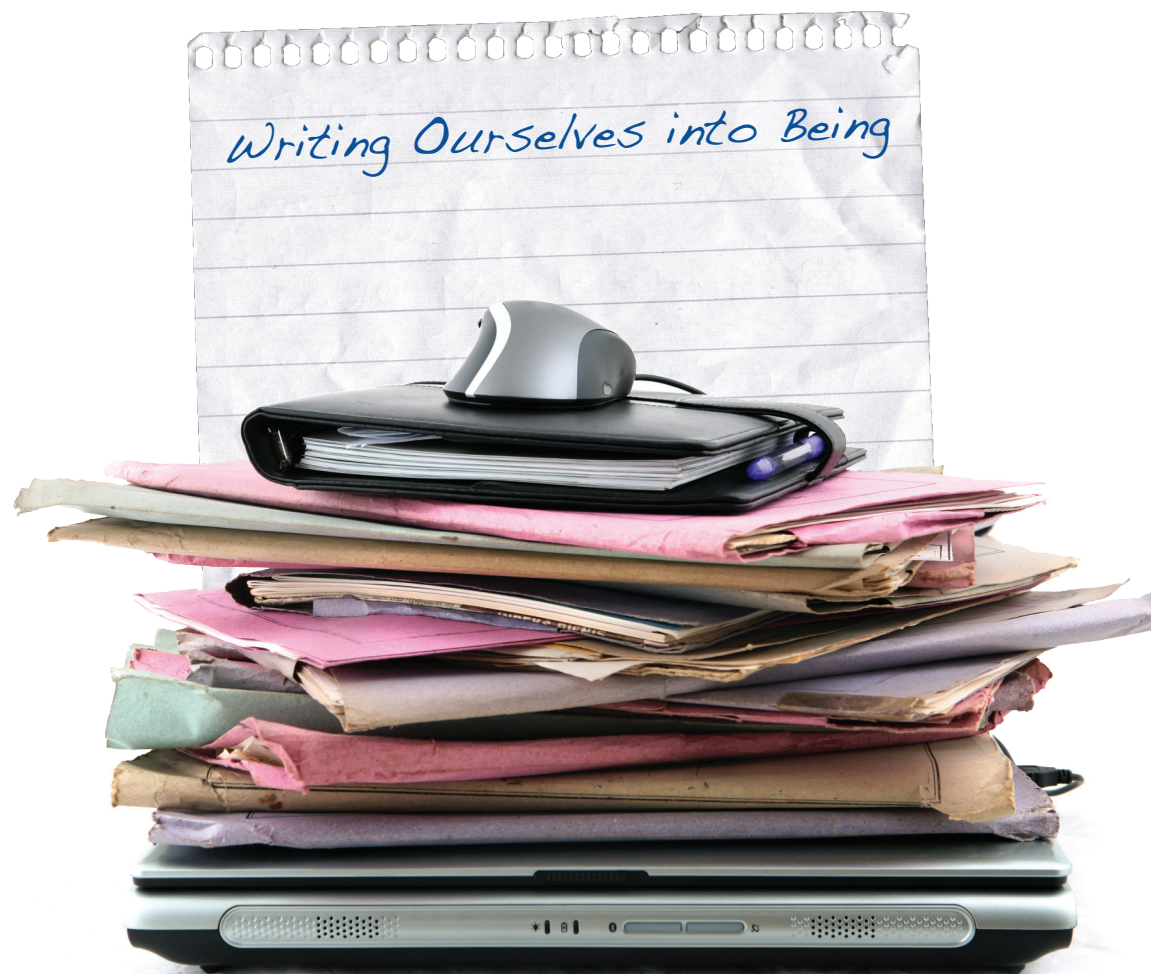


THE GIRLS' DIARY PROJECT

Writing Ourselves into Being



Shannon McFerran and Daniel G. Scott

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University
of Victoria

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For all the Spiritual Princesses of the Underground

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A note from the authors

In 2003, Dr. Daniel Scott, Associate Professor of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, was asked to write a chapter on girls' spirituality to be included in a handbook intended for practitioners who work with girls at risk. Not being a girl, Dr. Scott decided to ask me and five other women to come and talk about the roots of our spiritual lives. He began by following Harrison Owen's principles of Open Space Technology¹ with its overarching assumption that whoever shows up are the right people; that whatever can happen, happens; and that when it is over, it is over. Daniel believed that the right people would come, and that something would happen that would lead to an exploration of girls' spirituality. We did not set out to study diary writing, but during the first meeting, one of us said that she had been an obsessive diary writer in her youth. She still had some of her diaries, and was curious about what they might say about her adolescent spirituality. A kind of electricity went around the room as we discovered that each of us had also been an adolescent writer, and might be willing to share our writing.

Our research quickly widened to include other aspects of adolescent development that we learned about through reading and reflecting on our personal writing. We wanted to understand not just our spiritual identities, but how we expressed our inner lives, and how this expression shaped our growth in the years from nine to eighteen.

What resulted was a five-year participatory research project—the Girls' Diary Project (GDP). Many women donated or lent their diaries to us for our research, and contributed adult reflectionsⁱ on their adolescent writing. Their contributions, along with our own reflective look back at our diaries and the published diaries of adolescent girls, make up the material on which we based our research. This book is the result of our team effort. It presents the exploration we made of girls' voice and identity formation in adolescence through substantial excerpts of

i The adult reflections are indicated not with an age, but "AR" when cited in what follows.

original adolescent source material, as well as adult reflection and analysis. And it builds on writing done by the members for conference presentations and for publication in the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* in 2005. We hope it reveals the true complexity of the practice of diary writing.

Throughout this book, Dr. Scott and I write from a collective point of view, reflecting the fact these conclusions were drawn by a group. We have used pseudonyms for all living project members who are authors of the original, unpublished diary material used here—myself included.

Shannon McFerran

There are a number of things I want to add to the introduction from Shannon to our project. I recently stumbled across a file in a move to a different office that goes back to the beginning of my academic work of exploring adolescent spirituality. I was surprised to discover that I had diary excerpts from two women friends who had entrusted me with pieces of their adolescent diaries as I was sure then that there must be some record of their spiritual lives in them. I had forgotten about this material even during the work on the GDP. I recalled in looking at it that I had put it away because I had an instinct that I was not ready to study it, not really equipped to do so and that it was not “right” to try, in whatever way I understood “right” to mean. What I am now aware of is how much trust those two friends had in me to give me copies of portions of their diaries. It has been an astonishing journey to be the man in the room witnessing this group of articulate and capable women exploring their own life journeys, trusting one another and me with their adolescent musings and doing the sometimes difficult personal work of facing what re-reading their diaries and reflecting as adults on their pasts brought up for them. I am grateful for their courage, tenacity and honesty in the process. I have great respect for each of them.

One of the realities of a participatory research project that grew so quickly and began to stretch into years of conversation, writing and re-writing is that life intervenes. It comes in many ways to take people on to new things: new relationships and responsibilities, tragedies and difficulties, new jobs, homes and cities. The team has disbanded and we have had a time when, in keeping with Harrison Owen’s Open Space principles, it was over. But now circumstances have led to this opportunity to return to the remarkable and challenging data we have and to put it into this larger format. I remember after one of our first international conference presentations where the team used a number of diary passages in our presentation, that audience members talked of how authentic the data were. Indeed. The passages were written by young women. They are not made up and they do reflect the inner reality of adolescent girls as they gave voice to themselves, their cares and their insights.

In the text that follows, we often write about the diarists and their writing as “we” and “our,” writing in the collective voice of the women whose diaries and stories we were exploring. As a reader you can be assured that when we are talking about girls and diaries it does not include me. At other points, when we write about the team and our work together, the collective voice includes me.

The Girls Diary Project: Writing Ourselves Into Being invites you to learn about the inner lives of girls, to begin to honour and understand the intense and complex passage into adulthood as it is expressed by girls themselves. One of the great skills of spiritual life is learning to be present in the moment and to pay attention. A young woman writing in a diary is practicing a form of paying attention to herself and to life around her. She needs peers, adults and friends who will join her in being attentive and support her in that process. We invite you to join us, in the hope that you, too, will catch sight of how much more is possible for girls as they become women. We hope you will hear something that alerts you to the voices and thinking of the young women you know, and inspires you to join them in testing life.

Dr. Daniel Scott

1. Introduction

Lara Gilbert, Age 14

I hope I never lose this. There are some important things written in here—at least, they're important to me. I know that in a decade or two, reading this is really going to be an experience for me. I'm looking forward to it!

When Lara Gilbert wrote the above entry, she had already been a diary keeper for half of her young life, and depended on her practice—as many of us did in adolescence. She looked forward to life on the other side of her teen years, to life as an adult, with the ability to look back—something that all of the participant researchers in the project could relate to. We dug through basements and shelves and hunted our diaries down with some reverence, and a bit of apprehension. We knew that there were important things written in the volumes that we would turn up. But we had no idea how raw and powerful the words would be, or what could be expressed at that age by average girls.

Lara did not live a whole decade after she wrote that entry. As the participant researchers of the GDP, we experienced what she had hoped to one day—to read our lives and make sense of how we wrote ourselves into being—and this changed how we as the primary researchers related to ourselves and other young women. Reading the diaries also led to an understanding about the roles that privacy and audience play in the practice of writing a diary, how the diary provides a site for establishing voice and a maturing identity, and how the diary acts as a protective self-care practice that is deserving of respect and encouragement.

Critical work rarely considers adolescent diary writers separately from adult diarists; when it does, it tends to cast girls' writing in pejorative terms. Popular writing about girls' diaries mines adolescent experience for humorous anthologies titled *Cringe* or the reading series *Mortified*, with the catchphrase, “share the shame.” We are concerned that

what is a critical developmental process for many girls is ridiculed or just plain overlooked. We want to present the rich trove of writing from the time in girls' lives when the practice of personal writing is most common. These little locked books are actually a source for understanding how a girl creates her self, unites her inner and outer experience, and guides herself into maturity and a sense of wholeness through a creative process.

Underway

After we had obtained university ethics approval, we began our next session by taking turns reading some of our excerpts to each other. Many of these readings were full of memory and emotion. The experience of sharing our entries was intense, and hard to summarize. The courage and beauty that came out of the texts astounded us. The pain evident in so many of the entries stilled us.

We were careful from the beginning to take notes and record our conversations and responses to one another's diary texts, and throughout those early stages we developed comfort and ease with one another. We realized that one of the strengths of our participatory process was that the writers of the texts could provide important clarifying details about the circumstances and context of the original writing. At times critical life events were barely described in the diaries, while things long forgotten were dwelt on in detail. In some of the diaries we read, girls developed elaborate codes and even private languages to hint at events or secrets, including abuse. Having the original writers at the table meant we had access to more of the story than what was recorded.

Because we had access to the context of the writing, we could, through our shared comments, support a process of intensive self-reflection on the original writing. Our adult commentary on adolescent experience became significant, and we began to note adult reflections as important interpretations of the original texts.

In several of our stories, 18 years of age seemed to be a critical turning point. Several of the diaries began at age nine, and few began earlier. For these reasons, we decided to consider material from the ages of nine to eighteen.

As you might imagine, it was easier to make the commitment at the first meeting to go find excerpts from our diaries than it was to actually show up to the next meeting with material in hand, ready to share with others. To find the diaries and open them up to warnings like this one from the beginning of Molly's diary introduced another level of intimidation.

Molly, Age 11

Nobody is to look at this diary at all. Not even when I die. So if you are curious and have opened this, please shut it. You may regret it if you don't. I could do something awful to you. So please, for your own sake, close this up, and put the keys where you found them. After all, a diary is supposed to be secret.

Emily, Age 14

*PRIVATE DO NOT TOUCH OR OPEN!! PROPERTY OF EMILY
KEEP OUT!! DO NOT READ!!!!*

Were we somehow violating the privacy of girls past, even if we were those girls? Some of us were anxious even at our first meeting about finding our old diaries, and finding what might be on the pages there. That anxiety produced questions: What did we write about in our diaries? What did we leave out? Emily summed up the content of her entries quite simply:

Emily, Age 15

*...writing in here is not about what you want people to see later,
it's about what you want to put down at the moment.*

What, ultimately, made us comfortable to share our personal writing at that first meeting? In a radio interview, the host asked us this question—particularly curious about how we felt comfortable sharing

these highly personal experiences with Daniel, both as a professor, and a man. The host wondered why that wasn't weird for us—so we attempted to communicate the comfort we had with each other, and with Daniel as our facilitator. Sharing these texts in adulthood was different than if we were still adolescents. We were still sensitive, but there was no risk of judgment with the group assembled. We were all respectful of the adolescent experience. We were all comfortable with who we were, and this comfort and respect together generated an enormous trust in one another, something that we considered a gift.

Our Process of Interpreting

Once we had selected passages from our own diaries, our next task was to go through the chosen excerpts and group passages that were related to a single theme. In this writing we saw glimpses of the spirituality we were seeking to discover—and so much more. We grouped several pages on the following topics that held vitality for us at the ages of 9 to 18. These were the topics that we needed space to think about.

- Death
- Solitude/Isolation
- Being young or old
- Time: the future, the past, working through things
- Creation stories/stories of life origins
- The soul
- Divinity/prayer/images of God
- Truth keeping and seeking
- Something beyond our vision/Mystery
- Body/Mind split
- Sensitivity to others' emotional states
- Future plans and coping
- Love
- Self-acceptance
- Dullness

The diaries took us into the private underground worlds where girls grappled with transformation into “suitable” adult selves, moving from the world of childhood to the early stages of adult life. We recognize that a unique blend of naïveté and insight gives the diaries an openness and unguardedness that enhances their power and authenticity. This blend leaves the texts open to a range of interpretations and readings.

Any reading of an adolescent diary represents a perspective which is imbedded in the time and place of the reader, just as the writer of the diary wrote in a unique configuration of life circumstances. Diaries are not simple texts, and the reasons for writing them are complex and varied as the girls writing them. We don't hope to offer a definitive interpretation of the diary texts, but rather to draw attention to what we think matters for girls, based on their own voices.

How did we Select the Diaries?

The girls wrote in diaries, notebooks, and on scraps of paper, and what they wrote took a variety of forms—short diary entries cataloging daily events, narratives of various lengths, poetry, longer reflections and passages of insight, sketches and various saved memorabilia. Some considered their records journals, some referred to diaries. For simplicity's sake, we chose to identify all of the writing as diaries.

First, the participant researchers began with their own diaries and personal writing—which included Victoria's letters to her mother, and Joan's and Victoria's poetry along with all the diary selections. When others learned of what we were doing and offered their own diaries, we accepted them. Our project didn't read and reject any diary—any diary that was shared with us was included. We didn't choose to share only the diaries that reflected the most dramatic experiences. The voices you'll hear through this book represent an unfiltered collection of girls' voices: many girls who weren't visibly troubled, and didn't appear to need rescuing—and others, who were legitimately at risk.

How did we Choose Excerpts for the Research?

We quote entries or parts of entries from the diaries, not any one diary as a whole. This is because we began looking for writing that reflected a girl's sense of her self and her own spirit, which led us to begin by selecting specific bits of the diaries. Our first selections were dense with aphorisms of girls' spirituality. There were almost too many to note. In the midst of what was reported as a chaotic time, the girls were writing very lucid and deep spiritual understandings, such as this expression of the interconnected fabric of life in Beatrix's diary:

Beatrix, Age 16

It's like a spider's web only so hugely three dimensional. As its pieces shifting and interlocking divide and multiply and always changing. Our earth is one small atom in somebody else's world.ⁱⁱ

As our interest broadened to girls' inner lives and identity formation, we went back to the diaries and selected still more entries from our own diaries, pulling selections that carried weight and importance for us. And after obtaining a new university ethical approval, we began to look at unpublished personal writing from ages 9-18 from other women who were willing to share their diaries with us. This new primary material broadened our perspective on the voices of young women, both supporting our existing conclusions and adding complex layers to our insights.

Some of the diaries actually had a narrative feel to them, telling the stories of lived experience – but since we selected entries and partial entries, sometimes pulling passages out from longer entries, the stories that emerged about the girls looked fragmented.

We chose passages that seemed to be efforts to create understanding with words. The work of adding words to emotion involves more thinking than just pure feeling—so the passages, and the girls,

ii Some of the entries contain spelling and grammatical errors. Unless the error impeded understanding, we have left the entries unaltered.

are not just bundles of emotions. The diary entries demonstrate thoughtfulness about emotions and feelings that suggest a reflective turn on experience. Sometimes, the lyrical passages do convey pure, raw emotion, but rendering emotion into words leads to a thought process that shows up in articulate entries. Girls were constructing self-understanding. They were giving voice to their own opinions and perspectives on paper. This expression seems to be an effort to make or shape a moral centre, to articulate values and beliefs that will shape an adult who is coming into being. There is often tension between a girl's own sense of meaning and what is important and what she sees around her.

Victoria, Age 17

*I'm at home on a Saturday night because I don't want to go to some party where the following **will** occur (like every other night): We will go to some house where everyone is sitting around a room. Some will be talking (stoned or drunk) passing around joints, etc. There **will** be a corner where the TV is on and around 3-5 guys will be playing on the Nintendo. There will be 2-4 girls in the bathroom checking their makeup (for the 3rd time that hour). There will be some people outside making fools of themselves – falling over or throwing up in the bushes. There **will** most likely be cocaine at this certain party tonight. Then when everyone gets bored – finally – they will stumble out of the house at 2am and drive home drunk or stoned on various types of drugs.*

I despise this behaviour. I'd rather get straight A's.

To start with emotion, then put that emotion into words, and then to consider those words on the page to come to a kind of understanding about her life seemed to be the process that the diarists used to make sense of themselves and their world as best they could in the complex contexts in which they lived—and these are the sort of entries we chose.

We should also note here that we use some diary entries multiple times in this book. Many of the entries have layers of meaning, and we considered them from different angles. An entry that demonstrates something about a girl's perceived audience may also say something profound about how girls create their own spiritual truths. Rather than repetition, reconsidering these entries illuminates the meaning in the girls' writing, in all its variety and depth.

Through the "Chatter" to the Really Real

*"There are two general ways the mind operates. One is a kind of self-contained chatter in which we mentally process events, recycle the past, and anticipate the future. The other is a present-moment awareness in which we feel in the flow"*²

Every diary contained what we affectionately called "chatter," casual reporting of daily events, social encounters, all written in a casual tone. Chatter covered who hooked up and who broke up, what happened at school that day, what the plans were for the weekend, and other details of lived experience. Some diaries were more focused on this content than on reflective writing. And initially, our selections excluded this content. But aside from the poetry, every diary and letter contained this chatter to some degree, so we became curious about how to consider this content, and posed the following questions to ourselves:

- What is the meaning of these sometimes meticulous accounts of daily life?
- Are they attempts to leave traces?
- What is the significance of a daily practice of record keeping for some girls?
- Does that chatter actually affect or preclude self-reflection?
- Is it enough for some girl diarists to keep a record like this?

At least one diary we read contained solely this type of content—a five-year dated book that allotted just a couple of lines to each day.

The pure act of chatter writing does seem to claim that daily events do matter and do mean something, and are worthy of being noted. Why, otherwise, would a girl write them down?

In the following entry, Emily engages in “chatter” with a tone we can so clearly imagine her using to update a friend after the weekend.

Emily, Age 14

I've found a new position to write to you in – on the can. Let me see what dull, boring things can I tell you about my life. Wellllllll. I had a birthday party at Mom's on Friday. I had Ben, Laura, Tonie, Paul, Cecelia, Danielle, Caron and Brad. It was a weird party. They all came over and we bounced on the trampoline, played pool, badminton, Mario Brothers, etc. and then had dinner. After dinner we had a scavenger hunt where you have an hour to go around to houses and trade a pencil for the biggest or weirdest thing they have in their garage.

Victoria (as an adult) reflected that as a diarist, she needed to get “through the chatter to the really-real,” a feeling with which we all sympathized. Whether we were engaged in a long conversation with a friend, or writing a letter or diary entry, this was a process we went through. So these passages that wound their way around to more significant content also became part of our selection of entries.

Victoria, Age 17

I guess getting 90% on my social studies essay should be more exciting than I'm taking it right now, right? Well, I'm pretty excited getting the highest mark in all of my teacher's grade 12 classes. Most of all I'm excited about him saying congratulations when he handed back the essays.

*I've been at my friend's place for a week now. So many things have happened. I haven't cried since Friday afternoon so I'm proud of that. I left for many reasons. Some having to do with mom and the rest me. Many people have said that it is unfair of me to put my family in this situation. Many have said I **should***

*be at home or I **should** go home. Well, I probably **should** go home and I **should** be at home but sometimes life isn't the way it **should** be. For instance, I **should** have a father but I don't. I am being selfish but I think it is for a good cause. I'm leaving home cause I would like to be happy. Many people don't agree with me.*

I saw my counsellor on Friday. She said I shouldn't go home 'till mom, me and her talk things over. She saw mom today. Just them by themselves. It's better that way so she can sort of get to know her.

Right now I don't know what I want. All I know is that something has to change in our family before I go back. I have an idea of what but it doesn't seem possible. I'm a good daughter. I drive once in a while. I clean. I do my homework. I study. I get straight A's. I don't get wasted every weekend. I don't drive recklessly. Why does everyone take advantage of the fact that I'm strong and I won't get mad at them? I don't want to be controlled by them. It has to stop.

Who were the Participant Researchers?

At the beginning, the project included six women, with our adolescent diary material covering four decades, from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. The volume of writing that each could find varied, as did the writing styles. Some kept diaries for a time, moving on to poetry, music, or other creative outlets. All but one identified as introverted rather than extroverted. All but one were very comfortable with written language.

The following briefly profiles each diarist-researcher from the original project group.

Beatrix

"Fuck anyone who thinks they know how I feel." (Age 16)

Beatrix raised herself through a high-risk adolescence. Parent figures being largely absent, she was left to navigate a social world with her peers that revolved around drug use. Her "obsessive" diary writing was

what, she says, kept her alive. She dragged three volumes of her diary from beneath a sack of rotting potatoes in her father's basement, and still searches for the other volumes.

Dorothy

"...don't let them fit you into their filing box – keep changing as you feel, retain the control over your life and never, ever give unto anyone that one thing or you are lost, dead." (Age 15)

Dorothy painted as well as wrote, and gradually the visual world became the dominant form for her expression. She grew up in the context of a privileged all-girls school. Dorothy was part of the project for a short period of time and left after the sudden death of her husband. She contributed a selection of entries that reflected the beginnings of dreams she realized in later life—painting and travelling. Her writing reflects a girl who was not overwhelmed by the questions of her youth, but who hung on to them, stripping away protocols and etiquette to get at what was really meaningful.

Joan

*In the bright class
of grade one, we sit.
In rows of hard plastic
chairs, and cold desks.
They teach us kat
is c-a-t. And 1 + 1
is 2. Sing us
the alphabet song.
Now we know
our A B Cs
But they don't teach us
what horny is.
Leave us wondering
if it's some kind of rhino.
What is sex
to a six year old?*

Joan primarily wrote poetry because she wanted—and needed—response to her thinking. She was an extrovert who liked to process in the midst of others and found poetry gave her a social milieu and immediate response when she read it to friends. Joan’s family had experienced tragedy in the death of her brother. She had grown up in a Catholic home, and was still a practicing Catholic. She married and moved elsewhere in Canada after the first year of our GDP work together.

Mary

“In five days I will be out of sucky grade seven. Well right now I’m going out with Dean Gibson. My brother Matt has moved out of the house because of an argument with my mom. But he is living in a beautiful home and I’m happy for him.” (Age 13)

Mary hid her “bad thoughts” in the back of her diary. She grew up with English as a second language, struggling to find her voice in a family context that controlled and abused. She wrote for a time until the privacy of her diary was violated and she turned to music. Her battle with bulimia along with her reflection on diary writing gave her a new perspective on self-destructive behaviour. Her writing reflects a frank and concise expression of what was going on in her world on a day-to-day basis.

Molly

“Strange things have been happening around here, lately. Mom starts crying, says things like “I’ve given up hope,” “I wish I could just drive over a cliff.” Dad is the same. As usual. Withdrawn. We went out for a tea yesterday, dad and I, at the top of Eaton’s. The new building they’re building there blocks out the pretty view we used to have. I remember feeding the seagulls bits of my lunch through those windows, and looking at that view.” (Age 15)

Molly grew up an only child of parents who suffered from depression. Her diaries reflect a struggle with her own mood and a search for her self and for meaning in the context of organized religion and analysis

of her own experiences. When the project began, Molly knew where each of her seven volumes was kept—on a bookshelf along with categorized appendices.

Victoria

“Oh shit, I hear [my mom’s] car. What am I going to say. Maybe I should fake sleep, like yesterday. I guess I shouldn’t. Please daddy make her go away. Make her not make me feel like shit on top of everything else. I can’t deal with it.” (Age 16)

Victoria grew up in an upper middle class neighbourhood surrounded by natural beauty and wealthy peers. Her writing reveals a life that was marked with grief from the early and shattering loss of her father, to whom she addressed her writing—in journals and poems.

The Broader Pool of Diarists

The GDP was fortunate to be given unpublished diaries from a number of other women, some of which contained multiple volumes. The following profiles introduce diarists who contributed a significant volume of diary writing to the project and whose writing we used more extensively.

Lara Gilbert

Maybe when I am older, like 30 or 40, I will find this diary, and I will realize that I wrote that, and that even though I am much older, I am still the same person. Sometimes when I look at photographs of me when I was like 2 or 3 years old, I think it’s weird that it’s the same person, me.³ (Age 10)

Lara is the only girl for whom we are not using a pseudonym. Her diaries came to us through her mother, who was entrusted with them after Lara’s death by suicide. Lara was a serious girl, an excellent student who grew up in the context of a family of struggling artists and writers in East Vancouver. Lara wrote against the descent of a clinical

depression and the revelation of years of sexual abuse. Selections from her 3,000 pages of diaries are published in *I Might Be Nothing: Journal Writing by Lara Gilbert*, published in 2004. The Girls' Diary Project also read and considered Lara's unpublished excerpts from the period of her life before the time covered by her published entries.

Emily

"I got the idea from a book I was reading about Emily of New Moon. I've tried writing a diary many times before but never succeeded. This time I vow I will finish it. My diary will have lots of poetry in it, also from Emily! Hope we'll be good friends! Love Emily." (Age 13)

Emily contributed a three-volume journal that begins soon after her parents split up and engaged in custody battles. She wrote through a loneliness that drove her from relationship to relationship, contributing a fascinating narrative of a girl seeking herself through sexual and relational experience.

The voices of these girls are joined over the course of the book by many others. They include contributed diaries that we quote from occasionally: those belonging to Leslie, who began writing at the age of ten in what she called her "Thought Book;" Raven, who began writing at thirteen and struggled with self-harming; Carla, who was hospitalized for a suicide attempt; Zowie, who recorded self-harming and her emerging sexuality in her diary; Claire Minkley, who was born with multiple disabilities, and who used a letter board to compose her poems and prayers that were published by her family following her early death; and Jen, who kept her diary entirely in verse.

Each diarist lived a different life, and through all the diaries we saw a spectrum of experiences of difficulty. Each girl seemed to take her own particular route out into adulthood—but the more we read, the more we were struck by similarities in all of the journeys. One of the qualities that many of the diarists shared was a sense that they were different or did not fit in. This is a common experience for younger adolescents for

whom belonging and social acceptance is a major concern. The diary writers were compelled to put into words their sense of marginality, or disgust with peers, family or the larger world.

Initially, we speculated that diary writing might be a practice more limited to middle class, white girls. In terms of culture, the research team members come from middle class and working class Canadian families in rural, suburban and urban environments. We are all white with Euro-cultural backgrounds. One has a white South African cultural heritage. English is a first language for all but one of us, and we all have some university education: writing, books and learning are significant in all our lives. But as our project opened up and we received unpublished material and read published material from women of different racial backgrounds, we recognized that “who writes” includes girls all over the world.

Our diary study also looked at published diaries from a range of cultural settings and historical periods, often from girls writing in contexts of difficulty. Among them, Sheila Allen,⁴ a woman of mixed English and Malaysian descent, lived with continual threat of inspection or seizure in a Japanese internment camp where writing supplies were very hard to find. Lack of opportunity in impoverished, rural China led Ma Yan to write almost exclusively about the challenges she faced in continuing with her education.⁵ Nina Lugovskaya’s frustration with the creeping oppression of Stalinist Moscow drove her writing, and led to her imprisonment when her diaries were seized by the Secret Police and eventually published when KGB files were opened in the 1990s.⁶ Charlotte Forten, an African American girl, wrote about racism during the American Civil War era.⁷ Eva Heyman’s diary reported a rising genocide and finally her entrapment in a Jewish ghetto by the Nazis.⁸ In stark contrast stand the vain and romantic diaries of Maria Bashkirtseff,⁹ a Russian émigré in the south of France who wrote copiously about the minutiae of her social relationships and status. Also included: Maggie Owen Wadelton, born in Ireland at the turn of the century¹⁰; Karen Horney, a German girl who wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, and who grew up to become a well-

known psychoanalyst¹¹; and Selma Lagerlof, the Swedish girl who grew up to be the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.¹²

Anne Frank wrote in unique circumstances. The project chose not to include entries by Anne, but her voice, so often treated as exceptional, may be more common than has been recognized. She lived under threat and confinement, had ample access to writing materials and lots of time. Her diaries are lengthy and rich in exploration and observations. The insights and life questions raised by Anne are echoed in many of the unpublished diaries we have seen, as well as other published ones.

