

Interview with Patricia Hersch

SB = Sean M. Blair, M.S., Counselor

PH = Patricia Hersch, author

SB: Your book, A Tribe Apart, has received much critical acclaim. I also share that adulation and I thought the book was an excellent read. Being a mental health therapist and substance abuse counselor working primarily with adolescents, I was able to gain great insight into the adolescent culture. Interestingly, your book is a non-fiction book that reads like a novel. How difficult was it to write a factual text in a fictional style?

PH: It has always been my goal to create such a project. For me, real life is as interesting as any novel. Also, I believe that everybody has a story, you just have to give them the opportunity to open up. It's a different situation out in the world when the intention is not necessarily to interact, but you have to build the relationship, as you do in therapy too. It takes a lot of patience, but with genuine interest and curiosity, I have never found it difficult to get people to talk. That is not sufficient, however, to write a non-fiction book that reads like a novel. Basically, in order to do it, I had to keep a very sharp focus both on the person and on everything that was going on around me at the same time; that is just the skill that you learn. The only way to describe it is to tell you about the process that I went through. As I listened to people's stories, what I did was interview and tape-record every conversation. I did not really do a formal interview; we talked. When we met and talked, I let kids set the agenda, so that it was much more of a real conversation. I didn't sit there mutely, if there was an appropriate time to interact, or if they asked me something, I answered. I did not answer however as a parent. Obviously, if my own children were telling me something that was talked about in the book I would have had the responsibility to moralize or ground them, but I did not have that responsibility in these interactions. I simply participated in the conversation as an older person who had a different perspective than many of them, but I did not tell them what to do.

Following that kind of a process over time, the truth about their lives, and basically the themes of their lives came out and would go back, just naturally, to a lot of the same vignettes. When I looked through the manuscripts, for example, everything that was highlighted in the book rose to the surface of the young peoples' story. So I wasn't saying, "Oh boy, I'm going to write about that party because that is going to be a sexy scene." I wanted the book to reflect the world that they saw it. So, what I did is that I picked up from the transcripts the scenes and times of their lives that were important to them and I would develop the whole picture. I had a camera and I took many shots. Quite often the responses were geared toward describing a fall day in Reston, for example.

I actually had my own memory, but I also had pictures of how the leaves were that year, there were real visual cues. When I was writing up the smaller details of anything in particular, usually, if it was important enough, the kids would remember. For example, I could say, "When you were at that person's house, at the party, and you said you were in the downstairs basement family room that had been converted into an apartment, you

mentioned a couch, do you have any recollection of what that couch looked like?" Usually they would recall. Now, do I know that their memories were 100% accurate? No, but if they remembered the couch and having a hole on a cushion, maybe the hole was actually on the back of the couch, but that is close enough and it's their recollection. So, the truth is still as they saw it and not something that I made up. When you put all of those things together, they become alive, but a lot of that also has to do with the skill of the writer. That is how the scenes came back into life, in a way that I can say that no details were made up. The only thing that is not the truth in the book are the kids' names, which I changed and I tell the reader that right up front.

SB: In an earlier conversation, you mentioned that the last two years have entailed much traveling and speaking engagements. What comments about your book have pleased you most to hear?

PH: The comment that pleases me most is when I hear people say that the book really changed their idea of how they look at adolescents. If I have done that in a way that people perceive them as more total human beings, then I achieved what I intended to. I think that of all the life stages, that is the one in which people immediately fall into stereotypes and tunnel vision. It is a time of life when we reduce kids to either good or bad and neither recognize or encourage all the parts of the human beings that they are. Instead of talking to them and teaching them about the world and listening about what they can teach us about their lives, what we do is throw in a course at school that teaches them character and we write contracts in families so that they will behave. Now, maybe some of those things are necessary and not really bad ideas. It is just that they continue to perpetuate the whole idea that takes root in middle school that essentially gives kids the message that we see them as objects to be controlled, or else they will go out of control and be bad and do things wrong. At a time when children are so fragile in many ways, it basically destroys the very self-esteem that we think kids should have. So if people come away from my book looking at adolescents as three-dimensional human beings, I am very happy. That is really the comment or kind of accolade that means the most to me.

