

The Little Mermaid

Focusing Activity and Discussion

Synopsis. *The Little Mermaid* is loosely based on the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Ariel, a young mermaid, is a strong-willed, musically talented, and intellectually curious 15-year-old who falls in love with Eric, a human prince. In order to get him to fall in love with her, Ariel makes a bargain with Ursula, the Sea Witch, who demands that Ariel give up her voice in exchange for human legs. Ariel has three days on land (without a voice) to get Eric to kiss her (the sign of true love). If she does not, she returns to the sea and becomes the property of the Sea Witch. If Ariel succeeds, she and the Prince will live happily ever after as humans.

1. Introduce the focusing activity by asking how many girls have seen the movie, *The Little Mermaid*. Depending on the background of the girls, this movie should be very familiar. Ask them for a few brief comments about the movie.

- How they liked it as a child
- What makes the movie so popular?
- Was there anything about the movie they did not like?

2. A plot review should not be necessary, but introduce the clips below by telling them which scenes they are about to view. They should watch for enjoyment—not analysis at this point.

- About 15 minutes into movie, Ariel brings a fork to her secret cave to add to her treasures. Show this clip until she finishes the song, *Part of That World*. The clip is about 3 minutes long.
- Without any discussion, fast forward about 37 minutes into the movie, to the scene with Ursula, the Sea Witch. After angry words with her father, who has forbidden her to go near land where the human Eric lives, Ariel is upset. Begin this clip from the point where she meets Ursula's helpers, Flotsam and Jetsam, who lure her to Ursula. Continue until Ariel emerges from the water to begin her quest for Eric. This clip is about 10 minutes long.

3. Lead a discussion of the movie, based on the following questions:

- What did you notice about the mermaid?
 - her personality
 - her physical appearance
 - her hopes and dreams
- Did these things change between the first clip and the second?
- What did you notice about her family and friends?
- Where were her sisters? What about her mother?

- Can you think of other childhood movies where there is an absent mother and a young adolescent girl? Are there any animated movies that show a strong, supportive human mother or older woman in the girl's life?
- Are there any animated movies in which girls have strong friendships with other girls?
- What about Ursula? What is her appearance and personality like?
- Try to recall the conversation and words to the song that Ursula sings as she tries to get Ariel to give up her voice.
 - Some lines that are worth noting:
 - "Men prefer ladies not to say a word."
 - "You have your looks, your pretty face."
 - "Don't underestimate the importance of 'body language.'"
 - "It's she who holds her tongue that gets her man."
 - "It won't cost much, just your voice."

There may be other details that the facilitator or the girls may point out: how Ariel emerges from the water, what kind of relationship she had with her father, the need for bodyguards, the fact that she will never see her home and family again, and so forth.

Close the discussion of the movie with these questions:

- What two things happen to Ariel in the bargain to get Eric?
- Be sure to make the following point before closing the discussion of the movie and moving on to the next discussion: ***Ariel has to change who she is by changing her body and giving up her voice.***

4. Change the focus of the discussion to the cultural experience of the girls themselves by asking the following questions:

- How close is this movie to real life?
- Are the stereotypes of men and women that Ursula sang about true in our society?
- Can you think of ways that girls change themselves as they become women? (Some answers to this question might be overemphasis on body image, girls who become quieter in the classroom, girls who may defer to the leadership of boys, eating disorders, depression, sexual promiscuity.)

Please note: In some cases the girls may react negatively to the analysis of this movie, because it demythologizes one of their favorite childhood stories. Expect some resistance and acknowledge those feelings.

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Prayer Service (20-30 minutes)

Preparation Instructions:

- Purchase or otherwise acquire individual flowers, vigil light candles, and seashells or some other memento for each girl.
- Prepare a prayer space around a central table or a pyramid of large boxes draped with large sheets or cloths. The second option requires a bit more preparation, but it is very effective artistically.
- Add any other decorations appropriate to your group and space: fabric, a plant, more candles, icons, a statue or sculpture, pictures, or books about women's spirituality. The individual vigil lights, flowers, or shells for the girls should also be placed on the prayer table.
- Arrange the chairs around the table or, in larger groups, in such a way that everyone can see the prayer space.
- Ask someone to be in charge of the CD or tape player, and give her a copy of the prayer service.
- Ask for volunteers from among the girls to read the assigned parts of Readers 1 and 2. Reader 1 will need a Bible. An adult should be given the part of Leader. Give them each a copy of the prayer service with their parts highlighted.

