

protect me. This didn't stop the taunts of "sissy" and "faggot," nor did it lessen the launching of paper airplanes, spitballs, and paper footballs at my head, acts that never drew a reprimand from the driver or safety patrol. I tried ignoring it, but this seemed to only encourage them to taunt me louder or throw an increasing number of objects at me. On the occasions when I would turn and tell them to stop, a whoop of victory at having broken my composure would go up, and the taunts would escalate. "What are you gonna do, faggot? Why don't you come back here and make me?" Here I would lose my nerve and would turn back around, inviting a new and intensified level of invective since I was a sissy who wouldn't stand up for himself. Two hours a day, every day, this routine repeated itself.

By sixth grade, I dreaded going to school. On Sunday nights I would get what I called my "Sunday funny feeling," which was a euphemism for the fear-induced nausea I felt at the prospect of going back to school on Monday morning... I would make complex charts of how many days remained in the school year, how many until the next big school vacation, eagerly crossing them off as each day passed and freedom grew closer.

[Things got a lot worse for him in middle school, where the locker room before and after gym class was a torture, and the time spent in the gym class itself was even worse. The gym teacher once called him out publicly for looking at another boy's legs] Whether it was intended or unintended, the chief consequence of [the teacher's] auto da fé of my young soul was that the campaign of harassment by my peers now blossomed into full flower, seemingly endorsed and blessed by a teacher. I began to avoid unstructured settings like the lunchroom, as they were the places where I heard the word "faggot" and "queer" the most.

The hardest part was feeling like there was nowhere to turn. [Some] teachers joined in the harassment; others stood by and let it happen; no one spoke up. In ninth grade I finally got fed up enough to go to a guidance counselor and report how often I was harassed, thinking he would do something about it.

[After some stammering and beating around the bush, he finally opened up...] "I get called things like 'faggot' and 'queer' all the time," I said in a hushed voice, face flushing red and hot, the victim blaming himself.

"Who calls you that?"

I listed some individuals, many of whom were the popular kids, the jocks and the cheerleaders.

[He] was unimpressed. "I know those kids. They're good kids. I don't believe they'd do something like this." With that, our meeting was over.¹

Second Reading

What Bullies Do Best

from *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*, by Trevor Romain

These are the things that bullies do best: hit, punch, kick, tease, push, pull, pester, brag, taunt, harass, play mind games, frighten, heckle, insult, annoy, gossip, bother, hurt, threaten, torment, ridicule, trip, pinch, act violent, and intimidate.

¹ Jennings, Kevin, *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2006, pp.53-60

Imagine listing those “skills” on your résumé when you are looking for a job. Picture a bully at a job interview:

Boss: “Did you excel at anything while in school?”

Bully: “Er... yes, Sir, I *did* excel at something in school. I was really good at punching other people out. In fact, I was the best!”

Here’s what bullies aren’t so good at: making friends, being kind, caring about people, sharing, and getting along with others.²

Sermon

A Sea of Pink

Rev. Judy Welles

Two years ago in Cambridge, Nova Scotia, a 9th grade boy was mercilessly harassed and teased all day long for wearing a pink polo shirt to the first day of high school. Bullies threatened to beat him up, calling him a homosexual (and probably other, meaner names as well).

By the end of the day, two senior boys had heard about the harassment and decided to take steps to assure that it wouldn’t happen again. “I just figured enough was enough,” one of them said. They went to a nearby discount store after school and bought up 50 pink shirts — T-shirts, tank tops, anything they could find.

Then they got on their e-mail and notified every friend they could think of about their anti-harassment campaign, which they called “a sea of pink.”

It turned out to be more like a tsunami. Not only were dozens of students dressed in the pink shirts that the boys had bought, but hundreds of others showed up wearing their own pink clothes, some of them dressed from head to toe in pink.

When the bullied student walked into school to see his fellow students decked out in pink, some of his classmates said it was a powerful moment. And there hasn’t been a peep from the bullies ever since.

One of the older boys commented, “If you can get more people against them... to show that we’re not going to put up with it, and [we] support each other, then they’re not as big as a group as they think are.”³

I think this story is a great example of what can happen when people speak out against injustice. This particular response was creative and humorous as well, which makes it even more the kind of story that is hard to forget.