Second to that would be what you mentioned before, is that I want the book to be appreciated as good literature that I hope is timeless; it does capture, as good non-fiction should, a moment in time and makes it accessible. If it has that kind of a shelf life and if people believe that, that makes me happy.

SB: What about the adolescent culture surprised you the most?

PH: The parents. I have a background in international relations (a Master's degree), and when I studied it, the thing that interested me was accepting cultures for what they are within the context in which they exist, sort of a sociological/anthropological point of view. So, a notion was developed that adolescents have fulfilled the basic human need for community by creating one of their own. Once you got inside of it, you see quite clearly that most kids were not walking around saying "I want to be bad, I am going to do something naughty." Basically, you found kids trying to grow up the best they could and

with the tools available to them. That surprises a lot of people, but did not surprise me. What did surprise me was the fact that parents were so disengaged from their own children. Two aspects of that I found to be upsetting. 1) The overall prevalence of the lack of appreciating and cherishing adolescents as their children at a different stage. Even parents who have chronicled every millisecond of early childhood see their adolescents as problems to be solved, not children to be loved. Also, parents definitely not viewing their adolescents as interesting people to be around and I don't understand that. I'm not saying that my children were not every bit as challenging as everybody else's children in adolescence, but I still found them interesting, as interesting as every other stage for its own reasons. That aspect of parents at large really surprised me.

The second thing that really shocked me was the amount of parents who are basically enabling the very behaviors that we are concerned about in adolescence. For example, when I started talking about my book, people kept asking me, "Well, it is interesting that you see adolescents as such well rounded human beings, but how many of them were drinking, doing drugs and having sex?" People always wanted to go back to the troublesome behaviors. And you know that is fair. So what I did was I went through the 8 kids and documented who is doing what. When I did that, I was struck by the fact that among the 8 kids that I chose at random, 4 out of the 8 had regular contact with parents of other kids who are regularly serving drugs and/or alcohol or allowing the kids to spend the night together, all with out consultation with the parents of other kids involved. So in other words, if a parent in Reston allowed their 15 year old to have champagne at a family wedding, that would not shock me, nor would I think that is necessarily bad. If my child were to go over to that family's house to watch videos and during that evening the parent served my child alcohol, that is way out of the boundaries of acceptable behavior. That parent should be arrested. It goes all the way from parents giving in to the knowledge that there are a lot of drugs and alcohol available, so they take the car keys and let the kids drink at their house. Or they have the parties in their home so that they know what is going on. It is also parents sitting and smoking joints with kids. I was so shocked by that that it became part of what I would ask people in other communities.

This is a very widespread problem that nobody is talking about in this country. I'm afraid that this will get worse with the next generation of parents. For example, I was in a town in Oklahoma for some time working on a project, and I was introduced to two young lawyers in town (they were in their mid to late thirties). We were chitchatting, having an informal conversation. One of them was very active in local politics and was sort of being groomed for a judgeship when he got older. We were talking at a restaurant/bar hangout of this town and he was telling me a story of how his niece was coming to live with him, which is a time-honored way that families supported each other. He proceeded to tell me without batting an eye or lowering his voice (to indicate that this was a secret) that when his niece came, the first thing that he was going to do with her was sit down and share a joint. I am liberal and open, and I was shocked. I said, "You have got to be kidding, why would you do that?" He said, "Well, you know, I want her to know that she can be comfortable in our home." Then the other man who had a teenage child of his own, said that he did that all of the time. I was like, well fellas, it is one thing if you want to lobby for pot to be made a legal drug, and I know that a lot of people share

that opinion; I happen not to, but maybe they did. It is quite something else to be breaking the law and they felt that there was nothing wrong with that. At least I know that parents of my generation would mostly think that they were being cool to allow it, that is a step further than these guys were going. They felt that it was alright.

