

# Editorial



## Back-to-school feelings

BY LAURA KEIL, PUBLISHER/EDITOR

My daughter starts Kindergarten this week. It is a momentous time in her life and in our's. She is excited and knows a lot of the kids in her class already. My husband and I feel positive about her school and teacher, and I will no doubt take a picture of her on her first day, dressed in new clothes, ready for the adventure that will be the next many years of her life.

In a weathered photo album on my bookshelf is a photo my mom snapped of me on my first day of school back in 1990. I wore a backpack shaped like a bunny, my hair was pulled into two ponytails, and I'm giving a toothy smile above a new white dress.

When I look at that photo now, I feel grief. Grief at an innocent child excited for school who, instead of enjoying a rich learning environment and wider social network, would endure years of unchecked bullying and low self-esteem.

Looking back now, it is difficult to quantify

exactly how much bullying there was—daily? weekly? But being in a small split class throughout elementary school, I was always with the same kids in my grade. There was no way to escape tormentors year-to-year. Even when they weren't calling you names or spitting on you or turning other people against you, you feared they would. A subtle look or action could pierce your heart.

With my daughter's school year approaching, my childhood tormentors have re-emerged with their torments. *Loser. Loooooser.* I see their backs as they retreat, laughing. I remember those Friday nights at home crying in the bathroom, wondering if there was anything worth living for.

I realize I have never actually dealt with what happened. I just tried to forget and "move on" as quickly as I could (for me the relief came in high school, when suddenly I wasn't with the same kids all day every day). I imagine, in some cases, simply forgetting works, but only if you can avoid triggers that drag up the emotions.

I drove to Prince George with my mom recently and told her about the recurring memories intruding on my thoughts, memories of taunts and loneliness. We talked about what hadn't worked at the time (ignoring them), and what did work somewhat (her talking to another parent). There were episodes I'd never told her about when they'd happened.

And despite being where I am today—a business owner, a wife, a mother, a university-graduate—these bullies still have the power to belittle me 25-30 years later. My tormentors no longer exist. They are no longer children in a school. But they remain vividly alive in my memory. They are still in my mind when I enter a room full of people gathered in groups, still alive when I try to join a conversation and fail, or think about my dreams and if I'm capable of achieving them.

*Loooooser.*

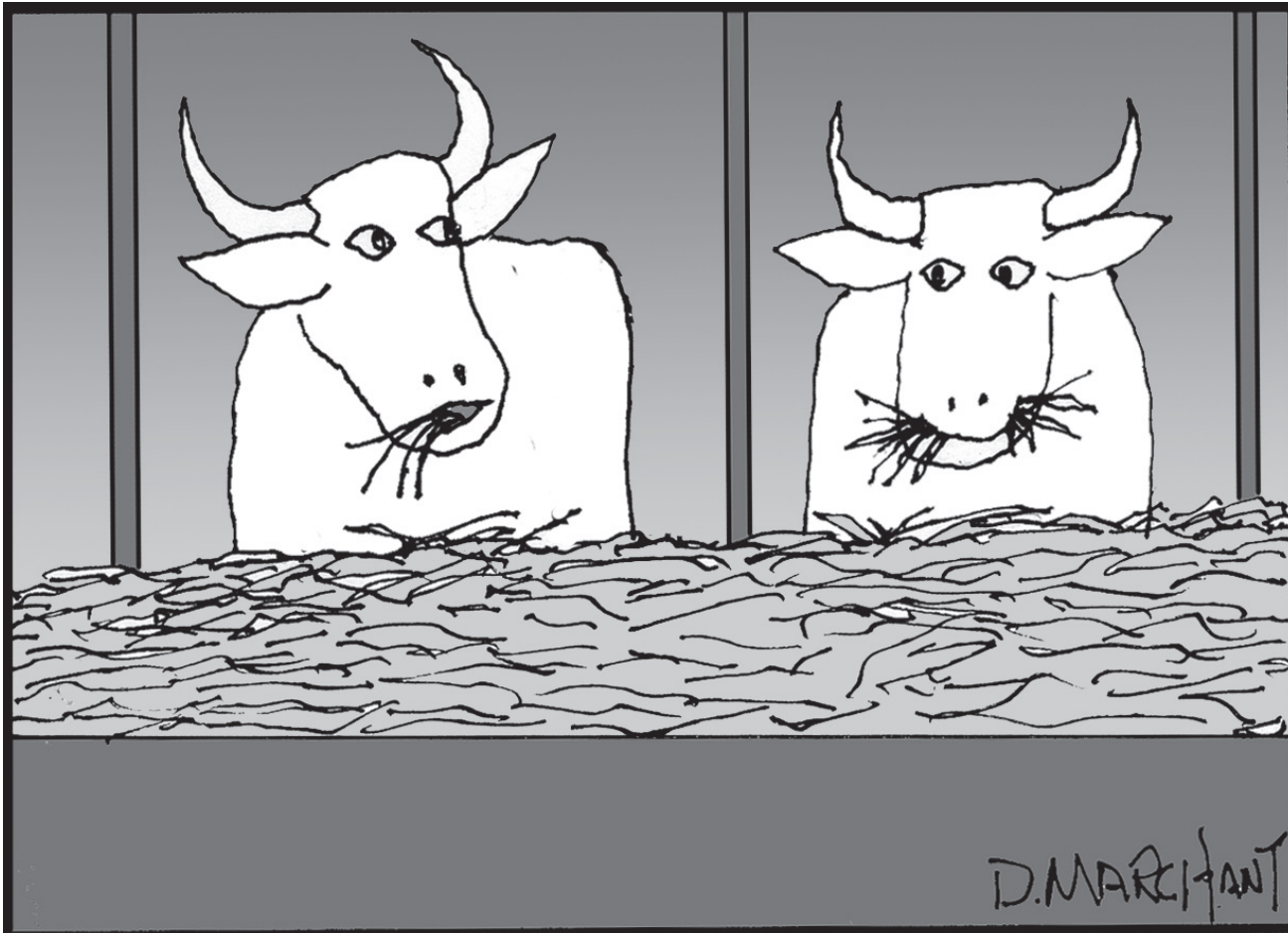
To overcome the invasive thoughts, my mom suggested I burn the photos of the people who bullied me. I thought about it, but realized this wouldn't make me feel any better. It didn't shift the equilibrium back in my favour, it only fed my anger and sadness over what they stole from me—a more peaceful school experience, the opportunity to enjoy more friends, the chance to feel accepted and appreciated by my peer group.

The only thing that would shift the balance was the opposite. But could I forgive them? I wasn't ready or willing. They didn't deserve it.

I've heard of cancer survivors who say that getting cancer was the best thing that ever happened to them. It is bizarre, unfathomable. How could you be grateful for something that brought you suffering and harm? And yet thanking the bullies seemed more doable than forgiving them. I would never forgive them. But could I thank them?

I tried it on for size.

CONT'D ON P6



"DOES THIS SUMMER'S HAY TASTE SMOKY TO YOU?"

