Introduction

Contemporary Realities

Recently, when I told one of my nieces, an almost 20-year-old in her second year in college, that I was writing a book on adolescents in the search for meaning, she commented that it seemed a semi-depressing topic and wondered how I had been inspired to tackle such a project. Her comment evoked a response that leads to a discussion of my overall purpose for this book. Yes, I have been among those many adults in the United States who have been continually alarmed at the violence among adolescents and caused by adolescents, particularly high-profile school shootings. But most of my questions at the time of the Columbine shootings were about what Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold read or didn't read and what happened in their lives that caused them to act with such violence. While undoubtedly their actions cannot be explained by one single reason, it is conceivable that the loss of meaning or inability to find meaning played a role. Fourteen of the books frequently cited by teens in my survey deal specifically with violence; two—*Rachel's Tears* and *She Said Yes*—are the stories of teen victims of Columbine.

A book by Scarecrow Press, *Life Is Tough: Guys, Growing Up, and Young Adult Literature* (Rachelle Lasky Bilz), was published in late 2004. An ongoing series by the same press, edited by Arlene Hirschfelder, is entitled "It Happened to Me"; this series is designed for teens searching for answers about certain illnesses, social issues, or lifestyle interests. Greenwood Press has published a series, Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers, with volumes published to date addressing end-of-life, health, societal, identity, abuse, and family issues. The more than 40 books annotated in chapters 4

through 8 of this book also specifically speak to the topics of violence and loss of meaning. The number of these books is just one indicator of the role story can play in addressing adolescents and violence.

Violence is only one of the many symptoms of a lack of meaning. It is precisely this hopelessness or inability to find reasons to live—and to live happy and fulfilling lives—that I suggest can be addressed through reading about the stories of others, through literature. The power of others' stories to suggest meaning for our own life stories impels me to suggest that we need to tap the resource of story. YA author Gary Paulsen frequently discusses the role reading played in his life. In his answers to the YA author questionnaire I sent to him, Paulsen said, "At least in my case, reading saved my life. I was a terrible student, hated school, failed the ninth grade, and a librarian I didn't even know gave me a library card and then handed me a book. That one woman helped me find a place where it didn't hurt, a place where I fit in, a place where I belonged—the pages of a book."

Psychologists posit that adolescence is distinguishable from other growth periods in that the biological changes accompanying puberty both influence and are influenced by psychology, behavior, and society (Lerner, Easterbrooks, and Mistry 2003, 296). They further suggest that adolescents possess the cognitive development to comprehend such realities as death, separation and divorce, ridicule and prejudice, peer pressure, and identity issues. But cognitive development is only a part of the total human psyche, particularly that of adolescents.

The contemporary movement toward holistic living—evident in everything from the rise of health food stores and vegetarianism, to the trend toward low-carb diets, to interest in meditation and yoga, to magazines such as *Holistic Living* and *Parabola*, to numerous websites such as Mind/Body Control: Holistic Online.com (which recognizes the total human person—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually)—emphasizes that human beings are complex, existing at multiple levels from the biological-physical to the societal-historical. There are even websites, such as www.mimbres.com/holp/bib/blk_r.htm, which provide bibliographies for the "holistic path." And while adults often bring to these multiple levels of existence a maturity and life experience that help them process meaning and live through a range of challenges integral to human existence from birth through death, adolescents rarely have that cache of resources. Further, young adulthood is a period fraught with identity issues, shifts in relationships from parental figures to peers, and questions about the future. Teenagers want to know who they are and what life holds for them, and they are in the

search for and development of identity with peers who are equally adrift. Ironically, although adolescents are in the journey together, they are not always the most supportive of each other. Peer pressure, harassment, and bullying barrage the vulnerable inner world of many teenagers—survey respondents listed peer pressure as the number one issue they face.

This inner world of humans holds the most fragile and yet most crucial component of our being—the spirit.

> Whatever the expression, everyone is ultimately talking about the same thing—an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia, a wildness that cannot be tamed, a congenital all-embracing ache that lies at the center of human experience and is the ultimate force that drives everything else. This dis-ease is universal. Desire gives no exemptions. (Rolheiser 1999, 4)

What Rolheiser suggests, after identifying the drives universal to humans, is that spirituality is "what we do with that desire"(Rolheiser 1999, 5); however, adolescents face such a variety of pressures, many far more external than internal, that they are not necessarily attuned to their inner world. And while organized religion grounds the spirituality of many adults, teenagers frequently are reevaluating and questioning the religion or spirituality that parents or adults in their lives embrace.

