

Big Bullies

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Hymns: #1007, There's a River Flowing in My Soul; Birthday Song (Tom Chapin/Franz Lehar); #15 The Lone, Wild Bird; #95, There Is More Love Somewhere.

PERSONAL REFLECTION—by Jim

SERMON—by Roger

We heard a moving testimony a few minutes ago of how the pain of *childhood* victimization can stay with a person for decades after the fact. In the news we see that schoolyard bullying not only hasn't gone away, it's gone online. Cyberbullying. Now, countless kids--and adults--can pile on a child, causing untold anguish. We've known about childhood bullies for a long time, but still haven't stopped them. A similar crisis has only recently come into our awareness. That is *adult* bullying. Big bullies don't disappear when they get big, they have a different playground. Some don't even start bullying until they are all grown up.

In the last half century, advocates and survivors have made us aware of domestic violence. This is abuse in which adults demean, threaten, and batter their partners or other family members in order to control them. Even though domestic violence continues, at least it is now against the law. There is now help and support for victims.

Workplace bullying has not yet been addressed as much as domestic abuse. But it's coming into the headlines. In 2014 the board of one of our local school districts voted to reprimand a fellow board member.¹

This trustee had failed to do anything about reports he'd received about bullying by their superintendent. News coverage and feedback by teachers described a culture of abuse in the school system. Some teachers noted that several principals had bullied them or their peers, while the superintendent looked the other way.

What is workplace bullying? It's a pattern of hostile behavior by one or more persons against a subordinate or a peer at work. According to Dr. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, it can include public humiliation, constant criticism, ridicule... insults and social ostracism. Bullying isolates and discredits the target [person] at the benefit of the ...power and credibility of the aggressor."ⁱⁱ A bully may isolate a targeted person ("target") by withholding information from them, ignoring them, or spreading malicious gossip about them.¹

The Society for Human Resource Management said the behaviors can include "shouting in public or private, slinging personal insults, ignoring or interrupting people in meetings."

Multiple stories include supervisors and or peers pointing their finger in a worker's face while threatening them. A man in a private security firm said his boss would "call for a meeting with no advance request of what he wanted you to have prepared." Since you have let him down, he'd scream, "Get out. Get out of my sight!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of the traits of bullying are similar to those of domestic abuse: threats, irrational demands, ridicule, incessant

¹ In addition to the resources cited in end notes to this sermon, see Workplace Bullying Institute, www.workplacebullying.org

blaming, and isolation. A man who used to work in the sports fishing industry said his boss would stand close and scream, “You idiot! You couldn’t run a [blasted] peanut stand!”^{iv} Another person said he could feel on his face the wet spittle of his screaming boss.

Usually the target of bullying is not incompetent or irresponsible. In fact, they may be “targeted because of their superior performance or skill..., tenure [on the job] ... or likeability.”^v Yet the shock and unreality of the abuse can undermine your confidence in yourself. Rather than questioning the disrespectful behavior, many targets question themselves. They try even harder, or maybe they give up. A church member told me that her boss’s accusations were so “ludicrous and unreasonable” that she tried even harder. Even as distress, depression, and exhaustion grew, she didn’t pursue transfer to another site. She believed that bullying was present in the culture of the whole system. Maybe it could be worse in another place! And she feared the boss had already damaged her reputation.

A researcher began studying this problem in Scandinavian countries in the 1980s, and scholars first looked at it in the U.S. and the U.K. in the 1990s.^{vi}

How big is the problem? Studies indicate nearly 30 percent of U.S. workers have been bullied at work.^{vii}

Even though it’s new in our headlines, you can find workplace bullying in the Bible, along with other types of abuse, inequity and violence. An example from the Book of Genesis (chapter 29): Laban, the father of Rachel, promises to allow Jacob to marry her after giving him seven years of labor. But Laban deceives Jacob; he gives away his daughter Leah instead. In order to win Rachel’s hand in marriage, Jacob is compelled to work for Laban another seven years. How frustrating! And of course the

daughters have no choice in the matter. The Hebrew Prophets Isaiah and Amos, while attacking other kinds of injustice, also call out bosses who cheat workers out of wages.

“Serial bullying” is what happens when a targeted person is driven to quit or is fired, and the bully identifies a new target. One woman said she and her peers labeled “an unfortunately mild mannered newcomer as the [office] bully’s [new] chew toy.”^{viii} Serial bullying shows the problem is with the *perpetrator’s behavior*, not with an individual’s performance.

