

Aftereffects of bullying can last a lifetime

By Jimmy Peterson

We've had a spate of teen suicides in my hometown recently, and like everyone else, I am worried about it, saddened for those who are gone and saddened for those who remain to somehow find the grace to pick up the pieces. My wife and I always taught our children that no matter how bleak the circumstance, it was temporary. And all their difficulties have to this point proven to be just that. Even problems that originate from bullying.

Bullying is a fixable societal problem. And yet we seem uncomfortable when talking about it. If we talk about it. I'm not sure if it has been determined how many of the six recent teen suicides in Midland, Texas, came by kids who were relentlessly picked on, poked at and made fun of by other children who inflate their self-worth and perceive themselves as some sort of higher being than the victim, often someone who can be, but is not always, smaller, meeker, milder and not as brash or outspoken as the bully.

This is a story about a 9-year-old kid who was bullied. Save for his parents' response, nothing was ever done about it. Fortunately, the boy never entertained thoughts of suicide. But that doesn't mean the incident just magically went away.

It was the summer of 1969 and the kid had been baptized in his church a month or so earlier and so he was, in today's parlance, on fire. So, he decided to be brave and venture out from the walls and protection of his mom and dad, something he had never before done. He and his parents had been many places together, near and far, and so the kid had always felt comfortable in their company.

When he finally relented and agreed to attend summer camp, he did so with sweat on his palms and a knot in his throat. But he went anyway, and that was a big step. The kid will never forget the first night of his church-sponsored camp. After

spending most of the afternoon alone (he was a shy kid, see), he had dinner with the other campers and at the end of the night the born-again 9-year-old with a newfound sense of boldness and adventure returned to his bunkhouse with the others.

But that first night's experience was different for him than it was for the other campers because the kid was a rookie.

Some call what happened initiation. Others think of it as hazing. To me, it was bullying. The kid was tossed into the bunkhouse unawares and told to run down the middle aisle. On either side of the aisle were the bunks, upper and lower, of the 30 or so other campers who were there for a week of fun and games and praise and worship.

So the kid ran down the middle aisle like he was told. And as he did, he was struck repeatedly with belts. He was hit on the torso, the chest and in the backside more times than he cared to remember. The only thing that exceeded the pain of being struck was the humiliation that came with it. In fact, that stung a lot worse and a lot longer than the belt marks.

At the end of the "beltline," as it was fondly called by his aggressors, were a couple of bigger kids waiting in the bathroom. By this time, the kid was crying. And when he got to the bathroom, the two bigger kids took the new kid, lifted him up and buried his head in a toilet filled with urine.

The bigger kids had a good laugh about the fun time they'd just had. For the rookie, the few moments in the aftermath disappeared from his memory; maybe because it was just too embarrassing to have to walk back through the beltline after the fun and festivities were over, knowing that he was on his way to the camp office, humiliated and embarrassed enough to call home and say, "Please come get me."

"Why?" the kid's mom and dad would ask during the new kid's call for help. And so he told them, and two hours later the kid's parents had made the trip from their Dallas-area home and picked up their urine-soaked, belt-licked, born-again son.

The parents, like the good parents they were, informed the camp and the officials at the church, and everyone prayed that the incident would be forgotten and forgiven

after the offenders were duly tongue-lashed and finger-scolded.

But the aftereffects of the incident never really subsided. The kid was never embraced by the group of kids his own age in the church, most particularly by those who swung at him and filled the toilet bowl with their surprise at the end of his long run through the bunkhouse.

The kid was scorned and never part of the “in crowd” and he often found himself sitting alone in church or with his parents while the other kids his age bonded together in their own pew. He would, in fact, spend nine more years at the church as he waited for his 18th birthday, but God never really seemed to be there with him. Not sitting next to him, at least.

That kid was me.

The incident happened in the summer of 1969, several weeks after I was baptized in the church in which my parents raised me. It's been 42 years since it happened, and although the pain is most certainly gone now, the memories of what happened are not.

Did it change my life? Yes it did. After being shunned by others my age for the remainder of the time I attended that church, it closed me down to that way of practicing the faith, although I hold that particular church in no way responsible.

In 1983, six years after I last set foot in the church, I met my wife and would warmly embrace - and would be warmly embraced by - the comfort and serenity of the Catholic Church. I was one of the lucky ones, finding a faith that I could call my own after a bad experience in another one. It took awhile, but I can honestly say those who did what they did quite literally never spoke to me again. But pain gave way to new faith and what has been a wonderful life.

Not all stories turn out this way. If you know someone who is being bullied, encourage them to step forward and talk about it. When they do, remember: that's when your job as a supporter of that bullying victim is only beginning. A person being bullied needs someone with them just as much as they struggle through the pain and scorn that will inevitably follow.

Pray for people who are the victims of bullying. And be with them. The scars can last a lifetime, and those who bear them need to be guided through their ordeal so that they will outlive the most painful of the memories.

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