

# Heliogram

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

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## Without Youth Voice, We All Miss Out

No one knows more about the stress, joys and routines of young people's lives than youth. Still we continue to design programs for youth, pass laws that define their rights, and form opinions about them without including them as respected and active partners in decisions that affect youth and their community.

This issue of Heliogram is devoted to "youth voice," a variety of efforts to bring young people's ideas, perspectives, talents, and power into shaping programs, organizations and communities. Youth voice is about integrating youth as leaders and decision-makers; about doing something important *with* youth rather than *to* them or *for* them; and about putting young people on planning teams and boards. Authentic attempts to increase youth voice deal with attitudes and relationships as much as they do with agendas and budgets.

**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.

We think youth voice is important, because it provides:

- Sorely needed ideas and energy
- More effective program designs
- Leadership training and opportunities for young people
- Meaningful youth-adult relationships
- Opportunities to combat "adulthood"

Youth voice does not mean handing over all responsibility for important decisions. It's not using a young person on a board as "window dressing." Adults must make space for young people to take an active role. Young people must respect adults' skills and resources. Adults must provide enough support to help youth succeed, without constraining their ideas. Young people must take the work seriously.<sup>1</sup>

This region has a few active youth voice efforts: Seattle Youth Involvement Network, Redmond Youth Partnership, Kirkland Teen Council, Bellevue Youth Link, and Metrocenter YMCA's Get Engaged: City Boards and Commissions program. Yet only a handful of program and organizations are inviting or

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## Youth Voice Resources

**Youth on Board:** Offers training, consulting services, and materials on why and how to successfully involve young people in decision-making. [www.youthonboard](http://www.youthonboard)

**Voice for Foster Care Kids:** The *Mockingbird Times* is written in Seattle for and by youth who have lived through foster care and homelessness. It is distributed as an insert in *Real Change*, a publication on homeless adults. The staff want to reach kids in foster care and give them an outlet for their views—and to share those views with policy makers who can make improvements in the system in Washington. [www.mockingbirdsociety.org](http://www.mockingbirdsociety.org)

**Teen Written Magazine:** New Youth Connections (NYC) is a teen written magazine for New York City teens, with a readership of 200,000 teens and adults. Youth Communications helps teens develop their skills in reading, writing, thinking, and reflection to help them make thoughtful choices about their lives. [www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)

**Youth Voice Bibliography:** [www.yscal.org/YouthBib.html](http://www.yscal.org/YouthBib.html).

### General Resource on Families and Children

**Connect for Kids** is a project of the Benton Foundation, offering adults (families, educators, policymakers) news coverage, reports, poll results and tools to help communities work better for kids. The web site ([www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)) covers topics from adoption to volunteering and mentoring, linking to many sites, service and advocacy organizations, along with state specific sub-pages. Their weekly email newsletter recaps what's new for and about kids and families. It is informative, timely and easy to read – with great blurbs and links for more information.

## Without Youth Voice

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promoting youth voice in a meaningful way. Doing that well is not easy. There are resources to help and the promise of significant benefits.

Our inspiration for this issue came from the direct voices of youth in the books we review here. They touched us as few other written materials have. The young people we read about are articulate, distressed, disconnected, dealing with complex lives, hopeful and caring. They taught us more about teen life today than we may be comfortable knowing. We hope this issue will give you ideas and inspiration to hear, heed and promote youth voice. **H**

<sup>1</sup> Beilenson, John. Looking for Young People; Listening for Youth Voice. *Social Policy*, Fall 1993.

## HELIOTROPE



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## Realities of Teen Life

We've been searching for deeper glimpses into the realities of adolescent life. Here are reviews of resources for getting a fuller story on what it's like to grow up as a teen today. The first two books, *Ophelia Speaks* and *Real Boys' Voices*, offer us youth's direct voices. The last two, *A Tribe Apart* and *Raising Cain*, offer adult interpretations of teen life. We hope these reviews will encourage you to pick up these engaging books and that you will share additional resources on youth voice with us.

### Innocence and Insight: Young/Old Girls

*Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self*, Sara Shandler (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, \$12.95 in paperback)

*Nancy Ashley*

Sara Shandler, just 17 when she began writing, makes a powerful case for youth to directly tell the world what is going on in their lives. She gives us the frank words of girls - words which humbled me in my ignorance of teen life today and caused deep sadness about the gap between the support and connection girls need and how little they often get.

Shandler's book was inspired by Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*. While Shandler found Pipher's book a gift of honesty, acceptance and hope, she was frustrated that "Pipher was speaking for me, and I wanted to speak for myself. We do not need an expert intermediary filtering our experience through interpretation. We can tell the world who we are directly and with an intimacy and accuracy inaccessible to those outside our generation."