But wait, you might be thinking, aren’t we just talking about workplace harassment? Isn’t this discrimination? Bullying is not the same thing, legally speaking. For aggressive behavior to be charged as harassment, the victim needs to be in a category known as a protected class. This includes gender, ethnicity, disability, military or veteran status, religion and so on.

If the bully is of the same gender or ethnicity as the target, it’s harder to prove the behavior as harassment. In and of itself, bullying is not against the law. In recent years, however, that’s been changing. Every year more states pass legislation defining and outlawing this kind of abuse. California now requires any supervisor in a firm of at least 50 workers to receive training in abuse prevention.

But what if there’s a real disagreement in the work place? Do we just avoid it, lest we be seen as a bully? If somebody is not performing well, how do we address the problem? The key question is how we handle it: with respect, firmness and clarity, or with antagonism and ridicule?

An old friend of mine has led a not-for-profit, managed a large government office and taught social work in college. He said, “Disagreement, conflict and stress are going to happen in any workplace.” We are

going to hear feedback we don't enjoy, or we're going to have to deliver that feedback. But a pattern of disrespectful words, relentless criticism, isolating behaviors, and threats are not normal. They are abuse.

In my twenties I was a project coordinator in a state agency in another part of the country. The boss of my boss was an ambitious middle-aged white man who was politically connected. Personally I never felt bullied by him, but I never trusted him. I'll call him Mike. He was demanding. Not in the spirit of "I know you can do it" -- but with lots of profanity. He berated some colleagues, and he would gossip about them. He ridiculed other leaders at his own level. One time in the office, he pointed to a young woman down the hall. He said, "Roger, if I were your age and single I'd be *on that* in a minute." This guy was not a person to whom I could come out of the closet, or trust with much personal information at all. Of course, this meant I didn't say much about myself to *anyone* in the office. Once after a few drinks at a dinner with me and an outside consultant, Mike told a story about almost getting caught when he was out with a woman other than his wife. Once at a staff dinner he put his hand on the knee of a colleague and offered to be of help to her, "in any way I can."

Fortunately, I was able to relocate from headquarters and work in our agency's office in a big city elsewhere in the state, but still working under Mike. He liked to visit our office. When I was away at a meeting, he'd use my desk. Once I found a white envelope on my desk. In his handwriting, it said: "Roger, hold this for Mike." Hmmm. Then, on a conference call with others, he said, "Roger, do you still have my envelope?" *Yes*, I said. I didn't ask. I did find out later; he was using my desk to stash condoms for his trips to the big city. He was happy to tell me. Fortunately, a shakeup and reorganization put him in a small office and

left him with no staff to lead. By then, however, you couldn't undo the hurt he had caused. The agency could not bring back the staffers who had left it out of hurt and frustration.

It is disillusioning to have your job, for any reason, become a source of dread, fear and pain. Moreover, the ordeal of being a target can almost break the spirit. People reported the situation can feel like "being treated like property," "like doing time in prison," "like being an abused child." Constant criticism or threats disconnect a worker from their job, making it harder to perform.^{ix}

In surveys, about 50 percent of workers report having *witnessed* abusive workplace behavior--or having been aware of it. Even when workers are not targets themselves, witnessing abuse promotes fear and secrecy in the system. A witness may feel both relief that someone else is getting the cruel attention *and* shame that they are letting it happen.

Sophisticated bullies hide their behavior and curry favor with superiors and human relations departments. They make a complaining victim look like a trouble maker. They go after the targeted person's self-esteem. Yet it's worth noting that bullies often feel insecure about *their own* position.^x Whether at work or at home, an abuser's goal is control, and their tool is humiliation.

How do you deal with such behavior if you are a target? I'm not an expert. I'm not a human relations professional or an attorney. But I've learned there are websites and workbooks to help you recognize abuse when you're going through it or seeing it happen. Advocacy organizations are getting legislation passed, state by state. Support groups and therapists are also good resources.

From the reading I've done I can appreciate a few approaches that can help.

In the workplace, it's important to document the behavior and the words that you feel are unreasonable or humiliating. Keep a record. Of course the tactic of some bullies is to document their accusations as well. This is another good reason to keep your own record, and note any witnesses to any abuse. In making their complaints, some targeted people have actually made use of the written messages of their aggressors. They have even used the documentation the bullies have kept themselves to intimidate the target.

