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Digital Storytelling: Empowering Feminist and Womanist Faith Formation with Young Women

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In the last five years there has been an explosion of interest in, and research connected to, understanding religious identity in contemporary contexts. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), for example, offers us rich data to explore in relation to young people (Smith and Denton 2005, Christerson *et al.* 2010). Putnam and Campbell's book *American grace* (2010) offers a multi-faceted look at religion in the United States more generally. In more specific pastoral contexts, Martinson, Roberto and Black's study (2010) of exemplary youth ministry provides insight into the discrete elements that point toward ongoing youth involvement in Christian congregations, and the Interfaith Youth Core's publications explore how shared service aligned with opportunities for exploration of faith can lead to enhanced religious identity (IFYC 2012). Yet even while there is much that is encouraging about these studies, in general they share at least one basic thread of observation: religious faith is on the ebb in the US, with more people identifying themselves as "spiritual, but not religious."

When we consider this research in terms of young women, the challenges are even greater. As Bischoff notes, "in the girls' studies literature, the primary location for academic discussions of girls' identities, consideration of the place of faith identity in the formation of female identity is almost completely absent" (Bischoff 2011: 38). Although there are a few published studies that suggest that "organized religious and other ethical institutions can offer girls important practical and psychological alternatives to the values conveyed by popular culture" (American Psychological Association as quoted by Bischoff 2011: 38), there is very little that actually offers advice on how to do so. Even explicitly feminist and womanist research has tended to focus on articulating theological frameworks, that is, scriptural interpretations that provide liberating foundations for religious belief, and liturgical resources for enacting liberative insights rather than concentrating on how feminist and womanist religious identity might be encouraged in younger women.[1]

Authority, authenticity, agency

At the same time, the birth of the web – and even more recently, of web 2.0 and social media tools – has dramatically altered the larger discursive terrain, creating a multitude of spaces which scholars describe as having characteristics of "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2009, 2006 Shirky 2008, Gauntlett 2008). There is some evidence to suggest that gender differences are less stark in some of the spaces present in digital culture – young women appear to participate in social media in about the same numbers as young men, for instance – but even with this participatory emphasis, research suggests that there are gender differences present here, too. Vedantham's careful research exploring the creation of online videos amongst undergraduates is particularly striking, finding that there are "significant differences in creation of online videos and roles played with video editing" (Vedantham 2011: x), with young men taking by far the more active roles in the process.

I have argued previously that three elements of religious identity are shifting particularly rapidly amidst media cultures: authority, authenticity and agency (Hess 2010, 2008). As these elements shift, new opportunities – and new challenges – arise for feminist and womanist faith formation that is attentive to the needs of young women. The crises of authority that have emerged as digital tools enter communities with clear hierarchical structures such as the Roman Catholic church, also create new possibilities for re-envisioning communal authority (Shirky 2008: 143–160). At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, amongst evangelical Protestant Christian communities, the vast reach and speed of digital tools create a similar crisis of authority (see, e.g., Eckholm 2011 on the recent controversy over Rob Bell's latest book),[2] with additional new opportunities.

At the same time, the question of what constitutes authentic faith has opened up new room for young women to assert their own conceptions of that term. Perhaps most striking is the reality that faith is no longer sustained and clarified primarily, or even generally, within religious institutions. The number of people who identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" is at an all time high. Indeed, the question of what constitutes authentic faith is increasingly being represented by, and contested within, popular culture contexts. Clark notes, for instance, that figures such as the late-night television satirist Stephen Colbert who "are positioned to serve as interpreters of religion's role in society, and whose views articulate those that are consensually accepted, thus emerge as authoritative figures in contemporary culture" (Clark 2011: 4).

These examples are drawn from the Christian context, where – at least in the US – there are still many vestiges of "established religion" to support faith formation. For other communities of faith, however, religious education develops in spite of the larger cultural surround, or even in active contestation with it. Imagine trying to raise healthy Muslim children in the midst of the current Islamophobia in the US, or trying to help your family celebrate Holi

while contesting the representations of Hinduism in the *Simpsons*. Active engagement in practices of faith is the single most effective means of faith formation that scholars have identified, but how does one practice faith without a larger active community within which to do so?

