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RACHEL MORRISON KENNEY

MOBBING IN THE CONTEXT OF A WOMAN'S LIFE¹

Trauma in Middle Age

My conversations with Gertraud took place in 2009, in the peaceful, refined, so very civilized setting of her apartment in one of the tonier high-rise condos in Waterloo, Ontario. I had just moved into an apartment of my own, where I could scarcely see the floor for all the cardboard boxes still unpacked. This impeccably ordered display of European taste was in sharpest contrast to the half-assembled furnishings from big-box stores strewn about my dwelling.

Nothing here hinted at the pain and loss that had marked this ninety-year-old woman's life, much less the nadir in 1976, that I had come to talk to her about. Nor did her personal appearance. Petite, gracious, with honey-coloured hair and the kind of eyes that smile on their own, she wore a blouse with nary a wrinkle, and over it a delicate brooch. She was a picture of what used to be called "good breeding."

That first day, and all the other times we met, Gertraud carried herself with grace and no inkling of self-pity. Her manners, so I was to learn, were a clue to her deep appreciation for the preciousness of life. In counterpoint to the staggering sorrows she had known were even greater joys, moments when she witnessed the power of compassion in the midst of strife. This article is about an uncivilized, unrefined, traumatizing time that shook her inmost self, but to keep in context that low point in her biography, I touch on other points before and since. Although I addressed her formally as "Mrs.," since she, if anyone, deserves such respect, I introduce her to you here simply as Gertraud, an intensely alive, aware, sagacious lady who really has seen it all.

Asked to think back to the month of March thirty-three years ago, Gertraud winces ever so slightly. Before our conversations, she told me, she seldom relived those days. Memories might crop up from time to time but "not generally," she said, "because you cannot live with it." Details have blurred a little over time, the mind's own way of coping with unforgettable sadness, but the emotion pierces deep as ever, like crystal shards.

It was late winter in Ontario. Gertraud was seated at her desk in a department much like any other at the University of Waterloo. She was in her fifties then, a fact that made her stand out from the half-dozen other secretaries in that office. Now, decades later, she extracts from her desk a carefully labelled photograph to illustrate the point. It shows a middle-aged Gertraud (with her signature smile) standing with her workmates, girls who looked to be in their twenties. The age gap glared from the photo. Gertraud might

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have been the mother of one of them. She hesitates now to say that the age difference caused tension, but admits that she felt like an outsider sometimes in that department.

The manager's shocking announcement came out of the blue that March morning: another secretary in the department would move to a higher position that included Gertraud's job – and that would involve her moving to Gertraud's desk, adjacent to the manager's office. Gertraud would take that workmate's previous position in the pool of girls half her age. There was no negotiation, no chance to object. Had she been given warning in advance, Gertraud might have applied for transfer to some other office in the university. Instead, she was informed of a *fait accompli*. What was worse, she learned that the other secretaries all knew of the upcoming change before she did. They were in the loop and she was out of it. That hurt.

Gertraud had nothing against the ambitious, friendly young woman by whom she was being displaced. The new assignment was not to Gertraud's liking, but she resolved to do it well.

The crunch came a few days later. The manager who had made the reassignment (and kept it from Gertraud until the others knew) approached Gertraud's desk with definite purpose in her stride. The manager's usual reserve and formality, brought with her to Canada from her native England, were gone. Flashing rage in her eyes and voice, she began shouting at Gertraud for having placed a reminder note on one of the student files. The note itself was of scant importance, but the irate manager magnified it into defiance of her authority. As the entire department listened and watched, the manager scolded and berated Gertraud.

The target of this tirade was stunned. The rest of that day is blurred in Gertraud's memory. She remembers going to the dean in a state of shock and explaining the events. He leaned back in his office chair, refused to intervene. He would keep his hands clean of the matter. Betrayal, cruelty, collective humiliation settled in over Gertraud. In her apartment that night, she tried to end her life.

