

LILLY, a MBYB case study

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What happens when you begin to realize that time and again, "*liberty and justice for all*" is really not meant for you or for your friends? How do you reconcile in your own minds the continual *silent* witness you are forced to bear to adult injustice?

The classroom of high school juniors, for instance, all said nothing as Lilly, one 17 year old girl, spoke up when her Social Studies teacher called another student a "retard."

For the expression of her righteous anger, Lilly was punished, severely. The other students watched it happen and said nothing. And Lilly got no help from her friends. Any of you who *are* willing to speak up, or to act up, know full well that your courage in the cause of social justice will be costly. ...

Most of you would never express the indignation you must all feel when one of your own is being treated unfairly. At best, you might offer a token verbal or physical resistance. For instance, you might shout *That's not fair!* or you might grab the adult's arm or try to stand between the adult and the child who is being treated unjustly. To do something like that, to propel yourself into an adult: child conflict situation would be to take an enormous risk. You would have to be feeling an incredible sense of outrage for what is going on. The indignity being suffered by the other child would have to touch you very deeply, probably at a place where you have been similarly violated.

You would deserve applause for your courageous stand for human rights. The problem is that you are taking this action while feeling pretty helpless to make a real difference. MBYB will help you to take actions like these not out of despair, but out of the conviction that *you will be able to stop the injustice.*

Often, like Lilly, the person who stands up against oppression stands alone. Or sits alone, like Rosa Parks on that bus. Those of us who oppose injustice to our own, or to other peoples' bodies, almost always face varying degrees of consequence for our human rights bravery.

Most of you won't answer the question that way. You won't answer that way because we have done nothing to help you answer such a question that way. More likely, your answer will focus on doing what adults want you to do. "Being good" is:

Doing what the teacher says

It's not getting in trouble

It's to do what they tell you

What do Lilly's classmates, then, make of their own inaction? If you were in that class and did not take a stand with Lilly supporting her against the teacher who called the other student a "retard," how would you feel about issues of social justice and human rights when you walked home after school that day? How would you feel knowing you let one of your own be singled out for unfair retaliation by people in power? Would you believe that fear for your own safety was sufficient warrant for your silence? If not, would you be questioning your conflicting emotions about your personal safety weighed against the greater good? Do you see your classmate as a heroine? An idiot?

Might you go home thinking nothing of it? *That* is the *unconscious* response adults hope you would have. We don't *want* anyone in that class questioning the teacher's authority. We don't even want you to *think* about issues of justice and injustice. We simply want you to accept whatever we do to you.

I think, despite our words to you about self-respect and human rights and all that, blind obedience to our authority is the lesson we really want you to learn. Pretty interesting, isn't it? ...

How often do adults control your body unfairly and unjustly?

All the time! The "retard" incidents are not isolated. They are a fact of everyday life for you as a young person. So there is a *cumulative* effect on you of your silence in the face of adult injustice, right?

If you were a classmate of Lilly's, you know you will face that same situation, just with different content, in the next class with the English teacher, and in the following class with the Spanish teacher. Like waves in the ocean, it never stops.

In the high school situation where Lilly reacted to her teacher calling another student a "retard," Lilly was focused only on righting what she perceived was a wrong. She didn't think what was happening was fair, and she said something about it. Lilly raised her voice in protest, not thinking that she didn't have that right as a young person. To Lilly, the other student's body deserved respect. She didn't "buy" the teacher's ownership of that other student's body, to do with it or talk to it as he pleased. That was the impetus for the cascade of events that followed, ultimately resulting in Lilly's detention.

SIDEBAR: "Detention" is the word used by adults to label the activity of keeping a child after school as a punishment for an infraction of a stated or unwritten rule of conduct, almost all of which are unjust according to MBYB standards.

Lilly was focused solely on *the issue*. It's a different focus for adults in times of conflict with young people. We rarely focus on the issue. Our goal is more to stay "in control." We usually don't pay much attention to the legitimacy of your concerns. Here, the teacher saw Lilly's protest as a challenge to his authority.

This difference in approach between Lilly and her teacher typifies the basic difference between adults and young people in times of conflict. Lilly, and young people like her, have the *issue* in the forefront of their minds in times of conflict. Adults have the adult: child *relationship* in the forefront of our minds in times of conflict.

What if the Superintendent of Schools was in the room and saw the same interaction as Lilly had seen, and reacted the same way as Lilly had reacted? Do you think the teacher's response to the Superintendent would have been the same as his response to Lilly? Of course not.

There is more to the situation between Lilly and her teacher, reasons why I chose it as a metaphor for examining the body ownership issue. Before I reveal the rest of the story, based upon the limited information you have so far, I wonder if *adult* readers are considering these kinds of questions:

How did Lilly challenge her teacher? What words did she use? What was her tone of voice like?
Was there a better time? Could she have accomplished her purpose by speaking to him after class?
Was the teacher's comment really important enough for Lilly to make a public statement about it?
What if the teacher was just joking?
Did the victimized student, the "retard," even care?
What kind of student was Lilly in that class? Was she an 'A' student? Was she failing the class?
Can I believe her? Were there any witnesses?

