
Introduction

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The question caught me off guard and stopped me in my tracks. I was at the end of a retreat for school administrators on bullying prevention based on my book *No Place for Bullying*. After two days, we had all grown more comfortable with each other and people were opening up about some of the real issues that they faced in their schools, and many dealt with issues that went far beyond the problem of bullying. Maybe that was why this particular principal shifted from the professional to the personal when she asked the following question: “What was it that brought me to where I was at the moment—doing a workshop on bullying prevention?”

I hadn’t thought too deeply about why bullying prevention was now at the center of my professional life and why I was so passionate about helping school leaders address this problem in their schools. My current status was a progression of decisions that I had made as a school leader, and in “retirement” as a writer, trainer, consultant, and now to some as a perceived “expert” on the topic. I didn’t really have an answer for her, but said something about how my experiences as a student must have given me a desire to ensure that kids didn’t get treated the way I had been treated in school. I had some vague connection between my experiences as a student and my mission and values as an educator.

However, that question and my fumbling attempt to answer it planted a seed for a lot of reflection, which when added to the time that “retirement” afforded me, did eventually lead me to the truth of why I did what I did and why I was standing in front of that group. In fact, that question and all that it subsequently triggered in me, led me to write this book about bullying prevention and to probe deeply into this issue and why it persists in our schools. Accordingly, I think it is fair that I share

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the story that I recalled in my reflection when I answered the question posed to me; the story that reveals why I do what I do now and how this book came to be.

Ironically, reflecting on that basic and personal “why” question transported me back in time to a different type of retreat almost twenty years earlier, one where I was a participant and not the leader. It was a two-day weekend spiritual retreat for the men of my parish church. It was led by a young, but very wise priest from Ireland who approached the Catholic faith very differently from any other priest I had ever met. It was for this reason that I decided to give up a weekend usually devoted to the paperwork I had to do as a relatively new elementary principal.

This priest, Father M., much to the chagrin of some others on the retreat was not interested in having us reflect on our sins and asking forgiveness, but rather in having us reflect on the times when others had “sinned” against us and how that mistreatment had affected us. Being raised in a faith (one I still practice and greatly value) that had emphasized *what I had done wrong*, this retreat gave me the opportunity to think and reflect on how people had treated me—especially when I was younger and more vulnerable.

Being a wise leader, instead of lecturing or preaching, Father M. simply told us this story:

He attended an all-boys Catholic school in Ireland. There was a teacher, a brother, who was very strict and could be harsh in his discipline with students. Very often, he embarrassed students in order to get them to stop misbehaving or to motivate them to work harder. One day when Father M. was in the fifth grade, this teacher went a little too far in ridiculing a student. Father M. decided that he had to speak up or do something in response to what was happening to his classmate. Finally, he raised his hand and when called on offered his opinion that what the teacher was doing was wrong and hurtful and that it should stop. The teacher didn’t say anything in response and just went on teaching.

That event happened early in the morning and the day continued as normal. All the students in the school went to lunch at the same time and following lunch all had recess outside on the schoolyard. When recess was over, all the students lined up in formation and stood at attention until the headmaster, their principal, dismissed them with their teachers to return to their classrooms. This time, however, they weren’t dismissed as promptly as they usually were. The headmaster called Father M.’s name and asked him to come up to the front and stand before him. Then, with the entire school watching, he verbally reprimanded him for disrespecting his teacher and promptly pulled down his pants and whacked him several times on his bottom. Afterwards, he was told to return to his class and the students were dismissed from recess to return to the building for their lessons.

When Father M. finished this story, I was stunned and sat motionless. I don’t really recall anything else after he finished the story because that

final scene remained so vividly in my mind. His story flipped on a light switch in a forgotten room of my life that had been dark for many, many years. Suddenly, my entire twelve years of education in Catholic schools replayed itself in my heart and in my mind. My past that I thought was *past* was still very much present inside of me. I thought that I had put all of it behind me. I had lived and learned and it was just part of growing up. Not so! His story revealed my story; one, I know now, that I had tried to forget.

