

Donation *Troy*

Speak Life

"Sticks and Stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

A simple little nursery rhyme every elementary kid knows. Sticks and stone are physical things so they can hurt you physically. Words are immaterial so what harm can they do? Easy to understand and straight forward in its concept, yet, the power of words are more complex than what a seven year old could comprehend. That is what my elementary school teacher, Ms. Kimbreaux, taught me some forty years ago.

I was participating in around of teasing with a group of kids I considered my friends. We were ragging on Chuck, an overweight kid with a speech impediment. Everything was fun and game until my little band from Lord of the Flies decided to turn on me. I tried to laugh it off while standing strong under their pelting assault of verbal quips, such as, "Troy's shoes got hole in them," and, "Troy's hair is nappy." I flung the Sticks and Stones mantra before me like Perseus shielding himself from Medus's stony gaze. It wasn't until they happened upon a catchy little sing-song quip, "Troy, Troy the dodo boy," that my trusty shield against hash words crumbled to dust and my mantra turned to stone in my throat—and Chuck had joined them!

Tears spurted from my eyes strong enough to hose down a forest fire. A banshee wail burst from my lips louder than an air raid siren. I ran from the little gang of gremlins like the Ginger bread man running from the Cookie Cutter Clan carrying glasses of milk.

Ms. Kimbreaux found me sitting on the school steps on the far side of the playground. She had witnessed the whole affair. The teamed up teasing against Chuck, to the teasing turned on me. I sat there as she approached crying shamelessly. She took my little chin in her warm soft hands and forced me to look her in the eyes. When she had captured my attention, she sang to me as she tenderly wiped away my tears:

"It's fun to pick on others
when the whole world's on your side
but then things change and you're alone
and you feel so cold outside
Sticks and stones may break your bones
and bring you to your knees
But words are sharp piercing the heart
inside is where you bleed."

Her words held little meaning to my adolescent mind, but the haunting melody stayed with me throughout elementary, middle school, and into high school. Ms. Kimbreaux had planted a seed in my heart that would be watered through the years with tears I would shed and tears I caused others. It wasn't until my sophomore year that the seed finally bore its fruit. It was during that year that a female classmate committed suicide due to bullying. I finally came to recognize that, though words have the power to help and heal, they also hold the power to hurt and harm.

Here in prison we think it's endearing to use certain words with each other in jest, words which at one time invoked duels. Conversely, it is these same words, if used toward us by a stranger, will invoke a duel. We have unwittingly conditioned our hearts and minds to believe and accept verbal bullying as a sign of

comradery. I once heard someone say, "You know that your accepted, when your friends start calling you names." I disagree. No one can receive, or express love with ridicule and verbal abuse. Consequently, what example are we setting for our children? How can we expect them to ^{speak} respectfully when we do not show them ^{by} how we speak ~~respectfully~~ to others?

I was reunited with Ms. Kimbreaux years later while I was doing a nursing internship. ~~I~~ held her ~~soft~~ ~~warm~~ hand as I recited that poem which had such an impact in my life. I expressed how grateful I was for her teaching me words have more value than just for communication. It was better sweet to thank her for those kind words during a time I felt so hurt and wanting to die.

I believe it is time we as inmates become responsible and accountable for the language we use and how we steward our communication with each other. We are not showing love when we call each other name, we are bullying others into accepting those monikers whether they like it or not. Sticks and stones inflict egregious wounds but those wounds will eventually heal. Wounds caused by hurtful words cause a pain than may never mend. A kind word cost you nothing to give, yet, can be a treasure to receive. Let us use words that express love, kindness, and humbleness with each, words that will mend our souls.