



# A Bully's Tale

I don't know why I'm thinking about this now. I thought I had dealt with all of these memories and emotions; but here they are, ready to disrupt my day. Maybe it's because it seems to be all over the news, all the time. Guns, metal detectors, bombs, Slushee poisonings. Since Columbine, society has been much more aware of school bullies. My heart breaks that it takes such drastic incidents to wake us up.

So what's my story? I'm a 25-year-old biologist, and I was bullied. Saying that makes me feel like I'm at an AA meeting, except there's no one around to say "good for you." As much as I want to forget it ever happened, as much as I try to convince myself that being bullied made me stronger, that I am now more successful than my bullies, the truth is, part of my soul is forever scarred, and if I don't deal with this now it will keep coming back to haunt and consume me.

I don't remember exactly when the bullying started – probably as early as Grade Primary. I was always chubbier than the other girls my age; taller, broader, louder, and covered in freckles. Clothes meant for my age group didn't fit properly, so I dressed more "grown-up," or wore elastic-waist pants and baggy sweatshirts. I was teased constantly about my size, my clothes, and my appearance. "Fatazoid" is my favourite. I remember one occasion, on the playground at recess, crouching on the ground, surrounded by my so-called friends, being poked with sticks. I wasn't very athletic or coordinated, so running away wasn't an option – I probably would have face-planted into the ground. Why were they doing this? Who knows, but they sure got a rise out of it.

Grades 5 to 7 were the worst. Elastic-waist pants are easy to pull down, in front of everyone, anywhere, anytime. Luckily that only happened a few times. Once, after I had auditioned for a school play, one of my classmates announced that she had "never heard of a fat actress." Classmates stole food from my lunch, broke into my locker and tossed my gym clothes around the halls like footballs, pinned me down to play "connect the dots" with my freckles, threw bits of paper at me, and put gum in my hair. Instead of playing along, I just waited until my bullies were no longer amused by their games and stopped.

Then there were the mind games. Someone would call my name; when I turned to look, they all pretended no one had said anything. Someone would distract me while another removed something from my desk; while I looked for it, they discretely returned it, making me believe it had been there the whole time. Was I going crazy? I didn't believe in myself enough to know.

It wasn't just the girls, of course. The boys loudly whispered derogatory comments as I walked past them in the hallway – "Why don't you wear a bra?" – which I did!

All the while, the teachers sat at their desks, apparently oblivious to it all. Even the classmates I thought were real friends just stood there and let it all happen. "Innocent bystanders."

I didn't have siblings and had never experienced this kind of teasing, so I didn't know what was "normal" and what was going over the line – or if there was a line at all. Who could I talk to about this? Obviously not my parents. Sure, they loved me and would have meant well when they tried to do something about it, but I didn't want any more attention drawn to myself. I just wanted it all to stop. Teachers? Guidance counsellor? Ha! Our school guidance counsellor was useless when it came to dealing with "personal issues." He would have said, "Just ignore them and they'll stop," or, "You're better than them."

It's hard to ignore physical bullying, but you can try to ignore name-calling and mind games. It's true what they say, though – once you hear something enough times you begin to believe it. I didn't tell anyone. I couldn't have proved anything, and I didn't have enough confidence to



think anyone would believe little ol' me over all of them. I just wanted it to stop. I even turned to prayer at one point: I prayed for a brain tumour so I didn't have to go to school, or for my "friends" to see the light and leave me alone. I briefly contemplated suicide. Luckily, those moments were brief; I realized the bullying would eventually end. Still, it was hard to get through those years. Had I known the saying then, my mantra would have been "God grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Eventually it did stop. Not because the bullies got bored or more mature, but because I was pushed to my limit and snapped. It was after school. We were at our lockers packing up our books. One girl grabbed something from my locker and started tossing it around with the others, as usual. Maybe it was her laugh – what sounded like a malicious cackle to me – that broke me. I grabbed her by the shoulders and started shaking her. I wanted her to know what it felt like, to see what she was doing to me. I'll never forget the look of sheer terror in her eyes; I think she believed I would strangle her to death. It scared me too. I was afraid I would seriously hurt her, so I let go and backed away, not saying a word. She slapped me and walked away.

Nobody who was there that afternoon spoke of that day again. And nobody ever laid a finger on me or my belongings again, either. I ache to think that it had to come to violence to put an end to violence. As good as it sounds in theory, I don't have much to say for the zero-tolerance policy upheld in most schools; students need a self-defence

option to counteract physical and emotional bullying.

Regrettably, I wasn't completely innocent: I bullied a girl or two in our class. I don't know why – I knew better! I don't know why bullying comes so naturally and effortlessly to adolescents, and why it took a conscious effort to stop. I was never one for revenge, and those I teased had not teased me. Maybe it was my way of getting anger and frustration out of my system. Maybe I thought that, since I couldn't fit in any other way, conforming to this behaviour would eventually lead to my social acceptance.

Did the teachers know all this was going on? I want to believe that they didn't, because if they knew and did nothing, it would hurt even more. Yet part of me is enraged to think that they could be so blind to it all.

Years later, the feelings I thought I had dealt with have returned. How am I dealing with this now? By sharing my story. My message: beware – both bullying, and the ways in which the bullied reach out for help, come in many, sometimes unusual forms. Bullies are likely being bullied themselves. The bullied are often afraid to ask for help, knowing the consequences of more negative attention, and may feel that they are left with no choice but to fight back. As unacceptable as both bullying and physical violence are, current zero tolerance and bullying policies ignore the complex and painful emotions that are at the root of school violence.

The author of this article is a graduate student in Biology at a university in Eastern Canada. She wishes to remain anonymous.



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