

From the Bathrooms to the Balkans

Teasing to Terrorism

By Kim John Payne M.Ed

Hearing of the horror of genocide from recent history, such as that in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, we often feel so powerless, horrified, and disturbed. Can we do something about this? Yes, and it begins at our dinner table at home, in our hallways and playgrounds at school. When 'joking around' crosses the line into put downs and then teasing we are witnessing the genesis of genocide.

The act of de-humanizing another person lies at the heart of this. As Ervin Staub Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at the Trauma, Research, University of Massachusetts, explains, genocide is primarily possible because one group de-humanizes another group.

I was in a school in New York on 9/11 when the news came through about the attacks. In working with a class to bring this news in the best way we could, one nine year old boy said earnestly "But why do they hate us so much?" Another child answered "Because we won't talk to them, because everybody thinks they are just bad." The children, without prompting, went on to talk about how that very same thing happens in their playground. As the children got ready to go out to recess a child who was known to tease and bully others came to me and said "I hit kids because they won't listen to me." A small group gathered and agreed that this was happening. Right there they made a plan to try to listen when the boy wanted to speak. While we adults struggled to understand the unimaginable, they made the clear link between being marginalized in their own playground to the dynamics of terrorism.

In July of last year a remarkable conference took place at the Royal Court Theatre in London called 'Engaging in Terror'. The conference challenged the often repeated mantra of many governments that we must root out these evil doers and eradicate them. It put forward the controversial idea that we need to engage with the organizations that sponsor terror. In writing the play "Talking to Terrorists", Robin Soans spent a year researching and recording conversations he had with terrorists. He found four common features. A sense of humiliation, degradation, powerlessness but most telling a sense that no one would listen to their story. They felt that only when they turned to extreme violence did their cause become heard. In the interviews the following account was played "A relief worker told us of arriving at a village which had been completely destroyed. The people were angry not because they had nothing to eat and nowhere to live but because no-one had listened to their story of what had happened." What gives me hope is that our children still have the purity of soul to know the importance of having their story heard and when *we* are willing to hear their stories about their struggles they in turn are encouraged to listen to each other.

What is the relationship between terrorists feeling they are freedom fighters and children who bully?

Terrorists feel they have a just cause and it is 'us' against 'them'. They feel the adversary is much bigger and more powerful and therefore they have few choices but to adopt what they see as direct action. Likewise most children who tease and bully ironically enough see themselves as victims. This is brought about because many schools lack the tools or interest to spend time working through conflict and instead rely primarily on a moralistic and punitive approach. Children who bully are spoken to and told their actions are not in keeping with the ethos of the school. This results in them feeling like outsiders. Then they are given consequences which often result in their feeling that they are now the victims. Now they feel justified in getting back at the school and also at the child they were bullying in the first place. So they now see their bullying as vindicated and see themselves as anti heroes standing up for themselves. A very warped cycle is set up that is literally and physically vicious.

What can be done to help our children?

To answer this question we need to understand the nature of much of our criminal justice system and see that it is based on finding whom to blame and how much to punish the perpetrator. The accused then tries to avoid punishment by claiming innocence or passing the blame onto someone else. Added to this is the question of whether to rehabilitate the wrong doer or punish. What we seem to have inherited from Roman law is a thumbs up, meaning life and survival or thumbs down, meaning guilt and death. We stand on a judicial see-saw trying to decide which side to sit on and argue for. The burning question here is, is it possible to have justice without blame? The clear answer is not only 'Yes' but moreover we have to seek a third way if we are to humanize our justice systems. It is well known that here in the USA we have one of the strictest criminal codes, we have the highest per capita incarceration rate yet we have the highest violent crime rate in the industrial world. Something is not working and what lies at the heart of this is our addiction to blame.

In many countries a movement known as Restorative Justice is growing. This involves bringing the victim and the perpetrator together and forcefully bringing home to the wrong doer the deep implication of his or her actions. Then the perpetrator has to be involved in designing and carrying out agreed restoration. Human dynamic replaces blame and a chance to put things right replaces shame. In school communities that adopt the Social Inclusion Approach this model is applied. It brings together the teaser and the teased. It confronts the bully with the implications of her actions but does not seek to apportion blame instead seeks to find a way that the situation can get better and stay better. Most of all it involves the most often overlooked and yet most influential group the 'bystander' in the problem solving process.

But doesn't this give the child bullying a soft option?

Over the years many children have commented to me that being involved in Social Inclusion work is one of the hardest things they ever encountered in their years of school. The reason for this feeling is fairly simple. It's easy to be found guilty and be punished, it's much harder to face the implications of your actions, take part in finding ways to improve the situation and then be held to your agreement. This changes the whole playground culture. After being involved in helping children hundreds of times with conflicts and seeing the power of this approach I can see no reason at all that it cannot work when applied to conflict between countries.

Terrorists seem to have fairly well defined operations. How does this fit with this picture of bullying?

Terrorist groups almost always have one very charismatic and somewhat allusive figure head. He normally has a well defined personal rationale and code of ethics. He seldom will be involved in the violence but 'inspires' others with his beliefs and rhetoric. He is normally very well defended physically and verbally and is difficult to prosecute. Bullying is usually done by a group of children who pick on one child. However as the bullying becomes more developed what often happens is that the child identified as the 'ring leader' does not take such an active part in the physical or verbal taunts and abuse, preferring to stay in the background and have others carry out the actions. If the school tries to take action against him he will be defended by his supporters and can easily claim not to have been involved. Others will readily, 'take the rap' and see this as a badge of honor which in turn tightens the feeling of belonging of this clique or group.

