

Just moments ago, we viewed the moving video “Don’t Laugh at Me.”  
As time went on, Peter, Paul and Mary added these extra verses to the  
song:

I’m black, I’m white, I am brown.

I’m Jewish, I’m Christian, I am Muslim.

I’m Buddhist, I am Hindu.

I was born in Serevo, I was born in Kosevo,

I was born in Northern Ireland. I was born in Canada.

I was born in Mexico. I was born in Afghanistan.

I was born in the United States of America.

I was born in Heh-vehl Land (in the Check Republic.)

I was born in Iraq.

I’m a Hutu. I’m a Tush-shie. I’m gay. I’m lesbian.

I’m an American Indian.

I am very very young. I am somewhat aged.

Don’t laugh at me....don’t call me names.

Don’t get your pleasure from my pain.

In God’s eyes we’re all the same.

Someday we’ll all have perfect wings. Don’t laugh at me!



## Cyberbullying pushed Texas teen to commit suicide, family says

---

**DECEMBER 2, 2016**

**TEXAS CITY, Texas -**

members of a Houston-area high school student who killed herself are rallying for tighter laws against cyberbullying.

Brandy Vela's family says cyberbullying pushed the 18-year-old over the edge,

leading her to shoot herself in the chest Tuesday afternoon at the family's Texas City home as family members watched.

Her father, Raul Vela, said she had been receiving abusive text messages for months from bullies using an untraceable smartphone application.

Her father said someone made a fake Facebook page of her, creating another cyberbullying medium.

- On Tuesday, Brandy sent an email to her family members telling them she was going to kill herself,
- They rushed home and found her alive.

"We tried to persuade her to put the gun down, but she was determined," Raul Vela told KHOU-TV.

“She said she’d come too far to turn back. It was very unfortunate that I had to see that.

It’s hard when your daughter tells you to turn around. You feel helpless.”

“I heard someone crying,” Brandy’s 22-year-old sister, Jacqueline Vela, told KPRC-TV of Houston,

“so I ran upstairs & I looked in her room, & she’s against the wall & she has a gun pointed at her chest

and she’s just crying and crying and I’m like, ‘Brandy, please don’t. Brandy, no.’”

Jacqueline Vela said she went to her parents’ room, “and I just heard the shot

and my dad just yelled, ‘Help me. Help me. Help me.’”

“I was almost certain that I could persuade her to put that gun down. It didn’t work. She pulled the trigger,” Raul Vela said.

Her final cellphone text to her family was, “I love you so much just remember that please and I’m so sorry for everything.”

Her family said the harassment focused mainly on Brandy’s weight.

“They would make dating websites of her, and they would put her number and they would put her picture (on the sites), and lie about her age

and say she is giving herself up for sex for free, to call her,” said Jacqueline Vela.

The family said they reported the bullying to the Texas City school district and several law enforcement agencies.

“School was a safe environment for Brandy,” said school district spokeswoman Melissa Tortorici.

“She had a lot of friends and was thought of warmly by her peers and teachers.

She did bring it to the school’s attention before Thanksgiving break that she was getting harassing messages to her cellphone outside of school.

Our deputy investigated it, and the app that was being used to send the messages was untraceable.

We encouraged her to change her phone number.”

Brandy Vela changed her number, but bullies always found her, her family said.

“We have lots of incident reports, and they always say the same thing:

They can’t do anything about it,” Jacqueline Vela said.

A Texas City Police Department statement says it continues to investigate the Velas’ complaints.

Jacqueline Vela told KPRC that she and her siblings have a good idea

who may have been behind some of these attacks and have been assisting in the investigation.

The father said that he hopes for stricter laws against cyberbullying and greater awareness of the problem to give some meaning to his daughter's death.

Some time ago, Dave and I attended the General Synod of the UCC in California.

I remember looking, amazed at the many rainbow scarves

that were created for the 'Scarves Against Bullying Project!'

Churches were invited to knit or otherwise create rainbow scarves

as a symbol of hope for UCC members attending that year.

The church I pastored at the time

sent a couple of armfuls of handmade scarves!

We were instructed to wear one and give the rest to others to wear.

You can imagine that wearing a scarf in hot summer weather drew attention!

which was just the intention!

Because when someone asked WHY we were doing such a crazy thing,

we would tell them about the Anti-Bullying Project.

