

## DAZED AND CONFUSED: BULLIED

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Over the years, I have thought deeply and almost continuously about bullying and being bullied. You may have read about my bullying of classmate Stacy (Poetter, 2018a) in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, when I conspired along with my friend Jerry Wilson, on the fly, to pelt her with wet nerf balls on the playground while she played on the school's swing set and begged us stop. That event had consequences in real time, and it has also stayed with me ever since, challenging my sense of any good in me and, as a result, my overall sense of self-worth at every turn. And you have perhaps read my musing in that curriculum fragment about the confluence of the personal, social, and natural worlds, and the explosions that can happen in the blink of an eye through my use of the heuristic "supernova." Perhaps we are all, in microcosm, mini-supernovas of a sort, living and burning and moving but ultimately on course to explode and perish. And we all carry, no doubt, at least a tiny bit of Mars dust inside of us (Poetter, 2018b). By the way, I know Mars is not a supernova, at least not literally.

There is also no doubt that all of us have played the bully. And there is no doubt that we have all been bullied. After all, we're all enmeshed constantly—in schools and jobs and communities and families—in unequal relations of power. Harmony in our lives—no matter our genders, sexual preferences, classes, races, and/or religious affiliations—is hard to come by. Most of us find happiness, harmony, and well-being, maybe, in small doses, in nooks and crannies of lives in search of any sense of joy that is so often crowded out by a legion of afflictions such as conflict, mental anguish, physical violence, and, ultimately in the end perhaps and all along the way, alienation, distance, despair, and even hatred.

And it is so with me and my life. I am working up my courage with words toward telling you with words about something that has been devastating to me—at least as bad as the cycle of despair brought on by my bullying of Stacy and, in retrospect, many others along life's way no doubt. But it's hard to tell it, any of it. Telling about Stacy caused me to spiral with self-doubt and despair for a long period before, during, and now after the writing. But I have put this next telling off for too long, scared of the consequences, but knowing how essential it is to take it on, at least from my perspective. So here goes: I was bullied.

### FRANK BOWSER: BULLY

I found myself grazing through our cable TV channels recently and landed on the iconic movie *Dazed and Confused* (1993). I couldn't stop watching it. I tried, but couldn't, kind of like when people my age land on a TV channel replaying *Caddyshack* (1980) or *The Notebook* (2004). In almost every case, we can't stop watching. Seemingly, to varying degrees depending on the day, time, conditions at hand, I can't pry my eyes away, and so I settle in with movies like these that are constantly appearing and rotating through channels, sometimes watching something familiar that I've seen many, many times before, thinking I'm relaxing but most likely avoiding other responsibilities and tasks. I hadn't ever seen *Dazed and Confused* before. I had heard about it, but it came out in the early 1990s, right during the end of my doctoral program and dissertation writing regimen, when time was scarce for me.

If you haven't seen it—"alright, alright, alright" then (Matthew McConaughey's lingering line from the movie that continues in the public ecosphere of language)—the movie was set in 1976. I started high school myself in 1977, so I could definitely identify with the writer's depiction of the key action in the story. The plot swirls around freshmen at an Austin, Texas, high school who are depicted as spending a great deal of their time in and out of school trying to avoid the hazing rituals perpetrated by senior high school boys, mainly, against freshman. The high school senior bullies and the freshmen chase each other throughout the script. It's a romp, and awful, and funny (sometimes, but also not so much), and almost all true to form. Many of us closing in on 60 lived lives incredibly close to the ones depicted in *Dazed and Confused*.