Bullying and harassment are nothing new at school, or anywhere that children gather. And let’s not forget that adults can also be bullies, or the victims of bullying. When I opened the newspaper on Friday morning and read of the Army psychiatrist who went on a rampage at Fort Hood, it didn’t escape my attention that he may have been driven to such desperation after years of harassment by his peers in the Army for his Muslim faith. Of course it’s extreme, but this event is a sober reminder of the intense suffering that can be caused by bullying, and the drastic responses it can evoke.

² Romain, Trevor, *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*, Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis, MN, 1997, p. 10-12

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/nova-scotia/story/2007/09/18/pink-tshirts-students.html>

So today I'm going to be talking about bullying, primarily in school, and primarily bullying of kids who are gay/lesbian/bisexual or transgendered — or who appear to be. And why am I doing this, you may ask?

Because this is the kind of situation that ought to be talked about in church. (Of course, I think nearly every topic is something that should be talked about in church. Church is a microcosm of life in general — chances are pretty good that whatever is going on in the culture outside these walls is also going on in here, but it's happening on a scale that is more accessible to us, and more manageable. So church as a microcosm provides us with a sort of laboratory to learn what life asks of us, and to develop the skills to respond appropriately.)

And I'm talking about it here because we Unitarian Universalists have a deep and passionate commitment to justice, and to supporting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including children. This is a justice issue.

Now I'm not saying that bullying is happening here (though it's possible — and if it is happening, I fervently hope that by the end of the morning anyone who witnesses it will feel equipped to address it immediately and directly). But there are children in this community and they go to school, and they are undoubtedly exposed to situations of bullying and harassment. Whether any of our children are bullies — I don't know; it's possible, though I doubt it. Whether any of our children are victims of bullying — probably. Whether our children witness bullying going on around them — absolutely, without a doubt.

Maybe one of the most important things that our kids can do when they encounter situations of bullying is to be a friend. I've heard stories from some of you about how your children have reached out to another student who is being isolated or teased in elementary school. Clara has just told us about a friend of hers who is out as a bisexual boy in middle school. All kids need someone to talk to, and kids who are being treated badly especially need someone to talk to. With our kids as friends, hopefully the victims of bullying can gain the courage to report the situation to an adult, who will be in a position to make it stop.

A good working definition of bullying is “repeated intentional behavior to harm.” It goes on over a period of time (remember the reading earlier about Kevin Jennings' experiences, and the torture that he went through every day for years), and its intention is mean-spirited and harmful. The bully wants to exert power and control over others, and he or she does this (yes, girls can be bullies, too) by diminishing their victim's self-esteem in every possible way. (Your Bulletin cover shows one author's image of the bully as a self-esteem vampire.)

You'd be surprised at how many kids get bullied. The fundamental underlying cause for a young person being bullied is that somehow they appear to be different, and the bully wants to feel superior to them. Of course, the range of possible “differentness” is huge. It could be because students are different in their manner of dress, such as head coverings; there could be cultural or religious differences, with foreign-sounding names or accents; it could be about size, with small and slender kids OR big and fat kids being bullied; and of course there is the matter of sexual orientation and gender identity, or just the perception of a student being gay or lesbian. Any child who is perceived as not fitting in with the established norm is vulnerable to teasing, harassment and bullying.

A study in Pennsylvania schools was conducted in 2006 by GLSEN (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network — a national advocacy organization about which you will hear more

later). This study reported that *two-thirds (65%)* of teens in Pennsylvania said they had been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year because of their perceived or actual appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability or religion.

“Adolescents developmentally seek to exhibit independence and autonomy at the same time they desire the approval to be part of any given group (Hutchinson, 2003). This dichotomy seems to play into why ‘good’ students sometimes get involved in group or gang bullying of other students.”⁴ And this is why I can’t be sure that none of our kids here at UUCV have ever been bullies; they may have been pulled into a bullying situation because of their desire to feel part of a powerful group.

