

Victims and Bullies in Ourselves: Taking responsibility

This essay was originally published in Protea magazine around 2000. It was written particularly for those with some familiarity with the work of Rudolf Steiner.

Introduction

As we entered the new millennium with all its hurriedness and stress, as well as a new respect for the freedom of the individual, harassment became a common area of concern. We have become more aware of this threat to our individual freedom and sense of well being than ever before and we can find it in every sphere of life, from the family to relations between nations.

In many areas of life, we discover the idea that what we can find in the world we can also find in ourselves. We also discover that rather than find a 'right' or 'wrong' way in black and white polarities, we more often find a 'healthy' way in the balance between the polarities. We can understand harassment better when we look within ourselves for when we lose our balance or centredness and have a tendency to move towards the extremes, the polarities of becoming a victim or becoming a bully. Such an approach to harassment, where we try to understand and take responsibility for our own part in the harassment situation, demands maturity and

objectivity about ourselves. Blaming and denial of the ownership on our part in any harassment distracts us from seeing the best opportunities we may have to work on self empowerment and change. Sometimes in the past such an approach to harassment has been seen as "blaming the victim". However the search here is for the truths which can help us to live more consciously and with more integrity.

This article then is concerned about retaining a strong centre and our legitimate power through a better understanding of the nature of harassment. The article will concentrate on creating pictures to help to see how we can be thrown out of balance, away from the uprightness of our 'noble selves', and into a tendency towards one-sidedness, sometimes as bullies and sometimes as victims, sometimes alternating between uprightness and these two. The pronoun 'she' will be mainly used for convenience but should be taken as inclusive of both genders.

The middle path: finding the balance & acting out of the higher self

Central to our search is the recognition of our higher self, that part of our individuality which seems ongoing and most noble. When we act out of this part of ourselves, we are more centred, more conscious, more truthful, more

authentic. On the other hand, we also need to recognise the forces and primal emotions in our lower nature which help us to survive, but, untransformed, can lead us away from our higher selves.

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Harassment is about the misuse of power and often occurs when we lose our centredness and the strength of coming from out of our higher self. Healthy legitimate power is a crucial aspect of our higher selves. It enables us to act with love, respect and esteem for ourselves and for others. When the strength of and confidence in this legitimate power and inner authority is weakened, we feel vulnerable and can be thrown out of balance. Then we may seek to retain our power or protect ourselves in less legitimate ways. We may try to take away legitimate power from others by the tyrannical use of our own power, or we may try to protect ourselves by giving away our own legitimate power. We become bullies and victims. In both of these survival tactics we lose the integrity of

our higher selves; we are no longer respectful of ourselves or others.

In the centre of this picture we have the person who can be inwardly 'centred', upright, deeply respectful of her own gifts and weaknesses, and also deeply respectful of the same in others; confident of her own inner power, she need not be threatened by others' competence and power. She can allow herself to be open, and also private, she can be loving, accepting, generous, supportive, principled, not afraid to be who she is or say what she believes because she also allows others to be who they are and have their own opinions. But she will not be trodden on. This is a picture of someone with true self esteem. It is also a picture of emotional intelligence and maturity.

Out of balance: the tendency towards bullying.

When the inner power at the centre is weakened, we may see a tendency towards trying to regain our power through harassment of all kinds, physical, emotional, racial, sexual, social – anywhere another human being can be manipulated and 'sapped' of their power. At the extreme in bullying, the 'armour' of outward confidence, posturing, aggressiveness and bravado (outward manifestations of tyrannical power), often hides and protects a fragile inner self. The existence of this inner fragility is sometimes hard to believe because the bullying protective mechanism can convince even the bully herself that she is what she is pretending to be. An entrenched bully can lose touch with her higher self and believe that she is her illusory self, strong, confident, inwardly powerful and centred, with the right to deny safety to others. In terms of personal growth,

this is a tragedy because such neurotic self delusion can limit the possibilities life brings for growth.

In ourselves we see the bully when we begin to feel the loss of our own true legitimate power as individuals or are weakened at our centre. Sometimes as parents, for example, we are tired through loss of sleep or illness, and feel harassed and un-centred by the constant chatter, the work, the whinging and demands for attention and misbehaviours (which become more intense and outrageous as we lose the capacity to respond to children from a loving centred place). Finally we may 'blow', with tyrannical outbursts of parental power, emotional dragons are let loose to roar and rage, reactions based not on mutual respect, but on a desperate effort to regain control of ourselves and of our children. The bully speaks!!!

Out of balance: the tendency towards victimisation

Sometimes, when the inner power of the centre is weakened, we are drawn in the direction of becoming a victim.

