

Terry Polakovic  
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## **Educating girls: feminine genius at the service of humanity**

Thank you. I am thrilled to be with you today. I am passionate about my topic because I think educating girls is one of the most important things we can do. In fact, I have dedicated the last 14 years of my life to this important mission.

Pope Saint John Paul II coined the term “feminine genius” and I believe that I first heard of it when I read his June, 1995 *Letter to Women*. This letter literally changed the trajectory of my life because it led me, along with two other women, to found Endow. As you heard in my introduction, Endow is an acronym for Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women. We develop study materials based on the teachings of the Catholic Church for women and girls to use in small study groups. Since 2003, over 40,000 women and girls from all over the world have participated in the Endow program.

Over the years, I have come to understand the term “feminine genius” to mean a woman’s capacity to care for the other. By our very biology God created us to carry another, whether that is physically or spiritually or both. Every one of us does this differently, but it is a great gift that all women share.

We serve humanity when we care for others in love and in Truth. I say this because we live in such a relativistic society that it is important to recognize that we can do a great disservice to humanity when we are not acting out of love, in service of the Truth.

Now to my topic: “Educating Girls: feminine genius at the service of humanity.” For the purpose of this talk, I am going to focus on an age group called the Millennials. Members of this age bracket were born between 1982 and the early 2000’s. This generation is an easy target for those wishing to destroy the world as we know it. In fact, a colleague of mine at Endow used to say: *“In the war for the soul of our culture, the woman is the battlefield, and the teenage girl is ground zero.”*

I would like to start by describing the effect of the current culture on the soul of a young woman. Then I will offer you what I believe is the remedy to this. Finally, I will share with you the obstacles that I have encountered in educating young women and what can be done about it.

We all know that girls today are bombarded with destructive messages, telling them that their value as a human being is based purely on their physical appearance. These ideas come by way of magazines, websites, social media, advertisements, billboards, TV shows, movies, and popular music. There is simply no way to escape this messaging.

They also learn very early that their accomplishments define them. Today a girl can lose all sense of her identity if she fails to get a good grade or if she doesn't earn a spot on an athletic team. At an early age, she learns that it is not who she is that matters, instead what matters is what she does.

Our society encourages even very young girls to submit to promiscuity, contraception, and even abortion, all in the name of sexual freedom. For the girls who have succumbed to these notions, the results have been disastrous, ranging from lifelong guilt over abortion to depression, suicides, eating disorders, and a long list of other self-destructive behaviors. Innately, a young woman knows that she was made for more.

By the time a girl is 10-12 years old, she has already begun to search for the meaning and purpose of life. She is asking age-old questions such as: Who am I? Am I important? Am I beautiful? Am I lovable? Only after these questions have been answered and only after she begins to understand her profound dignity as made in the image and likeness of God is she in a place to extend this to others. In other words, she is not in a position to use her feminine genius to serve humanity until she understands who she is in the eyes of God.

Flannery O'Connor, one of the one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, once claimed that: "You have to push back as hard against the world as the world pushes against you." This is certainly true when it comes to educating young women. With everything she is up against, a young woman must be reminded time and again that her dignity is a gift from God, that it cannot be taken away, and that she was created for a specific purpose that only she can fulfil. She needs to know that her value lies in the fact that she is a daughter of God and not in anything the world has to offer.

I stress this fact because it bears repeating, and also because in this day and age, we simply do not know the history of the young women that God puts in our path. We cannot assume anything.

By way of an example, I recall my parish priest telling a story about a teenage girl he encountered following his presentation to the high school youth group. He had told those attending the presentation that when they date someone, they must remember that they are responsible for the soul of the other person. After the meeting, this particular girl came up to him and asked him what a soul was.

No doubt he was saddened that a young woman from his parish would ask such a question. But he is a good and holy priest, so he took her to his office and showed her how the Catechism defines the human soul. Thank God for holy priests!

Because we live in such a visual age, I have found that best way to teach young women to use their feminine genius to serve humanity is by giving them concrete examples of how to do this. For example, I know of religion teacher at an excellent all-girls high school who dedicates one hour a week highlighting the positive aspects of the feminine genius.