If Ferdinand the Bull [*read during the Children’s Moment*] had been a boy instead of a bull, you can be sure he would have been bullied for wanting to just sit under his tree and smell the flowers. I was delighted to find this book on a book list suggested for gay students and their allies; it was a favorite book of my father’s, and he read it to us a lot as children. From this angle, I realize how much my Dad, who was a gentle soul if ever there was one, must have identified with Ferdinand — and it makes me wonder if he was bullied as a student. I wouldn’t be surprised.

Now Ferdinand was lucky. He just got to go home to his cork tree and spend the rest of his life smelling the flowers. Victims of bullying aren’t as lucky, as bullying can cause serious difficulties in a young person’s life at a time when things are difficult enough already for any kid, even the most innocuous.

The most common concern expressed by young people who are bullied is that they feel unsafe at school. The same GLSEN survey reported that *fewer than half* of high school students in Pennsylvania feel safe there. You can imagine what it does to the learning environment when half the students are spending their class time wondering whether they will be taunted in the lunchroom or beaten up in the locker room.

Grade point averages drop, and truancy soars as kids skip school rather than risk the humiliation of attending and being bullied. Kids who are bullied are less likely to plan on attending college, they are more likely to be depressed, and their self-esteem sinks abysmally. For some, their misery is so intense that they contemplate or actually commit suicide. In 2003 a student at Cedar Crest High School in Lebanon County committed suicide after some of his classmates told him to “go kill himself.”⁵ A fifth-grader in DeKalb, Georgia hung himself in his closet this past April after being incessantly teased about being ugly and gay; he had complained repeatedly to his mother and she to school authorities, but nothing was done about it and he finally gave up.

Although they exist in many other states, there are no consistent, state-wide regulations within the Pennsylvania public school system to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning students from bullying. Nor has any legislation been passed in the state legislature to combat bullying — of any students, for any reason.

⁴ Karanen, Terry D., Social Analysis Paper for MSW Program, Temple University School of Social Administration, April 29, 2008 (shared privately)

⁵ Karanen, *op cit*

Personally, I think it's going to be a long, cold day in hell before the state of Pennsylvania adds the words "gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered" to any anti-bullying guidelines it might eventually adopt. Even in a state as liberal as California, a legislator who repeatedly introduced a bill barring discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation eventually had to remove the words "sexual orientation" and reference the state's hate crimes statutes instead in order to get the votes needed for its passage. And in Pennsylvania, sexual orientation and gender expression aren't even on the list of protected categories in this state's hate crimes legislation. So we have a long way to go.

However, there is hope. In fact, there are lots of reasons to have hope that bullying, especially anti-GLBTQ bullying, is being addressed and dealt with ever more effectively in at least some of our local schools.

Last September I read a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "Coming Out in Middle School." It stated that more and more middle school students are coming out as gay or bisexual, at least to some trusted friends and family members, and are doing so with pride and self-confidence. Some of this change to a younger demographic is probably due to the Internet. "Going online broke through the isolation that had been a hallmark of being young and gay, and it allowed gay teenagers to find information to refute what their families or churches sometimes still told them — namely, that they would never find happiness and love."⁶

It does give one pause, and the temptation is to say to a 12- or 13-year old "Are you sure? It's probably just a phase you're going through. Everyone wonders about their sexuality at your age." But if you wouldn't say that to a 13-year old girl who says she likes boys, why would you say it to one who tells you she likes girls?

Many of these middle schoolers reported that they first became aware of an attraction to the same sex when they were around nine or ten years old, so by middle school they have already had a few years to absorb that information about themselves.

With this article in mind, and because Clara (who is in middle school) had offered to work with me on this service, I called a counselor at one of the middle schools in Carlisle to talk with her about anti-gay bullying and how her school handled it. "Oh, we don't have any of that here," she assured me. "At this age, we don't encourage the kids to talk about their sexuality anyway, so it just doesn't come up." I resisted the temptation to ask her what universe she was living in, and decided to focus on high school, where I knew that Kevin Wagner would be glad to talk with me.

Kevin is a social studies teacher based at Carlisle High School who is the faculty advisor to the school's Gay Straight Alliance, and by the time I left after an hour interviewing him, I was feeling very good about the work he and others at the high school are doing on behalf of gay students and their straight allies.

The Gay Straight Alliance, or GSA, is a club that meets twice a month at the school during "club period." It has been active at Carlisle High School for about ten years, and was organized by an out gay student who was self-confident and politically savvy, but who also knew that there were other gay students there who were miserable and needed some support.