The puppy lies on its back and urinates a little; this is the victim stance in the canine family to stop larger dogs attacking it. It is an honest gesture. It means what it says. 'You are boss here.' Canine instincts cooperate with this!

As humans, when we feel our centre is weak, we too can take a submissive stance. We buckle inwards where the bully pushes herself outwards. Our gestures and speech, our whole stance says 'Don't hit me'. In the human case however, our responses can be far more

When the victim is powerful too.

In the same way that the bully has her facade of outward confidence and bravado, the victim also may use mechanisms to protect a vulnerable inner self and its power, by making 'neurotic claims' (not necessarily based on the reality). 'I am the victim.' 'I do not need to take responsibility here.' 'It's your fault'. 'I am a martyr.' To hold others fully responsible and/or manipulate their guilt may also be a manipulation of power, seen as necessary for survival. When you allow a victim to make you feel guilty (e.g. for not being there to help them more, for hurting their feelings), you give them your power. These feelings of guilt need to be clearly separated from the shame you might feel at not handling a situation in a way consistent with the values of your highest self! This view of the victim in no way abdicates the responsibility of the bully, who has abused his/her power, or been drawn into the power game of the victim. We are all responsible for what we do. The question is to identify where our responsibility

complex than in the instinctive behaviours of the canines. A victim stance can come out of pure survival, like the dog's, (perhaps our instinctive passivity in the face of abuse belongs here). This is a literal handing over of power. The tendency to be victimised can also come out of psychic vulnerability, a weakness in our inner strength and centredness, momentary or more long lasting. Lastly the tendency to become a victim can come out of learned behaviours aimed at retaining power by passive means. This is by far the most complicated and neurotic basis for becoming a victim, and the one that severely compromises the higher self.

might lie and what would help us to live more 'healthily' in the future.

So in some cases, the victim's apparent gesture of giving away the power is deceptive. Certainly there is an illusion of powerlessness here, but in some cases this may be the very means of protecting the vulnerable inner self, by playing helpless, weak, powerless, 'dumb', etc. In this way, the victim too may believe that she is her illusory self— perhaps the martyr, the victim of others, that she is the way she may act— powerless! Once again, in terms of personal growth work, this is a tragedy because it means she has lost touch with her higher self, her real potential, her inner power and the possibilities this life brings for growth.

Similarly the human response to the victim stance can be very different. Some of us may indeed respond with 'Poor you! Of course I won't hit you!' For others, the victim may call out the bully in us, as an opportunity to regain some power. Or we may respond more

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objectively to the situation, and not be caught up by the games we can play here. To personalise this, you may like to consider your response to unending whinging! Does it call out the sympathetic 'co-victim' in you ('Poor you!'), or the bully (Shut up!) or a centred objective response? (Can you please speak in a normal voice and say exactly what you want!) Your response may well vary, of course, according to your own state of 'centredness'!

In ourselves we see the tendency to become a victim when we begin to feel the loss of our true legitimate power as individuals. When, for example, our children, become demanding and harass us endlessly, until worn down, we give over our power and say 'yes' when we really wanted to say 'no', our inner authority is knocked off centre by emotional fatigue. One of the disturbing trends in parenting which

illustrates this 'fall into victimisation' and what could be described as a neurotic acceptance of it (denial of reality), is when the power of teenagers becomes so great and so persistent that a parent without a strong inner centre and authority 'gives way' and lets young teens do as they like. Some parents then justify this position saying that the teenagers are old enough to make their own decisions, and in this way the parents may abdicate responsibility (out of feelings of powerlessness). At a time when teenagers desperately need the guidance of centred, respected adults with real inner authority, this abandonment can make the teenagers even more angry and tyrannical. In this the adults allow themselves to become victims and leave the teenagers to flounder between the extremes of bullying and becoming victims themselves.

What helps is to keep a strong centre

So the big question is: What can help us to keep a strong centre, in touch with our higher selves so that we do not so often overbalance into the tendency either to bully or to become a victim?

Basic self-care is of course important to be inwardly strong – good sleep, healthy eating, regular exercise all promote feelings of wellbeing which support our intellectual and emotional strength. Having unstressed time to withdraw into ourselves, reflect on our actions and prepare for what is to come is also helpful for inner strength.

However, the core for keeping a strong centre is to be found in self esteem. That is esteem for all aspects of the self, the body, the soul (our thinking, feeling and willing) and the spirit. When we fine-tune our care for all these aspects of ourselves, we help develop a strong centre from which to meet the world with legitimate power, wisdom and love. There is room in an

article such as this only to briefly suggest some areas worth considering in our search for specific practical ways to strengthen our centre.

