

# WHEN WORDS HURT

**WHAT  
if people  
actually bled physically  
every time we cut them  
verbally?**

BY DIANE EBLE

**R**EMEMBER A GIRL NAMED Joyce in junior high school. Joyce was kind of fat, and wore dorky clothes, and had a high, squeaky voice. And when she walked behind you she trod on your heels. She wasn't too smart either. My friends and I had great fun thinking up new names for Joyce. "Elephant." "Retard." We would imitate her squeaky voice, ask each other the kind of dumb questions Joyce would ask, and make a big deal out of avoiding being in front of her in line. We thought Joyce was too stupid to understand when we were making fun of her. But one day after some put-downs she got up and headed for the washroom. A few minutes later I found her in there crying. And I didn't know what to say.

### **The Pleasure of the Put-down**

WHO DOESN'T LOVE A GOOD put-down? We think they're funny. Rodney Dangerfield built his comic career on relating how other people put him down and lamenting, "I don't get no respect." Put-downs are the foundation of most television sit-coms. There's even a phone line, "Dial an Insult."

Put-downs are such a big part of our everyday communication, we hardly think about it. Cracking jokes at another person's expense may be a way to get in good with friends. You crack a joke,

your friends laugh and say, "Good line, good line." You feel great. Maybe the other person laughs too, on the outside. You rarely stop to think how that person might be feeling on the inside.

### **The Under Side of Insults**

"HEY, PIZZA FACE, who hit you with the ugly stick?"

The whole group of guys laughed. There was no one else in the hall but them and me. I pretended I didn't hear as I walked quickly to my class, but I felt my face get hot. And when I got home that day I cried. Their words confirmed my worst fear: No guy would ever want to go out with a girl with acne and glasses.

If it's cool to insult others, it's necessary to stay cool when insulted. You might even laugh along with the others. But you don't forget it. You think about it for days. The person who insults you forgets it easily enough. Confront him with what he said about you, and he may not even believe you. But you know. You carry it around with you like a secret wound.

Why does it hurt? Because words filter down to our subconscious minds. And *the subconscious mind does not have a sense of humor*. We believe, at the subconscious level, what other people say about us. You see, words paint a picture in our minds, and our minds can't distinguish between true and false.

The picture is there, and we conform to the picture.

The baseball coach told Barry, "You'll make a lousy baseball player." Guess what happened? "I convinced myself that he was right. I just gave up and dropped out of baseball," says Barry. We tend to live down to the names other people call us.

It's like we all have a cassette player in our brain, and we're recording all those comments—about our shoes, athletic ability, appearance, weaknesses—and we play back those tapes to ourselves all the time.

And the people in your family, the people in your circle of friends, are playing back tapes of things that you've said to them, things you've said about them to other people that get back to them somehow. (Ever notice how nobody can keep a secret? And how gossip always gets back to the person being talked about?) Do you ever wonder what tapes are playing back to the people in your life, things you've said that hurt them? You may have forgotten your words, but they might carry them around for years. Some things are carried around for the rest of our lives, hurtful things that somebody tossed out without thinking.

Here's a question to ask yourself: How do you think other people feel about themselves after they've been around

# WHY?

**Even though we know that our put-downs, gossip and careless words hurt people, we keep doing it.**

Inside we have a scary tendency to hurt people. Even to enjoy it sometimes.

It's like there's this animal we can't control. We don't like this animal, other people don't like what this animal does. God certainly doesn't like it, but we don't know how to fight it.

Part of the good news about Jesus is that he named this animal. In John 8:36 he told us it's called sin, and that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. That's the animal on the loose inside us that comes out so often and tears people up, the animal that causes me to do all kinds of things that I don't really want to do.

But Jesus not only named the beast. The gospel tells us that Jesus also tamed it. He said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

We don't have to be people who tear other people down. We can be builder-uppers, because Jesus Christ tamed the animal of sin. How? He turned all the fury of that animal on himself. If you want to know what the animal looks like, look at the cross. There Jesus said, "Punish me, take me, so those who come to me don't have to take the punishment they deserve and so they can change." (See 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

If you try to fight the animal inside alone, it will one day destroy you and those close to you. But it is possible to overcome the animal by going to the place where Jesus Christ died to liberate us.

