

A Spiritual Response to Bullying

When we love our “enemy,” we see the good in them. That includes understanding what lies behind their actions, and even helping the perpetrators heal.

By Arturo Mora



“You’re such an idiot. Why don’t you learn how to drive?”
Have you ever yelled that at your spouse or child?

Or, “Lose some weight; you’re starting to look disgusting”? Or, “Give me that! You don’t know what you’re doing”?

We’ve all been there, as kids and adults, on the giving or receiving end of cruelty. It hurts as a kid, it can scar for life, and it can hurt anew as a grownup.

Bullying is a hot issue, especially after a series of bullying-related suicides made the news. The simplest definition of bully is, “To treat abusively.” That mistreatment takes many forms, from childhood taunting and fighting to more recent incidents of harassment over the Internet.

Regardless, do we pay serious attention to the spiritual questions, especially about our own part in this phenomenon? The mirror is the most powerful spiritual tool, one of many we can use to face up to this issue.


For Ken Daigle, a student at Unity Institute and Seminary, the spiritual response is in “calling people out”

when they engage in abusive talk or behavior, something no one did for him when he was young. Daigle, who is gay, said he was bullied as young as 9 years old for being “different.”

“As a kid I was beaten by nuns at school,” he said, “and then beaten by boys at school, and then when I got home, beaten by my dad, to make me ‘more of a man.’ The nuns publicly made fun of me for being effeminate, for crying, shaming me in front of the class. The boys would call me things like ‘sissy,’ ‘fag.’ The nuns gave them license to beat me with their shaming.”

Daigle cites Matthew 23:23 in which Jesus takes a stand against the Pharisees. “He said this is hypocritical, this is wrong. A 9-year-old can’t do [that]. But the adults can do it, especially clergy, teachers, political leaders. They can all say, ‘This is wrong, this is not what Christianity teaches about God.’”

We all have it in our power to bear witness and end the silence that allows bullying to continue. We can all be heroes when



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we open our hearts and mouths, and just say something, anything, to the abusive person who thinks they're hilarious at the lunch table, at work, in our homes.

Is speaking out enough? If we're bullied, surely we have the right to fight back, defend ourselves, even physically if necessary. Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek," but is that realistic? Some would say turning aside encourages the abuser and puts the abused in danger.

Common sense dictates that safety is always first. There's no spiritual reason to stay in harm's way, or stand by while others are attacked, if you're able to help. Yet beyond intervention and reasonable self-defense, it's a natural temptation to strike back, and even give the bullies their due. The danger is that retaliation can lead to escalation.

"We need to do more work with the heart, feelings, emotions. We need to teach kids about emotional intelligence."

—Rev. Jan Chase

"I saw a news story about some kid who was bullied and just snapped, lashed out at the bully in a violent way," says Rev. Jan Chase of Unity of Pomona, California, who has helped organize anti-bullying assemblies for grade schools. "People cheered him on for that, 'what a hero,' and so on. I don't think that's the answer, the bullied becoming the bully."

Rev. Lori Woodley, founding Unity minister of Peace Matters (www.peacematters.com), an alternative ministry, suggests a different meaning to "turn the other cheek."

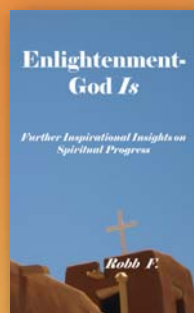
"I see it as meaning, 'Hit me like a man,'" she said. "Let me stand and face you evenly. It doesn't mean, 'Just keep beating me.' It means, can I (stand up) in a way of being self-composed? I have the choice. If I'm reacting, running away or hitting back, I have no power. Let me try another way, the way of nonviolence."

To embrace nonviolence we are required to love our "enemy" and see the good in them. That includes understanding what lies behind their actions, and even helping the perpetrators heal.

In her volunteer work for the Community Mediation Center of Kansas City, Rev. Woodley reaches out to those who act out. "We use a 'Circle Process,' where they get to hear from everybody they've affected," she said, "and also everybody hears what's going on underneath their actions. Because acting out as a 'bully' is about trying to meet some kind of need. I believe they need love, they need

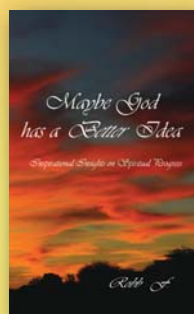
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a sense of belonging possibly even more than anyone else.”

For all kids, Rev. Chase believes, “We need to do more work with the heart, feelings, emotions. We need to teach kids about emotional intelligence.”

It’s not just kids who can stand to learn that. Rev. Chase, in her work with some Islamic schools, was disheartened by “adult bullying.” A peaceful Muslim fundraiser she attended was surrounded by political protesters. “It turned into a hate fest. Huge crowds were out there, saying terrible things about Muslims—‘we hate you’—and worse. It was terrible, bizarre stuff.”

It’s hard to get away from mockery in our society, and it sets the stage for bullying.

Daigle points out, for example, that “America’s a very macho culture. There’s a certain idea of what it means to be a man. I’ve witnessed too many emotionally crippled people because of that.”

We may not consider ourselves hateful bullies, but our most powerful spiritual response can be for each of us to honestly ask ourselves, “What mocking, hurtful energy do I put out there? What snap judgments do I make?”

I diminish my divinity every time I give in to the bully in me. Change begins with us. Let us develop our own zero-tolerance policy for bullying behavior and attitudes. ■



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