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Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self

by Sara Shandler

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD

The editor of this book is a teenaged girl who conceived the idea of publishing a book of brief essays written by adolescent girls. She asked hundreds of girls from around the country and from a wide range of backgrounds to write about the most important of their life experiences. The result is an impressive piece of psychosocial journalism that will be important and useful to anyone wanting firsthand descriptions of the life-shaping experiences faced by teenage girls. Some of those experiences reflect contemporary issues; some go back to biblical times. *Ophelia Speaks* is thus relevant for physicians, both in their practices and in their homes; for parents who cannot understand what is happening to their daughters; and for adolescents themselves.

The book is divided into five sections: The Body Under Assault; Family Matters; The Best and Worst of Friends; Touched by Desire; and Overcoming Obstacles and Coming Into Our Own. Each section begins with a few pages of the author's remarkably frank descriptions of her own feelings and experiences in that area, followed by those of her contributors. Of the process of creating the book, she writes, "... most girls, but not all, opened the door on dark and disturbing times. Still others allowed light, instead of darkness, to glitter in their contributions."¹p.xvi

Section One discusses sexual abuse, something we all tend to deny but which current news articles force us to acknowledge. The editor writes, "... I was asked, 'Would you use the [Wesleyan College] escort service?' I sighed, 'I don't want to recognize the possibility of my being raped at my new home. If I call the escort service, I'm admitting to myself I can't be safe here walking alone.' ... Yet the mere existence of sexual violence shapes me."¹p.54

Family Matters addresses loss, especially the ongoing effects of divorce, but also death. "I can remember nights that I would yell and scream at my mother—but only in my head: Why did you abandon us? Do you know what you did when you left us?"¹p.100

Eating disorders are common, although we generally do not recognize them in our medical practice. These disorders are described clearly in the book, sometimes along with other distressing techniques, such as self-cutting: "When blood starts to gush out of the newly opened veins, all the bad feelings fly out with it and I find release. I find my heaven. If only they would ever let me bleed long enough. They believe they are saving me, but only I know how to save myself."¹p.93 The remarkable editor observes, "Sadly, tragically, three abusive themes—incest, violence, and alcoholism—were mentioned more often than all others when girls wrote about their fathers."¹p.105

Touched by Desire contains details, often counterintuitive, of adolescent love and affection. Some of the stories may induce personal remembrance of anguish and confusion or perhaps memories of emotional support and understanding. "No one wrote about feeling satisfied by first-time sexual relationships. Instead of feeling love and commitment, girls consistently reported disappointment and disillusionment."¹p.184-5 One girl writes, "I thought by having sex together we would become closer; instead it tore us apart."¹p.185 The book contains meaningful descriptions of manipulative and destructive relationships.

Its concept and firsthand descriptions make this a remarkable book. Its thematic material makes it an important book because it affects us all: as humans, as parents, and as physicians. We might wonder how these girls' emotions will later manifest in our offices decades later. Adolescence is not an easy time; we will remember that Shakespeare's Ophelia escapes into madness. Some of these girls will escape into illness. Will we be aware of its causality? Or will we merely respond to its physical symptoms while knowing nothing of our patients' unexpressed feelings? ♦

Reference

1. Shandler S. *Ophelia speaks: adolescent girls write about their search for self*. New York: HarperPerennial; 1999.

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