

## Have We Given Them Any Other Option?

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Jeremy Myers

Assistant Professor of Religion and Youth and Family Ministry

Augsburg College (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

### *A Question*

“Who wants to see Dean kick my butt? Who thinks it’ll be a fair fight?” Before I knew it, I was standing on the bench outside of the men’s locker room shouting these questions. Me, a 120-pound high school freshman. Dean, a 220-pound hulking senior defensive lineman on the varsity football team—and a bully. For some reason he had me in “missile lock” for most of the year. To this day I don’t know why. I was fed up and was now standing on a bench and offering Dean a public challenge in front of at least 100 peers.

It was the early 1990’s and I had learned my anti-bullying strategy from the only available expert—my VCR. I would walk to our neighborhood video store every Friday to rent movies like *Weird Science*, *Can’t Buy Me Love*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Back to the Future* and *Karate Kid*. I was an expert. My strategy? To publicly humiliate “the bully” before he could hurt me. By doing so I could convince the crowd that an actual fight between the two of us would be boring at best or inhumane at worst. It worked. Dean left me alone. But now, in hindsight, I realized I had become a bully just like him.

My question? Why was Hollywood my primary source? Why did I have to become a witty, smart aleck bully in order to stop a strong, physical bully? Why wasn’t my church able to provide me with an alternative narrative? If we, as a faith community, are going to step up and intervene with the intent of bringing an end to bullying, then we need to disengage from these modern-day David and Goliath narratives and reengage in the actual lives of our young people with a new way of understanding what it means to be human.

### *A Snapshot*

Bullying did not appear on the radar of researchers in the United States until 2001 when a landmark study uncovered its pervasiveness.<sup>1</sup> In a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Tonya Nansel and her colleagues found nearly 30% of children and youth were involved in bullying. 13% had been involved as bullies, 11% as victims, and 6% as both bullies and victims at different times. Bullying was more common in grades 6 through 8 than in grades 9 and 10. Boys

were found to be more involved in bullying than girls, as bullies and victims; and poor psychosocial adjustment was found among both bullies and victims. However, more recent data suggests girls and boys experience bullying at about the same levels, albeit different types of bullying.<sup>2</sup>

There are multiple ways in which one can become involved in bullying, each with its own unique set of ramifications. The victims often struggle with being socially isolated, struggling to make friends, having weaker relationships with peers and experiencing more overall loneliness.<sup>3</sup> They have also been found to have higher rates of depression and lower self-esteem than their peers at the age of 23, even though they were no longer experiencing unusual rates of being bullied.<sup>4</sup>

The bullies themselves also experience negative ramifications. Although they may not suffer from the same social isolation, they do tend to become more involved in other risky behaviors. They engage in these behaviors with their social network. They also generally struggle to thrive within the school setting, both academically and culturally.<sup>5</sup>

Some claim that those who fill the bully/victim role should be our primary concern.<sup>6</sup> These students experience the social isolation that the usual victim experiences but it is dangerously paired with the same high levels of risky behavior a bully experiences. *Victims* tend to avoid risky behaviors but are social outcasts. *Bullies* have a social network but routinely take part in risky behaviors. But *bully-victims* are social outcasts who routinely take high risks *and* do not thrive in the school setting. The bullying event has long lasting consequences that do not distinguish victim from perpetrator. All are affected.

The pervasiveness and the effects of bullying are not the only things that are troubling; so is the reality of underreporting. Whereas younger kids (elementary and middle school) usually react to bullying by acting out, older youth (high school) tend to internalize their experience.<sup>7</sup> This makes their experience of bullying less obvious and harder to catch. Another study found that 24% of those identified by their peers as victims of bullying did not identify themselves as victims. This means they either were not victims (which is unlikely, given that their peers identified them as such) or that they simply deny the fact that they are being bullied. In the same study, about 33% of the victims did not even answer this question (identifying the victims in their school), which might also be an indication of denial.<sup>8</sup>