And tell they did. Shandler sent packets to 6,750 school, church and community professionals who work with teens requesting "self-disclosing contributions" on personally important experiences. She received 815 contributions.

The reports shocked Shandler as she read of the gap between what girls have been *told* to think, what they *say* they think, and what they *truly think*. She perceived her friends as others saw them – basically healthy girls who had some problems. What she found instead was that a large proportion of even the so-called "high-functioning/ready to enter an Ivy League college" crowd was plagued by drug abuse, eating disorders, self-mutilation, depression, rape and sexual abuse.

Girls described their parents and family members as oblivious to what was really going on – partly because the girls worked very hard at hiding their problems and partly because the adults weren't alert, aware, or willing to see what was happening. Girls often hid their situations or the seriousness of them from their friends. Many did not get help until their symptoms brought them to a crisis. Girls included pleas to let "other girls know they are not alone."

Shandler calls out a disturbing conclusion. "Although the contributors are mature, insightful, and self-reflective," she says, "we are still teetering on the edge of our childhood. Our youth compounds the gravity of our words." As I read the sophisticated thinking and writing of the girls, I found it hard not to think about them as women well into their twenties and thirties with some of the tools and wisdom we begin to gain by those ages. Their ability to understand and articulate what was happening to them belies the fact that they are 13 to 17-year-olds dealing with things most adults have trouble navigating successfully. Shandler writes, "In adolescence, stickers and dolls mix with sex and depression." She calls her peers "old-youth."

Shandler hopes her book will help adults understand adolescent girls. She is most hopeful that other girls will hear their own voices in these pages. I believe she has accomplished both. I know that the power and pain of these girls' voices will stay with me for a very long time. **H**

## Boys Speak From Their Hearts

*Real Boys' Voices*, William S. Pollack, Ph.D., with Todd Shuster (New York: Penguin Books, 2000, \$14.00 in paperback)

*Christina Malecka*

Our society often stereotypes teenage boys as problems or criminals based on the perception that they can be difficult or violent. We read news stories about school shootings and violence perpetrated by boys, yet rarely hear the good news that most boys care deeply about their families, friends and the world around them. We don't hear boys speak from their hearts about the challenges they face growing up in a society that discourages them from expressing emotion or making genuine connections with each other, their families and with girls and women.

*Real Boys' Voices* gives us an opportunity to hear what boys have to say about their own lives and offers us *their* ideas for reaching them. The majority of William Pollack's book consists of transcribed interviews or essays from a diverse spectrum of adolescent boys across the U.S. on school, work, sports, spirituality, sexuality, bullying and violence, depression, body image, drugs, divorce, racism, creativity and relationships with parents, girls and other boys. The voices are rural, urban and suburban, gay and straight, Latino, Asian American, African American and White, affluent, middle class and poor.

Boys are desperate to talk about their lives and emotions but are fearful of backlash from appearing "soft." They talk of being teased and bullied for stepping "out-of-line" by expressing interest in anything not considered "masculine," or being labeled "sissies" or "fags" for expressing an interest in the arts or academics but no interest in athletics. Homophobia is still used to keep boys from stepping outside of proscribed gender roles.

The rules that equate strength with silence and stoicism still apply for males. Our institutions uphold these rules and teach boys

to perpetuate them. There is no safety in expressing emotions and boys feel very alone. Many become depressed, angry and even violent or suicidal. Some interviews illustrate that often boys perceived as "bad" are more likely "sad."

Pollack balances his alarming wake up call about the fear, isolation and pressure boys experience with inspirational stories. He includes the stories of boys with the courage to come out as gay in conservative schools, boys who intervened to support a suicidal friend, boys who value their creative side in a society that does not encourage them to be dancers or artists, and boys who express deep love for their families, friends and girlfriends. Pollack offers suggestions - gleaned from interviews with boys themselves- to those who want to encourage boys' voices.

In the section entitled "15 Step Program for Mentoring Boys and Creating Safe Spaces," Pollack writes, "America's boys need safe places where they can go to be their real selves, free of shame and the constant pressure to prove their masculinity. As I read and re-read their voices, I hear them saying that they want to create a new definition of boyhood, that they are ready to launch a gender revolution that will enable them to become their true selves. They want and need our help to make it physically and emotionally safe for them to do so. They cannot and should not, make all the necessary changes alone."

My only disappointment with *Real Boys' Voices* was its somewhat unsophisticated analysis on how gender and power operates for girls and boys. Pollack equates the barriers and fears that boys face with the institutionalized sexism facing girls. I would never discount how restrictive gender roles rob boys of their chance to become "whole," but I believe that girls face greater restrictions and difficulties because women and girls are the primary targets for physical and sexual violence. They still do not have equal social status with men.