For adolescents, in particular, what we—caring adults—need to address is their human spirit, where they have the disquiet, the restlessness, and the ache, but need guidance regarding what to "do" with the feelings. They are human beings with the same unanswerable questions about death, suffering, and an afterlife that older human beings have, but adolescents' resources are more limited. An amazing number of books do have stories of young adults in the search and facing the realities that disquiet; one of the purposes of this book is to help teenagers know these books exist.

In the excellent series published by Greenwood Press, Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers, the many contributors acknowledge the realities that adolescents experience. Pamela S. Carroll, drawing on realities prevalent in 1994, listed seven of the myriad problems that teenagers need to negotiate:

1. Teenage sexual activity, and pregnancies for teens 15 years old and younger
2. Drug and alcohol abuse, with adolescent use of marijuana beginning by

tenth grade, and binge drinking and intoxication growing most rapidly among young adolescent females
3. Obesity, eating disorders, and poor physical fitness, and resulting low self-esteem
4. Delinquency and violence, not only among poor dropout teens, but now affecting teens from mainstream communities, and with the incidence of rape, robbery, and assault about twice as high as the rate for people age 20 and older
5. Serious injuries, including injuries that cause 57 percent of all deaths of adolescents who are 10–14 years old
6. Suicides among adolescents, with greatest increases among white males, and with those who are intoxicated seven times more likely than other victims to use a gun
7. Single-parent families and stepfamilies, with poverty more closely associated with single-parent families than with two-parent families (Carroll 1999, 9)

Possibly even more troubling than the data listed above are data related to adolescent suicide, a major indicator of the inability to find meaning in life. Keith Valone, Ph.D., Psy. D., a licensed psychologist, submits these facts in his presentations on the prevention of adolescent suicide:

- Somewhere in the United States, a teenager commits suicide every two hours
- Suicide kills more teens than any disease or natural cause
- Over 5,000 youth commit suicide every year
- Over 50,000 youth attempt suicide every year

Valone's statistics are verified by data provided by the American Pediatric Society & Society for Pediatric Research, the National Adolescent Health Information Center, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Mental Health Association (see websites listed below). These institutes add:

- Suicide is the leading cause of death for youth 15–19 years old
- Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for children 10–14 years old
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college-age youth

Now some 10 years since the report from which the above data were taken, the problems are no less prevalent; the opening decade of the twenty-first century has added to the list terrorism and new wars, increasing issues related to technology, the further disintegration of the nuclear family, and more instances of violence. The statistics included above are not limited to those teens sometimes referred to as "at-risk" because of socioeconomic realities. And particularly because it is almost impossible to describe any teen or family setting as "normal," many more than those teenagers labeled (inappropriately or not) as "at risk" are affected.

As I mention in the opening statement of this introduction, this book is built on the premise that it is important to hear what adolescents say about their lives. I attempted to hear the voices of 13- to 18-year-olds by surveying them. Since late November 2001, nearly 1400 respondents have responded to the following questions:

1. What are the major issues you face in your life (e.g., peer pressure, separation of parents)?
2. Where do you go to get advice or guidance for dealing with the issues listed above?
3. Have you ever read a book or some type of writing that helped you with the issues that challenge you? Name that book or work(s).
4. What are some books or other writings that you'd recommend to your peers to read for finding advice or guidance?

What the teenagers themselves identify as the biggest issues in their lives shows that all of them struggle with a range of issues, but the survey reinforces that not all young adults are prone to violence or as self-focused as they have been portrayed. Carol Tell, in "Generation What? Connecting with Today's Youth," conveys that same notion in the words of an anonymous twelfth-grade student:

> "More than anything, our youth culture responds to positive feedback from the media and adults. Often the only feedback we're getting is negative. I have many friends who feel like they're taken for granted, because the troublemakers get all the attention. The people who are doing what they should be doing are just overlooked."—Twelfth-grade girl (Tell 1999/2000, 13)

There are millions whose lives have the ordinary and private tragedies of "normal" adolescence; unfortunately, the teenagers we "know" best are frequently those who make headlines, like John Lee Malvo, teenage sniper suspect in the Washington D.C. sniper deaths.

One group that has already responded and continues to respond to adolescents is comprised of the authors of young adult literature. Many of these authors have parented teenagers, many have been or are teachers, and most have been "that one significant adult" who has made a difference in the life of an adolescent. These authors, and so many other authors, have known the impact of their stories on the lives of young adults—often they receive poignant letters from teens chronicling the book's influence. Joan Kaywell's forthcoming *Letters of Hope: Young Adult Authors Respond to Teens in Trouble* is a collection of many of these letters.