### *A System*

Any given bullying event is best understood as a system, or a group phenomenon, rather than as a simple interaction between two (or more) youth.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Dan Olweus, the founder of an evidence-based bullying prevention program, has provided us with a helpful model.<sup>10</sup> He has identified eight roles a student might play in any given bullying event: the student who is bullied, students who bully, followers or henchmen, supporters or passive bullies, passive supporters or

possible bullies, disengaged onlookers, possible defenders, and defenders.<sup>11</sup> Our prevention and intervention strategies must extend beyond just the bullies and victims.<sup>12</sup> We must work to change our culture from one that condones to one that rejects bullying, moving young people into the role of defender. Some say any “effective violence prevention requires a comprehensive response that brings all segments of the community into play. Health care, public health, mental health, youth development, education, family support, faith and religious, and criminal justice institutions and professionals have roles to play as do community groups, survivors, and others who live with the consequences of violence on a daily basis.”<sup>13</sup>

In summary, bullying is real and more pervasive than we realize. Its effects are broad and long lasting. The victim of an act of bullying does not remain the only victim of the event; all of those involved (actively or passively) are impacted. Bullying events must be thought of systemically and must be approached systemically. The faith community has a role to play.

### *A Theory*

In an interesting review of Nansel’s landmark study, David Gil borrows Erich Fromm’s idea that we become destructive when our drive toward life is thwarted. Gil argues that bullying is essentially a form of counter-violence against a long history of social-structural violence as witnessed by our youth.<sup>14</sup> I would concur. If we are ever going to have anything constructive to say about bullying we must honestly face the fact that we have created a culture that not only condones bullying but also glorifies it through movies, television, video games, sports and even our foreign policy. By condoning and glorifying bullying, we have backed our youth into corners where they feel bullying is their only option. Our culture has become more violent, and this is an easy target when looking to blame someone for bullying. However, it is also important to critically consider the life-phase of adolescence itself and how we’ve constructed it.

Education professor, Nancy Lesko, puts forth a very provocative theory of adolescence. She claims that adolescents are, and always have been, considered a problem. Adolescence was identified as a new and unique phase of life in the early 1900’s. Lesko argues that the primary anxieties of America at that time—race relations, gender roles, and nation building—began to drive the way we thought about and interacted with our teenagers. The white, straight, married, male, productive citizen became the measure of normalcy; adolescent development became the way in which we imaged and ensured the pathway towards normalcy.<sup>15</sup> Anyone whose drive towards life might lead them down an alternative path would be considered abnormal.

Today’s anxieties revolve around sexual identity, economic vitality, and educational standards. Our culture’s anxieties and expectations around these dynamics impact the way we imagine and interact with our young people; they drive what we consider to be the “norm.” We are scared that our children might grow up to be

queer, that they might never hold down a “good” job, or that they will not perform at the expected academic levels. These anxieties cause us to place inordinate amounts of pressure upon our young people. This pressure thwarts their drive toward life and they react through counter-violence. This reaction includes any number of stereotypical, risky adolescent behaviors, including bullying.

Henry Giroux claims that we have created a society that defines teens primarily as consumers (of material goods but also of “socially approved” life styles) and therefore considers those who cannot (or choose not to) consume appropriately or at the expected levels to be “disposable.”<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on consumption and the subsequent notion of disposability creates anxiety among our youth and causes them to treat *others* as disposable in order to prove that they *themselves* are not disposable. They are simply performing the way they’ve been trained. We (collectively) have been the bullies.

### *A Way Forward*

To successfully intervene in this burgeoning bully-culture, we must understand and approach it as a system. Olweus’ (and others’) research has made this clear. But we must also disengage from our current way of constructing adolescence. In order to do so, we will need more than a theory, we will also need a story; a story that gives life and does not thwart it. The church has this story.

In *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Douglas John Hall mines our Christian narrative and lifts up the *imago Dei* (image of God) as the best explanation of what it means to be human.<sup>17</sup> And this is what we need in order to address the bullying we see, a better way to be human. Rather than understanding ourselves as primarily anxious, disposable, all-consuming bullies, Hall suggests that we might begin to understand our being in the image of God—as community, communion and ecology.<sup>18</sup> Being-as-ecology calls us to understand our existence not as being at odds with nature but wrapped up in nature. Being-as-communion calls us to understand our existence not as being under the wrath of God, but in relationship with God. Lastly, being-as-community calls us to understand our existence not as being independent from our neighbor but responsible for our neighbor.