When I started high school in the fall of 1977, I had just lost Dad after his second heart attack in November 1976 (Poetter, 2014). His death made me wobbly, both personally and in school, but I was in the know enough to be aware of what was going on around me. I had been in the junior high for two years in the building adjacent to the high school and knew a lot of my older peers from school and sports and community life, like church. And I had heard about "Freshmen initiations." It was relatively well known in stories circulated through our small city that seniors on sports teams hazed freshmen, performing initiation rites like kidnapping, blindfolding, and driving kids out of town after practice and dropping them off to walk home. Other stories told of older students scooping any kid off the street after school and pummeling him with punches just for "kicks." We never heard about any permanent damage being done to anyone, just that all of it was bound to happen at any time to all of us, and it was very unlikely that anyone would escape the situation unscathed. Even if we didn't get pummeled, we walked around for months in anticipation and fear of it. So, great harm was done no matter, just in terms of the threat itself, as abstract as it was and seeded. Most freshmen in high school in my day would be lying if said they didn't worry about and fear hazing, bullying, and initiation rituals during at least their first semester of high school.

But I have to admit that I thought I would be immune to high school bullying back then when the story I'm going to tell you all went down. I worried about it but didn't truly fear it, especially since I had been building a strong relationship with a high school senior in my neighborhood who was popular in school and a very good basketball player. He drove me from home to school every day. We played ball after school in fall workouts in preparation for the basketball season, too, so I was interacting with and meeting and playing with a lot of upperclassmen in the school. Things were going well...

Then one day things turned for me as I walked through the main gymnasium to the locker room for workouts. I never saw it coming.

Almost every day after school, I made my way to the auxiliary locker room to dress for workouts and never had any issue as I walked by the upperclassmen on the football team while they messed around and dressed informally for practice at the same time. I knew almost all of the boys, some of them well, and despite the age difference, some of them were friends. And nearly everyone in the school knew about my situation, who my dad was, that he had perished suddenly, and that I now lived in a single parent household, with uncertain prospects in our lives. My family, having lived in the same town for all of my lifetime, decided not to move away. We were staying put, despite the limited prospects for employment for my mom. The schools were good, and we had friends, and my sister Anne, born with Down's Syndrome and thriving in the county school, had a base of support from which to build her life. We weren't going anywhere

and felt loved in our own home and in the wider home of our community, schools, and church.

And I want to be honest about what I'm going to tell you that happened. I pretty much have never backed down from anything. Most people who have known me forever would at least call me "spirited," "competitive," even "physical." Especially in athletics, I never shied away from contact or conflict. Even though my sports were basketball and baseball, and not football, I didn't mind a rough contest. And I had my share of dustups on the playground throughout my school years with other boys. I know I'm considered diminutive in terms of physical stature, especially now in my late 50s, but I was nearly full grown at 12 years old, so I wasn't small for my age. I grew up in an era when bullies knew that the people they picked on, all of them, had permission from their own families to take care of business with any means necessary. If that meant a fistfight to even the playing field, so be it. And friends almost routinely stepped in to set things straight if there was a mismatch. We all knew that there could be consequences at home or in school from engaging in retribution, but we all knew how to settle a score and what the rules were. And I grew up in the household of a prominent protestant pastor; he taught me to stand up for myself and not to bring my problems home. That's just the way things were.

And in that moment—as I think about that dark set of hours that happened so long ago—I admit I was vulnerable to fits of rage while grieving the loss of my father. I was angry, hurt, lost, alone, and could be mean. I didn't want to snap, but I had no mechanism for defeating my anger except through physical activity. Church helped, and I remained faithful. I did the best I could. I had a deep sense in me that peace and justice were far more important in life than power and strength. My parents taught me all of it, to love others, as well as to defend myself if need be. I have mentioned in other places (Poetter, 2014) that playing basketball saved my life, and perhaps it's literally true. Working out, running, playing, even fighting on the court, helped me work things out, make new friends (and a few enemies), and solidify my identity. It gave me space and room to maneuver—to figure it out, to work through (Pinar, 2012). We didn't have mental health options back then, no therapy, no counseling, only friends and family and church and basketball.

That's all there was. There was life, and there was death; my entire culture challenged me with the bottom line: deal with it. Comforts popped up here and there, through friendships, good teachers, and family. But the stark truths about life and love and fairness and pain entered me at an early age. And they no doubt consumed me, and broke me, and made me who I am all at the same time.