The late Robert Cormier, whose numerous novels have had a major impact on adolescent (and adult) readers, expresses the passion of many YA authors. In his letter to readers, cited in *Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers Cope with End-of-Life Issues*, Cormier says:

> I've always believed that a writer's job is simply to bring up questions—because nobody has the answers to life-and-death mysteries—but I think it's important to provide hints to the answers . . . (Allen 2002, xix–xx)

Cormier admits "The hint of an answer" is all we really have. He reminds us, though, that we can draw comfort from the hints, the comfort of knowing we are part of the whole, part of all humanity. "In this link with other people, this sharing of our futures, we can somehow find a bit of solace, a sweet slant of light in all the darkness" (Allen 2002, xix–xx). Cormier goes on to comment that "light" for many, including for him, is God, but acknowledges that for others, "light" may be something else. He implies, as I've stated above, that participation in organized religion may not be the route many adolescents go. The larger issue is that adolescents keep searching, find some way to live with the unknowns, and realize they are not alone in their search.

Sue Ellen Bridgers, writer of several YA novels, all based in family life, shares Cormier's commitment to adolescents. In an essay called "Stories My Grandmother Told Me: Part Two" for the *ALAN Review*, Bridgers writes that we are all caught in our culture, searching for sense in the confusion, but she suggests that no one is more trapped than teenagers who are faced with the problems of daily life:

> The tremendous freedom they have, the problems of ecology and economy, the real and oppressive fear of nuclear holocaust—they have more need for interdependence than ever before. (Kelly 1999, 33)

As Bridgers has demonstrated through her novels:

> [Adolescents] need to share their mutual concerns with adults . . . They need to know we are with them and that they have ideas and visions and love to share that we adults are in true need of. They need books that reflect both the confusion and the calm, books that speak to the basic human need for companionship, books that portray family life in such a way that young people see the possibility of commitments to it that can sustain rather than destroy them. (Kelly 1999, 33)

Because hearing others' experiences and stories of life so often lends perspective to our own life, literature and story may actually be a means of "saving lives," particularly the kind of literature that Cormier and Bridgers, two significant YA literature authors, suggest. Writers of fiction create whole worlds with people and events, with values, ideas, and worldviews. These worlds can broaden our perspectives and in this way, teach us. Arthur Lerner discusses the emotional impact of story, speaking of how fiction presents characters facing the most tragic experiences and feeling the most harrowing emotions; at the same time, readers see the characters surviving conflicts and coming to resolution. The fictional world allows readers to experience vicariously and in a sense, safely, some of what real life does not allow (Lerner and Mahlendorf 1992, x).

The power of story—to heal, to teach, to motivate, to transform—is timeless. From fairy tales to biblical parables to folk tales to Alcoholic Anonymous and other 12-step programs to "witnesses" at religious gatherings to accounts of survivors of the Shoah (Holocaust), instances of storytelling abound. Frequently high schools host speakers at assemblies and the student body hears someone's story and recovery. An NBC evening news broadcast in recent months highlighted how telling one's story can serve as restitution for involuntary manslaughter. In this particular story, an adolescent driving while intoxicated killed a man's wife and child. The husband/father of the victims did not press for imprisonment for the teen; instead, the husband and the adolescent travel as a team to high schools and the adolescent tells his story: an example of the cathartic and healing power of story, one teenagers grasp.

Michael Ryan reports an even more interesting study in "Read a Book—Or Go to Jail" (1995). A district court judge in New Bedford, Massachusetts, began this experiment in January 1992 when he told repeat offender Don Ross, "Go to school and read books—or go to jail." Ross started to participate in a 12-week literature seminar led by English professor Robert Wax-

ler at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Participants are serious offenders; the average participant has 16 prior offenses. Waxler, believing in the transformative power of stories, started by assigning short stories and then progressing to novels of increasing difficulty. He looked for materials that would address issues of violence, identity, and the individual's relationship to society. The first four years the seminar was in operation, 19 percent of participants were rearrested, but this compares to 45 percent of a similar group (matched by age, race, income, neighborhood, and offense), based on a study done by professors at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the University of Indiana.

Particularly for young adults then, the emotional safety of seeing their real-life experiences mirrored in fiction or in someone else's story gives books the power to reach these adolescents not only intellectually, but also emotionally. When gripped by characters and their experiences—as I was with Vicky Austin in *A Ring of Endless Light*—readers, especially adolescents facing a complex of issues, can grow in understanding of and sensitivity toward themselves and others. Their worldviews can be broadened and opinions enlightened in a far less threatening way than in settings with adults with whom they may or may not be able to communicate.

