

# Heliogram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

Volume 3, Number 1

A Heliotrope Publication

Summer 2000

## Beyond Maslow: Asset Building with People Whose Basic Needs Are Not Met or Who Are in Crisis

As I present workshops about developmental assets and talk to social service providers about the asset approach, I am troubled by responses from some that assets don't have much relevance to people who are hungry, homeless, dealing with deep poverty, or in crisis.

My gut feeling is that this is not an either/or issue – but rather that meeting basic needs and responding to people in crisis *and* asset building can and should happen together. Yet I have been unable to articulate my own thoughts, and lacked credible information and ideas from others who had dealt with this issue.

After much research, reading many books and many journal articles, and talking with several people, I think I'm at the beginning of a longer conversation for me and others interested in this topic. I decided to describe my current thoughts and invite your responses to push exploration of this issue further and deeper. Please e-mail me at [nancyashley@balcyon.com](mailto:nancyashley@balcyon.com) or call at 206-526-5671 with your ideas and reactions.

The developmental assets model created by Search Institute provides a picture of how to optimize young people's development. It provides a comprehensive view of what is *good* for children, providing a balance to the mountains of information collected about what is *bad* for them. I believe the asset philosophy compels us to think about approaching *all* of our human interactions with a strengths perspective rather than with a deficit-seeking lens – from parenting to mentoring to outreach and counseling. (Recent focus groups about developmental assets with communities of color in Seattle and agencies that serve them raised several

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.

serious issues. Although all cultures relate to and value the key messages of this framework, the groups consistently noted that existing written materials about developmental assets appeared to them to be aimed at white, middle-class people and not very inclusive of other cultures or people with limited incomes.)

I also believe the asset framework is complementary to other strengths-based work that travels under such names as "community asset development," "positive youth development," "resiliency," and "strengths-based

continued on page 4

HELIOTROPE

INSIDE

Nancy's Reading Corner page 2

Feedback on Fathers page 3

Millennium Project Update back

## Nancy's Reading Corner...

Two books I've recently read provide practical ideas for using strength-based approaches in working with children, youth, families, and communities. Both of them provide a good theoretical foundation, and go far beyond that in helping us learn new techniques for building on strengths in a deficit-focused world.

### The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice

Saleebey, Dennis, ed. *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work*. Longman: New York, 1997, \$39.00.

This second edition provides an up-to-date view of strength-based social work practice with a variety of individuals and families. It is largely based on the research, curriculum development, training, consultation, and practice done by faculty, staff, and doctoral students at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare. Editor Dennis Saleebey is a faculty member there and the editor of the first edition of this work.

"The strengths perspective is a dramatic departure from conventional social work practice," states Saleebey. "Practicing from a strengths orientation means this – *everything* you do as a social worker will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients' strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings....To really practice from a strengths perspective demands a different way of seeing clients, their environments, and their current situation."

Saleebey notes that the preliminary research on the effectiveness of a strengths approach suggests that it is an effective and economical framework for practice.

Where do problems fit in a strength-based approach? Critics claim this approach ignores people's problems and glosses over their real pain. Contributors Ann Weick and Ronna Chamberlain propose that "...although some problems are too critical to be ignored, they need to be consigned to a position secondary to the person's strengths once a crisis has passed. The dilemma for both the client and the social worker is that the problem is sufficiently frightening that the details of daily life seem to be of little significance by comparison. The paradox appears to be that the problem will defy control until the client has a daily life providing enough gratification to make it worth the arduous task of overcoming a problem as powerful as impulses toward mutilating or violent behavior."

They further explain that "the strengths perspective is anchored in the belief that a problem does not constitute all of a person's life. Whether the name of a problem is schizophrenia, addiction, child abuse, or troubled family relations, a person is always more than his or her problem...Focusing on problems usually creates more problems." They provide several examples of how employing a different strategy turned around the lives of people with severe mental health problems.