The other thing that didn't shock me, but it was an insight that I found quite striking and I think it is a very important one is the following. I was pleased to find out that many youngsters choose not to do substances (drugs and/or alcohol), for reasons such as not wanting to do it in high school or middle school, or maybe they have done it and don't like it. What I realized through working on this book is that, ultimately, 8 out of those 8 kids partied at empty houses; this is a given by mid to late high school. What I try to get across to parents when I talk to them (after being very defensive, and saying "not my kid"), is that maybe your kid is perfect, and maybe your kid will choose not to do drugs or alcohol, but you parents have to understand that more than anything, kids want to be with each other. You can guarantee that by mid to late high school, all the kids, those who are doing drugs and alcohol and those who are not, are partying together in empty houses. What adults need to realize is that the entertainment for the evening, for kids who are not doing substances, is how entertaining the kids are that are doing substances. Essentially our children are all growing up with a substance based social life and that terrifies me.

I think another thing that is not being recognized is that our children are growing up, and starting at such crucial years in middle school. They are beginning to fall into a pattern; doing drugs and alcohol themselves and seeing that is what you do to have fun. Or they are seeing that they are not doing the drugs and alcohol themselves, but instead are watching the kids that are, and that is the amusement of the evening. That indicates that our children are growing up without the type of social skills they need to understand that they can have fun with each other without relying on chemical substances. That is so dangerous and damaging even beyond the problems, additionally it seems to get peoples attention more than when therapists or drug treatment programs at school or prevention programs talk about the dangers of addiction. That does not sell well. It does not even matter that we know that younger children actually have brain cell changes, that to me would be enough, but it doesn't work. There are too many parents who fall into the same trap. I guess I was a bit surprised at the extensiveness of the use, particularly of marijuana and alcohol. It is so pervasive and considered so normal and so much a part of adolescent life. The kids that are users, and this comes out in the book, just think nothing of going to school stoned and leaving school and getting drunk and coming back. The teachers and the educators are really in collusion with the kids, not because they think it is okay, because they don't, but because a certain bureaucracy is set into place. If a teacher or anyone in the school recognizes what is going on, many responsibilities follow and they just don't want to bother. I am afraid to say it, but that is the bottom line.

SB: One thing you had mentioned is the pervasiveness of substance use and how the social scene really revolves around chemicals. One quote on page 247 is, "Boys and girls really want to be together at this age, but society fails to create enough safe developments and social opportunities that catch on." Do you have any ideas?

PH: Well, my new book is going to focus on the passions of adolescents and what kids really love to do. One of the things that is striking to me is that 5th and 6th graders, when you talk to them, never miss certain shows. Like on the Discovery Channel or National Geographic, they usually will come forth with a whole line of things that they like to do or are interested in. But what seems to happen is that it is a combination of the self-conscienceness that comes with adolescents and with the lack of adults around that kids begin to self-sensor. For example, in the book there is the example of the girl who loves deep sea diving, and yet her best friend does not even know that about her. I thought long and hard about why something like that would happen. This may be a long way around answering your question, but I think, in the end, it is part of the solution. When I was driving every carpool in Reston (because I was the only parent home, but it was convenient because it was research for my book) I listened to the kids talk and I knew enough about the peers of my own kids that I could say, "Gee, I heard that you went with your family to visit relatives in Pennsylvania last week, did you do anything interesting?" Of course the boys would grunt, "Oh yeah, it was fun." And I would ask them, well, what was fun? What did you like best? Pretty soon the whole car was talking about these details. But if you had left the children alone, they would have continued grunting to each other because adolescent boys find that this way of communication protects them.