What was it in his story that touched me so deeply and brought my story into the light? I didn't know that answer right away; all I knew was that I had to talk to Father M.; I had to tell him that his story had connected with my story. As everyone left to go to dinner, I asked Father M. if I could talk with him. We waited until the room was empty, and then he nodded and said, "Go ahead."

As the first words were about to come out of my mouth, a wave of emotion swept over me and I began to cry. I felt I was releasing something deep inside of me and when I finally stopped and took a deep breath, suddenly I knew what I was crying about—it was very clear in both my heart and my mind.

I wasn't crying over being hit or humiliated like Father M.; I was crying because I hadn't been.

I thought my story of twelve years in school was pretty simple: I did what I was told to do, got very good grades, and ultimately got into a good college. I had friends, enjoyed my summers, and viewed school as just something everybody had to go through and at times endure. Most people would say I had a good education and that the sisters and brothers did a good job by keeping students on the straight and narrow, out of trouble, and on the road to success.

What I didn't know about my story was that during all those years in school I *lost* something important along the way. That was what Father M.'s story revealed to me. That was why I cried. I was grieving the loss!

Father M.'s story was the same as mine, up to a point. We both witnessed many acts of mistreatment or bullying. We both witnessed classmates and friends being shamed and humiliated at times. He couldn't be silent anymore, finally spoke up, and paid a severe and painful price for doing so. I never spoke up and had no price to pay, or so I thought at the time. That was where our stories parted ways. I stayed safe and made sure that I avoided what some of my classmates couldn't avoid. Nevertheless, his story showed me that I ultimately did pay a price by not speaking up. His story changed how I looked at my story, and I grieved what was missing from it or what was taken from me without my knowing it.

I wasn't grieving over my lack of courage or failure to speak up or help others. The loss went deeper than that—I was grieving because *I had never even considered for one brief moment* in those twelve years, the *possibility* of my speaking up or doing anything in the face of this mistreatment of others. I just accepted it as part of how things were done in school; it was all perfectly normal. It was just a way for the teachers to keep things running

smoothly and keeping the kids who broke the rules in line. I had internalized the idea that the kids who were mistreated deserved it, that they had it coming to them. They were being punished “for their own good.” Looking back, I realized just how well my fears had worked; it was so much a part of me and of my experience of going to school that I couldn’t see it or even know it existed. How could I know what it was taking from me?

On some subconscious level, I made the decision that I had to protect myself and ensure that I stayed safe. I felt bad in some way for those kids who got in trouble, but not bad enough to think of doing or saying anything to help them—certainly not by challenging or questioning my teachers! In retrospect, I didn’t blame myself for this attitude, I was only doing what most kids or people do: stay safe in the face of danger.

However, when the danger and the fear it generates isn’t a onetime event or emergency, but is spread out over the years cleverly disguised as a normal routine, then it ends up producing long-term consequences. The people who endure it, who learn to live with this silent and visible fear, lose a part of themselves—they lose some compassion, empathy, and courage. Consequently, they become more of what those who have the power over them want them to be, and less and less of who they really are. That was the loss I was grieving. That was the true and high price I ended up paying.

Looking back now, I realize that it was this invisible silent fear that made me stay in school and become an educator; I learned to be successful in school, but had very little confidence that I could be successful anywhere else. Nevertheless, as an educator I did know that somewhere deep inside of me, I knew that school could be different than my experience, had to be different for the students I served. I didn’t want school to take away from them what it took from me. The driving force for me as an educator was to make school a safer place, a place without fear, a place where students could be themselves and feel at home. That mission, my mission, continues to this day. It is the true answer to the question posed to me at the end of that retreat for principals. It is the reason that I wrote this book.

This book is a different way of telling my story, a way to shine a light on a problem that has remained hidden for too long. The act of bullying, using fear to change others or as a means to an end is sadly woven into the fabric of how schools function, and until it is exposed to the light, it will persist despite all of our attempts to address it as a separate and distinct problem.

