

Heliogram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

Volume 2, Number 1

A Heliotrope Publication

Summer 1999

My Journey Into the Millennium

Ever have a good idea that seems to float into your head one piece at a time? My millennium project took form over the holidays as one component at a time fell into place.

Readers of earlier issues may recall that I decided to undertake some type of millennium project to mark this occasion and contribute to a stronger, better future for our world. My initial plans to work with a couple of dear friends got side-tracked and I was facing New Year's Day bereft of ideas.

First clue: do something about 1,000 to symbolize the millennium. Okay, 1,000 what? Letters? Phone calls? Dollars? Nah, all too easy. A thousand miles sounded like a much better challenge – especially for someone who said they wanted to be healthier at age 50 than they were at age 40. I wanted something that would remind me daily of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Second clue: do something with or for youth. All of my work and personal learning about developmental assets told me I wouldn't be satisfied if my project didn't benefit youth. It was a modest leap from there to decide I would pledge \$3 a mile to a youth program.

Third clue: do something cross-cultural. I think much of the promise of the new millennium is reaching across cultural barriers to find our commonalities and caring for one another. Fortunately, I have talented and committed friends who work with many of Seattle's immigrant and refugee communities. I asked their advice about which youth groups would find a modest infusion of resources helpful to their work. With their assistance, I selected the Somali Community Services of Seattle to learn from and give to.

heliotrope 1. A flower that turns to face the sun. 2. An instrument for making long-term observations. 3. A purple that is bluer and stronger than cobalt violet.

Bonus points: undertake something good for yourself that has external motivation and see it become easier and more meaningful. On the days when I could easily have stayed in bed or done one more work project rather than go for a walk, all I had to do was think about how I was going to explain to 25 Somali children that I was too tired, too lazy, too uninterested in them, too wet, too cold, etc. to keep my commitment. Isn't one of those 40 assets about being a role model?

Ever look back on what you thought was a good idea and wonder where your brain was? Does anyone still remember what the weather was like in January and February? Yet, despite a few weather challenges, I couldn't be happier with my plan.

continued on page 7

HELIOTROPE

INSIDE

Nancy's Reading Corner page 2

Of Boys and Fathers page 3

Celebrating Five Years! back

Nancy's Reading Corner...

Inspiration in Odd Places

More and more, I find that ideas and inspiration for my work come from unlikely places. Over the last few months, the books described below have helped heighten my personal and professional commitment to young people, to my community, and to focusing on our strengths rather than feeling hopeless and helpless. I hope they may do the same for you.

A long-time friend has been a hospice volunteer for many years. Her humor and energy must be incredible gifts to her hospice patients and their families. I've often admired her willingness to give of her time in such an important role. When she recommended I read *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom (Doubleday, New York, 1997, \$19.95) I took her seriously.

Inspiration in Dying from Lou Gehrig's Disease

I'll admit some skepticism upon discovering I had purchased a book about an old man dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, written by a newspaper sports columnist. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is always fatal with a brutal decline of the neurological system. I wasn't feeling very inspired as I opened the short, small book.

About ten minutes after I was "introduced" to Morrie, I changed my mind. This former college professor came to symbolize the incredible power of an individual's choice to approach life's challenges with an outlook of what they *can* do rather than what they *can't* do. Morrie not only upped the ante on his lifelong commitment to being a

mentor and a guide to his students and others, he transformed his illness into a final teaching project and into one of the most energetic periods of his life. "Don't assume it's too late to get involved," he wrote after he began to need a wheelchair full-time and chewing was a chore.

Morrie also transformed the author's life. Albom spent numerous Tuesdays with Morrie, talking about life's lessons. Morrie peppered him with questions: "Have you found someone to share your heart with?" "Are you giving to your community?" "Are you at peace with yourself?" He also generated philosophical sound bites almost faster than Albom could write them down. "Dying," Morrie said, "is only one thing to be sad over. Living unhappily is something else. Many people who come to see me ... are more unhappy than me – even in my current condition."

Albom began to question why he spent so many hours on things that meant absolutely nothing to him personally: movie stars, supermodels, O.J. Simpson, John F. Kennedy, Jr. He began to envy the quality of Morrie's time. By the time Morrie told him that "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live," Albom knew what he meant.

Morrie refused to accept that we are victims of our culture. "Build your own little subculture," he urged Albom. "Invest in the human family. Invest in people. Build a little community of those you love and who love you. Be compassionate, and take responsibility for each other."

HELIOTROPE



All contents copyright © 1999 Heliotrope.
Permission to reproduce in whole or in part is granted with the stipulation that Heliotrope and *Helioqram* be acknowledged as the source on all copies.

