

Random Acts of Kindness: *A Reflection on the violence done to youth*
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During the months of September and October 2006 in Northern America we have learned of stories that break our hearts. School is back in session and young people are once again dealing with the tragic reality of guns and violence in their classrooms. In just two short months we have seen violence in Essex, Vermont, Montreal, Canada, Bailey, Colorado, Gazenovia, Wisconsin, and Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Some of the victimizers are youth and some are adults. Sadly, the victims are youth as well as principals, teachers and other adults who strive to serve young people.

The recent controversy with Representative Mark Foley has also brought to public attention how easy it is to prey on the innocent with inappropriate and explicitly suggestive e-mails or instant messages.

Often the news and government studies focuses on the issue of youth violence, violence perpetuated on others by young people. The United States, however, continues to grapple with the issue of violence done to youth in what have become to be known as random acts of violence.

In depth investigations frequently reveal that adults perpetrating violence on youth were themselves victimized. The oppressed become the oppressor. How does a culture move away from living under the reality of random acts of violence?

The Gospel calls us to a deep understanding of the Kingdom of God. As Christians we are reminded that we live in between the already and the not yet. We experience glimmers of hope in profound acts of holiness expressed in the community of faith. Yet we realize that our hope in life eternal is not yet realized, it is something to come. The already and the not yet place us in what can appear to be an *awkward in-between* when we are confronted with violence to youth.

When young people are victimized we mourn the tragic loss of life as well as the loss of innocence. We weep for those who lose a child, a relative, a friend. All of us, adults and youth ask the questions: "Why?", "How could something so horrible happen?", "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

As adult leaders in youth ministry we struggle to find the appropriate words. We know that our presence and the presence of many other healthy adults in the lives of young people make a positive difference. We also know that by listening to the fears and the questions of the young that we help them to express what is going on in their minds and their hearts. Ours is a ministry of compassion in the midst of violence.

We cannot answer exactly why these tragedies happen. We can, however, create safe zones where young people can be allowed to question, ponder and pray. There is a great deal of suffering in the world. Some of the suffering puts us in touch with the extreme

way that Christ suffered for all of us. It does not explain away tragedy but suffering puts us in touch with the grace of love that the living God has for each of us.

There is a response to the random acts of violence which can be found in random acts of kindness. We can begin to help break open the difficult words and images of violence through prayer with young people and their families. We can help to break the cultural perception that my life is about me only and that the decisions I make have no affect on others. We can help young people move beyond the violence by allowing them opportunities to safely process what is going on in our world. *(Below, you will find a series of questions for small group discussion and processing, along with a concluding prayer of hope.)*

Those who mourned the loss of young life at the Amish School in Pennsylvania learned that the Amish community began their prayers by forgiving the victimizer. The grace of forgiveness was the initial prayer for the entire community as they prepared for simple funerals and burials. The Amish act of faith reminds us that we too are called to forgive violence which we do not understand. It is with forgiving hearts that we may move on with hope to share random acts of kindness with others.

Random acts of kindness surprise receivers with the experience of joy and hope. It is seen in those who pitch in without being asked, those who make an effort to include, to welcome and to smile at people that are neglected and rejected. They are small efforts that have a big effect. Our role as youth ministry leaders invites us to encourage our Catholic faith communities to think about embracing random acts of kindness. Living as true disciples of Christ we are challenged to put that thinking into practice so that we may be signs of hope in a world confronted with awkward in-betweens.

The next time you gather with youth in your community you are encouraged to confront the issues of violence that young people are currently dealing with. Consider your own community and the effects of violence that youth experience. Is it present in daily living or experienced as far removed since it only seems to appear on the television news? Review the reflection above and put it into words that would speak to the young people in your community. After this introduction invite the participants to gather in small groups and discuss the following questions:

- 1) How do these experiences of violence to young people make you feel?
- 2) Have you ever lost a friend or family member to an act of random violence? What was it like – how did you feel? How have you dealt with anger and grief?
- 3) How does our faith help us to deal with or make sense of these senseless and evil acts?
- 4) How do young people speak about difficult things like inappropriate e-mails and instant messages? To whom can they turn for guidance?

- 5) What can young people do and what can a parish and school community do to prevent these kinds of tragedies?

After a time of sharing bring the discussion to a close with prayers of petition from the group. Pray together the Our Father and conclude with the following closing prayer from *Prayers for Peace*, published by Graphics, Inc., New York, NY, 2002, p. 33.

*May I become at all times, both now and forever
A protector of those without protection
A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross
A bridge for those with rivers to cross
A sanctuary for those in danger
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
And a servant to all in need*

*For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I, too, abide
To dispel the misery of the world.*

Shantideva

Additional Resources:

Resources for Loving Your Enemy, St. Mary's Press
<http://www.smp.org/resourcepage.cfm?article=386>

Resources for Hope during School Tragedies, Saint Mary's Press
<http://www.smp.org/SchoolViolence.cfm>