So, as I walked casually and alone in front of the football team that Tuesday afternoon after school on the way to basketball workouts in September of 1977—with my gym bag in one hand, my books in the other—I never saw Frank Bowser coming. Before I even knew he was there, Frank got in my face while poking me hard in the sternum with his index finger, literally stopping me in my tracks and knocking me on my heels. I had great muscle control and balance back then and tremendous reflexes, and I can remember not dropping anything to the ground though I had been sucker-punched. He hit me really hard, and I will never, ever forget the sharp, physical agony caused by that one move.

I looked up very quickly in wake of that immediate and acutely painful act, and Frank Bowser said to me, "What are you doing walking here, Poetter?"

I said, "I'm on the way to basketball workouts, Frank, just like every other day. What the hell?" I was hurt and angry all at once, just speaking as quickly as my brain would let me while processing it all. And this act was public; everyone there heard every word.

"You don't walk in front of the football team anymore, show some respect. You go around from now on, not in front of us or you'll get the same thing tomorrow. Got it?"

I didn't answer. I just brushed past him and kept walking. I dressed for practice, made my way to the floor, and began thinking about next steps. All of that next 24-hour period is a blur to me now. But I do know that I was steeled against his will and would not back down. I resolved that, no matter what happened, I would not walk around the football team but would take my own path and walk wherever I wanted to. I didn't talk about what happened with anyone at school or at home. I had to handle this on my own.

As is true for most of us our entire lives, the next day came without any drama, and I walked right in front of the team, at the same time, with the same intent, which was to make my way to the locker room for workouts after school. That's it. I kept my eyes open and my head up (I learned that lesson the hard way!). I thought I had made it through the gauntlet unscathed when I felt this extremely forceful push from behind that sent me, and everything I was carrying, flailing to the ground, hard. It happened really fast.

Frank Bowser had tackled me from behind and crushed me to the ground, jumping up and celebrating and running around the gym while I came to my senses on the ground.

I remember very purposefully watching him glory in the moment, for that split second, and then picking up everything that had gone flying, including myself, my glasses, my books, and bag, and making my way to the locker room on my own. I was humiliated but not hurt. Just stunned, and very, very angry.

I also remember that not one person came to my aid while I was on the ground.

Literally, no one checked on me later.

No one said they were sorry and that they would help me out next time.

No one told me Frank was an asshole, a king-sized prick, and that I didn't deserve that kind of treatment, even as a freshman.

No one reported Frank to the principal.

No one called me on the phone later.

And no one in that gym celebrated, except Frank. Even then, as well as now, I think that everyone in that space was just as stunned and upset about what happened, and no one had a clue what to do about it. Mayhem as usual? A drug induced moment of random violence? A cowardly attempt at setting freshmen straight? Whatever. It didn't matter then, just like it doesn't now, except to me.

No one did anything about it that I know of to this day.

But I decided in that moment that an act like that would meet with complete and total retribution. And that the next day, I would walk on exactly the same path, in the same way, but I would be ready to fight Frank Bowser until one of us didn't get up.

And I don't mean that figuratively. That's the truth.

I didn't care about the consequences. I didn't care about hurting him. I would make this right myself. After all, I had just stared my own dead father in the face and buried him in the ground along with everything I thought was stable and good and joyful about life. What else could hurt me now? Frank Bowser? No, effing, way. I felt in the moment like I had nothing to lose. I certainly wasn't scared of Frank Bowser.

After all, he tackled a defenseless person from behind. That's cowardly in every way. And he was exactly my size, not known as athletic or aggressive. He never cracked

the football line-up but participated like so many other boys did in my school just to be on the team and close to the glory and action, which there was plenty of in those days at my school. I learned then, as I learned later after many years, that Frank Bowser was just a jerk. That's all. I also realized that I didn't have a great deal of experience in fights that lasted very long but that I would see this through to the end.

Frank Bowser would literally have to kill me to win that fight.

