

A word of courage: Talking with my goddaughters

by [Kay Lynn Northcutt](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

For some of us, small talk is a land mine. For those of us who are barren, the innocent inquiry, “Do you have children?” is far from small. I used to answer no, but the inevitable, miserable silence that followed led me to change my answer. Now I quickly say, “I have three daughters through God,” and enjoy feeling the broad smile that breaks across my face.

Early church fathers like Theodotus of Ancyra understood Mary’s pregnancy quite literally to have begun through her ear: “It was through her sense of hearing that Mary conceived the Living God.” Heartily concurring, Kyros of Panopolis notes, “Brethren, let the birth of God our Savior Jesus Christ be honored with silence, because the Word of God was conceived in the holy Virgin through hearing alone.” The Syriac Acts of John, written in the third century, reiterates four times that Jesus “entered by the ear of the Virgin, and dwelt in her womb nine months.”

I am not the mother of God, but I did become pregnant through my ear—through countless conversations with several cherished girlfriends that led to three goddaughters for me. It is just as well that they came to me “through my sense of hearing,” since a godmother’s most important job description is listening. Not surprisingly, as Mary’s pregnancy came through her sense of hearing, listening was far more cherished than speaking in the early church. Even as late as the sixth century, St. Benedict encouraged the brothers to cherish silence over speaking.

Whenever one of my goddaughters encounters a rough patch, her mother urges her to call me, and I’ve learned to “honor with silence” whatever a goddaughter has on her mind. Jesus “normalized” suffering when he came upon it—whether it was a social disease like leprosy or a socially marginalized job like whore or tax collector. “Normalizing a rough patch” is also the work of godmothers, whether the suffering surfaces as school lunchroom shenanigans, or unfair behavior by “adults in charge,” or the simple fact that mothers and daughters sometimes can’t see eye-to-eye.

In the midst of such conversations with my goddaughters, I bring God with me. Sometimes I say this to my goddaughters. Many times I don't. But I'm clear about my role: I'm to help my goddaughters "learn God" through knowing the presence of God that I bring to their lives. That means remembering that listening was more cherished than speaking in the early church—and should be for godmothers as well.

My eldest goddaughter studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City: she's a life-changing force in my life. My middle goddaughter, now in the seventh grade, is a chrysalis trembling with life. This past summer she paddled next to me on her favorite float as I tested my endurance swimming across a seemingly gigantic pond. Cautiously she offered her float to me—"in the unlikely case" I should "need it," she said.

That leaves my youngest, Thelma, bright as the sun and smart as a whip. Whenever Thelma has a worry it moves straight from her heart to her tummy. At the age of nine, she already has a gastroenterologist. The picture of childhood I have for Thelma did *not* include regular trips to the gastroenterologist.

Recently I shared my worry about Thelma with my friend Penny. "When I was her age the only thing I worried about was remembering all the B-flats in the new piano piece I was practicing, and who I was going to sit by at lunch the next day," Penny said. There were a few minutes of silence as we reflected on our childhoods. We agreed that children today suffer from carrying the weight of tragedy in ways foreign to our childhood. At least the cold war and the nuclear arms race had names, and we practiced in case the worst might happen, tucking ourselves under our desks during drills. The fears my generation suffered are not as difficult as the anxiety my goddaughters suffer. Fear has an object. Terror and its anxiety do not.

Anger ran through me when a young boy was stabbed to death on the street where my youngest goddaughter lives. Then I worried, "Not Thelma! She already has more anxiety than we can say grace over!"

Immediately I sent an e-mail to Thelma, inviting her to cookies, ginger tea and a godmother-to-goddaughter conversation. I realized that our conversation would be one of the most difficult theological conversations of my life. Like a hunter-gatherer in panic mode I quickly collected resources from my divinity school education for speaking to Thelma about the "tragic." Ambiguity? No. Radical contingency? No. Theodicy? No.

I wanted to lie. I wanted to tell Thelma that every prayer I had uttered for her in nine years was circling her like an insurance policy and that tragedy would never come to her. “Thelma,” I tried to reason, “has a godmother,” and “things like that don’t happen to children who have godmothers.” But I realized that if I lied to Thelma she would immediately ask me, “Why didn’t that little boy have a godmother?” and “Why didn’t you pray for him, too, and all children—so bad things don’t happen to them?” That’s the problem with lying, particularly under the spotlight of a child’s instinctive genius for what rings theologically true or false.

So without the protective coating of ambiguity, radical contingency or theodicy, and without lying, I lay awake several nights, holding my goddaughters in prayer and asking myself, “What are you going to say to that goddaughter when, eyes wide open, she looks expectantly at you?”

Then one morning at 5 a.m., while praying the Morning Office, I realized that the word *courage* was being given to me to speak to Thelma. Martin Heidegger posits that our being-in-the-world includes a “thrown-ness” and that the only response is sheer, determined courage. Douglas John Hall calls the “suffering of becoming” necessary and says that one of the “gifts” cultivated as a result of it is courage.

The suffering-of-becoming is not a theological concept for a nine-year-old. But *courage* is a perfect word. We’ll talk about the courage not to be fearful. I’ll tell her what I most believe about her: she is being made strong. She is being called to face her fears and to develop an entire cargo-load of courage. Someday she will need to call on that courage for someone else’s sake. Someday God will call upon Thelma’s courage, and she will be ready. She’ll use her courage for God’s sake.

Yes, there are times to keep silent, as the early church fathers knew. But there are also times to bring new life into the world—through words. Into the ear of a goddaughter I’ll whisper courage, and pregnant with courage she’ll sally forth.