

# Battling bullies in boyhood and beliefs



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

I've never liked bullies. Who does? I learned at an early age who a bully is, what a bully does, and some ways to overcome bullying, while trying not to become one myself.

In elementary school (isn't this usually where it begins?) I was followed and surrounded by three older boys walking home from school. The taller one stood over me, challenging me to fight, while the others blocked my way. I can still feel the emotions that welled up in me, as the tears began to flow (I was no fighter). For some reason, the boy was disarmed by my tearful plea to let me go. The rest of that year he would smile and say hello to me in the hallway.

In junior high I was a P.E. assistant, helping the teacher (also my basketball coach) to run calisthenics with younger boys. Roger's locker was next to mine in the locker room. He had thick glasses and walked with an awkward gait which made other boys laugh. He endured taunting on a daily basis. One day the teacher came over while Roger was

standing in front of his locker and asked me to help Roger with his combination. It must have been hard for Roger to trust another boy, but he allowed me to help him learn to dial the padlock. Others snickered as he put his face inches from the small numbers to open the lock.

I'd like to say Roger and I became friends but I don't think we did. I would talk to him in the hallway or library, but stood back to watch as other boys teased him and mimicked his "funny" walk (I hope I spoke up, but can't remember). He would sometimes threaten to fight the bullies, and with his muscular arms I have no doubt he could hold his own. He was a gentle guy who taught me more about handling bullies. Though very vulnerable, he would, if provoked, stand up for himself.

These memorable moments in my early life parallel the bullying I witnessed and experienced with some in the faith community. I never thought of it as bullying at the time, but upon reflection some actions, words and dogmas could certainly be described as bullying.

A preacher warns that God is a loving but "jealous" Judge and strict Father. Unlike a truly loving parent who might discipline a disobedient child, send them to their room without dessert, or

ground them for a week, this angry Demanding Dad built an eternal time-out room to punish unruly children. Add to this the guilt we felt that our Father in Heaven had to kill his favorite Son for our bad behavior. This was probably the most bullying belief to bear.

"Have you been praying regularly?" one youth leader would ask. "I'm not sure you've been reading your Bible enough," another would accuse. "Have you saved any souls this week?" one more would ask. These questions may have been well-intentioned but the intimidating message was fearfully clear: "You'll make God very unhappy if you don't live by faith, show your faith, share your faith."

In the words of Webster, a bully is "one who is habitually cruel, insulting, or threatening to others who are weaker, smaller, or in some way vulnerable." We know bullying behavior when we see it or feel it (in an odd twist of the English language, we may recall Teddy Roosevelt famously exclaimed "Bully!" as an expression similar to "Excellent!" He used his "Bully Pulpit" to exercise the power of his position to expound his views).

In the history of religion we find many bullies using their own bully pulpits to keep the most vulnerable obe-

dient. Thankfully there have been guardians who responded, like bodyguards or mind-guards, for the weaker ones – who stood up to the bullies, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. Anti-bullying teachers like Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad put themselves in very vulnerable positions, inviting strong response and resistance – especially when their teachings challenged God's bullies. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, the message of the bodyguards of old often becomes the new orthodoxy that gives rise to more bullies of belief.

Thinking back to that tall boy who threatened me in childhood, I seem to recall I may have taunted him myself on the playground during recess. I was a fast runner, so maybe I said something to him, called him a name, and outran him. I wouldn't put that past my boyish foolishness. Maybe I had a bit of the bully in me too?

What makes a bully? There are many reasons someone acts with cruelty toward another. Who is responsible for standing up to bullies? Maybe all of us?

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Learn more at chighland.com.*