In this regard, this is an ambitious book that I hope contributes to addressing an issue greater than bullying alone. Currently bullying in schools remains a persistent symptom of a deeper problem that disguises itself using the nomenclature of *standard operating procedure*. Despite the best intentions and the hard work and effort of so many people, and despite the fact that most people don’t bully and don’t approve of bullying, it continues to be a problem that negatively affects the entire school environment. This book is designed to help educators step back and view bullying in its complete context and not as a separate problem to fix.

The first section of this book, Chapters 1 through 4, explains the relationship between the problem of bullying and the current structure and operational framework of most schools. Chapter 5 offers promising research on how organizations can positively change their culture and climate. Chapter 6 articulates a new vision for understanding the problem of bullying, and offers a positive way to not just address the problem, but to improve the learning environment for all members of the school community. As it is described in the book, reframing bullying prevention should support the work of competent and caring educators, students, and parents in creating and sustaining the type of school community they want and need.

Key concepts of Section II of this book, the *how-to* of reframing bullying prevention, can be traced back to another story that points the way for how to remove fear from schools and make them safer places for learning.

This story is very brief one, but it sheds a light on what schools can do about bullying. The story offers wise advice that has been right in front of all of us for as long as we can remember; a basic truth, which is probably why we have so much trouble seeing it and putting it into action.

My friend and mentor Dr. Barrie Bennett was conducting a workshop for our school district. (Barrie works in a stream of consciousness manner, so knowing this, I stay on the alert for any of his stray thoughts that depart from the main topic of his workshop. They can often be as valuable as anything else he says.) So, one day in the middle of some point he was trying to make about instruction, he just stopped and said the following: *"It's pretty simple with kids, never treat them in any way that you wouldn't want to be treated."* And then he just moved on the next part of his workshop. For me, however, I knew that he had boiled down into one simple sentence exactly what I knew was missing in most schools; the one thing that many teachers either forgot and/or thought didn't apply to them because they were teachers.

If Barrie's *simple* advice borrowed from the wisdom of the ages were followed in schools, so many seemingly intractable problems would move toward positive resolutions. If those in power and authority acted with more kindness and empathy toward those who have less power, the problem of bullying would be more visible and less camouflaged. Students would have a clear and positive example to follow if they could see and hear adults consistently treating all students with respect and care on a daily basis. In such an environment, bullying would stick out like a sore thumb, it would attract people's negative attention and it would go away because it would know it was not wanted and it had no place to hide.

The way to reframe bullying prevention and to create stronger school communities can be found in Barrie's seemingly stray thought, stated in the middle of a workshop in a summer many years ago. That simple advice is the counterbalance, the alternative path, the remedy, to the story by Father M., my story, and sadly the story of too many other people; a story that continues to this day in too many places.

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Section II of this book is translating Barrie’s advice, the “golden rule,” into a variety of guidelines and strategies that support those who want to transform schools into optimal and safer places for learning. Since changing hearts and minds is a process, a human process, I offer resources and activities for people to share and experience together as a way to reframe bullying prevention and to build community spirit in our schools. To paraphrase a saying about peace, “There is no way to community, community is the way.”

Although the challenge of transforming our schools is very daunting, I have great hope that we can change the *story* of our schools so that our students and staff can experience and live a better *story*—a more human and kinder story. *I am hopeful because I know that my story would have been a lot different, a lot better if I had been educated in a school with less fear.* I am hopeful because I know from my reading, my research, my interactions with others, and my experiences in school as a student and as an educator that the following is true:

- People are basically good and want to have positive relationships with others.
- People are easily frightened and need to stay safe.
- Sometimes the need to stay safe prevents them from doing good and helping others.
- Sometimes situations arise and good people find themselves mistreating others, yet think that they are really helping them and are doing what they believe to be “right.”
- When people feel safe and supported, the good in them comes out. They help others and discover that they are also helping themselves.
- When you change the conditions of people’s environments and give them alternative and more humane ways of meeting their needs, they will ultimately do what they originally wanted to do in their hearts: do good and help others.
- Once people believe that they can change their circumstances by working together, they will do so and create the type of environment where everyone can feel safe and supported and where everyone can thrive.

My hope is that we can join together to make our schools places where each student, each person is cared for and valued. My hope is that this book can help us achieve this goal.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead