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Reviving Ophelia

David VanCleaf

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Book Review

Reviving Ophelia, by Mary Pipher. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994 (ISBN 0-399-13944-3) 304 pages.

According to Mary Pipher, adolescent girls, much like Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, encounter a raging storm as they enter puberty. Many of today's adolescent girls are destroying themselves as they try to escape the pressures forcing them to abandon the carefree, easy-going lifestyles of their preteen years. Pipher describes these girls as "saplings in a hurricane." The greatest loss is the positive sense of self.

Reviving Ophelia chronicles the difficulties girls experience during their adolescent years. As girls enter the teen years they encounter physiological and cognitive changes that diminish their precious sense of self. Of course, adolescent girls have always faced these changes. However, today's youth have a newer, more pervasive enemy, our culture.

Only a few decades ago our culture provided support that assisted teens as they navigated through these difficult times. Pipher asserts that today's culture has changed and, rather than support adolescent girls, it works against them. For example, the media and advertising establishment present unrealistic models and standards for girls. Further, "The diversity of mainstream culture puts pressure on teens to make complicated choices" (p. 92). These cultural pressures are enormous and difficult for older generations to understand. Hence, the traditional cultural supports are missing and adults, like their teens, are exasperated.

An alarming number of today's teenage girls are resorting to destructive practices as means of coping. Bulimia, anorexia, self-mutilation, suicide, sexual promiscuity, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse are destructive practices many of our youth are resorting to as they try to cope with cultural pressures and, simultaneously, retain a healthy self identity.

Families try to protect adolescents, but because the cultural factors are so pervasive many families are unable to provide the needed support. "The mass media has the goal of making money from teenagers, while parents have the goal of producing happy, well-adjusted adults. These two goals are not compatible. Most parents resist their daughters' media-induced values. Girls find themselves in conflict with their parents and with their own common sense" (p. 82). An increasing number of teens and their families are turning to counseling for assistance.

Pipher, a clinical psychologist who specializes in the treatment of adolescent girls, skillfully uses case studies to illustrate the themes in her book. These themes include developmental issues, family members and their roles, divorce, depression, the cultural emphasis on thinness, drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence. The case studies provide descriptions of teens who have serious problems as well as case studies of girls who have found positive ways of dealing with problems.

Although the challenges are great, Pipher offers useful suggestions. Good communication is the most important suggestion. Pipher also illustrates how she encourages clients to cope with their problem through journal writing, focusing on positive qualities, and clarifying expectations.

Pipher refers to the African saying "It takes a village to raise a child" and states that "most girls no longer have a village" (p. 28). This book should be required reading for every parent and every educator who works with preteen and teenage girls. Parents and educators must work diligently to create a supportive environment that will help each of our Ophelias withstand the hurricane that is undermining the precious positive sense of self.

Review by David VanCleaf
Washburn University
Topeka, Kansas