⁶ Denizet-Lewis, Benoit, "Coming Out in Middle School," *New York Times*, September 27, 2009.

Usually this club has 6 to 8 kids in it, but this year it has twenty-one, most of them freshmen. (This confirms what that middle school counselor told me, that “we don’t talk about this in middle school.” Those kids must have been dying to get to high school where they knew they would find a safe place to be who they know they are.)

For several years, the GSA has sponsored an annual Day of Silence in the spring. This is a nation-wide event when students pledge to remain silent for a full school day as a way of calling attention to the silence endured by GLBTQ students due to bullying, name-calling and harassment. In addition to hundreds of students, on last year’s Day of Silence 54 teachers out of 119 at Carlisle High pledged to support the silent students in their classes, which is an astonishing show of support.

The GSA also asks teachers to designate their classrooms as “safe spaces,” by putting a specifically-designed poster on their doors. This indicates to GLBTQ students that gay-bashing and harassment won’t be tolerated in this classroom, and that it’s a safe place for a student to come if she or he feels unsafe or just wants to talk. At Carlisle High School, one of the strongest supporters of the “safe space” classroom concept is the Head of the English Department; he has also made sure that the school library acquires books and other print materials that will be of specific interest to the gay students.

This year, for the first time, the Carlisle High School GSA hopes to offer an alternative prom, where GLBTQ students from this and any nearby school that also has a GSA can come with their same-sex dates or by themselves, dressed as they wish, and have a fancy, memorable prom experience without fear of being teased or ostracized. It’s a huge project, but the kids are gung-ho to do it and Kevin is trying to keep up with them. Depending on how the plans go, you may be hearing more about this from me later in the year. Just as we have given money from our Change for the World program to Common Roads, a safe gathering place for gay youth from a six-county area, so this alternative prom might be something we’d like to support financially.

There are 4,000 Gay Straight Alliances at high schools and some middle schools all over the country. They are sponsored by the aforementioned GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network which conducted the 2006 study on bullying in America’s high schools, which I cited earlier. GLSEN was organized in 1990 by Kevin Jennings, whose experiences as a bullied student I read before the sermon.

GLSEN is another cause for hope for GLBTQ students and those who love them. It is doing wonderful and important work not only through the school-based Gay Straight Alliances it supports, but also with teacher trainings about how to respond to bullying in schools; with clever videos to help kids learn other ways to express disapproval without saying “that’s so gay;” and with careful and well-respected research. GLSEN works on the state and federal levels to pass effective safe schools policies that will improve the school climate for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

As for those of us who aren’t directly connected with a school, what can we do as justice-makers in support of the GLBTQ kids we know, or just the kids who are at risk of bullying because of their perceived differentness?

For one thing, we can listen and believe kids if they should tell us about being harassed. Why would they make up something like that? And we can go with them to someone in a

position to make the bullying stop, be that a teacher, school administrator, or anyone else in authority.

If we hear disrespectful language, we can speak up and say “I wish you wouldn’t say that. It’s disrespectful and hurtful. How would you feel if someone said ‘that’s so teenage boy with a cheesy moustache’?” *[This references a GLSEN video showing how to respond creatively to “That’s so gay.”]*⁷

It’s important to educate our children who might be witnesses or bystanders to take action when they see bullying occur. If they say they don’t want to get anyone in trouble, explain to them that it’s the other person who got himself in trouble; you as the bystander are trying to make the trouble stop. Children who frequently witness bullying and don’t do anything about it will suffer also: from fear that they might be next; from guilt that they didn’t do anything; or from desensitization to the effects of bullying, so that they gradually might become more tolerant of it.

If we had to, probably any one of us could come up with personal qualities that we might be teased about — perhaps qualities that we have, in fact, been teased or harassed about. Each of us is wounded in some way, and each of us has the capacity to bind up another’s wounds through friendship, compassion, and empathy. Let us go from this room ever more deeply committed to help the kids around us who need our help and support, to be friends in need, to speak up, to care. The world needs our caring and commitment, and the kids around us deserve it.

May it be so. Amen.

⁷ <http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/>