For more information about Heliotrope, contact:

Nancy Ashley
1249 NE 92nd Street
Seattle, WA 98115
Tel: 206 526-5671
Fax: 206 522-6557

E-mail: nancyashley@halcyon.com

Perhaps Morrie's most amazing transmutation was his decision to view the eventual need for others to attend to all of his bodily functions as another chance to experience the tender nurturing we give a baby – rather than suffer them as embarrassing indignities.

Tuesdays with Morrie is a sweet tale of an incredible man reminding us of what really matters. As a mentor, Morrie successfully transmitted his gifts in ways that profoundly influenced the author and millions of readers.

Inspiration from the Medical Field

Gesundheit! is the story of the “impossible” dream of the real Patch Adams, M.D., to build a hospital where health is based on happiness and care is free. After seeing the movie starring Robin Williams, I wanted to find out more about the person who dared to propose that medical care could include caring, service, and fun. It seemed to me that if Patch Adams could figure out how to work from a person's natural strengths and throw aside “unbreakable” rules in the monstrous medical system, we might learn something about how to look at other systems more closely and challenge unnecessary constraints.

Patch Adams has spent 28 years establishing and working to expand the Gesundheit Institute in northern Virginia. Gesundheit (which means “good health”) Institute is an experiment in holistic medical care based on the belief that one cannot separate the health of the individual from the health of the family, the community, and the world. Adams hopes to expand the facility to a full-service hospital providing free care that will stimulate other caregivers and hospitals to develop ideal medical approaches for their communities.

Gesundheit! (Healing Arts Press, Rochester, VT, 1993, \$14.95) describes how a two-week stay in a mental hospital near the end of his college years was a turning point for Patch. “The people who had the greatest impact on my recovery were not doctors but my family and friends, especially my roommate, Rudy.” Talking to Rudy taught Patch empathy and the need to receive love from others — and fueled Patch's desire to go to medical school.

There, Patch discovered that the medical books didn't talk about health, but only disease and that the psychiatry texts did not discuss any aspects of a

healthy, happy life or how to attain it. Instead, they were filled with descriptions of pathology and case histories of bizarre mental disorders. (Have we not taken a similar route in adolescent development?)

Patch developed clowning and theatrical presentations to his lectures about health care. His skits and shows feature what he defines as the magic elixirs of life: wonder, nutrition, humor, love, faith, nature, exercise, community, hope, passion, relaxation, family, curiosity, creativity, wisdom, and peace. Missing from the list are surgery, prescription drugs, and lasers. Patch's list of magic elixirs cannot help remind me of the list of 40 developmental assets and how they remind us of the basic human needs of all children and youth. Programs, like the bells and whistles of modern medicine, are not a complete answer to what is ailing youth.

Patch also redefined the doctor-patient relationship, discarding the “distance ethic” taught in medical school and replacing it with an “unabashed projection of love, humor, empathy, tenderness, and compassion for the patient.” Patch claims that friendship is a great medicine, one that overcomes many of the inadequacies of the healing profession. I see signs of similar trends among therapists who are embracing a more engaged relationship with their clients, and youth workers who understand that their relationships with their participants are probably far more important than the content of their programs.

The analogies in *Gesundheit!* to the field of positive youth development continue throughout the book. Often I have heard and repeated the famous words of national youth development expert Karen Pittman: “Problem free does not equal fully prepared.” Patch has his own version: “Health is far more than a disease-free interlude. To be healthy is to have a body toned to maximum performance potential, a clear mind exploding with wonder and curiosity, and a spirit at peace with the world.”

For its tale of turning the medical system on its head, and for the lessons that can be used in almost any system or field, *Gesundheit!* is heartening. **H**

Of Boys and Fathers: Part I

Ever since Mary Pipher's book *Reviving Ophelia* became such a talked-about tome, I've wondered why there was no companion book offering comparable insights and rethinking about the development of boys and how society's stereotypes, rules, and assumptions about boys cause so many problems.

In a similar vein, ever since I gave up lawyering and moved into the world of programs for children, youth, families, and communities, I've wondered why I see so little information about fathers and so few men as staff or participants/clients in those programs.

Somehow, the two topics seemed related. I begin with boys; the next issue of *Heliogram* will address fathers. (Nothing written here is intended to diminish all of our ongoing efforts to ensure that girls are freed of gender stereotypes and are given the love, understanding, and responses they need to thrive. As Mary Pipher says in her foreword to *Real Boys* (see below), "I don't like 'suffering contests.'" Both our boys and girls need to be better understood and supported in their own unique ways.)

What are We Doing to Our Boys?

Starting last year, several researchers and authors have published books on how to better understand and take better care of boys. To start, I chose *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (Owl Books, 1998, \$14), because it was one of the earlier books, it relied heavily on the voices of boys themselves, it was broader than other books that only looked at the violent behavior of boys, and because it had reached the status of a *New York Times* bestseller. That last qualification indicated to me that it was readable and was responding to something many of us are seeking to learn about.

Author William Pollack is a Harvard University faculty member. He writes about what boys are like, how to help them, and what happens if they are not helped. Pollack focuses on four themes as the major causes of bad outcomes for boys:

1. Early and harsh pressure to disconnect from their

families that occurs when boys are toddlers and again in adolescence.

2. The "Boy Code," Pollack's name for the rules and expectations that come from outdated and highly dysfunctional gender stereotypes. He describes it as so subtle sometimes that boys may not even know they are living their lives in accordance with it. The Boy Code includes such models of behavior as the "sturdy oak," "give 'em hell," be the "big wheel," and "no sissy stuff."
3. The mixed messages boys and men get throughout their lives – to be manly but empathetic, cool but open, strong yet vulnerable.
4. Boys' hidden yearning for relationships with mothers, fathers, friends, and others.

As we have recently seen, some boys today are in serious trouble, including many who seem "normal" and to be doing just fine. Pollack cites statistics indicating boys are doing less well in school than they have in the past, that they have very fragile self-esteem, and that the rates of both depression and suicide in boys are rising significantly. "Many of our sons are in a desperate crisis," Pollack says.

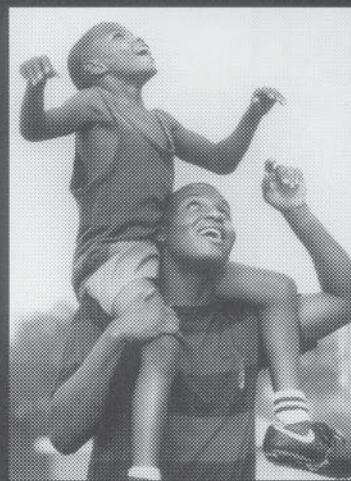
The complexity of these subjects and the limited space here do not allow an in-depth description of Pollack's extensive research, analysis, and stories. However, even without this background, there are some important things parents and those who work with boys can begin to do.

I believe that the research and wisdom offered by Pollack is equally important to grandparents, youth leaders, program planners, teachers, prevention specialists, faith leaders, child care workers, funders, coaches, program planners, and everyone else who has influence in how we raise boys. I hope you will be able to translate what he suggests for mothers, fathers and schools into ideas to shift how you think about and interact with boys – regardless of your role.

For Mothers (and other important females in the lives of boys): How to Stay Close and Still Prepare Him for the “Real World”

- **Talk openly about the Boy Code.** Discuss the new double standard of masculinity, and how it places both you and him in a bind. Acknowledge that as much as you’d like him to become an empathic, caring man, you realize he is under enormous pressure to conform to the “Code.”
- **Teach others about the Boy Code.** Talk to friends, neighbors, families and especially educators about the Boy Code – how it operates and how it limits boys.
- **Teach your son about masculinity by talking about the men you love and why you love them.** Talk to him in a positive way about the men you and he care about—your husband, your father, an uncle, friends of the family, a coach, a faith leader. Discuss the qualities you admire in these men. By hearing the way you appreciate these men, your boy can develop a picture of the kind of man he would like to be and feel more confident about breaking rigid stereotypes he absorbs in so many other places.
- **Rotate parenting responsibilities.** If you’re in a two-parent family, make sure each parent is involved in nurturing and being the disciplinarian.
- **When your son is hurting, don’t hesitate to ask him whether he’d like to talk. Don’t shame him if he refuses to talk with you.** Even though your son may not respond right away, letting him know you notice something is wrong is important. The key is to wait until he’s ready to talk to you, to account for the “timed silence syndrome” Pollack has observed in boys. A boy often needs a period of silence after suffering a hurt or loss, and then may only give subtle signals that he is ready to talk.
- **Experiment with connection through action.** Doing something together can often provide the opportunity for talking together. Not only is this a good way to connect with many boys, it also gives them a message that you understand their style of relating, that you respect it, and that you’re eager to experience it together.
- **Don’t hold back.** Show your son love and attention – often and at every age. Pollack believes the psychological literature overemphasizes the problems of parents who

Listen. Laugh. Play. Every day.
Give a kid your time.