Yet, I am recommending this book to every woman I know because I think we will benefit from greater empathy for men and boys. I was in tears several times as I realized how much pressure boys and men feel to keep their emotions inside, resulting in devastating effects.

I was deeply touched and encouraged by the emotional intelligence expressed in the interviews and essays. *Real Boys Voices* is a gift to all of us – parents, teachers, women and girls – who want to understand and support the men and boys in our lives. **H**

## The Kids We Think We Know

*A Tribe Apart*, Patricia Hersch (New York: Ballentine Books, 1998, \$14.00 in paperback)

*Nancy Ashley*

“America’s own adolescents have become strangers. They are a tribe apart, remote, mysterious, vaguely threatening. Somewhere in the transition from twelve to thirteen, our nation’s children slip into a netherworld of adolescence that too often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of estrangement,” argues journalist and parent Patricia Hersch after spending four years immersed in the lives of young people in Virginia. She had a gut feeling that the damning statistics didn’t mean we had a generation of “bad kids” but rather that the fabric of adolescence itself had changed.

“In the vacuum where traditional behavioral expectations for young people used to exist, in the silence of empty homes and neighborhoods, young people have built their own community. Their dependence on each other fulfills the universal human longing for community, and inadvertently cements the notion of a tribe apart. More than a group of peers, it becomes in isolation a society with its own values, ethics, rules, world view, rites of passage, worries, joys, and momentum. It becomes teacher, advisor, entertainer, challenger, nurturer, inspirer, and sometimes destroyer.”

Hersch believes that a clear picture of adolescents escapes us for one main reason—*we aren’t there*. We can’t understand the milieu in which children are growing up because it is caused by our absence. It transforms the environment for all kids, even the few who have parents at home or other caring adults in their neighborhoods.

She distinguishes today’s situation as dramatically different from the needs of kids growing up in the sixties. There is no similar “us” versus “them”—because there is no active engagement by “them.”

*A Tribe Apart* tells stories from the point of view of eight kids in the “mainstream”—a spectrum of adolescence from seventh through twelfth grade. Her focus on “regular” kids reveals a life far different from what we know. “That’s why applying our standards to them does not often get at the truth,” she notes. “Even the very best kids are often in danger. Adolescence is rife with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, sex, lying, violence, unstable and broken families, and so on. This is the mainstream of adolescence today.”

One eighth grader offered this often-repeated plea to Hersch: “Just remember, that quiet girl in the back of the class may not be what she appears. That boy that never talks to anyone and loves to read in his spare time may be extremely out-of-control on Friday nights. You adults need to give this more attention. We are not as innocent as you may think. You need to talk to us and watch us and be alert. It is very easy to fool you. It is very easy to lie to you. Teachers and parents need to be smarter about us and stop denying what is really going on.”

Hersch does not provide a solution. She suggests that if adults will listen to adolescents, with a sincere desire to get to know them and respect them, we can respond to their longing for adults who care about them and help them. Until then, our piecemeal attempts to mend, motivate, or rescue them may be obscured by a larger reality: *we don’t know them*.

We must allow young people to tell their truths and express the realities of their lives without shock or judgment. While it may be frightening for us to hear what our kids are engaged in, it is far more damaging to expect platitudes based on our childhoods to resonate with today’s youth or to let our children raise themselves in isolation. Instead of saying “no” to our kids, it may be time to ask them “why” they engage in risky behaviors and to offer them safe havens and support to make reasonable choices and to weigh their risks. **H**

## Boys Trapped by “Manly” Expectations

*Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Dan Kindlon, PhD and Michael Thompson PhD (New York: Ballentine Books, 1999, \$14.00 in paperback)

*Bobbie Rogers, guest reviewer*

Raising Cain is a book I found through my awareness and concern for boys. As a parent of a 14-year-old boy, as a teen educator for Planned Parenthood, and in my other professional work, I was seeking to better understand the inner struggles of boys.

*Raising Cain* was written by two psychologists with 35 years of working with boys and families between them. Dan Kindlon is a professor and researcher at Harvard Medical School, with an emphasis on fighting and violence. Michael Thompson has the hands-on experience of being a school teacher, school counselor, and clinical psychologist.

The authors discuss how boys suffer, what causes them emotional pain, and how those that love them can help them become emotionally whole men. We too often see only boys’ anger without understanding its roots in their fear of exposure and vulnerability. We need to see boys as they truly are – rather than as they appear or we wish them to be.

Kindlon says most boys still experience being pushed into a box of “manly” expectations and denied feelings. The stereotypical notions of masculine toughness deny a boy his emotions and rob him of the chance to develop a full range of emotional resources. As a result, boys are left to manage conflict, adversity, and change in life with a limited emotional repertoire.