These dynamic streams of authority and authenticity flow together into perhaps the single biggest challenge to faith formation in the US context: how we understand agency, or the active initiating, executing and controlling of one's actions in the world. Nearly every religious community has a theology of agency. In Christianity, for instance, God is understood as the primary Agent, with varying degrees of control (depending upon the theological perspective on free will, predestination and so on) over God's creation and God's creatures. There are even more complex articulations of the relationship between human agency and transcendence in Hinduism (Clooney 2010) and Buddhism (Makransky 2007).

In contrast to these religious frameworks, "agency" is generally understood in popular US contexts as originating individually with individual consequences. People have less and less ability to imagine organized collective action or action that is primarily group oriented. Although the advent of participatory digital media has begun to challenge this ideological dominance of the individual, that resistance is by no means widespread or hegemonic (Benkler 2006).

This challenge, where religious communities speak of agency as something that emerges within community and through community, and yet the wider popular culture represents agency almost wholly in individualistic terms, opens up room for young women to find ways to discover their own voices in the midst of community. As the dominant notions of religious authority – thoroughly permeated by centuries of patriarchal and sexist dynamics – begin to crumble, new experimentation emerges and young women can be encouraged to claim alternative understandings of religious authority, which are present in religious traditions but have often been marginalized or suppressed. Feminist and womanist approaches to faith, for example, often emphasize deeply collaborative, non-hierarchical and participatory forms of religious authority.

Yet coming to a sense of oneself as a person of faith *and* a female within any of the primary faith traditions in the US context requires a complex and difficult process that encompasses what Parker calls a dance of "realization, resistance, resilience and ritual" (2006b: 165). It is at one and the same time a dance into the heart of a community of faith, and to the edges of that same community. Young women – indeed, women of all ages – must find ways to hold within themselves the "tensegrity" of living amidst the destructive dynamics of religious cultures that privilege patriarchal dynamics and heterosexism, and yet at the same time also provide powerful narratives of resistance and deep traditions of transformation.[3]

Ironically, popular digital cultures and ancient religious traditions provide at one and the same time both resource and restriction for this tensegrity. Caught in the grip of this paradox, a group of creative feminist and womanist religious educators are working with young women in ways that help them to develop

the critical stances and pragmatic practices that result in the very kinds of resistance and resilience that Parker (2003, 2006a, 2006b) promotes.

Digital storytelling offers one route into this pragmatic practice of faith formation with young women. Given the vast array of definitions that have accrued to the term "faith formation," I will note here that my use of this term incorporates two interconnected elements: religious education and spirituality. By "religious education" I mean a process of "making accessible the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between traditions and transformation" (Boys 1989: 193). Notice that this definition is not linked to a specific religious tradition: it could be used within Judaism, Christianity, Islam and so on. Notice, too, that it emphasizes "traditioning" as opposed to "traditionalism" (Pelikan 1984: 65).

I understand spirituality as:

> the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence ... . [it] has something to do with the integration of all aspects of human life and experience ... . spirituality is that attitude, that frame of mind which breaks the human person out of the isolating self. As it does that, it directs him or her to another relationship in whom one's growth takes root and sustenance.
>
> (Schneiders 1986: 264)

These two components, when linked together, define what I mean by "faith formation" in this chapter. The former element describes the communal or collective character of faith formation, while the latter voices the more personal elements of that process. Faith formation, then, must take into account the historical and contemporary process of engagement with a community of faith collectively at the same time as it attends to the journey of individual persons as they seek to listen to and develop a relationship with transcendence: in Christian terms, to "know as we are known" (Palmer 1993).

In the case of working on feminist and womanist faith formation with young women, the whole process becomes a level more complex and challenging, given the patriarchal nature of faith communities through time, and the necessity of both finding one's voice within a tradition, but also of being an active agent of transformation for that tradition. Given what research has suggested is already a gendered divide between young men and young women in their sense of agency within the digital culture, finding ways to develop one's voice within a community becomes of significant importance in emerging digital cultures, yet – and this is precisely the heart of the challenge – feminist and womanist communities of faith are few and far between. Digital tools provide some possibility that such communities might be made more accessible, might even be developed in some way. As Clark notes, young people often experience practices that become possible through digital tools as "liberating

and empowering, a way to manage risk and to direct one's own life course ... . an openness to possibilities rather than a limit" (Clark 2005: 218).