Social elimination of the kind Gertraud experienced, the robbing of a worker's dignity by managers or peers, was first subjected to scientific scrutiny by Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann in the 1980s. He called it workplace mobbing, borrowing the term used by ethologists for the ganging up of many birds on one. Since Leymann's initial work, researchers across Europe and around the world have enlarged and developed the study of workplace mobbing. Waterloo sociologist Kenneth Westhues has defined it as "an impassioned, collective campaign by coworkers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker."¹

Where does Gertraud's story fit in the burgeoning scientific literature? It is first of all a case study that illustrates what mobbing means and how it differs from what is commonly called workplace bullying. That Gertraud's manager behaved on this occasion as a bully is obvious. Yet what defined this episode of workplace humiliation was its collective aspect, that Gertraud was up against not just one hostile manager but also peers and higher-level authorities who gave that manager overt or tacit support. What gives mobbing its power is not so much the ringleader as the ring: a message conveyed with one voice that you are outside the circle all the rest of us are in.

Gertraud's story matters also because the impact of mobbing on a person's life easily gets lost in statistical surveys and theoretical treatises. Factual description of a single case deepens our understanding of the threat this workplace pathology poses to the one who is singled out for shame. The effect on Gertraud shows how life-threatening mobbing can be, even to a strong, mature, resilient woman.

Studying Gertraud's mobbing in the context of her biography allows us, moreover, to transcend the fatalistic, despairing tone that Australian researcher Linda Shallcross has correctly discerned in much of the scientific literature on this subject.² The majority of mobbing targets do not, in fact, die as a result of their experience. As Shallcross has shown, most of them recover and are transformed. What looks at first like a brick wall blocking all movement turns out in most cases to be just a deep pothole or high hurdle – something to go under, over, around, or through, in creative exercise of human agency. Gertraud is a case in point.

I cannot tell Gertraud's whole life story in this short space, but I can pencil- sketch her portrait and show how her strength was tested in an affluent, genteel Canadian workplace, more even than it had been by the hardships of her upbringing in Germany. I can show also how she emerged even stronger than before. I want you to know a little about this incredible woman I was lucky to meet in the maturity of her years.

The Tortuous Path from Berlin to Waterloo

She was born in Berlin in 1919. Her father had moved there from Upper Silesia, a mountainous region now part of Poland where Gertraud's grandfather had owned a carpentry business. Her mother was a Berlin native of humble origin. Gertraud's maternal grandparents had run several successful small businesses, however, and been able to buy an attractive, five-storey apartment building in 1912. This is the building Gertraud remembers as home. She spoke to me fondly of it still, extracting a black-and-white photo from a thick album in her closet. The building had a majestic brick exterior and looked large enough to house forty or fifty tenants.

Gertraud was her parents' first and only child. Her father supported the family by his position in the public service. He had been trained as a teacher, but in the years following the Great War, teaching jobs in Berlin were scarce.

At the age of three, Gertraud suffered the first major loss of her childhood. Her father developed an infection that, decades later, antibiotics might easily have cured. The infection killed him in a few short days.

Gertraud continued to live with her mother in an apartment of her grandparents' building. There, four years later, her mother fell ill with an aggressive cancer. She was determined to remain at home, where nurses and an elderly aunt cared for her around the clock. Her health deteriorated before little Gertraud's eyes. In 1927, she died.

Orphaned at the age of seven, Gertraud struggled to find her place. "Your inner circle is somehow broken," she said in a quiet voice, the smile having drained from her eyes. Finding ways to navigate through the loss and begin to build a new inner circle proved a large task for such a small girl.

Gertraud's care now fell to her grandparents. "On the whole I should have been very happy that I could stay with them," she says now, but the adjustment was difficult. Her mother had been decidedly modern in her dress and way of doing things, but her grandmother was not. Gertraud often felt deep loneliness, worlds apart from her old-fashioned grandparents.