One of the things that happens is that without adults in the kids world, we don't break through that barrier that comes over adolescents who feel that to show nothing is better than making a mistake. Maybe there are things that kids would like to do in the world today, but they just don't know that they are interested in it. Also, one of the saddest parts of adolescents for me to watch is the following. I can remember growing up in the Midwest; there were all sorts of age appropriate things that we could do that made us feel older at each stage of adolescence. For example, when I was in 6th, 7th and 8th grade, the "in" thing to do was go to the Y and to square dance or play ping-pong. There were things that we could do so our parents could drop us off for a couple of hours and we would feel like hot shots in front of the 5th graders. As we got older, there were sock hops and a sliding scale of later curfews, further geographical areas, more grown up activities so that we had a sense of being 15 rather than 12 and the 12-year-olds had a sense of being 12 and not 10. That is what growing up needs to be, kids need appropriate markers. Today, it doesn't exist, because the world relies on a ton of committed adults. We do not have that today and we blurred all of the lines because now that we have older siblings basically in charge of the younger siblings and the older ones are drinking after school, and the younger siblings want to taste it...and on and on. By talking about what kids do through the intermediary of an adult, kids may become interested in something and decide that they want to try it, or they can ask an adult that is available to take them to something that exists because they can get there. All of this builds up a young person's sense of alternatives and possibilities and imagination and maturity and all these great things that they need to grow up with. But instead of that, they only have each other to talk to. They live in a self-censored world; grown ups become increasingly afraid of kids and what happens is that the occasional things that are set up for the adolescent are such trouble.

For example, a non-alcoholic music club. Kids would love that; they don't need the alcohol, they would just have fun if they had a place like that. Well, I think there was a club like this started in Chantilly a few years ago and inevitably there was a fight in the parking lot and they shut the whole thing down. Now, if there is an adult fight in a bar or club, you don't shut the whole thing down, you just take out the problem person. Or, another thing, a skateboard park. We now know that the limbic portion of an adolescent brain is larger than in an adult so there is a whole biological reason for adolescents seeking thrilling behaviors. Skateboarding by that definition is a perfect activity for an adolescent who likes it. It takes advantage of their razor edge coordination when they have it, it is a thrill, gives them a sense of speed and danger, and something to show off because most adults could not do it. However, we have created a situation where the skateboarder is labeled a bad kid. Why? Because we don't have skateboard parks, so they are like screw it, I'm going to do it anyway. Who cares if we get in trouble? Then adolescents aren't honest and attitudes become bad, therefore, that is why skateboarders are bad. What we need to do is to talk to the kids to see what kind of venues would be healthy, would satisfy their developmental needs, and would be fun. We just don't do it – we look at the other end of it, which is “restrict, restrict, restrict.”

SB: How do you think professionals working with adolescents, such as counselors, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, probation officers, and lawyers would benefit from your book?

PH: I think that the book breaks down stereotypes. It allows an inside look at how many of the behaviors for which kids come into contact with all of those professionals are appropriate. However, it also gives the larger view of the whole child, which I know that therapists want to know, but may not be so easy within the office. It gives the sense of how this all came to be and I think that that is the most important thing. I think that we impose an intentionality on kids sometimes that can be seen as a logical outgrowth of the culture in which they exist and the tools around them that they use to cope. For example, I did a story on homeless families a number of years ago. One of the things that I had to admit to myself after spending a lot of time with these families in a couple of different locations around the country is that to be perfectly honest. If that was me and I came from the kinds of backgrounds that these people came from, and I had no resources on which to fall back, and I had to live with my three kids in one room in a shelter, I might turn to drugs too. I'm not saying that it is right and that it doesn't have to be addressed, I'm just saying that too often we look at the problems as indicative of weak people or lazy people or bad people.

