The Uncomfortable Subject; Bullying

September 22, 2014 By Joseph Burke

Writing this article is very difficult. I'm revisiting old wounds that I've long moved past from, but I'm doing so to raise awareness to stop bullying. My local television station here in Orlando WESH2 is dedicating an entire week to raise awareness of bullying, cyber-bullying and beyond; which is hosted by anchor Jim Payne. In light of this week, I feel it is necessary to open up about my scarred past and encounters with multiple bullies during my elementary and high school years back in Kentucky.

Growing up a sickly immediately raises the bar for any child going to school. Being born with Hemophilia Type-A severe, which means less than 1% of clotting factor in my body, I had no idea what was in store for me in the years ahead. By age three I contracted both HIV and Hepatitis C from contaminated Hemophilia blood products from Cutter Pharmaceuticals in the mid 1980's. Much like the stories of national news headlines of Ryan White and Ricky Ray, I too faced mountains of discrimination and bullying.

Being a hemophiliac, I bruise easily, so being like any kid, playing in the dirt, on my bicycle in my back yard at home, I acquired tiny bruises all over my arms and legs. There were times my parent's own care at home was questioned by the school board, but thankfully they quickly realized I was a hemophiliac and understood. But some of my fellow peers in school didn't understand the term bleeder or hemophiliac, and in that misunderstanding, lashed out at me because of my differences.

By age 8, I developed what doctors called a target joint as a hemophiliac, my right knee was injured around 3rd grade and I formed a noticeable limp. I was mocked, pushed out the way, butted out line in the cafeteria, and nicknamed "bruise." I will not mention names, nor will I ever, but about five of my male classmates developed a sport of mocking me in front of my entire class when the teacher would leave the classroom for any manner of time. Trash was thrown at me, and yet I kept going.

Bruise, cripple, peg-leg, hop-a-long were just a few of the names. But then, later in high school, the bullying increased, and verbal mockery became physical mockery. My books were knocked out of my hands, thrown down the hallways, purposely tripped and I was slammed in lockers. At one point, my entire right arm from shoulder to elbow was one massive bruise from the physical bullying. The only solace I found was in a handful of friends who were all girls. I found out that girls didn't mock or bully, so I hung around them as much as I could to escape any interactions with those that bully me.

Many nights, I would come home from school, close the door to my bedroom and cry silently in the pillow so my parents wouldn't hear my pain. I cried out to God, "Why do I have to be so different? Why did you make me a cripple to be made fun of?" The pain of those moments was incomprehensible. The dichotomy of my life from a loving home life, to being bullied waged a mental war within me that took me years to decipher.

There were moments in which I questioned the value of my own life. Why do I have to suffer so much pain mentally and physically? Why do people not understand me? Why does my body hurt and bruise every single day of my life? Why do my joints swell to four times their normal size? Why do I bruise at the simple bump or flick of a finger? There were many times, I just wanted it all to end, my life included. For some reason, death didn't scare me, mainly because I encountered so much hate and anger in my own life. The only thing that kept me sane during all of this was the love of my parents.

The veracity of the situation molded me into the man I am today. I know what it's like being "that kid" in school. I know what it's like soaking your pillow with tears from not understanding life. As a man today, I see that God had a perfect plan for my life.

Looking back now, as an adult, I forgive each and every one of those individuals that did wrong to me. I don't hold grudges against any of them, and I pray they find the goodness of God and feel the joy that I have in my soul if they haven't already.

Unfortunately for me, I had to be thrown into an adult world at a very early age, and the responsibilities of taking my medicine on time, keeping up with my home IV's and being extremely cautious of my surroundings at all times molded me to become the very observant person I am today. Name bashing get's one nowhere in life, it only lowers us to the level of expectations of the source. What's the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me?" So true.

My message to those bullied, your life is so precious. God crafted you perfectly for a purpose, and even though right now you may not know that purpose, you're still one of His. We all have to live with the choices we make, good and bad, but you also have the power to change lives and do good. Sure I cried in pillows and questioned my creator for the hand He dealt me. Don't be bullied into silence, and left to deal with this alone, and never allow yourself to be the victim. Accept no one's definition of your life, thus do not be defined by what others say you are. I was called cripple so many times, but I realized I am not my disease.

It's estimated that over 160,000 children stay home from school daily, simply to avoid the bullying. Don't let small people reduce your great worth. Reach out, talk to a teacher, talk to a counselor or church pastor. You will get through this season of life, and shine brighter than any star the heavens have ever seen. You can do it if I can do it. I'm not defined by words, rather by my Savior Jesus Christ who molded me perfectly. **Ephesians 2:10** says, "*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" I am not my disease, I am a child of the one true King. I am Joe Burke.

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