On the third day, I walked past the team and dressed for practice. No one spoke to me, no one dug their index finger into my chest, and no one hit me from behind.

After Frank Bowser tackled me in the gym, it was as if he disappeared. I never saw him in the hallway at school. I never saw him in the gym. I never saw him out in the town, at a restaurant, at the library, at a ballgame, at a parade. Nowhere. After he graduated, I never saw Frank Bowser again, not even in passing or at a distance, not in a car driving down the road. Never.

I haven't seen Frank Bowser since September 1977, more than 40 years ago now.

It's really impossible for me to explain, though my thinking is that his act either satisfied his hunger for complete domination or that someone who saw what happened or heard about it handled it for me without my knowledge behind the scenes and made him knock it off.

After all these years, I don't know what happened to Frank, though I heard over the years in casual conversation with friends and family that he made it through college, spent some years later in my hometown, didn't become a criminal, and wasn't/isn't dead (I didn't really care either way). But I never saw him again, and believe me, a big part of me was looking for him then and has been ever since.

I'm sure that if I saw him now, after so long, I wouldn't recognize him. I'm sure Frank Bowser wouldn't remember me or recognize me, and I'm positive he wouldn't remember what happened in the gym at our high school in September of 1977.

When conflict like this happens, who gets closure? How does that even happen? What are the consequences of something so egregious just hanging in space, a bad dream gone bad, with no end, no justice (seemingly), nothing? Or is there something else? Anything else? In past attempts at addressing bullying, I described and acknowledged my own bullying behavior. Stacy could tell you first-hand about my bullying side. And I wonder if I've ever been perceived as bully later, in ways that I have even missed, even while being sensitive to it all and knowing what it feels like to get knocked to the ground for no reason and to find no closure or resolution whatsoever to the pain of it all.

### **REFLECTIVE INTERLUDE: WHERE IS MY THINKING NOW ABOUT FRANK BOWSER?**

Recently NBC aired a story on the *Today Show Third Hour* (Leist & Mazzarelli, 2020) about sisters who suffered at the hands of a bully 60 years ago during their school days in a small town. The person who bullied them, a boy in their class, called them names and got others to ostracize them as young girls in school and then kept it up all the way through high school. His actions hurt the girls, and they described that their experiences in the town and school were tainted by his bullying, their social lives during their youths ruined by the lack of acceptance and care of their classmates and townspeople.

Much later in life, the bully confessed to his wife about his past behavior. His wife located the sisters, and they began discussing together the possibility of his apologizing to them in person. When they made contact with the sisters, the sisters very graciously accepted a meeting. When they met, their nemesis apologized, admitting after all these years that he regretted what he had done and that his treatment of them had haunted him

ever since. The sisters forgave him, and now they have an ongoing, positive relationship, even spending holiday meals together. It's a miracle really, a fitting tribute to the possibilities of humanity. Contrition and forgiveness are possible. They all wished none of it had ever happened, but the end result of reconciliation, the conquering of alienation, is the life giving and soul-flourishing power of forgiveness.

I admit I teared up during the spot, mainly because I desperately want what both parties got: forgiveness, the true kind, filled with grace and understanding and reconciliation and hope for ultimate redemption, as close to "real," and "genuine," and "authentic" as possible, in terms of what those things mean to me, maybe not to you, but possibly. To me, I think that the giving of grace and the receiving of grace, through forgiveness, whenever possible, even up to and beyond the limits of what most in society thinks is "appropriate" or "acceptable," like in the cases of perpetrators of crimes such as rape and murder asking for forgiveness from victims and victims' families and receiving it, constitute one of the great process challenges and possibilities in the human condition, our lived curricula (Berman, 1968) toward fulfillment, redemption, and life.