This book provides several strength-based assessment tools and approaches. Saleebey provides us with a list of factors to consider when looking for a person's strengths:

- What people have learned about themselves, others, and their world.
- Personal qualities, traits, and virtues that people possess.
- What people know about the world around them.
- The talents and skills that people have.
- Cultural and personal stories and lore.
- Pride.
- The community.

continued on page 7

## HELIOTROPE



All contents copyright © 2000, Heliotrope.  
Permission to reproduce in whole or in part is granted with the stipulation that Heliotrope and *HelioGramme* acknowledged as the source on all copies.

For more information about Heliotrope, contact:

NancyAshley  
1249 NE 92nd Street  
Seattle, WA 98115  
Tel: 206 526-5671  
Fax: 206 522-6557  
E-mail: nancyashley@halcyon.com

## Feedback on Fathers

Craig Weiss, a father and advocate to engage organizations and individual fathers in ensuring that fathers are positively involved in the lives of their children, was concerned that one of the opening paragraphs in our lead article about fathers in the last issue of *Heliogram* furthered the stereotype that men are mainly responsible for child abuse and neglect.

Craig called about his concern and sent a follow-up e-mail stating that “women are the main perpetrators in child abuse and neglect” and referred us to a recent national incidence study of child abuse and neglect included in the web site for the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (which can be found at <http://www.calib.com/nccanb/pubs/statinfor/nis3.htm#family>). He added that he hoped “this information is informative as well as eye-opening and that whenever you have a chance to set the record straight you will do just that.”

We totally agree with Craig that child abuse and neglect is terrible no matter who commits it. The National Clearinghouse confirms Craig’s views in terms of overall maltreatment of children. The web site states that children were somewhat more likely to be maltreated by women than men: 65% of the maltreated children had been maltreated by a female, whereas 54% had been maltreated by a male. However, as with most statistics, there is often important information behind each piece of data. The web site also contains these dreary facts:

- Children of single parents had a 77% greater risk of being harmed by physical abuse, an 87% greater risk of being harmed by physical neglect, and an 80% greater risk of suffering serious injury or harm from abuse or neglect than children living with both parents. Among children in single-parent households, those living with only their fathers were approximately one and two-thirds times more likely to be physically abused than those living only with their mothers.
- Of children who were maltreated by their birth parents, the majority (75%) were maltreated by their mothers and a sizable minority (46%) were maltreated by their fathers. In contrast, children who were maltreated by other parents or parent-substitutes, or by other persons, were more likely to have been maltreated by a male than by a female (80 to 85% were maltreated by males, 14 to 41% by females).
- Children were more often neglected by females (87% by females versus 43% by males). This finding is

congruent with the fact that mothers and mother-substitutes tend to be the primary caretakers and are the primary persons held accountable for any omissions and/or failings in caretaking. In contrast, children were more often abused by males (67% were abused by males versus 40% by females). The prevalence of male perpetrators was strongest in the category of sexual abuse, where 89% of the children were abused by a male compared to only 12% by a female.

This information indicates to us that it is dangerous to make generalized statements about the extent of abuse and neglect by either men or women. Clearly, many children are being harmed by their caretakers, both female and male. The comparisons depend on more specific definitions and societal factors such as the likelihood that female caretakers are currently spending more time with children than are male caretakers. Much is unknown about the true incidence of child abuse and neglect, which are widely considered as underreported activities. Also, the report described above does not appear to address the devastating effects of children who witness domestic violence in their homes – where national crime statistics indicate that males are over 90% of the perpetrators in reported incidents.

Craig’s call and follow-up information helped us to look more carefully at the facts behind our article. Our intent is to encourage all caregivers to be lovingly involved in raising their children. We believe fathers are too often overlooked in efforts to enhance good parenting. We want to avoid statements that unfairly represent the behavior of *any* group of people. We also want to present complete and balanced information and not shy away from issues that challenge our personal beliefs. We hope the additional information above furthers those goals.

### An evaluation by a staff member at Boys & Girls Club:

“I wasn’t looking forward to coming to a 3-hour training after work today, and I was expecting just another training with another approach to helping kids that doesn’t apply to what I do and won’t incorporate our current procedures. But instead I was surprised to find very helpful information that fits very well with our current methods and breathes new life into our motivation and draws new attention to the assets that really affect kids and make a difference in their lives.”