The day I visited, she began the class by telling them that they are called to love in a special way and that this love must be placed at the service of others. Then she asked them to share a time when they or someone they knew had done this. She ended the class with a movie clip, again reinforcing this idea.

In contrast to this, I once asked a college intern to develop something that could be used to teach high school girls about their dignity. I have found that most university students have a flair for the dramatic, and she was no different. In this case, she covered every inch of an 8 x 8 foot room with pictures from various women's magazines. The pictures highlighted hundreds of women who were living the lie of the culture.

Over each picture was a headline, which shouted such things as: how to lose 15 pounds in a week, how a woman can make herself happy, how to satisfy a man sexually, and how to dress suggestively. Once my intern had set up the room just as she wanted it, she and her friends took small groups of high school girls into the room and let them stare at the pictures for about 5-10 minutes.

After the high school girls had soaked themselves in these images, the college girls sat with them to help them process what they had observed. Even though these pictures and others like them were familiar to the high school students in that promiscuity has become part of the American way of life, this exercise overwhelmed them. The pictures were disgusting. Many of the girls left crying and all were repelled by what they saw.

These leads me to share with you some of the obstacles I have encountered when trying to teach teenage girls the meaning of the feminine genius. This may surprise you, but frequently a young woman's mother is the biggest obstacle that you will encounter. For instance, the room that my college intern created caused a lot of buzz in the community because it was a novel idea. It was actually featured in both of our local newspapers.

Unfortunately, we also received negative feedback from some of the mothers. These mothers were not upset that their daughters were exposed to such graphic pictures. They were upset

because the pictures put them in a bad light because they had embraced this way of living. In other words, these women were offended that we would put their lifestyle into question.

In certain respects, the millennials bear a special burden in that their mothers were part of the social revolution that took place between the mid-1960's and the 1980's. During this time, birth rates plummeted, divorce rates rose sharply, as did the rates of out-of-wedlock births and non-marital cohabitation. Still today so many women are stuck in this mind-set that it is impossible for them to propose something different to their daughters.

While the mother may be the largest obstacle, the high schools and colleges these young women attend are a close second. It is a rare school that welcomes any type of counter-cultural thinking. In fact, in our day and age, counter-cultural thinking is frequently subject to punishment.

The third obstacle that I have encountered is time. The mother has no time, the teacher has no time, and most especially the young woman has no time. Every minute of every day is booked. Today when someone says that they have no time to think, they mean it. How is it possible to educate a girl when neither you nor she has any time? It is not possible.

Believe me when I tell you that I have given this a lot of thought and I have come to the conclusion that the best way to teach a girl to use her feminine genius to serve humanity is to educate the older women in her life. I have heard people say that Catholicism has lost at least one or two generations, so we must concentrate on the young. I disagree.

While I definitely concur with the premise that we must concentrate on the young, we can't simply accept that we have lost the generation above them. We must do everything we can to reach them and share with them the beautiful teachings of the Catholic Church, particularly as it pertains to the dignity and vocation of women. Helping a woman who has led her children astray might be the very thing that saves her soul.

Similarly, we can't forget that the mothers, aunts, friends and mentors in that generation still have tremendous influence over the young women of today, so reaching out to them is time well spent. If you allow God to work through you to help change the heart of a mother or even a grandmother, you can rest comfortably in the fact that you have changed her entire family. In fact, a few of the mothers who initially resisted what we were trying to teach their daughters have since become great disciples of Christ.

In closing, my experience tells me that the young women who fall into the millennial category love to sit at the feet of an older woman who is living a faith-filled life. They crave stable relationships and they are eager to hear your stories. The more authentic you are the better. I have found that the young women of this generation are suspicious of older women who seem too perfect. So rather than trying to make a good impression, it is better to be yourself.

In addition to your successes, they are eager to hear about your failures, hurts, and struggles, particularly if you share the challenges you have experienced while trying to live out your own feminine genius at the service of humanity. Hearing your struggles gives them the courage to face their own.

Again, I go back to the issue of time. It takes time to develop authentic relationships, but I assure you that if you are willing to give of your time, and if you are willing to be open and vulnerable, a young woman will not miss this opportunity.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. I appreciate it very much!