Digital storytelling

In this chapter I am working primarily within the tradition of digital storytelling that has been established by the work of Lambert, Weinshenker, and others associated with the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS 2012). That process of telling stories using digital tools emerged from a community theater group which was deliberately focused on evoking and empowering personal "voice" and its sharing. Since 1993, the CDS has taught the elements of this process in a myriad of contexts, estimating that more than 12,000 stories have been created (Davis and Weinshenker 2012: 417). In contrast to some of what is labeled "digital storytelling" in current commercial media contexts, the CDS process is focused primarily on the storytelling part of that phrase. The digital tools might at first glance seem incidental or even merely instrumental to the primary learning. As Joe Lambert notes:

> What we know is that when you gather people in a room, and listen, deeply listen to what they are saying, and by example encourage others to listen, magic happens. The magic is simple. We do not have many safe places to be heard.
>
> (2006: 95)

There are, however, elements of the dynamics peculiar to digital tools and digital distribution that add a layer of learning outcomes that were originally unanticipated by the CDS, and at the same time lend themselves to powerful use when engaged in faith formation (Lambert 2006: 10–11, Gauntlett 2008: 256). So how might this additional layer be useful for feminist and womanist work with young women? To explore that layer I need to add two elements to this discussion that grow out of the work of Michael Wesch, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown.

The first element has to do with yet another paradox, this time one that Wesch, who is a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University who works in the field of digital ethnography, has identified.[4] Wesch has observed that the medium of YouTube "vlogs" – a form of autobiographical self-presentation to the imagined community of YouTube – demonstrate an important experiential paradox. Their combination of "anonymity plus physical distance plus rare and ephemeral dialogue can equal hatred as public performance," and at the same time, "anonymity plus physical distance plus rare and ephemeral dialogue can equal the freedom to experience humanity without fear or anxiety" (Wesch 2008, time stamp 29:13).[5]

I believe that the "hatred as public performance" phenomenon is fairly well described, but much less attention has been paid to what it means to have the

freedom to "experience humanity without fear or anxiety." That kind of experience, built upon the constructed or perceived intimacy of being able to stare directly at a close-up of a person baring their experience to a potentially global audience, is perhaps most analogous to the confessionalism previously encountered through spiritual autobiographies (Bondi 1987, 1991). It is this element of digital storytelling, with the context collapse which accompanies it, that offers new room for young women to walk into feminist and womanist identities, for it creates a space in which young women can become part of a visible community, or at least a collective arena, in which they have the freedom to explore an identity that is not constrained by institutional religious authorities, but is still embedded in something larger than themselves alone.

In addition, the CDS authors have noted that the creator of the digital story in many instances is "writing to the future" in a way that articulates an aspiration which, once having been articulated, draws the creator toward achieving it (Davis and Weinshenker 2012). While the spiritual autobiographies of times past most often were explicit in their address to God, or at least explicit about their author's desire to explore a relationship with God, what is most analogous here is not necessarily an explicit engagement with a Divine entity, but rather the baring of one's affective knowledge of self-in-relation, and the aspirational quality of the reflection that can arise from creating such a public disclosure. For young women exploring feminist and/or womanist identities, this room to practice an articulation of identity that is grounded in a community that cherishes (or at least is perceived as possibly cherishing) such an identity is a precious resource.

A further dynamic that Wesch observes comes in what he terms a "cultural inversion," where we are "craving connection but experience it as constraint" (Wesch 2008, time stamp 31:34). He notes three elements in particular — individualism, independence and commercialization — that we are immersed in, but which vlogs seem to want to counter by reaching out for, or at least expressing a desire for, community, relationships and authenticity. This "cultural inversion" directly invokes the elements I stated earlier as essential for faith formation, both in terms of community as well as in personal spiritual connection. Wesch notes that "Media do not just distance us, they connect us in new ways that can sometimes feel distant but sometimes that distance allows us to connect more deeply than ever before (Wesch 2008, time stamp 31:34) ... And new forms of community create new forms of self-understanding" (Wesch 2008, time stamp 32:10). Note that I am not ignoring that Wesch has also identified these new environments as allowing for "the public performance of hatred." I am simply recognizing a positive element of the paradox he has described.

These elements that Wesch is pointing to appear to be echoed in Thomas and Brown's observations in their recent book *A new culture of learning: Cultivating imagination for a world of constant change* (2011). In this book, most of which is an integrating argument based on the research coming out of

the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Project, Thomas and Brown argue that learning which emerges in media culture (particularly as observed in computer gaming and social media) is best understood as a process of "indwelling," with three key questions (What is my relationship to others? What am I able to explore? And how can I utilize the available resources?) constituting distinctive characteristics of learning today (Thomas and Brown 2011: 101–105). Note how the dynamic tensegrity of the communal/personal is described in this term of "indwelling." Note, too, that it is possible to see iterations of "authority, authenticity and agency" being voiced.