1. Begin by quieting the group with an invitation to prayerful centeredness. After a few moments of silence, introduce the song, *Part of That World*, by pointing out that when Ariel sings this song, she still has a voice. She expresses a desire to learn and find the truth about the human world. Our closing prayer service will remind us of our God-given ability to use our voices to bring about the Reign of God. Play the song, *Part of That World*, from *The Little Mermaid* soundtrack.

Leader: Gracious God, we call to mind your presence, always with us, cradling us with your love. We know that we are made in your image—reflections of the Divine. Grace us; bless us at this point in our lives. We walk together on a spiritual journey, searching for all that is good. Help us to learn from one another, empowering our sisters with faith, hope, and love. In this way we will help to bring about the Reign of God in all that we do and say.

All: Amen.

Reader 1: *Read Luke 2:46-52 from the Bible (Jesus is found in the temple), ending with the line, ". . . and Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."*

Reader 2: I am half woman, half child. I believe I am on my way to great things. I often do my own thing. I don't ask permission; I just do it! I am filled with enthusiasm and sadness, energy and gloominess, smiles and tears. I am a living contradiction. I am not always comfortable in my body, so look into my eyes. They express all my confusion and pain and happiness and excitement. I may try to run away, but do not give up on me. I need you. I am on my search for God, for authority, for identity. Please celebrate my age—most people just hope I will grow out of it! There is a time for my sadness and my joy. Help me to see that. There is a season for everything and I am ready to grow!

(by Carole Goodwin, Archdiocese of Louisville, KY)

Sharing. Invite leaders and girls to share any insights they may have about being a girl or a woman in today's world. They can spontaneously share an insight, a hope, a dream for the future, or they can begin with the following suggested sentence starters:

- I wish . . .
- I wonder . . .
- I hope . . .
- I believe . . .

Giftng of Girls. With background music from the soundtrack of *The Little Mermaid* or other appropriate instrumental music, introduce this part of the prayer service by explaining the following in your own words:

In most cultures and faith traditions, when a young person enters adolescence, she is fully welcomed in some way into the community by the adults. The Catholic church celebrates this full initiation in the sacrament of Confirmation. In other cultures, the women of the community may perform a ceremony for the girls, whereas the men initiate the boys into the male world. Today, we celebrate you as girls who are becoming women by gifting you with a remembrance of our time together—a reminder to use your voices to strengthen your relationship with God, with yourself and others, and with all of God's creation.

Invite each girl to come forward to receive her gift of a flower, a candle, a shell, or some other memento. The adult leader should address each girl by name with the following blessing as the leader hands her the gift:

(Name), you are made in the image and likeness of God, good and holy. Live your life by becoming the person God created you to be.

After all the girls have come forward to receive their blessing and their gift, the leader should say the following prayer:

Leader: Jesus, strong and gentle friend, you treated everyone with great love and respect. In a time when women were treated as second-class citizens, you listened to them, you taught them, you healed them, and you dialogued with them. Most of all, you encouraged them to use their voices to spread the Good News of your Resurrection. In your name we bring our hopes, our dreams, our faith stories. In the words of Teresa of Avila, we are your hands, your feet, your voice on this earth. We now reach out to others in ways that you taught us, breathing in and living out the Spirit of God.

Closing Song

End with an appropriate song from *The Little Mermaid* soundtrack or another selection that is familiar to the girls. (Asking them to choose a song ahead of time is an excellent way to include them in the prayer service planning.) *Voices That Challenge*, on the album *I Shall See God*, by David Haas, is another possibility. It is available through GIA publications, Inc. 800-GIA-1358.