We fail and partly because everybody is too way over taxed. We have to deal with things very quickly. That goes for therapy too. It is terrible, what has happened in terms of the kinds of insurance coverage that goes for therapy. The bottom line is that I know people have to do their day to day jobs with the limits imposed on them, but I would hope that for those people who read my book that they at least come out with more compassion. I'm not saying that they don't have compassion now, but I think that the book allows people to see a much larger view of how things have come to be. It may also make some people who are working with kids who aren't very sympathetic a little bit more

sympathetic to the situation. Even if the kids look like they are coming from nice homes and decent backgrounds, they can suffer as much as kids who we are more readily open to see the suffering. There is a lot of suffering going on in adolescents these days. If not suffering, I think that kids overall in America are not the priority that they should be, and that growing up is being cut short for most kids. They just don't have the kind of support and the kind of space. I am worried, for example, that day care is not even an issue that we have come to terms with in this country. Yet, by now we have young adults who have been shuffled from place to place and who have been left alone too much. What is that going to do to kids when they become adults? My guess is that they may look okay on the outside, but we have denied them the right to grow to their fuller potentials, just by the culture that we have created for all children.

SB: Along those lines, how do you think parents could benefit from reading your book?

PH: I think that we have some hard choices to make in this country. My sympathy for families comes from the fact that the last 30 years have spawned so many social changes. By necessity, there isn't any support or understanding in the larger culture and this has been played out within individual family units. As a result, families are overburdened and overtaxed in so many different ways. On the other hand, while I have compassion for that situation, I am adamant on the fact that raising children is a responsibility. I don't care how tired parents are, how many demands they have on them, we have a responsibility to our children to monitor and nurture them to the fullest extent possible. This is hard, for adolescents it takes a lot of mental power. You really have to focus and decode and you have to know your own child. This isn't easy, especially when it feels that adolescents are pushing you away all of the time, even when you do try. But, we have to be the adults to the children and not be so intimidated.

I think that if parents read my book, on the one hand, it is scary, there is no getting around it. I say to all my audiences when I speak is that the bottom line is that we have to start with accepting that this is how adolescence is being lived in America. People may look at my book and at the state statistics and find that the book is right on target. That is a tough reality, we have ignored this for so long that we now have culture around adolescents that includes a lot of illegal things. People don't want to have to look at that, but they have to. I think that parents reading the book should rightfully be scared, but they have to rise to the occasion and engage their children on what is going on. I also hope that the book gives them some compassion, because adolescents, as scary as parents may find them, are still kids. I also hope that if parents read my book, they will have the understanding that we all need the next generation – they are the next adults.

Developmentally, adolescents have not lived out within a single home. In other words, maybe you can do everything exactly right for a two year old, if you stayed in the house with a two year old, but you can't do that with adolescents because their developmental imperative is to go out in the world. We need to have our ears open and our eyes out. Essentially being that village that raises the children, because it can't be done any other way. It is just as likely, and this was shown in the book, that your next door neighbor, who has a child the same age as yours, who has a house just like yours, who has a professional job just like you and your husband do, is serving pot to kids in their house

when you would never in a million years do such a thing. Life is that crazy these days and you can't take anything for granted. Unless parents start talking to each other and start looking out for the children in the community, then we are not going to resolve any of these issues.

SB: I have seen a number of comments from adolescents who have read the book. Many adolescents state that they can relate very strongly to the characters in the book and that they get a feeling that they are not alone. I would see that as one of the big benefits for adolescents.

PH: Right, and actually I should put that along with the things that make me happiest about the book. When kids read it and tell me that they feel less alone, that really warms my heart and makes me feel good because I can remember feeling alone as an adolescent just because at any level I think adolescents have this existential loneliness. But, when kids are literally alone, as well as existentially alone, and are afraid to talk to their friends about certain things because it is such an egocentric time of life and they are afraid, naturally they are the only ones that feel that way. I remember feeling as a kid and even as an adult that books are a safe place to explore my feelings; books have always been good friends to me. If this book can be a good friend to an adolescent, then that is a wonderful bonus.