Open this heart of yours, where the animal of sin lives, to Jesus Christ, and you'll find he has the power to tame the animal. Animal-taming is the reason he died on the cross.

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you? Do they feel bigger, or smaller? Do they feel like more of a person, or do they feel more like some (unmentionable) thing?

## What Put-downs Say about Us

WHY IS IT SO EASY—even fun—to put people down, even though we hate to be put down ourselves?

Some of us do it to get attention. We happen to have a knack for thinking up clever lines, and we use our sharp wit to gain us admiration.

Other people use put-downs because they want to fit in. (Everybody puts people down, right?) To prove they're cool.

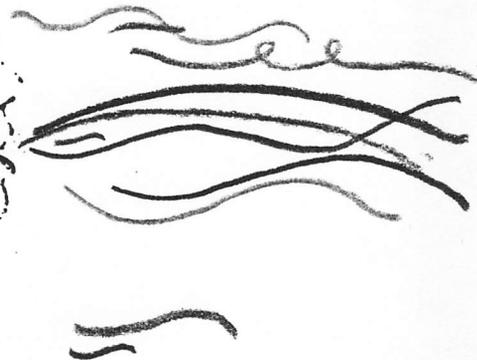
Some of us cut down other people because secretly we don't feel very good about ourselves. If I feel low, and I step



has a wonderful sense of humor. Or that the "burnout" is really very caring.

Jackie was a girl who was not quite up to the academic speed of most kids, though she went to regular classes in a regular school. She started coming to her school's Campus Life meetings. After being in the group for a year, she said, "This is the first place I've ever been in my life where I wasn't called 'retard.'" Every other place, she had not been Jackie, she had been "retard." The Christians in her group, however, accepted her for who she is. And she began to see herself as more than "retard."

■ *Attack weaknesses.* The second way you can hurt people with your mouth is to become a shark. When sharks dis-



cover there's blood in the water, they get excited. At just the hint of weakness, the sharks close in.

Every school has its share of sharks. And we've all been a shark at one point or another, ready to attack at the first whiff of blood. You miss that basket that would have won the game. Afterward, in the locker room, a shark comes up to you and in front of all your friends says, "You missed, you jerk-head!" As if you didn't know you messed up. And maybe you hear about it all week. ("Isn't that the idiot who lost the big game?") Wear the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing and you get slashed by the sharks.

Imagine this: What if people actually bled physically every time we cut them verbally? We'd really have a lot of messes on our hands!

"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21). Your tongue is the most powerful part of your body. When you use it to attack weaknesses, you're wielding a death-dealing blow.

## How to Mug People with Your Mouth

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO HURT people, there are three ways to do it.

■ *Call them names.* We never forget the names we've been called. Sometimes we become the names we're called, as Barry discovered when he believed his baseball coach.

One way we call people names is by putting them into categories: jock, cheerleader, burnout, brain, dork, etc. Once we plunk them into a category, once we've neatly labeled them, we treat them according to the label. As we've already seen, people have a way of conforming to the names people call them.

A better approach would be to get to know the person first, before you form opinions. Then you—and the person—are open to possibilities that labeling eclipses. You might find that the "brain"

cover there's blood in the water, they get excited. At just the hint of weakness, the sharks close in.

But if you hold it and refuse to rip into people like a shark when they're bleeding, you can help stop the bleeding.

■ *Dump garbage.* Sometimes we're like a big garbage truck that backs up and unloads a heap of trash on top of someone. And so often it's the people closest to us who get dumped on.

Your little sister borrowed your records again and didn't put them back. And now there's a big scratch in one of your favorites. You're angry. As soon as she gets home you light into her. You inform her she's careless and inconsiderate. While you're at it, you tell her that she's obviously too stupid to remember anything, since she can't remember to put your records back. And, all warmed up now, you go on to criticize her for her weight, her shyness, and any other weaknesses you can think of. That's dumping.

Or maybe you're just in a bad mood. And anyone who gets in your way is criticized, grumbled at, ignored or cut down. A truckload of negativity gets dumped on anyone unfortunate enough to cross your path.

When we unload our mess on someone, we may feel better, but the other person is buried under all the stinking trash we've left behind.

