

Who's Persecuting Whom?

Are life's habitual victims really persecutors in disguise?

I remember my small daughter, fed up with our family, bursting into tears and running up to her bedroom where she sat on her bunk bed and proclaimed in a high-pitched wail, "Now everyone's done something to me!"

A child's world is usually framed in these terms: people are either with us or against us; the world is made up of victims and persecutors; experiences are either good or bad; we're either loved or hated and we either love or hate other people.

Most of us move on from this position and are able to understand the world and the people in it as a mixture of good and bad, lovable and hateful. But some young people (and some adults) remain stuck, convinced that life is out to get them and that they'll be victimized wherever they are. They never need to take responsibility for their own fallibility, therefore, because it's always someone else's fault. "They were picking on me!" insists the young person clearly picking on other people.

In a way, it's a comfortable position to adopt because nothing changes: life stays simple and no one can make us take responsibility for anything. New ideas, new suggestions are merely new persecutions to be rebuffed because they threaten the simplicity of the victim's world. It's a position that we're all inclined to fall back on when the going gets tough.

But however listless, however defeated it seems, it's also a quietly hostile position. With great determination, with great persistence, the occupant of the position, the victim, refuses to budge, refuses to countenance the possibility of things ever being different. The victim's helpless passivity antagonizes everyone, antagonizes people wanting to help who end up jumping up and down in frustration, enacting the feelings provoked in them by the victim's passivity.

I'm not writing about people who, through no fault of their own, become the victims of other people's genuine cruelties. I'm writing about those people who are forever stuck in the role of victim. I'm writing about a state of mind. And I'm suggesting that playing the role of perennial victim is a roundabout way of persecuting other people, a way of powerfully enacting our own (disavowed) hostility towards other people, a way of being angry with them without having to own or to take any responsibility for that anger?

As I say, the temptation to retreat into victimhood is there whenever we're faced with a daunting challenge. We may well be frightened of the challenge but we'll also be angry with life for presenting us with it and refusing to make it go away. Sixteen-year-old Carla, for example, always gives up. She assumes that everything will go wrong, that she won't be able to do anything and that no one will ever understand or want to help her. Yet when people do try to help, she finds ways of spurning their help, complaining that this help isn't the right sort of help, that it's misplaced or doesn't allow for how really *impossible* her situation is. It's as if she's waiting for

Who's Persecuting Whom?

Are life's habitual victims really persecutors in disguise?

some great rescuer to come along and save her from having to deal with anything difficult, and perhaps that's what her parents always did when she was younger.

I ask her why bad things happen.

"Because people are mean," she says, sounding younger than her sixteen years. "And because they don't care."

"And bad things seem to keep happening in the world," I observe. "What if sometimes it's no one's fault? What if lots of things happen randomly? What if there's no plan? What if life just happens to us sometimes?"

"I suppose," she says, "but then what would be the point?"

"Good question!"

"There's got to be a point...."

"Has there?"

This is really at the heart of young people's questioning. Why *do* things happen the way they do? Why don't we get what we deserve? Why do bad things happen to good people? Is there someone somewhere sorting everything out, allocating life's good and bad experiences? Or is life quite arbitrary? To what extent can we ever control our destinies?

"Maybe there are some things that we can't control," I suggest, "and other things that we definitely can. And it's really annoying when we can't control everything!"

"Yeah," she says. "It's depressing when you think about it. Makes you feel like giving up."

She's right. It *does* make you feel like giving up. It makes you feel like retreating to the simplicities of childhood where there are only victims and persecutors, good and bad people. Sometimes it makes you feel like inflicting your victimhood on other people.

I suggest to her that, although people might see her as shy and unconfident, she's probably much angrier than they realise and much, much more powerful.

She looks at me, a mischievous glint in her eye. "You think so?"