In digital spaces such as these, young women are learning to ask questions, and taking that practice into their engagement with their faith. In ways that encourage them to come to feminist and womanist responses, that invite them into the "resistance and resilience" so necessary to faithful and faith-filled identities, they ask, for instance: What is my relationship to a community of faith? What kinds of questions and concerns can I explore there? What resources exist within that community and tradition for the articulation of my own experience?

Indeed, one very fascinating and constructive film about religious identity recently created by a group of young women was made in the context of the organization TVbyGirls, rather than in a faith community. The film, *Undercover*, is an exploration by a group of diverse young women – Muslim, Christian, agnostic – of the practice of wearing *hijab*. In order to engage in this practice they found they needed to think about it through the experience of creating a film, rather than in their own specific communities of faith because they wanted to ask questions and to be in dialogue in ways not wholly possible in their communities, and in a manner which crossed faith borders (TVbyGirls 2012). People working in the field of faith formation who desire to foster feminist and womanist religious identities with young women need to enter into these processes with care and attention to the dynamics of authority, authenticity and agency. We must discern ways to apprentice young women into experiencing a freedom to observe humanity without stress or anxiety that moves them actively into the embrace of empathy – for themselves as well as for others (Hess 2011). At the same time, we need to find ways to help our learners weave their own stories into the larger story of the faith community through time, and at least in traditions where this matters, with God (or transcendence or the Divine) (Anderson and Foley 1998, Scharer, Hilberath, and Hinze 2008).

Pedagogies of digital storytelling

One very fruitful learning mechanism for doing so lies in the pedagogical design of digital storytelling, using story prompts that evoke connections to communities of faith. Because digital storytelling begins in learning to tell stories, and most frequently stories that have a personal foundation to them,

the process is immediately congruent with the kind of faith formation process that seeks to sustain and develop spirituality. Further, in learning how to construct a story – learning the basic elements of a story, working in a story circle to refine and hone a story, multiple rounds of editing as various elements are placed into a digital framework – learners are brought into a more critically engaged relationship with their own story, as well as, potentially, the story of their community of faith. When the additional layer of distributing the story in digital format is added, the process can take on a deeply communal character (McQuistion 2007). That communal character takes shape around the individual learner's agency. As Erstad and Silseth write:

> Digital storytelling, then, both gives students the opportunity to learn how to use technology to make their own voice heard and the opportunity to use knowledge and experience acquired outside of school in the process of becoming citizens – a potential way to foster agency ... . The democratic potential of digital storytelling lies both in the way people might learn to express themselves and the way it challenges traditional conceptions of formal vs. informal ways of learning.
>
> (2008: 218)

So far, there are only a few projects investigating digital storytelling in the context of religious education, but their findings are encouraging. Kaare and Lundby, for instance, in Norway, have been involved in studying one of the Norwegian church's pilot projects in new forms of faith formation. Their work on a project that engaged digital storytelling suggests that:

> By participating in the Story Circle, and negotiating how their stories should be constructed and interpreted, the young narrators are connected to the collective identity of the congregation. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities.
>
> (2008: 117)

Similarly, in a DMin completed within the program at United Theology Seminary in Dayton, OH, where McQuistion used digital storytelling as the culminating project of a year-long confirmation program, there was consistent evidence that the young people involved in the program had very positive experiences in deepening their faith – a process which spilled over into the larger church community (McQuistion 2007: 146).

These same elements are being noted in the rare instances in which story-telling with digital media has been picked up as a constructive tool for feminist and/or womanist engagement with young women. Parker writes of developing a "faith, film and the feminine" series for young women (Parker 2003: 168).