SB: In the book you state, "Kids who do best are those who have a strong interactive family and a web of relationships and activities that surround them." Has this viewpoint remained consistent since the publication?

PH: For sure, because of the research. What I find ironic and nice is that I based my conclusions on what I observed and heard from kids. Now you have science catching up with what was obvious to me using common sense. For example, the first results from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health came up with the conclusion that connectedness was the single biggest protector of kids in terms of avoiding at risk behaviors. You also have the Search Institute's research stating that the more assets they have the better off they are going to be. In a sense what you find is that science is beginning to use soft language like "relationships" and "connectedness." A sense of safety and security and those kinds of words have been used in Psychology, but they have not been the conclusion from hard data in the past, as far as I know. Yet, the research coming out now is saying those same things. My only concern about that kind of research is that human beings have not changed, these are the kind of things that humans have always needed. So why do we need to spend money on 10 year longitudinal studies to find out that kids need to feel connected – I would rather see the money spent on a skateboard park.

SB: I can see that by following around adolescents for so many years and with all of your speaking engagements you have clearly become an expert from observation.

PH: You have to remember too that one of the huge advantages that I have is that I can speak the truth. I don't have to worry about being fired; it puts me in a fabulous position really.

SB: In the book, Brendan had said that drugs don't take away the pain, it just puts the pain aside, and that use is an escape from feelings. I am sure that you have found many adolescents that relate to this.

PH: Oh sure, one of the comments about drugs from the kids is that they just don't know what to do with their feelings and their pain. It doesn't necessarily mean that their pain is of an unnaturally large magnitude, or that they are abused or something like that. It means that they have a lot of big feelings and they don't know how to process them, so they do drugs for a couple of hours, but guess what, the feelings come back. One of the comments Courtney made was that doing drugs was more fun. Also, I think that adolescent suicide is high because, again, kids don't know what to do with their feelings. I'm not sure that the conventional definition of suicide or suicide attempt is necessarily telling the whole story about adolescents.

I'll give you a personal example. When I was a teenager, I was given to moodiness, as all teenagers are to a certain extent. I would go to my room and play West Side Story over and over again, especially Maria. I would weep and whatever I started being upset about, by the time I listened to the song about 12 times, I was in tears over everything in my world. My mom knew that about me and respected that I liked spending a lot of time in my own room, and knew that I liked my own space, I liked to read and do other things, etc. She also had a sense that I was upset and if that was going on after some period of time, she would say, "Okay, Pat, that is enough, let's go to the grocery store or something." Of course what would happen is I would say that I didn't want to go, but I would listen to her and I would go. That is another thing, I would listen to her. A lot of parents give up on their kids much too fast. So we would go and within 10 minutes we were laughing about something or choosing what we would get, etc., and I would be out of the mood. When I went to college, which was only a year after high school, obviously that behavior would not have changed. So I would go into my dorm room, which is much more isolated, and start moping around. But, I had learned my lesson well enough to be able to say to myself, "Okay Pat, you know what you are doing here, you are going to mope and be miserable for as long as you stay here. You know that you are going to get yourself over to the snack bar and you'll feel better." That is a coping skill, that's all it is. But the thing is that that was something that my mother helped me learn. She taught it to me through repetition, and kids are not learning that.

So when kids fall prey to moods, they don't know what to do. Literally, they don't know what kinds of feelings are appropriate or how long the feelings are going to last and so they are ashamed to admit them to anybody and no one is there to help. It is easier to turn to drugs or alcohol in despair. I'm not sure, I'm not a professional and I'm not dealing with these kids in any sort of last ditch places, whether it is therapy or detention. But, to me that seems like common sense and somehow people have just not stopped to consider the fact that learning how to grow up, be mature, and develop coping skills, etc.

just don't fall out of the sky. They need to be experienced and taught in real life situations, not in school. We are simply just not doing it.

