



Who Will Take Care of the Bully?

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Lucy was the name of my bully in grade 6. At the age of 11 her mother had died suddenly from a cancer leaving behind 4 children and a husband. Lucy didn't get mean right away; she seemed lost and sad at first. I remember my teacher telling us we should show her compassion and we did, for a while. It's hard to say when her transformation occurred but her sadness gave way to a cold and hardened demeanor around the time her father remarried. We all understood on some level that you couldn't go through something like that and stay the same person, but I wasn't prepared for the bully she became.

Lucy seemed to take great pleasure in trying to make me feel invisible and in sending a message that I was unimportant. She worked hard at school, not on academics but on alienating me. While I remember being sad about it, I just moved on, avoided her, and played with other people. I remember feeling sorry for my friends who followed her, like sheep to the slaughter.

It was only when Lucy started the rumours that I got really upset. My friend Natalie would rush to tell me, with flushed face and rapid speech, the latest 'secret'. I quickly realized it was just Lucy using Natalie to get to me. At some point I had enough of her hurtful words and in exasperation I reached for the only desperate solution I could think of. I told Natalie that if Lucy continued to spread rumours, I was going "to wait for her after school and we would fight it out." As I saw Natalie's naïve but kind brown eyes widen I decided to emphasize my message. "I don't care if I get in trouble, I am going to beat her up so she learns her lesson." What I didn't tell Natalie was that I was terrified of getting in trouble, of getting hurt, and of hurting Lucy, but I just couldn't see any other way through. One day later Natalie found me, tense with the weighty burden of being a peacemaker, and said, "Lucy doesn't want to fight you. Will you still beat her up if she stops?" Shocked, I managed to assert, "okay," and a sense of relief overwhelmed me.

When I was 11, there were no anti-bully campaigns, counsellors to talk to or a zero tolerance policy at my school. I am not sure how these would have influenced my decision-making or helped. What my 11-year old self believed was that if I had gone to an adult for help they would have made me a bigger victim. My mother would have been up at the school demanding action and calling Lucy's father. While today I understand these actions as a parent, I intuitively knew at 11 years of age that the last thing you did in front of a bully was show vulnerability. If Lucy saw that my adults needed to rescue me, I would have been subjected to further torment and ridicule.

While I was 'fortunately successful' in stopping Lucy from bullying me, I know it didn't change the bully inside of her. She started bullying another child in the class who was quirky and came from a poor family. What Lucy really needed wasn't consequences, punishment, empathy lessons, zero-tolerance or me threatening to beat her up. What she needed was to be understood and taken care of. Lucy had faced more separation than she could bear and she was lost. She had a mother that had disappeared unexpectedly, a father who had a new wife, and she was facing her adolescent development without a female guide. These were the separations I knew of, but there could have been more. Was her father available to her or was he lost in his own grief or new wife? Did she move to a new house as a

result of her father's remarriage and away from the home her mother had cared for her in? What became of her brothers and how did they deal with the loss of their mother? Was Lucy bullied at home too? Did she have grandparents or other adults that could hold onto her as she faced all that she had lost? While I don't know the answers to these questions I do know that the bully she became was created from the seeds of facing too much separation.

What Lucy couldn't say was that her wounds were too much to bear and her brain had moved to defend her against these vulnerable feelings. There wasn't anything wrong with her brain but with her world – it had come undone. The firm footing she had grown up on had been torn away overnight. It wasn't that she wasn't capable of caring but that if she did, she would have had to face a cascade of emotions flooding and overwhelming her. How could she possibly find all the tears and words for a mother that had been lost, let alone all the changes that had unfolded? On the outside Lucy had a tough, untouchable, cold demeanor as she moved to exploit the vulnerability in others. She used shame, putdowns, and intimidation and took great delight in wounding me. This was not who Lucy was, but who she had become in light of facing too much separation. She had grown dark inside and moved to exploit other's vulnerability, a projection of all that she could not bear inside herself. Her heart had grown cold and her feelings were numbed out, she was surviving but no longer fully human.

If you were to ask me what I would have wanted for Lucy and I, it would have been for the adults to take the lead while preserving our dignity. I wish they could have seen what was occurring and moved in to take care of us both. Our problem wasn't for us to figure out and 'bully' or 'victim' labels would have done little to help. Being called a bully would have only increased Lucy's wounding and separation while being labeled a victim would have done little for my self worth. What prevented her words from sticking to me was that I never saw them as personal but more of a reflection as to how she was hurting and that I was her favourite target.

There were many ways adults could have moved to take care of us without our knowledge. From lunch yard supervision to adult lunch dates for Lucy, there was no shortage of ways to intervene naturally. Lucy needed to feel again and when she did, the bully inside of her would have been made human once more. The question was how to protect and shield the kids around Lucy's wounding ways until this happened. If the adults had eyes to understand her they would have seen her dominance and lack of empathy. Why did there have to be a victim before they could see the bully inside of her? She was free falling but no one knew how to catch her.

When I reflect back on Lucy I no longer want to beat her up, I want to put my arms around her and tell her I am sorry. I am sorry I scared her because I was too frustrated and hurt. I would tell her I hold nothing against her and understand why she was moved to wound others. I would tell her that I am sorry life handed her too much to bear. I would tell her that I hoped someone had taken care of her so she could find her tears and be made fully human again.

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