## Beyond Maslow

continued from front cover

social work.” Going even further, I believe the developmental assets philosophy has important applications for adults and families, despite the fact that the research part of the model is mainly addressed to the development of children and adolescents. Parents who have asset builders in their own lives will have more to give their children, and youth workers in an organization that uses the asset model to shape supervision and support activities will have more to give the young people with whom they work.

I found few resources that directly tackled this issue. I ended up with two major strands to follow. The first involves some closer scrutiny and partial debunking of Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs,” which is often cited to support a belief that assets don’t have a place in working with the people described above. Maslow’s model (1943) involves a linear progression of meeting needs and assumes that each lower need (physiological, safety) must be met before a person can address the next higher level (belongingness and love, esteem, self-actualization, etc.). There is much to suggest that Maslow’s model is often misapplied.

The second strand involves digging deeper into the use of a strengths-based social work model in situations involving people who lack one or more physiological needs (food, shelter, etc.), who are not safe, or who are in crisis.

### Flying in the Face of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow first published his theory of hierarchy of needs in 1943, in the field of employee motivation. Maslow divided human needs into two groups: deficiency needs and growth needs. He argued that each lower deficiency need (beginning with physiological needs and safety) must be met before moving to the next higher level. He believed that only if the deficiency needs are met is an individual ready to act upon growth needs. When I try to apply these comments to the development of young people, they seem out of touch with reality and contrary to current resiliency research. We know now that many young people can thrive despite serious deprivation and unsafe households if they have caring adults in their lives who honor their abilities and believe in them. We cannot wait to build assets or protective factors in youth until we can get rid of all of their risk factors.

Despite the fact that the hierarchy of needs model was not based on any research, it has become one of the most popular and often cited theories of human motivation. Maslow’s model has such theoretical elegance that it has been widely but wrongly accepted, say some researchers (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Soper, Milford & Rosenthal, 1995; Wahba & Bridewell, 1976). It is used in health education and psychology text books and self-help books.

Maslow acknowledged that his hierarchy is not necessarily in a fixed order, and that for some people self-actualization may be more important than physiological needs. (Self-actualization can be defined as finding self-fulfillment and realizing one’s own potential.) He also recognized that not all personalities follow his proposed hierarchy. Furthermore, Maslow noted that a need does not have to be completely met to be satisfied. Beyond these seldom-cited “exceptions” to the hierarchy of needs model, it may have more fundamental flaws.

Researcher John Sumerlin and his colleagues concluded that meeting Maslow’s physiological and safety needs is not a necessary prerequisite for self-actualization, after finding fewer differences than anticipated on the self-actualization scores of homeless men involved in a daily battle for shelter, food and safety over an extended time and college students (Sumerlin & Norman, 1992). Over 39% of the homeless men described themselves as happy, suggesting a tremendous inner strength such as that attributed to the self-actualized person. Sumerlin’s work supports the hypotheses of others that the tendency for growth is universal, and that this potential appears to be normally distributed even among the homeless.

In a later article, Sumerlin challenges researchers “to identify abilities of homeless persons, even those who are mentally ill. Researchers have concentrated on disease among homeless people, overlooking their assets.” (Sumerlin & Bundrick, 1997).

The words of Mother Teresa: “In every country there are poor. On certain continents poverty is more spiritual than material.... Perhaps in rich countries people aren’t hungry for bread as they are in India or Africa....I think it is much easier to give a plate of rice or a piece of bread to a hungry person than to eliminate loneliness, and the feeling of being unwanted—a feeling that many rich people have who spend their days alone. I think that is great poverty.”

continued on next page

## Beyond Maslow

continued from previous page

### Strengths-Based Social Work

Dennis Saleebey, author and Professor of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas, shed a great deal of light on this topic during my telephone interview with him. He described experiences similar to mine when he is presenting workshops about a strengths-based approach to social work. He noted three common responses to the family of strength-based concepts:

- “Oh yes, we do that” – but participants really don’t deeply understand the strengths philosophy and are still operating mostly from deficit thinking.
- “I’m interested and intrigued – tell me more.”
- “Get out of here. You don’t know the kind of people I work with – they are on the streets... have raped their kids... are hungry.”

