



*Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.*

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## Still, Too Many Ophelias

Mary Pipher's seminal book, *Reviving Ophelia*, about her clinical work with adolescent girls was written in 1994—two years before my daughter was born and one year before Jack and I seriously pursued parenthood. I don't remember what initially drew me to the book—maybe being a teacher or maybe intuition: someday I'll parent a daughter. Unfortunately, I find Pipher's insightful and compassionate text to be just as relevant today as it was fifteen years ago.

Why my renewed interest in *Ophelia*? Why do I badger my female friends with questions about their adolescence? Why do I ask counselors and teachers at my daughter's school about proactive efforts to support children? The answer is simple. Mona is a seventh grader (twelve, soon to be thirteen), and though we are grateful that she is still confident and communicative, we sense that she's up to her neck in unfamiliar waters.

Three times in one month, Mona came home complaining that girls are terrible. At times, she was the victim, but she wasn't so much seeking our help as she was thinking out loud—accepting a dynamic without questioning it. To resist her broad stroke assumptions, I asked: "What girls are being terrible? Do you mean all girls?"

Mona mentioned that some girls were meaner than others, but she also expressed that given the right circumstances girls just act that way. Predictably, specific taunts had to do with bodies and sex. Breasts and body weight are constantly criticized. Even the media's idealized thin bodies come under attack. Slim girls are anorexic. Teasing, initially cloaked as concern, turns to insult. On a dime, a best friend becomes a "slut". Gossip is intentionally spoken aloud, so the victim will overhear it and be brought to tears. And of course there are the gay slurs. Perpetrators might argue that they're not homophobic, but when attacking, all ammunition is fair.

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Mona didn't want me to intervene; she'd work things out. But some of her stories were about other girls who weren't weathering their taunts. The teacher-parent in me wasn't comfortable keeping silent just because my daughter was surviving.

Around this same time, news reports surfaced about pop singer Chris Brown brutalizing Rihanna. According to court documents, Brown punched, bit and choked her. An article in the New York Times, reporting that a high number of teenage girls made excuses for Brown's behavior, made an already horrific story that much more tragic. Even Mona was slow to remove Brown's poster from her bedroom wall, though she insisted that she would never allow a boy to treat her like that.

I couldn't help but connect the dots between New York Times quotes like, "she probably made him mad," and Mona's, "girls are terrible." If, "girls are terrible," might they trigger or even deserve the wrath of their exasperated boyfriends? Did the blame-the-victim response of too many adolescent girls have something to do with how they feel about themselves? The same feelings that when taken to an extreme cause our daughters to starve themselves, cut themselves or even take their own lives.

So I'm back to the books. No longer the baby books about early developmental milestones, but books about development nonetheless—milestones that are as critical as learning to walk and talk and read. And I'm asking a lot of questions, much to the chagrin of at least a few of my female friends who look at me as if I'm harboring some chauvinistic agenda.

My agenda is simple. Adolescent girls go through a very difficult transition at a time when our culture places an inordinate emphasis on independence. They need the adults in their lives to help them negotiate their changing bodies, feelings and the messages they receive from, in Pipher's words, "our poisonous, girl-hurting culture." Mass media and pop culture provide ample evidence to support Pipher's claims, and unfortunately so do statistics.

Finally, Mona agreed to have me talk with a school counselor and health teacher as long as I promised not to mention names. I had no interest in naming perpetrators and victims. I've no doubt that, over time, most of the girls—including Mona—take on different roles. As I expected, both educators appreciated and shared my concerns; they plan to meet with students. Of course, I wasn't telling them anything new.

I'm no expert, just a former teacher and a parent who believes that girls still face the tremendous challenge of becoming (in Pipher's words), "'female impersonators' who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces." Having once been a gay boy coming of age in the sixties, I know about small, crowded spaces. They're called closets, and I don't want my daughter or any child to "fit" herself into a closet.