



Muster Your Strength

Writing prompts, discussion questions, and audio transcript

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

Orrit Hershkovitz is an attorney in New York who, as a child, endured several years of emotional bullying. A classmate of hers from those years, Laurie Phillips—who did not participate in the bullying and who is now both a close friend of Orrit’s and a rabbi—also contributes to the story.

Talk it Out

Based on advice from Mrs. Levy, Orrit decided, “I’m not going to be able to change these [mean] girls, but maybe I can try to change my own reaction to what’s happening....” Brainstorm a list of pros and cons to advising the victim of bullying to try to change his or her reaction to the bullying rather than trying to change the bad actors.

Brainstorm a list of allies you could turn to if you were bullied. What is it about these people that makes you feel comfortable seeking their help?

Brainstorm a list of advice that you would give to a friend who is being bullied by other kids in her class. Use Orrit’s story as inspiration if it is useful. Do you think s/he should ask a grownup to do what the school psychologist did in Orrit’s case --namely, call a meeting of all of the kids in the class, including your friend, and discuss what’s going on with your friend? Explain why or why not.

Read the following statistic and advice from www.ditchthelabel.org regarding bullying:

1 in 2 people experience bullying so you’re really not alone. It’s ok to talk about it.

Now discuss:

Does this statistic ring true to you, given what you know about your school and those of your friends? Why might someone be reluctant to talk about being the

victim of bullying? Brainstorm a list of advantages and disadvantages of openly discussing being the target of bullies.

Write it Out

Choose one of the following prompts and write 1-2 pages, double-spaced:

- Write a story in which a kid tells his or her parents about a problem at school, and in response the parents offer terrible advice.
- Pretend that one day in school you happen to overhear a group of your friends telling a teacher that they wish you would stop hanging around them—it's like you're stalking them. Write up the scene. Be sure to include dialogue and describe the setting and your feelings.
- Write a diary entry that begins, "Today something bad happened, and I had to muster my strength."

TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO MEMORY

Orrit: I remember speaking with our social studies teacher, Mrs. Levy, about this, having a brief conversation with her during which she advised me to muster my strength. It's interesting that I remember that because almost every night I would speak to my parents about this. I mean, I remember having many, many conversations with my parents about this, but funnily enough I don't remember a single word of advice that they gave me.

My parents were immigrants, just to put things in context, and I think they didn't really have the tools to understand, let alone deal with this problem. But I do remember what Mrs. Levy said. I think what I took in from that comment was, I'm not going to be able to change these girls, but maybe I can try to change my own reaction to what's happening. And I think also for some reason I interpreted what she was saying as her confidence in me that I could be strong, and (now I'm getting emotional) and I've tried to – whenever something hard has happened through the years, I think I always do try to muster that strength. I don't always succeed, of course, but I still carry that.

The other thing I recall is we had, I think, a school psychologist at the time. I don't remember her name. I remember her being pretty ineffectual and convening a meeting, like a class, a student meeting, in which I remember sitting at a long table with – if it wasn't all of the students in our class, it was many. I would say 15 to 20, and having a conversation. I do not remember anything about that conversation. I remember leaving it feeling like nothing had been accomplished and this wasn't going to get any better, and gosh, I can't rely on the adults to help me here. I'm on my own, and I'm just going to have to deal with it.

Julie: Did you ask for help from the psychologist or for a meeting with everyone?

Orrit: I don't think I did. It's a good question. My guess is... My first guess would be my parents--my parents calling the school and trying to do something, but I'm not entirely sure that's true. It may have come from one of the teachers, but I wouldn't know who. I really don't know is the answer to your question.

Julie: And it was a meeting of 15 to 20 kids about you? About the situation?

Orrit: About what was happening with me, yeah.

Julie: Wow.

Orrit: Yeah, and I don't even remember at what point this meeting took place, whether it was fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade. [Speaking to her former classmate and now good friend, Laurie Phillips:] Do you have any recollection?

Laurie (classmate of Orrit's during that time): I have a recollection of a meeting, but we were sitting in a circle in a classroom, and I can't remember our school therapist's name, but I can kind of see her. It was so uncomfortable because it wasn't a conversation with us. Orrit was in the room, too, and they were wanting us to reconcile or resolve, and nobody would say anything, of course.

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