To enlarge her inner circle, little Gertraud set about initiating friendships with people not her kin, a practice she would continue throughout her life. She was never afraid to approach other kids and invite them to play. Her infectious laugh (which spread to me often during our conversations) undoubtedly drew others to her. One schoolmate remains to this day a constant in her life and a treasured connection to her childhood in Germany. Gertraud says now she has always been drawn to people who were somehow different from her, whether in their views or background. Gertraud valued friendships that challenged and reshaped who she was, leaving an impact on her life. She has not shied away from opportunities to expand her social circle and enrich her mind.

"I must say, we had a good life even through the worst of times." Despite the economic depression and political instability that plagued Germany in the wake of World War I, Gertraud's grandparents lived comfortably through the 1920s. In 1930, they purchased a garden just outside Berlin. It is etched in Gertraud's memory more vividly than the apartment house. Her face lit up as she struggled for words to describe its beauty, recounting fond childhood memories of afternoons spent sitting in a cherry tree with her friends eating the fresh fruit.

"It's living things," she said. "When you see a tree bloom, in your imagination you are always looking to find the same tree again." Her grandparents' cherished garden symbolized life to the little girl who had already been touched too closely by death.

Love for plants is an enduring theme in Gertraud's life. Her apartment includes a collection of orphaned or overwatered orchids, which she nurses back into glorious bloom. There are other floral decorations, too. When I visited her one warm day in early spring, she shared with me a pamphlet for the Royal Botanical Gardens, which she visits often and supports. She advised me to be sure to take a spring tour of the rose garden.

By the time Gertraud turned fifteen, two more adults who had cared for her had died: her grandfather's sister, the same one who had helped take care of Gertraud's mother during her terminal illness, and then her grandfather. That left the grandmother with sole responsibility for managing the apartment building and raising the now teenaged girl.

At the age of eighteen, Gertraud was enrolled in a kind of finishing school in Hannover, three hours by train to the west of Berlin. She loved the school but hated cooking. She recalls with a warm chuckle making a pact with another girl that she would peel the potatoes and carrots if the other girl would cook them.

Then came a year's study to be a children's nurse, and half a year to be a medical secretary. These enrolments exempted Gertraud from the new Labour Service Program (*Arbeitsdienst*) of the Nazi Government.

Gertraud was not quite twenty years old in 1939, living with her grandmother in Berlin, when World War II began, compounding on the national level the instability and uncertainty that had marked her personal life. Looking back, she remarked, "Actually my best years were terrible," but she emphasized that for others in Germany, things were much worse. In recounting her hardships during the war and occupation, Gertraud showed no trace of feeling sorry for herself.

Immediately when war broke out, Gertraud registered with the Red Cross. That same year she fell in love with a young German airman and became engaged to him. There was hesitation in her voice when she told me what happened then: "On the 17th of February in 1940, I was supposed to go skiing with my fiancé, and I got the news in the morning that he was killed." Gertraud's usual eagerness to share details failed her. I asked how she managed to survive so much loss at so young an age. "You know," she answered, "at that time, nobody thought anything of it. It was for all people the same: little food, death of loved ones."

From 1941 to 1943, Gertraud worked as a Red Cross nurse in two successive hospitals. One assignment was to a ward treating soldiers with head and back injuries, an experience that had a profound impact on her political values and her deepest self. To this day, news of soldiers being injured or killed in war calls forth memories of what she witnessed in the hospital. "You felt so much for people your own age," she said. "They had nobody around. Most of their parents lived on the other side of Germany." As best she could, Gertraud showed them warmth and comfort. The faces of young men unable to walk, to see, to hear, unable to recognize their own families – these, for Gertraud, are the faces of war. "I have become a complete pacifist. I am against every war. You can always settle things if you want to."

In the winter of 1943, Gertraud was married. There is regret in her voice. "It was not a terribly good decision on my part, because I couldn't get over the first person." The newlyweds left bomb-ravaged Berlin to start their life together near Passau, Bavaria, where her husband was stationed. They rented an apartment in an old castle, but there were no jobs there. The war was taking a heavy toll on everyday German life.

Unemployed in January of 1945, Gertraud was herself drafted into the army. "You could see that the war was lost. They took all the women and sent them somewhere." Gertraud and her fellow female conscripts were sent back and forth between Czechoslovakia and Germany, but assigned little actual work. Frustrated, Gertraud said aloud to one of her friends, "Circumstances here are worse than in Russia!" Gertraud's superiors overheard the remark. For the next four weeks, she was forbidden to speak to any of her peers.

Gertraud's worry grew as months passed with no word from her husband or her grandmother, as allied armies closed in from east and west, and as Germany's defeat became imminent. Her grandmother, now in her seventies, was still in the apartment building in Berlin, if indeed she were still alive, and Gertraud felt a

duty to get her out of that city. She therefore decided to desert, joined in that decision by a young woman from Czechoslovakia. They knew the consequences if they were caught. Desertion was not a forgivable offense. Summary execution was the common penalty.

The two young women had papers enough to explain the first leg of their journey, after which they would part company and proceed to their respective destinations. During their change of trains in Lueneburg, the station was bombed. The two young women were sent flying against a wall. Shaken but unharmed, Gertraud boarded the train for Berlin. Smiling, she explains that the bomb allowed her the excuse of claiming her papers had been lost in the ensuing commotion.

On arriving at her grandmother's building in Berlin, Gertraud found its formerly sturdy doors and windows bent and warped from an explosive that had destroyed the house next door. The food in the pantry had been ruined from the blast. Her grandmother, moreover, was gone, having travelled outside the city toward the Russian line to buy food from relatives.

Gertraud had a hard time convincing her grandmother to leave Berlin. "This was all she had worked for her whole life, and now she should go?" Gertraud knew that remaining in the city when the Russians moved in would mean death or worse, and she knew the elderly had priority among those allowed to leave.

The grandmother yielded to persuasion, and the two women went to board what turned out to be one of the last trains leaving the city. Gertraud wore her Red Cross uniform so as not to be attract attention in the station. In the crush of desperate Berliners on the platform, the grandmother bribed a young man with a flask of cognac to get her on the train. Gertraud got herself in through the train window. They made it out just in time.

"We were very lucky to get out at this time," Gertraud says now. Berlin fell to the Russians a few days later. As it was, Gertraud and her grandmother made it to the apartment in Bavaria, which had not been bombed, and where they joined her husband's parents and sister. They had little more than food stamps. In the excitement of departing her apartment, the grandmother had forgotten her money and left it there.

The war officially ended on May 6, 1945, but then came the occupation. In that summer of 1945, American soldiers arrived at Gertraud's apartment and announced they were taking possession of it for their own purposes. Gertraud salvaged what she could, bundling her belongings in sheets and throwing them out the windows, before the soldiers claimed the place as their own. Suddenly "you are there and you don't know what to do. There is no work, there is nothing."

Gertraud's grandmother went from house to house looking for somebody who would take them in. She eventually found a room in a clean, pleasant house owned by an eighty-year-old man and his sister-in-law. "It was wonderful," Gertraud says now, "they were the kindest people." The house was in the countryside, away from the path the American soldiers normally travelled. A community began to form of people local farmers had taken in. "This was a wonderful time because in spite of everything, there was peace in this place." Gertraud forged friendships as usual, and these helped restore hope.

In 1946, Gertraud's grandmother returned to her apartment building in Berlin, where she remained until her death years later. Gertraud stayed in the South. Her husband returned five months after the end of the war. Looking for work, the couple moved to Karlsruhe and shared an apartment with two other families, both of them women with children who had lost their husbands in the war. Gertraud became close friends with both these women. "This was one of my best times in my life, because of those two ladies." The bond between them has endured. Today, more than six decades later, Gertraud considers the one lady's grandchildren her best friends.

Gertraud and her husband left Germany for Canada in 1951. Here they divorced. Gertraud worked in Hamilton, Montreal, and Toronto, mainly in the health sector, before beginning her job at the University of Waterloo in 1971. Her favourite job was working as a medical secretary in Montreal. She recalls feeling respected and productive there. Her varied places of employment taught her an important truth: "It helps to work with people with whom you have a lot in common."

What is remarkable about the first fifty years of Gertraud's life is how heavy were the blows she was able to take in stride: being orphaned by the age of seven, losing her fiancé, the terror of war, then immigration to Canada, the shift from German to English and French, the divorce, the demands of varied jobs. Gertraud coped with all these challenges. She is a paragon of adaptability. She could handle anything – until the peculiar social process that enveloped her in a workplace at Waterloo.

How did the tumult of those early decades shape her character? Gertraud leaned back in her upholstered chair, her eyes focused somewhere beyond the room we were sitting in. “It does change you. You don't know how, but it does. On the whole, you are the same person, but you are more sensitive. You are easier hurt because you know that nothing is final, that always something can happen.”

How and Why Gertraud Was Mobbed

Gertraud answered my questions simply, without theatrics or grandiose gestures. She let facts speak for themselves and insisted I get them right. Still, her facial expression tightened, she seemed to “tense up” a little, when our conversation turned to the events of 1976 at the University of Waterloo. As for many targets of workplace mobbing, recounting the story reawakened emotions long since overlaid with happier ones. Her expressive eyes betrayed wounds she still carries from the ordeal.

In being willing to call up painful memories from three decades ago, Gertraud gave me – and all readers of this article – a great gift. Her experience of workplace mobbing, against the background of her long and varied life, sheds clear light on this cruel, life-threatening process, and enables us to be on the lookout for it in our own working lives.

When Gertraud joined the department's staff in 1971, it consisted of about eight people: half a dozen secretaries and a manager, with a dean holding higher authority at a distance. Mature and dignified, Gertraud struggled to fit in. Most of the other secretaries were “a bit coarse” by Gertraud's standards. The office culture included a lot of idle gossip and occasional trips to a pub.

Fortunately, there was one other secretary with whom Gertraud connected closely: Miriam, a fortyish immigrant from South Africa, wife, mother of three, and possessed of no more interest than Gertraud in heading to a pub after work. Gertraud and Miriam clicked right away, the painful depth of their respective life experiences overriding differences of temperament. Gertraud's formality contrasted with Miriam's flamboyant, “typical Jewish mother” ways. Yet they formed an enduring bond, a friendship that would play a big part years later in the remedy of Gertraud's mobbing.

In the shorter term, Miriam transferred from this office to a better-paying position as secretary of a small department. This changed the dynamics of the workplace she left behind. Gertraud now found herself the oldest secretary there, and the only foreigner.

As the research literature tells us, targets of workplace mobbing are often somehow conspicuous even before they are singled out for shame. Westhues explains that “being different from most colleagues in an elemental way” makes a person more vulnerable to being ganged up on and driven away. As the chronicle of Gertraud's earlier life makes clear, an unfathomable gap separated her from the young women she worked with. It was not just that she was older. She had survived some of life's harshest lessons and gained a broad perspective on life. As for her Berlin origins, Westhues writes that “foreign birth and upbringing, especially as signalled by a foreign accent,” increases the odds that a worker will be mobbed.

Trying in retrospect to make sense of what happened, Gertraud folded her hands and said to me: “I'm not quite sure that my being German didn't have, in the long run, something to do with it.”

Gertraud's work ethic and experience also set her apart. Having been organizing and maintaining files for thirty years in varied offices, she was qualified to suggest how routine tasks might best be handled – a fact that would ultimately trigger the tragic unfolding of events. The other secretaries were good at following instructions and limited themselves to that. “They did their jobs,” Gertraud explained, “but not more than their jobs.”

Shortly after Miriam's departure, a new manager was hired. This woman would later become what researchers call the "Chief Eliminator," the leader of the collective push of the target toward the workplace exit door. I therefore refer to her here as "Mrs. CE." She was cut from a different mould than her predecessor, who had encouraged a relaxed atmosphere in the office. In Gertraud's words, Mrs. CE "was a lady who knew what she wanted," and did not take kindly to those who disagreed with her. She was not much taller than Gertraud, but carried herself with an air of authority that made her seem much larger than she was. The younger secretaries in the office were taken aback by her commanding presence. They "did what she told them to" without question.

Wasting no time in exercising her authority, Mrs. CE promptly ordered a complete reorganization of student files. They had been ordered department by department for years. Mrs. CE wanted them arranged alphabetically by student, regardless of department or field of study. Gertraud thought the change unwise. Switching to the new system would take many hours of work, and in the end, managing the files would take more time, not less. Gertraud voiced her concerns. Mrs. CE brushed them aside, sternly insisting that the files be reorganized immediately. With a slight smile, Gertraud told me things might have turned out differently if she had flattered Mrs. CE and said, "Oh, this is a wonderful idea. I've never thought of it this way." Daring to question Mrs. CE's judgement set Gertraud apart as an undesirable worker. Gertraud's independent thinking "got under the skin" of her boss, who then saw her as a threat to workplace solidarity.

What other factors played a part in Gertraud's marginalization? This question perplexed me more and more as I came to appreciate Gertraud's compassion and kindness, and I kept coming back to it in our conversations. Mrs. CE was "very English" in her manner. Although a little younger than Gertraud, she was old enough to remember the raining of German bombs on London, and she had worked in the British Foreign Service. In Gertraud's experience since coming to Canada, strained Anglo-German relations in the workplace were a common fact of life. She had encountered animosity on that account before, and suspected it might have something to do with Mrs. CE's coolness toward her.

In addition, Gertraud knew something the other secretaries did not: Mrs. CE frequently drank on the job. Because her desk was positioned directly beside the manager's office, Gertraud could not help but notice. She had chanced to see the thermos Mrs. CE carried with her, and regularly observed her flushed cheeks in the afternoon. I asked Gertraud if the other secretaries were aware of the manager's drinking. "I don't think they had any idea," she replied. "If you sat quite a bit away from it, you didn't notice it. And I had more insight."

It is a truism of employment that you should never know anything bad about your boss, or if you do, make sure the boss doesn't know you know. Contrariwise, as the research literature on mobbing points out, knowledge of something that would shame one's supervisor invites the latter to instigate an eliminative campaign. Had Mrs. CE's drinking become common knowledge, it might easily have stalled her rise in the university bureaucracy (As things turned out, she rose to become one of the most senior and honoured women in the hierarchy).

There is no way to pinpoint which of Gertraud's vulnerabilities mattered most in the formation of the collective movement against her. The important thing, in this as in all cases of workplace mobbing, is that the snowballing process of exclusion commenced, and once underway, gathered strength toward the target's elimination. After the initial confrontation over the filing system, Gertraud could feel a certain chill, some kind of lingering resentment against her. Looking back, she remembers, "You could feel something different." Mrs. CE "was not as nice." But Gertraud went about her work as usual. There were no overt comments or criticisms of her performance. "If it was obvious, I probably wouldn't have been so hurt," she added.

The message that she did not belong came through loud and clear when Gertraud was ordered to surrender her job to the younger secretary and to move to a different desk. The change of jobs was bad enough. What was worse was that it had been planned without her knowledge. For a woman who values friendship and trust so profoundly, the fact that the other secretaries knew what was afoot but said nothing amounted to personal betrayal. "This was a very degrading thing. If you are the person in charge and you manoeuvre

something like that, the other people must have known. And they become part of the manoeuvre. Why wouldn't they tell me?" The questions still swirl in Gertraud's mind, just as similar questions lurk in other mobbing targets' minds for the rest of their lives.