Again, no outside definition of “who writes” emerges. We have to look at what the girls say about themselves in the diaries, and what the adult women reflect about themselves as girls, to answer this question. The diaries from around the world showed surprising similarities in themes and raised similar questions. One conclusion we could easily come to—even when the girl’s environment shaped her style differently, there was clearly a necessity to write.

Lara G., Age 11

*I depend on it. I need it to help me get through my life.*¹³

Anaïs Nin, Age 12

*Why am I not like everyone else? In glancing at random over the lines written in this notebook, I said to myself: Yes, those are my thoughts, but they are the opposite of other people’s. Am I odd? Do people look at me as someone strange? ...When I read and reread these pages, I am glad to be able to say: this is a special story. What does it matter if nobody understands it. Am I writing for other people? No. I write for me, for myself. My voice is unknown. What joy if I am looked down on. My treasure will then belong only to me.*¹⁴

Beatrix, Age 16

Why am I so old and still so young. Why do I know this much and yet still lack the most necessary answers. I hate it. I would never change it, I just hate it.

Writings about Diaries

We also found a number of journal articles about diaries. In looking at context, we will address what has been said before by those who have taken a look at girls' expression of their inner lives, writers such as Cinthia Gannet,¹⁵ Carol Gilligan,¹⁶ Mary Pipher,¹⁷ Rosalind Wiseman¹⁸, and Barbara Crowther.¹⁹

While we were informed by the work of these authors, we did not start out by reading material written *about* diaries. We came to our own conclusions as we read and reflected on the girls' original diary material. And when we began reading literature about adolescent inner lives and about diary writing, we did not alter our conclusions. In fact, in many places we found our conclusions confirmed—and in others, expanded, or given a new perspective.

There are many possible interpretations of this material. In the chapters to come, we will report on what the Girls' Diary Project found—that diary writing is a spiritual practice for adolescent girls that reflects their descent and re-emergence into the world. Diaries are a self-directed rite of passage in a culture that does not offer a meaningful way to transition from childhood to adulthood. As they write, girls make a mark or leave a trace in the face of death and vanishing. They intuit their own spirituality. They investigate their connection or disconnection with others. They come to an understanding of the necessity of self-care during the passage to adulthood, and they take up diary writing as their own strategy to care for themselves.

2. Context

How often do Girls Take up the Practice?

During the project, the researchers were surprised at the number of times they would bring up the topic of diary writing with a woman, and hear that she too kept a diary. Sometimes she still had a diary from her youth, or volumes of diaries, or at least knew where they were located. Some women said they still kept up the practice, and some acknowledged that keeping a diary was their key to growing up. For most, that was in their late childhood and adolescence, a period between the ages of nine and eighteen. One woman started her diary in her early twenties. She told the researchers about her relatively calm adolescence, and a period of growth that didn't begin until she began travelling after high school. She talked about her journal of her travels, when she did "so much growing up in there." But more often than not, starting a discussion about diaries with a woman revealed that she kept a diary as a young adult or adolescent, or that she tried to—and not because anyone told her to do so at the time. It was a practice taken up out of a need in the moment, and often kept secret. At one of our conference presentations, an academic claimed that her daughter did not keep a diary. Her daughter arrived to visit the next day, and said in complete astonishment to her mother: "Of course I did Mom. We all did. All the girls."

Girls' diary writing is widespread, and so similar in both process and content. In most cases, it begins without any prescription from adults. For these reasons, we concluded the practice is a self-selected ritual, one that records an internal journey that is common to girls wherever they live, however they live—a kind of rite of passage, which we will explore later in Chapter Eleven.

What Motivates Girls to take up the Practice?

The first thing we noticed was that the diarists who wrote frequently were comfortable in their literacy. They were readers, and some were, or became, creative writers. In our context of the academy, of course all our first group were in, or had been in, post-secondary education, and could write. Today's very literate girls spend a good deal of time writing informally online—blogging, emailing, and texting—the diarists of the GDP had written in the period from the 1960s to the late 1990s, so their informal writing largely consisted of handwritten correspondence in the form of notes to other girls in class, letters to friends and pen pals, and even letters to their mother, in one case—in addition to handwritten diary keeping.

Beatrix wrote a novel about her best friend. Lara started autobiographical novels. Emily, Leslie, Dorothy, Jennifer, Lara, Victoria, and others included poems in their diaries and letters. After devouring pulp novels propped behind binders or tucked under her desk during Eighth Grade classes, Molly tried her own hand at writing novels. Another woman from the broader pool said she spent long days in trees, just reading. She said that getting absorbed into the stories of characters who lived lives unlike her own was her spiritual practice as a child and teen.

For those of us who engaged with text one way or another outside of what was prescribed in school, writing was the next place to take our emotions and make sense of them. It was often the preferred way to express them—and ultimately, to expend them and feel calm—something that motivated us to take up the practice of diary writing for a regular experience of meaning—making and altering our inner states.

The comfort some girls have with narrative as a form of expression also acted as motivation to become diarists. The girls who chose writing as their preferred form of emotional and reflective expression

were readers. The diarists—not just in the primary group, but also others—reported that curling up with a book away from the world was a frequent pastime. It was a natural transition from reading narrative to writing the story of her life—to see where she fit in with the other characters in her own life, and to discover what her role was. The expression of her own story, in her own voice in her diary, gave her a sense of cohesion. In some diaries we read, we could see the connections and causality of story emerge as we read, chronologically, entries about each other's and our own lives. And we concluded that seeing our lives as a narrative, with a cast of familiar characters, was reassuring, at least—healing, at best. It was another way to make sense of our existence.

This attempt to make meaning of experience is perhaps the prime motivation for diary writing. And yet some girls, like Marnie—the author of the 5-year diary—were motivated just to write the happenings of her day. Of course, the nature of her book encouraged this kind of log, to report events without room for comment on them. And yet, Marnie included a small code in her diary that added another layer. At the back of her book she explained that certain passages had marks on them to indicate hidden meanings in what appears to be just a daily log. These were cues to her not to forget, and probably her safest way to mark something that no one else could discern. Even her condensed form of diary keeping was meaning making—making daily events valued and laden with messages.

For some girls, entries that read like reportage of events without any internal reflection, helped to create a narrative that helped her to see herself as a character, to make sense of her “story” for herself. Beatrix affirmed this was a reason for her prolific entries that chronicled parties and what her friends did each day. These entries were also a way to create for herself the image of her life as cool, (or what she thought was “cool” at the time.) For other girls, the record of daily happenings served to fill up the space with the external life, and squeeze out the personal—which may have been a conscious decision when the personal became too painful or too confusing to

integrate with the rest of her life. In that case, the surface-skimming entries were a type of self-protection.

A diary also provides a site for various forms of reflexivity. Events and the feelings that arise from them can be externalized onto the pages of the diary. A little distance is achieved from some of personal pain. Some sense can be made; the words on the page make the events *mean* something other than how she feels about them. Even the daily reportage gives experiences value and allows for events to be reconsidered, in the writing and later on in re-reading.

Perhaps as well as making meaning there is an attempt in diary writing to make our lives matter. Even when what we did was of little consequence, to ourselves or those around us, marking down what we did helps the days pass with a little more significance. The diaries say: *I do matter and here is the evidence – I have been written about and it matters.* And *matter*ing is a big piece of adolescent survival.

A motivator for many of the diarists was missing a close friend with whom they could share and explore their emotions, and thoughts about life in general. These girls missed long heart-to-heart talks and their diaries and the imaginary audience who was listening as they wrote became a substitute companion.

Leslie, Age 18

Once again I long for someone to really communicate with. I don't really want to get into a relationship again but just a deep understanding. Right now I just feel emotionally I don't know how I feel anymore. I've got to get my mind together and get organized. The future scares me but I'm determined to make the best of it...

Lara G., Age 14

*...At the beginning of each class we take 5-10 minutes to write in our "journals." This morning, feeling spiteful, I wrote partly in Kawiakee,ⁱⁱⁱ telling of my love affairs and swearing a bit. You see, at the end of the 6 weeks, our student teacher, Mrs. Kay, will read our journals (ugh). That completely distorts the true meaning of a journal: to illustrate your inmost and utmost feelings; only by reading what someone has written, from the heart, can you tell that person's character, I mean **real, true** character which is too private for others. This is, of course, my opinion, and it will probably be constantly changing. Anyway, I got guilty so I re-wrote today's entry in the journal, making it short & sweet and ever so innocent.... you, diary, are the only one I can confide in, the only one I can express without embarrassment my loves and fears and all those wretched problems of life. I have no friend dear enough to say what I say in here... Being a teenager was harder than I thought, oh, so much harder... it's true what they say; it really does feel as if the weight of the world is crashing down on you.*

Diarists may be motivated by loneliness or feeling like they need a recipient for their heartfelt thoughts. Some may feel on one level, as Molly did, that they are okay with their own company—even when they are being critical of themselves. For others, the diary writing is a way to create some distance between the experience and the self. This distance may contribute, in time, to a girl's capacity to manage her own experience and feel good about herself and her choices.

Safety and support for the practice of diary writing is another crucial motivator. It stands to reason that if a girl feels her diary is at risk of being read, she cannot treat it as a safe place to explore her inner life. Likewise, if the practice of keeping a diary is derided or otherwise discouraged, either by family or peers, a girl cannot maintain the

iii Kawiakee is the secret language Lara Gilbert developed, which she used to encode portions of her diary.

practice. But when diary keeping is supported or viewed as a worthwhile activity, either by peers or her family, this itself builds motivation to take up the practice.

Victoria said that her mother supported her writing, to the extent that her mother would tell her to “go write it down,” when Victoria was visibly upset. She was given a diary, and so was Molly. Emily was given her first diary at 12. Pretty, hardbound books are frequently given as gifts to young girls—even now, when most would assume that young girls would be taking up the practice digitally. The popularity of Moleskine books among youth is also a testament to the continued practice of keeping handwritten books of personal writing in the digital age. There is something important about the ability to give this tangible object to a girl, too. One can’t make a gift of a Blogger account, but handing a girl a blank book is itself a way of saying “your life matters,” and has the potential to motivate an exploration that might not otherwise be taken up by the girl, without the dedicated space to do so.

Do Girls who Write Have one Strong Characteristic in Common?

We mentioned in the first chapter that it is a common experience for younger adolescents to feel as though they do not fit in. Girls who felt free to be who they were, with their peers, their family – it might be that these girls did not need the outlet of the diary. But feeling like they could not be who they wanted motivated some girls to keep diaries.

Nina Lugovskaya, 14 years

I crave emotional experiences, strong moral and emotional experiences that can make the soul work and struggle. I am beginning to live morally. I find these emotional experiences in many different things: in music, in the beauty of nature and of people, in life- not in the life that I and many others live, but in life in the full sense, in the sense of life’s struggle and sufferings, which are again based on emotional experiences.

Molly had a sense of not fitting with her peers, and wrote about daily “battles” to fit in. And even Beatrix, who lived in an underground culture with other youth and a complete absence of parents, living every day with a group of friends, all of them living the same lifestyle—felt she still didn’t fit with her peers, and had to write to process that.

Beatrix, Age 16

I don't belong. I don't believe they are brewing coffe again while I see walls breathing with the ease of memory. I don't know how to put myself. Should I scream or whisper. Should I eat or starve. It doesn't really matter. Nobody knows the trouble I've been.

Beatrix, Age 16

I mean nothing is quite right. People are strange and I don't know how to deal with their trips. I just feel like saying fuck you world and hiding in a cave with a sheet of acid. I mean it. I love someone so much that nothing else matters. I feel like what's the use of looking good if he's not here to appreciate. What's the use of even getting out of bed in the morning. I feel like being really depressed. Just being nobody for awhile. Not have to try and solve the worlds problems every time I step out my door. Or is it just my imagination. Maybe life is just my image. Sometimes I think I am the only sane person on this planet.

Girls who have a sense of fitting in, as Maria Bashkirtseff did, don’t need a space for reflection and processing, and perhaps only write daily logs. But girls who feel set apart—either from carrying grief, loss, or a need to manage what they perceive as their weaknesses, or feeling compelled to self-harm in order to manage pain—these girls require a place to process their discomfort, whose source is not fitting in with the people and context around her. Those girls are motivated by the lifeline the diaries provide.

Anaïs N., Age 13

My soul belongs to you, Oh! mute companion of my life, who keeps all my tears enclosed in your humble destiny.²⁰

Other Writing about Adolescent Diary Writing

We discovered that many women wrote, and honoured the process of secret and personal writing, no matter what their adolescent context was. Because so many women knew what we were talking about when we spoke about the importance of diary writing for adolescent girls, we assumed that we would find a whole literature about adolescent diary writing, and that we would venture there next—to broaden our reading beyond the diaries themselves to analysis and commentary about diary writing. But while we found plenty of literature about adult diaries, we found there was very little being written *about* adolescent diary writing.

If this is such a large cultural practice, why has next to nothing been written about adolescent diary writing? In the one study we could find that considered exclusively adolescent girls' writing, the author herself noted the lack.²¹

I have found very little contemporary academic work in either cultural or psychological studies that treats child diarists separately from adult diarists. Most references to diaries are made in the context of the historical silencing of women's voices, or they are discussed as a form of autobiography. I have found only one study that considers diaries by authors as young as 12 (Sosin, 1983, an article that contains a full review of previous relevant literature). Educational research (e.g., Gilbert & Taylor, 1991) has studied teacher-led diary projects, but such a context necessarily produces a rather different kind of writing.

Why Girls Only? What about Boys and Personal Writing?

There seems to be a general bias in literate cultures to encourage or support girls and young women to take up diary writing. Very early on in our study, we realized how often young girls had been given diaries or journals by family or friends as presents. We have also given diaries to daughters, nieces and other girls we know. This doesn't happen with boys—or at least not with the same frequency.

Studies confirm that girls have quicker language acquisition, so it might be that girls are more apt to start this kind of “recreational” writing, writing that is not for school. But still, boys do have language acquisition, even if later. So why do they not take up the practice with the same frequency?

One team member gave a diary to her son, and as far as she knows he has never written in it. But we suspect boys are engaging in the same process different textual media. That same son contributed his reflection on writing of a different sort:

Joffrey, Age 12

A long time ago, about 6 months or so. I had this overpowering fear about SARS diseases and death. It lasted for about 2 months and i thought I must be depressed. Then I started sketching graffiti. Everything changed. I felt so much better and felt like I had nothing to worry about. (I always start worrying right before bed. . .) Then when I moved to my new house, on Saward Ave I felt even better. I kept sketching graffiti, and kept feeling better and kept getting better at graffiti. Graffiti totally saved my life, but then it didn't. I started actually getting really interested in it and felt like I wanted to do it for real about 3 days before we moved to Banker Street. Then last weekend I did it on the elementary school and down by the breakwater with spray paint. Not a good choice. Somehow my school (middle school) found out that I did it on the elementary school. I had to talk to the police

and they even had photographs of the stuff me and my friend, Pete, had done. Pete's tag was Miffed and mine was Twink. Now I'm suspended for 3 days and so is my best friend, Pete. I still have a love for graffiti and art, but I'm definitely never doing it for real anywhere again. This is a true story.

So why do girls have a desire to fill those lined notebooks, and not boys? Are boys reflecting in different ways? In our explorations, we found many more boys writing song lyrics and poetry, but we were aware of only a few male adolescent diarists; and none who volunteered to share their writing. Perhaps, as Jane Dupree Begos²² wrote in her review of published adolescent diarists, girls see writing as an expressive medium in a way that boys don't—that boys look at writing as a tool for a job—but even this belies the fact that expressing oneself is a job that has to be done. Some boys do keep journals. We speculate that a Boys' Diary Project would not be a fruitless endeavor, especially if coupled with other forms of boys' personal writing, including poetry and song lyrics.

Where, What, and How: the Tools and Process of Practice

The diarists sought out whatever they needed to experience in order to proceed in their development—some of the girls in the project sought out religious experiences, some sought out sexual experiences and relationships, some sought out drugs—but more importantly, they all processed experiences in personal writing. All of the diarists felt that they must stop in their activity to comment. Some wrote in a diary with the devotion a contemplative brings to meditation. These girls prioritized their diary writing, and prioritized a certain kind of writing.

Emily, Age 12

I've decided to take you with me wherever I go so right now I'm writing at dad's. I'm supposed to be doing homework right now but this is much more interesting...

Molly, Age 16

[I intended] to be completely and utterly open in this diary, and show every thought that had crossed my mind in it, however small, so I would remember what I was like when I was growing up. I can't recall every blissful or negative feeling I've had over the span of time... but I will try to cover the basics... So, I will now begin.

I am sitting in the indoor chapel at the moment, supposed to be doing devotions, but instead I am journaling...

Lara, G. Age 12

I guess I sort of feel sorry for myself. I read somewhere that "we can not afford the luxury of self-pity", but I just can't help it. Oh dear, I wasn't supposed to put anything private or emotional in here, but, oh well. Who cares.²³

Naming the diary is another practice we noticed. Emily made up a name for her diary, which she took from the backwards spelling of the name of a boy—the first object of her affections who eventually becomes her boyfriend.

Molly had read Anne Frank's diary at 13, and briefly named her diary:

Molly, Age 14

Dear Kitty:

Hello, I just got this diary today, so it explains why I haven't written in the first 27 pages. I hope that you'll be my very best confidant, and instead of "DIARY" I'll christen you "Kitty" after Anne Frank's diary. A lot of people think I'm a lot like her. Maybe I am.

On Chatter

Earlier we introduced the type of entries we classified as “chatter.” Chatter is an important part of the process of diary writing, and to adequately set the context for this research, we need to address this important part of the process in more detail. Chatter provided a dumping ground for the concerns of the day, clearing space for thoughts and perceptions that may not have been tied to the girl’s immediate context. Sometimes chatter preceded deeper content as a distinct section; at other times, a place was reached where both forms were accessible and within the chatter, more meaningful reflections emerged. It was also a way of getting started, warming up to get to the bigger thoughts. This entry from an eleven-year old Molly catalogued surface details, which seems to clear the way for something more important that she wanted to say about her relationship with a friend.

Molly, Age 11

So it is May Day and 19 more days till my birthday. Today I went to [my dog] Jasper’s class. It was a little boring, but I loved the playground outside. Tonite I didn’t do my Socials, but don’t tell anybody. It doesn’t have to be done by Friday anyway. [Shelly] won the election but I came in second. We had to sing for two hours as loud as we could today and I practically fainted. Julie has her old boyfriend back. Sometimes I hate Barbara. She won’t admit when she’s wrong.

Mary, Age 14

School is out, no more exams. I have a boyfriend (sort of) and I may have a job. Dennis went to Vancouver last week, he came back yesterday (Friday) but I was out all day so I didn’t get to talk to him. I think Philip must have gotten the point that I don’t like him. The only thing holding me and Dennis back is Philip. It makes me so mad!! But I don’t care, nothing is going to hold us back for getting together. For my birthday I got three pictures of Michael Jackson and a button from Dennis. I got a book and

drawing of Michael Jackson. Also a t-shirt, earrings and fifty dollars. I still love Michael but I sure do like Dennis. It seems like Michael brings me good luck. Because after Dennis gave me that Michael Jackson book I was looking at this picture of Michael and I said I bet yah he put a note or that drawing he drew into this book. And I said to Michael. Please let him have and I got this feeling like I get when I know something good or bad (mostly good) is going to happen and then on the phone that night Dennis asked whether or not I got the picture he drew in my book! Also God always brings me luck. Thank you God.

Chatter writing was a warm-up. We came home from school or a party wrapped up in the emotions and reactions of the day, and needed to chronicle the details as a way to worm into something deeper. Diary writing brought girls to a place where they could relieve their minds of the social chatter, and be in a frame of mind that the busy world did not permit. One girl reflected on that process in her life:

Victoria, AR

Writing was liberating. I freed my mind of the chaos it felt. I could organize my thoughts while keeping a record of my life. There were no limits of what I could write. The journal was an open discussion of anything that came to mind, and sometimes I surprised myself with what I was thinking underneath all of those random thoughts, the social chatter, and short but sweet insights. It would take me from a place of confusion, of an overwhelming environment, of thoughts going around in circles.

Victoria's diary reflects her day-to-day experience alongside her grief at the loss of her father. As a girl bent on high grades, her entries were often fraught with a good deal of anxiety and intensity about school. But this content fluctuates with quieter inner reflection within the same entries.

Victoria, Age 16

I just want people to say – no matter what grades you get (whether it be an A or a C-), no matter how you look, no matter if you have a job or not, 'I still love you and you're the most important thing in the world to me.' And I want someone to say that without saying – 'but you should try harder at school, and you should try to get a job, and you should try out for the musical.' Cause maybe if they just say that I'm special no matter what (without saying 'but') then maybe in time I will do better at school, and maybe I will get a job, and maybe I will try out for the musical.

Where to Write?

The question of *where* to write was a valid one for the diarists in the project, since all wrote in notebooks that could be taken anywhere. Some girls carried the diary with them everywhere they went—Beatrix reported carrying her diary with her everywhere once she left home, but that prior to that, she kept the diary in her bedroom and primarily wrote there. Other girls in the project reported that they too kept their diaries in their bedrooms, and wrote before bed, or just generally in the privacy of their own rooms, sometimes beginning to take the diaries with them as they grew older, writing at other times of day. Some girls included a place as well as a time and date when they began an entry, and some included mention of their location in the midst of an entry, especially if the location provided some necessary context for the entry: *I'm at my dad's house right now and I'm not happy, or I'm at summer camp, and this is what's happening...* Selma Lagerlof²⁴ faithfully noted the location for each of her entries: "On the train from Kil to Laxå," "In the parlour at Uncle Oriel's," and "Written by Ulla's small lamp," and these set context for her entries.

Some girls reported not feeling their diaries were safe if "left alone," preferring to carry their diary with them. Polish holocaust survivor and adolescent diarist Danuta Maczka reports that it was luck that made her diary survive the war. "The British made us all walk through disinfection spray - and while we were in there, they burnt all our

things. Like my school blazer. What was really lucky was that I took my diary and my drawing book into the disinfection tent - so they came out with me."²⁵

We asked ourselves even at the beginning about the particular privilege of writing. We were all grateful for the privilege of literacy, for ample supplies – the physical objects of pen and paper, for a safe space and enough time to write our thoughts. Later in our research, we come across a girl who went to all ends to obtain paper and pen for the purpose.

Ma Yan, Age 14

This afternoon when I want to start writing in my diary, I can't find my pen. I ask my brothers. No, they haven't seen it. I look for it in the place where I was doing my writing yesterday, and it isn't there either. I ask my mother. She says that yesterday she noticed that I had left my pen and notebook on the bed and she was worried they'd get lost, so she put them away in the drawer. But my pen isn't there. I'm distraught.

You're probably going to start laughing. 'A pen. What a little thing to get so distressed about!'

If only you knew the trouble I had to take to get that pen. I saved up my pocket money for two weeks. Some of my comrades have two or three pens, but I had none and I couldn't resist buying one.

The difficulties I faced in getting this pen are a mirror of all my other problems. My mother had given me some money with which to buy bread. For days, I had eaten only yellow rice. I preferred going hungry and saving so I could buy the pen. How I suffered for that pen!

....But my dear old pen gave me a sense of power. It made me understand the meaning of a difficult life or a happy life. Every time I see the pen, it's as if I were seeing my mother. It's as if she were encouraging me to work hard and make it into the girl's senior school.²⁶

Ma Yan's experience, and the circumstances of other writers in war settings, in prison camps, in ghettos made us appreciate the gift of private space for expression—however it's offered—whether with concrete materials, or the privacy and time afforded a girl to explore her own voice.

Breaking Assumptions

When the team started out, they wondered if they would remember what was inside their own minds when they were thirteen. They dug through basements and shelves and hunted diaries down with some reverence, and a bit of apprehension. But no one had an idea how raw and powerful the words would be, or what could be expressed at that age, by average girls—or the memories the words would evoke.

Some women, when asked if they kept a diary in their youth, would say “but it was all about boys, nothing in it worth keeping.” But this attitude belied what really goes on in diaries. Women do initially roll their eyes, talk about how awful they were as teenagers, how their pages are full of unrequited crushes. And then they admit that yes, they still have their diaries, after all these years. They confess they never could get rid of them. Maybe there was something there aside from all the talk about her crushes? And maybe she was learning something that mattered through the crush talk? We were primarily interested in what spoke about the girls' spiritual identities, but we chose to consider quotes about the every day, about crushes, about friendships. A wide variety of writing taught us what we now know.

We noticed several important things while reading these first entries that tied all of the diary writers together. Repeated in all of the diaries was a desire to be taken seriously. Periods of high anxiety and intensity fluctuated around ongoing life matters, the day to day. The diaries seemed to express that survival was at stake: it may have been psychic or emotional, spiritual or occasionally physical.

In *Gender and the Journal*, Cinthia Gannet writes about women's diaries. She makes note of her own beginnings as a diarist, and quotes from her first volume, a passage that talks about what she'll wear to school and what a boy is giving her, and how she's going to wear her hair, and says the entries are "exactly what one would expect from a thirteen year old girl."²⁷

But what we found in the diaries was exactly *not* what you would expect from a thirteen-year old girl. We found reflection of a depth and maturity in so many diaries, that we had to shift our expectations of thirteen-year old girls, and in some cases younger girls as well. In fact, the process of reading the diaries was a process of stripping away the notions we held about what it is like to be a girl. We had to keep looking at the age of the entries we were reading, to remind ourselves that these were not women writing these profound insights, but girls. And not just girls with a particular background that made them predisposed to writing that kind of reflection. They were girls living in a variety of contexts, many of them in chaos, at risk, or with severe challenges. And in the midst of their chaos – the girls' context – they wrote very lucid and deep spiritual understandings, like Beatrix's perspective on the universe, or the reflection in the writings of Claire Minkley:

Claire M., Age 10

*...at night you were alone with your thoughts. I thought about all sorts of things. How I had come to have to make such hard decisions about myself and why my body was bringing everyone so much grief...Finally, I learned that sometimes we think things are important but really life is foremost.*²⁸

What was exceptional about these insights was how familiar they were to the women in the GDP group. We may have been reading those thoughts about death, relationships, or how time worked in others' diaries, but they might as well have been our own. We recalled this capacity for depth, speculation, and analytical abilities in our own thoughts as girls. We concluded that this work of diary writing

deserves respect. And this reverence is despite the perspective people have in our culture that adolescent writing is nothing but a source of embarrassment. The inner lives of adolescents are bigger than has been imagined. The diaries make that evident.

Another false assumption made of girls' diaries is that they are impossible or difficult to read—either because of the poor quality of writing, or because the content consists of melodramatic drivel. Teenagers are often the recipients of blanket criticism of being non-communicative. Real teenage girls, critics assert, don't actually speak like the teen characters in young adult literature—no sixteen year old would conceive of such profound insights, let alone express them so articulately. From an author's point of view, of course, that doesn't matter. No one wants to read an exchange of boring text messages as dialogue. But from our point of view as researchers into girls' diaries, we found the insights of young girls *were* profound, and articulately expressed. In older girls' diaries, the expression at times was even lyrical.

Jen, Age 12

Flying

Wanting to fly,

Wanting to soar,

but feeling chained

to the ground.

exillation of the wind

against my face, but

I guess it's fine down

here.

Leslie, Age 13

To feel old and mature in ways of the world and to be young and grim in experiences. The hurts and disappointments weigh you down and it seems you'll never make it yet you turn around and its over and a new one has begun to block the memories and to remember and hold on to 'what was'. Grasping at straws is all that keeps you going on. Always you find the long one and you loose it. Then you fumble around in the dark again. Is there ever a permanent one? How can you be secure in life if the straws get fewer and fewer and shorter and shorter.

Lara, G. Age 13

It's my birthday. Material wishes are right here, but ultimate dreams are no closer.

Carla, Age 16

I have stolen my life and run away from everything. I have chosen uncertainty of destination instead of knowing I was going nowhere. I stole my life from my parents. In this destination I am in controll any mistakes made I will be free to learn from and overcome...for the first time I truely know love and trust like nothing else I've ever known.

Anaïs' Nin's exceptional gift for expression was found mirrored in the original writing of common teenage girls.

Anaïs N., Age 12

There is one thing that troubles me. I feel different from everybody. I notice no child in my class of my age thinks as I do. They are all alike, they are in accord. I know their thoughts, their ambitions. And I make comparisons. I am altogether different. Why am I not like everybody?