"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18). A reckless tongue can do a lot of damage. But a wise tongue can actually help put people back together again.

King David prayed, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3). Imagine a guard over your mouth that doesn't let anything negative out at all.

### **Making God Cry**

YOU REALLY HAVE AN AWESOME power: You have the power to make God himself cry. Ephesians 4:30 says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit." You can actually make God the Holy Spirit grieve, like you grieve and cry over someone who dies. And how can you make God cry? By engaging in "bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, . . . every form of malice" (verse 31).

God is trying to build up this person you are slandering, cutting down. He's trying to let this person know how loved he or she is, how unique and special. Tear down what God's trying to build, and you can see why God would cry. It's like if you spent all day building a model airplane—you're really into planes, and plan to be an air force pilot someday—and someone comes over and smashes it. "Oh, I was only fooling around, I'm sorry," the person says casually, but you, like the model airplane,

are crushed.

### **A New "Cool"**

IT MAY BE COOL IN YOUR SCHOOL to be cruel, but there's a better kind of cool. And you and your friends can start it.

It takes admitting to yourself that you're tired of tearing down. That you're ready to resign from the demolition crew, and apply to the construction crew. That you want to learn how to become a builder-upper of people.

Think of a time when your words built someone up. Maybe you came up to a person who looks kind of weird and is usually left out of things, and you asked him what he did last weekend. And you noticed he looked a little perkier than before you spoke to him. Didn't you feel better yourself?

Or maybe you noticed that a friend who was kind of a loner looked a little down. And you went up to her and said, "You look really nice today. You have the nicest clothes, and you always look so put together." Didn't you feel great when she looked at you and smiled, even though she did look a little embarrassed by your compliment? Building other people up brings a special bonus: You build yourself up in the process.

Here's a verse worth memorizing: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29). If you want to be on the construction crew instead of the demolition crew, you adopt a policy of saying only *positive* things.

### **Becoming a Builder-upper**

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS about using your mouth to build up instead of tear down, here are some suggestions.

■ *Positive name-calling.* Notice the positive. Look for things you can praise in people. We're naturally good at finding the chink in people's armor. It takes extra character to find things to praise. If you're the kind of person who honestly looks for the good in a person and praises a person, you'll never be forgotten. It can almost be a game—how many positive qualities can you find and compliment in each person? Here's a list to start your hunt: thoughtful, good sense of humor, generous, helpful, good listener, smart, good-looking, cheerful, fun. . . . Use your quick wit to think up creative *positive* names to call people (gorgeous, hunk, athlete, quick-wit. . . keep going!).

■ *Thank the unappreciated.* Look around you. Who are the unappreciated in your world? What about the janitor who looks so grouchy? Maybe his frown

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comes from being treated like dirt, or, sometimes worse, as if he doesn't exist. What about the school secretary no one likes? And what about parents, brothers, sisters? Can't you find something to thank them for—the little favors they do, or even the everyday things you take for granted. (Does your mother cook your meals? Wash your clothes? Pick up after your eating binge in front of the TV?) Thank the unappreciated people in your life, and you'll find yourself feeling thankful more often.

■ *Include the excluded.* People who don't fit in. Anyone who's different, who could use a friend: the real smart kid with her nose in a book who doesn't have many friends; the person who doesn't seem to have many nice clothes. And what about the handicapped, the elderly? How can you show them someone cares? Bring the left out people in, let them be a part of the group.

■ *Defend the attacked.* What's the opposite of a shark? A football player! What? Yes, a football player. The guy's running down the field with the ball, several people are blocking him, saying to potential tacklers, "You've got to get me first if you want him." We were meant to be each other's blockers, people who are big enough and strong enough to say, "You'll have to get past me first before you can attack the name and reputation of someone I know."

For example, when a shark closes in and says to one of your friends, "Way to go, losing that game for us," you can step up to him and say, "What's your problem? He played a good game. I didn't see you out on the court yourself." Or you hear someone spreading a rumor about someone you know. Instead of sharing in the gossip, you confront the person spreading the rumor: "I'm sure that isn't true. I happen to know she would never do a thing like that."

You have tremendous power in that tongue of yours, power to build other people up or tear them down. The more you tear down, the less you become. The more you build up, the more you become. According to the Bible, it's a matter of life and death. □