Would you believe that about 10,000 scarves

were sent or brought to California that week?  
The City of Longbeach was full of people of many ages  
wearing those scarves in the middle of summer!

While Dave & I were at General Synod,  
we had our choice of workshops & intensives to attend.  
One I chose was an intensive on bullying & the scarf project.

We shared in small, then the larger group,  
our own experiences of being bullied or of doing bullying.

**[RAISE YOUR HANDS IF....]**

We found that the truth is, most of us have experienced some level of  
both!

I have always been moved by the words to the song we shared earlier...

and Peter, Paul and Mary do my favorite rendition of this song!

It is described on the album insert as

“A cry against disrespect & stereotyping of any kind.

The song has become the anthem for Operation Rescue,  
an organization seeking to assure children a ridicule-free learning  
environment.

We are moved by these words, but sometimes as adults,

we condone these behaviors, knowingly or unknowingly.

Have you ever heard this said, “Boys will be boys,”  
or ‘Sticks & stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.’”  
Truth is that broken bones heal far more quickly & cleanly  
than the damage words or names can cause.

Our Bible acknowledges the power of words.

Just a few minutes ago, we heard teachings of Jesus  
& the Apostle Paul on right relationships and communication.

Let me share with you more words written in the wisdom book of  
Proverbs:

“The words of the wicked are a deadly ambush...like sword thrusts...

Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

A cruel tongue breaks the spirit, & a broken spirit – who can bear it?

The words of the wise, however, bring healing & deliverance.

A gentle tongue is a tree of life & a truthful witness saves lives.”

**WORDS MATTER.**

Words can wound, divide, destroy, even bring death.

Oh, the names, the labels of those who are different, misunderstood  
judged,

Those who stick out among others...they change over time.

The means of bullying change over time.

We used to image bullying as happening in a playground, classroom,  
or on the way home from school.

But the boundaries of bullying change.

Someone now can't escape bullying by running home.

Bullying now follows one almost everywhere!

It is spoken, acted, snapchatted, facebooked, twittered and much more.

It can be passed on to hundreds or even 1000's of people  
at the touch of a button or screen & it can live indefinitely online.

How does cyberbullying happen:

Listen to a recorded conversation between 3 teens:

**HANNAH**, looking at her smart phone says,

"look! Look! I just got the funniest text!

Athena just sent me a picture she took of Katie

at the drinking fountain with her big butt sticking out.

You can actually see her underwear and **EVERYTHING!**

**ALEYA** replies, “Show me! O, that’s **TOO** funny!

Text it to me – I’ll send it to Jessica.”

**JOHN**, also standing there, adds: “Yeah & send it to me, too!

I can get my sister to put it on her facebook page.

What should she write to go with it?”

**HANNAH** says, “How about ‘Caution: Wide load?’”

**ALEYA** adds, “That’s perfect. Or maybe “HIPPO crossing.”

**JOHN** has the last words: (for the moment)

“Great! WE can snapchat & twitter it , too!

I know, I’ll have her put both of your ideas up,

and tell people to post it to their pages with their own captions.

We can have the entire Middle School involved in this!”

### **WE CALL IT CYBERBULLYING.**

And the sad fact is that this doesn’t happen just to children or teens...

I have heard from superintendents, teachers and parents and the news,

that adults do their own share of cyberbullying.

Studies show that cell phones and the internet worsen the problem of bullying.

But no matter what form it takes, the results are often devastating!

It is a reality being addressed in our own area.

From 2007 through 2011, there was an average of 724 deaths by suicide per year.

Wisconsin suicide rates are the 10th leading cause of death for all ages.

Vilas County's suicide rate is 21.2% per 100,000 residents,

which is almost double that of the National rate, which is 13.5% per 100,000

The Wisconsin Violent death Reporting System, reports that:

In Wisconsin, suicide has been a leading cause of death for young people aged 10-17 from 2004 – 2013.

The Wisconsin Violent death Reporting System examine suicide rates for 10 – 17 year olds in Wisconsin areas.

What I learned by reviewing it shocked me:

Overall, male rates are considerably high than female rates,

though female suicide **attempts** are higher.

Both have increased steadily over time in Wisconsin and the US overall.

In 2014, 1,168 teens aged 13-18 committed suicide in our country.

