

Building a World for All of Us
Arlington Street Church
April 26, 2009

In the autumn of 2005, twelve-year old Olivia Gardner suffered an epileptic seizure while in her sixth grade classroom. She survived the seizure but those several minutes forever changed her life.

Instantly, classmates and other students in her middle school began calling her a “retard.” They verbally and emotionally taunted her, even dragging her brand new backpack through the mud.

Olivia withstood the bullying as long as she could and then her mother requested a transfer to another middle school in the district. Things went well at the new school for less than one week, when students at her new school learned about what had happened at her former school. Her new classmates trumped the personal bullying at her former school by creating an “Olivia Haters” MySpace Web page.¹

There, Olivia found that she had been labeled a “homo” and other epithets not to be spoken in church. Visitors to the MySpace site

¹ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/17/MNG>.

rallied around the call to “kick her ass.” One girl wrote, “I wish she’d just leave Hill Middle School and never come back.”²

Well, Olivia did leave – this time to a private Christian middle school in her community. There, things went well for almost one year, until once again students from her former schools found out where she was. They invited students at her third middle school to join the “Olivia haters” MySpace page.

Students at her third school then trumped the MySpace Web page by creating plastic bracelets that read “Olivia haters.” Soon some other classmates began wearing plastic bracelets that read, “Olivia should die.” As Olivia would pass students in the hallways or on school grounds they would whisper, “Die Olivia.” Within days, Olivia became so paralyzed by anxiety attacks that her doctor advised her family that she should be withdrawn from school in order to preserve her physical and emotional well being.

Even so, as an impressionable preteen, Olivia had taken their taunts to heart. She emotionally withdrew from her family, refused to leave her home and spent her time and focus contemplating ways that she could take her own life.

² *Ibid.*

Olivia's mother had become her biggest advocate, obtaining transfers of schools for her twice and always sought to involve teachers and school administrators in addressing Olivia's plight. While the multiple school transfers and ultimately being home schooled brought an end to the daily torment, these measures only served to compound one of the most painful consequences of being bullied, isolation.

Olivia had become the object of "extreme bullying." Her experience in various middle schools was compounded and magnified by the cyber bullying through MySpace. Even though she was no longer subject to the daily harassment at school, and her mother had terminated her access to MySpace, Olivia could not escape the torture what had been inflicted upon her.

The absence of any other peer interaction in her life allowed the two-year's worth of taunts and torments to continually echo and crescendo through Olivia's mind and heart and soul. She could not look anyone in the eyes, not even her mother or doctor. She was so withdrawn that she could barely even speak.

Then, after two years and three schools, Olivia's story became a front-page news item in the local newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*.³ Initially, this compounded Olivia's sense of being a victim and an object of negative attention. It even furthered her suffering and isolation. But as a result of her courage in allowing her story to be told, something quite extraordinary came about.

Two teenage sisters, ages 14 and 17, from a nearby town read the newspaper article. They were devastated and incensed. And they were also summoned to action in support of this girl that they had never even met. They asked friends and classmates to write notes of support and encouragement to Olivia so that she could experience something positive from her peer group. The sisters set a goal for themselves of securing 50 notes for Olivia.

Then they got more ambitious. The sisters sought the endorsement of their school's PTA and teachers and administrators in what they called their "Olivia's letters" project. They pitched their project at PTA meetings and school assemblies and asked teachers to devote class time to "Olivia's letters."

³ *Ibid.*

Within two months, the sisters had collected over 1,000 notes and letters, most from complete strangers, who wanted to reach out to Olivia. Correspondence came from other middle-schoolers, high school students, teachers, many parents and other adults. Grade school children, who were too young to write letters, drew pictures of stick figures of themselves holding Olivia's hands and dancing under rainbows. Some carrying the message, "Olivia, I don't know you but I love you."

The *San Francisco Chronicle* then ran another front-page article, this time about "Olivia's letters." Within one week of that article, the sisters had received another 1,000 notes and letters for Olivia. And in addition to the snail mail, the sisters received 1,400 emails, in that one-week alone, from all around the world.

These amazing young women, committed to ensuring that their work would empower and uplift Olivia, read every single piece of correspondence before they forwarded it on to Olivia's mother. They vowed to not let one negative word fall into Olivia's or her mother's hands. Remarkably, they did not have to hold back a single item of the 3,400 pieces of correspondence that they had received.

What began as a tender gesture of solidarity set off an overwhelming chain reaction of support, encouragement and love. That chain reaction holds life lessons for all of us.

One of the most striking things about all of this correspondence was who had written it. Many of the notes were from other targets of bullying - children, youth and adults. The sisters were astounded to read notes and letters from people in their 60s and 70s who had been bullied when they were in school and who were moved to tears by the story of Olivia's torment and the sisters' response.

While many of the elders who wrote had recovered from their bullying in the ensuing decades, many could point to difficulties that they had struggled with throughout their entire adult lives as a result of the torment they had suffered in school hallways, lavatories and playgrounds. Many exhorted Olivia to not live in the shadow of all that had tormented her. Others encouraged her, not to become stronger for it, but to become more sensitive, compassionate and empathetic as a result of it.

Another category of letter writers was people who had been bullies at some point in their lives. Not surprisingly, these women and

men often were themselves victims of abuse and other violations that likely underlie the need to bully. Many said that they could not explain why they did it. They all expressed regret, and many shame, for their behaviors and their consequences. Some of the bullies were never able to apologize to their own victims, and offered moving apologies to Olivia instead.