*Raising Cain* describes different influences that may hinder a boy’s emotional development – from an elementary school environment that creates shame and resentment because it fails to accommodate boys’ higher activity level, lower levels of impulse controls, and slower development of reading and writing skills; to harsh discipline; to the culture of cruelty in which we live.

The authors urge parents, teachers and community members to respect and cultivate the inner lives of boys by:

- Helping boys understand and express a full range of human emotions so they can understand themselves and communicate better.
- Recognizing and accepting the high activity level of boys and giving them safe places to express it.
- Talking to boys in ways that honor their perspective and masculinity: be direct, ask them to be problem solvers.
- Teaching boys that emotional courage is as honorable as battlefield courage.
- Using discipline to build character and conscience, not to punish or shame.
- Modeling emotional attachment and physical affection among men.
- Teaching that there are many ways to be a man.

I see our inability to help boys break out of an imposed stereotype of toughness and anger as being the foundation for many of the issues we deal with in the human services field – domestic violence, single mothers, and addictions. If we spent more time and energy dealing with the emotional development of boys, we could foster healthier and happier male youth and men. *Raising Cain* provides some excellent guidance on how we can do this. **H**

Bobbie recently received her Bachelors degree in Human Services from Western Washington University. She is now a recruiter for WWU. You can contact her at [Bobbie.Rogers@wwu.edu](mailto:Bobbie.Rogers@wwu.edu) if you are interested in the WWU Human Services program.

**Heliotrope Web Site Coming Soon!**

Look for it after January 1, 2002.

[www.heliotropeseattle.com](http://www.heliotropeseattle.com)

## Heliotrope Retreat on Racism

While this issue of the Heliogram addresses the importance of youth voice and advocates to help end “adultism,” we remain passionate about many other social change issues, including racism. One of our goals for 2001 was to further explore ways in which we could combat racism.

On November 10, we gathered with colleagues to explore this topic with the guidance of facilitator Russell Campbell. Russell created a safe environment for us to talk about racism, and helped us identify tools to enable us to be more proactive in confronting racism in our daily lives.

Consultant Alice Ito suggested some excellent reading material to prepare us for the retreat:

- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (Basic Books, New York, NY, 1997) is a great resource for those looking for a working definition of racism and seeking a better understanding of how racial identity develops in a racist society.
- *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*, Jane Lazarre (Duke University Press, USA, 1996) is the personal account of one white woman’s experience as the mother of two African American sons and as the in-law of an African American family which makes her especially conscious of race and racism.

Russell Campbell, our facilitator, is available for workshops and retreats on racism. He can be reached at: Rhotsoup@aol.com. **H**

## Heliotrope Values Giving Back

On November 28, Christina began volunteering for Powerful Voices’ (www.powerfulvoices.org) Girls RAP after school program at Denny Middle School. She is acting as an “adult participant” in a program that encourages girls to develop and use critical thinking skills, express themselves, take advantage of learning opportunities and constructively deal with the harmful aspects of growing up as a girl.

Powerful Voices’ philosophy and strength-based approach is a good fit with the work we do at Heliotrope. In fact, Powerful Voices has identified seven developmental they are actively working to build in the girls they serve through the Girls RAP program: achievement motivation, high expectations, personal power, interpersonal competence, adult role models, school engagement and school bonding. Christina is excited to have a chance to practice asset building more actively and to learn from the amazing girls and women who are involved with Powerful Voices.

Earlier this year, Christina also served as a volunteer for Project Dvora – Jewish Family Service’s Domestic Violence Program, and for Chaya, a domestic violence agency serving South Asian women.

Nancy has recently completed her third year of walking 1,000 miles and donating an amount per mile to youth groups. She also is close to completing her added goal of 2,000 strength-building exercise repetitions for a second year, for which she also makes donations. Nancy recently celebrated her first anniversary as a Big Sister and is enriched in ever greater ways by this friendship.

# Heliotrope: Who We Are

Heliotrope seeds positive change by providing planning, consulting, training, facilitation, writing, and coaching services to human and community development projects. We bring a strength-based approach to all of our work on behalf of local and state governments, non-profit organizations, neighborhoods, foundations and funders, local and national initiatives and collaborative groups.

Nancy Ashley has over eleven years of experience in systems change, strategic and project planning, analysis and evaluation, report and grant writing, process design and facilitation. Christina Malecka joined Heliotrope's staff two years ago and specializes in qualitative data gathering and analysis, research, writing and project planning.

## A Parting Thought

We recently came across these words from a teen: "I now realize how important it is to spend time with my family and friends. Two weeks after September 11, I spent a day with my family at a park. As simple a trip as that might have been, it meant a lot to me that my family is still here and we are spending time together." Perhaps the windows to connection are open. We hope this issue will give you ideas and inspiration to hear, heed and promote youth voice.

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