



A Middle School Regret

Writing prompts, discussion questions, and
audio transcript

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

Gordon Center has been a middle school teacher in Texas for the past fifteen years.

Talk it Out

Read the following quote from psychoanalyst Dr. Michael Klein about the memory shared above:

Most of us would say, “I would never do that—I would never stand by and watch my friend be picked on and bullied by another girl.” But time and time again, what social psychology teaches us is when the person is in the actual experience, it’s harder to step out of that role and the situation and . . . assist. It’s a problem; it seems to be built into the system; and it looks like there needs to be intention brought to solving it. We just can’t rely on people being good and morally able to act as agents [to help]. If you are in a social group, and the norm for some reason is “this girl deserves to be picked on,” [or] even, “this is what we’re doing right now,” and there’s a power hierarchy in that friend group, it can be difficult to step out of your role and defend this other girl who might also be a friend of yours.

Now discuss:

Do you agree with Dr. Klein’s statement that it is hard to stand up for someone being picked on if you are in a group? Explain your answer.

Which situation would make it easier to stand up: if you were friends with the person being picked on? If you were friends with the bullies? If you were friends with both? Explain.

Describe, in your own words, what Dr. Klein means by “there’s a power hierarchy in that friend group.”

Brainstorm a list of steps you could take now that might make it easier for you to stand up for someone being picked on in the future, even if you were in a group.

Write it Out

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

- Create a script of the memory described above. However, include a student standing up for the girl who is being made fun of.
- Imagine that you are Gordon Center or one of his friends in the memory described above and write a letter of apology to the girl you made fun of.
- Imagine that the girl in this memory finds Gordon afterward and confronts him about what he did. Tell the story of what happens. Be sure to include dialogue.
- Consider a time when you treated someone else in a way that you regret. What if that person found you afterward and confronted you about what you'd done? Tell the story of how that moment might play out. Be sure to include dialogue.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO MEMORY, A Middle School Regret

Gordon: When I was in middle school, there was this girl who went to my school; and she had the oddest walk in the world. She took a long, loping stride; and she was tall and gangly. And I'm sure she's one of those girls that grew up to be a super model, but the boys used to make fun of her walk. And I had no reason to dislike this girl; she had done nothing to me. If I had been a real man, I would have turned to the other boys and said, "Why are we picking on her?" But I wasn't. And I tell [my students] that to this day, I look for this girl--you use Google to look up all sorts of things—I said, "I have looked for this girl under her, you know, abbreviated name, what her name could be, I've tried cities, nothing." And I said, "Only because I want to apologize. I was mean to someone who didn't need someone to be mean to them."

Question from Interviewer: Did you actually mimic her walking, or you want to apologize for not – [stopping your friends from doing that]

Gordon: No, we all mimicked her. Well, I mean I like to say "we all"--my group of friends mimicked her walking. She would walk by sort of our part of the hallway, and of course the classic thing to do was to stand up and then pace along with her in her walk.

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