

Teen behavior a call for reflection

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An upsetting news story these recent days about a pair of high school students who tormented homeless people in the Hsimen area has particularly affected those of us who work with local youth.

It is shocking enough to know the students poured human excrement onto the faces of people sleeping in public areas of Ximen. The realization that the youth filmed their cruel antics and dashed off to post their prank on line only increases our sense of dismay and anger. What a mix of twisted bravado, what a sick need for attention.

It is not surprising then that new letters in recent hours to the editor of the China Post and discussants in other forums as well have continued to question the reactions of authorities. Should officials at the boys' high school have expelled them, as they in fact did? Would not counseling have been a more beneficial route in the end? There has also been debate about keeping the boys in school, thus a "no" to the expulsion question, but a "yes" to a plan to transfer the errant students to a different school.

Let us briefly step aside from this scenario.

I want to walk now on precipitous terrain. Perhaps I need a good head doctor, or perhaps I am trying too hard to level the playing field here. Still in all, I must do this. I must confess.

Long ago and far away (as James Taylor puts it), I was once a boy. Boys can be nasty. Boys can be cruel. I'll leave it to readers at large to handle the question of girls. My hunch is that, on occasion, teenage girls can also be nasty and cruel.

One time a friend and I had the incredible luck of coming upon a large and beautiful soft-shelled turtle that was floating, dazed and barely conscious, in the placid waters of a small lake in southern Michigan. It was obvious that the propeller of an outboard motor had badly clobbered the poor groggy creature.

Had we left the turtle to its own devices, it very likely would have survived quite nicely and gone on doing its share to bring countless cute little soft-shelled turtles into the world for many a year to come. But, nasty and cruel kids that we were, we took no pity on the fellow. We gloated over the creature in all its misery, and dragged it into our fishing boat. We took him to the shore.

Then my friend and I called two other buddies for "help." We tied a rope around the hapless reptile's shell, and dragged him off into the woods. I am too ashamed to say more about what we wound up doing that day to this innocent creature.

I am not comparing homeless human beings in Ximen with reptiles that live in swamps and Michigan water. I am saying that there dwells within each of us a person capable of true human compassion, and a person as well who can be cruel and unfeeling beyond description.

To those who want to make scapegoats of the boys who acted so horribly to the homeless that recent night in Ximen, I say, look into the mirror, the mirror of our society and the mirror of your own life. Let us at least not deny that there are all sorts of ways to pour excrement on the defenseless, and many a way to be unfair and cold-hearted to the vulnerable and marginalized around us.

What those boys did was despicable, and they should make restitution. The cliché about having a debt now to pay to society doubtlessly applies to them.

When political parties refuse to work together for the good of the people simply because they want to embarrass and make life miserable for the opposition, they are no better than nasty teenagers. When as individuals or societies we taunt and reject others simply because of gender, sexual orientation or racial or national or religious background, we are pouring you know what on human faces.

Those boys need counseling, yes. And whenever we find ourselves in moments of cruelty to others, we need counseling too.

The worst suggestion I heard was to keep the students in school, but in someone else's school. Ship them someplace else, make them someone else's problem! Heaven help us.

In time of great need, almost always the best place to begin to heal is at home, at home in familiar surroundings and in the presence of people who know us and care about us. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking Point:

- 1) This column focuses on the news story of two high school students pouring human feces onto the faces of sleeping homeless people in Ximending. Did this behavior surprise or shock you? Why or why not?

- 2) Some people say the principal should not have expelled the boys from their high school. What is your opinion?

- 3) The writer shares here an embarrassing and sad story of cruelty to animals, and implies all of us can be cruel or unfeeling in life at times. Is this example too extreme? Have you in the past ever done a cruel act for which you now feel deep regret?