For ideas on how to support kids in your life, call 206-382-1475



are too domineering or dependent. He concludes that the love offered by moms is tremendously valuable, and that it truly helps boys become confident, powerful, successful men.

For Fathers (and other important men in the lives of boys): How to be a Well-Connected Father

- **Stay attached—no matter what.** Be nurturing and stay attached. “Boys are never hurt by too much love,” says Pollack. The styles of love and affection you use will vary as your child progresses from toddler to teen, but your continued investment and love is essential. Even the smallest gestures of love and connection can do amazing things for a boy.
- **Stand by Mom.** Encourage your sons to stay close to their mother. By respecting the love a boy gets from his mother, and not shaming him for taking in that love, fathers help boys fight stereotypes and show respect for women.
- **Value your sons for who they are, rather than what they do.** If you make it clear that you’ll always love him for just the person he is

continued on page 6

Of Boys and Fathers

continued from page 5

and that there is no single definition of “goodness” or “masculinity,” your son will be spared the agony of constantly falling short of your expectations. As your boy’s first and probably most important role model, the more unconditional love and encouragement you give him, the better he will feel about himself and taking on life’s challenges.

- **Develop your own style.** Feel free to develop your own style of playing, teaching, and nurturing your son. What matters most is that you simply do something positive with your son. Try to find activities that you both enjoy.
- **Do not be the policeman dad.** Try to avoid becoming the “heavy” or “bad cop.” Sharing the disciplinary role with your son’s mother makes it much easier for you to develop a close and affectionate relationship with your son.
- **Show rather than tell.** Especially with boys, it’s important to make the learning process one that encourages boys to follow “what I do” rather than “what I say.” If you want to instill in your son the importance of respecting girls and women, let him see you talking to your daughter

Staff Changes

On July 19, Heliotrope will be welcoming Christina Malecka on staff as Consulting Assistant. Christina brings nine years of experience as an activist, community organizer, fund-raiser, event planner and non-profit administrator. In addition, she is a singer and actor who performs in fringe theater venues around Seattle. Christina says she was originally drawn to Heliotrope “out of a desire to move her work for social change beyond the level of despair, crisis control and reaction.”

Heliotrope will be bidding a fond farewell to Ruth Seidel, who has supported its growth and success for over two years. Ruth brought to her work the skills and commitment that make her a terrific mother, a dear friend, and someone who demonstrates her faith by her daily actions.

or wife gently and thoughtfully even when you are upset with one of them.

- **Be aware of your own “father longings.”** Many men harbor memories of being teased or mistreated by their fathers for not being “masculine” enough or for having disappointed their fathers’ expectations. Try to muster the courage to go beyond these memories and avoid repeating the same kind of shame-based upbringing for your own son.
- **Real men show emotions.** Try your best, in appropriate doses, to share the full range of your own feelings and experiences with your son. Let your son know that even as an adult you sometimes feel lonely, vulnerable, afraid, or sad.

Clearly, parents alone cannot counter all of society’s messages and codes for boys. As noted earlier, schools, sports programs, extended families, youth and faith leaders, and others need to examine whether they are reinforcing or breaking down the Boy Code.

For Schools (and other programs that help boys learn and grow): Addressing Boys’ Specific Needs

Pollack believes that schools, in general, are not sufficiently hospitable environments for boys and they are not doing enough to address boys’ unique social, academic, and emotional needs. Typical coeducational schools have teachers and administrators who, though they don’t intend it, are often not empathetic to boys; they use curricula, classroom materials, and teaching methods that do not respond to how boys learn; and boys do not find a warm and friendly environment in school.

- **Include boy-friendly subject matter.** Be creative in developing eclectic classroom materials and covering a broad range of topics that will spark the interest of many boys (and girls). Tell stories not just about men, but from the perspective of men.
- **Use teaching methods that work well for boys.** For young boys, provide lots of opportunities for hands-on learning, problem-solving and interactive teaching. Older boys also need creative opportunities as students, including those that do not require only sitting.
- **Respect the learning pace of every boy.** Boys often lag behind girls in school, especially in the

areas of reading and writing. There's little use in asking a boy to write a short story if he cannot yet complete a sentence. If boys are not given the time they need to learn, they don't learn very well and their self-esteem falls dramatically.