Over his years of direct and supervisory work, writing and teaching, Saleebey has identified a number of misunderstandings or fears that at least partially account for the third response. He offered his response to each.

- *If we talk about strengths, we must ignore needs.* The strengths-based perspective is about balance. It requires us to notice, acknowledge and respond to needs. Yet, it requires us at the same moment to begin looking for and talking about strengths and capacities. It brings balance to thought patterns and interactions that have previously been only about what is wrong.

Medina Children’s Services in Seattle switched to an intake form that identifies successes and goals after adopting the developmental asset approach. The prior problem-focused form left “both the youth and the worker . . . overwhelmed as to where to begin or what would show progress,” says Cynthia Williams, Program Director. With the new philosophy of intake, “the problems would surface,” she says, “but this gave the youth a way to look at how to build their strengths in an area.”

- *Many of us don’t know what strengths are or have a vocabulary for them.* Both the popular media and academia have inundated us with ways to describe what is wrong with people. We have popular and technical terms for most every type of failing or problem. Yet, there is no compendium of diagnoses for what people are doing right. A strengths vocabulary contains ordinary words: loyalty, wisdom, friends, family, church, hope, dreams, love. Saleebey joked that he’s been threatening to write a DSM (the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which provides a comprehensive classification of all recognized psychiatric disorders) for strengths. I hope he does.

The list of developmental assets themselves provides a pretty good start for naming the building blocks for healthy, balanced young people.

- *We’ll be manipulated and duped by clients.* Some workers in human services agencies fear that using a strengths perspective will signal to their clients that they are “soft” or naïve, allowing the clients to abuse the system to get more benefits or services than those to which they are entitled. The strengths perspective is about respect, caring, and empowerment. It does not suggest that staff wear rose-colored glasses or ignore what their training and instincts tell them.
- *We’ll be wasting the expertise we’ve accumulated in learning what is wrong with people.* This expertise is as important as ever. Using a strengths-based approach is about adding to your toolbox, not emptying it out and starting over. It does require some shifts in beliefs and actions as to when to use which tool.
- *We’ll be seen as not holding clients accountable for their behavior.* Saleebey cited a situation where staff in a child protection agency were concerned that efforts to identify strengths in families where parents were abusive or neglectful would be viewed as implying the child was responsible for being maltreated. While this is clearly a very sensitive issue, in most cases a careful approach leaves room for both accountability and acknowledging the strengths that parents have.

The Winona County Department of Human Services in Minnesota reports a dramatically improved ability to engage parents who have come to the attention of child protection services. By going through the list of assets with parents to identify the positive things they are already doing and identifying activities that would build additional assets, child protection workers are able to engage families in situations where they would normally be much more defensive and resistant. Workers can then, over time and with the cooperation of family members, address whatever deeper, underlying problems may exist.

Saleebey summarized his views on using a strengths-based approach with people whose basic needs are not fulfilled or who are in crisis in this way: Hopes and dreams, skills and capabilities reside inside almost everyone; we need to help uncover them as an essential

continued on page 6

## Beyond Maslow

continued from page 5

survival tool – and as a doorway out of lack and deprivation. The ability of helping services to notice and talk about strengths and skills *while* they are attending to crises or basic needs is critical. It can plant the seeds that can be nurtured further as the situation stabilizes. As he noted, there is a great deal of research indicating that the positive expectations for their clients held by those in the helping professions are more likely to lead to a good outcome than are the technical skills they use.

### Meeting Needs and Building Assets/Strengths

All of this strengthens my belief that every person in the “helping professions” would benefit from knowing about and using asset or strength-based approaches, even with people we would describe as in extreme need or in crisis. In doing so, we can help them draw upon their existing strengths to deal with the current situation and to reorganize their lives over the long term. We can renew our understanding of the purpose of social work and why we chose this profession. Failing to address the strengths side of the human equation with at least as much attention as we give to deficits and problems seems to shortchange those we profess to help.

