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Does Romney's bullying past matter now?

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NCR Today

The story of Mitt Romney and high school bullying is a tough one to read. It reminds me, on a certain level, of myself.

News reports over the past several days reveal that Romney led a "pack" of fellow boarding school boys in chasing after another student, holding him down and jaggedly cutting off the boy's long, bleached hair. The victim -- since passed away -- was most likely gay, and a ready target in a single-gender school.

Romney says he doesn't remember the incident, but others involved say it haunts them to this day; several sought out the victim years later to apologize. Now, I wish the former Massachusetts governor had given a much more compassionate response -- but I'm also worried about just what this story is supposed to "mean."

It feels like the unspoken lesson is that Romney was a homophobic bully as a teenager, and therefore is certainly one now.

I find myself less ready to condemn.

When I was at an all-boys Jesuit high school in New York, there was this kid in my year -- he was thin and pale and a good guy, but he was different and most likely gay. I never attacked him physically (I wouldn't dream of it, and the Jesuits would have none of that), but I often engaged him in "cut-down sessions."

For instance, I'd launch a verbal attack of supposedly-humorous jabs at him. He'd respond with some volleys of his own, but mostly he'd just laugh along. He was a gentler person than I was, a better soul.

It was in junior year, I think, that my homeroom teacher did one of those exercises for which Jesuits schools are famous: the class got in a circle, with one student in the middle. Everyone had to take a turn saying something positive about the boy in the center. When it was my turn in the hot-seat, one kid looked at me, thought hard and then mentioned the thin, pale kid: "I like the way Joe cuts him down. It's funny."

That comment smacked me in the face. I suddenly realized this was not something I wanted to be known for, nor to be complimented for. I didn't see it as a positive at all.

I stopped it. And I've never forgotten that moment.

This is what teen years are about; you make mistakes as you struggle to fit in, to find yourself, to accept yourself. With very few exceptions, you don't stay the person you were at 17, any more than you stay the person you were at seven.

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So I'm not sure anybody should condemn Romney for the boarding school incident, rough as it was. Yes, it plays into the "narrative" well: the child of privilege who is out-of-touch and out-of-reach becomes the country-club Republican who doesn't care about the average American.

But people change, experiences shape us. We should give Romney the benefit of the doubt.

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