

EDITORIAL

Mrs. Mathieson, Bullies, and Bullying in Our Time – Online

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When I went to school there were bullies. My way to school on my very first day, at five and a half years of age, was about a six or seven block walk from my home in a Western Canadian city of about 80,000 at the time. It was a quiet, peaceful, and friendly city. There was very little crime and so far as I had known, everybody was nice to me and to my family. It was therefore something of a surprise verging on shock to me that a small group of rather larger boys thought it was a great lark to take my new hat and throw it into the bushes as I walked to school that very first morning in Grade One. That was all they did, but it was pretty scary nonetheless. After school at noon, on my way home for lunch, when I went to look for my new hat in the patch of bushes it was gone. That was one of only three incidents of bullying that I suffered in twelve years of school. The other two were equally minor. When I was a little older, also going to school, some older boys took a new baseball I was carrying with me to play with at recess. And when I was in Grade Six some boys, also a little older than me, held me out over a railing above a staircase as if to drop me. Wisely I did not struggle and pretended to enjoy it. Happily they finally released me and left me alone after that. I do not know if my rather modest experiences were typical, but I expect that at some point nearly all school children suffer a little bullying with few long term consequences. However, for others not so lucky as I, the consequences can be devastating.

I recall that once in the third grade I was called to stay after school by the teacher, Mrs. Mathieson, as she questioned me about a boy who had complained that on the way home from school as he passed under a bridge, the water under which was now frozen so naturally most of us walked under rather than over the bridge, that another couple of boys pulled his pants down and played with his privates, threatening him with disturbing possibilities. I had seen the larger boys approaching him

and calling him names as I was crossing the river up-stream past the bridge at that time, but had not noticed the more disturbing incident and was not much help as a witness, but I have always felt badly that by my lack of realization I was no help to him either at the time nor when he brought his case up before the teacher. This was bullying of a magnitude more troubling than the rather common-place sort that I had undergone.

Beyond that, the only incident of bullying that I personally subsequently recall was at a summer camp when I was perhaps 14 or so in which a couple of teenagers of my acquaintance decided to tease a helpless boy about his rather large nose. They were merciless until I intervened, told them to stop and suggested that his nose was not particularly large, certainly not significantly larger than my own relative to my face. This was not true, but it seemed a good thing to say at the time. Indeed my acquaintances stopped bullying him but immediately turned on me and continued in this vein for the next few months whenever they saw me, pretending to duck every time I turned my head. I had learned that bullies might be deflected. But I also learned that they enjoyed the torture of their actions or words and did not really care who the victim was.

It is possible that girls also bullied and were bullied by their peers at that time, though I never witnessed it. By and large the girls seemed well mannered, worked hard, and appeared to enjoy school and each other. The boys were the bullies and I suppose I thought it had something to do with "boys being boys." The boys were very shy of the girls as a rule and if they were inclined to bully the girls it never came into my ken.

Clearly a teacher, like my third grade teacher, Mrs. Mathieson, had to deal with bullying. But there did not seem to be any special policies and bullying was never mentioned in class as such.

My rather naive view of bullying changed radically a few years ago when there was a news item that a hapless young high school girl in the lower mainland of British Columbia, was set upon by a number of her classmates after school who ultimately physically brutalized her until she died of injuries they had inflicted. She was not a particularly good looking girl, so it might have been a case like the boy with the large nose, but in her case they did not just say nasty things, they also physically abused her to the point of death, ultimately drowning her I believe, then abandoning her. It was not just one or two bullies either,

but a whole large group of other teenage girls. It certainly was not a case of "boys being boys" any longer.

From that event onwards, for it became a national *cause celebre*, bullying policies have been put in place in practically all the school jurisdictions in Canada, usually by provincial legislation or curriculum decisions. In faculties of education across the country the social studies curriculum or its equivalent will almost certainly discuss bullying, require students to engage in research on the topic, and classroom discussions will be encouraged on the topic. In one of my own social studies classes in the recent past a very sincere and intelligent young woman, who told us that she had suffered bullying herself while in high school and had contemplated suicide, produced a very powerful presentation on the topic from a personal vantage point. I recall that I had tried to suggest in the class discussion that bullying might not just be between school students, but might also involve the teacher, as bullying was actually something that could only occur when there was a power differential between the bullies and their victim or victims. But that notion did not find many friends, especially as all the class members were in the process of becoming teachers and they could not imagine themselves as bullies.

