

# Girls Becoming Women

## Rites, Responsibilities and Reality

BY ROBIN MILLER CURRÁS

When I was a young teenager, I read the book *Forever* by Judy Blume. My mother had forbidden my sister, Heather, and me to read it, but we did anyway. I remember hiding the book under my bed and reading it late at night when I was supposed to be asleep. Heather and I had heard that the book included explicit descriptions of sex, and we were, of course, curious about it. To my mother's credit, I think she wanted to read the book first so she could decide on its appropriateness, but we decided not to wait for her.

When my mother found out that I had read the book she voiced her disappointment, then asked, "Well, did you understand it?"

"Yes," I said, displaying the typical embarrassment and Mom-you're-so-stupid attitude for which teenagers are known. That was the end of our conversation. That was the end of my sex talk.

Unfortunately, I did not understand what I had read. Later, when I teased my mother for slacking on the job—"I had to learn everything on the street," I told her—she responded, "But you read that book!"

"But I didn't understand!" I said.

"But you said you did!" she replied.

"I was embarrassed. You should have told me . . ."

"You should have told me" is the phrase that inspired the leadership of Presbyterian Women in Newton Presbytery to create a retreat for girls and the women who love them.

### Getting It Together

Sometimes it only takes one voice to inspire a crowd—or in this case a steering committee. The idea of creating a retreat for girls that recognizes, acknowledges and celebrates their transition into womanhood was presented to the PW Coordinating Team of Newton Presbytery. Three women immediately volunteered to take part.

Lisa, a very young-looking and -acting grandmother, Sherry, a mother with teenage girls, and Connie, a mother with preteens, joined me, the mother of a terrific, if sometimes terrible, two-year-old girl. We all had stories of awkwardness, regret and "Gee, I wish someone had told me."

"My mother told me to [avoid] kissing a boy for as long as possible," said Lisa. "But then when I kissed a boy, I found out I really liked it. I was scared and confused and didn't feel like I could really talk about it with my mother."

Blessed with hindsight and experiences we didn't want to repeat with our own children, we sought to create a safe space where mothers (or other loving adult figures) could talk with their girls about sex, their bodies and the glories and pains that come with sexuality and relationships.

The first thing we learned was how much there is to include. During our first brainstorming session, we came up with a long list and agreed that we simply could not do it all. We knew that most schools do a good job of educating children about contraception and the whole



An Apache girl celebrates her coming of age at a rite of passage ritual commemorating her first menstruation.

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The Balinese celebrate a girl's passage into puberty with traditional dancing.



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sperm-meets-the-egg thing. Plus, it was important to us that this retreat be accessible to as many women as possible, so it needed to be brief. We determined that a 24-hour retreat (beginning Friday at 4:00 P.M. and ending Saturday at 4:00 P.M.) is an easy getaway for most women.

Our first homework assignment was to find out if anyone was already doing what we were talking about doing. Although I had many helpful phone conversations and exchanged several emails, I learned that no one was doing exactly what we wanted to do. But there were people interested in helping us, and from our interactions came new ideas. By our next meeting, a title had emerged—Girls Becoming Women: Rites, Responsibilities and Reality.

## The Retreat

The retreat begins with a celebration of women's bodies changing from infant to toddler to girl to woman to crone. The media's images of beauty are expanded to include all of God's good creation—short, tall, thin, wide, sleek, lumpy, fair, dark, freckled, stretch-marked, robust and diminutive.

Then participants are divided into two tracks—one for adults and one for girls. The adults meet with a counselor who specializes in the area of teenagers and their emotional development, someone who is qualified and prepared to answer adults'

questions about how to talk about sex with their children and how to field their children's questions.

- How do I answer my daughter when she asks, "How old were you when you lost your virginity?"
- How do I tell my daughter to do as I say but not what I did without sounding like a hypocrite?
- What if I think she's too young to handle my truth? When will I know?
- Do I ask her questions when she comes home from a date?
- There's part of me that doesn't really want to know what she's doing, but am I abdicating my role as a parent by remaining silent?

At the same time, the girls meet with another capable, well-trained adult to discuss the joys of sex, intimacy, pregnancy and motherhood. Did anyone ever tell you what you're going to feel like when you're aroused? That sex is one of God's good (no, great!) gifts to humankind? That hormones can flood your brain and carry you away to "The Land of Unintended Consequences"?

Participants come back together—grown and growing women—to talk about responsibility, promiscuity, discretion, sexual violence and unwanted pregnancies. The sexual dynamics in our culture need to be

navigated carefully. It is impossible to cover all of these topics thoroughly. Sexual violence on its own requires an entire retreat. But our intent is to open the door to discussion and create an avenue of comfort for future conversations that may arise from confusion and frustration.


Next, the girls and women spend time one-on-one, talking about what's on their hearts that they'd like to share with one another. Then our day ends with a meaningful ritual. The women form a small circle and stand facing outward, surrounded by a larger circle of the "girls becoming women," facing inward. A ribbon is placed at the foot of each girl, like a threshold. In the center of the circle of women are small soapstone statues, each depicting a mother holding the hands of a young daughter. Each woman takes a turn selecting a statue and sharing with the group one gift that her mother gave her as she transitioned from girl to woman. Then each woman turns to the girl she accompanied on this retreat and shares with her the hopes she had before the girl was even born.

The women take one step closer to the girls and share one thing they have learned from this girl since her birth. Taking another step, the women share one wish they have for this girl who is becoming a woman. Then each woman gives each girl the gift of the soapstone statue as a symbol of her hopes and dreams for her and her future. The girls are then invited into the circle of women. As they cross the ribbon at their feet, the girls say, "If I ever have a little girl, I will tell her of the gifts I received from you." The women and girls turn inward, forming circles of strength—standing shoulder to shoulder and arm in arm. Participants close in prayer, thanking God for the gift of our

bodies, our sexuality and the support of other women who love us. As they depart the circle, the girls lift their ribbons and enter the world again, alongside the women.

A retreat such as this will change each time it's held, depending on

the ages and personalities of the participants. The purpose, however, should remain the same—to celebrate womanhood, provide opportunities for straight talk about the potentials and pitfalls of sex, and allow adults to find guidance for

sharing their values and answering some tough questions. 

Robin Miller Currás is the pastor of Wharton United Presbyterian Church in Wharton, New Jersey, and serves as spiritual life coordinator for Presbyterian Women in Newton Presbytery. She is

In conjunction with the Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center of Newton Presbytery, Camp Johnsonburg, the retreat described in this article will be held for the first time February 25–26, 2005. Please lift this retreat and its participants in prayer.

—Robin Miller Currás

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