We have become quite adept at bullying our neighbor, our Creator, and creation. Our current narrative of anxiety, consumption and disposability will never free us (or our youth) from this cycle of bullying. Any attempt at bringing an end to bullying must also bring an end to the myth-of-being we’ve constructed for our youth, a myth that forces them into a corner where their only option is to prove that they are not as disposable as the next person, the next organism, or even God. Only the gospel can do this.

The problem of bullying is real and more pervasive than we realize. It functions as a system with a variety of participants and roles. It must be addressed as a system, offering more than compassion for the victim and consequences for the perpetrator.

Instead, we must offer a new way of understanding the self for all those involved in bullying. When we convince our young people that their primary vocation is to fit our definition of normal (see above), then we thwart their drive toward life and we will begin to witness their counter-violence. Bullying is one manifestation of this counter-violence. The love of Christ does not thwart life, but gives life. It frees us, and our youth, from anxiety, consumption, disposability and bullying, and frees us for community, communion and ecology. The love of Christ frees us to be human!

This happens as communities proclaim the love of Christ in the lives of young people by entering into meaningful relationships with all young people—victims, bullies, bystanders, etc. Christ’s love draws us into these relationships. By being in these relationships we communicate Christ’s love for our youth and Christ’s call for our youth—to be responsible for your neighbor, a steward of creation, and a “communer” with God.

Society calls me to fight bullying by standing on a bench and humiliating Dean in front of my peers. Christ calls me to fight bullying by seeing myself as deeply connected to and responsible for Dean. This is the cross we bear as disciples of Christ. But we do not bear it alone; we bear it with Christ, with one another and with all of God’s creation. Until we are convinced this is the *only* way to understand what it means to be human, we will always have bullies, victims, and far too many bystanders.

*Jeremy Myers is Assistant Professor of Religion and Youth and Family Ministry at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Areas of research include adolescent experiences of God’s presence and activity, how adolescents construct theology, contemplative youth ministry practices, interfaith youth work, and a vocational understanding of adolescence.*

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<sup>1</sup>Tonja R. Nansel, Mary Overpeck, Ramani s. Pilla, W.J. Ruan, Bruce Simons-Morton, and Peter Scheidt, “Bullying Behaviors Among US Youth.” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>2</sup>“Olweus Answers Questions, Discusses Data on Bullying,” accessed February 18, 2011, [http://www.olweus.org/public/webinar\\_102010.page](http://www.olweus.org/public/webinar_102010.page).

<sup>3</sup>Nansel et al., “Bullying Behaviors,” 2008.

<sup>4</sup>Dan Olweus, “Bullying at school: Long-term Outcomes for the Victims and an Effective School-Based Intervention Program,” In *Aggressive behavior: Current Perspectives*, ed. L. Rowell Huesmann (New York: Plenum Press, 1994), 97-130.

<sup>5</sup>Nansel et al., “Bullying Behaviors,” 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Nansel et al., 2009. Lindsey M. O’Brennan, Catherine P. Bradshaw, and Anne L. Sawyer, “Examining

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Developmental Differences in the Social-Emotional Problems among Frequent Bullies, Victims, and Bully/Victims," *Psychology in the Schools* 46, no. 2 (2009): 113.

<sup>7</sup>O'Brennan et al., "Examining Developmental Differences," 113.

<sup>8</sup>Christina Salmivalli, Kirsti Lagerspetz, Kaj Björkqvist, Karin Osterman, and Ari Kaukiainen, "Bullying as a Group Process: Participant Roles and Their Relations to Social Status within the Group," *Aggressive Behavior* 22 (1996): 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>10</sup>"Olweus Bully Prevention Program," accessed February 18, 2011, <http://www.olweus.org/public/index.page>.

<sup>11</sup>Dan Olweus, "Peer Harassment: A Critical Analysis and Some Important Issues," in *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized*, ed. Jaana Juvonen and Sandra Graham (New York: Guilford Publications, 2001), 3-20.

<sup>12</sup>Salmivalli et al., "Bullying as a Group Process," 13.

<sup>13</sup>Howard Spivak, "Bullying: Why all the fuss?" *Pediatrics* 112, no. 6 (2003): 1422.

<sup>14</sup>David G. Gil, "Bullying," *Contemporary Justice Review* 5, no. 1 (2002): 71-72.

<sup>15</sup>Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 27-67.

<sup>17</sup>Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 114. Hall borrows these terms from Joseph Sittler, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 (1971): 35-45.