Baker and Mercer describe using films as a way to help young women see "mutuality, distinctiveness, and community as central to the good life" (Baker and Mercer 2007: 93). Baker suggests that doing what she calls "girlfriend theology" invites young women to recontextualize and reframe the stories they pick up from the wider culture (Baker 2005). The most thorough research to date on this topic is Bischoff's dissertation on young women, narrative agency and religious education (Bischoff 2011). As she writes:

> Young women with strong imaginative faculties tell counterstories about female identity that challenge and serve to eradicate sexist master narratives. They work for social, political and religious change in the world, tapping into new ways of being, knowing, and acting to address troubling issues like poverty, addiction, ecological degradation, and war from new perspectives.
> (Bischoff 2011: 227)

Further, in each of the larger cases – the Norwegian project and the Ohio project – the primary challenge was in developing the story, *not* in the use of the technology to craft the story. Yet the lure of learning to use the technology added an element of energy and engagement to the projects, I believe at least in part because it drew on the "cultural inversions" Wesch describes, and promoted the "indwelling" of which Thomas and Brown write.

The most pressing challenge for feminist and womanist faith formation in these arenas is finding constructive ways to, as Kaare and Lundby put it, develop identity that "is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities" (2008: 117). Their research project did not focus specifically on gender, but had it done so it is hard not to imagine that the dynamics of "resistance and resilience" about which Parker (2006a, 2006b) writes would align themselves congruently with this "lived experience" participation of which Kaare and Lundby write.

The feminist, womanist and liberationist work that has been done in non-digital settings focused on storytelling in religious education is also helpful in this element of learning design. See, for example, Baker (2005), Bischoff (2011), Conde-Frazier (2007), Court (2007), Foster (2007), Irizarry (2003, 2008), Miedema and Roebben (2008), Parker (2006a, 2006b, 2003) and Selçuk (2008). Stories are at the heart of faith experience, they often form the primary content of faith practices that engage sacred texts, and they wind their way through liturgical and other ritual practices. Indeed, much of the more general literature in the field of Christian religious education in the last decade has centered on discussion of narrative in religious identity. See, for instance, the work of Avest, Bakker, and Miedema (2008), Dalton (2003), Everist (2000), Vail (2007), Gilmour (1997), Groome (1991), Kang and Parrett (2009), Mercer (2008), Parker (2003), Smith (2004) and Wimberly (1994).

The pace of change in our current contexts, particularly around emerging digital tools, is far too rapid to draw definitive conclusions about the impact and utility of such tools when used within faith formation. Yet experience to date suggests that there is a powerful and deeply constructive learning convergence at the intersection of digital storytelling, faith formation and gender dynamics. It is too late to think that we can simply do "what we have always done" in faith formation. Such methods no longer function well in our pluralistic, non-established religion contexts; furthermore, they take no account whatsoever of the delicate and dynamic dance of feminist and womanist religious identity construction. Yet all around us there are examples of experiential learning unfolding through the use of emerging digital tools (Watkins 2009). Why not draw on these experiments within religious learning? Digital storytelling may well be the most creative bridge we have to a future of vibrant faith communities. If we are able to help young women come to a richer sense of themselves as feminist and/or womanist people of faith, and at the same time give them access to creative production tools that increase their sense of personal and communal agency, why would we do anything less?

Notes

1 I distinguish here, and throughout the paper, between "feminist" and "womanist." "Womanist" is a term that entered popular usage through the work of novelist Alice Walker, and intentionally conveys attention to dynamics of racialization as they intersect with sexism. It is also a term that conveys a more full-bodied intersectional critique of theological sexism, and as such was first advanced by theologians Delores Williams and Jacqueline Grant. Some of the most interesting recent work with adolescent girls and the development of religious identity has been done by womanist theologian and scholar Evelyn Perkins.

2 Prof. Rob Bell is a younger evangelical pastor with a national reach, given his astute use of various forms of digital and social media. In 2011 he published a book, *Love wins*, which many across evangelical Protestant Christianity felt erred on the side of being too universalist in its theology. The book became a bestseller, and its widespread reception sent shock waves across the evangelical establishment.

3 "Tensegrity" is a term first coined by the architect R. Buckminster Fuller, who combined the words "tension" and "integrity" to describe the incredible stability of structures that are built out of competing forces that are held together with respect to their individual integrities.

4 Wesch and his students are rapidly becoming famous for their short videos exploring various aspects of digital culture. "The machine is using us," for instance, has been viewed more than 11,500,000 times as of March 2012. Perhaps even more surprising, given its length and scholarly subject, is Wesch's 55-minute lecture, "An anthropological introduction to YouTube," which has been viewed more than 1,780,000 times as of March 2012.

5 These quotations are taken from my personal transcription of the "An anthropological introduction to YouTube" video available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU (cited on May 11, 2011). In all cases, the numbers in parentheses refer to time elapsed.

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