Most recently we have had suicides relating to bullying and court cases involving young people, well beyond school, who were bullied and physically maimed sometimes by their roommates or their "lovers." A particularly nasty form that has emerged has been the plight of young gay men or women who openly admit to their sexual orientation in schools and are almost as openly mistreated by their schoolmates. This has been a continuing source of suicides among young school students, more usually young men. There are undoubtedly cases of bullying that are racially motivated or religiously motivated as well, though these are not so obvious. When these sorts of cases hit the media it is usually connected with ethnic groups that live near one another and go to the same schools, groups that have historic grievances that they have brought with them to Canada. For example young Serb boys were sometimes involved in harassing and even stabbing young Croatian boys who had taken up with a Serbian girl or vice versa in Toronto while I was teaching at the University of Toronto some years ago. This was beyond bullying and was connected with blind hatred, but the methods were similar.

While all these forms of bullying were deplorable and some horrendous, and while many were harmed, there seemed opportunities

for direct intervention such as that of my third grade teacher Mrs. Mathieson who interviewed the boy who was victimized, the boys involved in the incident as bullies and others passing by such as myself. The bullies never did anything like that again as I recall. Their bullying was stopped in its tracks by the publicity of their actions.

But in our own time new possibilities for bullying have multiplied exponentially in such a way that the victims can be hurt in enormous numbers of ways, humiliated publicly, extorted, or perhaps even raped and murdered – and yet it is hard to know who exactly the bullies are. This is because of possibilities that the Internet has made available to bullies who may be physically at any physical distance from the person or persons who are their victims. This sort of thing is now known as *cyberbullying*.

According to the *Internet Safety 101* curriculum there are many types of cyberbullying including gossip, exclusion, impersonation, harassment, cyberstalking, flaming (or online fighting), outing and trickery (tricking people to reveal secrets or embarrassing information which is then shared online), and cyberthreats that may involve extortion. Something like all of these seems to have happened to the young British Columbian girl, Amanda Todd, who took her life a few weeks ago and who put her plight up on the internet in a graphic way before committing suicide.

Although I am not young I found myself being impersonated a year or so ago by someone who broke into my Facebook account and sent rude messages to a former student of mine pretending to be me. A rather insulting would-be photograph of myself was included in the package. The astonishing thing from my point of view is that my password was not in the least obvious and could not easily have been cracked by someone just randomly trying for it. So there are probably sophisticated programs available that can more or less easily break someone's encoded information in order to take over one's account for whatever reasons. Clearly better cyberprotection measures are probably important as the present systems are still rather primitive and easily cracked by hackers with evil intentions.

As it happened in the case of Amanda Todd, a group of concerned mothers calling themselves Anonymous were able to track down a person who had been bullying her, a middle-aged man in Vancouver who had been stalking her online and threatening to send a picture of her exposing her breasts when much younger to embarrassing locations on the net. Apparently young girls commonly get involved in such activities

when they are very young teenagers, often with other boys and girls on the net, probably as some sort of joke or part of a dare. But equally apparently cyberpredators, often male pedophiles, are looking for opportunities to harass and cyberstalk them, perhaps even threaten them with exposure thereby extorting them to produce online "favours" for the stalker, or to meet with them somewhere. The Anonymous mothers are to be cheered, though they have suffered since their exposure of the 32 year old Vancouver man who was stalking Amanda Todd, by being cyberbullied themselves and have received many threats.

The job has become harder for Mrs. Mathieson and other teachers like her. But all of us are glad that teachers out there are aware of the problems their students face and who make known to them that there are groups like "Internet Safety 101," "Olweus Bullying Prevention Program," "Stomp Out Bullying," "Delete Digital Drama," "Cyberbully411," and "STOP Cyberbullying," all of which can be Googled. But our teachers will need help from the parents too.

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