

Insults & education share nothing

November 26, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

My Thursday afternoons follow a routine I rarely break. By 3 o'clock or so I am ready to tackle this weekly votive offering for page 4. If I feel the need, I grab a quick nap first. If not, it's a cup of coffee that I grab as I head to the computer screen.

Today I needed the nap and, Holy Toledo, in the nap a reader of this Sunday column of mine appeared, someone I do not know. Upon hearing my name (we were on the telephone), he said in a whiny, raspy voice that dripped with disgust: "I used to read you every week, just religiously. Then you got to hanging yourself by the same old rope. Same topics, week after week, you hear me? I didn't like the repetition, so I gave up on you." I winced at his words.

It was just a dream, but my critic's point was as valid as a check from an honest millionaire. With all my heart, I dread losing readers by being predictable.

Today I must take that chance, however, for I am focusing on an issue the media have brought to our attention again and again in the past; honestly ad nauseam, and a problem I've discussed before. The topic leapt into these headlines in a local English paper a few days ago - - "Corporal punishment still commonly used in schools" (TT 11-22-12 p. 4).

Now, I know I cited a widely publicized survey among our teen-age population last week (can you see the worried look on my face?), and I promise with hand over my heart to not even whisper "survey" next Sunday, but we should not overlook this report.

The Humanistic Education Foundation in Taipei said last Thursday that a survey it had administered over the past sixty days to some 1, 112 elementary school students and 1, 112 junior high students in 22 counties reveals that corporal punishment is alive and well in Taiwan schools, even as we near the 13th year of the 21st century.

Slightly over 95 percent of the high school students in the survey said they had witnessed corporal punishment in their schools. That figure was more encouraging, but still sad, in our elementary schools. There 89 percent of the students said they'd seen

teachers use corporal punishment. The study essentially says that 9 out of 10 schools in Taiwan continue to rely on physical discipline to deal with their students.

The survey defined corporal punishment as "spanking, making students stand still [or maintain a certain position] for a certain period of time . . . and having students perform certain actions." Among the forms of punishment students say they've observed are squatting with hands raised in the air or running laps on playgrounds.

Joanna Feng of the Foundation was quoted as saying some teachers also still resort to violent language in talking to students. Words such as "stupid," "idiot," "scum," and "loser" are part of the arsenal.

So, yes, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I am guilty. I am guilty of repetition. I sing again the same old song.

How long must it take for members of what ought to be an honorable profession to face the fact that it is we who must discipline ourselves, and not our young charges? When will the sun finally rise on the dark truth that it is more than easy to make ourselves the enemy in the eyes of our teen population by the way we treat them?

Humiliation by name-calling is nothing less than bullying, of course. And of course, of course, forcing students to run or squat or stand in unnatural positions "to teach a lesson" is bogus and bankrupt as a form of education.

You have to wonder why corporal punishment is so widespread in our local society. Psychologists routinely say children who are abused tend to become abusers themselves. Is that the case here? Are scads of Taiwan teachers treating students as if they were made of wood because they were kicked around like this when they were young? I prefer to think not. Do teachers who engage in this type of nonsense honestly feel they are helping young people? How?

Perhaps I need another nap to refresh my tired old mind. I simply can't make the connection between insulting words, compulsory squats with hands held aloft, or lap-running, and the word "learning." (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. This column speaks of corporeal punishment in Taiwan's grade and high schools. A new survey among over 2,000 students says teachers still are using physical punishment in various ways. Without talking too much about your personal experience, do you believe that teachers for younger students "punish" them?
2. Is physical punishment of a student acceptable in your opinion?
3. What do quite young (grade school) students and more mature (high school) students "learn" when their teachers punish them physically?

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