

# *“Peace on Earth”*

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“Have compassion for everyone you meet even if they don’t want it. What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there down where the spirit meets the bone.”

—*Miller Williams*

When I was six years old there was a nine year old who would tease me mercilessly on my way home from school. He did it day after day. One day he twisted my arm and left me shrieking in pain. I told my neighbor, a ten year old with a reputation for mean behavior, and he beat up the nine year old. I never got into trouble but my neighbor did.

I wonder how many of us here have ever been bullied? If we have not been bullied, perhaps we have been a bully, or were a bystander witness to bullying? There is research to suggest that almost everyone has been bullied or been a bully, or been a witness to bullying, and that most of us can remember those experiences even into our elderhood, and, that the memory is not only intellectual. It is likely also textured with strong feelings many years after the occurrence.

I can still remember the face of the boy who hurt me and the tension surrounding the fight, not only in my mind, but also in the pit of my stomach. I was angry, I was hurt, but most of all, I was afraid. I also was a bit ashamed as I knew my part in the consequences to the bully who was my neighbor, especially since I didn’t especially like him. He was mean, but he was also my protection. I don’t think I ever told anyone about that experience until I started to write about this subject!

This morning I invite us to think together about our children and the affects of bullying on their lives. I invite us to consider why it happens and what we might be able to do about it.

In the materials I have been reading I have found several definitions of “bullying.” Almost all of them include the following: “Bullying” includes ongoing belligerent acts by one or more person over another. In “bullying” there is always an imbalance of power of some kind. It is deliberate, it is intended to cause harm, and it induces fear through threats of future harm. Bullying is an act that can be analyzed not only by looking at what is going on between the “Bully” and the “Bullied” but also by examining the systems in which the individuals find themselves, whether they be a family, or a school, a culture.

All research I saw pointed to an understanding of bullying as being widespread, devastating, and often seemingly invisible to adults. Here is some of what we know about bullying of children in contemporary America:

An AMA study reported in 2001 that almost a third of children in grades 6-10 have had a serious experience with bullying, 10% as bullies, 13% as victims, and 6% as both bully and bullied. When that subjective word “serious” is removed some studies place the percentage of who is affected much higher. The percentage of children who acknowledge being bystanders to episodes of bullying is higher still.

We learn from college students that many of them experienced bullying in high school but never told their parents or other adults. Fifty-one percent say they had been afraid of others in high school. Forty-six percent of those say their parents never knew. They did not believe that the adults would believe the intensity of their experience nor could they make it stop. Some reported that they were threatened not only by language and physical harassment but even by threats of shooting. Still, they did not seek out adults to help them.

Instead, when in high school these young adults found their own response to being bullied; feigning illness so they would not have to be to school, staying in classrooms during lunch or break periods, taking drugs to control their pain. Risky behaviors they reported include; suicide ideation or attempts, procuring weapons for protection, drinking and impaired driving, vandalism, self mutilation (such as cutting).

And, some of those young people retreated inward, shutting down their emotions. Some of these then became bullies themselves.

One question we adults ask, of course, is why didn't they seek adult help? Many felt adults wouldn't care or couldn't change the situation, some felt that "telling" on a bully would be breaking "the code" or worse, that it would most likely intensify the attention of the bully towards them. Other reasons include; the perceived "shame" of being bullied, believing that bullying is just a normal phenomenon in growing up or in life generally, another reason offered was that the belief that if you tried to tell a parent or an adult, that person would minimize the seriousness of the experience.

Let's think a bit further about bullies, about the bullied, and about the bystander, about each of those who are affected by bullying.

### **First, the bullies themselves.**

Nobody is born a bully. Most bullies are born instead out of a sense of deep rejection. In response the child cuts off, deadens his feelings and his relationships with others.

