

INTRODUCTION

This book gathered dust on a back shelf inside my brain for decades, blocked by some vague frustration, waiting for something to push me to my keyboard. Then one evening, while on a panel at a seminar on adolescence, I found myself suddenly haunted by the faces of some of the kids you are about to meet. As people spoke of various teen struggles, these teenage faces in my head began to powerfully answer some of their most poignant questions. “Yes,” I silently exclaimed, “Ronald, man, you should be here to answer *that* question. And Susan, geez, your story would get a standing ovation.” As their unforgettable faces began to fade, I vowed to finally write this book that I had struggled with for so long.

After that night, the words flew out of me. I think that’s partly because the stories of the kids you are about to meet have been repressed far too long inside my files, and inside my heart. Many times over my 30 years of working with adolescents, I’d try to pull out these most special memories, dust them off, and verbally share them with others, but I’d always find that my voice would fail. My spoken words could never convey the essence of these kids or their struggles, losses, and victories. After each telling, I’d shake my head, frustrated at my poor offerings of such profound people. Like a colorblind artist, I had no way of conveying the rich hues, the subtle textures, or the inspiring character of these *human beings*. Yes, *human beings*, not just *teenagers*, but complex *people*, folks like us who dream, feel pain, get scared, love, succeed, fail, strive to do better, and then fail again. But more often than you might think,

they also triumph heroically, in ways that might reassure those adults who fear for the future of our world.

Many could dispute their hero status. One could argue that these kids were not the student council presidents or football stars, and, to my knowledge, not one went to West Point or Harvard. But this book is not about the heroism of the athlete, soldier, or scholar, or even the struggle of the physically challenged kid. For we can all see that heroism, and have some sense of what those accomplishments are about. The heroics you'll experience in this book are all invisible. No parades, no honors, not even one medal gets awarded here. In fact, most of the kids you'll meet had no idea of their own valor, no concept of their courage under fire, of the teenage bravery most adults would envy. If confronted, they would all vehemently deny being special. I think it was that humility and ordinariness that most endeared these kids to me.

Each of the chapters that follow comes from a drawer where I've kept the files of extraordinary, ordinary kids I've known. Since most of these people could not be located, some of their identifying data have been changed to protect their identities. But of the clients whom I was able to contact, all gave me permission to use their stories, though sometimes without a smile. Whether their memories brought them sadness or joy, each was anxious to help others who are now facing similar challenges not to hurt so much. Isn't that the way of heroes?

Some stories tell of very dramatic situations that most kids are lucky enough never to face, like abuse, addiction, and death. Others are about more common problems that many teens confront daily like bullying, divorce, and rejection. But each story offers some wisdom, some nugget of gold that the rest of us, old and young, can use in our own lives as we fight the same fights, using their examples as models for ourselves to help us triumph in the end, as these kids did.

These adolescents were very special in another way. They offered powerful words and insights about experiences common to most teenagers, things that most adolescents cannot or will not share, fragile self-revelations bravely offered by vulnerable kids

whose peers usually stay silent to protect themselves from a confusing and hostile world. Some were able to disclose directly and fluently; others spoke powerfully without saying a word. But if you look closely, you'll even know what the silent ones said.

These stories were mostly recorded as they unfolded, with conversations captured exactly as they occurred either in tapes (used for training and teaching) or in a reconstruction of my elaborate notes. In my early therapist years, I discovered that being able to replay a client's exact words was a very powerful tool. Not having the best memory, I developed a system of blindly writing extensive shorthand notes during therapy sessions so that I would not lose critical words, thoughts, or observations. Afterwards, I would add my own impressions to these texts, and then put the special ones away like fine wines of experience. They were stored with a hope that one day they might be taken out, shared, and savored so that the pain, struggles, and triumphs of these heroes might become helpful to the rest of us, whether adolescent or adult.

For the teenage reader, I hope that these stories do at least two things. First, I hope they *teach*. Most kids tell me that they learn best about how to deal with challenges by listening to other teens. Ideas can come alive and become real through the words of a peer. It's like how watching a friend struggle with drugs can become the best anti-drug program you'll ever see. Second, I hope these stories *inspire*. I can't tell you how many times I've walked into my office at 10 AM feeling overwhelmed and sorry for myself, and walked out at 10 PM feeling confident and lucky. The only thing that happened in my life during those twelve hours was a thing called inspiration. Like that day when a teen fighting to survive cancer taught me how to stand up to a challenge I thought I couldn't handle. He did this just by telling me his story.

To the adult reader, my hope is that these pages become a kind of canvas, a painting through which the lives of adolescents take on their true depth of color, conveying a real sense of what it's like to be a teen today and in many ways, a teen at any time. Far too often, we only view teenagers in black and white snapshots that discount them as simple children. We assume that their unwilling-

ness or inability to talk implies that they don't experience life as we do, that they don't *really* feel pain or joy, fear or hope. Whether a parent or principal, a counselor or cop, I believe that the kids you will meet here will teach or re-teach us all that teens feel life *at least as intensely* as adults, and that they struggle mightily with powerful issues of morality, character, and courage in battles that we adults too often never see. In knowing this, perhaps we can maintain a respectful empathy for the kids we love and care for, and then our next generation can better rely upon us. That's my greatest hope of all.

Whether an adult or a teen, I have one last wish for you: that this book become an engaging journey through that amazing chapter of life called adolescence. I hope that these pages come alive, making you see, hear, and feel what I get to experience daily in working with teenagers: maddening frustration, raucous laughter, paralyzing fear, wondrous hope, overwhelming sadness, and almost always, that odd, quiet joy of victory.

That list of wishes makes it finally clear to me why these stories were so difficult to share for so long a time. Because in chatting about these kids over the years, I never did their stories justice; my depictions were such poor representations of their poignant struggles and profound character. But now I can relax. For their own words do a much better job, and it is their own words that you are about to hear.

So if you are ready, turn the page and I'll let some of the next generation speak directly to you. I suspect that when you've said goodbye to the twentieth teen, you will feel much better about the hearts and souls of the next generation. But first, be sure that you really want to take this ride called adolescence. Because once you start, it can get a little scary. And it's really, really hard to get off.

I know. I never did.