

Growing Up Tough

Dedicated to: Mark Twain, and my very own high school bully

*If man had created man,
He might be ashamed of his invention - M. Twain*

Growing up as a football coach's kid, our family would uproot to a new town every few years. So, without really earning it, I might have a new-kid reputation wherever Dad's job took us. In 7th grade, we traded a gritty steel town in Pennsylvania for a rural college in Western New York.



Here I learned 'new' could attract all kinds of attention. In my case, the school bullies would be lining up a country mile.

Though self-esteem and self-worth are not well differentiated in the literature, it's fair to say that bullies get their self-esteem (concept of inner self) from overpowering or controlling another person. A true bully gets their self-worth (the perception of others) from the overall reputation of being tough. In effect, they are fighting for their own identity. This translates as cruel, impulsive, and even calculated abuse toward others. Some can be hard to read, even charming, But, their negative impact on others is measurable.

In my school, seniors and 7th graders shared the hallways. This was a pressure cooker for dominant behaviors. You were bound to see some shenanigans. Remember those 80's movies where lanky puppet-faced kids get crushed by a man-child? Well, that really happens. Except, don't hang hope on the chivalrous homeroom teacher with empathetic acne scars



It's a strange phenomenon, but adult survivors of nerdiness defend the system that broke them. Like the rest of us perhaps, they're still bit scared of the bully.

Most experts agree that reporting a bully to an adult is the best thing to do when there is danger involved. However, be prepared for the adult to be a bit hard of hearing. Even in world where cyber-bullying comes in the form of homophobia, racism, and elitism, untrained adults still have skepticism about the emotional impacts of bullying. In part, School Systems and workplaces are still making the cultural transition from denial. Due to the severe consequences and complexities of bullying (suicides, hate crimes and school shootings), Institutions have been trying to implement reporting and advocacy programs over the last twenty years. The 'volunteer culture' of these programs ('peace builders', 'mentors', Teacher Advocates) have had some impacts on general violence among students within certain school systems, but none with prolonged efficacy. In a way, bullying seems to be more adaptive than our programs.

One day, while riding the bus home, an upperclassman athlete and infamous hard-ass decided that I was too friendly with a 7th grade girl he liked. You heard me...a Junior and a 7th grader. (See my upcoming blog on '3rd world mating customs'). I tried to stay cool. But, I 'voice-cracked', probably trying to swallow my testicles. I told him she was 'just a friend'. He laughed, smacked me in the head, and said, "you're alright for a pussy".



His giant Rottweiler smile seemed to forgive me for the moment.

Some little-known and good-to-have facts on the subject are:

- 1) Bullying is persistent unwanted attention/intimidation/threat from another person.
- 2) In K-12, 57% of kids report having been bullied.
- 3) Two-thirds of the time, families of bullies are friends of the victim's family.
- 4) As of 2010, one-half of adolescent suicides are related to bullying.
- 5) Isolation poses higher health risks (anxiety/depression) than all forms of bullying combined.



However, he decided not to take any chances. One night leaving a local Youth Center, a group of us bumped into him while walking home. He stormed at my friend, grabbed her and yelled some nastiness. I told him to stop being an ass and to get his hands off her. He snatched me up like a rag doll. The booze made him mean on top of some pretty impressive rage.

Bullies are preoccupied with the perception of 'disrespect'. They perceive the world as a place where others are constantly attacking them. This is not uncommon for the hyperactive component of ADHD. Swing first; ask questions later. In extreme cases, there can be abuse of the elderly, small children and even pets. But, severe conditions are likely diagnosable. (e.g. Conduct or Bipolar Disorder, Antisocial or Borderline Personality). Coloring every bully with a diagnosis is like embellishing every college drinker as alcoholic. The trauma/pressures from home, early developmental hormonal surges and social anxieties of school, as well as learning disabilities explain bullying far more than psychiatric diagnoses.



I grew up on a wrestling mat, so physical conflict never really shook me much. But it was rare that I would take a serious beating from a furious man-child.

Bully's often see dating partners as possessions. Their style with an intimate other is more like mate guarding than dating. A bully's reputation depends on the perception of being an 'Alpha' in all respects. 'Territory' includes friends, girlfriends and anyone they can control as a possession. Feeling shamed by a rival male or, even the threat of 'cuckolding' (see Blog on 'Cheating') can cause the bully's strategy to go from 'bully-face' (the psychological terror of what he/she might be thinking) to physical 'doing' of assault. Make no mistake, most bullies are tough. They don't tend to back down in a conflict. But if someone is prepared to stand up, they switch targets. This doesn't change their mind about bullying. Aggression is too well rehearsed in the brain and physiology of a bully to simply expect them to abandon their strategy. It's a limited and reliable 'tool kit' so to speak. Violence is always an accessible until systemic changes occur (Intolerance of wide peer group, healthy intervention by parents, therapy)



*Details are vague and probably favor my noble efforts.
Our own memory is a bit of a liar so, here's how I am told it went down:*

I dodged him once or twice. He missed a haymaker. I got lucky when he tripped into a wall. That was as good as things got for me. It wasn't long before my pre-pubescence was being stomped unconscious. As the lights went out, I could hear my dad saying to me, "a real man knows when to walk away". But, I didn't. And, knowing my dad, I'll bet he never took his own advice.

The next weekend, I held my head up and went back to the youth center. It's funny how quickly your ego can heal when you defend a girl's honor. I imagined she was grateful. My reward, however, was a hard fought lesson.

When I got to the Youth Center, the bully and the girl stood at the door in a fever of heavy kissing. He smiled at me and squeezed some sacred parts of her.....

There's a great deal of mythology and theory concerning best practices with bullies. The simplest formula is to be prepared to stand up for yourself, (intellectually, emotionally, even physically) always start with kindness (which will be interpreted as weakness) and finish with a strong boundary. This is a form of rejecting intimidation. Keep in mind, the bully has trouble reading emotional/situational cues in the environment. They count on extremes (fear, aggression, verbal attack to 'cure their confusion about who they are and what is happening in their immediate environment.

Outcomes vary, but far and away exceed traditional practices of 'killing with kindness', turning the other cheek, or ignoring/keeping it quiet until it goes away. All the aforementioned actually escalate the bullying. Don't offer violence in return, just send the message that intimidation doesn't work with you and you will defend yourself. 'I don't want trouble, but it doesn't scare me'

Twain Said:



*'A man will do many things to gain a woman's love,
but he will do anything to gain another man's envy.'*

I would add humbly:

***At the heart of envy lives jealousy....
the bully that will do every terrible thing for love.***