Once again the solution lies in believing justice is possible without blame. By blaming and punishing we further strengthen the stigmatization and marginalization of the children who are bullying. This in turn solidifies the role of the leader and motivator of the bullying.

Yes, but what about suicide bombers?

Rudolph Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf Education movement brought clarity to the question of what it is to be human. He described the soul as having three distinct yet interdependent aspects. These were will or volition, feeling which results in empathy, and finally thinking or cognition. This paradigm is sometimes referred to as balancing head, heart and hands. Simplistically, if one of these aspects dominates over the other then ill health both physical and mental can result. In an article in the New View magazine Terry Goodfellow describes the bomber as having disassociated feelings, he says, "The bomber has deadened his or her feeling and as a consequence has no concern for the terrible effects of that action." He speaks of ideologies being directly translated into action. In other words thinking is bound with willing and feeling is driven out. To further illustrate this point he speaks of the 'smile' that is commonly reported on the face of the suicide bombers as they bring death to others and indeed meet their own death. Their focus seems to be on the righteousness of *their* actions and on the promised

rewards *they* will receive in the after life. It seems their focus is utterly turned inward all empathy is driven out.

Goodfellow goes on to point to another three fold dynamic that Rudolf Steiner introduced, that is the struggle between being pulled up into fantasy and illusion or downward into coldness and rigidity. Compassion and empathy lie in between these two opposing dynamics and it seems that the terrorist is held in the grip of the polarities lacking the middle ground. The terrorist sees the pleasures awaiting him or her in the after life and the righteousness of the cause and also experiences, heartlessness and the coldness of the execution.

The research of Ken Rigby shows that a child who bullies is weak in three main areas:

1. Perspective-taking—the ability to see an issue from different angles,
2. Empathy and imagination—how a conflict could be different and how does the other person feel
3. Impulse control—refraining from acting quickly.

This research again seems to support the view of Steiner's in that we can see that the child who bullies is lacking in the three vital qualities of thinking or perspective taking, feeling or empathy and will or impulse control. However in twenty years of working with children who bully I have come to see that by far the most important ingredient in whether a child bullies is empathy. While some children struggle to see things another way or have impulse control issues, these alone do not make them bullies. The crucial determining factor is empathy. I have heard countless accounts of children who receive pleasure in the discomfort and pain of others and who 'smile' as they bully.

What is the relationship to bullying?

A psychologist, Dr. Leibowitz at the Nuremberg Trials, after interviewing hundreds of people found guilty of genocide, encapsulated the nature of evil as simply a lack of empathy. When I think about genocide, I think about a culture lacking impulse control, imagination, perspective-taking, and above all empathy. Some people have said these qualities are in us all, but that we are manipulated by socio-political forces which deaden them within us.

So every day, we can make a stand against genocide and it is simple. Yes, it is governments and political movements that envision genocide but it is individuals who carry it out. We need to on work strengthening ourselves in our daily lives to know and work on the part within us that can be manipulated to commit anti social acts. One powerful and simple way of achieving this has to do with becoming very aware of our put-downs because our put-downs and the fact that our children model themselves on us is the potent beginning point of what grows into the de-humanization of another human being, and when that becomes acculturated genocide becomes not only possible, but even likely.

When we use the word genocide, we have a certain picture of what that word means, but actually being violent towards a whole group of people is only one aspect of its meaning.

Marginalized groups are subjected to subtle yet more powerful social, economic, and even spiritual genocide.

All this begins when we speak. A choice is made as to which road we go down, not in counseling sessions, not in formal meetings only, this decision is made sitting at the dinner table with our family when we reflect on the day's events.

What are the effects on the child who is targeted?

Let's talk about both the child who is targeted and the child who is bullied, but let's not forget that in any exclusion situation, probably the most influential group is the bystanders.

The reason to consider the effects on the child who is targeted and the child who is bullying is that this links to the question of empathy and ultimately to intense anti-social behavior on the part of the whole community. It takes them into a survival mode of the well-known fight or flight and, I would add, flock - by flock, I mean on a socio-political level. Politically, we can see examples that in recent history or even contemporary times when a population is manipulated to believe they are under threat and therefore will flock together out of a fear reaction. We can see this in street gangs as much as in the Congress. But that same flocking is created when there is the climate of fear and intimidation in the classroom or the hallways and the playgrounds of a school.

What pierces this intimidation and fear is consciousness and a climate where we are safe to speak out on the playground and penetrates the darkness within our souls.

What research is out there that clarifies this?

One longitudinal study done here in the Midwest of the U.S. (Enron Huessmann, 1987) gave some statistics on children who bully. The individuals were tracked from 1960-1987. The conclusions are that children who bully by age 8 have a 1 in 4 chance for developing a criminal record for serious, violent crime, while the control group (which reflects the general population) showed a 1 in 20 chance. The group studied has a higher rate of domestic abuse and their own children have a three times higher rate of becoming bullies. Another study (Dietz, 1994) found that children who bullied have an eight times higher rate of depression. While another study (Dan Olweus, 1991) found that boys who bully in grades 6-9, by the age of 24, 60% had 1 criminal conviction. The national average of men at 24 with criminal conviction was 3%.

How does the Social Inclusion work relate to the bigger picture?

The "Ready for Change" program has been adopted as a pre-mediation strategy on a global level by the United Nations when the UN becomes involved with countries which have reached an impasse in negotiations. The "No Blame" approach is a similar process to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Some people in South Africa speak of the 'spirit' of Ubuntu. Ubuntu generally means "I find myself in you; you find yourself in me". We work with Social Inclusion so that we can actively make manifest the mantra, "Education towards freedom" to which I add "... and humanity."