

**Day 5 Hot Topic presentation: School violence and bullying  
by Ingrid Rose**

Since February 1996, there have been 34 reported school killings in the United States. A shocking incident occurred at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon on May 21, 1998, when, after murdering both his parents in their home, Kipland Phillip Kinkel opened fire on his classmates, killing one and wounding 23. When asked why he had killed his father, Kip replied that he could not face his father's continued shaming of him when Kip was expelled from school.

My dad kept saying how my mom--(sobbing loudly)--how embarrassed she was going to be, and how horrible I was--(more sobbing)--and I couldn't let my mom feel like that. I couldn't do anything else. There was no other way. I had no other choice. It was the only thing I could do.

Rather than allowing the shaming to continue Kip had killed both of his parents, and killed and wounded others at his school. He could give no explanation for his actions other than that there was something wrong with his head. He identified as loving his parents, but knew that he could not allow them to be shamed by his expulsion from school. Kip's own shame, in becoming intolerable, was projected onto his parents, particularly his mother, and in order to get rid of the pain of exposure, he killed those he perceived as suffering from it, attempting to rid himself of it at the same time. In this dreadful way, Kip Kinkel attempted to empower himself in an intolerable situation, exacting in his mind a strange sort of justice and retribution. Rather than there being an opportunity for Kip to share his pain with another in an humanitarian way, rather than there being a context in which Kip could have felt contained through some sort of conveyed understanding or attempt at treatment, Kip was sentenced to 111 years in adult prison, without the possibility of parole.

*I am facilitating a group of 8 adolescent males and females all over the age of 15. We have been working together once a week for the past three months. The group discussion today turns to parties. Hilarity breaks out as people share outrageous stories of their own or others' deeds while "high" either on drugs, alcohol, or on party atmosphere. As the discussion progresses, some members describe fights breaking out in the midst of partying. The group becomes more solemn. There are pauses, moments of silence. In one such hush, Gwen begins to speak. She tells of how she used to physically fight other girls and wanted to kill them. She still hates people and often feels murderous. She is trying to curb her anger and hatred, and has succeeded in stuffing it deep down, she says. Sometimes it explodes and she finds herself physically attacking somebody she dislikes. This gets her into trouble with authority. She prefers to keep her feelings bottled up and doesn't want others to know what she is really thinking and feeling. She doesn't want to get into trouble any more. She has been given a number of warnings for violent behavior and feels threatened to be on her best behavior. Then in almost an aside she confides that she is on medication for depression.*

*Gwen's sharing in the group makes a space for others to divulge their inner secrets. One girl who is slovenly and overweight begins to talk about how much she hates people. "In fact", she says, "I would like to kill nearly everyone I know. I hate people!" she says with great passion. This is a young woman who sat beyond the edges of the group for many weeks, usually in a corner. Previously made fun of by her peers in the larger school context, she has now gained the respect of other group members for her rather extreme views.*

*After these two statements, there is a hush in the group. Some participants are looking down as though in deep feeling. We had not previously spoken of the desire to kill. This is a new topic for the group. A young man turns to me. "This will stay just among us?" he asks, making sure that our confidentiality policy is still in place. Violence is taboo in the school.*

The above examples illustrate how the experiences of anger and hatred become constellated in a city shadow<sup>1</sup>, which remains unheard and unable to express itself. Due to the violent reactions toward youth who show any sort of aggression in the school environment, feelings and fantasies are held in and remaining unexpressed, take on gigantic proportions, only to burst out in hurtful or violent action. The role of the school avenger is held in contempt by those to whom it is revealed and there is no milieu in which the strong emotions associated with it can be expressed and heard. This role manifests in the behavior of troubled youth and it becomes identified with those boys or girls who express it. However, it is also very present on all levels of the school system. It goes unrecognized, remaining unknown and unexplored, except where it is punitively reacted to through expulsion, exclusion, or imprisonment of those who offend.

When given an opportunity to dialogue about this dynamic and to express repressed feelings and opinions, youth are hugely relieved to be recognized and understood, dispelling the need for pent up emotions to burst out in violence. Parents, school staff, teachers and administrators need to be offered an opportunity to learn about not only the experience of school bullies and aggressors, but to find this experience in themselves. Transformation then becomes possible.

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to an idea that behaviours which are marginalised in the majority become concentrated in a few people who as it were 'carry' the unacceptable feelings and experiences for everyone else. See 'City Shadows' by Arnold Mindell, 1988, Routledge.