

The Problem of Bullying, 17 April 2011

Part 1 Garry – why bully?

Part 2 Lee – causality and new research

Testimony from participants

Part 3 Garry – how make better

Part 4 Lee – how make better

Part 1 (Garry Francell)

Part 2 (Lee Bond-Upson)

The second sermon I ever gave here, last September, focused on providing a scientific and philosophical basis for forgiving others their trespasses.

At the beginning of that sermon I quoted the Swiss Mme de Staël, who ran a salon during the early years of the French Revolution, and survived it and the Napoleonic Wars. She is famous for having said something like “To understand all is to forgive all.” Those who agree with this, therefore strive to understand.

The understanding in question is in making the effort to take in the entire situation of the person who did something that needs forgiving. Seen in that light, digging deep into cause and effect, we see that we are all, devils and angels alike, driven by circumstance, that we have no more free will in these matters than Pavlov’s dogs.

When I made the case for causality, some of you rebelled against the idea of losing your free will, and that’s perfectly understandable. Everything you’ve been taught, all your assumptions about choice are so strong, so habitual, that it was inevitable that there would be a rejection—a revulsion even—against the idea that we are bound by circumstance. Given all those antecedents, all those past events that shape the present, you had to object. It could even be said you had no choice in the matter.

Now you may now feel that was snarky, but I’m taking the chance because belief in free will—tied as it is to conventional morality, traditional religion, and the religion of capitalism, is one of the big causes for the United States, with less than 5% of the world’s population, incarcerating almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners. Our share of prisoners is 5-1/2 times our share of general population. It’s very expensive. We’d do better spending most of that money on education and early childhood medical care and other positive investments.

What does this have to do with bullying? Well, because there’s more evidence. There’s research going on about a way of measuring the causes of behaviors that are destructive to self and destructive to others. The research gives us more good reason to pity rather than condemn those who bully.

It’s a measuring of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or A.C.E.

These Experiences include:

1. Recurrent physical abuse
2. Recurrent emotional abuse
3. Contact sexual abuse

4. Having an alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
5. Having an incarcerated household member
6. Someone in the household who is chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
7. The Mother is treated violently by her partner
8. One or no parents
9. Emotional or physical neglect

How many of these have you experienced? Let me repeat them:

1. Recurrent physical abuse
2. Recurrent emotional abuse
3. Contact sexual abuse
4. An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
5. An incarcerated household member
6. Someone in the household who is chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
7. Mother is treated violently by her partner
8. One or no parents
9. Emotional or physical neglect

Growing up, I experienced

1. Recurrent physical abuse? A little, but the threat was always there.
2. Recurrent emotional abuse? Again: some, but constant threat. My father was what some people call a 'rageaholic.' He was not an alcoholic but he was just as unpredictable.
3. Contact or non-contact sexual abuse? No.
4. Alcohol or drug abuser in the house? No.
5. An incarcerated household member? No.
6. Someone chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal?
My mother was chronically depressed for maybe 10 of my first 20 years.
7. Mother is treated violently by her partner. On a couple of occasions--that I remember vividly.
8. One or no parents? No.
9. Emotional or physical neglect? Some. I didn't get a lot of positive attention. My dad concentrated on his work and do-gooder activities. He opposed unjust authority and oppression in the world, except his own.
Why? Take a good look at his mother.

My mother was focused on her own problems, including, during the worst years, her migraine headaches. So my dad made my life harder, and my mom wasn't much help.

The research indicates that the more ACEs you have, the more disproportionate your chances for serious emotional, mental, and medical problems.

I figure my Adverse Childhood Experiences score is about a 2, and I think it weakened me, and helped make me a target of a couple of bullies—Eddie Lang in the neighborhood and Jim Hamilton in middle school. Eddie's dad was a police officer, a man who abused his three boys. We knew this because the Lang family lived so nearby. I never did figure out what made Jim tick.

I have worked all my life to figure out what made me tick, though, and why I bullied my two

younger brothers. What was I thinking? I don't remember thinking—I remember emotion.

Part 3 (Garry Francell)

Part 4 (Lee Bond-Upson)

Garry and I agree about the science that underlies our behavior. He has also spoken of how the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, deprivation, and anxiety, if sensed, if brought to consciousness and examined, can become an opportunity to make things better.

Speaking of making things better, there's a website that is titled "It Gets Better.com." The site is aimed at BGLQT young people who are going through what many people say was the worst time of their life: middle school, or junior high. Is it true that the cruelest people on earth are middle school girls?

ItGetsBetter.com's idea is to give hope to the otherwise hopeless, and prevent more of those suicides we've witnessed over the past two years.

As I say, it's aimed at young gay people, but I and other straight kids could have used just such a message when we were that age. It *does* get better, and like so many other kids, it got better the minute I left home for college, far from my hometown milieu.

In fact, I did get that message while I was still in high school. I didn't get it from my parents or even my nice teachers—I got it from my new, gay, Unitarian minister. He counseled me to be patient, to focus on finishing high school well, and to not do anything stupid. He also began a chapter of Liberal Religious Youth, LRY. There were a dozen of us, and we all benefitted greatly from being together, and meeting other liberal kids in the Pacific Northwest—BC, Washington, Oregon.

The research indicates that excessive, long-term stress, which causes the over-production of cortisol, the main stress hormone, causes deep physical changes—it actually alters the chemistry of DNA in the brain, through a process called methylation.

Research indicates that the methylation patterns can be reduced by parental-type nurturing.

Jeff Kaplan, the Program Director of the Waikiki Health Center Youth Outreach program, who spoke here February 6th, is offering that kind of nurturing for young people, some of whom have ACE scores of 4, 5, 6.

Foster care, when it's done right, can be a life-saver, or a life-destroyer, if done wrong.

In thinking about these things, I remembered a conversation that took place 50 years ago, a moment I would otherwise have remained forgotten. In 8th grade, the worst year of my life, I witnessed a conversation between two boys my age. One of them had gone to live with another family for the rest of the year. I didn't know such things were possible. The boy was straightforward, unapologetic, and clear-eyed about the change. He was happy.

We have generous--I think we can say liberal--traditions here in Hawaii, of ohana and hanai,

routinely expanding the capacity for nurture beyond the nuclear family, which has proven so prone to dysfunction.

All the Adverse Childhood Experiences have the effect of leaving children emotionally alone, disconnected from what family is supposed to provide. The medical clinics that are trying to prevent adding to the ACE scores of little children emphasize to the parents of these at-risk keiki, the importance of secure attachment.

There's no-one too young or too old to not benefit from secure attachment.

Garry spoke eloquently of connecting with oneself, on many levels.

The lesson is, more good connecting makes for less bullying.

Closing words

From E.M. Forster:

"Only connect! That was the whole of [his] sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.
[pause]

Only connect! Isn't that why we come to church?

Out-takes:

Medical problems? Yes. It turns out that the stress caused by having recurrent or unceasing ACSs causes “significant and long-lasting chemical changes in both brain and body.” Stress physiology and neuroendocrinology show “that repeated, full-scale activation of our stress system, especially in early childhood, can lead to deep physical changes.