Glancing over this notebook, I said to myself, 'Yes, those are my thoughts, but they are contrary. Am I what is called an eccentric, an 'original' as the French say? Must I be looked on by the world as a curiosity?'²⁹

Beatrix, Age 16

How could I lose my faith in life and love as if it were only a momentary feeling of security. So many can pass by and never think of why they live. Alone afraid I wonder if I am right or am I crazy. Why was I born into this world with a realization of something more.

And, from a subsequent 16 year old entry:

Why am I so old and yet so young. Why do I know this much and yet still lack the most necessary answers. I hate it. I would never change it, I just hate it.

We found similar stories of girls moving into and out of writing as a primary site for processing her inner life when we later read published diaries and diarists offered by others —we read about girls choosing music, art, dance, or other creative self-expression when writing was no longer a possible or preferred method of expression for them.

Deep work is being done in the pages of diaries, and for girls who find comfort in writing, those insights are being expressed, fully and clearly. So why isn't this out there for the world to read? That was the question that drove us to complete this work.

3. Privacy

From the first days of keeping their diaries, the diarists staked out a private space for themselves and declared it up front:

Molly, Age 11

Nobody is to look at this diary at all. Not even when I die. So if you are curious and have opened this, please shut it. You may regret it if you don't. I could do something awful to you. So please, for your own sake, close this up, and put the keys where you found them. After all, a diary is supposed to be secret.

On the front page of her first diary, at the age of 8, Lara Gilbert wrote: “Do Not Look in Here!!! This is my Diary!!! This is Lara Gilbert’s LIFE!!” (LIFE written in large print, taking up a whole page.) Like Molly, she added a threat: “you will be sorry if you do look!”

Putting words on a page involves a risk. Privacy protects that risk, and young girls who are beginning the process of writing for themselves know the risk instinctively. This is reinforced by the physical appearance of a diary, as many of them come with small clasp locks marking that they are considered private and may contain secrets.

Emily, Age 15

*Emily, ONLY!!!
Poke your nose
elsewhere!!!
(ya geek!!)*



Having one's diary read can be a devastating violation. Many girls abandon writing when they discover that someone invaded the privacy of their diaries. A woman who attended one of our conference presentations told us that the most traumatic betrayal of trust she ever experienced was when she discovered, as an adolescent, that her mother had read her diary. Mary stopped writing when her diary was read, and turned to improvising on the piano in order to process and express her feelings in a way that left them invisible and inaccessible to others. Like the diary writer who embedded a code into her entries that kept track of abuse, Mary encoded her own experience with abuse into music. No record remains, but the time spent with the piano allowed her to keep her spiritual self alive until she was eventually able to find a place of safety.

The fear of having one's private thoughts scrutinized by a parent, another adult or a sibling meant some girls could not get past chatter content in their diaries. If the girl perceived a lack of safety, it could lead to a disconnection to her inner voice. Of course for some girls writing was not a natural form of expression, so a diary may not have been the place for serious introspection or deep pondering. We know that a state of calm is achieved in a variety of ways for girls.

But fear and potential embarrassment can continue to exist around diaries into adult life.

Leslie, AR

I have never shared this book with anyone. It feels very scary to do so, even 28 years later. I never felt anyone would understand how I felt and would have some kind of judgment about what they read. I did not want that. In writing down my thoughts I could just be what I wanted to be.

This last sentence "I could just be what I wanted to be" is critical for understanding the significance of a diary for a young girl. Life is being worked out. A self or selves are being tried out, tested and a girl is going about the work of becoming a woman. It is a fragile time, and this process of writing is not easily available for all girls. Molly speculated:

Molly, AR

Girls who are somewhat comfortable with being vulnerable write in journals. I think I felt comfortable enough with who I was that even if someone found my journal and tried to publicize it in some way, it wouldn't break me. It was a risk I could take.

Secrets

A diary is one place where girls can have a conversation within themselves and seek connection beyond themselves, allowing them to preserve what matters to them. Their search for what they feel and know about life's most important matters keeps alive their inner life, the place where things matter, and where it's all right to say (in writing) what cannot be said out loud, or to ask what should not be asked. Diaries allow for speaking the unspeakable: a way to break silence, even though that breaking of silence itself is absolutely secret. Girls tell their own truths to themselves on the page. Emily, thirteen, felt a love so strong and serious she contemplated spending the rest of her life with a boy she loved—something she could never have said out loud without someone laughing. But Emily could read that later and remember the strength of her love at that age, and know it was part of the person she was becoming. In this way, girls find ways to resist the forces that ignore their passions, suppress their interests or otherwise ask them to compromise themselves in order to fit in.

Girls who are writing a diary join a society working in secret. This is acknowledged culturally—girls are given diaries with locks as presents. The novels and stories written for adolescent girls revolve around secrets kept from friends, from family, from teachers. There is an implicit cultural message that seems to say to girls: 'you must have secrets'. It is condoned. Girls gossip with each other. Whether culture- or brain-based, girls seem to have social needs that extend beyond what boys are expected to need, and diaries are part of this. But Beatrix asked: Does giving a girl a diary for her secrets encourage her, or does it create anxiety?

Molly's entry into adolescence demonstrates a developmental shift regarding secrets:

Molly, Age 12

Today mom read you. I don't care. I never tell you any secrets, I don't have any to tell.

Molly, Age 13

Ha ha! A lot has changed since then....my entire life is made up of secrets, and male companions... I also have a hell of a lot of different ideas on the creation of Earth, religion, etc..

In the GDP team musings we wondered if a girl reaches the age when she feels she should have secrets, but she doesn't, does she think: "I'm an inadequate girl." Or, "I've got nothing to fill this book up with." Maybe girls who feel they have no secrets write with the idea that the writing will create secrets out of their lives. Lara did have secrets, and over time, wrote them into visibility. Even Lara hedged her bets by writing some of the secrets in her personal language.

Lara G., Age 14

I have a few (I should say a lot) of secrets – personal ones – that I've never written out. Well guess what! I'm going to write out a couple now, and each day I write I'll include more if I think of them.

Lara G., Age 14

I hope I never lose this. There are some important things written in here—at least, they're important to me.

*THE FOLLOWING IS NOT TO BE READ BY GERRY GILBERT
OR CAROLE ITTER (her parents)³⁰*

This warning is followed by a paragraph in Kawiakee, her personal language, and the entry is marked unfinished, with two blank pages saved, perhaps to finish the piece. She never returned to fill in the gap.

writing again. I'll write the next few lines in it.

U 25 TLOXQ 40VLOUW
KOVU 600-2T (020 790 207P
P7K 2T0 (I forget how to ^{write} question marks)
U UxvTq P V H 2K TV 7V 2T0V
5V - 5V P - 0P 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2
25 TLOXQ M0V 250-7U 79P 5 2 2 2

In case I can't decipher this later on in my life, (although I do have a fill of Kawiakke) here is the alphabet:

A = 2	B = 9	C = H	D = M	E = V
F = 4	G = U	H = Y	I = W	J = 7
K = 0	L = K	M = 6	N = 4	O = 7
P = 0	Q = 7	R = 0	S = T	T = E
U = K	V = 6	W = 0	X = 7	Z = 2
! = 0	, = 2	. = 2	Y = P	

when a letter is repeated, the second repeated letter is written as : 9
such as in "moon": 5 9 9 7

Here are the letters (written) of the

An entry written in Kawiakke, Lara Gilbert's invented written language and alphabet.

We discovered in our research that in parts of rural China there was a secret language that Chinese women, who were forbidden education, developed to communicate with one another over distance. The language, called Nūshu, or women's writing, was an adaptation of Chinese characters that had unique symbols as well, and was believed to have had phonetic qualities.

Upon marriage, the custom was for a young woman to move to the home community of her new husband. Having been part of a woman's network that included learning the language, three days after the wedding the new bride would be given a "Third Day Book," a clothbound volume in which her sworn sisters and her mother would have recorded their sorrow at losing a friend and daughter, and express best wishes for happiness in the married life ahead. The first half-dozen pages contained these laments and hopes, written in Nūshu, a language that the groom couldn't read. The rest were left blank for the bride to record her own feelings and experiences—in Nūshu—for what would become a treasured diary.³¹

The practice of writing secretly to maintain women's lives crosses cultures and history. There is much that could be explored here in terms of patriarchal cultures and the suppression of women's voices that is beyond the scope of this particular book, but which may well be part of the enduring practice of girls' and women's diary writing.

Personal writing is sometimes a way to hide what needs to be said. Mary kept her diary in secret, afraid of it being discovered by her family. As a mother herself, she discovered pages of her daughter's personal writing hidden under the headboard while cleaning her daughter's bedroom. This drive to hide writing may come out of a real threat of being discovered, or it may be part of making the private space sacred. It brings to mind the folk practice of writing a spell to hide in the hollow of a tree, or to bury in a meaningful place—in order to multiply the power of the writing.

At other times, parts of a girl's life is kept from her personal writing—a necessity to keep herself from being overwhelmed. For some adolescents, the writing is not a place to reveal the worst of what happens in her life, in order to examine her most difficult emotions, but rather, writing is a way to keep herself afloat.

Lara Gilbert couldn't even get in touch with her secrets, so couldn't write about them—though much of her diary appears to be an effort to do so. As an adult, Lara reflected on this. Her diary was a self-preservation effort that, void of memories or record of the sexual abuse she later remembered, still required that she deal with the emotions that surfaced as part of her denial and purposeful (if subconscious) forgetting.

Lara G., AR^{iv}

Now the memories I have of my fear of him and my secret guilt tell me that I was protecting myself, through denial from the knowledge of what was happening to me. And unfortunate consequence of this denial was my shouldering his guilt, internalizing his self-hate, as if it were my own.³²

Lara's frequent entries about guilt, and feeling like a bad person, helped manage these emotions and the low moods that attended them.

When it comes to the omission of secrets from a girl's diary, her writing can be seen as an effort to make sense of something that doesn't make sense—writing despite these large, “unwritable” issues. Joan was trying to peel back the layers of a death and alcoholism in her own family, which wore a veneer of happiness and wholeness. Mary decided she had to limit what she wrote about in her diary, fearing her mother would read about herself and become angry. Her diary had been read by family members. She also felt unable to read what she'd written about herself with a critical eye, which led to entries about liking boys, and what her dog did that day. As she reflected as an adult, the diary “ended up being a way to keep a record of my existence in the safest

iv Lara's adult reflections come from adult-aged entries in her published diary.

way possible.” Always there was a sense of self-consciousness and the danger of being found out. But still she wrote, and saved her diary into adulthood.

After we spoke at conferences, women talked to us about what they remembered about writing—about the necessity of secrecy for their diaries, and often about how and where these precious records are stored and moved from home to home throughout their adulthood, never being let go—even the diaries that were records of daily activities, never delving into their inner lives. Holding on even to these volumes spoke to the importance of a private record, no matter what purpose it performed.

Solitude

The diary afforded privacy for the writers, but writing often required its own privacy. In the same way deep reflection requires a certain amount of calm, it often requires the girl to separate herself from others. And so sometimes girls had to seek out solitude in order to write.

Zowie, Age 13

I ran out of the cabin crying and that is how I came to be here. Feeling like a totally miniscule, awful, no good, very bad person. I ran up the little cliff and found a beautiful little place. Then I began writing in this. I felt like I wanted to kill myself for being such an ignorant, selfish person. It is beautiful here though.

Emily, Age 15

I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm scared and crying [tears dot the page] and I need you [her boyfriend] to hold me. Please I just ran out of the house. I'm in a field like the one we were in before. I don't want to be here. I want to go home.

Those were both moments of high emotion. Emily desperately sought out physical solitude in order to have a quiet moment to write in her diary, and the intensity of Emily's feelings at that point are preserved in her words. Even if no one could see what she was writing, it would be impossible to connect with those emotions fully and to write what she wrote in that full entry while in the company of others.

But the GDP team members also recalled moments when, as teens, they would drop in the middle of a crowd and crack open their notebooks. Molly remembers being in a room full of other grade eleven students on a school trip, in a great room in the lodge where they were staying. The other kids were horsing around, and the following entry is complete with an explanation in the margin, "Karen is being tickled near me," and an arrow to a word she scribbled as she was bumped. As an adult, Molly was struck by how easily she could have been in the midst of such activity and yet choose to write commentary on her own inner life, as well as what was going on around her.

Molly, Age 16

*I've forgotten how good it feels to write in a diary, and read it again. I love documenting my life and reading it eons afterwards. So much has happened since I have last written an entry. I've had my first love. Did you know that? I guess not.... I'm not into this. I'm really not. You know what I originally wrote to tell you? You'd laugh. Seriously you'd laugh your guts out. You really would. This is what it is: I **still** like Jeff. It's been a year and a half.*

*Ha! Ha, ha ha ha! I haven't seen something so funny in so long. Alex said he was going to "show us all a trick he learned in 'Nam, climbed up a wall, and put his foot through it. I have **never** seen him so scared. He's still trying to make a joke about it. He'll never change.*

And while that entry was a lighthearted creation of alone-space in the midst of a crowd, some entries spoke of an unwelcome solitude in a crowd.

Leslie, Age 17

Lonliness

You don't have to be all by yourself to be alone.

You can be surrounded by people.

and your life packed with activities, yet still be Lonely.

To many that word has no meaning or only is associated with single or old people....

In the diarists' hunt for solitude in order to write, and their creation of solitude through writing, they often venerated the state of being alone.

Anais N., Age 12

I would like that nobody should ever know me. I would like to live isolated and alone. I envy the lives of those souls who can feel such peace, such sweetness in solitude. In one of my stories I uncover the sweetness of this solitude which everybody fears. Why? Because they are sick, and blind.³³

Molly wrote about her special writing spot at summer camp, away from the action, at the bottom of a field with a view of the ocean. She was there when she wrote the following entry.

Molly, Age 16

If you are in solitude

And someone enters that solitude,

You are aware of their presence.

Are they aware of yours?

Molly, AR:

When I read that short passage, I remember what I felt when I wrote it. I was sitting in a quiet spot... where I liked to write my journal. It was at the end of the playing field, facing the beach... So I sat in my grassy spot, looked toward the channel and the Vancouver Island Mountain Range behind it, and wrote. I sat alone there before someone came far too close, and sat down to do her own writing. It wasn't the first moment I was really conscious of the different state of awareness I had when alone, but it's the first time I articulated what I felt. I didn't like it when someone would spill into my space, filling it up, not aware of what they were interrupting.

So there is the necessity to protect not just the privacy of her inner state, but the actual physical solitude that is required to access her inner life. In the following entry, Emily expresses the despair some girls felt when solitude wasn't readily available:

Emily, Age 15

...Me dad n Jenna can't even get along in a house for a weekend let alone being cooped up in a migit sized cramped, unavoidable prison for half a month! Bet that I won't even be allowed to go off alone. Though shit I'll go anyways...

Through all the searching for solitude (and emotional wrestling as she tried to reconcile desired solitude with feelings of loneliness and separation) there is a desire for, or a claim of ownership being made, on her own space.

Beatrice, Age 16

To lose the fight is to greet despair, don't tempt the evil that is waiting there. I can tell you only, that which I know, my path is lonely, but it is my own.

4. Audience

Emily, Age 15 [upon starting a new volume]

I won't even bother going thru the whole intro spiel, you know me, and since you're the same as last one [a black, lined notebook], I know you.

If you ask a girl who she's writing to when she writes in her diary, she may answer that she's writing to herself. And the self seems to be the primary audience for a diary. But some girls have wider audiences in mind, either consciously or subconsciously—and this is also an essential part of her framework for writing.

Among the original researchers, at least four of us seemed to have an imagined audience for our accounts, although our diaries were strictly private. Victoria wrote to her deceased father. Beatrix wrote simultaneously to her absent mother and herself in the future. Mary wrote to God. Molly wrote to a friend who lived abroad. When we started to read more broadly, we saw evidence of other girls writing to an audience. Emily wrote to a friend who had also become a love interest. Leslie also wrote to a divine presence. But even when the audience was someone who could actually receive a letter, rather than write directly to that person—the girls had a sense that the diary was the right place for this communication to happen. The content of the diaries is partly what required a private space for expression. But there are many other reasons—one being the attachment of their inner lives to a preserved and protected space allowed the diarists to develop voice without the same self-censure that they would practice were they writing directly to that audience in a letter for delivery. Even when the content was not particularly private, the way the girl chose to express it may have been personal, requiring the diary space.

Audience of the Future Self

All of us could identify with the idea that we were writing to ourselves in the future. And we weren't surprised to find mentions of this in other diaries we read.

Leslie, Age 18

What am I searching for now, Leslie? I have that feeling inside that I'm looking for something. Will it come and more important what will it be? Will it be God again? Could I ever go back to that life again? I've changed so much since then!

Beatrix frequently wrote with her future self in mind. Though she did not always feel cared-for in the present, the idea that her future self would one day read the words she put to paper, and would care and understand, provided an unusual form of self-nurturance that she may not have found otherwise. Through imagining her future self as safe and compassionate, she also gained some perspective that she would survive adolescence. She cannot remember thinking that it was very likely, or even desirable, that she would survive without this future picture to keep in mind.

Beatrix, Age 16

I don't leave myself entirely in fate's hands but I know that there is some plan made out for me and that I will achieve my happiness when I'm ready. Maybe I have a lot more learning to do yet eh. I'm still so young, I shouldn't be laying ultimatums and saying that this is where it's at. Cause most likely I'm not always right. I shouldn't deny that I love. By suppressing my emotions I am only going to hurt myself more.

Beatrix referred to her adolescent diary writing practice as 'a lifeline'—a sentiment that was echoed by others. In retrospect, she believes it may have been her diary (and perhaps a bit of divine intervention) that got her through intact.

Beatrix, AR

I remember the importance of journaling in processing the heightened emotions and perceptions caused by a bad trip on psychedelics. Pen to paper was the only thing that was real... and my diary the only thing I could trust when things got terrifying.

Evelyn Lau, Age 15

This is Sunday afternoon. I have to write more often in these pages. I think writing even beats drugs; it's necessary for my survival.³⁴

Leslie's entry, below, illustrates a girl writing to herself in the present, but with her eye on the future.

Leslie, Age 18

I've got to get my mind together and get organized. The future scares me but I'm determined to make the best of it; to do really well and not let things get buggered up like my grade twelve did. I feel like I need to slow down and unwind; just have time to relax, get things sorted out, and get the things, just little things done I'd like to do. Even though I feel this way I know I won't be able to have this time. In a way I'd like to be alone with no one to bother me so I could do what I want yet I'd get so lonesome I'm really so dependent on other people.

I'm really not depressed or feeling sorry for myself, just relaxed and thoughtful. Well Leslie here's hoping that the future turns out all right for you; always have faith and don't let things get you down. Everything will turn out all right. Just be patient and calm. I love you!

Lara wrote occasionally about when her diary might be found and published. Perhaps she always had this in mind. From a young age, we can see it was a kind of hope for her.

Lara G., Age 10

If maybe I become famous one day, I might say "I had no idea I'd become famous, when I was a little girl," but that isn't true, because I think I just might become famous with a book I write or something because I love making up stories and writing them down. My mom, Carole, says that you don't make any money writing books because she's a writer and we're kind of poor. But I don't care about money. I just care about writing stories for people to read. I like reading books or stories that have feeling. (How people feel.) Maybe I will write a book that will become just as famous as the one called Alice in Wonderland. ³⁵

Lara G., Age 11

*I think it would be neat, for, in about 100 years, someone would find my diary, and make it into a story or T.V. show, like "Little House on the Prairie," a T.V. show that used to be on, about a girl. It all started when they found her diary...*³⁶

The diaries of the original researchers didn't include speculation about others reading them in the future, but we did imagine ourselves reading our own diaries when we were older. Victoria wrote with multiple audiences in mind—her father, but also, at times, herself. In the following diary excerpt, she wrote about her emotional state with awareness that her adult self would live in a very different life space, far removed from the pain of her grief, and her feelings of isolation:

Victoria, Age 16

Today I woke up with huge puffy eyes on the couch. No one cared to come see me last night. In case I don't remember in 30 years. I cried for like an hour on the kitchen floor.

Victoria believed so strongly that her experience was important, she didn't want to forget it, not even far in the future. Alone with her sadness, knowing that no one could be with her in that moment, she chose to have her future self bear witness. With that future self watching, the events were more important, truer—there was less sense of isolation. There is perhaps a parallel with the religious idea of God watching us that gives a sense that our lives are being witnessed—with that in mind, this idea of a future self as witness may have some unconscious primal sense of being visible—and here being visible directly, intentionally.

The imagined future self may be someone who would be able to provide emotional security, or have an answer for a big question being asked through the writing. They may also have been written in order that they might have the experience of future reflection. Some of the diarists had faith that their future selves would be able to finish, heal or close whatever difficulty they expressed in the diaries. Some of the diarists (Beatrix, Molly, Lara) felt that almost every entry was written with the intent that they would read it as adults.

Others may not have had such a strong sense of themselves in the future as the audience for their entries, but the future self was considered in the mere act of keeping the diaries. Why did they not toss the volumes out when they moved from home to home? Why did so many take the care to preserve these little books when they no longer needed to write in them? For some, the reason that they saved their diaries was so they might have them for future reflection.

Some adults are quick to assume that keeping a diary is evidence of present self-absorption, to the exclusion of all perspective. But the diaries reveal something quite different. Even at ten years old, Lara was thinking ahead to how she would respond in the future to her present self. Imagining that response was a way to gain another perspective on the present, was something quite powerful, and something adults might not expect from adolescent girls.

Lara, Age 10

*Maybe when I am older, like 30 or 40, I will find this diary, and I will realize that I wrote that, and that even though I am much older, I am still the same person. Sometimes when I look at photographs of me when I was like 2 or 3 years old, I think it's weird that it's the same person, me—Lara Gilbert. Also, in the days when I am old, like maybe 70 or 80, things will probably have changed.*³⁷

The fact girls write to their future selves has several implications. If girls write to impress themselves, as Beatrix admitted to doing, they may actually be shaping future decisions through diary writing. In other words, if they write to impress themselves, they may become the impressive self. Beatrix had in mind the judgments her future self would make on the girl she was, and she choose to stop self-destructive behaviour as a result of that. So are we writing who we want to be or become? Are we writing our future selves into being? The GDP study would answer this question for us in time.

Present Others, and Benevolent Spirits

Among the six of us who first met to talk about girls' inner lives, Victoria was the one who most consistently addressed someone in her diary.

Victoria, Age 15

Daddy don't listen right now, I want to talk about boys.

Victoria's loss of her father at eleven years old affected every part of her. It makes sense that in the early years after her father's murder, even her diary would be a longing for him. Victoria told us that writing to him made the relationship continue in a way that she needed—not in an unhealthy refusal to acknowledge the loss, but in a way that allowed her to honour her Dad and the place he had in her heart and life.

In Victoria's life context, the sudden loss of a parent at that age was enough to make her stand out. That the loss was through murder made Victoria's circumstances even more extraordinary. With whom could she talk about what she felt? She may have been surrounded by family and friends who cared about her and wanted her to be happy, but where could she turn when she did not want to forget, did not want to "move on" and be happy? When Victoria instead wanted to be with her grief, to know it inside and out, know how it was part of her—who could she be with then? Talking to the father she lost through the diary seemed a sensible response and solution. The diary, and through the diary the benevolent spirit of her lost father, served as the perfect audience for her thoughts when there was no one around she could talk to.

Victoria, Age 16

I think I just might explode. I have so much to say. But no one cares to listen long enough or no one cares to do anything about it except say "what's wrong." Then when I say everything (and when I say everything- I mean it- I wouldn't joke about that) everyone says "oh don't say that, everything's fine don't worry." They say that because they have nothing to say. What they should of said in the first place is nothing. Then I would have more respect for them.

Another contributor to the project was Belle, a First Nations woman from Vancouver Island. She was adopted at the age of four by a white family who raised her as their only child. Belle remembered her birth mother and her family from the reservation where she spent her early childhood, and addressed her mother in letters she wrote in her diary. When younger, she wrote that her mother was like an angel looking out for others. "you could have done something drastic and I wouldn't be here..." she wrote. But Belle also likened herself to an angel, as "someone who isn't here with both feet on the earth."

Belle came to terms with her mother's choices in one letter, but years later that changed, and hate, regret and disgust were more current emotions. Belle no longer referred to her birth mother as "mom" like she did in previous diary letters. Belle wrote that she needed to come to terms with her treatment as a child and her separation from her mother, and wrote in the same entry "I think I just did," illustrating her movement toward inner understanding through writing to her mother as audience. Belle was also aware of unintentional audiences, and made the choice to burn selected volumes of her diaries when she married, hoping to protect her husband, and her adoptive mother and father.

Mary wrote with awareness of an omnipotent presence as audience. She perceived this presence as accepting and loving, but at times condemning, depending on the content of her writing. Sometimes, this presence inhibited her self-expression. Beatrix felt the benevolent presence she wrote to was a kind of mother-figure, offering a reinforcing sense of acceptance, and that the presence encouraged self-discovery through writing. For Mary, this presence took a recognizable form: a conservative religious notion of a judging God.

Mary, in her address below, even feels pressure from her audience, who she perceived as a judging, if benevolent spirit—a feeling that she "should" write, even if, in her own estimation, there was little to write about. Life looked normal to her at eleven, even when any reader outside of her context would know that there is immense discontent.

Mary, Age 11

About time I write isn't it. I haven't had any exciting things happening except a kid says I'm pretty, mother beats me and we're selling the three puppies.

For Mary, that didn't seem like having much to write about. She also felt that her benevolent spirit would want her to be making morally right choices—something that reminds us of the diaries women wrote as a kind of in earlier centuries as a kind of meter of moral development.³⁸

Beatrix acknowledged that writing to a benevolent spirit and keeping a record of positive choices may serve as sufficient reinforcement to continue “doing good.” She felt that someday, someone, or an older self, would read her diary and could validate what she had chosen that day, or how far she’d come. It’s also significant to note that this omnipresent audience who listened with a caring, or sometimes condemning, ear, was seen as divine by both girls. In Mary’s case, she envisioned herself writing to a Christian God. In Beatrix’s case, the spirit was divine as well, but not any traditional figure of God, and not a masculine figure.

Mary’s diary provided a listening ear for a voice that was not allowed to speak up. In this entry, she creates a special audience for her resisting voice, strong even as she relegates it to the back of her book:

Mary, Age 13

I have decided to make a bad side of my diary, every time my Mum doesn't let me go out or hits me for no reason. I will pay her back when I get older. Well in the last few years she has hit me for no reason. Last night she wouldn't let me go to the mall and she won't let me go to my friend's party for no reason.

Beatrix’s assessment of herself through writing was less about judgment from a figure that was morally perfect, than a softer judgment by someone looking out for her. Her audience of future self and absent mother came with a concerned eye. She reflected as an adult that writing in her diary provided a way for her to “time-travel her needs into the future.” So her audience developed as more mothering, created out of a need to look after herself, out of a need for care and understanding that was not being met in the present. The creation of that audience became a form of self-care in which trust in a future self provided nurturing and helped Beatrix make decisions in the present. This older self had the potential to acknowledge “good choices” as well as pain, and writing to her future self became a primary connection to a personal ethical responsibility. For Beatrix, there was a sense that she herself would someday care about what she did.

Lara also wrote in her diary of feeling the presence of a benevolent spirit.

Lara G., Age 14

...Why am I so, so, I can't describe the way I feel.

I feel as if someone is comforting me, consoling, ensuring me that I have nothing to worry over in the future; all is well and life is beautiful...

Carla, Age 15

Who am I supposed to be what kind of a life is this. Can't time go faster show me if there is a light to go to. Show me teach me anything. I'm just gone.

We wondered, from this and other similar entries, if the sense of a benevolent spirit was itself created through the act of writing—that the creative act of writing itself demanded an audience, even if it were just an imaginary one—in the same way words can sometimes create the sense that someone is listening, just because we speak them out loud.

Others held a view of a benevolent spirit common to their culture, and wrote to a God or spirit they felt looked after them.

Claire Minkley, Age 10

Jesus came into my mind. "Do not die." He said. "Leave everything to me. I will look after your life."

Leslie, undated poem.

Tired

oh so tired and

alone

I write this to you.

So far away yet so close and full of

love through you.

Thankful, full of praise for your work in my life.

yet,

complaining

caught up in the spin of the world

surviving nurtured by you

amidst it

Molly and Emily, and other girls who addressed their diaries to friends or others in the present, wrote with an ease that may have come from having this audience in mind. Addressing these people on paper was like being able to speak to the friend whom they loved enough to entrust with their inner meanderings, with all the freedom to express themselves while still maintaining their own safe space in a private book.

One summer, after spending three weeks with her best friend who had moved half way around the globe, Molly spent the next year addressing her diary to her. She so wished for the intimacy she had in her friendship to continue (something that made her feel quite the opposite of isolated), that she transferred the communication she would have kept up with her good friend to the diary. She wrote continually to her friend with the intention of sharing it all when they next met, the following summer. In that way, her diary was somewhat abandoned for a year and a great letter taken up, instead. But the writing reads the same—it looks like the same personal writing

with very little, if any, editing. But still, with the idea that it would be read shortly by another, Molly certainly made choices about what to include. Perhaps addressing it to her friend involved little change, but just an acknowledgement that a relationship in her life had actually reached the level of intimacy that previously had been afforded only by her diary.

This quest for intimacy, as well as the idea that some girls used the diary as friend, will be taken up in Chapters Eight through Ten. Victoria, Molly, and others used their diaries to maintain relationships, which may be a primary function for keeping a private diary.

The Private Audience

We noted that particularly for urban or digitally-connected adolescent girls, a sense of audience is ever-present. Not only are adolescent girls developmentally self-focused and hyper-aware of their image, but they are rarely without an audience, whether crossing the street in traffic, at school, or just seeing their own reflection in windows.

Beatrix, AR

When I moved [to the city] at 17, the realization that I was never without at least a potential audience outside my home was unnerving. I discovered a privilege that I had previously always taken for granted: being alone outside. It takes a certain gumption to always be on display. What does one do with one's private self?

Being “looked at” is a complex cultural mind game that girls are taught, which centers on appearance, but also on issues of sexuality and reputation. Intense self-consciousness is not necessarily egotistical, but a necessary response to transitional experience. Every day the body is different. Being aware of that experience is overwhelming, and contributes to being watched, being centred in context.

Zowie, Age 12

Another thing that is going on in my head is me. I am not particularly good looking but better than some. Not very attractive to boys mainly because of my body. I am taller than most boys I know. There is one thing that I know boys don't really like me for. I know that I shouldn't worry about how I look and what my body is like but it is hard to keep my mind from wandering to it. For my age I am overaverage tall and underaverage chest size. I know that inside me someday my genes will give a ring and go but still! I am not as flat as Maureen but she is hairy. I can't really find any girl my age that I can compare and say "I have more".

The sense of a perpetual audience for girls today is deepened and complicated by social media. Without the sense of needing some privacy for the inner life, a girl may broadcast personal thoughts to an available audience any time of day or night. Instead of processing her emotions or reactions to her life in private, she can involve others immediately. This has only become more common, even since our diary project began. Beatrix suspected that journaling provided a refuge for her private self. The refuge of a diary is still available for girls when they use a private space—whether that's a notebook or a password protected digital record. And even when there is no "other" as an imagined audience, this diary itself may take on a persona for some girls.

Initially, Emily kept her diary in a little Chinese hardcover notebook with a red, embroidered cover. This volume begins without an address for the diary (no "Dear Diary," or name used for the book). But she does address the diary as a listening entity: "I've decided to take you with me wherever I go..." Emily, among the other diarists, did not need to drown in her own experiences if she could envision a concerned and private audience for her life story.

Molly also addressed her diary, even though it was an unnamed one: “Well, I haven’t really written to you since I started going to this school. I have something important to tell you...” Addressing just the diary itself, or an imagined other without a specific real person in mind, also allowed for the writing that reports on the every-day. Who would the girl imagine listening to the reports of what grade she got on her math test, or who she talked to at lunch, or what she wore when she went out for a walk and ran into an old friend? The audience for this diary content may just be an imagined other with whom the girl felt close to, enough to bother sharing the little details of her day, the details that make up a kind of intimacy. In this kind of writing, the girl’s *whole* life story could be relayed to an imagined other. Together with what troubled her, she could write a complete picture of her life.

If a girl fears some aspect of herself and thinks it makes her unlovable, not including it as part of her whole person would fracture herself. But finding this private space to include everything—what she fears, or what she would rather not admit to a friend—helps build the courage to be human, to be her vulnerable, “real” self.

The Romantic Audience

The private audience can at times become a romantic audience. We had no better case study for this than Emily’s diary. Soon after beginning her Age 12-13 year old volume, Emily began addressing her book with the name of a boy, a friend that she had already been infatuated with for two years.

Emily, Age 12

Dear Jonathan,^v

That’s what I’ve decided to call you from now on. It’s better than “Dear Diary” or maybe it should be Nahtanoj, that’s Jonathan backwards. I’m sorry I haven’t written in so long but I’ve been busy. I’m very lonely nowadays...

^v Also a pseudonym

Emily begins alternating between “Dear Jon,” “Dear Nahtanoj,” and “Dear Naht.” She then addresses “Nahtanoj” in every entry for years. Most of the time, her address is partly just a fond name for her little book, and she doesn’t appear to be writing to her friend Jonathan.

Emily, Age 12

Dear Jon,

I have just finished rereading my diary that Jonathan gave me in grade five for my birthday. Boy was it ever a mistake! I can't believe parts of it. Some are so childish and corny I don't believe that I could have really written them but others are not so grueling to the soul.

Some entries reveal that she is actually thinking of her old friend, and may even be writing to him, as she is in this entry.

Emily, Age 15

Dear Nahtanoj,

Yes I know it's late. But when you gotta write, you gotta write... Oh Jonny, everything in life these days is so screwed up. I'm really not having the greatest of times. I don't know where to start. I guess this breaking up business wasn't all I thought it was in the first while. I'm so lonely. Not that you have any reason to be, Emily, you're getting close to slut persona...

And in that entry, she’s addressing herself as much as she’s writing to her friend Jonathan. “...Emily, you’re getting close to slut persona...” It may be that addressing the object of her affection and herself in one place lends the pairing some credibility. Even when Emily wasn’t intimate with Jonathan, she could experience that intimacy in a way by addressing him in her diary.

In her latter days of age sixteen, she breaks her convention and addresses first no one, then “Dear Someone,” then, “Dear whoever the hell wants to read this crap,” and “Dear I Dunno.” She returns to addressing “Dear Nahtanoj” on her seventeenth birthday, with a small comment below: “why not.” This follows a struggle of decision between two boyfriends, neither of whom is Jonathan. But her growing consciousness that she is beginning to write her diary to one of the boys throws her usual address into question.

Emily, Age 17

*It's happening again. I'm writing to him. I might as well put
“Dear Michael” at the top of the page instead of yours.*

*I wish I could get down what happened at the spit properly, but
it's too hard to describe in words.*

Emily casts around for her address like this as she is speaking always to her need for intimacy – she is reaching for contact for someone who cares. Maybe for her the diary never quite got there—but she kept at it, and it was as close as she could get. Emily, the one most consumed by a need for a male partner in her life in the diaries we read, addressed her diary to her idealized boy. We speculated on whether this kind of romantic address worked like the audience of the future self for girls—if, hoping to impress her ideal boy, she shaped her writing, and in turn herself, for presentation to her imagined audience.

Regardless of whom the diary was addressed to, we have seen the power of an intended audience for girls in the context of a private space. They make an effort to connect beyond the self through their assumed audiences as they grow up: the absent mother made present; the deceased parent or distanced friend. And in writing to their future selves, their words build a bridge across time, which is a great act of hope, their gesture assumes survival and future. And the loneliness so pervasive in adolescence is something that fades to the background, at least in the moment, as she writes to her chosen audience.

5. Identity and Making our Own Truths

We found the diaries contained statements of universal truths relating to girls' inner lives, their growth, and their developing spirituality. The truths weren't ones that girls had looked up in wisdom literature, or had told to them by adults. The truths that they sought out were found without help. And the effort to arrive at this knowledge seemed to be directly related to their sense of self-worth and identity.

Beatrix, Age 15

I see things in a strange light, maybe, I agree with you, because of my youth. But they are truly my ideas and therefore worth something.

In choosing what to record in the private record of her diary, a girl is allowed to make the choice about what is important to her. Even setting aside the time in her day to make the record is an affirmation of the importance of her life, despite what anyone might say to her—whether they tell her that the years spent in high school are nothing, or that the real world will happen once she's an adult. They have so few years behind them, but the diarists' thoughts on youth and age showed such a great deal of insight.

Victoria, Age 17

...how old do you think I sound? I feel like I'm 20 or 30 years old just w/o the experience, so why don't people treat me like that. Do I really have a sign on my forehead saying "take advantage of me 'cause I won't yell or criticize back?"

Molly, Age 16

[I'm] too young. Or rather, too inexperienced to form a solid opinion yet. Life is change.

Leslie, Age 17

To feel old and mature in the ways of the world

and

To be young and grown in experiences.

The hurts and disappointments weigh you down

and it seems you'll never make it yet

you turn around and it's over and a new one has begun

To block the memories

All adolescent girls wrote about age in some way—this is just a sampling of an enormous collection of thoughts on the nature of age—and feeling older than her years was a common theme. The diarists marked passages of time with attention and reverence in their diaries, noting how their internal selves changed in response to growing up or passing life milestones.

Molly, Age 15

I'm older, now. I feel a great deal older, all of a sudden. I had my last indulgences today. They weren't the same. They were better. They were what I had been trying to experience. When they were finished, I walked down to where the water lapped at the rocks. I stood on the rocks, and I knelt down, and washed my feet, then hands, then face in the bitter, salty ocean of the Pacific. When I was cleansed of my indulgences, and my youth, I stood up on the rock. Then, I prayed for God to send me willpower, to become a kinder image. The water was salty, and dried my skin.

Emily, Age 15

Goodbye Emily of 15 years old. I'm growing up and leaving you behind. I just hope I don't get any older. This is already pushing it. I feel and have felt a change in myself coming. A new me, older, different.

It's midnight, and I brought it in smiling.

Love Emily.

Molly, Age 16

I was just remembering, I cried the day after my first kiss, staring out the window at the rain. I suppose it's because I had left a part of me behind. I'll never be there again.

The age the girls were when they began writing—9, 11 or 12, may be the age of awakening. Along with the self-awareness and the deepening complexity of their emotions at this age come thoughts about the nature of life and death, and girls' own ideas about the source of divine energy.

Zowie, Age 13

The world lets out a mournful sigh... because... we know what will happen

Why should we be joyful now... when there may not be a tomorrow?

Be joyful as long as you can... it is true, yes. There may not be a tomorrow.

And as I sob, we all sob. We cannot control it now.

And as others die, part of me dies too, till I am dead.

Molly, Age 16

[perhaps God is] a name for people's own divine insight. God inside everyone of us all.

Beatrix, Age 15

I have been very well aware of what I simply call "the power". It exists inside most of us, many of us ignore it, few of us understand it and even fewer have learned to use it.

Zowie, Age 13

Some say that when you die you either live forever in happy heaven, or you burn in eternal hell. Some believe that after death there is life. Reincarnation. I believe in death after life. Oh yes, to me it is so unfair but – to others? I like to believe that

it is all the same, we are all treated the same. But how can I know? Who should remain alive after death?

Theories of love and connection were another important recurring theme, one that we explore later in the book. And together, these are the important cares, particularly of 11-15 year old girls, judging from the diaries we read: death, the nature of love, the divine. And all the writing on these topics reflected the same effort to get at a central truth of something, whether that truth was what she thought about love, or what she thought life after death looked like.

Personal spirituality takes form for many girls at this age, especially ones who grow up in a religious tradition (either culturally or within the tradition of their family) and are now asking questions about what has been held as truth until that point. The diary is a space for establishing what they feel is spiritually true for themselves.

Evelyn L., Age 15

I'm going to deal with my problems alone and return healed, like those Indian youths who go into the forest to fast and consult the holy spirits. Well, the spirits are inside me and I have to unearth them. Nothing is simple, especially self-realization...³⁹

Molly AR:

As a young journaller I read the Bible, but never wrote about what I found there except for those instances when it was a constructed thing to do—like at camp. I found much more meaning in laying down the experiences I had, and in creating the meaning “from scratch” as it were. At that age I was not enthused about gleaning spiritual knowledge from the experiences of believers who lived thousands of years in the past.

Nina L., Age 14

I crave emotional experiences, strong moral and emotional experiences that can make the soul work and struggle. I am

beginning to live morally. I find these emotional experiences in many different things: in music, in the beauty of nature and of people, in life- not in the life that I and many others live, but in life in the full sense, in the sense of life's struggle and sufferings, which are again based on emotional experiences. Thus I'm faced with a vicious circle; perhaps the circle of events and inner turmoil is what they call life's maelstrom. Perhaps I haven't begun to live yet. If childhood is only a pleasant prologue to life, then I can hope for things in the future. 'To hope is human' I think that's true. There's not a man alive who doesn't hope, we never lose hope even in the most hopeless times ⁴⁰

Beatrix, Age 16

As you have thought I am not as you first saw. Some other thing haunts me. Some of understanding which I cannot retain myself. Caught only sometimes I think he could help me get there. A supernatural feeling, I want to so badly. Of course I do not now fully understand...

Beatrix makes the effort to use words to get at something that she is sensitive to, which is wordless. It's not just a simple irony – there's meaning in her search. The effort to put into words what she feels creates an understanding she didn't have before. Creating this understanding then works to create peace for herself. The effort to express her understandings led to small successes, which built her confidence in her own way of working toward authentic knowledge that arose out of her own experiences.

At that time in their lives, it felt like the girls had so much knowledge, that they needed somewhere to keep it. Coming to their own conclusions about life and spirit meant an accumulation of many thoughts and emotions that were brand new to them as girls. Writing their ideas made them ideas real—made them substantial. Writing captured something of the new knowledge and new emotion that floated around in their minds, to be kept safe in a sacred and private space.

Truths about the Self

Sometimes when we read the diaries, we recognized that the girls felt their selves were in danger of being lost—even if that fear was unconscious.

Beatrix, Age 16

I confess my confusion but what does the world expect. For one so young, first born of innocence, now left with only the faintest shadow of a childhood. I look out at the world and do you know what I see? I see nothing but the evil of an earth gone wrong. Too few true souls and so many, so very many people without any hope in themselves. Can't anyone see what is happening to us?

Emily, Age 16

No more boyfriend talk. No more giggles. Why do I seem to be two sides of the same person. A reflection in a mirror and the person behind the mirror that's actually a window... Why don't people understand that when I'm pushing people away I'm actually calling out louder for them to help.

And why do I stop feeling bad as soon as the god forsaken pen touches you?

Some of the work of the diaries appeared to be an effort to hold onto the selves they were as girls.

Emily, Age 16

Dear Nahtanoj:

My writing is getting messier by the entry. I'll be surprised if you can even read this in 10-20 years.

...I think all of a sudden in the last month or so I've turned into an adult. And if this is what it's like, I don't wanna be one...

Something is in there. And for some reason I can't understand, I don't want to let it out. It's like all my emotions are on hold.

And my thinking is done with cool calculation. I don't even know when it began. It just did.

Lara G., Age 11

I'm writing really small because I want this diary to last a couple more days. I still haven't got a new diary...Right now, I'm sitting in my new house and I'm looking out the window. Everything is so beautiful! I wish I could keep this memory for when I'm 70. And I'm wishing I were a kid again.

For some girls, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood was always shifting. Writing about where that line was, and how she felt in relation to how close she was to stepping over that line (or when she realized she already had at least one foot over) helped her form her identity. Writing about the passage of her childhood or yearning for her childhood provided some continuity through the transition of adolescence. Time and our relationship to it is a slippery thing during adolescence.

Getting at emotional truths seemed to be necessary, urgent even—because those emotional truths were what formed the girls. Those truths were part of what made them who they were, and what differentiated them from who they perceived were the “fake people,” to borrow Victoria’s term.

Written in the back of Zowie’s Age 13-17 diary:

Some nights as I sit awake till late at night and scribble down my thoughts, I am actually truthful and ignore the fact that they will be read by someone someday because on some nights, I feel that this book is a way to release my emotions- sort of sort them out. Nights when this book is my only confidante...

I shall reveal my true thoughts and aspirations and fantasies etc. regardless of this ludicrous fear. Books are written to be read & this is certainly a book. This will not be mentioned again & I

will assume that publishing is a laughable idea. I shall expose the true me that is unknown to anyone else without withholding information of any kind whatsoever.

As they wrote their own truths, the girls created a new self image, a self who knows *about* herself in the “wild zone’ of the journal,” as Gannet calls it:

...the journals and diaries of women have both indirectly and directly allowed for the creation, confirmation, or reconstruction of a sense of a positive and knowing self, with its own voice or voices, in the “wild zone” of the journal.⁴¹

Gannet refers to women’s diaries, but this statement extends to young women’s—Gannet’s chapter having given consideration to the practice of assigning unread school journals. The personal diary is a “wild zone” because it has no rules. There is no prescription for what is included on the pages, and the diary’s purpose may change according to what the girl feels she needs.

Yet the results are clearly not chaotic. Instead of an accumulation of discrete days, a diary is a coherent entity. It consists of interwoven themes and sequences, large blocks of which may constitute the working out of an action from its inception through its stages of growth to its ending (though the pace is likely to be leisurely and digressive and regrettably sometimes the ending and crucial details are left only to inference). This coherence helped lend girls a sense of wholeness as they wrote about themselves. But it was not easy work, for those girls to acknowledge and work with the disparate elements of the self, to get down with those thoughts and insights that at times seem to weighty to carry.

Beatrice, 16

Why can't I just live, and be normal and dumb. I have sight in two worlds, and I prefer neither.

Anaïs N., Age 12

I must recognize that I am crazy, but since my diary is destined to be that of a mad woman, I cannot write reasonable things in it! And they would not be my thoughts.⁴²

The girls asked over and over who they were, while at the same time they wrote passages that demonstrated detailed self-knowledge.

Zowie, Age 17

I haven't found the real me yet. What I don't like about me is my lack of honesty, willpower etc. I'm stuck with me though, I'll have to make the best of my life. What particularly disturbs me is that I'm not good at anything and I never know how I feel.

Leslie, Age 14

Who are we? Do we really know ourselves? Sure we all have names and labels but that doesn't tell who or what we are. Are we a body jammed full of hurts, angers, frustrations, tension, etc.? Sometimes I wonder! There are so many things I want to be and do. I want to help so bad, but what am I doing? Losing my temper at others, hurting their feelings, why can't I help others instead of hurting them? Sometimes I think so hard about things I think my head is going to burst. I say I don't like some people and peoples habits bug me.

The girls often landed on a positive image through the work of writing down their own truths. Exploring their own emotions in reaction to something in their lives brought clarity, and this clarity had the power to change how they acted and how they related to themselves.

Zowie, Age 16

My coach wanted to have a "little chat" with me about this summer. I was just shaking like an aspen leaf. My voice was all tremble. I had a real problem. Then I did it. I told him that I didn't like the way he cross-examined people. I told him that

I didn't like the way he yelled at people. I did it all without crying. At one point my chin & lips began a little convulsing dance of their own but I took a deep breath and got in control of myself and him. I managed to tell him these things without insulting him. I was so proud of myself and felt so good afterwards like a burden being lifted off my flat chest. He gave me my T-shirt and left. I know he was disappointed in my reactions. If there had been more time I would have expressed my opinions further. This has been a personal triumph. Little as it may be it has been one giant step in my self-confidence.

Molly, Age 16

New beginnings, new people, new advancements, new—loves, perhaps? Oh, good. Here it is, a new year, and I've got a chance to change, and I'm getting sappy again. I don't think I'm going to change. I don't want to change, really. I like myself. I don't think I want to change.

Creation of truth about the self in the diary is different from autobiography. It's not as clean, and not as interested in presenting a polished public persona. There is coherence created through the entries, but what the girl is left with is not an ideal self. In all the diaries we read, we saw evidence of girls developing an idea of who they were, and who they would be—the person they would write into existence. There was a lot of writing that expressed hope and knowledge that she would be well in the future, even if life was hard in the now. There was a lot of writing that examined emotion and events and thoughts to get at *what was*. But putting *who* she was on paper didn't mean creating a heroine image. It was a vulnerable process to come to her own truths about her self.

The diarist's urge, however, is not the autobiographer's: where the autobiographer aims to reconstruct in a coherent self-valorizing work the self that once she was (or thinks she was), the diarist ordinarily seeks to rein a self in process as she currently sees it, unconcerned about whether the parts all fit or

*focus in one direction. Consistency and avoidance of repetition belong rather to the more shapely form of autobiography than to the diary, whose virtues lie in its casualness and candor of the moment and whose repetitions are valuable for what they inadvertently reveal of obsessions and preoccupations.*⁴³

So the diary was not a constructed self-image, but a revealing self-image. And the team did not find that the self was created for the purpose of presentation to an audience, even when the process of diary writing included writing to another.

But how did that sit with the knowledge we had that some girls neglected to write about major aspects of their lives? Molly, like most of the modern diarists except for Lara, chose not to write about her parents through most of her adolescence, focusing on her peer relationships and her own reactions to life events—at school and church, but rarely at home. Beatrix didn't write about school very much—even when she managed to attend.

These omissions may mean the diary was not for developing an objective truth about the every aspect of the self. But the entries that are made reveal what the girl wishes to know about herself at the time, what she feels compelled to address about her life that day, in that moment, and what is important to her.

*This is not to say that diarists simply set down whatever occurs to them. They are selective, and they are protective: diaries, it bears repeating, are a form of self-presentation...*⁴⁴

Selma Lagerlof, Age 14

*I have found that it is no pleasure to keep a diary unless one writes the truth. I had plenty of time to write last evening, but something happened that I was ashamed to set down. I can't understand myself. I seem to have become so wild and unruly that I've lost all control of myself, which is something I have rarely done before.*⁴⁵

Anaïs N., Age 13

*I have only one true friend left and that is my diary, which forces me to understand part of myself.*⁴⁶

The diary is a form of self-presentation to the self, which is necessary for adolescent girls, for whom the mirror plays such an important role. But for most of the girls the awareness of her audience and a desire to present herself to this audience runs parallel to the drive to set down an honest account in order to learn about herself. This creates a tension between the girl's perception of her "true" self and a more "presentable" version of her self.

Truths and Injustice

The Canadian writer and broadcaster Eleanor Whachtel interviewed Edna O'Brien on Writers and Company. She summed up this idea of "truths":

EW: "You've described your younger self as full of romantic yearnings coupled with a sense of outrage. Tell me about this..."

EO: "Well, I am obsessed with truth. And very few people that I have met in my life, or that I have read, are faithful to that, and by truth... you might say, it's a work of fiction, but that's not how it happens. I don't mean that kind of truth. I mean the interior truth of an emotion, or a feeling, or an action. Or an idea. So that is one of the things. Another thing is that I feel the upbringing, and the Catholic church, and the particular scenario that I was brought up in was rather crippling, but my real outrage is, and as we know the world is absolutely teeming with it, is injustice, I cannot abide injustice. And it happens in every walk of life, in every country... so if people were really, truly, spiritually alert or religious, I don't think they would haunt each other the way they do. Another way of putting it is... if people were truer, and deeper, that many of the crimes, betrayals and outrages let alone murders... they wouldn't be committed. That's

*the real education that people need. The education that people get is just patter. They don't get the psychological education. They just don't. They don't want to, often. But they just don't.*⁴⁷

And if girls aren't getting the "psychological education" that Edna O'Brien speaks of, where do they go to seek it out? They find it amongst themselves, and within whatever mode of creative expression lets them most comfortably process their emotions and make a connection with whatever they feel is spiritual in their lives.

Getting to "the interior truth of an emotion" seems to be a chief search in girls diaries, matched only by a search for connection and relationship. That emotion may spring from personal experience, or from the girl's reactions to the larger world and its confusing and enraging injustices. Wherever the emotion comes from, girls need a way to be personally and actively involved in their own coming to understanding about it—and about spirit issues, or other issues of their internal life. Reading about it, listening to it in song lyrics—is not enough. Girls need to get their hands dirty. Reading about an experience of a mind/body split doesn't replace the experience of expressing what it is she feels at that moment, in her own words. It means more, to convey what it is she just felt, or thought.

Beatrix, Age 16

I got so stoned last night that I feel out of place with my life. Like someone gave me a body but didn't even bother to see if it fit. ... Now it's just strange. This house isn't mine. I don't belong. I don't believe they are brewing coffe again while I see walls breathing with the ease of memory. I don't know how to put myself. Should I scream or whisper. Should I eat or starve. It really doesn't matter...

Leslie, Age 15

It would be so nice to talk with anyone and not talk about people. No one has the right to judge a person. We're not God! Why do we do this.

Nina L., Age 15

I feel all the futility, all the outrage of life today and it weighs on me terribly. To see this injustice, the lies and the cruelty, and to feel that I'm powerless. But what can I do? Can it be that a person will never be completely free? Can it be that freedom is only an illusion? Can it be that man's entire, endless, centuries-old struggle for freedom has died in vain?⁴⁸

Zowie, Age 12

This is a crazy, stupid place. I wish that I was never born. Then I'd be happy. The Soviets are killing and bombing. The US is the same. Each country is trying to see which is stronger. It is a child's game. World War III is going to finish us off. The whole world is going to go into violent destruction and then all that will be left is my diary.

Even when girls are not new to a sense of injustice, the emotions that attend those experiences of injustice may be new. The emotions may feel new to girls, as adolescents. In some cases, it might seem like their processing is reinventing the wheel, but it's not—because it's an honestly unique experience from their perspective. If a girl is thirteen and describing her own ideas about life and death, she's never felt or thought that before. She's never experienced that before. She's going to have to write out her own truths because she's just come into this knowledge. And coming to this knowledge herself is part of what establishes her own positive identity.

In this chapter, the writing in the excerpts we selected had a distinct purpose: to write through to some truth, to figure it out, no matter what "it" was. The girls were asking: "what are *my* morals? *my* ideas? What do I think the world/my life means? This is key. Girls who look within for their answers are likely to trust their own voices.

6. Voice

A diary is an act of language that, by speaking of one's self, sustains one's sense of being a self, with an autonomous and significant identity⁴⁹. Much of diary writing circles around voice. Central to the matter is the task of girls developing a distinctive personal voice during adolescence. The task of nurturing voice, coming to one's own voice is a particular challenge for girls becoming women, as it has been common for women's voices to be marginalized in cultures. In her dramatic way, Nina addresses her view of women and their collective silence:

Nina, Age 14

I often want to know what other women and girls think, then I'd be able to understand myself once and for all. We women do not know ourselves because we have no one to learn from. All the great writers are men and they describe us from their own point of view, they don't know us. I want to know women's thoughts, their wishes and needs. I personally am a tangle and chaos of all wishes and needs, men's as well as women's. And I'm proud to say that I have nothing but contempt for women because of their stupidity and inability to get out from under the power of men and stop being slaves because of something specifically feminine.⁵⁰

Nina has not named voice specifically but throughout the diaries there are examples of this kind of protest and resistance to what the girls see as an inadequate normal. Writing was finding a way, a personal voice, "breaking the silence," as one of the team said in an early meeting. So what was this silence? What about it needed to be broken?

There is the personal silence that is a moratorium on emotional expression that a girl goes through in the underground, the place where dullness, emotional hibernation and depression visit. But there is also, as Nina is notes, a collective silence. Women's struggle to have

voice and to communicate their concerns, their feelings and their perspectives is common across patriarchal cultures and so the private writing in diaries is one site where voice can be developed and claimed. Following one presentation, where the matter of voice was discussed, a woman approached one of us to say thank you for saving her life—she admitted several suicide attempts, and that she had never known what was missing for her. Now she did, and could begin to find it: her voice. As we read Beatrix’s diary, Molly’s diary, Victoria’s—we saw a beautiful strength emerge in the entries as the girls resisted and took ownership of their voices.

Victoria, AR

I got my voice out the way I wanted to and was proud of it.

The diaries frequently give voice to anxiety about writing and the desire of a girl to be heard. There is a persistent intent self-awareness coupled with the need to have someone who will listen to her voice.

Leslie Age 14

It would be so nice to talk with anyone and not talk about people. No one has the right to judge a person. We're not God! Why do we do this. Sometimes I try to help people but as soon as I say anything they shut me off as if I were a radio. What am I to do then. Maybe I don't make sense at times, but if they'd just let me help. If they did they'd be helping me.

Emily, Age 14

I'm calm now. I want to phone someone and tell them the whole story but I'm afraid I might start crying again or they might think I'm trying to get sympathy...

The diarists sometimes also write with a critical ear to what is acceptable, perhaps permissible to write down. It produced choices of what to write. Mary took to writing in a different part of her book to record her protest at her life and Lara slowly opened the darker secrets of her life, giving voice to them.

Mary, Age 13

I have decided to make a bad side of my diary, every time my Mum doesn't let me go out or hits me for no reason. I will pay her back when I get older. Well in the last few years she has hit me for no reason. Last night she wouldn't let me go to the mall and she won't let me go to my friend's party for no reason.

Lara G., Age 14

I have a few (I should say a lot) of secrets – personal ones – that I've never written out. Well guess what! I'm going to write out a couple now, and each day I write I'll include more if I think of them.

The personal silence will be broken. The diary will allow a fuller range of words, fears and secrets to be voiced on the page. After Mary's privacy was violated by having her diary read, her emerging voice was slowly silenced. That's when, Mary said, her musical voice became her authentic voice. But it was also when she substituted bulimia as a self-destructive strategy to manage her emotions. She said early on in a GDP meeting, "I have some sense that I was beaten into silence and I have not totally broken it yet." But she was not silent in her early writing. Mary clearly expresses her anger in her diary in this entry resisting her oppressive parental relationship:

Mary, Age 15

Mom if you ever read this I thought I would tell you I hate you. I think you're a fuckin' bitch and if you don't get out of my life within two years than I am getting out of yours. Everything I do or say you criticize. Woman I think you're insane and you need serious help...

Mary felt watched as a girl, even her thoughts forbidden. When she made a "bad side" of her diary, she was desperately seeking out a space of her own. She told us about never being on her own, in her house with siblings and a controlling mother who made sure she was busy

every moment of her day. The lack of solitude eventually affected the content of her writing. “What I wrote,” she told us, “was nothing in comparison to what I was experiencing.” For many girls, protected solitude sustains the inner work of developing voice. As an adult, Mary expresses regret that she wasn’t able to continue writing more. Her reflection on her diary writing showed us where disconnection with language or her own voice led Mary ultimately to abandon diary writing and substituting it with music—but also bulimia. She explains:

Mary, AR

Maybe words just mess me up because a lot of the time we were basically being manipulated and degraded with words. When that happens it is easy to lose the meanings behind the words not knowing what is really meant by what is being said and not really trusting what anybody says. Always looking for the underlying meaning. It can be very exhausting and could be also maybe why understanding what the teacher wanted us to do at school was so very hard. Music accesses a different part of the brain; at least it feels like it does.

Mary changed a great deal over the course of our project. At the beginning, she refused to contribute writing, saying her expression wasn’t clear. She didn’t feel she could assemble her thoughts in written form. But over the years we worked together, Mary emerged to be the one who asked the questions that pushed our thinking and research further, and as she formed these questions, she became incredibly articulate. She began to write, and her writing grew more and more clear. Her own process of being able to put words to what she thought and felt became complete. Mary herself was aware of this process, too, and wondered if she couldn’t have saved herself years of discontent if she had protected space for writing in her youth.

Voice and Resistance

In the diaries, the girls are giving voice to the resistance they feel so naturally. They must resist so much in their lives – parents, pressures to conform by an adult world, pressures from their peers—and some pressures are easier to resist on the outside than others. Voices have more credit in a space where there is fear of exposure. For those girls for whom writing was not safe, the fact they have given voice to their resistance at all in this medium speaks of such bravery, and a real belief in herself and her own value.

For some girls, diary writing is an act of resistance to being made over by culture. As Beatrix put it at 16 in her voice of resistance, “Fuck anyone who thinks they know how I feel.” As an adult, Beatrix said, “When your own values are at odds with the mainstream, you’ve still got to have a place to voice them. Very true for me. A way of preserving individuality.”

While girls struggle to own their voices and then use their voice to resist, they are still suffering from the exclusion and invisibility that comes with being young women, part of being underground, unseen and silenced. Even those close to them may not see or hear who is really there. And the girls themselves, in their resistance, don’t want anyone to assume they know what is emerging. They don’t wish to be summed up. They have worked long and hard at determining who they really are apart from outside sources, at claiming their voice, their identity, and their spirituality. It’s been a hard road. Who can assume they know what she’s just been through?

Mary and Beatrix discussed and reflected on the self-sacrificing voice that Mary had to resist in order to survive the passage into adulthood.

Mary, AR

As I was learning to let go of the bulimia I became more aware that there was also a very self sacrificing voice in my head which I also linked to God and that is the voice I had to let die because I slowly realized it was destroying me (and trust me I

truly felt like I was dying.) So as an adult there was a need to make a choice on what voice I was going to choose to listen to and learning to differentiate what was truly spiritual and loving and what, well to sound really cliché, and not that I believe in the devil, but basically what was the devil in disguise.

Beatrix, AR

I wonder, is this self-sacrificing voice gendered? Is it part of the message that girls receive that they need to care for others and sacrifice their own needs? Spirituality can get mired in this self-sacrifice (like a self-crucifixion).

Mary, AR

When I was young I can remember saying I would rather hurt myself than hurt anyone around me and I truly felt these words and basically that is what I did end up doing for many years. I think in many ways the voice does have to do with gender; however, in my circumstances this was also further confirmed by a mother who also reinforced that I need to not pay attention to how I feel but to instead put her and others' feelings before mine. As well, yes, the self-crucifixion is a very accurate depiction of what I believed.

But she added a comment that she was aware of a voice taking shape that was a form of self-care, same as the insight Molly had that a girl's soul takes care of her:

Mary, AR:

When (Beatrix) said (her) sensitivity is linked to (her) spirituality I can say that voice inside of me that said to not hurt myself too much –I would always make sure to eat lots of fruits and vegetables so that I wouldn't destroy myself too much and I would never throw that up – was linked to my spirituality.

Voice and Facing Reality

In workshop or conference presentations, we begin by reading quotes from the diaries about a wide range of concerns from coming to grips with mortality and the value of life to the moment she stares up at the stars and knows she is less than a speck of dust in the universe. We read quotes like these:

Molly, Age 14

But in the last hour of life, I know one doubts if there is a god. Yet it is the only thread of hope we have to hang onto... I love life. I value it more than anything. Please god, Please don't take it away from me.

Lara G., Age 15

I don't find facing reality a very healthy thing to do. In fact, I think I can get along fine without ever letting myself become totally aware of what's happening in the world. Because I don't like much that's going on around this old planet of ours. I'd much rather just ignore it and proceed with my naive methods of obtaining little bits of happiness here and there than be brave and say to the world, "Hey, I realize you're in quite a mess but that doesn't scare me because that's what I'm here for, I'm here to save you, to stop all the wars and poverty and . . . I'm here to turn you away from self-destruction." Shit, at this point in my life I'm more worried about avoiding my own self-destruction.

Beatrix, Age 16

My life pisses me off. I just don't know how to take it. I always try to do my best. I always try to take care of myself and do what I think is right. I don't want to hurt anybody at all. Why do I always fuck it all up. I can't do anything right. Actually that's not true. I'm just a teenager and I get paranoid like everyone else.

Emily, Age 15

...I've taken to stargazing, makes me feel small, but encourages me, to look.

Across the range of emotions and insights these readings caused women in the audience to nod in recognition and tell us that they hear their own voices from that age, and remember who they were as girls. There is a wonderful combination of innocence and maturity being expressed. As an adult Molly said:

Molly, AR

And I can recall my pleasure in the kind of magic that writing a diary entry worked for me—the transformation it created in me. Whether it stilled me, made me more sure of something I felt, or brought me some new bit of insight, writing would change something in my world . . .

The diaries are also a record of hope as girls use their writing to survive and believe in the future, giving voice to themselves. In the entry below, Evelyn Lau writes of herself in the third person, but she sees forward through her difficulties to someone she is becoming who is worthy of life and a future.

Evelyn L., Age 15

It doesn't matter though. It is pure fantasy for her to think that one day the audience will breathe and her scribbling will be transformed into print on the pages of a book. There were all the diaries she wrote since she was six years old, but she ran away and destroyed those volumes of ink and paper. She tries to compensate now, recording her discoveries and disillusionments, the gradual learning process and the falling apart, but she has no motivation except that writing means life, and it gives her the feeling that she still belongs inside herself.⁵¹

Voice and Self-Censure

For Joan, writing was a romantic endeavor, not accessible enough for her practical expression needs. When she tried it and it did not meet with the romantic image, it was left behind. When girls try to take up the practice of diary writing not as an expression for their voice, but as a form of striving for an ideal image, the practice fails. Without the motivation of self-expression, it can't be sustained. For some girls, the idea of a perfect little notebook with daily entries, or beautiful handwriting (or witty, well-written blog posts) may create a barrier to using diaries as a useful form of self-expression.

Many girls are familiar with the romanticized images of writers such as *Little Women's* Jo. Diary writing is often presented as a feminine activity, and those who find this image appealing may attempt to write. Likewise, those girls working against this feminine identity would be turned off of diary writing. But the girls for whom the image appeals might find that in trying to meet the ideal, she edits what she wants to say, or she abandons the effort when it doesn't look the way she expects. This was the reaction of our team's extrovert:

Joan, AR

One thing, I always hated my handwriting, I was so conscious that it didn't look right or that it was too messy. I mean come on, what was the point in writing in a diary if you couldn't even make it look like how it might look in the movies? Also, I was always wanting to write down things that would be considered "cool," like the time I wrote down every person I was friends with, how many times I smoked, drank, kissed a certain boy... As if anyone would be interested in those things but me.

Joan was good looking, smart, and very involved with her church community. She had many friends. And yet, her self-criticism meant that she couldn't even stand her own handwriting. Joan said she felt, as all adolescents do to one degree, that she was watched all the time—but she felt it especially intensely. She even wrote in her diary that she

always cared what people thought of her. Joan wrote letters to herself to read later, but still censored these. They were marked ‘For Joan’s eyes only,’ but she still worried about them being found.

By contrast, Emily’s diary was inspired by a romanticized ideal, naming herself for the fictional heroine who inspired her practice. But this image did not deter Emily from keeping the practice of diary writing into adulthood. Joan stopped writing not long after she started, not feeling it was the right venue for her to process her emotions and thoughts—something she did better with others.

Emily began her diary with childlike enthusiasm and inspiration, setting up her relationship to her little book right away:

Emily, Age 12

These are just a few of the things I thought of while at the beach for a weekend. I got the idea from a book I was reading about Emily of New Moon. I’ve tried writing a diary many times before but never succeeded. This time I vow I will finish it. My diary will have lots of poetry in it, also from Emily! Hope we’ll be good friends! Love Emily.⁵²

And it is perhaps this identification with the diary as her “friend” that keeps Emily, as it kept other diarists, from the self-censure that would prevent her from developing her voice.

7. Self-Care

Many psychologists and sociologists writing about adolescence assert that it is an artificial phase, a product of a society in which children grow up without a clear idea of what their lives will be, and with such a vast number of decisions to make. “Adolescence is...not a universal feature of development, but an adaptation enforced upon contemporary children by the complexity of their society. The extensive range of choices for adult roles, the continuous threats of failure, the paucity of support in face of failure, cloud the paths to adulthood, and delay maturity.”⁵³ But the adolescent brain, according to the research of the past sixteen years, is still developing and changing—particularly the prefrontal cortex, the site of planning, organization, judgment, impulse control, and reasoning.⁵⁴ Coming from that perspective, adolescence is a wholly natural developmental phase, one in which adolescents are having strong emotional responses that they are only just learning to mediate with reasoning. They’re building brain capacity, which is hard work—along with building their adult identities. It’s not a wonder the diarists appear to be under stress.

One of the most remarkable things we found during the project was evidence within the diaries that the girls were finding ways to care for themselves through periods of stress, and in the midst of their own demanding emotional states. The relational challenges that sparked these states were documented and analyzed by the diarists on the page (which we will examine in Chapters Eight through Ten). Picking up a pen to sort out the mental, emotional, and spiritual states in play was a method for looking after themselves—which is in itself a crucial skill to learn as girls evolve into women.

Part way through the project, we assembled all the ways women had talked about the way diaries helped them look after themselves, particularly to sooth and calm themselves during stress. Here are a few of the ways they summed up the process:

- a mind mapping process, “to turn my head off, but in reality it turns your head on” changing gears trying to quiet the out of control “noise” in our heads
- letting out the “deeper and slower thoughts”
- un-burdening
- you’re wrapped up in emotions and reactions of and to the day – you need to release this first
- a process of getting to “cruising altitude”
- the submersion into meditative space

And the first descriptor the original group of diarists gave it was “a transformation to calm.”

Transformation to Calm

Chapter Two introduced the concept of the diaries as being a practice for entering into a different mental space, beginning with chatter, and calming down to a state that was not always accessible for the diarists as adolescents. Some talked about how they wrote to still themselves, or reach to a calm inner place—some of the team continuing to do so in adulthood. Many diary entries ended with the thread of thought tied up, or at least an end reached—the energy expended. So many of us wrote before sleep, and the writing brought sleep. The following excerpt from Victoria includes the moments after writing:

Victoria, Age 16

...Why does everyone keep leaving me? I know I am going to live my life. But why does it have to be so hard? It hurts too much. I am so afraid. I mean who is 'he' going to take next? Please talk to him and tell him to stop it. I haven't done anything wrong. Ever. Daddy, what should I do? I'm sorry for not writing longer. It's just I can't stop crying. I love you so much, and tell that to him.

Victoria, (AR)

I wipe the tears that have streamed down my face to my chin. As I feel my body exhausted, I fold up the paper and leave it on the desk. On the top of the folded piece of paper, I write: I'VE HAD ENOUGH. I lay my head down on the pillow, bringing my knees up close to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. I close my eyes and fall asleep.

Sometimes, a decision was made by the end of a girl's entry:

Emily, Age 15

I've actually really cried over this whole thing, and have known what I was crying about...

I'm not going to be ready for anything but light kissing for a while. And getting feelings on the page could make way for thoughts.

Zowie, Age 13

My brain is making me think. I am not thinking. My brain is. Why can't I have control over the things I do? My brain is wondering. Hello I'm a brain. Actually I'm quite stupid- oh brain stop interfering! See? I was only put on this earth to reproduce and die. So why were we born in the first place? Who am I? What if I died? What then? I don't want to be nothing. Why. I don't want to be dead. Dead. What does that mean? I've (my brain) has wondered off the topic... Now that I have my feelings sorted I think.

Occasionally, an entry ended with an acknowledgment that the writing had shifted her state of mind.

Leslie, Age 14

Thoughts swirl around in my mind and spin out onto the paper

Thoughts, ideas won't let me sleep until my pen falls asleep, exhausted.

Take the load off my shoulders in the form of paper with writing and you ease my mind.

Nina, Age 13

On our way home, everything irritated me: Ira's stupid chatter, Ksyusha's laughter. I was disappointed, though there wasn't any reason for that, still that's the way I felt. At my own behavior in school! When will I learn to control myself? I promised I wouldn't sit near Levka and then went and sat next to him. I swore I wouldn't wait for him after school and then did just that: I wore myself out watching for him and, when he appeared, screamed frantically along with the other girls. My sensible ideas conflict with the unbalanced reality of my actions...

What is life? Why live? Live, comes the answer, until you die. Easy to say! People fall in love when they're young, then they marry, have children and spend the rest of their life cooking meals and grumbling, 'Is this life?' Is that really the life I want? I want to be a great and extraordinary person. Dreams, dreams! Dreams are what give me the chance to feel happy at least sometimes. Oh, how I love to write. Once I've got it on paper I calm down, as if someone had put everything in my soul in a certain order, so that not one little part could trouble me ⁵⁵

Of girls approaching adolescence, Mary Pipher said, in *Reviving Ophelia*, "Calmness is replaced by anxiety. Their way of thinking is changing. Far below the surface they are struggling with the most basic of human questions: What is my place in the universe, what is my meaning?"⁵⁶ It is hard to overestimate the anxiety that accompanies being faced with responsibility for your own life for the first time. Girls becoming women are becoming responsible for their own lives, as well as becoming physically able to bring life into the world. Existential questions that would not have occurred to them at seven or eight are now front and centre. This is profound—as adults we have a hard time imagining what it's like to be thinking about death as a real possibility for the first time, or to be pondering our purpose here on earth for the first time—that question becomes old, even if

unanswered, in adulthood. But for girls, asking “What is the meaning of life,” is no cliché—it is completely fresh, and important. And this question is huge cause for anxiety.

Molly, Age 14

My imagination just wants to make a mark in the world, so if I do vanish, at least others will remember me. Even if I do that, the world, along with all of my books would probably be blown up by some politician that's afraid of having the embarrassing experience of having a small bomb dropped on him. He hears this, that Oregon got a little ball dropped on it, that wiped out Portland, and he presses the big red button for “NUK” and away we go. Vanishing into non-existence. Well, I'll try to ignore it for now, (my imagination that is,) and hope for a normal, trendy little fourteen year old life. Free of all stress, worry, and emotional overflow.

Girls in the in-between space of adolescence cannot live a life completely free of stress, worry, or “emotional overflow.” But they can calm themselves down, even in the face of all that anxiety. For the diarists we studied, writing achieved the calm.

Victoria, AR:

Writing was a stilling process. Merely the act of moving one's hand against the paper, creating words, lead to calmness, a calmness that was found in few other places. When I finished my thoughts for that day, I knew that they weren't solved, but I knew that everything felt just a bit better because I got it out.

Victoria says the mere act of writing was enough to calm. If we consider handwriting a diary entry from a purely physical standpoint, the focus required to form letters and make the small motions to write is stilling, in perhaps more ways than the act of typing an entry, when you don't actually need to look at either the keyboard or the place where the words appear. There is more concrete connection to the physical task required of handwriting. And the sense that worries can be physically

removed from the mind and body and placed over there, in a different place, has therapeutic value. Externalizing her worries as things that are not her, but things apart that she could choose to attend to or set aside, means they are not stuffed to resurface later at inconvenient times, but acknowledged—at the same time they are evicted from her heart, to preserve her sense of well-being.

When we consider the content of diary entries, we see the act of writing serves to still and calm the writer in another way—since getting the chatter out of the way, then liberating the “depth,” getting at what she really wants to say, relieves agitation. To get at what is really important and find her own way to express that is powerful. After writing what is real for her—there is release.

Emily, Age 14

Dear Nahtanoj:

I wish I had someone to talk to. I hate my parents. I hate it having them divorced. I hate having to put up with them bickering back and forth through me and giving all sorts of implications of what horrible people each says the other is.

I wish I had a friend close enough so I could go and cry on their shoulder when fights like this happen. She put me through hell when I was in grade five saying horrible things about dad. And I can still remember every word... She used to say “Someday when you’re older Emily, I’ll tell you all the horrible things your father did.” I’ve hardly ever written about this before. but it happens a lot. I decided since I don’t have anyone close enough to me to talk to I might as well tell you. I’m calm now.

Most of the diarists felt physically relaxed after writing down what was really important. The release of what they held onto internally allowed them to let go of tension the same way a good cry could. Emily makes that connection in her entry—she writes she wishes for a friend so she could cry on their shoulder, but instead, Emily makes a friend of her diary.

Many world religions share the goal of training the mind to be in the moment. In childhood, this state of “flow” seems to come naturally. We all remembered moments of complete absorption in our task at hand. Molly remembered long summer afternoons spent exploring and building forts in the properties at the top of her road, afternoons that passed in what seemed like a heartbeat. The diarists remembered being so focused on reading a good story, making things, or even watching television that nothing permeated their consciousness in that moment. They weren’t self-conscious in those moments.

In childhood, the world would seem to have the capacity to narrow and expand at the same time. But in adolescence, as girls become self-conscious of everything in their lives, they’re blocked from accessing this flow state, the ability to be in the moment and transcend the self. Writing in a diary, however, married the self-consciousness with the action of being in the moment, slowing the writer down. In fact, the diary entries served to get the girl “beyond the self” through an examination of the self, or a close look at her world from her own point of view.

Like Vicky says in *A Ring of Endless Light*, “it’s as though I’m out on the other side of myself. I’m not in the way.”⁵⁷ The diarists described this as the state of being that the diary writing let them access—a state in which they open to something transformative. As Victoria put it, they’re “blanking out, but still going somewhere.”

But writing was not always the route to more insight. The calm could come from reaching insight, or it could come from just putting the chaos on paper to hold it contained in a book, instead of keeping it inside herself to cause agitation. As Emily put it in her diary at age 13:

Oh well I shouldn't be bothering you with these outbursts but it feels so good to get it off my chest. I believe that is the chief use of a diary, in order to have a big emotional time of it for a while and then feel better after because you've cleared the air after it's become polluted with emotions.

While it may be worrisome that Emily viewed emotions as “polluting,” and while there is a lot that could be said about the valuing of emotions in her family context, she did take care of herself in the moment by clearing the air in order to feel better.

As adolescent diarists, the girls sought out a calm place in order to find self-knowledge, and that they could create calm in their minds by emptying themselves of the “chatter.” They created their own space—either physically removing themselves to a private space or relying on the diary to create private space in the midst of others. They wrote to get absorbed in the task, and the state of absorption was a worthy end in itself. At the end, they were happier. They’d found the key to processing and becoming alert to their own selves—that reflection requires a certain amount of calm.

Sensitivity and Vulnerability

In a word-association activity at the beginning of the project, the researchers linked “diarists” to certain assumptions they held. They began with “Diarists are...” and the list evolved:

- “girls”
- “quiet”
- “They reflect on their lives.”
- “They look internally.”
- “They are more sensitive.”
- “They can be seduced.”
- “They are more vulnerable. And so a vulnerable form of expression, one where things are less open to interpretation, and more confessional... is appropriate.”

The list led to reflections on the girls themselves as vulnerable, and how this linked to their heightened sensitivity. It also raised the question of whether the act of diary writing made the girls vulnerable—something explored in Chapter Three: Privacy.

Beatrix, AR

I would have been scornful of this label at the time, but if I step outside of the bravado, perhaps this was true, and journaling was a way for me to express this/preserve this. Preserving sensitivity.

The following excerpt from a conversation that some of the researchers had around vulnerability contrasts two perspectives. No matter how different the girls were, whether they saw themselves as “tough” on the exterior or wearing their vulnerability visibly on the outside, diary writing preserved their sensitivity so they did not have to carve off that part of themselves as they underwent the process of transformation to adulthood. As we mentioned in Chapter Three, Molly felt more comfortable with her vulnerability. Beatrix responded with her feelings about vulnerability in adolescence:

Molly, AR

I think girls who are somewhat comfortable with being vulnerable write in journals. I think I felt comfortable enough with who I was that even if someone found my journal and tried to publicize it in some way, it wouldn't break me. It was a risk I could take.

Beatrix, AR

In contrast, I was not comfortable with being vulnerable. I considered vulnerability to be a weakness in myself, though it was to be expected in other people. Perhaps the journal gave me a place where I could be secretly vulnerable. I think my fear of being publicly vulnerable (of letting anyone see) was because of my feelings of emotional abandonment from my parents. I had to appear not to care. Nothing could appear to get to me. So I think this has helped me unlock another key: for some girls, a diary could provide a safe place to keep this sensitivity (vulnerability) alive, so that it is not entirely suppressed, so the hardening is not complete. Obviously it plays a different role for girls whose sense of self is strong enough, as Molly wrote, that they can risk vulnerability.

Diary writing, whether or not the writer feels vulnerable to begin with, can be said to create vulnerability by exposing her internal self. Mary reflected:

Mary, AR

Words are less open to interpretation than other artistic forms, or spiritual practices... Music, being wordless, can convey emotion, maybe even a story, but so much [of the interpretation of music] is the grafting of my experience and thoughts to what I hear. Yes, this is true for words too. I must bring my prior knowledge for interpretation. But, being words, they tell more. There's less to make up on my side. And so, for a girl who uses words to get on the other side of herself, there's more revealing going on, which leaves her more vulnerable. There are girls who see the journal as yet another vulnerability.

The danger of having their diary read by others must have, as it was in Mary's family context, made writing things down seem dangerous. Being exposed in contexts where weakness provided a resource for attack meant that vulnerability had to be hidden. Beatrix knew this as well but for different reasons. Being safe and protecting oneself is part of an adolescent journey.

Preserving this vulnerability and emotional sensitivity is a crucial part of self-care for growing girls. They may do it in solitude, or they may do it with a best friend, or someone they trust with their inner lives—even if that is only themselves in the future. Writing to the future self, as was explored in Audience, is another way girls perform self-care through diary writing. Mary's direction of her entries to God was a way for her to care of herself. In the midst of bulimia, Mary was able to heed an inner voice that advocated for self-care.

Mary, AR

I was grappling with the idea of sensitivity while brushing my teeth. I looked at my teeth and thought people might wonder why if I was bulimic are my teeth not destroyed. I thought, in

response, because although I struggled with bulimia there was also a voice inside of me that I could still hear that said I need to take care of myself. And that made me remember that voice I used to hear. Initially I couldn't hear the voice that told me to destroy myself. I just did it (bulimia) not really knowing why I was doing it.

Mary also describes how she continued to listen to a tiny voice that urged for self-care in the midst of her destructive behaviour. Girls who can attend to this small voice that sends messages giving perspective and hope in the midst of their painful transformation will be more likely to prevail against the forces that would subvert their emotional sensitivity. A diary is one way to access the inner voice: the inner voice that provides a conduit, however slim, to the sensitivity within.

Mary, AR

When (Beatrix) said (her) sensitivity is linked to (her) spirituality I can say that voice inside of me that said to not hurt myself too much—I would always make sure to eat lots of fruits and vegetables so that I wouldn't destroy myself too much and I would never throw that up—was linked to my spirituality.

In the midst of adolescent storms and calms, writing was a way of “making sane.” Mary’s struggle with disordered eating may have been worse than it was if it weren’t for listening to the voice within that asked her to take care of herself. And Molly’s sense of losing her sanity as she entered adolescence was lessened through her diary writing practice.

Like others, Molly went through a period in which she worried excessively about the end of the world. She was sensitive to news broadcasts at the time about the threat of nuclear war, and carried that concern through her days, and the dread at night as she tried to think about the unfathomable concept of ceasing to exist—naming those feelings the “Vanishing Syndrome.” These concerns made her feel very separate from the “trendy teenage” lives being lived around her—and

that separation made her fear she was going crazy. But recording her thoughts in her diary helped alleviate that concern.

Molly, AR

It was my way of not being crazy. I know people thought I was weird. But the reality was that writing did not change that either, but it did have some impact on me not being crazy.

The diary writing was Molly's way through that period of her life. It not only helped calm her fears, the process developed a way for Molly to look after herself—and not just emotionally and mentally.

Molly, Age 13

I've got it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I do!!!!

I need the answers to the questions, but I found one. We look after our souls as we do our children, and we don't worry extensively over our offspring, because we know they can take care of themselves, so, our soul, like our children will take care of themselves. We don't have to worry.

I answered the biggie now there are only the others to answer. Maybe, if we don't have to worry over our souls because they can take care of themselves, so they know the answers. If they do, it would be nice to know where we are going to die, and why, where, how, and what is the last #, and where the universe ends, and maybe, we could just ask to our souls, and they could tell us, and we could reach inner peace. That would be nice. I suppose that is my next question. How we could ask ourselves the rest of the answers.

It's nothing to feed yourself, or take care of yourself, putting on a sweater to keep warm is easy. Maybe, unconsciously, we look after ourselves spiritually.

Molly claimed that her soul, our souls are tended maternally—and like children, they find ways to take care of themselves. And as she wrote this insight down, she nurtured her own soul and trusted the inner intensity of the process. She was aware, and claimed something from beyond her awareness. Her writing fed her. As an adult, Molly reflected:

Molly, AR

[This writing] led to an exploration of my primary knowledge. I found much more meaning in laying down the experiences I had, and in creating the meaning 'from scratch' as it were. When I could answer the question with understanding that came from me as much as the question did, it affirmed my belief in myself as a resourceful person.

We've already considered the generation of personal truths in diary writing. It's also important to note that for a girl creating her own truths is a way to care for herself, by building her own respect for her thoughts and ideas.

All of us expressed a vulnerability of some degree. At an early meeting Beatrix laughed nervously and exclaimed how at risk she was as a girl—something she conceived of but didn't know to what degree until she re-read her diaries. Mary, Molly, Victoria, Dorothy and Joan were all reminded of a girlhood vulnerability through reading their diaries. Vulnerable, and yet with a core of strength that may not have been visible on the outside.

Girls take up the practice of keeping a diary in part because they instinctually know they need to take care of themselves. Writing serves a purpose. Though the ups and downs of adolescence and the specific contexts of each and every girl's life, writing a diary is one means for survival, one way adolescents naturally find the means to process through crisis, feeling misunderstood, or merely to process through the years when the rational part of the brain is scrambling to catch up with the emotional.

8. Diaries and Intimacy

Girls in their adolescence may well be spiritually and emotionally vulnerable, and cannot always go through the complex states of crisis, pain, and identity in a healthy manner. In examining the diaries, we realized that girls were frequently capable of finding ways to help themselves, on their own, through these passages. One common focus we found in the diary writing indicated that girls also sought out relationships with others, or expressed a yearning for relationship that was not fulfilled. If we consider that the diary's role in identity creation is to act as a site for reflexivity, to assist a girl to reveal her self to herself in the arenas she is interested, it makes sense that so much of a girl's diary can be devoted to processing (and speculating about) intimate relationships—whether that's a friendship, or a romantic relationship.

The yearning for relationship is a significant concern that runs in parallel to the yearning for solitude that we identified earlier. It is important to note that the diary itself is a primary relationship – the diary is spoken to as a close confidant, addressed with love, with connection. (Emily's "Dear Nahtanoj;" Molly signing off, "I'll talk to you later, diary;" Victoria addressing her "Daddy,") The diary serves as an intimate friend, with its imagined audience who listens, who cares, critically important in the battle against loneliness, and as a support while a girl seeks relationship, and navigates new conflicts with her family.

Yearning to be Known

Jenn, Age 15

Contact

*Of course I am secure,
one minute let me apply my mask.*

*Pawns of our psyche,
and our selfset boundaries.*

*we wear costumes to hide
ourselves.*

*The society we have
created to be a safety net is
cold, and consistently challenging our being.*

*We yearn for
human contact,
for something real
and true.*

Throughout the diaries there is a contradictory desire to be known, seated beside a desire to remain in solitude. At the heart of a girl's yearning for a relationship, whether that is for a romantic relationship, or a deep connection with a friend, or parent—there is the need to be known for who she really is—not just what is seen on the surface. At 12, Anaïs Nin expresses these conflicting desires.

Anaïs N., Age 12

My language is unknown. What a joy it will be if I am overlooked! Then my treasures will belong to me alone. When I die I will burn these pages and my thoughts scribbled here will live only in eternity with the one who expressed them!

But of course, if someone should understand, if someone should hear this contradictory language, these novel impressions, I would be very happy indeed.⁵⁸

It would make her happy to be understood, to be heard, to have the truth of her inner life to be known by another. It appears that often this speculation about the diaries being read is how the diarists contemplated having their inner selves known.

In a self-critical passage, Molly expresses a desire to be known through her writing, even while being negative about “mak(ing) things up.” She knows writing is a key to her inner self, and a way to make herself known and memorable in the world.

Molly, Age 14

My imagination created things, like having someone to love, for example. Or my imagination blows my books up into great proportions, and I end up thinking they will be some great literature that everyone will read. My imagination just wants to make a mark in the world, so if I do vanish, at least others will remember me.

Other diarists express an interest in having their diaries exposed at some point in the future, or at a distance—what is private right now may be a source of being known in the future—when the immediacy of the content (and the fragility of the girl’s passage into adulthood) is no longer so vulnerable.

Beatrice, Age 16

Well what a diary writing day. Sometimes I think I write too much. Maybe I’m wasting paper but no. I enjoy writing so I write. It’s not as if I have to create a masterpiece or anything. But the fact is still there, it’s written down on paper. This book may well survive me and be read by my grandchildren’s children. What will they think? Would they wish that they, too, could have lived way back in the stone age of the 20th century? Or will they read it and be glad they don’t.

Maggie Owen Wadelton, Age 12 (1908)

I think it may well be this book will fall into the hands of me grandchildren or me great-grandchildren and they'll wonder what I was like. I will set down what I am like for them. ⁵⁹

Evelyn L., Age 15

I'm not going to die, because I've decided to shape a book out of this journal and will see to it that it gets flung whole into the bowels of the world. The book will redeem me, justify my existence. ⁶⁰

These girls are proud of their inner lives—to the point, in Lau's diary, that the inner life on paper is what would make her life valuable. The inner life is treasured, and feels exceptional—even though it is not any different from another girl's. Nina Lugovskaya recognized this:

Nina L., Age 14

It's hard to reconcile myself to the idea that I'm ordinary. It's annoying to think that everyone has as complicated an inner life as I do, that everyone feels things as deeply. That's probably the case and yet, reading about adolescents in books, I haven't once encountered aspects of myself, whereas in grown-ups I've read about I have- that makes me a little proud. ⁶¹

So a conundrum remains: the inner life is something to be cherished in secret, but the only way to be known for who she really is would be to reveal her inner life. Consequently girls seek people they think worthy, or they look for someone to love, with the hope that the love is returned with the same intensity. Only then can their inner lives be revealed in safety.

From the outside, some of the peers they knew looked like they had an easier time of it socially—looked like they fit in, and looked like others knew them. For some of the diarists, the desire to fit in connected to this desire to be known, while at the same time recognizing that

concealing the inner life was a requirement of fitting in. Part of growing up is the struggle to determine how much to reveal, and how much to withhold. For many, it was hard to know.

Nina L., Age 14

It's not easy, really, to know how to behave. I've been wrestling with myself for a long time and have achieved only negligible results. The one thing I can do is be quiet. I don't tell anyone about what worries me. Why should I? Some people have a bad habit of blurting everything they know.⁶²

Molly, Age 14

This war for popularity is hard, and it's going very very slow...I don't think Chelsea likes me very much. I'll have to change that. I gotta shut up for once, too. Every time I'm around them I start talking about me, me, me, me. I gotta stop that...

Molly returned to her battle with privacy over the years as she expressed a strong desire to be known and included, alongside the horrible social reality of being embarrassing by saying too much, or by appearing vulnerable and inviting exclusion by doing so. She searched for a trustworthy reader, and experienced the risks of that.

Molly, Age 17

I let too many people know too much about my life. I'm going to have to start being more private with my friends and less with my diary.

Offering the diary to a friend or loved one to read is a practice that some of the girls ventured into. Molly shared her Age 15 diary with her friend across the globe, a friend who, like her diary, provided a listening ear for her written emotional expression. Molly began addressing this friend in her diary after letting the friend read entries from her previous volume, and encouraged her friend to write an entry inside the diary. One of Molly's crushes that winter found out

about her attraction from another friend who had read her diary with her permission, and consequently she stopped the practice of sharing her little book with anyone but her distant friend.

Molly, Age 15

It's really ridiculous, the way I open up so much, spill my guts out all overtheplace... Well, I'm working on that... Another thing—No one's reading my diary again except you.

Others shared their journals. Emily shared entries on a couple of occasions with her boyfriend.

Emily, Age 14

Dear Nohtanaj,

Today I did something I've thought about doing with many other people but never actually went thru with it. I showed Justin you. I'm not really sure what to think. He didn't read the whole thing. Just the last entry. I couldn't tell him how I felt and a note is too mushy so I let him read you. Do you feel desecrated? I don't really. Well maybe a little. But I trust him.

A sensitivity regarding the violation of the sacredness of the diary is evident in Emily's discomfort. The desire to reveal what is concealed is partly a desire to share the inner life, but also a desire to form a meaningful bond through this sharing. For Emily, addressing the diary as her loved one was one way to connect the two—inner life and object of affections. For Lara, sharing journals meant trading with a friend, which gave her a window into her friend's inner life—knowing her at the same time she was revealing herself (at least in the limited way she did in her school journal), and was aware of the paradoxical deepening of both intimacy and distance through this. And in doing so, she was sorting out an essential fact of human nature—how unknowable we really are—at the age of 14.

Lara G., Age 14

...me & Vir... decided to trade diaries. (I mean journals.) But not this one; the journals that we've been writing in English class...

I loved reading it; some parts were hilarious, others were very serious and expressive. I got the same feelings reading it as I got when Vir told me of her life in Vietnam...It made me realize that although I may think I know her really well, I actually don't. It's a sort of funny feeling; like Vir is suddenly a stranger to me—my best friend a stranger! —but also I feel a great respect and affection for her...

Victoria reported that she shared entries with her mother, in addition to her correspondence with her. Yearning for a connection with family members though was not something the GDP found was significant in the diaries. When family arises in the diaries, it was most often in the background, a mention of a fight with her mother, or a sibling. With the exception of Nina Lugovskaya and Lara Gilbert's diaries, the practice of writing about relationship focused on the girl's friends, other peers, and romantic interests—when it came to family, the diary served as a site for processing conflict, but less for yearning. Victoria's diary, addressed to her deceased father, was threaded through with the yearning that comes out of loss and grief. But there was little wrestling to be done, the way there was in the girls' passages that wrote about yearning for intimacy.

At times, the journal became the mediator for a girl's conflicts between peers and parents or guardians.

Victoria, Age 16

After school I did stuff with Elizabeth. We're becoming really good friends now. Me + Miriam too. Liz and I talked about how we're going to rent a place (Liz + Me + Miriam + Trish) in Victoria and go to UVic. It's going to be so much fun. And we only have one rule – no smoking in the apartment.

Mom says it's a bad idea because you're supposed to see the world w/o your friends along with you. But if you need something to look forward in life otherwise there's no point in living—I think this is a pretty awesome dream. I can't wait. Just the girls. Total independence.

Maggie W., Age 12

All the well known people you read of have trouble with their families. Look at Joan of Arc and Queen Elizabeth and St Therese. Their families didnt understand them when they started to be noble so they went away from their families. No one understands me either. Some day I will leave Castel Rea and go out into the world and me name will ring down the corridors of time no doubt⁶³

Carla, Age 15

I must be terrible to be with. I'm sorry I made life so hard for my mum. I should have just let her be happy. I'm so fucking selfish and now I'm taking all the happiness out of this family. How long till they want me out...I want my friends back. I can stay grounded with them they can't send me away when they're through.

At other times, the diary was a place to rehearse confrontation with a parent, or to declare one's thoughts instead of in a confrontation.

Beatrix, Age 17

My life is mine, only I can live it. So why the fuck are all these fucken goofs trying to tell me what to do. Everyone except Dad. He's so fucken neutral I just want to scream at him. Just to get a reaction. I tell him something I did or plan to do and he's like "oh...hmmm" he never gave me shit for staying out all night, he doesn't get upset and say he'll miss me when I tell him I'm moving, he's not happy when I give him the scoop on whatever gorgeous man, he's not impressed if I spend three hours cleaning

his house while he's at work. I mean fuck. I love him so much and I know he loves me, I rarely doubt it but he doesn't understand me. Or maybe he does and just can't get involved cause he wants me to work it on my own. I don't know. I just don't fucken know anymore.

Making sense of family relationships and parents was often impossible for girls. And the distance being created with parents as the girls become women may be, in part, the developmental work of individuation—yet it contributes to their sense of isolation, fuelling their desire for connections with peers, and for an intimate relationship with someone.

It might be that the girls who have a warring desire to be known and to be hidden thwarted their own efforts to reveal their inner lives, in an unconscious way, to satisfy the latter requirement. While girls wish to seek out solitude at required moments, feeling alone and outside of her peer group or her family (while not uncommon) is not something that feels right. Girls make an effort to care for themselves here too, through the use of their diaries. They use them to sort out what is required to create or maintain a connection with others, something that the girls found, often simply required that the inner life be kept unshared—as painful as that was.

Molly, Age 17

I started reading Cat's Eye today. Bettina's mom said we were too young to appreciate it. We'd have to wait for middle age. She was wrong. I'm understanding it very well. I know, inside, I'm older and wiser than 17. I know I have depth, the surface shit of everyday life is just clouding it up, and I can see how much everyone else likes it. They respond to this "me" better. They like a more shallow Molly. Easier to judge. Easier to read.

Girls find ways to form and maintain connections to others—even when those connections are difficult, or endanger their wellbeing. They work to resolve relationships, and make connections to others beyond the self.

And while the diary may be the confessor for girls, as an intimate friend, it was also a comfort. Girls “hung out” with their diaries the way they would a close friend they could trust. Entries like the one below reveal the comfort and company that a diary provided, while the girl spent her time longing for relationship.

Emily, Age 13

*...I'm painting a teddy bear holding a heart for Jon for V-Day.
(Ceramic) I hope he likes it.*

*Did you know that when Murphy rolls over he creaks? Your such
a cute doggie aren't you! I'd better stop before I run out of things
to say!*

*TOO-DOO-LOO FOR NOW! (with music notes drawn around
it)*

Love Emily

The scope of yearning for relationship is large—perhaps even too large for this book. What we can say here is that this was a primary function of the diary for girls—to chronicle, tease out the meaning in, or just to make real and significant those longings for true relationship.

To Love and Be Loved

For many girls, the desire to love another, and be loved by that person, was a deep yearning explored in their diary. The importance of relationships and learning about relationships was often a central concern and it included thinking about the complexities of love and how it works, including the place of loving oneself.

Zowie, Age 17

*Why is it so hard for me to get love or to love others? Maybe it's
because I can't love myself!*

Victoria, Age 18

I really want to be purely happy. And I honestly think that by going away and doing everything for myself (not for mom, not for guys, not for girlfriends, not for anyone – maybe even not for you daddy) then maybe I'll be happy. It's true, you have to make yourself happy first. Then you can be happy with other people. You have to love yourself. Then you can love someone else.

Seeking friends and connection isn't easy in adolescence for these girls, who are hyperaware of the dichotomy between how people act with each other, and how they relate to themselves. Many of the diarists expressed a need to break out of their shells and natural reservation in order to find love and connection. Leslie laments the need for reservation in her relationships—and grieves a simpler, and innocent view of love and its expression.^{vi}

Leslie, Age 14

Everyone is so reserved. Why can't we, if we feel sad be able to cry and know someone will ask you what's wrong, care about you, Feel with you; it's not impossible. Why are we scared to love each other and show it? Can't we hold each other when we're happy: just to show them we love them? Not just family and relatives. anyone!!! We can love one another, I know we can, if we just try! If some read this they'd just scorn at it. Some just wouldn't be able to understand. They'd have a few names for me. That's the trouble we're always saying something about each other or calling each other names. It may be just a little phrase but how can we know how much it might hurt. If we were more open it would be better. If we could tell people what we think of them, not behind their backs but right to them, there might not be so many misunderstandings. You'd feel better if you got it out in the open, it wouldn't build up inside of you and cause all the tension etc. today's people have. Let it out.

vi This entry also speculates about humanity's demise and questions God's love—serious themes that are echoed throughout the diaries.

Wouldn't be so bad if we said to anyone we know or someone we don't know.

"I love you."

Even if you did people would look at you and wonder what kind of kook you were. People don't know what love is. To most it's sex. Love could never be defined or understood. Love to me is careing, understanding, listening... Love is the way you act and feel. If there's no one else God cares for us. Sometimes I wonder about that too. Maybe someday we'll be able to understand what we're all about but I doubt that very much. Man will destroy himself first. It's something to try for though.

Sometimes the urge to break the boundaries of reservation and give in to impulse would have had disastrous consequences and so the diary gets the story and the girl dreams of being bolder.

Molly, Age 15

I find it hard not to jump up and kiss him, or touch him. It's difficult. Especially after our philosophical talk last night by the fireside. There's the "we're all going to die anyway" side of it, and if we're so unimportant, why couldn't I have just jumped up in the middle of a Science class and kissed Teddy? Now, it's Damion. My God, Molly. what are you doing? That's all this book is full of!

Sheila Allan, Age 17

Everybody is kind and friendly here. But we don't entertain much. Bill Glennon (who is about twenty five. He is also a Scotsman with a round serious face, brown eyes and hair. Tall and slim and quite good-looking in a way) often comes down to visit us. I'm so shy of people. Wish I could make conversation.⁶⁴

Being shy of others, or holding in the impulse to share herself or express affection, was not something Beatrix did. But all the same, she managed her self-expression tightly—most of the time. But in a rare moment, Beatrix let her usual guard down, revealing her true self—and used her diary to sort out how she felt about that.

Beatrix, Age 16

Days pass and I achieve nothing. I do not ask for much. I do not expect anything but pride and respect and one person who could understand me. I was so ripped last night, the acid, the many beers, Deitrich's birthday marijuana cupcakes. I was myself and I didn't care that I was showing myself. Brent was attracted to that. Was it me or that fact of getting fucked? It's so hard to know. It makes it really hard to trust any guys.

The complexity of relationships and sexuality keep surfacing, coupled with another theme that the team identified in the diaries early on—the expression of frustration or dismay at the fact that emotions can't be freely given or shown. Who can be trusted? The struggle to reign in her feelings, or expressions of love—is something girls feel they have to do to fit in. The pain of that needs an outlet and so they come to the diary: a place that will listen without judgment.

Molly, Age 17

I don't want to be an adult and get closer to death. Regardless of my faith. I still fear death and life is going way too fast for me. Before I'll know it I'll be dead, without having done anything I wanted to do in life. I'm so scared and unstable, now. Although, on the outside, I'd appear very stable. It just occurred to me how little I tell Cody. I wish I was closer to him, and God. Maybe then I wouldn't be so damn scared.

Wishing to be closer to another, yet managing a necessary separation between the inner life and her public day-to-day existence, was critical for many of the diarists. In a section of her Age 13 diary, Molly recounts in considerable detail her attempts at relationship, her contradictory reaction and her struggle to manage an inner life and how much it could, or should, be shared. The account carries layers of innocence, romance, idealization and a genuine struggle to make sense of emotions in the complex world of peer relationships, social context and the ever-present sense of being watched.

Molly, Age 13 (January 13)

Yesterday in cooking class Kara was accusing me of liking Lee as more than a friend. I don't, but every time our eyes meet I can't help but wonder if there's something there. He is a good friend. At least I consider him one. . . . Lee was asked if he had any feelings for me, and all he said was friendship. Then Jennifer started bugging him again. Why can't they just leave us alone? . . . On my way out, I got 1/2 a glass of water and poured it over his head. Don't ask me why I did it, I just, well, people do strange things when they're in love.

Molly, Age 13 (January 14)

We (Kara and I) pushed Lee off his chair, and we were bugging him quite a bit. I don't know why, but I do strange things in my depressed mode. And I'm deep into my depressed mode now. He got really angry, I don't blame him. I was acting kind of strange. Well, I wrote him a note, apologizing, and saying a few other things. I slipped it into his bag after school today, and I don't know how he'll react. I'm in for something tomorrow.

Molly, Age 13 (January 22)

He wasn't amused. Thank god he kept it a secret, but he was irritated. He was angry at me for about a week, then he returned to his normal self. Today was the first day he looked at me in my eyes again, and made a point to brush his hand over mine. .

. Lee is a lot more mature than the other boys. He knows that he should go out with someone who can talk about things deeply, someone he can love. Heather is just an excuse to have a date, some girl to hang around with. I could tell it in his eyes when the subject was brought up today. Eyes can tell so much. Lee and I could carry on a deep conversation we wanted no one to hear through our eyes.

Molly, Age 13 (February 5)

I spent this weekend with Bettina. . . I told Bettina there about Ted and I, and Lee and everything. I suppose you don't know what happened a few weeks ago. I slit my left wrist and seriously tried to kill myself. . . . Lee got really angry when I did that, then he acted like a jerk for a week. Oh, well. Lee broke up with Heather today. Lasted longer than I thought it would. Ted . . . calls me "Doc." He's the only one I know who does call me that. No one else thinks I'm serious about becoming a psychiatrist, people joke that I **need** one. Maybe they're right. I do tend to express myself too openly. And Bettina even says I shouldn't show my feelings. I'm afraid that's too hard for me to do.

Molly, Age 13 (February 21)

Well, well well. The dance was on the 13th. Bettina came, and got introduced to the gang. Lee had been watching me lately, and guess what?! He asked me to dance. And guess what?! I said no. After he left (and you should have seen his face. It was **sooo** sad. I really hurt him. I just wanted to give him a big hug and tell him I didn't mean it) Bettina shook me and said "what the **hell** do you think you just did?" I started to cry, and bawled like I hadn't done for a year or so. "Did you see his **face**?" she said. Well, my makeup was shot, and I just sat in the bathroom and bawled my heart out. I'm really stupid, aren't I? Anyway Nikki had tried to talk to him after and she told me that he was really upset, and that he really, really liked

*me. We didn't dance at all that night. Bettina keeps on telling me the way he looks at me, but I just try to turn my eyes away and pretend not to notice. That night I wrote him another letter. . . . Anyway, I slipped it into his locker on Tues. at lunch, and told Jennifer about it (through notes) in Art. . . . Anyway, when I got to Science (last period) he walked in **with the note**. He must have gone to his locker between 5th and 6th period, found the note, and had not had time to read it until then. Anyway he sat down, read it, and gave me a great big grin. It seemed to put him in good spirits.*

Clearly Molly is torn between her desire for relationship and the actuality of having one in practice. Perhaps there is a degree of safety in trying things out and keeping distance. At some point, the relationship shifts and “ends,” so Molly moves on:

Molly, Age 13 (April 4)

*It's been a **long** time since I wrote in you, and a **lot** of things have happened since then. First of all I'll get Lee completely out of the way, because that's the way I'd prefer it. . . we've been having one of our stupid little bickerments, and the fight got worse, he started making rude suggestions, and making a complete asshole of himself. So Lee has changed and **I want nothing to do with him...***

I've said goodbye, and torn up his picture (But I kept the pieces. I just couldn't bring myself to throw them out)

Learning about relationships and connection, especially romantic connection is complicated, and there is a lot to learn and a lot to work out through trial and error. What counts as normal becomes problematic. Molly struggles with her emotions and yearnings and has trouble containing them, and uses her diary to sort as much as she can. But in the end, her struggles serve to make her feel separate, contributing to a sense of isolation in her adolescence.

The Work of Intimacy

Both Molly and Emily were living in conflicted families, and so their need for and desire for connection were complicated by their personal context. For Emily, seeking to love and be loved was a deep search for fulfillment that focused on romantic relationships. When the romantic ideal was attained, her entries were ecstatic.

Emily, Age 13

Dear Nahtonaj (this entry covered in hearts)

You would never in a million billion trillion years guess what happened to me at precisely 9:00 p.m. tonight! I am sooooooooooooo HAAAAAAPPYYYYYYYYY!!!! I am, as of 9:01 pm tonight, officially (are you ready) GOING OUT WITH JON!!

I can't believe it's true!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

I'll tell you the whole story from beginning to end. OK.....

The audience named for her diary, Jonathan, is being told that she is now dating the Jon who inspired the imaginary audience. Emily is unrestrained in her enthusiasm. But a year later, when the threat of separation faced her in a different relationship, the entries plunged down into a yearning for the connection that was threatened:

Emily, Age 14

8:39 pm [her handwriting is now very different from entry earlier in the day – smaller, more contained] ...I just got off the phone with Adrian. That was the strangest talk I've ever had with him. It was like he was really short tempered or something I said he was acting different and he got all defensive. Now I'm all worried. He told me that last night he was thinking of breaking up with me. But he said it was just a stage and he's over it. But I don't know what I'd do if he did. I'm more in love with him than I have been with anyone else in my life. Just him saying that made me realize. He was talking to me

as if he was holding something back. Something I don't want to think about.... that conversation, it was like seeing a side of him I'd never seen before, Don't want to ever see again...I'm almost mad, angry now. At him, I mean. I don't know why. For getting me worried, I guess... I don't want to lose him. He's my best friend. But I could never be satisfied with just friendship. Now Emily. Stop it. Your getting yourself all worked up about nothing, or just a little thing. You're being all paranoid. Stop it!!!...

Like Molly, Emily is trying to make sense of the complex new feelings and desires around relationships that include sexual attraction and its complexities. The desire for connection takes many forms so that when a connection was made with another, with a mutual understanding of the inner life, the yearning in the girls' diaries was replaced with the chronicling of exceptional moments—even if they were fleeting.

Nina L., Age 13

*Before class ended Ksyusha came up and hugged me. I stared into her clear blue eyes and sang quietly: **You don't love me, but I love you and you must beware of my love.** Ksyusha raised her fine eyebrows and smiled: 'Nina I want to cry.' I knew what she meant and it was wonderful to feel that there was a person who could see what was going on inside me and wanted to help.⁶⁵*

Beatrix, Age 16

Clayton was totally staring at me. It was weird. It wasn't quite like he used to stare or maybe it was. He looked (Upset? Confused? Bewlideder? Hurt depressed regretful scared). I know how to read his eyes. We have to talk.

Sometimes, writing about a love interest served the purpose that the diary did for other aspects of her life—making it significant, through committing it to paper. Much of the writing in girls’ diaries follows this pattern. Lara Gilbert kept track of the number of dreams she had about a boy in one volume of her diary. Emily wrote for years nearly every thought she had about her Jonathan:

Emily, Age 13

Dear Nahtanoj:

...To get completely off the subject and on to one that has been overused I am thinking about Jon constantly.

That’s all I’m going to say.

Except....

I keep imagining me and him at the movies sitting 2 seats apart, not even sharing popcorn. Too shy to make a move like holding hands because we think the other will think you’re too forward. Oh well. At least I haven’t lost my sense of humour!

The diary was also a site to record the momentous occasions when yearnings turned to fulfilled reality.

Emily, Age 13

Dear Nahta,

You would not guess in a million, billion years what just happened to me. (written in bold large letters surrounded by hearts:) JON CALLED.

What follows is long passage recounting how friends are telling friends how other friends feel and what they say through a series of telephone calls, and then the entry continues:

It sounds strange, but it's like something inside of me was finally put to rest. All the time I was with Rudi or Dan or anybody else I always felt like I'd love to be friends and play with them etc. but I didn't want to do anything else with them. Sometimes I would think of Jon and my "heart would start aching" as they put it. Ha ha. After Rudi told me that Jon still liked me it was if something inside that was aching constantly had suddenly stopped and I felt sort of... relieved? That doesn't really describe it but I guess you know what I mean. I do know that I do love him and I always will no matter what. I feel thankful that he still thinks about me. Almost touched...

But whether she was barreling ahead with physical exploration like Beatrix, or intellectualizing the concept of romance as Molly did, the girls were using the diaries to sort out their emotions and thoughts about romance, and come to their own truths on the topic.

Molly, Age 15

*Jessie and Jet's "romantic relationship" ended today. I watched them both, and they seemed a little awkward and detached, like they'd "broken up" after "going out." Not like a true romantic relationship at all. If ever I was in a relationship and the other person wanted to stop the Romantic aspect of it, that would be fine with me, but hopefully we could continue being **close** friends.*

The diary was also a site for establishing the connection, the real relationships made with love interests that supplanted other connections that may have been more important—as Emily does in this critical entry:

Emily, Age 15

Adrian please it's been such an awful day. I'm so lonely ... Why do there have to be days like this. I miss you. I've been in such a wicked mood. Mom called me a slut now she says I'm the most ungrateful child she's ever met. She says you're not allowed to come see me on vacation anymore... I need you to hold me.

—and in yearning for her boyfriend's presence, she used the diary in place of his listening ear.

Tell me it's gonna be alright. Please let it be alright.

The diary serves again and again as a site to process life, to sort emotions, new experiences and the awkwardness of growing up and not knowing how to act in the midst of family battles, personal hurt, loneliness and the looming future. Intimacy is difficult territory, and often painful and confusing.

9. Sexual Intimacy in the Diaries

As those diary entries of Emily's show, the writing was also a site for nascent desire—for the yearning for connection of a more physical nature, and for the management of those desires with feelings of apprehension. Girls explored their sexual desires in the safety of their pages, often intertwined with the desire to be known as they really are, and to have a meaningful emotional connection with another. Everything from an innocent romantic dream with physical proximity to frank discussion of sexual experiences:

Molly, Age 13

I had quite a different dream last night. I was asleep in a really calm and scenic garden, like Eden. When I woke, I found I was under a rainbow, about 6 feet in diameter and it grew out of the lawn at my feet, arched and then went back into the ground at my head. I was clad in those flimsy white dresses, the type faeries wear. And Scott was lying behind me, holding my waist. Then, that was the end.

Zowie, 15 years

School is still there and I'm still going. Nothing exciting happens. I'm told I'm beautiful and should be a model (I pretend to be exceedingly modest). I still mourn now and then – you know I could be very passionate in terms of sexual behaviour but that won't happen in several years and this irritates me.

Emily, Age 15

...maybe he's being kind or maybe he's just a dumb geek who doesn't know anything except how to –ahem- eat someone out.

Sorry. Go ahead and bawl me out. Tell me I'm a slut. But it's not true. And I've given him oral sex too. I think I like it.

Emily wrote about her changing opinions about sex, recalling the disgust that she felt about nakedness and intimate touching before the recent encounters with her boyfriend. She confesses the details of their physical intimacy, and her changed feelings toward the male body and sex, summing up that: “now it’s different.” This shifting status of sex in girls’ minds was often recorded and analyzed like this, beginning with the record of an event that brings the topic to the fore. In the following entry, Emily reports that a good friend of hers had sex for the first time, which triggered personal reflections on how her perceptions and attitudes were changing.

Emily, Age 15:

Never thought it would be her. before me...

I feel like crying but I don't know why...

I wonder how it was for her for the “first time.” She couldn't talk because her parents were in the room. I have to find out. I'm afraid if I do it it'll hurt. Some people say it hurts the first time. I don't think it did for her. She said it was good....

I guess people have 2 personalities. The normal one they use for everyday almost all the time. Then there's the other one. When you're around the one you love. The sexual personality. The one that can be horny and not have to worry about feeling guilty about it the next day, or embarrassed.

...I sort of feel like telling all this to Adrian. I will right now.... I did. Love Emily.

Beatrix's contributed entries begin at 16—her earlier volumes having not been found. What was already underway in Beatrix' journal was a frank detailing of sexual encounters, wrapped in a haze of complicated interpersonal relationships amongst her friends. Discussions of sexual intimacy were absent from Beatrix's excerpts, but frank statements about her own drive and sexual events amongst her peers were recorded.

Beatrix, Age 16

I could have fucked you all forever. I could have continued down that road and never returned. Because when it overtakes me & I need more & more & more I know that all I need is him. No other answer can compare. Don't be a square don't you dare.

Beatrix, Age 16

Clayton fucked Anita. Stupid slimey bitch eh. Should have figured why she always wanted to talk to me about him- the bitch was after him. She's going out with Scott too. Suppose she thinks she can fuck whomever she likes. Actually I think it's funny. Ha ha ha. Clayton thought Nadia was fucking him around so he went to go get laid.

The layers of feelings and the entanglement of relationships in these passages indicate some of the complexity of adolescent peer groups where certain kinds of knowledge are shared (or assumed to be shared), and the emotional reactions are intense and also complicated. Hurt, jealousy and attempts to dismiss one's own feelings in acts of self-protection are evident in the struggle.

Self-Protection

In the diaries, girls managed the emotions that came out of an unsuccessful search for relationship. Yearning for relationship creates vulnerability, which leads to pain. To manage that, some girls used their diaries to beat their emotions to the punch, in effect—to reject before they felt the full force of a rejection. The girls used their diaries to carry out this rejection, to firmly fix it in their minds before (or while) carrying it out face-to-face with the object of their affections—as Molly did with her episodic updates, and as Beatrix did with Clayton.

Beatrix, Age 16

*Clayton has been talking to Amber. He said (quote unquote)
"Nadia and Beatrix drive me completely insane. They're both*

so gorgeous and so... black". Yeah right asshole I hope you do go insane and totally freak out goof. I'm having such a good time hating him. But somewhere in me its not quite real. Just for a second, when I heard that from Amber that familiar feeling crept into my heart. But then I crushed it. I'm not ever going to let myself get caught in that trap again. I go on hating him for the public to see. I HATE CLAYTON. You see. It's just that easy.

Evelyn L., Age 14

After a while it doesn't matter, you stop caring about whom you might hurt and in fact you just want to hurt more people because that's the only power you've got left.⁶⁶

There is yearning for connection here... even in the hurting. Hurting is still a strong connection with someone, even if it is a connection of last resort, when the search for a caring relationship has turned up empty.

At times, the girls used the diaries to execute this pre-emptive rejection with others whom they had previously had a more intimate emotional connection—friends, and sometimes family. In the following passage, Evelyn Lau writes about a social worker with whom she felt she had a special connection, but whom she felt separated from as she grew older living on the streets. Managing her feelings of rejection at her social worker's perceived indifference led her to reflect on the audience for her inner life.

Evelyn L., Age 15

One upon a time, there was a man named Michael. He was a social worker for a twenty-four-hour branch of social services called Emergency Services. And then there was a kid who had given up her home and identity who came to depend on him and wrote about him until her non-existent audience emitted a collective yawn.

It doesn't matter though. It is pure fantasy for her to think that one day the audience will breathe and her scribbling will be transformed into print on the pages of a book. There were all

the diaries she wrote since she was six years old, but she ran away and destroyed those volumes of ink and paper. She tries to compensate now, recording her discoveries and disillusionments, the gradual learning process and the falling apart, but she has no motivation except that writing means life, and it gives her the feeling that she still belongs inside herself. ⁶⁷

Evelyn L., Age 15

*I don't know how to live reasonably. I don't know how to stop being hurt from the most insignificant things, from being overresponsive to people, except by shutting and locking doors firmly, checking them twice to make sure no one can penetrate. How does one manage?*⁶⁸

And finally, Beatrix's chronicle of boys that follows reveals how she worked hard to keep her emotions in their place—taking boys she felt strongly about and making sure she can laugh at them, in the end—making them characters in the narrative she was writing about her life, protecting herself even as she yearned for those connections.

Beatrix, Age 16:

Oh wow. I was supposed to go to school today- but no. I do not have the correct procedure. I have got to get down to the facts. What my feelings really are and who deserves them. Men are difficult. Some are beyond reality. There are more than a few that I think about. I want 2 tell U why. First I have to know WHO they are. Obviously there's Rafael and Clayton, not so obviously is Randall and Larry and even to the extent of Chris, Kieran and and and. Rafael is my skater babe. His is the memory that I can depend on always. We spent so short a time together and yet our love is so strong. What is in our future? I don't know. Now of course, secondly is Clayton. I want to disobey my instinctual love for him. I want to be free of him forever but maybe that's not my fate. Nadia's breaking up with him because she knows she's not the girl for him. She says I am. But am I? Will I forgive

as I always do and pray that it will never happen again? Will I look into his eyes and feel the same double heartbeat? Randall is a sweetheart. I don't know if I could ever break that trust. In my own unconscious ways I might hurt him and that is the last thing I ever want to do. Larry. This is a story. Loved by Nadia as I loved Clayton, things became very confused. Lare was after me and I didn't even really notice. Too drunk, too stoned I talked and laughed my way through time. As he watched me I began to really see myself in him. He charmed his way into my heart and soon I was at a loss for words. Chris was not too much after Rafael. He is one of the best guys to talk to. I watch him, it's true. And he catches me sometimes but it's all a game. A funny silly game. Kieran is an animal. I refuse to even wonder why I look at him. He is nothing but he has a strange power over me. I resent him. So these are my men. A funny bunch of characters. Good to laugh with, at and about.

Again with Beatrix, as with Molly and Emily and others as well, the diary is the place of sorting and processing emotions, connections and relationships. The impact of the peer social context is foregrounded in the struggle to sort relationships. There are webs of relationships, friendships and emotional, sexual encounters that need to be considered—or as Beatrix says: “I have got to get down to the facts. What my feelings really are and who deserves them.” There are decisions to be made.

10. Decision-Making in the Diaries

In the last two chapters, we were looking at the yearnings for connection and the formation of friendships and relationships, including romantic and sexual relationships and the diaries as a site for sorting out intimacy and all of its implications. As we pondered some of the more intense passages from the diaries where girls grappled with making connections—where they articulated their yearnings, described trying out relationships, using drugs, and beginning to be sexually active—we saw another important thread in the texts—that of decision-making.

As we discussed the complexities of the girls' lives, we mused that there was an underlying tension around choices and decisions, and decided to explore this further. It is not always immediately evident or explicit, but we reasoned that as the diaries portray girls' struggles with making choices, it seems important to acknowledge what must have felt like “big” decisions that they were making with their own futures in mind. The passages we were looking at seemed to convey a sense that they knew the choices they were making would matter longer term, that writing about them was one way of both preserving them, but also sorting out the implications.

As we have noted, the audience for their writing is sometimes a future self—but always an imaginary someone who cares. This provided the writers with a way to reflect back to themselves the required care—certainly the spiritual self-care that Molly identified providing herself.

Molly, Age 14

It's nothing to feed yourself, putting on a sweater to keep warm is easy. Maybe, subconsciously, we look after ourselves spiritually.

The reflexive process that the writing allows gives a girl a chance to question herself, and her direction. Personal writing provides a way to wonder about what she is, or who she may become. Beatrix, a young

woman, who, as we have previously noted, identified herself as being at risk through drug use and sexual activity, wrote a series of very intense, self-aware and self-critical passages that are an attempt to make some sense out of her life and the choices she was making.

In the series of excerpts that follow, Beatrix's narrative of a search for love and meaning is about boys and her social scene—and it illustrates the vulnerability and yearning for relationship at her core, clothed in the need to appear carefree. It also illustrates the difficulty of sorting out identity, and a gradual process of deciding who, and how, to be.

Beatrix, Age 16 (June 3)

I want to see Clayton. Like it's necessary. I'm calm, mellow, reserved but I'm also freaking out. I missed him when he was gone but compared to what I feel now it was nothing. He is my future. I dream about him, wish for him. Even just as friends I enjoy every second we spend together. But somehow putting it all down on paper incriminates me. I know girls have chased him, followed him and bothered him since the first day I knew him. I have never been and don't want to be one of those girls. It is just a fact that I am falling in love with him. I have heard from R. and A. that he feels the same way for me.

From the beginning of this account, the future is evident, as is awareness of how she will be seen and known. The relational world, love and connection are not simply emotional, but a complicated territory of connections and decisions to be made.

Beatrix, Age 16 (June 7)

Beach party was great. Clayton was supposedly there but he was on ACID so nobody knows where he ended up. I ended up at Dylan's. I don't really know what to say to that only he's a good friend as well as a fuck and I love Clayton even more... How can I express myself when I'm so mixed up inside. I could cry for the loss of all meaning. Stuck here in another world so far away from home. I hate to admit that I miss it but I need something.

Something to control myself with. I need a word to show my aggravation. Something stronger than four letters. Why do I feel so lost alone. WHY.

In this entry, Beatrix sees her own confusion and expresses an important inner loss of meaning that has come out of being available sexually. She does not make a direct link, but she does identify that she feels out of control. And she is angry as she seeks something more.

Beatrix, Age 16 (June 24)

I feel like I am barely happy. I mean nothing is quite right. People are strange and I don't know how to deal with their trips. I just feel like saying fuck you world and hiding in a cave with a sheet of acid. I mean it. I love someone so much that nothing else matters. I feel like what's the use of looking good if he's not here to appreciate. What's the use of even getting out of bed in the morning. I feel like being really depressed. Just being nobody for awhile. Not have to try and solve the worlds problems every time I step out my door. Or is it just my imagination. Maybe life is just my image. Sometimes I think I am the only sane person on this planet.

Relationships exist in context, and the moods that the previous chapters explored are also expressed here—but Beatrix sees herself in a larger scale trying to “solve the world’s problems.” The inner world is bigger than sex and relationships, and there are serious implications to the choices being made. The diary is a place to set those thoughts in order, and try to make sense of one’s self.

Beatrix, Age 16 (July 25)

I have heard so many stories about what I did last night. I totally fucked up and I don't remember how or why. . . Fuck I hate not remembering. I fucken hate it. I could die I'm serious. I just want to talk to D. All these people now have the wrong impression of me. They think I'm a slut and a tease and a bitch and I'm not that kind of girl. 'I'm not that kind of girl'. No serious - I feel

totally undesirable now. Why do I always fuck up and oh god S and he wants me and I just get totally grossed out. I could cry you know. Fuck. I need a new life.

Again context and the self in the world become critical for Beatrix. She is trying to be herself, and yet loathes the choices she has made—that make her a “fuck-up”. She is starting to look for another life. Underneath all the connecting and sex in these passages is a growing sense that she needs to choose differently.

Beatrix, Age 16 (August 24)

I should know in my heart that everything is fine. I should be confident in myself but it's hard. So many things to wonder about. So many things that I could cry about. Fucken what's my trip. A guy tells me he loves me and I spend the next couple days depressed thinking of what might happen. Okay you know what I'm doing. I'm getting involved. I know Clayton. He needs his space and lots of it. He's just like me in a lot of ways. Words are pretty strange how they are made of letters and they mean things eh. I will take a positive attitude from this point on. Only one problem. No no no no no NO. No problems!!!! I read R's letters last night and it's no problem. I need to talk to Clayton but I don't know what to say except the truth which is scary.

The future looms large and intimidating, and Beatrix is torn about how to be in love, how to express love, how to give adequate space and to wonder what will be. And the truth is frightening as it is full of implications, unsaid, but present.

In her diary, Beatrix has an inner sense of wanting to be something other than what her friends expect her to be, and what she appears to be to others around her. She seems to have a deeper, unnamed strength that leads her to leave her context and set out on her own, escaping the lifestyle and fate of her adolescent friends. She left that place and those connections, and commented as an adult that she escaped a lifestyle that all of her peers remained in, and became stuck in.

Hidden in the turmoil of relationships and connecting are the small moments that accrue into a larger scale decision. It is chaotic, mixed up but there is a direction being established that does lead Beatrix to a different life. Somewhere in the confusion, choices are being sorted.

Emily's Choices

Emily reports little drug use, unlike Beatrix, but she struggled with sexual activity, and considerable tension with her mother around perceived sexual activity at a time when her mother is on her own and also looking to hook up with someone.

Emily, Age 15

Adrian please it's been such an awful day. I'm so lonely ... Why do there have to be days like this. I miss you. I've been in such a wicked mood. Mom called me a slut now she says I'm the most ungrateful child she's ever met. She says you're not allowed to come see me on vacation anymore. I don't know what's wrong with me.

I'm scared and crying [tears dot the page] and I need you to hold me. Please I just ran out of the house. I'm in a field like the one we were in before. I don't want to be here. I want to go home. Adrian she says she can't find a man because of me and Wendy. Says from now on she's only free every second weekend. Has to plan her schedule around us, away from us. Doesn't want us anymore.

The family tensions around sexuality seem to intensify Emily's desperation for connection, but they also speak as well to her struggle to define herself, to have an identity that is acceptable to her mother but that also gives her the comfort and connection she desires. Decisions about what kind of person she is becoming echo Beatrix's struggle. Emily continues:

Emily, Age 15

Thinks I'm a slut, that I do it all the time. That I sneak around. Thinks I disapprove of her. I don't, honestly. Addie, I do love her. I just can't say it sometimes. She apologized for calling me a slut, said she didn't mean it. I don't know. Wanted to forgive her but something in me couldn't. Wouldn't let myself.

I just need someone to hold me. Tell me it's gonna be alright.

Everything will be fine. I need you.

I'm scared, Addy. are we going too fast? Are we rushing it? What would people think? Or what would mom? I don't want to grow up. I don't like it at all. Want to stay little. Have no pride. I do now. Too much. I can't apologize easy. Addy I don't want to get old. Don't want to. Will you protect me. Be with me?

Please.

I'm scared.

I don't even know why I'm crying or what I'm writing. Just know I need

you. Tell me it's gonna be alright. Please let it be alright.

It's dark now.

Can't see to write.

This what love is?

Don't like it. Not at all.

Love Emily.

Here again the present and the future are at stake, and in spite of being eager for intense physical relationship, Emily does not want to grow up. The future is worrying. From her first kiss through to intercourse there is a divided self—going ahead with the activity, while hesitant and uncertain.

Emily, Age 15

I never knew so much desire could be packed into 1 person.

I went so far as to get the condom from his bag. And during that time I wanted it, wanted it so bad, and so did he. But it's weird. All during that time I kept hearing these thoughts, my conscience I suppose. But they were saying things like "People have always told you you're a level headed person. You can think clearly. Are you thinking clearly now? Do you really want this? Is it just lust or is this something you're ready for?"

Half of me would say yes, half no. And when I handed him the condom I got scared... he said he wasn't going to if I had even the slightest bit of second thoughts. He put the condom down and held me close. And for some inexplicable reason I wanted to cry. But I loved him so much. More then ever before. I still do...

...Also another reason I didn't was cause mom was right upstairs, awake... I didn't want to take a chance that she would come thumping down stairs and we'd have to disengage and I'd have to run like hell. I want the first time to be perfect... no having to be quiet cause someone might hear. No time limits. Cause relaxation, making noises and making it last is half the fun. I've felt the urge to scream before when he's giving me oral sex, I'm sure he's felt like making some noise too, sometimes he does.

...well, for the first time I didn't feel like a class A idiot writing all this down, and it hasn't ruined it. I'm glad.

The diary serves as a place to speak the complexity and record the journey of first-time actions as well as the difficulty of the decision about what to do. In this early sexual encounter, her partner is sensitive to her hesitation, and waits. She goes on to admit she has already been raped by a good friend at 14—so she is not a virgin, but someone trying to sort out what matters for her and how she is to be

seen and known. Her mother, who is clearly anxious about Emily's sexual activity, accuses her of being a slut and apologizes later—but the damage is done, and Emily is left to sort out how she is to be seen and known.

In an adult reflection, Emily explores the distance from her mother. This distance was growing at the same time her relationship with her boyfriend was intensifying. In writing about these changes at 15, she expressed a longing to stay on one side of the passage, firmly in the place of childhood—but not as someone mothered. Rather, Emily sought out the comfort that she wanted from her boyfriend.

Emily, AR

He came up to visit me when I was staying with my mother and sister in a cabin up there. The two of us snuck out one night . . . We walked out to the bluffs and lay in the grass and watched the stars (and one another) and a deer came very close to us. When we came back, at about 4am, all the lights were on: my mother had found us out. Chaos ensued. I don't remember now if he was sent home early... It was a beautiful night, though...

The battle we had . . . would have been fairly normal for that time. I remember where I was standing in the hall . . . she kept insisting that Adrian and I were having sex, and I kept denying it, and eventually screaming it, and running out. There were lots of those battles...

My loneliness would also have been partly from the fact that I felt I couldn't tell her anything, as she had a bad habit of using things against me later, if she got upset. Nothing was ever safe to tell.

The diary then became the safe place, and the site where the struggles could be written down, the choices weighed, and the future pondered. In both of these passages it is worth noting that the instinct to take care of oneself is present in the midst of the difficulties.

One of the few volumes we found that took girls' diary writing seriously were edited by Laurel Holliday. In her introduction in *Heart Songs*, a collection of excerpts from girls' diaries, she says of the material she has collected:

*Although the girls span five centuries, are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and eight different countries, they share concerns which are the same as many young girls' today. The perennial questions of adolescence are explored by girls in ways which may take us beyond our culture-bound answers. Sex, marriage, the position of women, for example are considered with a candor and outspokenness which will probably surprise readers today.*⁶⁹

One of the diaries we have seen was written by Claire Minkley, a young woman who had multiple physical disabilities, whose writings were also published, in her case, by her father, following her death at a young age. She was a deeply spiritual and religious young woman and reflected on her difficult life journey and the decisions she had to make.

Claire M. Age 10

I had my loneliest time when I was in hospital clinging to life. I was in intensive care in Children's Hospital after my hip operation. I could not see. I was on life support equipment. Jesus came into my mind. "Do not die." He said. "Leave everything to me. I will look after your life."

*I noticed the marvellous nurses were always watching me. Hovering over my head were machines that gave information on how I was doing. During the day there was lots of activity but at night you were alone with your thoughts. I thought about all sorts of things. How I had come to have to make such hard decisions about myself and why my body was bringing everyone so much grief... I finally decided that you are given just very hard decisions to challenge yourself. Finally, I learned that sometimes we think things are important but really life is foremost.*⁷⁰

Claire's insight that the decisions are a form of challenge, and that in the end it is life that matters resonates as a summary of the complex decisions all of the girls are making in their diaries—decisions about who they are becoming, about their survival and their way of taking up life and what has been given to them by their context and circumstance. They are trying to survive. Their struggles are not so immediately life and death as Claire's were, but in the end "life is foremost." Getting through adolescence and becoming someone they are glad to be is the critical challenge for all of them.

11. Rites of Passage

As pointed out earlier, the writing of diaries by girls and women is a widespread practice across cultures. We began to consider whether this practice represented something larger for girls, some common experience no matter in what time or what culture they grew up. We were sparked by the comment of thirteen-years-old Anaïs Nin who wrote about her writing as a descent, imagining that “the bottomless pit is life,”⁷¹ and predicting a day when she would be able to write that she had reached the bottom. “In the meantime,” she wrote, “I plunge into the light.” And before she reaches the bottom of the pit, she plunges into the light of truth. And that truth, that light, lies underground. Could we then make a symbolic interpretation of diary writing?

In exploring descent we realized two things were connected. First, there are many traditional cultural myths that involve journeys of descent for young women. In Greek mythology, Persephone is abducted and forced to reign in the Underworld until her rescue brings her back into the light, to return underground only cyclically. Similarly, in the Celtic tale, Winter holds Spring captive when Cailleach imprisons the beautiful young goddess Bride inside a mountain. In Korea, a story is told of a girl drowned at the bottom of a pond by jealous sisters, but rescued to join with her lover and bring up a family. In the Inuit tale, Skeleton Woman descends to the realm of the dead, but returns to the surface on the hook of a fisherman, bringing fertility and abundance as reward.

Second, our identification of an “underground” space in the girls’ lives expressed in their diaries was explored in the research we read about young girls, which also connected this to cultural myths. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan links girls’ lives to Persephone’s voyage. Girls travel to an “underground world,” according to Gilligan.⁷² This world represents the darker reaches of inner life, the territory of myth and metaphor, as well as the out-of-sight sub-cultural space that adolescents on the margins can and do live in. As we have expressed

thus far, girls who wrote diaries left accounts of their underground experiences, some of which were sub-cultural experiences out of the sight of adults, and some which were more mythic and spiritual as they searched for meaning.

Edith Sullwold⁷³ points out that:

In such times of transition there is often an experience of being “betwixt and between” when one is neither here nor there, neither child nor adult. Into this open undefined space of adolescence, other dimensions of reality enter, often of a spiritual nature.

The diary writers were in the undefined space:

Lara G., Age 15

*I don't know how to start. I don't know anything. I'm changing. I can feel it. I can feel myself going through a major personality transition. Deep inside me two forces have been struggling and one has finally won. But I feel lost and I wish things hadn't shifted so suddenly.*⁷⁴

We read these recorded journeys that described not only the cyclic process of the natural world, but also the journey girls undergo as they become cyclic, as they become women. Their stories link to seasonal and fertility cycles. While hero myths may describe the archetypal journey taken by boys as they become men, descent myths chart the journey of girls, and provide preparatory and cautionary tales about the psychic demands and cultural scripts of womanhood.

In their adult reflections on their diaries, the women of the GDP attested to the experience of retreating into the inner life through diary writing as a way to process and emerge with new self-knowledge and the beginnings of adult identity and form. Victor Turner⁷⁵ speaks of archetype and notes that it “donates in Greek a master stamp or impress” and goes on to say that: “these “sacra” stamp into the

neophyte the basic assumptions of their culture,” and serve to teach them “how to think with some degree of abstraction about their cultural milieu and gives them ultimate standards of reference” while at the same time changing “their nature, transform(ing) them from one kind of human being to another.” In other words, girls are being shaped or molded into adult form while at the same time learning to look at and consider their own cultural context.

Dorothy, Age 15

...don't let them fit you into their filing box – keep changing as you feel, retain the control over your life and never, ever give unto anyone that one thing or you are lost, dead.

In their construction of adult identities, girls must find ways to engage a feminine mythos as part of growing up. Living in the underworld, even through the practice of writing, duplicates some of the deliberate rites of passages of traditional societies that are usually conducted by elders and the whole community. Edith Sullwold offers an example from a young Nootka woman found in the work of Anne Cameron,⁷⁶ where “the destruction of the old ... at the heart of all transition initiations” happens, and that water “is the element of transformation” in some traditional rites for girls.

And you had to learn if you weren't a woman. It isn't easy becomin' a woman, it's not somthin' that just happens because you stand' around in one place for a long time, or because your body's started doin' certain things. A woman has to know patience, and a woman has to know how to stick it out, and a woman has to know all kinds of things that don't just come to you like a gift. There was always a reason for the things we hadda learn, and sometimes you'd been a woman for a long time before your found out for yourself what the reason was. If you hadn't learned, you couldn't get married or have children, because you just weren't ready, you didn't know what needed to be known to do it right. . . .

When you'd learned everythin' you had to learn, and the Time was right, and you'd had your first bleedin' time and been to the waitin' house, there was a big party. You were a woman. . . they'd take you out in a special dugout . . . and you'd stand up there so proud and happy. And they'd chant a special chant, and the old woman would lead them, and they'd take you a certain distance. When the chant ended the old woman would sing a special prayer, and take off all your clothes and you'd dive into the water, and the dugout would go home . . . And you'd be out there in the water all by yourself, and you had to get back to the village.

The people would watch for you, and they'd light fires on the beach, and when they finally saw you they'd start to sing a victory song about how a girl went for a swim and a woman came home, and you'd make it to the beach and your legs would feel like they were made of rocks or somethin'. You'd try to stand up and you'd shake all over, just plain wore out. And then the old woman, she'd come up and put her cape over you and you'd feel just fine. And after that, you were a woman, and if you wanted to marry up with someone, you could, and if you wanted to have children, you could, because you'd be able to take care of them the proper way⁷⁷.

The elements of teaching and learning, a physical challenge that involves a water descent experience, the support and guidance of elders and the celebratory participation of the community are all present in this account. The girls in our project did not have guiding elders, and missed the adult accompaniment and elders' wisdom that this narrative makes evident in the transformational journey. They needed the assistance of a trusted and trustworthy adult to enter an in-between space, to move from the body, mind, and values of the child to the body, mind and values of an adult. As we found and have discussed in "Audience," the girls may envision the diary writing to an adult, a parent or themselves as adults, a future self—in this way, the diary offers a substitute for adult accompaniment. It provides a safe

site for reflecting on meaning and existence, for asking questions, for reconsidering values, and for engaging in relational exploration. It is often addressed to someone – a listener who listens, without judgment.

Emily, Age 15

I keep telling myself to write down everything, but for some reason I don't want to. Or can't.I want to cry to the whole world "Leave me alone—But help!" I don't know which it is, maybe both.

Molly, Age 16

[I intended] to be completely and utterly open in this diary, and show every thought that had crossed my mind in it, however small, so I would remember what I was like when I was growing up. I can't recall every blissful or negative feeling I've had over the span of time... but I will try to cover the basics... So, I will now begin.

Leslie, Age 13

To feel old and mature in ways of the world and to be young and grim in experiences. The hurts and disappointments weigh you down and it seems you'll never make it yet you turn around and its over and a new one has begun to block the memories and to remember and hold on to 'what was'. Grasping at straws is all that keeps you going on. Always you find the long one and you loose it. Then you fumble around in the dark again. Is there ever a permanent one? How can you be secure in life if the straws get fewer and fewer and shorter and shorter.

As we've said in earlier chapters, there is some hope for a future, but the struggle and difficulty involved is part of a time in the underworld, which imitates the customary rites of passage practices where youth might spend a period of time living as if dead—being treated as invisible by their community, or being forced to live outside of the community and fend for themselves by whatever means possible, including theft⁷⁸ and other normally illegal practices.

Beatrix, Age 16

To lose the fight is to greet despair, don't tempt the evil that is waiting there. I can tell you only, that which I know, my path is lonely, but it is my own.

Leslie, (AR)

I have never shared this book with anyone. It feels very scary to do so, even 28 years later. I never felt anyone would understand how I felt and would have some kind of judgment about what they read. I did not want that. In writing down my thoughts I could just be what I wanted to be.

In some rites of passage, for example ones used by Indigenous communities in the Americas, various natural hallucinogens or periods of fasting are used to stimulate visionary experience. Often called vision quests, these are efforts to reshape identity through an altered state. Evelyn Lau, writing in a Canadian context, speaks to her form of the healing journey.

Evelyn L., Age 15

*I'm going to deal with my problems alone and return healed, like those Indian youths who go into the forest to fast and consult the holy spirits. Well, the spirits are inside me and I have to unearth them. Nothing is simple, especially self-realization; a few of those native youths must have gone mad with the solitude. I'm not exactly a shining example of emotional stability. But I'm trying. I must begin to understand why I'm running away, my feelings about people, my fears of attachment.*⁷⁹

Other rituals have included tattooing, scarification or other ceremonial markings to make visible coming of age completion. These physical practices have echoes in contemporary youth culture in drug use and body markings (tattoos, piercings) and in the diaries where young women can take deliberate self-directed journeys to the underworld/underground.

Beatrice, Age 16

I got so stoned last night that I feel out of place with my life. Like someone gave me a body but didn't even bother to see if it fit. ... Now it's just strange. This house isn't mine. I don't belong. I don't believe they are brewing coffee again while I see walls breathing with the ease of memory. I don't know how to put myself. Should I scream or whisper. Should I eat or starve. It really doesn't matter...

Nina L., Age 15

At Granny's I pocketed a vial of opium, at my lunch and went home. 'What if I suddenly change my mind?' I measured out twenty dark drops into a teacup and drank them before bed. I actually drank them! A corrosive bitterness filled my mouth and burned my nose. Pleased with my boldness, I snuggled under the blanket and prepared to fall asleep- only I couldn't. Half dreaming, I thought about what would happen tomorrow. I couldn't believe that I would die. It was strange: one part of me was happy I wouldn't have to go to school, while another part was shivering. Would I really die?⁸⁰

Beatrice, Age 16

I'm more than happy but still something is missing. I smoke a cigarette. I have something to eat and I smoke a joint and finally realize I am craving something completely different. I don't know, I'm a perma acidhead. Everything is in distorted dimensions but its not the real thing. Not the real spun out, tripped around effect. Not the real laughter or complete Universal understanding.

The goal of passage was a successful adult, capable of living responsibly and wisely, contributing to the community and understanding the ethos and values of the community. Cultures demonstrate wisdom when they recognize the spiritual importance of this passage. Mircea Eliade⁸¹ emphasizes the spiritual significance of rites of passage:

Initiation recapitulates the sacred history of the world. And through this recapitulation, the whole world is sanctified . . . the experience . . . changes the neophytes fundamental mode of being, but at the same time reveals to him (sic) the sacredness of human life and the world.

However it's marked, cultures that practice rites of passage know that the period spent in the liminal space of passage is a critical time between worlds. Some girls, like Persephone, Eurydice, and Skeleton Woman, find themselves hopelessly trapped underground, disempowered, and waiting to be rescued. Other girls burrow into a much-needed refuge, a place that provides the privacy and enclosure they need to gestate their evolving selves. Entering the world of a diary, with its privacy and set-apart space, is a self-directed liminal practice.⁸² In the absence of the culturally guarded and nurtured liminal space between the two stages of life, adolescents must find their own way through descent. The diaries we studied offer some accounts of how complicated the process of inner descent really is, as are the negotiations with the outer surface world from this place.

Leslie, Age 16

I wish I knew why I do the things I do.

I wish I knew why I feel the way I feel.

I wish I could explain how I feel and why I act the way I do.

Especially I wish I had someone to talk to about these things.

Someone who will understand me, love me, honour what I tell them.

Physically, the diary writers in the project and often the published diarists we read were visible, but spiritually and emotionally they were underground, in a place where adults are generally unwelcome and rarely inclined to go. Communications from underground may look like 'behavior problems' to adults, when actually they contain coded messages that are sometimes requests for attention and help. Beatrix,

as an adult, commented that she could not believe that the adults around her seemed to have no idea the degree of risk she and her friends were in, or that they chose to remain oblivious. Two passages from her diary affirm her sense of aloneness and danger.

Beatrix, Age 16

Please god make somebody come. Anda should know but she ignores my plea. I am alone. Really I should have known that I was alone all along. From the beginning to the end it will always be just me.

Beatrix, Age 16

I confess my confusion but what does the world expect. For one so young, first born of innocence, now left with only the faintest shadow of a childhood. I look out at the world and do you know what I see? I see nothing but the evil of an earth gone wrong. Too few true souls and so many, so very many people without any hope in themselves. Can't anyone see what is happening to us?

Though there may be certain freedom in an adolescent cultural underground, the substance use, self-mutilation, promiscuity, depression or alienation written about in the diaries mark the difficulties of living underground without guidance.

Beatrix, Age 17

I am so off centred. So unbalanced and I don't know if I can cope. I need to be alone and yet I am scared of myself. I have had no time to be who I am, all I have done is listened to other people and dealt with all the trips except the one inside myself. I have opened the door which leads to suicide. I have not ventured inside, I only watch and see it as a more plausible alternative. I don't know why. I wish I could be happy. I wish I didn't have to face the world alone. I wish I could be accepting of my surroundings.

Nina L., Age 14

*... I'm still sticking to my last decision- to be as secretive as possible. I've already stopped laughing and don't joke with my family anymore and am gradually separating myself from them.*⁸³

As Nina and Beatrix point out, the underground world of girls in the context of families is complex. The gulf between the underground and the cultural space of adults is dangerous. Not all girls have been able to cross successfully into adult life, to leave the underworld space. Lara, we know, took her own life contending with a dark history that gave her no way out. Others we know lived with the dangers of self-harm (Raven, Carla, Zowie), eating disorders (Mary). Beatrix, who did emerge, hinted at her desire to commit suicide, making clear the risk so present in the transitional time. It is not always a matter of physical life or death. More typically, the girls lose critical parts of themselves as they become women, aspects of self they may never recover.

Victoria's adult comments run a different way: "I got my voice out the way I wanted to and was proud of it." We read about the underground and its attendant dangers, but we also saw a beautiful strength emerge in the entries as the girls took ownership of their voices.

Resisting Invisibility from Underground

We recognized that living underground may put one close to the dangers of oblivion, setting the girls apart from those who neither acknowledge underground dwellers, nor see their world. We identified our adolescent selves and many other adolescents we know as living in whole or in part underground and invisible to many adults. It may be a preferred and chosen space, but dwelling there can lead to isolation or disconnection from other life spaces. Beatrix wrote:

Beatrix, Age 16

Why am I so old and yet so young. Why do I know this much and yet still lack the most necessary answers. I hate it. I would never change it, I just hate it.

As an adult she remarked that: "I felt like I was an outsider seeing the world from a different place - writing recorded that view." Her diary was a place that even though, as she put it, she was:

Beatrix, AR

feeling not accepted, having to fit the mold, not that anybody looking at me would think I was trying but at times I was, quite desperately. In my journal I could balance this so that my true self didn't get lost. Or alternately, support and sustain myself through the stress of rejecting the mold.

Through imagining her future self as safe and compassionate, Beatrix also gained some perspective that she would survive adolescence. She cannot remember thinking that it was very likely, or even desirable, that she otherwise would. In retrospect, Beatrix believes it may have been her diary, (and perhaps a bit of divine intervention), that got her through intact.

She was not the only one who grappled with the depths. On the page, we met a group of girls who lifted the lid on their descent journeys. The girls themselves told us in their own words, across time, about their own emergent spirituality and their sense of connection to others. They told us this alongside reports of family conflicts including violence that shattered family life, sexual abuse, extensive substance use, eating disorders, family breakdown, various kinds of personal disappointment or betrayal, untimely death, and the anxieties about identity, love, meaning, value and the future. Their passage from being girls to becoming women is in writing.

The diarists themselves know about this passage, whether consciously or unconsciously. They knew they were in transition, and journeying on their own. We read entries from girls as young as 10 and 12 who moved through a kind of descent and emergence in the course of one entry. Emily ends one of her Age 12 entries with this: "I know you can't give me any advice but it's poisoning my life and I can't stop thinking about it. There. I feel better after that outburst. It did

me worlds of good!” The diaries follow this movement not just over entries, but they make cycles of delving down and coming back up with new insights, new ways of being or believing in themselves over the course of months or years. The girls emerge. Even when their final entries do not show a successful crossing over into adulthood, the girls wrote about the cycles of emergence from the beliefs they held before, from the moods they had lived in before, the people they had been before... writing as an effort toward a goal.

Some of the girls in our project sought religious experiences, some sought sexual experiences and relationships, some sought drugs—but more importantly, they all processed their experiences in their personal writing. All of them felt they must stop in their activity to comment. They prioritized their writing, and prioritized a certain kind of writing.

The girls who took on the journey to the underground in writing were doing exactly what Margaret Atwood⁸⁴ in her book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* claims is the work of writers:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time: all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more—which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change.

The girls were seeking the treasure: the wisdom and stories only available through descent. They followed the pathways of figures like Persephone, Skeleton Woman and Bride down into the underworld, the bottom of the sea or inside a mountain to find what they needed to learn to become women—and most of them did emerge.

12. Implications

So what does this research on girls' diaries say to adults: parents, teachers, youth workers, social workers, counsellors, youth leaders and anyone else who befriends, accompanies or cares about a young woman? There are some concerns we want to note, and a few suggestions to make, that may be helpful.

We begin with a reminder that there are more than a few girls who do not make the successful transition to becoming women. We have diaries from girls who killed themselves (Lara⁸⁵); one who died under suspicious circumstances; some who were at risk in adolescence (Beatrix, Nina, Emily, Carla), or practiced various forms of self-harm (Raven, Emily, Zowie), or struggled with eating disorders (Mary). They have left us accounts of their inner discourses, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. The troubles that these girls faced were not of their own making. They were responding to violation of their bodies, their personal space and their sense of safety and security, or to difficulties in their families where they may have lacked adult attention, or were living through a marriage collapse or a parent suffering from mental health challenges. Their diaries are courageous attempts to make sense of their lives and to uncover truth, or say the unsayable.

Raven, Age 13

Just so you know, I got raped by George when I was about 5. He kept doing it too for about 3 years. Then I learned how to kick his ass. Traumatizing. Maybe that's why I'm so deranged.

Lara G., Age 16

Something happened which triggered a memory of mine, one which I've kept totally secret for so many years. It's a haunting, nightmarish memory, even more so since it is one of my first memories. It shaped my character, my personality, my future too. What I have chosen as a career I know now to have come from that incident. I thought on the drive home that I might finally write it all out, pull all the secrets and memories that incident years ago resulted in, but I just can't. Simply can't.⁸⁶

We also have diaries of girls who lived with loss (Victoria) with families in crisis (Molly, Jen), who survived and prospered through their difficulties (Beatrix, Evelyn Lau⁸⁷), who paid a terrible price for their passionate concerns for the world (Nina⁸⁸) and others whose lives simply went on (Joan, Dorothy). There is no formula to identify what a girl does or doesn't choose to write, nor any universal practice about reading what has been written. As an adult, Mary reflected on the danger of having a written record, reflecting her anxiety about words and their power to overwhelm.

Mary, AR

Could it be almost sometimes more dangerous to have the text to reflect on? I wonder if the act of writing can somehow be enough to somehow make real things that have occurred. Writing itself solidifies things in our memory. To then go back and have all that stuff in your face I imagine could be like having no control over what you want to deal with. I wonder if I had a [whole] book to go back [to] if I would have been completely overwhelmed. Instead my intuition was in control of what I could handle when.

We have pointed out that girls choose other forms to engage the world and their reflections on their lives – visual art, music, poetry, athletics, or dance. They had to feel comfortable with the form and safe with what it produced for them. It is important to note that the diaries, for the girls who wrote them, were a form of self-care, and that those girls were working to make sense of life and take care of themselves.

Molly, Age 14

I need answers to questions, but I found one. We look after our souls as we do our children, and we don't worry extensively over our offspring, because we know they can take care of them selves, so, our soul, like our children will take care of themselves. We don't have to worry. I answered the biggie now there are only the others to answer.

Victoria, AR

So I guess I took care of myself. I took care of myself when no one else could. I became pretty independent. I knew I could get through all of it but I'm pretty sure I'd be in a different place without writing, a place where I wouldn't be doing very well. It made me think by myself, for myself. I would discuss my life with my dad. I would ask questions. I would decide what to do about a situation. I would say why I thought something was good or bad. I would be lost without writing.

Writing kept me alive instead of becoming lost, as I viewed many people around me. When I felt lost in my thoughts, or lost in an unfamiliar or unwanted situation, I found the writing and in the writing I found me.

Victoria is not making a small claim about finding herself. Identity is being formed. Writing is helping to shape her.

First and most important to recognize and remember is that girls can and do have inner lives of considerable depth, that they do grapple with all of the “big” questions of meaning and life. The diaries we studied are not simply a record of crushes, flirtations and social events, although it is worth noting that making sense of relationships is an important developmental task for adolescents and the diaries are also a forum for trying out love, for working through friendship crises and for establishing a relational sense of self. In addition, the girls' writing has significant insight in their accounts of searches for meaning, identity, voice and mattering. The diaries are passionate and honest while also being adolescent in their idealism and innocence.

Nina, L. Age 16

What is this state I'm in? I yearn for something, it's as if I hadn't eaten in along time, I'm hungry, but my hunger isn't physical, it's spiritual. I want love, I want to forget myself in that feeling. I want to dissolve my ego and stop analyzing so as to feel only that love and that blissful peace. But there is none.⁸⁹

We were sometimes concerned as girls described the degree of risk that they live with or how they self-harm—as Beatrix pointed out when she said she could not believe, looking back, that none of the adults in her life paid attention to how much risk she was in, nor did anything to intervene. The diaries are complex and we do not want to give an impression that glosses over the dark side of their content. In some cases the dark side – the descent – is a necessary part of becoming women, while in other cases there is danger in the depth and intensity of the darkness and the degree of risk it indicates.

We advocate that young women deserve to be acknowledged for their passion and care, for their struggles in the midst of difficulty and for their attempts to make sense of what goes on around them in their families, their school settings and their daily lives. The adult women made clear that they longed to be taken seriously, to be listened to and not to have their intensity or concerns minimalized. In our view it is important to change how we think about young women. Acknowledging the complexity and depth of their thinking is an important step in beginning to accompany them in their process of coming of age and becoming women. It means noticing risk, assessing the level of danger in the risk and knowing when to support and when to intervene.

Many of these young women wrote of their fears of the future underlining their anxieties about life and the condition of the world as they absorbed the culture of potential mass destruction. They clearly needed a place to externalize these fears. The diaries were one outlet. There is certainly a need for educators, counsellors and family members to be prepared to talk about these fears, and to do so in a way that acknowledges the worries and takes their fear seriously.

Molly, Age 14

If there is a god, then it won't happen. We won't die or vanish forever. Ragan won't press 'nuke'. The San Andreas Fault won't open up and swallow us alive. But in the last hour of life, I know one doubts there is a god. Yet it is the only thread of hope to hold onto. I love life. I value it more than anything. Please god, please don't take it away from me.

Zowie, Age 12

Today is the last day of the year. I'm scared. Scared of what the future is going to hold. What I mean is the fear of life, everything. I only hope that there will only be a nuclear war after I'm dead and gone. I have often wondered what it would be like to be dead. There are many questions that no one can answer. My favorite question is why.

At the back of her diary, Zowie wrote this undated entry:

Some nights as I sit awake till late at night and scribble down my thoughts, I am actually truthful and ignore the fact that there will be read by someone someday because on some nights, I feel that this book is a way to release my emotions- sort of sort them out. Nights when this book is my only confidante.

Emily, Age 13

You know what?! I'm worried about the future. I'm worried that what I write down, or don't write down in this book might or might not come true. I'm worried that if I look at this and other pages that I'll ask "I should have known" or "why didn't I do this, then maybe this would have turned out differently."

I'm so worried that I'm almost afraid to write in here, for fear of what the future might bring.

Fear of the future may be normal adolescent experience, but the intensity of the fears articulated in the dairies point to a need for some place for those fears to be addressed and processed. The girls are voicing what is on their minds and it needs to be acknowledged and engaged.

If adults are to give a girl's diary writing serious consideration and respect, it will also mean accepting that risk, danger and troubles are a necessary part of her journey. Adults need to become attuned and sensitive to the lives and journeys of the girls they love. The girls need adults who can offer wisdom when asked, and who will wait when necessary. How do adults stay present and available to young women, responding to their cues and questions, their fears and hopes? We need to recognize how often difficult behaviour is actually a confused and confusing plea for help as it enacts the inner turmoil without voicing it.

Girls in the midst of becoming women need adults in their lives who will respect their secret and private musings, and support them in their inner work to sort out life. There is wisdom in what they are doing—that must be acknowledged. There is no one best way to do this, but it would seem being prepared to listen and being available to listen has positive influence.

Victoria's mother wanted to know what her daughter was thinking, and wanted her to be able to say what she needed to say. But their conversations were often unhappy experiences, over charged with emotion—So she encouraged Victoria to write. They lived in the same house, yet shared in an exchange of letters to keep communication open. Victoria was clear as an adult about why she wrote diaries.

Victoria, AR

No one told me to do so. I just felt as if it was the right thing to do. I began telling the story of my day: who I saw, classes I took, boys I thought were beautiful, and so on. Then I began to write about why my eyes always felt like crying and why my head felt like it was spinning.

Victoria was also clear about the benefit to her:

Victoria, AR

Writing was liberating. I freed my mind of the chaos it felt. I could organize my thoughts while keeping a record of my life. There were no limits of what I could write. The journal was an open discussion of anything that came to mind, and sometimes I surprised myself with what I was thinking underneath all of those random thoughts, the social chatter, and short but sweet insights. It would take me from a place of confusion, of an overwhelming environment, of thoughts going around in circles.

Be aware that some risk taking will happen, and it may be necessary to establish limits and boundaries. Becoming an adult does entail being able to assess circumstances, to make decisions in the midst of events and handle the consequences. This takes practice and requires that real difficulties be met. A lot of adolescent learning is through trial and error. There will be wounds and mistakes with lots of turmoil and anxiety. Parents cannot prevent difficulty, but they can be supportive in difficulty—which may mean consulting professionals or advisors. It may mean making sure a daughter has trustworthy adult mentors. It may mean being supportive in ways that stretch a parent’s limits and takes emotional energy and time. It may also take time to go through. Resolving difficulty is not instantaneous. Most adolescents will make the same mistake more than once in the learning process, and may need help at some point in choosing a different way forward when faced with the same difficulty.

A lingering concern that is a reality for parents is whether the degree of risk that their daughter is experiencing is actually dangerous for them, and if it is, how and when they should intervene. Should a parent read a daughter’s diary to find out if there is life-threatening risk? There is no simple answer to this question. It has been our experience in the GDP that the girls who wrote were at the edge in some way, and being at the edge or feeling marginalized or different was one trigger for picking up the pen. In considering the girls whose diaries are included in the project, there is a parade of fragile or sometimes, at-risk souls.

In the published diaries, too, we saw the same marginal sense of self and risk - Evelyn Lau living on the streets, Anaïs Nin plunging down, Nina Lugovskaya living in resistance to Stalinist Russia, Anne Frank in hiding. The girls who feel they are misfits or are in an oppositional stance to their own worlds seem to be the girls who chose to write and keep their diaries. They articulate a desire to be taken seriously. They are concerned about the future and how to survive. They are trying to address the risk and dangers in their own lives in meaningful ways. They may be resisting the world they see taking shape around them, and they may need support to do so.

Reading a child's diary has repercussions. We know that Mary stopped writing when her diary was read by a family member. At one conference, a woman in the audience told us the discovery that her mother had read her diaries was the most devastating breach of trust she had ever experienced. After this violation, she did not feel able to write again. Such a violation of trust may sever a relationship with a parent (or sibling) or worse, silence a girl's conversation with herself that is vital for her survival, even if she is at risk. This loss of voice can last long into adult life and inhibit a woman from living a full life, preventing her from having voice to express what she knows and believes. Protecting a girl's personal space may be vital if she is already violated or betrayed. How does one do so? By expressing care and offering to listen; by believing what has been said, and being in a relationship of respect that does not violate the private space of a diary and that prevents humiliation. There are very few circumstances in which reading a child's private writing is justifiable.

Mary, whose adolescent diaries were violated, takes a very different approach on finding some of her daughter's writing during a room-cleaning spree with a small battle brewing:

Mary, AR

*Then under her headboard I saw a bunch of paper crumpled etc.
with her two books that I know she writes in amidst this rubble.
I clued in that maybe that was what all the fuss was about and*

went downstairs to find her sulking on the couch. I told her she can do it herself and gave her a garbage bag for what I hoped she would put the crumpled up paper in. So she called me when she was done pulling all the stuff off the shelves and I went and looked under the headboard and all the paper was still there. I looked at her and said she needed to clean that too and again she insisted no. So I know she is a pack rat, but I get the sense that there is something bigger going on there. Something more than just a fire hazard. So I will leave it alone, but isn't that bizarre?

Mary has learned. She doesn't read the paper and she lets the "mess" stay in place.

Violating her secrecy or being dismissive of a girl's concerns will increase her potential isolation and multiply her silence. In the passage below, Victoria insists that saying nothing would have been better when faced with her in an emotional state. If Victoria was down in a hole of grief and despair about every aspect of her life, a more valuable reaction someone could have shown would be to crawl down there with her, and respect where she was with silence. Saying "everything will be okay" to a girl at this point is equivalent to saying what you're experiencing right now doesn't have meaning. It is not useful to try to sweep all the worry away.

Victoria, Age 16

I think I just might explode. I have so much to say. But no one cares to listen long enough or no one cares to do anything about it except say "what's wrong." Then when I say everything (and when I say everything- I mean it- I wouldn't joke about that) everyone says "oh don't say that, everything's fine don't worry." They say that because they have nothing to say. What they should of said in the first place is nothing. Then I would have more respect for them.

Other girls and women told us that they stopped writing, or never started writing because they were afraid of exposure. Many girls seek the safety of putting their thoughts, experiences, and feelings down on paper instead of sharing them with someone who might not keep a secret—but the risk in this decision is that the words could fall into the wrong hands. In adolescence there is a practice of trying out styles, roles and ideas. A diary is certainly a safe space to try out ideas and explore emotions. That must be respected.

Beatrix reflected on the shift she felt after her diary had been read—and how she continued to use the journal as a safe space once she made it mobile.

Beatrix, AR

I carried my diary with me everywhere, I think, in my massive purse, also filled with 5 lbs of cosmetics and the other necessary paraphernalia of my lifestyle. But that was only after I left home. In earlier adolescence I definitely had the bedroom orientation more typical for adolescent girls. Then my journal stayed in my bedroom and I wrote in my bedroom, except after my stepfather read it.

One participant's friend, Julia, told the project about coming home to find her mother unapologetically reading her diary at the kitchen table. Julia's mom looked up and said "Julia, you should never write down something you don't want anyone else to read." Perhaps the injunction should be: you must never read someone's writing without her permission.

At conferences we also heard about girls who wrote reflective writing that they would present to others—one woman told us about her daughter, who was sharing her writing with her. She wanted to know what to do with this connection. It's hard to imagine that her daughter would not be editing if she had her mother in mind as her audience. The diary may in fact be a way to tell her mother things more easily. The moment another is the audience for the diary, another who is able to read the diary while the girl is still in her current context,

some editing inevitably happens. What did we tell the mother to do with that connection? Honour it. Be thankful for it. Try not to direct it. And don't be sad when it's gone—the audience may shift, but the worthwhile effort of her daughter to build herself, to write herself into being through her words has not changed.

Although there are risks in the journey of transition through descent and writing about it in a diary, there are benefits for the girls who bother to do so. A private practice may be going on, and the borderline between those girls who write and are in danger and those who are using their writing to process and resolve issues and come to “short but sweet insights,” or come to calm, is not always easy to perceive. Many parents are unaware that their daughters are writing diaries. The practice itself may be a hidden activity. Being alert and attentive through good communication is necessary in assessing risk and acting on concerns. If a parent has a daughter's trust and there is respectful communication between them, there are grounds for managing risk, for knowing when danger is at hand and paying attention at the critical moment.

What are options for family members? To begin, accept that girls are thinking about and may be writing about big issues—and from their perspective, everything may be awry. The task, then, is to discover how to accompany them in ways appropriate for that girl, perhaps in silence, perhaps over time with conversations that approach issues such as mortality, safety, boundaries, spirituality, relationships, sexuality, loss or other hurts and concerns that arise. Girls are looking for ways to survive through the time of descent and need support and connection to return from the underworld. It is also critical for parents to be aware that if they are struggling with a major crisis in their own lives, it will be having an impact, acknowledged or not, on their daughter. As we saw with Emily, name-calling made the situation worse. Victoria also clashed with her mother in their shared journey of grief—but in their case, a written correspondence eased some of the tension.

Accompaniment in some form is essential. It must not be intrusive. It must not take over the journey or push for a particular response.

It is worth considering how to help mark the reality of changing relationships, changing roles and a changed sense of self. It is helpful to discover what can be celebrated to affirm milestones and successes. As girls become young women, what choices can mothers and friends make to indicate they accept this young woman as no longer a child? How can they be part of sharing knowledge by sharing their own experiential wisdom? Are there family rituals that can assist? Small gifts or symbolic totems that indicate that someone is noticing and willing to be there when needed may be helpful. The ceremonial nature of traditional rites of passage may give some guidance to parents for creating celebratory events and underscore the need for clear transformational boundaries. In the words of the Nootka woman, there are things you “hadda learn,” and hopefully there are elders who can do some of the teaching.

Accompanying someone on a difficult transition does not mean preventing the difficulty, or even intervening automatically. A preferred strategy may be to wait until asked, or until a small opening is offered to take an elder’s role or to have a trusted friend who will take that role. It may be helpful to consider what role fathers or other family members can play in support and/or accompaniment. The adage that it takes a village to raise a child has some pertinence in the journey from girl to woman. A community is needed to acknowledge the girl becoming woman, and this is a task that requires more than the immediate family. Both a supportive home environment and respected adults who can be role models (who may or may not be family) are important for girls.

As girls develop voice they will need encouragement to trust their instincts, to articulate their concerns and have them taken seriously. They may need help to guard and nurture their sensitivity and critical insights. There is a degree of secrecy and hiddenness required that must be allowed, and the privacy required protected. The inner work that is psychological and spiritual requires a sacred space and all that that implies.

Counselors or youth workers must be similarly sensitive to the complexity and depth of the inner underground journey that girls may be undertaking. Being aware that girls may be diary writers or be using some other forms of expression to engage their transitional tasks can potentially be a valuable asset in a therapeutic intervention. Providing opportunities to be expressive, to engage in conversations about matters of the heart can provide girls who are in difficulty a chance to give voice to some of what troubles them.

Keeping a diary to tell of personal risk, to spell out dark secrets may well be an indication that a girl needs to externalize, to verbalize her thoughts and feelings, but she has no safe person or place (except the diary) to do that. There is significant personal and therapeutic benefit in eternalizing feelings and concerns. Writing them down allows for enough distance from the feeling to give space for reflection. The diary writers who talked about coming to calm give testament to the benefits. Being a trustworthy listener may allow the risk and the underlying wounds to be addressed, and appropriate responses initiated.

Considering the Spiritual

This project began as an effort to explore girls' spirituality and has grown in ways we did not anticipate, yet the original intent remains: to discover the nature of the spiritual in adolescent girls. The diaries are testaments to the complex inner life of girls as they record it. They are being shaped by their context and all its complexities in each of their lives, but they also appear to have similar concerns across cultures for making meaning, for figuring out what matters for them and to them. They resist aspects of life around them—for some, the youth culture they don't quite fit in, and for others, members of their families in the midst of conflict. They worry about self-care; they think about death, struggle with moods, sometimes depression, sometimes self-harm. They call out, pleading for help from others and occasionally to God or some beyond the self assistance to help them emerge and survive.

How then are their journeys of descent and their struggles to sort out meaning and mattering to be respected? How could an inner spiritual resilience be nurtured in adolescent girls? What would make it okay to

be sensitive in the face of social stigmatization in a violent, frightening world? In our earlier writing we identified a number of factors that we said would support girls:

- a supportive home environment, and/or supportive adult role models,
- unconditional love with the freedom to explore and to display different personas,
- understanding that what a girl defines as spiritual in her life may not conform to institutional or societal expectations,
- a meaningful learning environment that values diversity in ways of knowing,
- value of spiritual knowing in the pre-adolescent period,
- adults and peers who model self-accepted sensitivity,
- adults who are willing to accept the adolescent's sense of what is or is not spiritual, allowing space for trial and error learning, exploration and self-directed engagement,
- strategies to keep sensitivity alive when repressed or under threat, such as diary or journal writing or other forms of self-connected expression, and
- a strong sense of self and the ability to self-reflect as well as reflect on the effect of her environment, as this girl is able to do.⁹⁰

We advocate that family members, youth workers, counsellors and others who care for girls recognize the diaries as a form of sacred territory—space set apart—where inner work can be done and must be respected. Sacred space must be private for the development of an authentic spiritual life. Girls seem to know instinctively that privacy is necessary to nurture inner life. For girls who are introverts, and many are, the quiet around their personal insights needs to be guarded. It means adults face the challenge of balancing responses between offering support that respects the privacy of inner life while at the same time being willing to engage and be engaged when needed—like being on call and having to wait for the phone to ring, and responding

when it does, interrupting the rest of life. Girls do need adults, both women and men, who value the underground world. They need adults who can strengthen and reinforce spiritual standing formed in reflective activity—guides who can draw on their own wisdom and experience as they offer support.

In accepting that self-care is at the core of diary writing, we suggest that girls be acknowledged as the experts when it comes to their own spirituality. They are asking to be taken seriously—for recognition that their inner journeys are complex undertakings requiring autonomy, but also respectful guidance. We can be aware that girls' spirituality is not necessarily distinct from other aspects of their development. It may find expression through the physical, social, emotional, creative and/or cognitive realms. Hay & Nye (1998) also point out that "one needs to enquire carefully about and attend to each child's personal style if one is to 'hear' their spirituality at all. At a theoretical level this implies that we cannot neatly distinguish the spiritual aspects from the psychological features of a child's life."⁹¹

What do we suggest? Support and encourage all forms of self-expression. Girls need to find their own voice and develop a sense of self grounded in their capacity to trust their own instincts, accept their passions, develop their creativity, be connected to the world, and form life-giving relationships. Diary writing is one activity that allows for the expression of and connection to a spiritual and inner voice to be nurtured. There may be other forms used to express spiritual experiences and they too can be nurtured and protected. It may be as simple as providing the tools—literacy skills, a book and writing instruments, drawing pads, lessons in a favoured activity: it might be a sport, dance, theatre, rock climbing or hiking.

And finally, as adults and as professionals we can attend to our own spiritual development, exploring the role of 'intuitive practice' as complementary to our intentional practice with youth, examining our own life journeys for moments that connected us beyond ourselves. We can add spiritual self-care to our practices, modeling the possibility

for those we work with in professional settings. We can also make it known that we are concerned for the spiritual development of children and youth, and wait for the conversations and questions to enter into the space such acknowledgement will produce.

We'd like to leave with this quote from Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*, a short reflection on the awakening that, it strikes us, is what sparks the necessity of the diary at early adolescence for some girls.

I never woke, at first, without recalling, chilled, all those other waking times, those similar stark views from similarly lighted precipices: dizzying precipices from which the distant glittering world revealed itself as a brooding and separated scene--and so let slip a queer implication, that I myself was both observer and observable, and so a possible object of my own humming awareness.⁹²

Earlier on, we posed the question of whether girls wrote themselves into being through their diaries. Writing may be just one of many ways in which a girl brings herself to the other side of her journey through adolescence. But the work done on those pages reveals that girls who write at this age are often the best authority on themselves—being, as they are, their own study.

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