

Chide not the sausage

By Ruth Ostrow

IT started a few months ago. My daughter came home from school complaining about a boy who kept tormenting her. "He calls me all sorts of names. He says I'm ugly and fat," she said, tears of misery streaming down her face.

"Don't worry. He's a mean person. Some people are just cruel. Ignore him," I said, to no avail. The next night she was in tears again. "He told me I'm stupid because I couldn't read this word in class. He made all the kids laugh at me and I felt so ashamed."

"Don't worry," I repeated. "He'll get his own lesson in life. Something will happen that'll make him realise what it feels like to be persecuted, you'll see."

"Just walk away," I told her, growing worried.

It didn't stop. I tried to teach my daughter how to fend for herself, how to tell him to shut up, how to turn the other cheek, even how to dob him in to the teacher. Nothing was working. So I went in myself.

"There's a little boy who keeps tormenting my child," I told the teacher.

"Yes, I know. It's 'Bobby'. He's got a sad home situation," the teacher explained, which involved the untimely death of a loved one.

"Oh," I said on hearing the story. "What a poor sausage." And suddenly I knew exactly what to tell my daughter. "The boy is a poor sausage," I said in the bath that night. "Some people who seem mean are actually feeling very fragile and vulnerable inside because they can't handle things that are happening to them."

"He's frightened and angry and it has nothing to do with you. And whilst you should never allow anyone to hurt you or speak badly to you, you have to forgive him and tell yourself: 'He's just a poor boy'."

Seeing the boy as small and fragile rather than a looming bully set up a self-confidence in my daughter that allowed her to deal with the situation differently.

From perceiving herself as the victim, she was now the bigger one, able to see a wounded person, not a scary one. And the words she then spoke were empowered by her empathy, compassion and lack of fear. "Leave me alone" is spoken quite differently from this vantage point.

More disarming to the boy, she held up a mirror the next time he teased her, saying tenderly: "You must be feeling very sad at the moment. I hope you feel better soon." While not falling at her feet in appreciation, he most certainly did stop bullying.

I was thinking about this the other day when a friend complained about a skirmish she was having with an insensitive neighbour who was smoking cigars in the non-ventilated hallway outside her apartment.

Explaining nicely that her son was asthmatic hadn't helped. Body corporate notices had made the guy more defensive and bullying. When I had coffee with her she was full of righteous indignation, and an I'll-stop-him-at-all-costs sort of rage.

Reflecting on how much like children we adults really are, I said: "He's just a poor sausage. I bet something really awful happened to him in life that he behaves in such an angry way. I'm not excusing bad behaviour. But if you can see him as a sad, damaged soul rather than the enemy, I'm sure you'll find a more effective way of dealing with the problem. Every time you smell the smoke think: `Poor man'."

At first my friend was furious with me. But after sulking for a few days she went off and practised what Buddhists call Loving Kindness. And keeping in mind some fictitious sorrow her neighbour may have suffered, the next time she talked to him she found herself being less indignant, less the "disapproving parent".

In fact, she even had a sense of humour: "How can we find a compromise that gives you the right to enjoy those smelly cigars but keeps us fuddy-duddies happy?" she joked. On hearing her make fun of herself, he laughed too. He now smokes on the roof garden, one floor up.

I'm not saying that it always works. Showing compassion and hearing the pain or anguish behind bad behaviour may not result in another person changing or becoming aware of their actions. But it does one really important, magical thing.

When you see your adversity - be it an ex-lover who's broken your heart; a school bully; an office tyrant; or a noisy neighbour - as a poor sausage who is suffering in some way, must be suffering in order to be so obnoxious, or so insensitive and unable to deal with humanity in a loving manner, then you free yourself from their power.

You stop feeling flooded with rage and emotion, a sense of powerlessness or injustice, and get a clearer perspective - may even be able to laugh at yourself for being so over-reactive when things don't go your way.

Deep down we are all poor sausages. But it seems to me, from dealing with schoolyard antics, that seeing it in others is a very powerful tool towards peace.

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