I see additional purposes, maybe tangential, for this book as well. Reports on reading comprehension nationwide continue to show a decline; most often, the decline is seen in data on adolescents. For "bibliophiles," comprehension comes automatically, but what about those who seldom read or dislike reading? This dilemma plagues educators; perhaps simply identifying more books that teenagers want to read (because the books address teens' lives) will contribute to improved comprehension. We do have evidence of the millions of readers who have become hooked on the Harry Potter series, even if the books are well over 500 pages.

Another focal issue in public education is character education. The character education movement has been one attempt to respond to violence and abusive behaviors in schools. In reading about others, in learning about their lives, we are changed. Sometimes a formal, structured program doesn't achieve all that is desired precisely because it *is* so structured. For example, proponents of cultural diversity comment that a single month devoted to a specific cultural group, such as African American History Month, actually limits the growth of diversity because such a celebration isolates recognition to a particular time period, a month out of the year.

Day to day reading, such as might grow among teenagers who see more purpose in reading when books are connected to the teens' life issues, could

shore up the efforts of the organized character education programs. Young adults can be changed by books that "show them their lives," by books that teach them they are not alone in fears, dreams, hopes, and anxieties. As adolescents find meaning, they need not resort to harmful ways to be fulfilled or to antisocial behaviors. An extensive list of resources for character education, compiled by Midge Frazel, is available at midgefrazel.net/character.html. In addition, numerous resources are included in the Works Cited and Character Education Resources following this introduction.

Many of the teaching ideas connected to the books annotated in chapters 4 through 8 offer suggestions for using the novel in connection with character education. Teachers could build entire units around YA literature.

Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story is written to and for parents, teachers, librarians, and anyone wanting to respond to the adolescents of our world, the adults of the twenty-first century. Is my goal of reaching so many too idealistic or too broad? If even one adolescent is "saved" by a book, I think not.

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Character Education Resources

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Braman, Amy. www.marcias-lesson-links.com/CharacterEd.html.
Children's Literature and Character Education. www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/chilitchar.html.
Education World Curriculum: One Character Education Program. www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr114.shtml.
Montgomery County Public Schools: Selected Secondary Literature. www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/publishingservices/PDF/CharSec.pdf.
The School for Ethical Education. www.ethicsed.org/resources/resource.htm.
www.indiana.edu/~reading/chared/rsrchschol.html.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story builds on the important premise that young adults are searching for meaning and their voices need to be heard. Chapters 1 and 2 summarize the data, which I gathered throughout 2001–2003 from over 1400 teens.

Chapter 1, "Young Adults Sharing Their Perspectives," presents the actual survey, provides general comments based on the demographic information participants gave, and presents data compiled in response to two questions: "What are major issues you face in your life?" and "Where do you go for sources of guidance on these issues?" Much of the data is presented on charts that examine the data according to respondent's age and gender as well as demographics such as school size, type, and location.

Chapter 2, "Young Adults Sharing Reading Choices," addresses Questions 3 and 4 from the survey: "Have you ever read a book or some type of writing that helped you with the issues that challenge you?" and "What are some books or other writings that you'd recommend to your peers?" This chapter has tables showing the books that teens identified as helping them and which they'd recommend. It also includes charts showing what males and females, according to age groups, have read and suggest to others to read.

In addition to hearing what young adults themselves have to say, I also wanted to explore what authors of YA literature say about writing for teens. Chapter 3, "YA Authors Describe Their Commitment to Adolescents" presents responses from about 20 writers about how they began writing for teens, why writing for teens is important, what books/readings the authors found helpful in their lives, and what these authors would suggest teens read.

Based on the issues the teens identified as most significant in their lives and building from the books they suggested, the remainder of *Adolescents in*

the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story presents books for adolescents. Each book entry includes publication information, a brief summary of the book, teaching ideas and resources, and a section entitled "Why You Should Give this Book to Teens." For many of the books, I have also given additional titles by the author for further reading. Following a brief introduction, chapters 4 through 8 annotate books in the following categories:

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences
Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss
Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions
Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival
Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable

Following the chapters is an appendix, a list of annotated books. Then, because no book could ever include all of the literature that teens should read or every writing that might help in the search for meaning, following the appendix is a bibliography that also includes additional print and electronic resources for YA literature.