Bystanders formed the final category of letter writers. Bullying expert, Barbara Coloroso, says that bystanders

Are the supporting cast who aid and abet the bully through acts of omission and commission. They can stand idly by or look away. They can actively encourage the bully or join in and become one of a bunch of bullies, or they can be afraid to step in for fear of making it worse for the target or ... themselves.⁴

Time and time again, bystanders wrote of the fear they held for the bullies and of their regret and shame at not having intervened in some manner or another. The bystander is often a key player in the bully's handiwork. The fact is that bullying almost always requires bystanders – witnesses, an audience – to make the most staggering impact on its target. Indeed, 85% of all bullying is perpetrated in front of other people.⁵

⁴ Garner, Olivia, Buder, Emily and Sarah. *Letters To A Bullied Girl*. (2008) HarpurCollins, New York.

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/nov/20/childrenservices>.

One category of bystander garnered the most attention, they are the adults who witness schoolhouse bullying and pretend to ignore it – or worse yet – participate in it. So many writers decried how complicit they believe adults are in allowing school age bullying to exact the toll that it does.

Bullying is so pernicious. It is profoundly contrary to human worth and dignity, to justice, equity and compassion, and to the interdependent web of life of which we are only a part. Bullying tears asunder the interdependent web of our living, of our lives. It rips apart nearly every strand of the web of life. No one is left unscathed by it.

Whether target, bully or bystander - all are diminished by bullying. Whenever it occurs in our presence, or we are aware of its occurrence, we become a part of it. Every person who comes in contact with bullying plays a part in it and is thereby harmed by it. We are all diminished by its continued existence, and especially by its prevalence in the lives of our children.

And children are not at all the only targets of bullying. It is estimated that 10% of employees are bullied in their workplaces on

a regular basis.⁶ Workplace bullying can be more sophisticated and psychological, but it is still designed to undermine self-confidence and esteem, often threatening one's ability to provide for oneself. Many of us here this morning know that bullying is not just about kids anymore. It pervades our culture.

And as we all so heartbreakingly know, there are some targets of bullying that do not survive the experience. Just last Sunday, we held in our loving embrace a community candle of sorrow for the life of Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, age 11. Carl hanged himself on April 6th, as a result of bullying and threats of violence against him. Like Olivia's mother, Carl's mother also sought help from teachers and administrator's at Carl's charter school. She did not receive it. Perhaps that was because Carl's bullying involved gender expression. And Carl is not alone.

It is devastating that Carl could not have had the same outcome from his mother's intervention as Olivia did from hers.⁷ Parents of besieged children cannot do it alone. Neither can school administrators and teachers. We must ask ourselves just how far does the orbit of responsibility extend for Carl's tragic death?

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/jan/26/publicsectorcareers>.

⁷ "Breaking the Silence Around Bullying" Hyde, Sue. April 18, 2009. http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles.

What role do we have in his suffering and untimely death? What role does each of us have in the epidemic of bullying that hurts so many people and the very fabric of our society itself?

One of the parents who wrote to Olivia was the mother of Corrinne Sides from Texas. Corrinne's bullies had been her good friends in grade school but something changed in middle school. They terrorized her for an entire school year until finally, at age 13, Corrinne took her own life with a gun. Corrinne's mother wrote, "The messages sent to the sweet girl Olivia may well have saved her life." Then, "I truly believe that if other classmates or children her age had shown her kindness and compassion, she (Corrinne) would not have felt so alone and desperate and would still be here today."⁸

Olivia and Corrinne did go on to share something in common though. In the summer of 2007, when the notes and letters to Olivia totaled 4,000, Olivia and the two sisters were invited to put their experience and put it into a book. It is entitled *Letters To A Bullied Girl: Messages of Healing and Hope*. The book consists, almost exclusively, of more than 150 letters and notes to Olivia. It

⁸ Gardner, Olivia, Bruder, Emily and Sarah. *Letters To A Bullied Girl*. (2008) HarperCollins, New York.

is dedicated to the memory of Corrinne Sides. Her mom calls the book and its letters “rays of hope.”

By the time the book was actually published in 2008, Olivia had received more than 6,000 letters, notes and emails. And they continue to come. Olivia’s life has been transformed by “Olivia’s letters.” So too have the lives of the sisters who reached out to her. So have the lives of those thousands of people who wrote to Olivia – the targets, the bullies, the bystanders.

We are all transformed by the story of “Olivia’s letters.” We are all transformed by Olivia’s courage in allowing her devastating story to be published in the newspaper. We are all transformed by the vision, passion and compassion of the sisters, Emily and Sarah Buder, who conceived of “Olivia’s letters” and set about making it happen. We are all transformed by those three teenagers who went on to create that book whose appendix offers a template for a letters project on behalf of anyone who is bullied.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have promised to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every individual and the cause of equity, justice and compassion in human relations. We have promised to respect the interdependent web of existence of

which we are only a part. We are obligated by our faith to speak up for the least amongst us. We are obligated to prevent the untold hurt that flows from bullying. We are obligated to do the difficult work of never being a bystander or a bully.

My friends, there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. When it comes to bullying and its harm, no one is innocent. We do not have to figure what to do; Olivia, Emily and Sarah have shown us the way. It is ours to follow. “And a child shall lead them.”

Let us have the courage, the wisdom, the vision and the compassion to never be mere bystanders – but to always step forward and act on behalf of human worth and dignity, equity, justice and compassion, and the interdependent web of all existence of which we are only a part. That is what we are called to and it is a summons to which we must always answer yes.

May it be so.

Amen.