A bully is one of the loneliest people in the world. S/he denies access to her/himself to what is fundamental in most human beings, relationships with others. In order to do this a bully will bury any sense of empathy or emotional connection to others. Ronald Cram, a scholar in religion and religious education, calls this inability to feel for others or be in relation to others "the seeds for violence." Cram tells us that it is out of a profound sense of isolation that a bully, still feeling a yearning to be in relationship, strikes out in an attempt to be in any relationship at all, even in an extremely negative way. Violence through bullying is the bully's attempt to be in any relationship at all. And, of course, the bullying leads to more and more isolation and more and more numbing of feelings. Cram says that, "For the bully, violence is one of the few places in her life or his life where pleasure, however fleetingly, is experienced—where relation with the other is experienced . . . Violence [verbal or physical] gives the bully exactly the opposite of what he or she yearns for. Violence is addictive. It gives intense momentary pleasure. And like any drug, violence must be increased in order to repeat the sensation of intimacy with the other . . . It is as if violence provides an energy powerful enough to break through the durable defenses of self-isolation and self-protection that allow life to continue on a daily basis . . ." (Cram, paper, p.3)

### **Now let's turn to those who are bullied..**

Ron Cram tells of an experience dealing with a parent and his 10-year old child who both had come to a religious education class Ron was teaching on the subject of bullying. The father emotionally told their story.

"My daughter is afraid to go to school. Nobody seems to care. Teachers and administrators aren't helping us—they don't know what to do. I don't understand why a group of older girls would want to threaten my daughter, and I'm afraid of what might happen . . . Friends tell me not to worry, that the bullying will go away in time, that 'kids will be kids.' But the bullying is not going away; it is getting worse and worse. We feel helpless. Please help us. We don't know what to do." (p.1-2)

This young girl was fortunate in that she had an adult in her life who believed her and understood the depth of her problem. Like this father's friends, many adults do dismiss bullying as simply something that some kids have to endure as they are growing up.

But let's try to imagine for a moment what it might be like to be threatened emotionally and physically in a steady, ongoing way, what it might be like to be afraid ALL the time, going from one temporary island of safety to the next, aware that soon might come, once again, a terrifying encounter.

Cram tells of another case, Karl, now middle-aged, who feels as much pain now as he did as a middle schooler many years ago. As a young adolescent this person made himself throw up every school day for two years in an attempt to avoid his nemesis. "He was afraid to go to dances, department stores, or sporting events alone, and he was too embarrassed about his cowardice to confide in either parent about the bullies. Teachers observed the bullies as they approached and threatened Karl, but did nothing to relieve him of his tormenters." (Cram, p. 33)

So, what happened to this boy. At some point he changed. "He began smoking, cursing and shoplifting. He had become a laughing stock with his peers. He lost any faith in adults as authority figures. Finally, he started to bully his tormenters. He continued with the other negative behaviors, adding to them glue sniffing and sexual harassment, auto theft, and continued violence. The course of his life was changed profoundly.

We might well ask in looking at his life, what happened? Was there nowhere that he was affirmed and valued: family, school, peers, church, school, neighbors, friends? They seem to have been absent and lacking in basic support. Add to this Karl's stage of life, early adolescence, and we can see that the bullying he endured was especially devastating.

Another question we might ask is: How are children chosen to be bullied. Quite often they are in some way "different"

from some sort of norm either in their school culture or simply in the mind of the bully. They may be new, or young, or have disabilities, be of a minority race or religion, be insecure. They may easily show their emotions which makes them an easy target for being taunted.

Because bullied children are not able to get adult or institutional help with the problem, either because they are not take seriously, or believe that they will not be taken seriously, their whole way of being is directed towards avoiding the bully or bullies.

They may avoid the library because a gang of bullies stands outside of it. They may not take a particular class because the bully is in it. They may avoid extracurricular activities, just the kind of confidence building activities they need, in order to avoid an encounter with the bully. Once again, the course of children's lives are changed dramatically because of bullying.

### **Finally, let's think a bit about the bystanders, those that witness the act of a bully.**

First is the feeling of fear they have about what it would be like to be bullied themselves. Most often they try to remain invisible, fearing that the bully might also single them out as a next victim. Often these kids are left with feelings of guilt, shame and helplessness. Those are the feelings that stay with them so deeply that they can remember the event/s even years later.

\_\_\_ We have looked at just a little bit of the world of the bully, the bullied, and the witnesses to bullying. So what does all this mean for us.

