

Teenage bullying may be an incurable plague

Human nature never seems to change much when it comes to bullying. At school, it's the big kids who seek to dominate the puny and the different because they sense a physical advantage; later it's those with a misaligned perception they can use more subtle but equally devastating advantages linked to so-called intelligence, economic power or social position.

The Wellington East Girls College "lick the ground" case is an example of something more modern in the bullies' arsenal, social media. But it was driven by the same ethic that has always applied to some peoples' need to intimidate others.

No matter how old you are, you can probably recall similar behaviour at some stage in your life experience. The memories will be vivid if, like me, you were the object of bullying that made your life hell.

Mine was at high school for a couple of years in the 60s, when a boarder – a hulking youth from somewhere deep in the rural countryside north of Taranaki – took a dislike to me for reasons beyond my ken (it might have been because I played hockey) and delighted in punching me on the arms and abusing me whenever we met. He was enthusiastically encouraged by a day boy in my class, whose tongue was as vicious as the punches.

Even though several decades had elapsed when I went along to the school's 110th jubilee, I was still smarting. By then I was no longer the runt of school years and harboured what now seems an absurdly inappropriate desire to exact revenge on my tormentors.

Neither showed up, so nothing eventuated. However, I met the mouthy one again not long ago while researching an article (I hadn't seen him for more than 50 years) and I mentioned his part in my never-quite-forgotten ordeal.

He was appalled. A seemingly gentle man who had made a successful career in a couple of fields, one of them education, he was genuinely remorseful, in fact shocked, that I perceived him in such a way. I was shocked, too, and delighted that someone who seemed at school to be headed for a life of dominating others had done nothing of the sort.

Which leads me to hope that for some people - and maybe that includes the gang at Wellington East Girls College – bullying is something you grow out of, that sometimes it is indeed the "dumb shit" that teenagers do, that teenagers' frontal lobes are not sufficiently developed to weigh up what seems obvious to mature adults, including their parents.

Well, we can tell ourselves that, I suppose. I'd want more convincing. Perhaps if my other school-days' nemesis (heaven help me, I can still remember his name, even though I have trouble remembering most other, nice, peoples' names) were to reappear in my life as a decent human being, I would take a more positive view.

Because that's the real issue, isn't it? What becomes of these little monsters when they become adults? Will their propensity to see difference as an opportunity to boost their own self-regard "mature" into something more sinister, like racism, xenophobia or admiration for politicians? I'm only half joking about the latter.

I met a few adult bullies in my days as a journalist. I wonder what they were like as kids. Were they bullies, or perhaps bullied, which might explain their later behaviour when physical lack of presence in adult life could be compensated for with verbal acuity or access to power. For instance, was Rob Muldoon a bully at school? He was a spectacular bully of journalists, although to be fair he was also known to be compassionate to the dispossessed and the unfortunate.

Journalists themselves are perceived to be bullies by some (perhaps many) people. A colleague once told my journalism class: “Always remember – we have the final say.” Not quite true, but near enough. Perhaps I became a journalist to compensate for the bullying I suffered, although I’d like to think a more compelling motivation was the same one that moved Muldoon to do good works as well as the other kind.

Of one thing I am convinced: society has no “cure” for teenage bullying, if only because its “logic” is too deeply buried in a human psyche that psychologists might be able to elucidate in academic theorising and perhaps modify through therapy, but whose balms are not sufficiently accessible to remedy such a widespread plague.