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Epilogue

Treating Troubled Adolescents

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How can the kids have hope when their parents don't?

—Mia, age sixteen

AS I THINK ABOUT the adolescents described in these pages and the contexts in which they live I have a nagging feeling that something is missing from my analysis. Is the lens I have used too limited? In treating these youngsters I attempted to include all of the important individuals and agencies that appeared to impinge on the system and which therefore had to be involved in order to address the problem and produce change. But I have ignored the broader context: no picture of the forces impacting the adolescent is complete without considering the larger social context within which the child is maturing. And to a great extent this context is made up of profoundly disquieting social and political forces which affect our adolescents in varying degrees at different stages as they proceed to adulthood. Of course, our ability to deal with these forces in therapy is limited. But as the young girl quoted at the opening of this chapter says so poignantly, "How can the kids have hope when their parents don't?" Regardless of the enormity of the problems, we have a responsibility to try to do something about them.

What are some of the problems that stress our adolescents? Just picking up a newspaper one is struck by the amorality of our leaders. In a recent article in *Time* magazine on the state of American ethics, Ezra Bowen (1987) quoted church historian Martin E. Marty as seeing a "widespread sense of moral disarray" (p. 26). Further, political scientist Steven Salkever is quoted in the same article as saying that "there was a traditional language of public discourse, based partly on biblical sources, partly on republican sources. But that language has fallen into disuse, leaving American society with no moral lingua franca" (p. 26). The moral beliefs of our grandparents no longer seem to hold. There is a popular consensus that moral disarray is rife. Also reported in the *Time* article (p. 26) is a poll by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman which reveals that more than 90 percent of respondents agreed that moral values have fallen because parents fail to take responsibility for their children or to imbue in them decent moral standards. Seventy-six percent saw a lack of ethics in business as contributing to tumbling moral standards, and 74 percent decried the failure of political leaders to set a good example. How are

adolescents to know right from wrong when there are no trustworthy role models?

Of course, the stress emanating from this confusion can only be compounded by the fact that for the first time in history humanity is threatened with the very real possibility of total destruction. More nuclear weapons are being built every day. Even excluding an act of madness, the possibility of inadvertent war or a holocaust produced by an accident at some domestic reactor creates stress.

Another recently emerging stress on adolescents is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). For our youngsters, sexual experimentation has new significance. The sexual freedom of their parents is no longer an option. Indeed, it has been propounded that "the only safe sex is abstinence." How do adolescents explore their sexuality under these circumstances?

To this list of stressors can be added the fear of becoming a victim of crime as well as the growing awareness of the scope and seriousness of global problems such as environmental pollution and overpopulation. It may seem paradoxical to conclude a book on family therapy, a field whose central tenet is relativity, by condemning this very tenet. But the fact is that living in an era in which truth is relative does add stress to the adolescent's life.

David Brock (1987), in an article on Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind,* gives an overview of the author's discussion of the quandary that afflicts young people. Bloom refers to the writings of the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who held that science had killed man's capacity to believe in God but left no moral substitute for God, and quotes a remark by Fedor Dostoyevsky that Nietzsche had much admired: "Without God, everything is permissible."

Bloom asserts that moral relativism is the dominant force in the American university—where the teachers and parents of today's adolescents were educated. As a result, openness is the only moral virtue worthy of respect. Bloom says "Everything else—what Immanuel Kant called the Good, the True, the Beautiful—is relative" (p. 10). Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago, does not place all of the blame on our schools and universities. Indeed, he holds that, "country, religion, family, ideas of civilization, all the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a place within the whole, have been rationalized and lost their compelling force" (p. 12).

How does this moral crisis affect our adolescents? They may be living in a world where they do not know right from wrong. I believe it is important to be discriminating about just what this situation implies in terms of the adolescent's experience: it generates confusion, anxiety, and disquiet. My hypothesis is that such factors result in the adolescent having an experience of diminished control over the world in which he or she lives.

There is considerable research supporting the premise that a sense of control is an important element in the maintenance of health. Meredith Minkler, in her article "The Social Component of Health" (1986), reports on a number of research projects in which increased social supports led to improved health. She cites evidence from a study of seven thousand California residents who were followed over a nine-year period. The study found that subjects with few ties to other people had a mortality rate two to five times higher than those with more ties.

According to Minkler, other studies confirm that whether one looks at family relationships or at broader measures, there is a strong relationship between one's social support and one's health. She suggests that a promising explanation for the salubrious effect of increased ties is the hypothesis that, "over time, people's perceived sense of support from others may lead them to a more generalized sense of control" (p. 34). Says Minkler, this global need to have control over one's destiny serves as a likely explanation for the finding that social support is critically linked to health.

This, of course, is a well-developed notion—that with more support there is a greater sense of control. The control comes from a derived strength, a feeling that there is confirmation from the people around us. Reality is confirmation by significant others. Thus, having an increased number of significant others gives greater confirmation to a person's view of reality. From a more coherent sense of reality follows a greater sense of control. The world is a safer place.

What does this mean for family therapists and parents? Our task is to create a context for our children in which they have a sense of control. With a greater sense of control the youngsters will have more hope. I believe that one way for parents to provide that context is to let their children see them attempting to make some changes—even if only miniscule dents—in our world's serious problems. There are many social actions that we can take that will give our children the sense that we are attempting to

have some effect, some control, over the social difficulties that have befallen our world.

One modest project I have been involved in is a television program linking families in Philadelphia and Leningrad—a simulcast "space bridge" in which two families will exchange not only greetings but experiences of family life. For example, they will discuss developmental pressures such as parenting, adolescence, and being a teenager in today's world. The goal of this program is to help the people of the two countries see each other as similar—to erode the image of the other as "the enemy." It is this distortion that our leaders use to justify the enormous stockpiling of nuclear arms. The viewing audience in the Soviet Union will be 150 million; in the United States 85 percent of television stations will carry the show. The hope of our group is that as these families meet, citizens of both nations will come to identify the people of the other country as self, not enemy. They will thus spark a sense of control precisely in the area where adolescents reflect the same feeling of hopelessness as most adults do concerning the tensions between nations.

I believe that parents of adolescents must demonstrate to their children a passionate concern for the world and for the future. They—indeed, all adults who deal with children—must model for them an atmosphere of hope and control, a paradigm of acting apart from the system. Our initiatives to fight social problems speak to the thwarted idealism of today's adolescents. They replace nihilism and depression with a sense that we can take control, we can work to end the sources of stress in our lives. This, I believe, is an ethical imperative of our generation for the next generation.

The ultimate complement to systems theory conceptualization is taking a model that sees the individual human being not only as a well-joined, articulated member of a system but also, at times, as an individual who acts asystemically when the human spirit prevails. The individual can be a member of a context as well as the *creator* of a new context.