What about confronting a situation, addressing a bully? If you can evaluate how much risk it might put you in, you can then decide whether it's worth the risk. There is no easy answer. However, lashing out in hurt or anger will probably hurt your case. Instead of *reacting*, it's wise to wait and reflect before choosing *how* to act.

A senior bank executive "returned from a week-long professional meeting to discover that the bank president had accused him of [avoiding his work]. Even though his time away had been approved ..., the CEO ... announced that he was off on a boondoggle. [On return,] the bank officer decided to... go into the president's office to complain and was fired on the spot." This personal blow became a financial hardship for this middle aged man's family. It's wise to choose when and how to speak up, and whether or not to do so.

Perhaps if this man had had a family member, trusted peer, friend or mentor, he could have considered other options first.

As I noted, many workers have reported that they have witnessed abuse inflicted on their coworkers by supervisors or by peers. It can be a great relief to a

targeted person to let them know you see what they are going through. Let them know it is not fair. Keep your own records in case it may be helpful sometime. And consider when standing up to a bully is your moral obligation. Consider when it's time for you and others to rise together to stand against a pattern of abuse.

At work, at school or in families, a bully works on you so your world shrinks down just to the size of your orbit around them. They often *project* their own fears or failings onto you: disloyal, uncaring, not committed, incompetent. They exploit what you are insecure about, or a fault you worry about. Speaking about his mother, one man said: "My mom would call me *selfish* whenever I didn't do what she wanted. I never wanted to be perceived as selfish, so whenever she flung that in my face, I'd end up going along with what she wanted."

He found help. He turned to people who knew him well and admired him. They affirmed his gifts of caring and kindness. The man came to realize that his mother was indulging *her own selfishness* by manipulating him.^{xi}

We all make mistakes and have flaws. We need encouragement to accept our imperfections, in order to be less vulnerable to manipulation.

In any setting, abuse operates in a way to break our spirit. We need to cultivate ways to renew our spirits. This is what we mean by spiritual practice. Simple things like, rest, reading, music, meditation, and prayer. We need shared meals with others. We need regular exercise, to stay healthy, regain energy, renew our perspective.

Isolation is harmful to human beings. When times are painful, going it alone is dangerous. In her book about getting through abusive situations, consultant Sam Horn advises us to find and reach out to

people with whom we can share friendship, respect, and encouragement. Cultivate activities that give us joy in life, and stay involved in them.^{xii} This is good advice for getting through life in any situation.

To build our self-esteem, we need others around us who can see us for who we are and who love us and accept us for who we are. We need the company of people who can accept our flaws and affirm our gifts.

This is where *we* come in—a community. We don't have to be experts to affirm the worth of someone going through a hard time.

We don't have to *fix* another person's problem for us to say: *I see you. I see you are hurting, and I'm sorry.*

We don't have to be experts to share the joy and healing of human fellowship. We just need to show up—to be present and aware, and to show that we care.

My closing words today are my prayer, a prayer for everyone here, and for anyone in any place, especially when you are going through a hard place.

For all who feel beleaguered and alone, may you come to see that you are part of something larger than yourself. For all who doubt yourselves, may you know you are loved.

May you learn you are worthy of love. May you know that your life is a gift, and you are a blessing.

So may we live, all of us.

So may it be for everyone, everywhere. Amen.

END NOTES

ⁱ Kalb, Loretta. "San Juan Unified to Consider Censure of Member ..." *Sacramento Bee*, January 12, 2014, B1.

<http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/education/article2588680.html> SEE ALSO: Kalb, Loretta. "San Juan Hit with Claims." *Sacramento Bee*, December 16, 2013, 1.

ⁱⁱ Lutgen-Sandvik, Pamela. *Adult Bullying*. (St. Louis, 2013: ORCM Academic Press), 57.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 64.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 57.

^v Rafter, Michelle. "Bullied at Work?" *Orange County Register*, July 27, 2015.

<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/bullying-673777-workplace-job.html>

^{vi} Lutgen-Sandvik, 14.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 30 & 37.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 103.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 106.

^x *Ibid.*, 58.

^{xi} Horn, Sam. *Take the Bully by the Horns: Stop Unethical, Uncooperative, or Unpleasant People from Running and Ruining Your Life*. (New York, 2002: St. Martin's Press), 103. **I appreciated this book very much for its workbook-like exercises, vivid examples, and practical advice on dealing with controlling or unkind people in many situations, not only workplace harassment or bullying, but in our families and other parts of our personal lives.**

^{xii} *Ibid.*