I know about this because I am in the process cycle of forgiveness, and you know about it because you are in it, too, all of us, like Dorothy caught up in her final cyclone swirl on the way back to Kansas, tumbling inside of memories and feelings about our pasts, with bad acts filled with bullies and bullying dominating the images in our mind. We are all in it when we gaze longingly in the mirror for something else besides those thoughts and feelings, the despair. Truth is that I would like to hear Frank apologize for sticking his index finger in my sternum and blindsiding me in the school gym, and I would like to accept it and also apologize for carrying malice in my heart for him each day of my life since September of 1977. I think that would be a nice moment. I would welcome it, and I long for it.

### CURRICULUM ANALYSIS

I think that most would agree that our life experiences in the cultures we inhabit, in many ways, are dominated by practices and images of interaction that are harsh, punitive. You don't have to listen too long to TV or radio, and you can land anywhere on the internet machine, to learn about the mayhem that happens all around us. And in our own life experiences, we feel the sting of relationships gone bad, along with the often accompanying physical and mental abuse and/or violence and the bullying, perhaps both as the receivers of bad acts and as the perpetrators. I have occupied both spaces in my life; maybe you have, too.

In many cases we are broken in ways that could result in criminal behavior, but most often we carry the weight of life's infractions committed and done to us that have deeply moral consequences (as opposed to legal ones), infractions that cause alienation, putting us behind bars of a certain type, not the literal kind, but the kind that can constitute devastatingly alienating prisons just as well, like the confinements of self-doubt, fear, self-hatred, loneliness, estrangement, and disaffection. And the world is opening up to the fact that almost all of us carry baggage and that almost all of us need help and support and love to overcome the extreme mental anguish that comes along with living. Joy occupies life, yes. But life includes, by definition, pain as well. How do we find balance in that tension and live lives unhindered by the despair of it all—at least lives lived at their possible best?

In her mostly forgotten but still timely book *New Priorities in the Curriculum*, Berman (1968) writes about a process-oriented curriculum as a set of new priorities

for human beings, focusing on the lived experiences of all students and citizens and the becoming of each person as an in-process work, negotiating in school and community the nature and meaning of space, time, selfhood, and the cohesion of thinking/feeling (pp. 2-13). Essentially, Berman builds a model for thinking about students as curriculum, as malleable, as moral, as moving, as in action. And in the middle of her work on this project is love, naming and describing “loving” as a central process that students learn about and experience in life. Key for her is tying the notion of loving to caring, to more than acceptance, saying that love “helps provide intensity in a mutually rewarding experience” (Berman, 1968, p. 65) where all become better as a result: “True love is a moral process in which all concerned are enhanced. The morality of love is not enforced; rather it is a concomitant of concern for the other” (p. 68).

Further, using Hora, Berman clarifies what love is, and is not:

Love is essentially a mode of cognition. Love is concerned neither with feeling good nor feeling bad. Love is concerned with understanding. Love listens to hear. Love is a state of complete attention, without intruding thoughts and motivations. Contrary to general belief, love is not just a feeling or emotion. The opposite of love is not hate, as is generally assumed. *The opposite of love is calculative thinking.* (Hora as cited in Berman, 1968, p. 68)

And so I would like to learn and grow through my experiences of bullying and being bullied and not be defined by it all in ways that harm or detract from the life I want to live and the way I live my life in relationship to others and, in particular, how I love others and the world. I would like to become a more complete human, alive and well and getting better, not worse. For me, holding on to all of this guilt and hate for so many years, as a result of these flashpoint experiences with bullying and so many, many more examples that dot my life in the world that time and space don't permit me to explicate here is *calculation*, all the thinking, plotting, mulling, and festering over it all on and on and on. I want to free myself from calculating and move to a new state of being, to somewhere filled instead with love and care.

But where does it stop? How can any of us who have bruised or been bruised respond and work on this without being trite about the pain and without being flippant about the power of forgiveness when serious, even mortal harm has been done? What can I do? What can we do?

For now, I think the answer lies in action, a step I'm willing to take, and the reason for all of it, all at once, from here to eternity: love.

I am so sorry, Stacy. I forgive you, Frank.

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