

There Is A Bully in All of Us!

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Some time ago, many of us were shocked and saddened at reports of the tragic suicide in Massachusetts of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year old high school student who took her own life in the throes of the emotional torment she was suffering as the result of heartless bullying, in school and online. In response to this event, and an invitation I received to offer some insight into bullying and how we can heal it, I felt called to offer the article below. I hope you will find it inspiring and informative . . . in relation to bullying by anybody in any numbers and in any form.



Bullying. Do we even know what it is? Or how rampant bullying is in our world?

By the end of this article, I hope you will.

Do we have any real idea what we need to do to heal bullying?

By the end of this article, I hope you will.

Bullying brings up intense feelings for the one who has been bullied, and also for those who witness the bullying and are unable or afraid to do anything to help. Bullying evokes feelings of hurt, fear, anger, and powerlessness, to name just a few. But bullying also comes from such feelings as hurt, fear, anger, and powerlessness . . .

A little boy is smacked when he cries for something he needs and is told "I'll give you something to cry about." Then when he grows up, he smacks somebody else, physically or verbally, over needs and conflicts of needs . . . maybe his own son. A little girl is ridiculed if she cries for what she needs . . . and is called names, like "sissy" or "spoiled brat" . . . or told she's greedy if she needs more than she's given. And then she grows up and calls somebody else - her child if she's a parent, her student if she's a teacher, her patient if she's a doctor - those same names and others, when they need more.

In fact, you may think this is odd, but bullying and suicide from bullying come from the same root: our not having been helped to build the capacity to bear our feelings and instead finding a way to defend ourselves against those feelings, or a way to escape from them.

So . . . both bullying and suicide are defenses against and escape hatches to get us away from feeling those young, vulnerable feelings. Our society is terrified of feeling . . . we defend against feelings all the time. Alcohol and drugs are just the most obvious ways. Overwork, over exercising, over sexing, being glued to the television or computer are defenses as well. Murder, suicide, and other violent crimes are extreme forms of defense and escape from feelings. But . . . bullying has become one of the more commonly utilized ways.

As a result, our children see bullying in our families, schools, houses of worship, communities, companies, country, and world.

As a result, our children utilize bullying as one of their options. And bullying in some ways has become normalized in our world.

As a result, our children utilize bullying as a socially acceptable form of both defense and escape.

In our families: "I'll give you something to cry about." Or "If I say jump, you ask how high."

In our communities: parents bully the coaches, the umpires or referees, each other and the kids in sports such as little league events.

In the workplace: bosses bully their employees, employees bully each other, and they all go home and bully those at home - their wives, husbands, children, aged parents, and pets.

In our country: people who didn't like the healthcare reform bill, bullied by threatening, vandalizing, and shouting racial slurs. During the elections, people bullied by mudslinging. And we bully all over the world through war - war on drugs, war on poverty, war in Iraq, war in Afghanistan.

You didn't realize the long, long thread of bullying, did you? Bullying is not just something one child does to another. Bullying is a small word for huge actions . . . a mild word for brutal actions.

If we are bullied, we will likely bully . . . even if we are not conscious of it. Alice Miller, in *For Your Own Good*, shows how Hitler was bullied by his father and in turn bullied millions of people into colluding with him, and millions of people to death. This may seem like an understatement, but if we don't acknowledge the very first, the smallest experience of bullying, it will escalate until it is noticed and responded to. Just as in the case of Hitler. Just as in the case of Columbine High School. Just as in the case of Phoebe Prince.

Bullying is not just an individual issue. It's a worldwide issue. There is a bully in all of us . . . even if we don't know it. Even if we don't want to know it. Even if we know it and try to simply go around it or rise above it. Just like with everything else within us, if we bury it, it only comes back to haunt us and those around us . . . because eventually it makes itself known somehow both in our inner world and in our outer world. We all need to explore and find the bully in us, explore it to its origin in our life, and do our own healing work with it. We need to do this purposefully, consciously, and safely. As the adults in the world, we need to do our work. As the adults in the world, we need to teach our children and the children in our lives to do their work by modelling it and helping them as part of daily living.

How do we help our children - or anyone in our life - who are being bullied?

- Create a safe relationship, so they can come tell you they're in pain.
- Help them build the capacity to feel the pain . . . so that it's not so unbearable that they want to kill themselves . . . or to bully and strike out at others.
- Help them learn to name their feelings and take responsibility for them.
- Help them find practical solutions while they're doing this - Help them find a social network elsewhere. If they are being bullied via social networking sites . . . close down their MySpace/Facebook profiles and open up new ones that are more anonymous.
- Don't stop until you've helped them solve this . . . inside and out.
- In the movie, *Karate Kid*, the whole story emerged out of Ralph Macchio's character being bullied. Teach your children to connect with and use their positive aggression for true good - like Ralph Macchio was taught to use his. There are many ways to do this, including those that don't involve learning a practice like karate.
- Make sure your child knows that there will be an end to the bullying and that you won't stop till you help him/her find it.
- And most of all . . . what do you model for your children? Do your children experience or witness your bullying? Can they count on you to take responsibility for the bully in you -whether you act on that bully or just feel it inside yourself? Can they count on you to do your own work to heal the bully in you? Can they rely on you to be part of the normalizing and escalating of bullying in our world? Or...

Can they depend on you to be part of the healing?