



Alice in Wonderland: Making the Most of Pop Culture

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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I love movies. I don't mean I enjoy them once in awhile. I mean big love. I love the smell of a movie theater. I love the flashing lights and larger than life posters. I love the big screen. I love when the volume makes my seat shake. I don't even mind that popcorn costs ten dollars.

Over the years, I have incorporated this love into my work with girls. Sadly, I've found that it has been much easier to find movies to serve as a horrible warning rather than a good example.

Once in awhile though, if you are lucky, a good example falls right into your lap.

The new *Alice in Wonderland* is just such a treasure. I expected to be amazed and enthralled by Tim Burton's vision of this classic. I didn't expect to leave the theater -- minus twenty dollars for snacks, tickets and 3D glasses -- having stumbled across a movie with some incredible messages for young women.

Fair Warning: If you want to discover this movie for yourself, read no further!

Alice is powerfully influenced by her father. As luck would have it, her father is an excellent example of living a strength-based life. Alice asks her father if she has gone mad. He tells her yes, she is mad, bonkers, 'round the bend...and that "all the best people are." Talk about reframing a negative!

Her father instills in her a belief that impossible things can happen. Alice draws on this belief when she faces a battle that seems impossible to win. She says, "My father used to say, sometimes I believe six impossible things before breakfast." In the end, not only does Alice prove herself able to face her destiny in Wonderland, she incorporates this strength-based approach in her real life.

Alice also shows a decidedly independent thinking streak. She doesn't rebel simply for rebellion's sake, but questions blind obedience. Her mother discovers she has refused to wear a corset or stockings and tells Alice it is not proper. Alice responds by asking her mother, "If everyone told you it was proper to wear a codfish on your head, would you?" Every young woman has heard, "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?" Alice is simply expressing the same sentiment. She opens the door to discussions about peer pressure, appearance, assertiveness and mother-daughter relationships with barely more than a dozen words.

Alice challenges rigid gender role expectations throughout the movie. The single most notable example is when the White Queen talks to Alice about becoming her "champion" to do battle with the Jabberwocky (a monster). Alice asks, "Why don't you slay the Jabberwocky yourself?" She doesn't say 'I'm too scared', 'I'm not strong enough,' or some other version of the damsel in distress. She doesn't even assume there is a legitimate reason why the Queen can't do it. What young woman wouldn't benefit from seeing more female characters on the big screen slaying dragons and otherwise saving the day? How many dragons exist in their lives that they don't think they are strong enough to slay?

Needless to say, Alice does battle the Jabberwocky. She chooses to be Champion. When the White Queen calls for a champion, she tells Alice, "You cannot live your life to please others. It must be your choice because when you step out to face that creature, you step out alone." Thoughtful decision-making and weighing consequences are the obvious messages here, however, considerations of co-dependency (pleasing others) and self-reliance (stepping out alone) are important as well. If you work with young women who are transitioning into adulthood, perhaps leaving the foster care system, they are definitely feeling like

they are stepping out alone. But Alice isn't alone when she faces the Jabberwocky--an army stands behind her. She is the Champion, but does not go into battle without support. Our young women in the system could stand to be reminded that being champion of your own life doesn't have to mean doing it alone.

Ultimately, Alice is just like any young woman who is experiencing changes. She is trying to figure out who she is and to reconcile her past and present selves. She spends time apologizing for not being the "right Alice," insisting she's not the Alice they are looking for and wondering who this 'other Alice' is that the creatures in Wonderland keep talking about. The Mad Hatter explains to Alice why no one recognizes her now. "You were much more muchier. You've lost your muchness."

Like so many young women, Alice was a spunky girl with a lot of "muchness" but something happened or maybe she just reached an age where that changed. We see her rediscover herself bit by bit throughout the movie. "Lost my muchness, have I?" she mutters to herself at one point. Clearly, she didn't like having lost herself.

Her journey to recover her "muchness" is challenging, exasperating, confusing, unique and, fortunately, successful. Compared to the movies that offer up a litany of negative "how you're supposed to be if you are female" messages, Alice in Wonderland is a breath of fresh air.

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