

Two Girls, Many Bullies

It is striking that in just four days, two very different stories from two dissimilar cultures have touched the hearts and imaginations of many millions of people. Both are stories of fifteen-year-old girls. Both are stories of courage and targeted violence. One died, and one is still among us, but just barely.

Malala Yousufzai and Amanda Todd are/were both cultural warriors, navigating the frontiers of our culture of unprecedented personal freedoms coupled with terrible impunity. Both used the media effectively to share their awful message. And both were vulnerable, terribly so. We – their families, the police, their teachers and friends – were unable to protect them.

Malala campaigned bravely for a girl's right to an education, a campaign that earned her accolades, first from abroad, then also in her home country of Pakistan. Through Desmond Tutu's nomination, Malala became runner up for the International Children's Peace Prize in October of last year. Two months later, she won her country's National Youth Peace Prize, since renamed the National Malala Peace Prize. In January of this year, a girls' school in the notoriously dangerous Swat region of Pakistan was named in her honour. She was still just 14 years old.

Malala's campaign also attracted the attention of the Taliban, whose restrictive outlook would not tolerate the education of girls. They called her "Western-minded" and proclaimed their intention to protect Pakistan from her foreign influence. First they threatened Malala's family, then on October 9, a Taliban assassin shot her twice, once in the head and once in the neck. A Taliban spokesman (they are all spokes-*men*) has threatened that if she survives her serious wounds, they will target her again.

Amanda Todd's story has a sadder tinge to it. It is a private, personal story. During her life, Amanda experienced none of the accolades accorded to Malala. In grade seven, among friends, Amanda naively exposed herself topless to a stranger before a webcam. A year later, the pictures were posted on facebook. It shattered Amanda's self-esteem and led her on a course of drug and alcohol abuse. Soon after, she fell for a seductive bully who turned her whole school against her. After being beaten and thrown in a ditch, and changing schools several times, only to be continually haunted with pictures and vicious postings on-line, Amanda posted her sad video September 7, ending: "I have nobody. I need someone. My name is Amanda Todd." On October 12, she killed herself, successful in her third suicide attempt.

Amanda had the education and the internet connections so hard come by in Malala's part of the world. She had all of it, but it was the hard-hearted bully in all of us that did her in. Collectively, as a culture, we didn't care enough.

Malala Yousufzai probably never heard of Amanda Todd. Amanda made the news three days after her own encounter with the powers of darkness, and she is still in intensive care. Perhaps Malala will learn of Amanda's fatal ordeal, if and when she recovers from her own grievous wounds. And if she does, I wonder what will she think of Amanda's solitary end and her life, now celebrated like her own?

There is a grave and terrible transition being made, and it is being made everywhere. It is a transition from little towns and villages, hearthfires and chimneysmoke, places where everyone knew everyone and cared at least to some extent, to a culture where we can be suddenly vulnerable to the unkindness of strangers; a culture where people we have never met might try to destroy our self-esteem, even kill us. It is a culture based on cold profit and fast technology without bearhugs and kisses or handshakes or much of what we recognize as inherently warm and human. Our technology has in it the promise of educating and thereby transforming the whole world. There are many who herald just that possibility. But just what kind of world, we must ask ourselves, are we creating?

Somehow, even in the face of this week's heart-rending tragedies, the churches and mosques, the governments and corporations, big media, the police, the schools and social service agencies, are doing okay. They always manage. They know how to look out for themselves. Government leaders, school representatives, police spokesmen, and the rest all rehearsed and said the right things once the world came to know of the terrible things that happened to Amanda and Malala.

Their families, however, are shattered because ultimately there was nobody big enough to look out for these girls, these precious young women. No one could protect them from the brutal bullies among us.

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