A few things come to mind.

#### **For parents:**

There are so many things that go into providing support for our children, starting with creating regular patterns of communication with you early in their lives. There are many other things that could get discussed here, but in this short sermon time I would lift up these messages that can be given consciously from parent to child, as articulated by Barbara Coloroso, author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*:

- I believe in you.
- I trust you.
- I know you can handle life situations.
- You are listened to.
- Your are cared for.
- You are very important to me

(Coloroso, p. 92)

I would add, "don't stop there!" Get involved with the systems which are dealing with the bullying of your child; the school, the team, the "whatever!" And if you are concerned that your child might be becoming a bully, get help. Talk with a counselor or therapist.

And whatever we do as parents, we must not withdraw from our children. Even if they tell us they don't need us, they do! Being there is part of our privilege and responsibility.

#### **Now let us look at the schools.**

There are many things we could say about handling bullying in schools. We could have more education for teachers and parents on the subject. We could not leave unsupervised areas identified as "dangerous" by those who are bullied (halls, bathrooms, playgrounds, lunchrooms). One poor city school I taught in really came to life when there were parents in the school everyday. They were everywhere!

We could have smaller schools for smaller numbers of children so that no one would fall through the cracks unnoticed. For our schools that are already in large buildings, perhaps we could divide the student body (by age or some other way) into separate schools within the building, with their own administration and faculty. This has been tried with success in some places.

We could amplify programs for children and teens that promote and nurture self confidence, a sense of responsibility, empathy, understanding of one's own emotions, peer counseling and conflict resolution, . . . and

how to deal with bullying.

When schools discipline children who have bullied we could advocate for them to handle it in a way that might help children begin to find their way. Let's give them a second chance as they try to accept their own feelings and learn to act responsibly. Let's give them opportunities to lead and to do good, to step up to a better image of themselves. Let's find counseling for them and work with their families. Discipline without intentional follow up and support will only further isolate the young person and probably will not stop the bullying.

But to all of that I would offer my own opinion about which some of you may disagree. I have a deep concern that these days in many schools the goals of academic accomplishment and the compartmentalization of subjects to be learned has compromised what used to be the hallmark of elementary and secondary education in the era of progressive education during the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century. I refer to the thinking of Unitarian John Dewey and others who believed that the total holistic experience of school would grow responsible citizens of a democratic society. It was okay, and in fact necessary, for schools to take the time to take itself seriously as a laboratory, as a microcosm of the larger society. That meant taking time for students and teachers together to notice and to talk about the social workings of the classroom and the needs and rights of those in it, listening carefully to one another, debating what was best for the class and for the individuals in the class, experiencing the sharing of a common environment in which each individual brings his or her difference and uniqueness to a common table in which acceptance was the rule. Concern for the common welfare was modeled by teachers. And time for this was not just given when there was a problem. It was the norm, the "Standing Operating Procedure." I confess that I am yearning for those good old days! I don't know if we could re-create them, but I think a re-commitment to at least a modification of such a system might reduce the amount of bullying and violence our kids experience.

### **Now, lastly, what can we do as a religious community?**

Some things Cedar Lane is already doing. Children here can learn the concept of mutual support and obligation through the covenants they make for their classes. They can learn the importance of both our first principle which honors the inherent worth and dignity of every person while at the same time acknowledging of the 7<sup>th</sup> principle which recognizes our interdependence and need to support the web of life beyond the individual. Children can have within their groups an experience of democracy at work. We try to nurture and model empathy that can give rise to a pattern of acceptance of others. This happens through curricula (such as DUSO) but even more importantly in the ways we are with one another. From my 23 years as a religious educator I know personally of more than a couple of young people for whom their loving youth group, class and church community may have saved them from a path destructive to themselves or others. Does all this happen perfectly? No, but we're trying. It takes all of us to do it—in R.E. classrooms, in the halls, in worship, in youth groups, in all the times of our meetings, our comings and goings. This the core of who we are. Here we get to practice both acceptance and democratic process. Here we can find the ways to live together in peace.

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#### Resources Used

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