- **Hire more male teachers.** School systems need to find more male teachers, especially at elementary schools where boys are first forming notions about gender-appropriate behavior. If all or almost all of their role models in elementary school are women, how do we expect little boys to see learning and the celebration of learning as something men do? Look for and assign teachers in less stereotypical areas, so that not all science and math classes are taught by men and not all literature and arts classes are taught by women.
- **Set up mentoring programs.** Boys benefit enormously from having mentors who are sympathetic to them as learners and who can serve as models for what's possible to achieve. Mentors can be male or female, as long as the mentor is interested in the boy's growth and development and has personal interests that are compatible with those of the boy. The mentor can simply check in with the boy regularly—to see how things are going for him emotionally and academically. The mentor can offer to help in classes where the boy is doing less well. Most importantly, the mentor should become a devoted buddy. Especially for boys who are not getting enough caring attention at home, a mentor who is empathetic and watching out for their needs is of immense value.
- **Provide safe “guy spaces.”** Boys need a safe haven at school where they can express vulnerable emotions. Creating such safe places helps undo some of the shame-based hardening and allows boys to connect again. Every school should ask itself: “If a student in our school is unhappy about something in his or her life, school-related or otherwise, would that student have a place he or she would *want* to go to talk about that unhappiness?” It is not safe to assume that boys will get all of their emotional needs taken care of at home. Many parents are already doing the best they can, given their other obligations, and simply cannot do it all. Also, some parents are not available to their boys for emotional support.

Pollack closes *Real Boys* with these words: “Real boys need to be with people who allow them to show *all* their emotions. They need to be taught connection instead of disconnection. They need to be

treated with the same kind of caring and affection we hope they'll express when they become men. They need to be convinced, above all, that we'll love them through and through for being just the boys they really are.” **H**

Additional Resources:

- Garbarino, James, Ph.D. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. Free Press, 1999, \$25.
- Gurian, Michael. *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors, and Educators Can Do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men*. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998, \$14.
- Kindlon, Dan, Ph.D. and Michael Thompson, Ph.D. *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. Ballantine Books, 1999, \$25.

My Journey Into the Millennium

continued from front page

The leaders of the Somali Community Services of Seattle that I have met were very gracious, if a little puzzled about my plan. Their organization is a grassroots, community-based agency dedicated to providing human services for Somali refugees as they adjust to a new life in the United States.

Their after-school homework assistance program is run by volunteers with one part-time paid staff person. On my visit there, they showed me how little they had in terms of materials and supplies to assist the students. At that point, I decided to make four installments on my pledge. They requested that the initial funds be used for such basics as paper, pencils, pens, tape, scissors, and books. I now have pictures of some of the children and their thank you notes with which to decorate my office.

As I walk (almost every day), I do reflect upon the new millenium. I know I have less stress and anxiety in my life, and that what I do counts for some young people I otherwise would never have met. At 475 miles and counting, I'm very glad those pieces of an idea began to fit together. Maybe it was no accident. **H**

Somali Community Services of Seattle can be contacted at 3320 Rainier Ave. S., Seattle, WA 98144 or by telephone at 760-1185 or 760-1181.

Celebrating Five Years in Business!

This summer marks five years since I began my own business. Although I adopted the Heliotrope name only about a year ago, my beliefs in a strength-based approach began soon after I struck out on my own.

I am very fortunate to have worked with so many skilled, dedicated people and organizations in these five years. Because of them, I have had the opportunity to do work I care deeply about in ways that are innovative, exciting, and long-lasting. Thank you to the clients listed below (and apologies if I have omitted anyone) and the people within those organizations who inspire and motivate me:

- Christmas in April*Seattle
- City of Bellevue
- City of Redmond
- City of Seattle Department of Housing and Human Services
- City of Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation
- City of Seattle Executive Services Department
- City of Seattle Neighborhood Planning Office
- City of Shoreline
- City of Tucson
- Communications for Child Protection Project (a collaboration of The Casey Family Program, Children's Home Society of Washington, and the University of Washington Human Services Policy Center)
- Executive Directors Coalition
- Greater Issaquah Youth & Family Network
- Horizons Foundation
- Human Services Roundtable
- King County Child Care Program
- King County Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- King County Community Services Division
- King County Department of Judicial Administration
- King County Department of Youth Services
- King County Parks Department
- King County Prosecutor's Office
- King County Community Sexual Assault Programs
- Mideast King County Community Public Health & Safety Network
- MOST (Making the MOST of Out-of-School Time)
- Organizational Research Services
- Seattle Public Health & Safety Network
- Thurston Community Public Health & Safety Network
- United Way of King County
- Washington Association for the Education of Young Children
- Washington State Association CASA/GAL
- Washington State Child Care Resource & Referral Network
- Washington State Office of the Administrator for the Courts
- Washington State Office of Child Care Policy
- Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Youth Eastside Services

HELIOTROPE



NancyAshley
1249 NE 92nd Street
Seattle, WA 98115