Developing such a strong centre can begin on the inside and work out, or on the outside and work in! For example, starting on the outside: how do we literally stand in our physical bodies? Is our physical centre where it should be in the healthy archetype of the posture of the physical body? Are we upright and centred? Or is our chest buckled in? Do we droop with carrying the burdens of the world on our shoulders? Are we sway-backed in our need to armour ourselves against the world? There are many therapies which can help to put us back in touch with the healthy uprightness and movement in the body: Feldenkrais, eurythmy, yoga, some of the martial arts, the Alexander technique and so on. We can observe when our physical gestures are sliding out of balance.

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Sometimes they just need our observant attention, at other times they need therapeutic

help. This physical centeredness can support centeredness in other aspects of our selves.

Finding the balance to strengthen our thinking, feeling and willing.

How do we find strength and balance in our thinking? When we become more conscious of our different ways of thinking, our head thinking, our heart thinking and our intuitive gut thinking, we also see that the modern world is dominated by intellectual, scientific head thinking and undervalues creative (heart) thinking inspired by the imagination and intuition. We have to create the balance for ourselves here.

How do we learn to respect and listen to feelings as if they were our friends, but also gradually learn to differentiate between when the source that triggers the feeling is real and justified and when feelings are triggered by past

experiences which should not dominate the present and need to be questioned? Can we bring more consciousness to the times when we feel vulnerable so that we can give ourselves space to re-gather our inner serenity, to meditate or whatever helps us to strengthen our centre? Mindfulness exercises can be very beneficial for some people for this.

How do we find a balance in our will activities, in our actions, our determination, our perseverance, our self control, so that we are not dominated by our impulses, and can be powerful when we need to be? How do we retain our creative will in a world of technology which encourages us to become addicted?

Strengthening the source of the light.

How do we nurture that part of ourselves which can most express our individualities, our higher selves? This is the part of us which needs to be loved unconditionally, regardless of our physical bodies, our capacities in thinking, feeling and doing. It is the part of us which is always becoming. Here lies the centre. Here lies the source of the light that can draw us back to the centre. When even one other person has recognised, deeply and respectfully, that very special part in ourselves, this acknowledgement can remain in our memory and become a guiding light back to our highest self and destiny. This can help us even in the extremes when, in the feelings of powerlessness and loss of meaning for the self, the wish to commit suicide arises; or, in the opposite extreme, when the delusions of 'all powerfulness' create

tyranny, where sense of meaning in the lives of others is lost.

We can start to strengthen this 'light' by creating sacred times and space for this inner self to be acknowledged and nurtured, times for privacy, meditation, dreaming space which are all so needed in these stressful busy times. Recent research has shown that these times of nurturing of the inner self have been sacrificed to the longer work hours and increased demands of family life in recent decades. Very likely this deprivation has been one of the contributing factors in increased aggression and harassment, manifesting in such phenomena as 'road rage' and increased violence within the family and elsewhere, in men, women and children.

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Harassment arises from the misuse of power when the strength of the centre is weakened, and the cost is the diminution of growth and the integrity of the higher self of both the harasser and the harassed. In no matter what position we find ourselves within the harassment picture, there is a place to ask, what do I have to learn from this situation? Where is my legitimate

power in this? Given that I must accept what is truly unchangeable, how do I stay true to my higher self? In the spirit, at the very least, we can be truly free and powerful. No one can take that away. We can only give it away. When we strengthen our spiritual centre, we strengthen ourselves against harassment, against becoming victims and bullies.

But what if I'm being harassed, what then...?

This article has mostly explored the nature of harassment and preventative measures. However the principles examined here can also be applied to dealing with actual harassment. Physical uprightness and the visualisation of being surrounded by the warmth and light of our inner power, our centredness, our love of self and others, and our wisdom can help prevent harassment in the first place. Our strongest position if we find ourselves as victims is still one which comes from this same centre with the gesture of uprightness, wisdom and love in the situation. We can use this and also reach out to the higher self, the best possible

self, in the harasser. This is a gesture of trust and confidence in the other human being which can actually draw out their best self, rather than a defensive lower self. If we let fear and doubt in, we become more vulnerable. If we let aggressiveness in, we challenge their power. Acting out of sentimentality or superiority may elicit contempt. But an honest reaching out to the human spirit in the harasser has worked for some people and it is worth considering. Try it in mildly harassing situations and build up to the difficult ones. And if you believe in God, angels and the spiritual world, call in their support!