notable. The literature focuses on preventing pregnancy but not sexual abuse; certainly if sexual abuse coexists with higher risks of pregnancy, it should be raised as an issue to consider both in research and in program development. Relationships with women may have considerable potential for healing among girls deemed "at risk"; the healing potential for these kinds of relationships, however, is sharply diminished if the silence that has historically surrounded sexual abuse persists.

Transformation

The transformative potential of connections between women and adolescent girls "at risk" has many faces. As this chapter has suggested thus
far, these include transforming the present and future quality of girls' lives by supporting their healthy development and, when necessary, acting as partners in their healing. These relationships also have the potential to foster change in the social sphere. Collins describes how the othermother tradition in some black communities has already transformed mentoring relationships between black teachers and their students to a "fundamentally radical" enterprise: "This community othermother tradition . . . explains the 'mothering the mind' relationships that can develop between Black women teachers and their Black students. Unlike the traditional mentoring so widely reported in educational literature, this relationship goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts." Collins cites feminist cultural critic bell hooks's description of this transformative aspect of mentoring: "I understand from the teachers . . . that the work of any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students [is] necessarily and fundamentally radical, that ideas [are] not neutral, that to teach in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens, is to challenge domination at its very core" (1990, 131). The potential for developing a critical consciousness that can inspire challenges to oppressive social structures and conventions that silence girls and women does not, however, appear in mentoring models aimed at correcting deficits, preventing high risk behaviors, or maintaining the status quo.

In her analysis of programs and policies that affect adolescents, Milli- cent Poole points out that "what has largely been missing from the discourse and action has been a concern to empower young people; to make them more socially critical or more able to participate in social transformation or social analysis and questioning." In the same way, instead of focusing on empowerment and on developing a healthy critical perspective, some of the more traditional notions of mentoring emphasize socializing, teaching, and modeling functions that, however well-intentioned, function to preserve the status quo—despite the ill effects that some existing social structures may have on the adolescent. As Poole stresses, "agency and self-empowerment [are] of vital significance for individual and societal futures" (1989, 80).

Yet for girls "at risk" the costs of speaking up may be high, including expulsion from the school system, as Michelle Fine (1991) has documented. This is particularly true when speaking up constitutes a challenge to prevailing norms. These girls need to know the risks that they face and to know how to formulate strategies that can minimize these risks without losing connection with their own voices, thoughts, and feelings. At the same time, adult women need to use their power in the system as
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adults to reduce the material and psychological risks that these girls confront.

Connections between girls and women contain the potential to let girls and women know that they matter and that they can make a difference. Unfortunately, while there are many positive stories of relationships with women in this study, there are also repeated stories of girls’ receiving messages that they do not matter, messages that cut across lines of race and ethnicity. Valerie, an African American girl, conveys this when she describes what she especially liked about the interview: “Being listened to. You just feel like there is someone out there that’s really paying attention to me.” Christina voices a similar thought when she says the interview was important because “a lot of people don’t ask . . . I think a lot of people should ask more questions . . . What do we think about something.” Donna, in the presence of an aunt who doubts she will go to college, feels “like I’m nothing. Like she doesn’t have any confidence in me.” Tiffany, a black adolescent mother, says she felt good helping a friend because “someone listened to me for once. . . . No one ever listens to me.” Bettina, who is Latina, describes why she does not talk to anyone about her future: “I just think about my future by myself . . . , it’s my ideas, I don’t want anybody to take them away from me. . . . If you tell somebody your ideas, they might be like, ‘Oh, that’s stupid,’ put you down and then you’d be like, ‘Oh, I don’t want to do that anymore.’ ” And Ana, describing the singular experience of feeling good during a job interview “because I was like, ‘Oh boy, they’re listening to me.’ . . . The lady talked to me as if I was a regular person.” Rather than dismissing such comments as variations on a typical adolescent lament, when taken seriously they point to a real and pressing need for these girls.

For women to be in authentic, healthy relationship with girls requires courage to question the ways in which women’s attempts at being “role models” may have separated them from girls and perpetuated traditions in the culture that are unhealthy for girls:

[Women] may discover that they have succumbed to the temptation to model perfection by trying to be perfect role-models for girls and thus have taken themselves out of relationship with girls—in part to hide their imperfection, but also perhaps to keep girls from feeling their sadness and their anger. . . . And it may be that women, in the name of being good women, have been modeling for girls repudiation—teaching girls the necessity of a loss or renunciation. (Gilligan 1990, 531, emphasis added)

Women who are mentors can still socialize, teach, challenge, and be role models for girls, but they must also be able to think critically about these
roles with an awareness of both what is helpful to girls and what is harmful. For any women in relationship with adolescent girls “at risk”—mentor or not—clearly what is central is the act and art of listening, of meeting girls where they are.

Across the lines of race and ethnicity in this study, the character of meaningful relationships remains a constant: they are distinguished by girls’ ability to speak freely; by women’s ability to listen to, understand, and validate girls’ feelings and experience; and by women’s willingness to share their own experience as well. The focus of this relationship is on confirming or drawing out girls’ experience, feelings, and knowledge. In contrast with the more instrumental nature of mentoring, the role of muse that emerges from girls’ narratives forms what can be called an evocative relationship. Unlike mentoring, which may be more unidirectional, transitional, and ultimately facilitative of separation, these are relationships that are decidedly more mutual, marked both by constancy and connection.

bell hooks, quoting the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, provides a description of communities of resistance that can arise from relationships such as these:

Resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly. . . . I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness. (1990, 43)

Relationships between girls and women can help girls develop a healthy critical perspective, to be able to develop, with women, strategies of resistance that maintain health and manage the inevitable losses, both psychological and material, in a social system stratified by race, class, and gender. By creating relationships that are not simply instrumental but evocative as well, and by creating connections that encourage girls and women to bring themselves more fully into relationship, relationships between women and girls “at risk” might indeed become “places where people can return to themselves more easily, where . . . they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness.”

Note
1. In this group, three African American girls, one Latina girl, and two white girls dropped out of high school. All of these six except one of the white girls became adolescent mothers.
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