So that really says that doing drugs is more fun because I'm not good at figuring out alternatives to using my time. That is something that is learned from an early age because an adult is around. For example, I have three sons and when they are bored they kind of pounce around on each other. That is okay as long as they are just goofing around, until it reaches the point where I can't stand it anymore and someone is going to get hurt and it is time for me to intervene. It is time to announce, "Okay boys, it's time to do...whatever." I might suggest five things before one of them catches on. But the repetition over the years, I would hope, helped my boys learned how to choose alternatives for themselves. So, a lot of kids are old enough and we might expect that they would know what to do with their empty time, but they don't.

The same thing goes for pain, they have no sense. For example, the young man who committed suicide at the end of my book was suffering from schizophrenia, that is something that happened. Most kids today of high school age have experienced the death of a young person that is not unusual. When I went to Jonathan's funeral, or showing, he was cremated, so there was nothing to see but a jar. I took one of the kids from the book with me to the funeral home and as we were leaving the car, she said to me, "I'm really scared, Mrs. Hersch, I don't want to go in there and face it." I said to her, "I'm scared too, this is never easy and very painful." Then I explained to her what the purpose was, of going to the funeral home, of talking to the family, etc. This was something that had been taught to me when I was younger. I got into this funeral home, and, of course, it was devastatingly painful. But after we viewed the jar, and talked to the parents, went into another room, and were speaking with the extended family, there were 10 or 15 kids that I knew who were there without any parents. I found that they were all in my energy field. They wanted to be near a grown up. I was astounded that parents would allow a child to go to the funeral home without an adult. My guess is that a lot of the kids did not tell the parents where they were going, or they said that they wanted to go alone. The point is that kids need to be connected enough to the adults in their lives and that doesn't happen, that is not right. Aloneness can deprive kids of all sorts of things. They need help and understanding, even if it is an adult saying, "I am upset too." It just makes them feel less alone.

SB: It seems like a lot of it really comes down to communication.

PH: Probably most of it. I learned something. My brother-in-law is a psychologist. Each child is different from other children in a family – they are their own individuals. My middle son, who I love every bit as much as the other two, and I just were often at odds when he was growing up. He was a tough kid, not bad, just willful and if you presented him with three appropriate alternatives, he still wanted a fourth, that sort of thing. He would not listen unless you raised your voice; he was just like that. The other kids, you could talk to them calmly and they would get it, but this kid wasn't; until you got right in his face, he would not pay attention. I used to feel so guilty because I was afraid that he thought that I was mean and that I didn't love him. Yet, when he would go to sleep, he

was such a beautiful child and great in many ways, so spirited. So each night when they were younger, I would tuck them in and give them a kiss. When I was talking to my brother-in-law about this, he said that my son knows and feels that kiss. I remembered that. When the kids were adolescents, I was able to learn and understand that what kids need to know and understand more than anything is that you are hanging in there with them and that is hard to learn. Too many parents often throw up their hands and give up when the kids need to know that they are never going to give up. I would never give up on a child of mine. I don't care how hard they are, that is what love is about. That is what true connectedness is about. It is not about being buddies, it is allowing the child to know that you are there and aren't going anywhere; they could do all sorts of things, but you aren't giving up. We parents make all sorts of mistakes, all the time. But if you are trying and doing the best that you can, the child picks that up. I think that is something that in an era where parents want to organize their child in a file-o-fax, it is too sloppy. Raising children is a sloppy thing.

SB: Thank you very much, Ms. Hersch, for your time and insight. One can certainly notice the passion you have for adolescents and how clearly you can see through their eyes. Your long, hard work and conversations with these adolescents proved to be very beneficial. Your work is a real testament to what we can do as professionals and what impact parents can have on adolescents by just giving a listening ear, just being there for them, and not giving up. Adolescence is a very difficult time in this day in age. One can see how people can overcome many difficulties through open communication.

PH: It is tough, but that is what you are supposed to do as a parent.