What defines mobbing is the collective nature of the aggression, the agreed-upon or unspoken collaboration that comes across to the target as genuine conspiracy. One need not do much of anything, maybe just lie low and refrain from speaking up on the target's behalf, to become part of a workplace mob. As Westhues points out, mobbers "vary in how much and what kind of thought they give to their eliminative actions." In Gertraud's case, the young secretaries probably did not act with malice. However naïve they may have been, they knew on which side their bread was buttered, enough to know when to keep their mouths shut.

Indeed, Mrs. CE may not have been altogether aware of what she was doing to Gertraud and why. She was new to her job, unaware of the history of the workplace. Her obituary decades later said she would be remembered for her kind and gentle nature, as she might well be by many people. Even so, in a given circumstance at a given time in a given office of the University of Waterloo, she and others acted in concert in a way that put a coworker down.

Mrs. CE's subsequent action against Gertraud, her eruption of anger at her in front of the others, might have had less devastating effect on a crustier, less sensitive woman. To Gertraud, it was an unthinkable violation of the civility she holds dear, made worse by its occurrence in a university. "When you have an argument with somebody," Gertraud told me, "you go into a room and close the door. Then you deal with it like adults."

Nor was the dean exempt from participation in that workplace mob. When Gertraud reported the manager's outburst to him, he could have used his higher authority to stop the attack, rescue its target, and set social relations in that office back on a constructive course. At minimum, he could have shown compassion: let Gertraud know he did not approve of ostracization and browbeating, that he would discuss the matter with her manager and get back to her. But higher-level authorities are usually as reluctant to take on an impassioned mob as Pontius Pilate was. If they do not actively approve, they wash their hands of the matter. Their silence gives consent. As in this case, they become part of the problem, not the solution.

Gertraud left work that day in a daze, unable to make sense of the events. Having survived so much in her lifetime, she had reached her limit. "It was meanspirited," she spoke the words carefully. "That was maybe the whole thing. You can work out everything else. I mean, in the worst things in my life, it was never that I couldn't work things out."

Recovery

Being fully human, according to Kipling, means that you can "watch the things you gave your life to, broken, And stoop and build them up with worn-out tools." In despair, Gertraud thought at first she no longer had the necessary strength, but she found it.

After her stay in hospital, she continued her recovery at home, in her modest high-rise apartment, on sick leave from the university. There she received a visit from two officials of the university's Personnel Department, what would be renamed Human Resources decades later. They brought neither flowers nor kind wishes for a speedy return to work. Instead they proposed that she leave the university altogether. In return for her resignation she would receive two months salary.

Gertraud knew then what she told me now, what researchers of mobbing have documented in thousands of cases. "I think they wanted to get rid of me. If one makes a lot of fuss, then it doesn't look good for the university. So they get rid of you."

Gertraud told them she was sick, that she would not make a decision on their offer until she was well. The officials left, but returned days later to repeat the university's offer. Gertraud gave them the same answer as before.

What enabled Gertraud to stop and build up her life again was the same thing that had saved her in previous times of turmoil, the single main resource any victim of mobbing has for achieving recovery: connections of caring, compassion, and love with other people. It was her friends who had seen Gertraud through previous crises, and they would do it again. "Having friends," she told me, "is always important. Shutting yourself off from other people is a very bad thing."

The point cannot be made too strongly: the simple kindness of friends is one's strongest defence against cruelty in the workplace. The single main reason workplace mobbing is so devastating is that it shakes the target's faith in other people. It is the betrayal of trust that leaves the person so much alone. It is the truth in the verse from Matthew (inscribed on the tombstone of Breaker Morant, the Australian scapegoated in Lord Kitchener's armies in South Africa), that a man's enemies shall be they of his own household. In such a circumstance, caring by friends outside the workplace gives comfort, restores faith in humanity, and lets the rebuilding of a life begin.