Saturday and Thursday are the most common days of the week

for suicides among 10 – 17 year-olds.

Together, Sat. & Thurs. account for nearly 1/3 of suicides in this age group.

Poisoning or overdose is the most common method of suicide for females.

Firearms are the most commonly used method of suicide among males.

Nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of teen suicides happen at home.

Thank God that events are held to raise awareness of suicide!

Most schools and communities now have programs in place to deal with bullying.

Because, 1 out of 4 teens report being bullied. 1 out of 5 admit doing some bullying.

Many of those bullied (*sometimes at home*) go on to **BECOME** bullies.

As many as 160,000 students stay at home on any given day,

because they are bullied.

And one of the truths not often addressed **is the fact** that 1 out of 3 teen suicides

are committed by someone struggling with her or his *sexual identity*.

We adults (family members, leaders (on all levels – I include myself)...each of us...

can't excuse ourselves of responsibility!

If we shun those who are different reduce people to labels,

instead of recognizing them as real, breathing persons made in God's image..

**If we do it.....then our children learn that it's OK.**

Everytime we reduce someone to a caricature...

forgetting that they are also a human being,  
a mother, a father, a husband, a wife,  
.....just like us, trying to do the best we can....;

or we use someone as an easy target and laugh...  
our kids will learn it's OK to reduce others to punch lines,

As long as the joke is funny.

Every time we see words used as weapons, and we say nothing...

our young people learn from us that that's OK too.

It's time to speak up for those who have little voice.

It's time to speak healing words, to speak life and hope..

and to raise our children to do the same!

Yes, we need to teach our kids to cope with bullying.

But we also need to teach them to stand up for & beside others.

To take the risk of defending or befriending...  
the awkward, the lonely, the small, and the foreign.

We need to teach them to simply say, as we do:

"That makes me uncomfortable.

No one deserves to be treated like that!"

We need to stop laughing (as is modeled in so many sit-coms & other  
comedy venues)

at another's expense, to say: "This is NOT OK."

Because all that is needed for evil to triumph in the world  
is for people to stay silent.

The Apostle Paul asks us to 'speak the truth to our neighbors.

Paul did not see FACEBOOK coming!

Quinn Caldwell, a UCC Still Speaking Writer, notes that:

“All Paul’s advice is given to people who can look each other in the eye.

What would he say about how to engage on Facebook or Twitter,

where you can be in an electronic relationship

with 1,000s upon 1,000s of people you’ll never meet in person?”

Quinn goes on to say that although Paul didn’t do a good job

of anticipating the Internet, **he bets God did.**

Quinn challenges you and ME:

“Since God doesn’t SEEM to have spoken clearly through Paul

on the Christian ethics of Facebook,

**Maybe God will speak through YOU (and ME!)**

**National Suicide Prevention Week is September 8 – 14, 2019**

September is National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month—

a time to share resources and to talk in an effort to shed light on this topic.

Nicolet College is hosting a free film screening of ‘**Suicide, The Ripple Effect**’

along with a mental health resource fair

on Wed., September 25<sup>th</sup>. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Wanna go?

-LOOK UP-

May God grant us the power and grace, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE,  
and fill us with the Holy Spirit for such times as **these....**  
Because then, we **CAN** make a difference! Amen.

**SUICIDE**  
THE RIPPLE EFFECT

**NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE**  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free Film Screening & Mental Health Resource Fair  
**WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 25TH 2019**  
Doors Open at 5:30pm

Suicide - The Ripple Effect focuses on devastating effects of suicide and the positive ripple effects of advocacy, inspiration and hope that are helping millions of people heal and stay alive. The film highlights Kevin Hines' journey, who at age 19, attempted to take his life by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge.

This film is appropriate for 10 years and above.

**EVENT LOCATION:**  
Nicolet College Lakeside Center  
5364 College Drive, Rhineland, WI 54501  
*Flip over for campus map and parking information.*

**REGISTRATION PREFERRED:**  
Email Ascension Koller Behavioral Health  
[ann.lawrence@ascension.org](mailto:ann.lawrence@ascension.org)

Event Sponsors:  
 Ascension  
 Marshfield Clinic Health System  
 NICOLET COLLEGE

For more information: contact Heidi Pritzl,  
Ascension Koller Behavioral Health  
at 715-477-3062.

Flip for more information about warning signs of suicide-->