Most adults think like this when hearing about situations such as the one that happened to Lilly. *She must have done something wrong.* So we start asking questions. Young people don't ask these kinds of questions. Young people accept and understand the basic legitimacy of Lilly's issue. For *adults* reading this, if we are asking questions like these, I suggest this is one reason why our sons and daughters and students might have difficulty talking with us about issues in their lives that touch on peace, justice, and human rights. If we believe that most adults are right in situations like these and that a young person like Lilly shouldn't get involved, then why should a child bother to ask our opinion or even tell us about a problem with something unfair?

The MBYB response to the situation between Lilly and her teacher

When Lilly's initial expression of rage, not expressed particularly elegantly, was rejected, she began to curse at the teacher. That approach won't necessarily win many adult allies.

So, making himself angry about the cursing, the teacher walked over to Lilly, picked up a nearby garbage can, and hit her with it in the shin of her left leg (which was up on the chair in front of her at the time). He then gave her two weeks of detention for what he called her *rude behavior* and for *talking back*.

The sad part for me about this whole situation is that Lilly ultimately chose the "giving up" option. She went to detention. How do you keep fighting? She spoke up in the first place. That was huge, especially because no one else in the class supported her. Then, reactively, she yelled

and cursed when the teacher didn't pay attention to her issue. At least she didn't back down. She just didn't know a better option. MBYB will show you a better option than yelling and cursing for succeeding in situations like these.

Lilly accepted the punishment and began going to detention after school. When Lilly's mother called me up and the three of us met to discuss what happened, Lilly had already served three days of the two weeks punishment. Assessing the situation after listening to the mother and seeing Lilly's bruised shin, I recommended to Lilly that she stop going to detention immediately.

I drafted this letter for Lilly's mother to write in her own handwriting to have Lilly deliver to the teacher:

"Dear Mr. _____. I have instructed my daughter to stop going to the detention you assigned her after the incident in your class where Lilly reacted to your calling another student a "retard." There are 31 witnesses to everything that happened. Although it does not seem that Lilly was perfect in what she did, I believe that overall she did the right thing. I am very proud of her for standing up for the student you called a 'retard.'

Lilly might not be the best student in the school but she is a good girl and I talk to her often about peace and justice in the world. We stop to help people with disabled cars when we are driving together. We use the little money we have at Christmas time to buy toys for little kids who are homeless or who have no money. I volunteer at Loaves and Fishes, the local soup kitchen in town. So, in trying to protect that "retard" in your class, Lilly only did what was natural for her.

If you think the children in your classes are 'retards' maybe you should choose another profession? I want an appointment to come in and speak to you about this issue to make sure it never happens again, to my daughter or to any other student in your classes. I can accept that maybe you were having a bad day. I know it isn't easy to be a teacher. I spoke with Lilly about this situation and we are both comfortable with not saying anything about this to anyone. As long as it never happens again. I've asked Lilly to watch you (as well as her other teachers because she tells me other teachers 'put down' students as well). If you insist on Lilly serving out her detention time, I will call the local radio stations and newspapers, give them your name, and tell them everything that happened. I will also call a lawyer. This is your choice.

Respectfully, Mrs. _____ "

Lilly delivered that letter to her teacher the next day.

So, the rest of the story?

Lilly's teacher read the letter, looked at her, and said as he turned and walked away crumpling the note, "OK, you don't have to go to detention." No apology. Nothing said about what happened or what he did to her.

You and any adult readers who might be reading this story are probably wondering about the teacher's reaction to that letter? I want you to know that his reaction is not important. The whole point of this story is to illustrate a situation that is not unique; It is not about *this* teacher. *There is nothing wrong with this teacher. It is also not about this child or this parent.*

There is something very big wrong here. Be sure not to scapegoat any one teacher or any one principal. If you do that, you will stop realizing how much injustice is being done to you and your friends on the larger, more important scale. *That* is the scale that MBYB wants to help you fight if you are willing. *That* is the real "**dragon**" you are fighting. Adults, fighting our own dragons, most of the time can't even see what we are doing to you. If you are willing to give it, we really need your help. Don't expect us to do it alone. We are like fish swimming in water that can't see the water.

To summarize, in this case, Lilly's teacher is just a man who is trying to do a very difficult job as best he can. Other teachers do worse. This teacher might even be very helpful to other students at different times. A different teacher might have reacted differently. So "the problem" can't be this teacher. *School* is the problem. *Schooling* is the problem. This is just one example of what the institution of school does to the human adults and the human young people inside of it. We adults become dead. We all become less than human with each other. Aliveness and love and light and truth cannot exist within the context of *schooling* -- which is designed to kill those very qualities. Those qualities are all threats to "it."