

Young Audiences: a great place to begin

by Bob Kloos, artistic director

Q: Why are we violent but not illiterate?

A: Because we're taught to read.

This riddle was created by a student of Colman McCarthy, founder of the Center for Teaching Peace and intermittent columnist in the *National Catholic Reporter*. I must confess the subtlety of the riddle was lost on me at first.

Nonviolence and literacy are values for all of us. Both are highly esteemed. But while illiteracy is quite the exception in schools I frequent, violence is a more prickly issue. Maybe there are degrees of illiteracy, too.

Schools are defined as safe spaces. The very nature of the school environment depends on limited access, a professional staff, mission focus, and measured results. The doors are locked once all the students are inside, but still precautions are taken should any danger arise within the building. There are drills.

There were never enough fire drills in my elementary years to suit me. Scheduled or not, clanging bells and immediate egress from the classroom were always welcome. And I remember only one orchestrated effort in the mid-50's urging perplexed students to take cover under our school desks from an "imminent" nuclear attack. For years there have been signs in classrooms indicating directions for evacuation in case of tornado, and more recently, schools have implemented "lock down" procedures for those times when an unwelcome visitor is suspected to be in the building. There are drills because child safety is a priority.

But how many schools have "violence" drills? What strategies have been adopted and how are they taught? What if the violence is bullying? How many students have been counseled on what to do when they witness bullying or are being bullied themselves? Are the students confident that the adults in the building will not tolerate any bullying, at any time, for any reason?

All school districts in Ohio must have a policy in place, and most states have passed similar legislation. But not every school building has a program that prepares and engages the students on

what to do when one youngster imposes his will on another with physical or emotional violence. Kids know it when they see it, and they know immediately that it's not right. They feel some of what is being perpetrated on the victim. It is precisely for moments like these that "nonviolence drills" are a good idea.

Most bullying is intended to go undetected, or the bullies believe bystanders are not likely to do anything about it. The intimidation is supposed to spread like an oil slick. And so it happens that a few students, often the more vulnerable or less befriended boys and girls, are threatened repeatedly. It's never the whole class that is challenged, just a few. So it begs the question: Does it make a difference if only one or two students are in danger?

Of course not. No one in the building is dispensable. Every student counts, and every student deserves the full advantage of a bullying free school building. But the reality is that certain students are targeted because the bullies believe they deserve the ill treatment. They got singled out because they are "unworthy" of better treatment. They had it coming to them.

Unfortunately, onlookers tolerate the bullying not just because they are afraid too, but because they do not feel sufficiently connected with the victims. In spite of the fact that they might be in the same homeroom or in the same seat on the bus, they do not feel responsible for the one who is under attack.

We need a drill that establishes connections between students, ties the knots of mutual regard, and builds a community that values the safety of everyone. We need to weave a fabric throughout the entire building that is bullying-proof.

Christian schools are not exempt from this task, either. Even institutions that boast of a gospel foundation cannot always boast of a nonviolent student body. ["Children who are victims of bullies need protectors": Regina Brett. PD: 10/10/10]. We need drills that groom "protectors" who will protest anytime someone is singled out in violent way. And these drills need to be as effective as those that successfully overcome illiteracy.

Bullying would not be tolerated in schools if bystanders really believed that everyone was valuable and worthy of respect. So maybe this is the “tipping point.” If the presumption is that members of a community will protect what they cherish, and we want every student to feel protected, we need to find ways to move as many students as possible to that place where they hold others in the highest esteem.

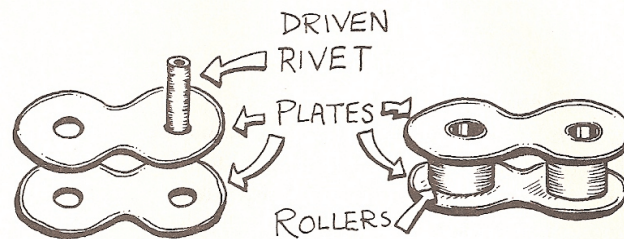
Tolerance isn't enough. Acceptance is too basic. Appreciation is the goal. Everyone can recite the Golden Rule, and the presumption is that we ought to be putting out affirming and helpful efforts if we want some semblance of goodness coming our way. But most of us have been around long enough to know that the good stuff that “goes around” all too often dissipates or even disappears before anything beneficial “comes around” our way. And we were told that gold will not tarnish or corrode!

So any school determined to adequately address bullying must build on a firm foundation:

all the children will be provided an equal opportunity education. The school will be a primary egalitarian institution in our community or it will mock the very foundations of our nation or our churches. And as soon as we suggest that not all are worthy of the same opportunities in the school community, we admit there are some who are less worthy, and least worthy. More worthy and most. We invite discrimination and we welcome bullying.

While there may be some schools or systems that cater to more “elite” students, this author/minister/parent believes everyone brings something unique to the mix they are in. It makes for the diversity that blesses every school with a unique profile. And in an effort to celebrate that diversity without prizing any particular gifts more than the rest, I have been working on some new programs that will be offered through Young Audiences of Northeast Ohio [yaneo.org]. Several use the metaphor of the bicycle, and even the tricycle, as a model for building community awareness.

I hope to be scheduled soon for K thru 2, Grades 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and junior high assemblies. I have also put together a “professional development” session for staff, teachers, and/or parents.



In an effort to highlight the importance of every single student, I plan to bring in my Witcomb 16-speed bicycle for the assembly with eight and nine-year olds. The bike was made in England in the early 70's and it is a lovely light blue.

“How many parts are there on this handsome cycle?” I will ask the third and fourth grade students. And I will take great delight informing them that there are over 450 pieces in the chain alone! And because I have had to replace links on a chain over the years, I know that unless the rivets are tightened just right, there will be an obnoxious “cha-chunk” every time that part of the chain gets to the rear derailleur. Four hundred and fifty pieces, and we hear from the one piece that is not quite right. Welcome to the wonder of community!

For demonstration purposes, I will get volunteers to assemble dozens of oversized, wooden and cardboard tube pieces of a bicycle chain model. About twenty feet of the working model will give students a much better appreciation of how many tiny pieces work in unison to transfer power provided by the rider in the saddle into forward motion produced by the rear wheel. And if any single piece from the working model is removed, the chain will no longer function properly. No part of the bike is unnecessary.

Furthermore, even a well-tuned chain needs help to keep the “friction” at bay. When students are asked what kind of “oil” they need to keep “friction” from wearing them down, answers like understanding, patience, polite speech, courtesy, and inclusion would be welcome responses.

Most, if not all, of the children at the assembly own a bicycle. Now they will know a little more about something they may have been taking for granted. And if the teachers want to keep the message of the assembly fresh, pictures of bicycles or an actual bike could find a place in the classroom as part of the “drill” designed to foster appreciation of community, interdependence, and solidarity. Quick references to the cycle in their midst can serve as “drill bits” when teachers or students need occasional reminders.

Nonviolence can be taught, and ought to be part of every school curriculum. It's no less vital than literacy, and it's a better answer to the riddle that got me started on this.