One friend in particular played an especially helpful, indeed crucial role in helping Gertraud get back on her feet. It was Miriam, the Jewish mother originally from South Africa who had worked in the university office with Gertraud before the new manager arrived. Seeing Gertraud now in need, Miriam telephoned and visited her frequently, brought her homemade soup. More than that, Miriam suggested Gertraud apply for a position then available in the department Miriam had moved to, as graduate secretary. There she would be working with just two other secretaries, both friendly and mature, Miriam and another of similar age.

When Gertraud applied for the job in Miriam's new workplace, Miriam used her considerable persuasive powers to convince the department chair that Gertraud was probably the one and only woman in Canada fully qualified to be graduate secretary.

During the eight years that remained before her retirement, Gertraud capably and happily met the requirements of her job, earning the respect of faculty, staff, and students alike. More than that, she carved for herself a niche in the department's graduate programs that went far beyond her official position. She befriended and mothered many students, became their confidante, and advised them gently how to negotiate the hurdles of their M.A. and Ph.D. programs. Living on a modest salary, she empathized with the financial straits most students were in, especially those from abroad. She chauffeured them around in her Volkswagen-bug, and took them on day trips to Niagara Falls and the Royal Botanical Gardens. On such occasions she took photographs they could send to family back home. With some of these students she is still in touch, a quarter century after she retired.

One further way Gertraud distanced herself from the work abuse of 1976 bears mention here, though it happened in late 1989, four years after she retired. The Berlin Wall came down and the East German government collapsed. The happy consequence of these big political events for Gertraud was that at long last she could take possession of the apartment building she had inherited from her grandmother. It suffered from decades of neglect, was in a sorry state, but it was hers. Gertraud renovated it thoroughly. With the proceeds from its sale, she has been able to escape during these past twenty years the near-poverty of her first forty years in Canada. She has also helped keep the Royal Botanical Gardens out of bankruptcy, and spent winters in Florida pushing the politics of American retirees there a little to the left.

Wrapping Up My Time with Gertraud

On the day of the last of the conversations on which this article is based, I bought a bouquet for Gertraud, my gesture of thanks to her for sharing her story with me. That day the rain poured down. Walking to her apartment, I wrapped the bouquet under my jacket, trying not to crush the delicate, brightly coloured petals and at the same time protect them from the rain. By the time I arrived at her door, both the flowers and I were a soggy mess.

Gertraud welcomed me as usual and took the flowers gratefully. I watched as she carefully pulled back the cellophane wrapping and gently arranged each bloom into position. I reflected on her similarity to the

flowers in that bouquet. Like them, she had been cut from her roots. She had weathered many storms. Yet she retained her beauty. Given a friendly environment and a touch of care, she flourished. She stands today a wise, poised, compassionate woman, an inspiration to people buffeted by workplace storms.

NOTES

¹ See e.g., Heinz Leymann, "The Content and Development of Mobbing at Work," *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 5 (1996): 165-184. See also, Brian Martin, "Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 13 (1999): 401-446; Kenneth Westhues, ed., *Workplace Mobbing in Academe: Reports from Twenty Universities* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 4-5; idem, *The Envy of Excellence: Administrative Mobbing of High-Achieving Professors* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); idem, *Remedy and Prevention of Mobbing in Higher Education: Two Case Studies* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

² Linda Shallcross, "The Workplace Mobbing Syndrome, Response and Prevention in the Public Sector," Paper presented at the *Workplace Bullying: A Community Response Conference* (Brisbane, October 16-17, 2003); Linda Shallcross, Michael Sheehan & Sheryl Ramsay, "Workplace Mobbing: Experiences in the Public Sector," *International Journal of Organisational Behaviour* 13 (July 2008): 56-70; Linda Shallcross, Sheryl Ramsay & Michelle Barker, "Severe Workplace Conflict: The Experience of Mobbing," *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* 6 (2013): 191-213.

AFFILIATIONS

Rachel Morrison is a PhD Candidate in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of Waterloo. Her current research focuses on the influence of leadership on employees' well-being.