Perhaps a more fundamental shift is to think of assets and strengths as basic needs – needs with the same priority and urgency that we have previously associated with hunger for food and thirst for water.

I invite your comments, responses, and questions about these thoughts. **H**

**Acknowledgements:** I thank Marie Bronoel and Ed Phippen for their research. I am grateful for ideas, encouragement and editing from Deborah Fisher, Linda Silvius, Rick Jackson, Marilyn Larson, and Dennis Saleebey.

#### References Cited Above

- Snow, D.A., and L. Anderson. (1987). Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92, 1336-1371.
- Soper, B., and G. Milford and G. Rosenthal. (1995). Belief when evidence does not support theory. *Psychology & Marketing*, 12(5), 415-422.
- Sumerlin, John R. and Reubin L. Norman, Jr. Self-Actualization and

Homeless Men: A Known-Groups Examination of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 1992, Vol. 7, No. 3, 469-481.

Sumerlin, John R. and C.M. Bundrick. Research on Homeless Men and Women: Existential-Humanistic and Clinical Thinking. *Psychological Reports*, 1997, 80, 1303-1314.

Wahba, A., and L. Bridgewell. (1976). Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 15, 212-240.

#### General Reference Sources

Benson, Peter. *All Kids Are Our Kids*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1997.

Garbarino, James. *Children and Families in the Social Environment*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. Aldine de Gruyer: New York, 1992.

Kaplan, Lisa and Judith Girard. *Strengthening High-Risk Families: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Lexington Book: New York, 1994.

Kretzmann, John P. and John L. McKnight. *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University: Evanston, IL, 1993.

Maslow, Abraham. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396.

Mother Teresa. *One Heart Full of Love*. Servant Publications: Ann Arbor, MI, 1988.

Saleebey, Dennis, ed. *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work*. Longman: New York, 1997.

Walsh, Froma. *Strengthening Family Resilience*. Guilford Press: New York, 1998.

### Enjoying a Craft While Helping Kids

Lauren Kirby, Human Services Director for the City of Redmond recently learned how to make candles and has become prolific in her production. As a passionate advocate for kids, she decided to offer the candles to a circle of friends in exchange for a donation to the Diane Hay Scholarship Fund that helps families pay for after-school clubs and activities at the Neighborhood Schoolhouse in Redmond. Lauren raised \$800 in one afternoon. Her next beneficiary will be the Redmond Youth Partnership, which engages youth and adults to work together to make Redmond a great place for young people.

## Nancy's Reading Corner

continued from page 2

Contributor Charles Cowger argues that “if assessment focuses on deficits, it is likely that deficits will remain the focus of both the worker and the client during remaining contacts.”

In his conclusion, Saleebey vehemently states that focusing and building on client strengths is an imperative of the values that govern social work—including equality, respect for the dignity of the individual, inclusiveness and diversity, and the search for maximum autonomy within maximum community. Saleebey warns that “...many models and institutions of helping have become pillars of a kind of inequality...They have evolved into means of domination through identity stripping, culture killing, status degradation, base rhetoric, and/or sequestering. We dominate, sometimes benignly with a velvet glove...” This book challenges all of us to examine our orientation toward “helping,” lest we inadvertently steal from people opportunities, courage, and their inherent power and motivation.

### Resiliency in Action: Practical Ideas for Overcoming Risks and Building Strengths in Youth, Families, & Communities

Henderson, Nan and Bonnie Benard, and Nancy Sharp-Light. *Resiliency in Action: Practical Ideas for Overcoming Risks and Building Strengths in Youth, Families, & Communities*, Rio Rancho, NM: Resiliency In Action, Inc., 1999, \$24.95

This book captures “the best” of the articles from the first two years of the *Resiliency In Action* journal. The editors were the key movers behind the journal. The book is a handy and powerful way to look at the current knowledge about the field of resiliency – the ability of children, youth, adults, organizations, and communities to bounce back from stress and risk and adversity.

