



Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

*“We know what we are but know
not what we may be”*

A word from Ophelia

Julia Kooser

When I was around ten, my mother suggested I read a book called *Reviving Ophelia*. As a psychologist, she appreciated the perspective of another psychologist talking about the turbulence of adolescence. During breaks at school, I flipped through pages when I had the chance, but did not feel particularly moved or invested in this book. As a plucky and gregarious ten-year-old, I did not understand the emotional turmoil of adolescence. Very quickly, I abandoned reading this book. However, as the years progressed, and I have experienced the turbulence of my own adolescence, this book has taken on new meaning for me.

Near the beginning of the book *Reviving Ophelia*, the author describes the

inspiration for its title. In the play *Hamlet*, Ophelia tries to navigate being a loyal daughter and sister, and her developing romantic interest in Hamlet. Her father and brother pressure her to renounce Hamlet’s romantic advances. After Hamlet goes into a rage and kills her father, she experiences grief over the loss of her father at the hands of her lover. Her actions take a chaotic turn, and she dies under ambiguous and tragic circumstances. Ophelia’s demise is attributed to the crush of societal pressures. The author of the book discusses how the societal pressures that often make adolescent girls implode are analogous to the pressures Ophelia faced. Just as Ophelia tried to balance the demands of her family and romantic interest, adolescent girls must balance the demands of society, peers, and school, all while trying to gain independence and move further away from their parents.

As the years went on, I too had to brace myself for the turbulence of adolescence. When I was around 14, as a part of physical education class, we all had to run a mile on our high school track. Having class

early in the morning and feeling a bit jittery from the coffee I had just begun to drink with regularity, I took off in a blaze of glory. My teacher was quite impressed and recorded my time. The next morning, I received a note asking me to report to another teacher's classroom. The teacher was the high school cross country coach, and told me I should join the team, as I had a natural knack for running. I was excited about the prospects of this new adventure and ended up joining the track and cross-country teams.

Throughout high school, I ran nonstop. When attending prestigious races, I noticed many of the best runners were exceptionally thin. Gradually, I started restricting my food intake, and as I lost weight, I lost several minutes off my 5k race times. People commended me for my racing performances. Running became my identity, and losing weight was part of how I realized this identity. I was in the throes of anorexia and felt that I must appease people by occupying as little space as possible.

While I may have left adolescence battered and bruised, I remained unbeaten. Even during this phase of my life, my passion for science and helping people endured. I came to grips with my eating disorder, mentored others with similar problems, and unrelentingly followed my dream of becoming a physician. Years later, I was able

to realize that dream, and entered medical school. During the holiday break of my first year of medical school, I decided to reread *Reviving Ophelia*. As I looked back on my time as an adolescent, and also forward to my life as a physician, the book came to life for me. I thought about how adolescence is a tumultuous ride from childhood into adulthood. Teenagers are trying to form a foundation. As this foundation is pressed upon by societal pressures, it might crack. However, a broken foundation can be repaired.

As I reflect on reading *Reviving Ophelia* and my own adolescent struggles and successes, I realize how excited I have become about the prospects of helping people navigate the transition of childhood to adulthood, as a future Medicine-Pediatrics physician. With skilled, caring support, more people can emerge from the turbulence of adolescence with renewed purpose and confidence. In the play *Hamlet*, Ophelia states, "We know what we are, but know not what we may be." She says this to express uncertainty regarding the future. However, in response to Ophelia, I say, "even if we know not what we may be," we can pursue our ideals and dreams, and know who we may want to be. Testimonials from the book, in conjunction with my own experiences, have shown me that with support and guidance,

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young people at the precipice of adulthood can have their best chance to achieve their dreams.

When I first started medical school, the idea of working with emotional, complex adolescents seemed very daunting. How does one help teenagers navigate relationships, peer pressure, and the media within a 20-minute appointment, especially if the cohort you are trying to help is actively trying to gain their independence by interacting less and less with adult figures? However, after reading *Reviving Ophelia* and facing the innumerable challenges of medical school, this anxiety has transitioned to excitement. Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, developing life-long friendships, and finding a sense of purpose. People sometimes dismiss or suppress their complexities, but I believe they are what make a person who they are. As a future physician, I hope to help patients accept and embrace the complexities of transitioning to adulthood, so they can come out on the other side confident and proud of the people they have become.