In the preface, Nan Henderson explains what she believes is behind the growing popularity of the resiliency approach to viewing and helping others. She quotes a young man who had spent most of his life in dozens of foster homes enduring tremendous risk, trauma, and

adversity. What helped the most, he told her, were those people along the way who gave him the message, “What is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong with you.”

Not only did this young man recognize the power of those that looked for his strengths, but a growing body of experts is coming to the same conclusion. In 1998, Martin Seligman, Ph.D., a resiliency researcher and then

---

### Some Helpful Definitions

Another thing I liked about Saleebey's book was the inclusion of sensible and clear explanations of two over-used and under-defined terms:

A **community** is a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people

- Participate in common practices,    ■ Depend on one another,
- Make decisions together,        ■ Identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships,    ■ Commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another's and the group's well-being (Saleebey, p. 201)

A **paradigm** is a framework crafted of symbols, concepts, beliefs, cognitive structures, and cultural ethos so deeply embedded in our psyches that we hardly know of its presence. (Saleebey, p. 240)

---

President of the American Psychological Association, stated that the entire field of psychology is moving away from the deficit approach to a strengths-based model.

Peter Benson, President of Search Institute, in his foreword to *Resiliency in Action*, emphasizes that everyone needs information about the work and ideas of resiliency – school staff, religious leaders, youth organizations, and agencies, as well as the people of our communities. We all need to unlearn the pervasive messages from the last 20 to 30 years that have would have us believe that risks, deficits, and pathologies define our youth and our society.

It is impossible in this space to adequately describe the content and possible uses of this book. It contains chapters on the foundations of resiliency and resiliency in schools, communities, mentoring and peer programs, youth development, and families. Scattered throughout the book are stories of individuals who exemplify the principles in the text.

*Resiliency In Action* also places a strong emphasis on showing how resiliency is related to the wider body of strength-based approaches, including developmental assets and strength-based social work and family support efforts. I found it an excellent “encyclopedia” of what is currently known about the ability of individuals to overcome risks and ways in which that happens. **H**

# Nancy's Ongoing Millennium Project

Regular readers know that I pledged to walk 1,000 miles again this year and donate an amount per mile to a youth program. I also added a commitment to complete 2,000 repetitions of strength training for 8-10 muscle groups. I will donate to another youth group for meeting this goal.

So far, so good. At the end of April, I had walked 415 miles and completed 810 repetitions of my strength training. Because of my pledges, both activities give me an opportunity to reflect on why young people are so amazing and important to all of us.

I have had the great joy this year of tutoring a wonderful second-grader at Olympic View Elementary School two days a week. She is the third student I have worked with there over the last three years and a delightful little girl. I have also applied to be a Big Sister. The wait for a match has been lengthy, as Big Brothers/Big Sisters has more female volunteers than girls who would benefit from an adult friend and mentor. If you know places (schools, youth programs, faith communities, etc.) that could help identify girls for the program, I encourage you to call Big Brothers/Big Sisters at 206-461-3630 or another one of the great mentoring programs in our community. It would also be great if lots of men and women call to volunteer! **H**

## Distinguishing Activity-Based Youth Programs from Developmentally-Based Programs

“[Erik Erikson’s theoretical model on human development] furnishes us a way out of program or activity-based work and shifts us into developmentally-based work. So much of youth work is, by default, activity-based. That is, it becomes something that takes up the time of youth, takes them off the streets, gives them something safe and interesting to do. In contrast, developmentally-based work is fundamentally different. By its very nature it is more long-term in its focus, helping young people to master a competency that affirms them, builds their confidence that they can make a difference, and assists them in identifying those gifts that enable them to be successful.”

*Eric Erikson’s Theory of Youth Development: Implications for Youth Work in the YMCA* by Doug Wallace, PhD

HELIOTROPE



Nancy Ashley  
1249 NE 92<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Seattle, WA 98115